

Family-School Relations as Social Capital: Chinese Parents in the United States

Dan Wang

Abstract

Guided by both Coleman and Bourdieu's theories on social capital, I interviewed Chinese immigrant parents to understand their experiences in weaving social connections with the school and teachers to benefit their children's education. This study confirms Coleman's argument that human capital in parents will not transfer to the children automatically. The intergenerational transmission process is interrupted because the parents, although well educated, are not familiar with norms and practices in the new education system. In sharp contrast to parents in China, who aggressively seek and create opportunities to connect with teachers, immigrant Chinese parents adopt a passive role in initiating contacts with school and teachers. Factors contributing to the lower parental commitment to networking include time, jobs, language, and cultural barriers. However, the deeper reason lies in the change of people's mindsets when they experience a dramatic shift in the surrounding social structures. The informant parents view American schools as egalitarian and competition free and, therefore, attribute to parent-teacher relationships less instrumental value in their children's success than they would in China. American education professionals would be surprised by these parents' naivety and idealization of American schools. Nonetheless, it would be simplistic to conclude that the lack of parental involvement is due to external restrictions or immigrant parents' misunderstanding of the current U.S. society.

Key Words: social capital, parental involvement, immigrant family, Chinese parents, networking, teachers, relations, United States, public schools, Asian

Introduction

The concept of social capital is acknowledged as valuable by an increasing number of educators and sociologists of education because it lends the researchers a new explanatory power, in addition to the traditional factors, such as gender, race, and socioeconomic status (SES), for stratification in the school system. Along this line of literature, researchers try to predict students' academic achievement (Carbonaro, 1998; Kim, 2002; McNeal, 1999; Morgan & Sorensen, 1999; Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1997), drop-out risk (Carbonaro; Croninger & Lee, 2001; McNeal), and college attendance and other life chances (Furstenberg & Hughes, 1995) influenced by parents' social capital. The concept of parents' social capital in these studies is operationalized in diverse ways; it incorporates a wide range of indicators, such as "mother attended school meetings" (Furstenberg & Hughes), "parents know parents" (Morgan & Sorensen), "homework checking" (Kim), and "mother's expectation for child's education" (Coleman, 1988). Many of these variables are not new at all in educators' attempts to explain the differences in students' performances and achievement in school. Inevitably, this leads me to question the legitimacy in using the term "social capital." Is it a new bottle that contains the old wine? Why not simply use "parental involvement" or "family support," which may carry more intuitive meaning than the term "social capital"? Maybe the word "capital" is used merely to attract new or greater attention to the old sociological or educational issues.

Despite these doubts, I still consider parents' social capital as a necessary and valuable concept. For one, its boundary is more extensive than that of school-based or family-based personal relationships; it can be extended to parents' worksites, religious affiliation, and other social organizations, some of which are not included in the aforementioned studies. Secondly, and more significantly, social capital is not a static and arbitrary collection of personal interactions occurring in different social sites; instead, it should be imagined as a network woven by the individual parent around him/herself for a specific purpose – better education for the child. Such an interlaced network allows dynamic flows of resources from one link in the network to another in the process of accomplishing the goal. The resources, not the network per se, are the key in the concept of social capital according to Bourdieu's definition (Bourdieu, 1992, p. 119). The nature of the network and the amount of resources available in the network may be responsible for differentiation in students' school performance and achievement. Therefore, the concept of social capital is not exactly redundant to the other existing notions in education research.

The empirical works on parents' social capital, most of which rely on quantitative analyses, mainly follow Coleman's theoretical framework (Dika & Singh, 2002). These authors endeavor to establish the correlation between the amount of social capital possessed by the parent and the children's school performance. This body of literature is insufficient in two ways. First, researchers fail to detect the mechanisms that transform social connections into something that could benefit children's school experiences. Coleman (1988) argues that social closure among parents can facilitate reinforcement of social norms and social control, and therefore leads to a higher degree of congruence of parents' and children's views on, for example, the instrumental value of education in one's life opportunities. Yet, the degree of social control in relation to parents' closure has not been directly measured and tested. Bourdieu's theory on access to resources in social networks (Portes, 1998) may be helpful in identifying the invisible mechanisms, but unfortunately, only a few researchers have taken advantage of it (Lareau & Horvat, 1999). Secondly, only a few studies have focused on immigrant parents' social connectedness and their children's education (Bhattacharya, 2000; Kim, 2002; Zhang, Ollila, & Harvey, 1998). Experiences of immigrant parents are undoubtedly unique in that they depart from their well-established social networks in their home countries and need to construct new ones in a new environment, possibly with significant language and cultural barriers. With a growing proportion of immigrant children in U.S. schools, research on immigrant parents' social capital is certainly pertinent to the improvement of America's schools.

For this study, I interviewed nine Chinese parents in six families so as to understand their experiences as immigrant parents in weaving their social networks to benefit their children's education. I was also interested in exploring how their Chinese background influenced their expectations and perceptions of American education, which in turn may have predetermined their strategies of networking with other people.

Theoretical Frameworks

French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and American sociologist James Coleman are the major contributing figures in the theoretical development of the concept of social capital (Dika & Singh, 2002; Portes, 1998). Bourdieu (1986) discussed the interaction of three forms of capital: economic, cultural, and social capital. A person would activate the capitals he/she possesses to achieve personal interests in accordance with the dominant practice in a specific social setting – the field – and also conditioned by his/her dispositions that are produced by his/her prior life experiences – the habitus (Bourdieu, 1984, 1992).

Coleman (1988) focused on the role of social capital in the creation of human capital, namely students' educational attainment. Dika and Singh commented on Coleman's model as having "structural-functionalist roots." They continued to summarize that "social capital has been elaborated in two principal ways: in terms of norms [along Coleman's theory] and in terms of access to institutional resources" [rooted in Bourdieu] (p. 33).

Norms

Coleman (1988) defined social capital by its function. "It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors – whether person or corporate actors – within the structure" (p. S98). The structure is the relations among the actors. Social capital is inherent in these relations and is productive in the sense that it helps realize personal interest (since this article concentrates on the individual level only) that in its absence would be impossible.

Coleman (1988) has identified three forms of social capital: (1) obligations, expectations, and trustworthiness of structures; (2) information channels; and (3) norms and effective sanctions. The first form of social capital can be interpreted as the amount of credits accumulated that are expected to be repaid according to the norm of reciprocity. A helps B and trusts B to return the favor in time. At first look, an instrumental motivation seems to be the source for this form of social capital; a close look can reveal that it is contingent on the norm of reciprocity and the severity of social sanctions once the norm is violated. Information channels can spread the deeds in compliance with the social norms or disclose the behaviors in violation of the norms, hence incurring social sanctions in the latter case. In either case, information channels facilitate the reinforcement of the social norms.

One important argument of Coleman (1988) is that financial and human capital of parents is necessary in the development of human capital in their children, but each by itself is not sufficient (Teachman, Paasch, & Carver, 1997). Social capital within the family – discussions with children, monitoring and helping with homework, number of siblings, and so forth – helps the children to take advantages of the financial, cultural, and human resources available to them in the family. In the past decade, the effect of family-based social capital has been tested in an extensive body of research. Dika and Singh (2002) gave a comprehensive review on the methods and findings of these studies. Most findings show positive relations between family-based social capital and students' learning and school attainment.

Coleman's essay on social capital in the creation of human capital has a far-reaching influence on educators and researchers who are interested in this issue. Despite reasonable criticisms by some scholars (Dika & Singh, 2002; Portes, 1998), several of Coleman's concepts, such as the structure of social closure and mechanisms of norms, are undeniably refreshing and enlightening.

Access to Institutional Resources

Another source of social capital theories is the work of Pierre Bourdieu. He defined social capital as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (1986, p. 248). There is a clear distinction between the resources and the network, that is, the access to the resources, in Bourdieu's definition (Dika & Singh, 2002; Portes, 1998). "The volume of the social capital possessed by a given agent...depends on the size of the network of connections he can effectively mobilize and on the volume of the capital (economic, cultural, or symbolic) possessed in his own right by each of those to whom he is connected" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 249). Social capital is not to be understood in isolation, but in relation to other forms of capital – economic and cultural – and more importantly, in relation to the field and the habitus (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Economic capital is that which is "immediately and directly convertible into money and may be institutionalized in the form of property rights..." (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). Cultural capital exists in three forms: in the embodied, objectified, or institutionalized state (p. 243). The embodied state refers to the dispositions in the body and mind; the objectified state means cultural goods like books, music recordings, and movies; institutionalized cultural capital mainly refers to formal academic qualifications. All three types of capital can be converted from one type to another. Yet, economic capital is the root of the rest of types of capital; social and cultural capital is reducible to economic capital in the final analysis (pp. 252-253). Cultural and social capital, like economic capital, takes labor and time to accumulate. The longer social and cultural capital take to accumulate, the more invisible their function as mediation to the reproduction of economic capital; however, this also entails higher risk of loss, for example, unwise trust or failure to find employment upon graduation. In a given situation, the possessor of the capital will decide to utilize a certain type of capital or transform one type to another so as to achieve certain ends, which ultimately can be translated into economic terms. However, social capital works in a way that is unique compared with other types of capital. Social capital makes it possible for an individual to use the resources (capital) institutionalized into the network but possessed by other members, not by him/herself.

Bourdieu (1986) insists that the definitions of capital are meaningful only in the systematic framework of capital – field and habitus. A field may be defined as “a network, or a configuration of objective relations between positions” (p. 97). These positions and relations among the positions are objectively defined, existing independently of the occupants of these positions. A field is often compared to a card game, both of which follow rules or regularities. In a game, the number of players and relations (winner or loser, for example) among the players are defined objectively. Players play against each other to compete for the stakes. The relative values of the cards they receive change with each game just as the hierarchy of the capital varies in different fields. Capital is a socially defined term and its content is subject to constant changes depending on the rules of various games or dominant practices in different fields. Players play according to the rules. They may win or lose, based on what cards they get in each game. However, players do not behave like machines which mechanically receive cards, show them, and find out the winner. Instead, they estimate their positions relative to other players based on their evaluation of the cards in their hands. Then, they will decide on the best strategy to use their cards. The agency in the players, estimation, evaluation, and decision making, roots in individual dispositions that have been accumulated from previous life experiences. Though constrained by the existing rules in the field, people are always actively creating changes to the structure they are in. It is the dynamic interplay of field and habitus, of structure and agency, that determines the process and outcome of a social event.

Background of Chinese Parents

Immigrant parents with a non-mainstream cultural background are likely to confront difficulties in communication with their children’s schools, association with other parents, or helping with their children’s school work. Ariza (2002) lists many common reasons why immigrant parents fail to actively participate in their children’s education: language barriers, time conflict, and most alarmingly, their expectations of schools that are rooted in their own home cultures and that are different from the typical American ones. Lacking knowledge about these reasons, especially the potential cultural mismatches, some teachers regard the immigrant parents as “apathetic” or indifferent to their children’s education (Ariza). In actuality, studies on Korean (Kim, 2002), Latino (Goldenberg et al., 2001), and Chinese (Zhang et al., 1998) immigrant parents show that, generally, parents hold high expectations of their children’s educational achievement and believe in the instrumental value of formal schooling for bettering their children’s life chances. Yet, exposed to a new culture, they

may not realize what the school and teachers expect from them. In addition, they may not have the knowledge needed to assist with their children's school work in this new education system. Active participation and frequent communication with teachers and other parents could render the immigrant parents better informed about the typical mainstream school practices, thus improving their disadvantaged position. Some schools have devised programs to reach out to the immigrant parents in their community, providing orientations, sample classes, and trainings to get them familiar with the operation of the schools (Lindeman, 2001). These programs are considered helpful in bridging the gap between the parents and the teachers.

The diverse origins of immigrant families might result in varied responses from the parents regarding the practices in their children's schools, even though they are attending exactly the same orientation program. The family-school relations in their home countries predefine the parents' self-perceptions of their own positions relative to the school. Therefore, it is necessary for educators to compare a certain home culture and the host culture, in this case the U.S. culture, in regard to education, and also to investigate the behavioral changes or non-changes of immigrant parents in the new culture. This study focuses on parent-school relations of Chinese immigrant parents in the United States that facilitate or hinder their children's educational development. To understand families' behaviors and mentalities in America, it is also important to review common parenting practices in China.

Urban parents in China generally hold high expectations for their children's educational attainment. College education is considered to be a must if it is within the financial capacity of the family. The competition for college entrance is fierce. In the early 1990s, the college enrollment rate was around 20% nationwide. Recent years have seen a significant increase in college enrollment rate, up to around 40-50%. While the entrance pressure is relaxed, a new round of competition is centered on getting into top-ranking institutions.

Education in China is a state-managed enterprise. Universal curricula are designed by the Education Ministry of the central government and applied to all schools throughout the nation, from primary to high schools, except for several experimental provinces. Not surprisingly, then, college entrance qualifications are determined by students' scores on the college entrance exams, which are held annually on the same dates for all high school graduates nationwide. Consequently, both schools and parents attach tremendous significance to children's academic achievement, especially to the courses that are pertinent to college entrance exams. Parents are strict regarding their children's academic performances. For those parents who received higher education, they often closely monitor children's homework, give children extra exercises, or teach their children advanced classes at home.

An interesting phenomenon in China is that urban parents take great initiatives to connect with the teachers in hopes that teachers can help their children more in learning. They often visit the school and meet with teachers in private; they visit teachers' homes and give them gifts, sometimes expensive gifts, on festivals or official holidays; they make real efforts to help teachers whenever possible, for example, repairing the teacher's stereo system or even seeking employment for a teacher's child. The relationships between parents and teachers are about students' educational achievement, but go beyond the boundary of educational issues. The relations are so personal that, to a large extent, parents have become crucial resources for teachers to solve their own personal problems. This utilitarian relationship between parents and teachers is almost an open secret to urban residents, but is surprisingly under-researched and documented. Although much of the description here is drawn from my personal experience and observations, participants in this study confirmed it as highly relevant to their own experiences with teachers in China.

With this prior knowledge in mind, I was very interested in looking at Chinese immigrant parents' social networks in the American setting. Do parents try to connect with teachers with the same incentives and initiatives? What are the reasons for changes or persistence in their parenting practices? What are the actual or potential ramifications on their children's development resulting from such networks or from the absence of such networks? As the number of Chinese immigrant students increases in U.S. schools, answers to these questions can be helpful for educators to understand the needs of students and parents in this ethnic group and to adopt more inclusive strategies that lead to more parental involvement. For sociologists of education, answering these questions might help identify the mechanisms that mobilize parents' social capital to facilitate children's school achievement, as well as the influential factors accounting for discrepancies in the amount of social capital.

Methods

I interviewed nine parents in six Chinese families. For three families, I interviewed the mothers only; for the other three families, both parents were interviewed at the same time. Each interview took 1-1½ hours. The three-step interview approach (Seidman, 1998, pp. 11-12) was adopted to structure the interviews. However, instead of conducting three separate interviews, all three steps – asking for interviewees focused life histories, details of experience, and reflection on the meaning of their experiences – were covered in one interview per family. Mishler warned against the “one-shot interview conducted by an interviewer without local knowledge of a respondent's life situation” (1986, p.

24). Such an interview, he continued, would not “provide the necessary contextual basis for adequate interpretation.” In this study, as a Chinese immigrant myself, I shared many similar life experiences with the participants, and therefore my prior knowledge gave me an in-depth understanding of the impact of their Chinese background on their life situations in the U.S. Hence, my ethnic status might help reduce the concern raised by Mishler.

Interviews were conducted in Mandarin, tape recorded, and later transcribed and coded (Lofland & Lofland, 1995; Mason, 2002). Conversations quoted in this paper were translated from Mandarin by the researcher. I understood that there were potential disadvantages to my position: being a Chinese myself could blind me from seeing some aspects that otherwise would be easily identified by an “outsider.” With this caution in mind, I discussed the field notes and transcriptions with both Chinese and American colleagues to gain different perspectives on the data collected. Based on Coleman’s and Bourdieu’s theoretical frameworks, I extracted the themes and tried to interpret the same set of data from both functional and institutional perspectives (Janesick, 1998). Finally, I paid short visits to the participants to verify the accuracy of data and to confirm my speculations and interpretation of their behaviors.

To recruit the participants, I started with the families with whom I personally had contact. Then the snowball sampling strategy was used to identify potential participants (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981). At the end of each interview, I requested the existing participants to recommend families that had at least one child who was attending a public school.

Five out of the six families had only one child, each born in mainland China. One family had two children: the older one was born in China, while the 2-year-old younger son was born in the U.S. All were two-parent families. All fathers had received graduate education, two with masters degrees and four holding doctorates. Mothers’ education levels were lower, one with a two-year college certificate, one with a masters degree, and the rest with bachelor’s degrees. The fathers all had full-time jobs. Three mothers had full-time jobs; one was working part-time; the other two were homemakers. The annual family incomes ranged from \$30,000 to \$60,000. Two of the families had achieved permission for permanent residence; three families were applying for the status; one family was hesitating about whether to stay or return to China. One family moved to the U.S. from another English-speaking country, and their child had completed elementary and middle school in that country. Except for this child, all other children came directly from China. When the interviews were conducted, three children were attending elementary schools; two children were in middle school; as mentioned previously, one child had completed middle school in a third country and was attending a high school in the U.S.

Results

Epstein (1990, p. 104) distinguishes two kinds of education models that affect parent-teacher relationships: one model that emphasizes specialization of skills, and another model that emphasizes generalization of skills. The former separates the academic skills required by teachers via school training from other skills taught by parents via home training. With specialization comes a division of labor that pulls apart the function of school and of family, which restricts the communication and cooperation between parents and teachers. The second model focuses on teaching “the whole child.” Schools teach social skills, concepts of home, development of talents, and so on, which traditionally are part of the responsibility of parents. Parents are advised to pay attention to children’s learning abilities and academic skills, the responsibility traditionally assigned to teachers. Thus, teachers and parents share “overlapping spheres of influence” that ultimately promote teacher-parent conversation and collaboration.

Chinese Parents perceived U.S. education more as the generalization model. Compared with the schools in China, parents saw apparent distinctions between the two systems in their education emphases. One couple, Mr. and Mrs. Ding (pseudonyms, as are all names used in this article), whose daughter was a first grader, commented on the difference:

Mrs. Ding: Here [in the U.S.], schools mainly stress on kids’ behaviors, being polite, caring. When holidays come, the kids are always asked to make cards or write letters [for each other].

Mr. Ding: Right! [U.S. schools] put more emphasis on emotions. For example, on Valentine’s Day, wow, all the kids are required to prepare cards and gifts for each other. Birthdays, also. He invites him; she invites her. Lots of social activities like this. This indeed has a lot of influence on [my daughter’s] emotional development. We Chinese call this “EQ” [emotional quotient]. I feel they [U.S. teachers] care a lot about EQ. As to IQ, unlike in China, they don’t fill kids with [knowledge] at young ages.

Other parents expressed similar views on schools’ emphases in teaching. They thought Chinese teachers restricted their attention to students’ academic achievement, but the U.S. schools were more into the “well-rounded” development of children.

Mrs. Wu, whose son was in second grade: [Schools] don’t care much about learning grades. They care about ability, like the ability to make crafts, or drawing. They have drawing competitions, singing competitions, etcetera, quite often. As to academic grades, they don’t care as much as we Chinese.

Mrs. Zhang, whose son is in first grade also: Here [U.S. schools] teach children to be independent, to be creative. Kids are developing well-rounded.

They take Arts class, make nice and pretty crafts. [Teachers] stress on “do-it-yourself” kind of ability. Well, in China, only physics or chemistry is the most important.

Contrary to what Epstein predicts, the model of generalization of skills did not bring about the anticipated partnership between teachers and parents, at least for these immigrant Chinese parents. Parent-teacher contacts were rare, and parent participation in school activities was low.

Parent-Teacher Contacts

Parents reported that opportunities for them to have an in-depth discussion with teachers occurred only once or twice per year at conferences, 15 minutes on each occasion. Usually such meetings were arranged after the summary student reports were distributed to parents. Schools set aside one or two days and parents were asked to pick a preferred time to meet the teachers. When parents found out the problems their children had experienced in school either from the reports or from their conversations with the children, they used these chances to communicate the problems with the teacher. Mrs. Wu, mother of a second grade son, Ming, once read in the report that the Physical Education (PE) teacher gave her son a low grade. She was curious about this and went to see the teacher.

Mrs. Wu: I met with the PE teacher once because my son seemed to have a problem in PE. My son couldn't understand the teacher. The teacher asked him to do the exercises, but he couldn't get it. So the teacher thought he was slow-minded. I told the teacher about it later. This semester, the PE teacher knew this and repeated himself a couple of times in the class. Also, my son has made fast progress in English. So the language problem is not so serious now. But back then, the PE teacher gave him a terribly low grade. My son is big and tall among his classmates. I might not be sure about his [English] reading or writing, but I sure knew he wouldn't be bad at sports.... So I went to see the teacher and asked him about the low grade. He told me that my son was slow-minded. So I asked what he meant by “slow-minded.” Then my son said he didn't understand what the teacher asked him to do in the class. The whole thing was made clear finally.

Mr. Wang had a talk with the teacher about his daughter Meng's English progress a couple of years ago. At the time, Meng had been in U.S. for one year and was transferred to a new school. She used to have an ESL teacher in the old school, but did not have one in the new school. Mr. Wang met the teacher and asked her if Meng could have extra ESL classes as she did in the old school.

Mr. Wang: The teacher was very nice. She said that if I worried about Meng's English, the school had an ESL teacher, too, and I could seek help from her.

But she also told me her own opinion on Meng's English proficiency. She said Meng spoke English just like the American kids did. She didn't think it was necessary to get her an ESL teacher. Anyway, I had a feeling at the time that the teacher thought Meng was good at everything. Actually, this was not what I knew about my daughter. The American teacher only picked the pleasant things to talk.

Author: Did you tell her your feeling?

Mr. Wang: Yeah, I did. But she seemed to be upset on hearing it. I could see that she was not happy about it. I said, I didn't think that Meng's English was good enough, especially in reading. She was not doing as well as other kids. After I said it, the teacher kind of made me feel "aha, are you complaining about my teaching?" She went like "eh, how come?" Actually, I didn't mean that [complaining] at all. I was just worrying that the child might still have [difficulties in language]. Later, I said to myself: in Rome, do as Romans do. So I never again mention things like this [to teachers].

Other parents thought the official parent-teacher meetings were not very productive. Parents felt they could not go deep enough in their conversations with teachers. Also, the time was too short; the parents could not occupy the teachers too long since more parents were waiting to meet the teachers, too.

Apart from the official meetings, parents would not take the initiative to contact teachers unless they spotted serious problems. They chose to visit teachers in school to discuss the problems or alternative methods of contacting teachers, for instance, in writing. For parents with significant difficulties in speaking English, writing might be an effective means of communication. Mr. Ding used to write letters to his daughter's teacher:

Mr. Ding: I wrote a letter to the teacher. Lin [his daughter] had a good friend in her class. That child could speak both Chinese and English. During classes, Lin didn't understand teacher's instructions. So the teacher sometimes asked this child to explain to Lin. In the end, this child became sort of like a little boss of Lin. This had a negative influence on Lin's self-esteem and confidence. She often complained to me: "why does that child know better than me? Why does that child always command me?" Obviously, [she] felt the suppressing pressure. This hurt her confidence...I wrote a letter asking the teacher to help her make more friends, not only restricted to this one child. Moreover, help her improve English both in speaking and in listening. Finally I requested, if the situation continued, I would like to move Lin to another class, or at least have the kids separated if Lin was to stay.

Mrs. Ding: The teacher noticed this and made effort to prevent it from happening again. Later, when Lin entered first grade, the two kids were put into different classes. [The information above] - was in kindergarten.

The relations between Chinese parents and the U.S. teachers stayed at a “business-to-business” level, unlike the personal level connections in China. Parents did not mention any intention to develop such personal relationships with teachers. Gift-giving from parents to teachers, which was common in China, did not happen often if it happened at all. Mrs. Zhang mentioned once about gift-giving in kindergarten.

Mrs. Zhang: We didn't know how the Americans handled things when we first arrived here. As time moved on, we didn't find much difference. Americans, Chinese, all the same. Like New Year's Day, Christmas, they gave gifts to teachers, too. At first we didn't know this. Other people told me so. They [Americans] gave the teacher a lot of stuff. One parent, her child in pre-school, didn't have a job. So, she had time to visit school. She told me those American parents also gave teachers lots of presents on Christmas, Thanksgiving, and so forth. Later, I came across this myself. It was the Christmas time. I went to pick up my son after school. I saw there were lots of gifts on the table. I thought they were the gifts parents prepared for the kids. Later, I found out they were for the teacher! Luckily I brought with me a little Chinese souvenir for the teacher too that time. I really meant to thank the teacher for her help with my son's English learning. Then, my son went to first grade. I didn't see parents giving gifts to the teacher again. So I didn't give her anything either. I asked another Chinese parent if she sent any gift to the teacher. She answered me: “Gifts? Of course not! I didn't even get to see her this semester!”

Mr. and Mrs. Zhang did not continue to give presents to teachers partly because they did not see gift-giving carry the same meaning in the U.S. schools as in China.

Mr. Zhang: Those gifts were little inexpensive stuffs. Parents gave them to the teacher just to show their thanks. They didn't intend to please the teacher. It was nothing like the gift-giving in China. When my son was in kindergarten in China, my mother, my son's grandma, sent gifts to the teacher's home, asking the teacher to take extra care of my kid. We paid the fees in full and did everything required by the kindergarten. But, my mother still insisted on visiting the teacher in private and gave her the gifts. She was worried that the teacher would care more about other children instead of our own kid. That was completely different. Here, we don't see it necessary to give gifts to teachers.

Generally parents were satisfied with teachers' work. In fact, parents with children in elementary school expressed the most satisfaction with teachers. They described teachers as caring, nice, and treating the children equally.

Mr. Ding: I feel in my heart that Lin's teacher likes her very much....This is very important! When the teacher likes a student, or at least the student feels that the teacher likes her, no matter if it is true or not, this is a big blessing for this kid. This child will constantly feel an encouragement. It is very hard [for a child] to have that feeling in China.

Mrs. Ding inserted: Lin's often thought about giving her teacher a hug. It would be impossible if she were in China.

Mr. Ding: We were very worried at the beginning. Our English was poor; Lin's English was poor also when she came to U.S. We were afraid she would be discriminated against. It turned out that she said her teacher liked her a lot. We had the same feeling since the teacher introduced her own kid to be Lin's friend. All my worries disappeared. This is so important! No matter if the teacher truly likes her or not, at least, the kid feels that teacher cares about her. It is not easy for a teacher to accomplish this. This teacher is very successful in this respect!

Parents with children in middle school or high school normally sang praises for teachers, also. Though two mothers thought the teacher-student ties were not as close in higher grades as in elementary school, generally they were still satisfied with teachers and schools.

In sum, parents' contacts with teachers were problem driven, with a specific purpose at a certain time. Despite the low frequency of contacts, many times the exchanges with teachers did benefit their children's development.

Parent Participation in School

Relative to connecting with teachers, parents were more active in attending the school activities, such as a scientific invention show, Christmas performances, open house, and so forth. Mr. and Mrs. Ding took part in almost all school events if possible. They saw the participation as one way to cultivate self-confidence in their daughter. They went to the events like the rest of the American parents so that their daughter would not feel that she was different from other American children. Conversation with some parents did indicate that the immigrant children might indeed have a fear of being viewed as different. Mr. Wang mentioned that his daughter, Meng, once asked him not to participate in a parent talent show held by her school. Mr. Wang wanted to take part in the basketball game with other parents and teachers. Meng did not want him to play, because she thought he was too short compared with her PE teacher and her friends' fathers.

All the parents I interviewed except one mother, Mrs. Tao, said they never volunteer in their children's schools. Mrs. Tao used to volunteer in her daughter Ning's elementary school. Ning finished second grade in China and entered

third grade when she first came to the U.S. Mrs. Tao spoke limited English, but she still volunteered in her daughter's class and enjoyed doing it.

Mrs. Tao: At that time, the teacher encouraged parents to go to the class. That would make it easier for her to communicate [with Ning]. Ning never learned English in China. I had classes with her. If Ning couldn't understand what the teacher was talking, I could tell her. Kind of coordination work. I went to her class for quite a period of time. The teacher was teaching in the front and I sat in the last row. When the teacher needed to pass around some handouts or paper or pencils, I went up to help her, assisting her work....I didn't go to her school every day, only once or twice per week. Sometimes, they had fieldtrips and the teacher would need two or three parents to help her take care of the children. Or sometimes, like Halloween, they needed people to paint pumpkins. I volunteered on those occasions also. I found it helpful to do this. I could know more about their [American] school life, teaching approaches, and so forth. So basically, when Ning was in third and fourth grade, I pretty much knew, like teaching in the school, her communication with teachers, the differences between her and other children, and how American children behaved in school. [Before that] I didn't know much about foreign kids' school performances. [I] never had the chance to see them.

Like other parents, Mrs. Tao often called American kids "foreign kids" even though she was fully aware that she and her family were the real foreigners in the United States. Later Mrs. Tao gave birth to a second child and did not have time to volunteer any more. Yet she believed volunteering could be very helpful, and she wanted to sit in Ning's classes if possible. Ning had been longing for her mother to go to school, too. Mrs. Tao mentioned that Ning often asked her, "Why don't you come to my classes any more, mom?" After Ning entered middle school, she managed to go to Ning's class only once.

Other parents received notices from school informing them of volunteer opportunities, also, but they never participated. When asked if they saw any influence of parents' volunteer work on children's school life, most parents responded negatively. However, Mrs. Wu recalled an interesting thing her son, Ming, told her about his friend Robert.

Mrs. Wu: My son said the kids all loved the computer class. One day, my son came home pretty upset. He said usually kids had computer class once every other week, but Robert could take computer class every week. I thought about it and came to the conclusion that it was because Robert's mom often volunteered as an assistant teacher. So this [parent's volunteer work] did make a difference. The teacher let him have more computer classes. Whatever he liked, the teacher would let him have it first.

Parents behaved differently toward various kinds of school participation. They took a relatively active stance toward events that involved more passive participation, like attending a drawing exhibition, open house, and so on, but mostly were indifferent to volunteer work, which required more time and energy input. Parents seldom attended PTO meetings because they found the meetings were “only about all kinds of reports, school budget report, principal report, and so forth,” which they could not understand.

Home-Based Social Capital

If Epstein was correct in that the educational model of “generalization of skills” inherently requires a close partnership between school and family to work to the advantage of children’s development, the loose connections between these Chinese parents and their children’s teachers would inevitably have an impact on their children’s learning and school experiences. Parenting practices within the home were especially interesting. With more autonomy at home, parents were more likely to adopt Chinese educational strategies. Yet, constrained by the dominant practices in the U.S. schools and the families’ situations, I suspected that those Chinese approaches could not be exercised to their full extent.

Most parents I interviewed held high expectation for their children’s educational attainment. They expected the children to receive a four-year college education at least; the college might not be as famous as Harvard or Yale, but certainly “not some community college.” They believed that education was highly correlated with one’s life chances. Mrs. Wang told her daughter: “If you want to live a decent life, you’ve got to study hard.” Mrs. Tao shared a similar view, but she thought education was even more crucial for one’s career in the U.S. than in China.

Mrs. Tao: In China, a student with graduate education may have the same salary as a person who only had a bachelor’s degree. This won’t happen in the U.S. People [in the U.S.] care a lot about your education and degrees. A Ph.D. graduate is meant to be paid at a certain level of salary. The degree does make a difference. In China, [people consider] social relations, acquaintances, nepotism, stuff like that.

Even though parents could not name specifically what professional path they would like their children to follow, they consciously or unconsciously had certain inclinations.

Mrs. Zhang: I asked [my son], “What do you want to do when you grow up?” “I want to be a policeman!” I said, “You are not strong enough.” The other day, he told me he wanted to be a doctor. I said, “Okay. You grow to be a doctor then.” He thought for a while and said, “No, that won’t do. I am afraid of

blood.” I laughed and asked again what he wanted to be. He thought for a long time and said, “I want to be a policeman.” I heard it and felt a little disappointed. I never gave it a serious thought on what he should be in the future, but when I heard that, I still couldn’t help my disappointment.

With parents’ high expectations and aspirations came strict monitoring and high pressure for school success. Parents defined success in the traditional Chinese way: academic success. Without in-depth and timely exchanges with the teacher, their knowledge about their children’s school experiences was limited to Friday folders, school reports and notices, and homework if there was any. They described U.S. education as “too relaxed” and “too indulging.” Following Chinese teaching approaches, parents believed that teachers should have sent a certain amount of homework so that children could review what they had learned during the day. Mrs. Wu used to ask the ESL teacher to send extra homework for her son to do at home. In lower grades, if teachers did not send homework, parents would give the children extra reading or math exercises to do after school. They would check the homework to see if the children completed it and understood the content. The homework assigned by parents included reading, math, and Chinese. It was said that teaching advanced math at home to their kids was a common practice among Chinese parents. They followed the elementary math textbooks bought from China to teach their children at home. Parents reported that the extra teaching at home improved their children’s school math performances. In higher grades, parents reported more difficulties in homework monitoring. Mr. Wang, whose daughter was in fifth grade, said that for some courses he could not understand the homework even if Meng asked him for help. A common complaint among these parents was about textbooks. The problem was there was no textbook for any class.

Mrs. Tao: There is no textbook whatsoever. In China, we have a book for Chinese, a book for math, and so forth, but they don’t. [The child] only brings back pieces of paper. There is no systematic curriculum. For example, we want to know what the child is supposed to learn this semester. In China, parents know what the children are taught in school. When the child needs us, we can help with her work. Here in the U.S., maybe [teachers] think there is no need for parents to teach the child. [Perhaps they think] children only need to learn in school; back home, they don’t need parents to help them....Well, if the child doesn’t learn well in school or didn’t receive a good grade, of course, parents want to help her. [But we] don’t know what to help, and how to help. We don’t know how the teacher teaches in class, like decimals, how the teacher explains to the kids. In China, [kids need to do] a lot of homework. [Kids here] don’t. One day they bring back one piece of paper, the second day they jump to another completely different

topic. Then after months have passed, they will come back again to the old topic.

Mr. and Mrs. Zhang's son, Hua, was only in first grade. Though the parents found themselves still capable to help with Hua's learning, they expressed serious concerns about the potential differences in their own teaching approaches and those of the teacher.

Mrs. Zhang: Hua brought back his reading materials from school. We took a look and thought they were too simple. Preschool kids can read them. Actually, we gave Hua much harder pieces to read at home. He has a [book of] children's Bible Stories. He can read that book. That one is much more complex than the ones given by school....

Mr. Zhang: However, I found an interesting thing. We think the kid is doing fine at home, learning much more advanced stuff than in school. But he didn't get his work 100% right in school. The highest grade is 1; he always gets 2s or 3s. What does this mean? It means his work still hasn't reached the teacher's requirement.

Mrs. Zhang: That's why I feel what we teach doesn't match what the teacher teaches in school...At home, he is doing advanced reading, advanced math...I think it is good enough for him. I don't know [why] that he doesn't do well in school. I think there is a mismatch between home education and school education. It is just not right!

Immigrant parents lack sufficient information about American schools' operation, teaching methods, and curriculum design. The benefits of advanced math class at home diminished along with the increase in students' school years. In higher grades, since children got used to the methods and teaching approaches in school, the incompatible content and methods they learned at home were quickly forgotten. Frequent communication with teachers, observation of classes, and active participation in school decision-making processes can bridge the gap in parents' knowledge about the U.S. education system. However, these Chinese parents did not adopt a proactive role in collaborating with the school and therefore rendered themselves disadvantaged in facilitating the children's ability to accomplish certain desired educational goals. The loose school-family ties diminished the expected partnership relations and benefits.

Among the interviewed parents, Mr. Wang held unique views on U.S. education and had an unusual definition of educational success. He thought American teachers did not care much about academic performance. Instead, they stressed cultural talents, like music, sports, and drawing. He did not think in U.S. society children had a big stake in education for their life chances.

Mr. Wang: When Meng first entered middle school, the school principal gave the parents a promise, which to me was very interesting. Unlike any of the

promises offered by schools in China, his promise was: every student would be willing to study in this school; if a child felt uncomfortable in this school, the parents should tell him and he would improve it. In China, the middle school principal would promise parents college enrollment rate, promise the kids the best, or at least one of the best, academic training in the city. Chinese schools promise those things. Here, [U.S.] schools don't guarantee that your kids learn best or receive good grades. They promise you the environment is comfortable and encouraging. This is the American promise. It is different. Americans say if you have a talent, develop it. If you don't, don't force yourself. If you say to teacher, I got a B and it was a problem. She won't admit this is a problem. Even if you have a C, it is not a problem either....Once I asked my colleague why some universities made a huge effort to run the basketball teams, and why some schools poured so much money into a school music band. Earlier, my daughter's school thought their music education was weak and dampened their reputation. So they hired a new principal and three music teachers. Later the school gave a concert. That involved a lot of efforts. I said to my colleague, why didn't the school put resources in teaching science, why did they do all this stuff. He told me if a school was poor in music or sports, it would be looked down upon. Sometimes, colleagues chatted about their kids' clubs, football team, or softball team. Parents would ask for leaves so as to take part in their kids' events. They made it a big deal. One time, a colleague missed his kid's activity because of a project at work; he raised up the issue in a group meeting with our boss. He said, for your project, I even missed the opportunity to attend my child's school event! The fact that he could so boldly complain to the boss indicated that such activities were very important to American families. Knowing this, sometimes when Meng wants to do something, I feel I shouldn't say no. I can't behave like we were still in China. I can't say "oh, you should study" or "you should do your homework." I think possibly we [Chinese] had different ideas [about education], and we should change them now.

His talk surprised me. I tried to say that American schools at least put some emphases on reading and math. This could be seen from the college entrance tests, SAT for instance. His response startled me even more.

Mr. Wang: In China, the career paths are limited. Everybody is competing to enter college in order to find a good job. It is different here. People don't have to go to college [to find a good job]. If you can get into a college, that is fine. If you fail, that is fine, too. The career choices are much wider than in China.

Viewing the U.S. society as ideally egalitarian, naturally he attributed less value to education in personal upward mobility, hence less emphasis on school achievement. Meng's school had an advanced math class in each grade, but she failed the entrance test. Mr. and Mrs. Wang did not know about the existence of the advanced class. When I was asking about tracking in Meng's school, they directly prompted the question to the child and then found out about the advanced math class. However, Mr. Wang did not regret not knowing this. "If Meng had wanted to get into the advanced class," he said, "she would have told me about it. If she did not want to be in that class, it was no use even if I made her."

Wang's wife did not agree with her husband's views. Such views may not be shared by the majority of immigrant Chinese parents, either. However, this single example could caution educators that, due to certain cultural stereotypes, parents may hold some misperceptions about dominant practices in the host culture, misconceptions that may jeopardize their children's development.

Intervening Factors

These parents were well educated. Some of them received graduate degrees in American institutions. Nevertheless, lacking connections with school and teachers, they failed to have their children take full advantage of their human capital. Both external conditions, such as time and the language barrier, and subjective perceptions of U.S. education hindered them from taking an aggressive role in their relations with their children's schools.

Time and Work

Parents complained about heavy work loads and insufficient time to spend with children or to visit school. All six fathers and three of the mothers were working full time. Except for the official parent-teacher meetings or cultural and social events that schools held for all parents, they seldom allocated extra time to meet the teacher individually and discuss with them children's school life. The time conflict partly resulted from financial pressures as well as these parents' immigrant status.

Mrs. Zhang: I feel that foreign parents [i.e., the American parents] spent much more time and money on their kids than Chinese parents. At least, the mothers, most of them don't work full time. So they can have plenty of time to take care of their kids. [Many of the mothers of my son's friends] only do part-time jobs. They have more time....It would be nice if I could take a part-time job only. I wish he [husband] could have a better and more stable income. A stable income, not necessarily very high, fifty thousand [per year] would be fine for us. Then I could find a part-time job and would be able

to visit my son's school a couple of times each week, to volunteer, to help, and to see how the Americans run their schools. At present, both of us have hectic work schedules. We don't have time to educate the child....I often feel exhausted. I am over-worked. I really wish I could work part-time, but my visa status won't allow that. That is a big problem!

Sometimes parents brought home their own stresses and frustrations from work, which could cast a worse influence on the children. The Tao's daughter, Ning, needed her father to help her with homework from time to time. Mr. Tao would blame her for learning too slowly in school.

Mrs. Tao: [My husband] usually gets very tired at work. Back home, he still needs to help [the daughter]. He is already stressed out during the day, and now sees the kid hasn't learned well in class. He would of course have a bad mood and ill temper. This sentiment is not good at all for the kid. She might feel hurt.

Although Mrs. Tao was a homemaker, her two-year-old young son occupied almost all her time and energy. Their income did not allow them to hire a nanny or babysitter. Teachman and colleagues (1997) found that parental income had a positive effect on reducing high school drop-out risk. However, such effect was involved in an interaction with parents' social capital, measured by parent-school and parent-children relations. At the same family income level, greater social capital enhanced the effect of income and less social capital diminished such effect on reducing the likelihood of dropping out of high school. It was unknown if the interaction between parental social and financial capital existed for other educational outcomes other than dropout risk. However, the experiences of these Chinese families led me to think it might be true. Financial restraints put employment pressures on both parents in the family and resulted in less time and energy available for children's education.

Language Barrier

English communication was considered to be a major problem for the parents. Even if some mothers did not have any job at all, they seldom paid visits to school because teachers "didn't understand what I was talking about." Sometimes children felt embarrassed by their parents' poor English level. Mrs. Wang had gone to her daughter's school once or twice. Each time she met someone in school, her daughter would say to the person "my mom doesn't speak English." Mrs. Wang felt that her daughter did not want her to speak in public, so she just became silent and never visited the school again. Mrs. Tao was the bravest one among the mothers. As mentioned earlier, she did not speak much English, but she kept volunteering as a class assistant until she gave birth to her second child.

Cultural Barriers

Unfamiliar with the explicit or hidden rules of the U.S. education system, these Chinese parents responded passively to school requirements. They received school notices about forthcoming events, requests for volunteering and donations, invitation to PTO meetings, and so on. Yet, without physical experiences in American schools, they could not empathize with the intangible cultural signals behind the activities per se. Some parents interpreted volunteer work as free labor needed by school. The view had some truth in it; but more importantly, with the volunteer request, the school and teachers made a gesture for community building, expecting parents' cooperation and support. Parents who missed this message would naturally see volunteer work as irrelevant to their children's well being.

As children entered higher grades, immigrant parents could not anticipate the possible decisions they and their children needed to make and, therefore, could not prepare ahead of time. Entering the middle school, for example, could be a big challenge for some children both emotionally and academically. Unless they knew of this potential challenge, parents could not get their children ready for it.

Perceptions of U.S. Education

Interestingly, though most parents agreed that closer relationships with teachers would benefit their children's learning and educational chances, and they admitted that their ties with school were not strong enough, they did not have anxiety about the status quo. On the contrary, they were quite contented with their children's educational outcomes. Compared with parents in China, these immigrant Chinese parents saw parent-teacher relations as holding less stake in their children's school success. Therefore, they deemed it not worth pursuing with heavy investments of time and energy.

Initially, I suspected that the rhetoric of meritocracy in the U.S. culture might lead the parents to believe that, unlike in China, generally in American society social connections were not pertinent to a person's education or career advancement. However, parents' responses dismissed my suspicions.

Mrs. Wu: Personal relations here are even more important than in China....

In the beginning, I did believe [in the U.S.] people got whatever they deserved. Nonsense! In my husband's company, the guy who is on good terms with their boss doesn't need to work as hard, and the boss could lay off any people, but not him!

Mr. Zhang: In my company, the Whites play with relationships, too. Like one guy, hates that guy, and then gossips to the manager about others. Just the same as in China, maybe not as blatant. You can't figure their relations out

on the surface. But in the back, they gossip about each other, flatter the manager, and so forth. It is all the same!

Parents all admitted to different degrees that social relations were important for adults and in business. Yet they did not think the same effect was applicable to U.S. schools. To maintain good relationships with teachers was a must in China, but was not necessary in the U.S., because they thought competition among Chinese students was fierce, and there the teachers had too large a power over students.

Mr. Zhang: Competition [in the U.S.] is not as strong as in China. Teachers in China have a great power over students. [They can] let you be a monitor, send you to partake in a contest, you know, make you the center of attention. Moreover, Chinese teachers often rank all kids from number one to number thirty-five! That is too much! In the U.S., they don't do it.

Mrs. Ding: [To please the teacher] is more than necessary [in China]. If the teacher has a prejudice toward your kid, or simply ignores your kid, or even speak to the child in a not-so-nice way, it can hurt the child's self-confidence. She may lose interest in school and in learning. Parents are all worried about that. So we give gifts to the teacher on holidays or festivals. Sometimes we have complaints, but we don't dare to speak out.

Mrs. Tao: [In China] if other parents give presents to the teacher and you don't, or you give the gift too late, the teacher treats your child differently. It happened in Ning's school [in China], too. Some parents had closer relations with teachers; in return, teachers would take better care of those kids.

In contrast to Chinese teachers, American teachers were regarded as "nice, caring, and treating students equally." They asserted with firmness that their children were not discriminated against by the teachers based on their ethnicity. Parents believed that regulations in the U.S. were more stringent than in China regarding teacher's power over students. They believed that U.S. teachers were well qualified and strictly followed the ethical codes of the profession. This perception dismissed parents' worries that teachers might treat other students better than their own children.

However, such perception alone was not sufficient to diminish parents' incentives to maintain a close relationship with teachers, because it could be even better if the teacher treated their children better than other students! This did not happen, for parents perceived no competition or a low level of competition among the American students. These parents mentioned that students in their children's class did not care about academic success. Mr. Wang, as reported earlier, took this to the extreme and thought the term "academic success" was meaningless.

Mr. Wang: Academic standing doesn't make a difference. It is the kid's interest that matters. If you like basketball, you can play basketball; if you don't like it any more, you can pick up another thing, say ping-pong.

In the U.S., children are assigned to certain public schools based on their residential district. Entrance into colleges is considerably easier in the U.S. than in China due to the smaller population and the larger number of institutions. Thus, students did not need to compete with their peers for the limited seats in the best elementary school or the best middle school and high school, as is the case in China. Seeing all these facts, parents lost their incentive to carefully build up and maintain relationships with teachers. As Mr. Ding put it, the outcome could not justify the investment!

Consciously or unconsciously, parents were still in a Chinese state of mind in evaluating family-school relations. Such relations were seen as an instrumental tool that oriented the needed but scarce resources to work to the advantage of their children in achieving educational goals. When the resources were believed to be abundant and competition relaxed, the tool was naturally rendered less valuable.

Conclusions

This study confirms Coleman's argument that human capital in parents will not transfer to the children automatically. The intergenerational transmission process is interrupted because immigrant parents are not familiar with norms and practices in the new education system. For immigrant families, parent-teacher relations do not function to impose shared norms on the children since the parents, lacking sufficient understanding about the new culture, may not acknowledge the norms in the host society. However, the higher volume of social capital inherent in the parents' networking with teachers can expedite the acculturation process both for themselves and for their children. For example, parents who volunteered to be a class assistant learned about American educator's teaching approaches and then could adopt similar methods when helping with their children's homework. In this sense, greater parent social capital – frequent exchanges with teachers on children's behaviors, homework monitoring, active volunteering, and so on – does facilitate the generation of human capital in children.

Relative to parent-teacher social connections in China, immigrant Chinese parents in the U.S. possess less social capital that they can mobilize to the advantage of their children's school success. In sharp contrast to parents in China, who aggressively seek and create opportunities to connect with teachers, these immigrant Chinese parents adopted a passive role in initiating contacts with

the school and teachers. The inconsistency in parent behaviors is not to be accounted for by the change of environment. In fact, both Chinese and American societies put high values on teacher-parent relations in their own unique ways. If immigrant parents simply followed the so-called mainstream practices, I would expect them to have much closer ties with teachers and schools. However, they did not. As Bourdieu (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) proposed, scholars should understand the agent's actions in the interactions between fields and habitus.

The comparatively loose ties between immigrant Chinese parents and teachers were not a signal that parents became indifferent to their children's educational achievement. Part of the habitus and rooted in their Chinese traditions, the parents' belief in the instrumental value of formal schooling had never changed. They still held high expectations for their children and valued academic success, diligence, and hard work. However, the parents changed their strategies regarding the use of the resources they possessed in response to the actual and perceived rules of the new field. The strategies that were considered to be effective in China lost their appeal in the U.S. Feasibility was a practical problem since the amount of resources the parents possessed (social, cultural, economic, and symbolic capital) had changed in the new field setting. As shown previously, time, work, language, and cultural barriers all disadvantaged the parents' generation and accumulation of social capital.

One interesting finding of this study was that participants might not be responding to the actual rules of the field, but to the rules they perceive to exist in the field, which may or may not be true. The view that American schools were free of competition seemed to me to be a misconception. Such a view was a product of the interaction between habitus and the field. The image of competition they carried in their mind was from their Chinese school experiences: students in the same class were ranked from the first to the last; children were fighting for the limited seats in the best elementary, middle, or high schools; resources were scarce relative to the population. They found this image was not applicable to the U.S. schools and, therefore, deemed that competition was low in this education system. What they failed to see was the hidden competition that was invisible to them. I used the word "invisible" because competition did exist, not at the individual level, but between private and public schools, between rich and depleted school districts, between the wealthy and the poor. The misconception that the U.S. school system was inherently egalitarian influenced the parents' evaluation of each kind of capital they actually or potentially possessed and thus changed their strategies in using their resources. I stress the norms or practices that are perceived by the participants to be dominant in the field, because for each of them, his/her subjective interpretations of the rules in the field are the most salient to his/her actions.

As Bourdieu rightfully pointed out: “Social realities exist...twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside of agents” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 127). These dual realities refuse oversimplified deterministic views in understanding the process of social reproduction.

Future Research

It is worth mentioning that the parent-teacher relations in China described in this study may not be applicable to the rural areas in China. The group of parents I interviewed all came from large cities. Parents from rural areas may have different patterns of social connections than the urban parents in regard to children's education.

Also, social networking as a process of acculturation is found to be a mechanism that transforms social capital of parents into human capital of the children. It will be interesting to see if this mechanism works for other ethnic groups, both immigrants and minorities. For instance, some minority parents may not fully acknowledge the hidden curriculum in the school system due to their ethnic/cultural background; their contacts with school teachers can also be viewed as an acculturation process.

Researchers need to be aware that the amount of social capital possessed by the agent, and the strategies in activating social capital are not independent from the social structures and the dominant practices in the field. However, individual actions are not completely determined by the external social structures. Practitioners are actively interpreting the phenomena in the field through their past experiences, thus constructing the realities that are most salient to their own life. These constructed realities may be true or may not be true. They may work to the advantage of the individuals' well-being, or they may compromise their well-being. Studies that investigate the impact of these subjective perceptions will enrich the body of literature on social reproduction and social stratification.

References

- Ariza, E. N. (2000). Actions speak louder than words – or do they? Debunking the myth of apathetic immigrant parents in education. *Contemporary Education*, 71(3), 36-38.
- Ariza, E. N. (2002). Cultural considerations: Immigrant parent involvement. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 38(3), 134-137.
- Bhattacharya, G. (2000). The school adjustment of South Asian immigrant children in the United States. *Adolescence*, 35(137), 77-85.
- Biernacki, P., & Waldorf, D. (1981). Snowball sampling: Problems and techniques of chain referral sampling. *Sociological Methods & Research*, 10(2), 141-163.

- Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*. (R. Nice, Trans.). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. G. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Bourdieu, P., & Wacquant, L. J. D. (1992). *An invitation to reflexive sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Carbonaro, W. J. (1998). A little help from my friend's parents: Intergenerational closure and educational outcomes. *Sociology of Education*, 71, 295-313.
- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, 94, S95-S120.
- Croninger, R. G., & Lee, V. E. (2001). Social capital and dropping out of high school: Benefits to at-risk students of teachers' support and guidance. *Teachers College Record*, 103(4), 548-581.
- Dika, S. L., & Singh, K. (2002). Applications of social capital in educational literature: A critical synthesis. *Review of Educational Research*, 72(1), 31-60.
- Epstein, J. L. (1990). School and family connections: Theory, research, and implications for integrating sociologies of education and family. *Organizations and Families*, 15(1-2), 99-126.
- Furstenberg, F. F., & Hughes, M. E. (1995). Social capital and successful development among at-risk youth. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 57, 580-592.
- Goldenberg, C., Gallimore, R., Reese, L., & Garnier, H. (2001). Cause or effect? A longitudinal study of immigrant Latino parents' aspirations and expectations and their children's school performance. *American Educational Research Journal*, 38(3), 547-582.
- Janesick, V. J. (1998). The dance of qualitative research design: Metaphor, methodolatry, and meaning. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Strategies of qualitative inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kim, E. (2002). The relationship between parental involvement and children's educational achievement in the Korean immigrant family. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 33(4), 529-540.
- Lareau, A., & Horvat E. M. (1999). Moments of social inclusion and exclusion: Race, class, and cultural capital in family-school relationships. *Sociology of Education*, 72, 37-53.
- Lindeman, B. (2001). Reaching out to immigrant parents. *Educational Leadership*, 58(6), 62-66.
- Lofland, J., & Lofland, L. H. (1995). *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis* (3rd ed.). Belmont: Wadsworth.
- Mason, J. (2002). *Qualitative researching* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- McNeal, R. B. (1999). Parental involvement as social capital: Differential effectiveness on science achievement, truancy, and dropping out. *Social Forces*, 78(1), 117-144.
- Mishler, E. G. (1986). *Research interviewing: Context and narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Morgan, S. L., & Sorensen, A. B. (1999). Parental networks, social closure, and mathematics learning: A test of Coleman's social capital explanation of school effects. *American Sociological Review*, 64, 661-681.
- Portes, A. (1998). Social capital: Its origins and applications in modern sociology. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 24, 1-24.
- Seidman, I. (1998). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences* (2nd ed.). New York: Teachers College Press.

- Teachman, J. D., Paasch, K., & Carver, K. (1997). Social capital and the generation of human capital. *Social Forces*, 75(4), 1343-1359.
- Zhang, C., Ollila, L. O., & Harvey, C. B. (1998). Chinese parents' perceptions of their children's literacy and schooling in Canada. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 23(2), 182-190.

Dan Wang is a doctoral student in the Department of Cultural Foundations of Education at Syracuse University. Her research interests include the educational experience of Chinese immigrants and the relation between education and the state in China. She has recently been working on her dissertation, an ethnographic study on how rural teachers in China, as capable moral agents, construct meanings of their work and negotiate their space in the top-down educational structure. Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Dan Wang, 1603 Hasbrouck Apts, Ithaca, NY, 14850, or address e-mail to dansyr@gmail.com