Expectations of Chinese Immigrant Parents on Schooling and Schools

19.11.2009

EDPS 360
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Asian immigrants, particularly from China, are the fastest-growing group of immigrants in both Canada and the United States (Li, 2008, p. 214). While Chinese immigrants are a very diverse population, there is a significant body of generalizations that may be drawn about their cultural attitudes toward school because of a common imperial and Confucian heritage, which stressed obedience, diligence, and academic excellence (Cheng, 1999, pp. 3, 5). In fact, Confucius believed that humans are distinguished by their capacity to learn (Hall & Ames, 1987, p. 45); it is no wonder that education is extremely important to the Chinese.

Some of the differences between the expectations of (North) American teachers and Chinese immigrant parents of what education and the school environment should be like are summarized in Cheng (1999, p. 6). These differences can be grouped into three broad categories: classroom structure and practices, teaching methods and content, and homework. Chinese parents bring with them expectations for their children's schooling based on the experiences of their own childhoods, and these expectations sometimes conflict with educational practices in North America. As I shall then examine, the conflicts often cause Chinese parents to take matters into their own hands, further widening the gulf between school and home educational culture.

In the traditional Chinese classroom, students are seated in rows, and the teacher is the authority in the classroom. Students are expected to sit quietly and take in the lesson, answering questions posed by the teacher only when called upon. Subjects (e.g. language, mathematics, history, etc.) are clearly demarcated. The most outspoken parent in Li's study, Mrs. Lou, felt that seating elementary school children in groups of desks led to distraction by peers rather than attentiveness to the teacher (2006, p. 164). The same parent, as well as others, also expressed the opinion that
split-grade classes were unnecessary and ineffective – they would prefer the entire class to be at
the same level so that the whole group can learn together with the same books, the same lessons,
and at the same pace (pp. 85, 155, 164).

Chinese parents seldom volunteer to help in classrooms, owing to lack of time, language
difficulties, as well as cultural differences (Li, 2006, p.98; Lo, 2009, p. 12). There is no such
expectation at schools in Hong Kong, so parents consider helping with raffles, field trips, and
signing notes sent home with children as sufficient involvement in the official school setting (Li,
2006, p. 98). Mrs. Lou offered the opinion that expecting parents to volunteer in the classroom
was an indication that the teacher was unable or unwilling to take full responsibility in the
classroom (Li, 2006, p. 99).

Despite this, teachers are held in high esteem by Chinese parents. In one of Li's case studies, the
parents were chastised by their son's teacher for putting the boy through after-school lessons in
six different subjects. The parents disagreed with the teacher's assessment that they were
“overprogramming” the child, but followed through with the teacher's suggestion to reduce the
after-school course load in deference to her authority: “[S]he is his teacher, and we respect what
she asks us to do” (2006, pp. 119-120).

Chinese parents were also unsatisfied with curricular integration between subject areas (Li, 2006,
p. 188). The idea of intensive single-subject, direct education was very important to these
parents, through which the values of discipline and focus could be instilled. Respect for the
teacher's authority and the support of direct instruction can be seen as stemming from the
traditional Chinese value of respecting one's elders. The child is seen as naive; adults know what
is best from experience. *We don't want you to make the same mistakes we did.* This is in
opposition to Western pedagogical values in which the child has an interactive role to play in
learning, and means that Chinese parents expect their children to learn by having information
given to them, whether it is in the form of facts, word definitions, rules of grammar, phonics, or
steps to solve a math problem (Cheng, 1999, p. 6). They prefer skills to be taught in a sequential,
step-wise order that builds upon previous steps (Li, 2006, p. 173). Factual information is what
matters and what is pragmatic; creativity, hypothesizing, and fantasy are strongly discouraged by
Chinese parents.

After-school activities are a significant part of many Chinese-Canadian/American children's
lives. Children are enrolled in music lessons and sports, because these are seen as essential parts
of the well-rounded person that are not emphasized enough at school (Li, 2006, p. 93). The
traditional “six arts” in which the ideal person should be proficient, as regarded by Confucius,
were the rites (literature and social customs), music, archery, charioteering, writing, and
mathematics (Hall & Ames, 1987, p. 45). From these “six arts” it is clear that training in
academics, sports, and music is viewed as the primary motivation of schooling, and that active
social citizenship, an important purpose of education in the Western tradition, is not as important.

So where formal schooling is seen as lacking in rigour, Chinese parents step in to pick up what
they perceive as the slack. Parents sometimes need to reteach or re-explain concepts, where their
own knowledge allows, that their children had trouble with at school. Many of these parents also

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1 In my experience, hypothesizing on a situation was acceptable only to the extent at which it would demonstrate
that one's parents/elders were the wiser and that one, then, ought to attend to their advice.
feel that Canadian/American schools are “all play and no work,” that children need to be kept busy in order to learn self-discipline and to prevent the cultivation of bad habits such as watching TV, and that enrolment in academic enrichment programs is a means to get more homework for them to do after school (Li, 2006, p. 94). The perceived emphasis on play and self-discovery at school is seen as detrimental to developing essential work and study habits such as responsibility and time management: “The school gave them too much freedom and it’s hard for me to make them study hard at home... I always have to get mad at [my daughter] if I want her to study” one parent says (Li, 2006, p. 109). “Each child should be given some homework to do,” says another. “Even some simple exercises would be ok... teachers should give [the children] more practice” (Li, 2006, p. 154). They consider homework to be exercises and written assignments; other activities such as reading are not considered to be homework (Li, 2006, p. 188).

Li (2006) claims that Canadian educators and Chinese immigrant parents are effectively engaged in a “cold war” in and out of school (p. 191), as the Chinese parent subculture utilizes its own cultural capital to negotiate space in the dominant culture (McLaren, 2003, p. 75). The two sides of the battle are contesting paradigms with sometimes incommensurable values, meanings, and standards. Chinese parents valued direct instruction and a traditional classroom, while the teachers valued student-centred instruction and an interactive classroom. Parental involvement and homework meant different things to both groups. Disciplined, able, and diligent students were the expected products of schooling for traditional Chinese parents, while socially involved, creative, and curious learners were the goal of the mainstream teachers. And rather than accommodate the differences and make compromises, each faction imposes their paradigm in their own space: the teachers at school and the parents at home.
But who are the real victims of the conflict? It is the children. Sometimes parents' strategies in asserting their educational values comes at the cost of depriving the child of an opportunity to engage in learning – for example, a mother's insistence on his son to read non-fiction books instead of the novels that he himself wants to read would have a negative impact on his literacy development (Li, 2006, p. 200).

Constantly caught in the conflict between two worlds, they find themselves taking sides or withdrawing altogether. Some come to resent their parents' emphasis on academics and protest having extra homework and after-school activities. Others lose interest in school when they fail to meet teachers' expectations because of the commitments and expectations at home. Some lose the desire to learn completely. Another group survives, but few come through the experience of school unscathed.

To better engage and encourage Chinese parents to take an accommodating approach and perhaps alleviate some of the disparities in paradigms between educational practices in school and home, one strategy could be to send home information packets describing teaching methods, philosophy, and curricula. A greater awareness of what is being taught can help parents support their children's learning at home and a framework over which they can discuss their concerns with the school. Exhortations to come to parent-teacher conferences are not enough because parents may not feel confident speaking English. Written communication such as notes or emails can be more effective in initiating a constructive dialogue with the parents, where they have the benefit of time to phrase a response. When explaining or demonstrating teaching methods to
parents (Lo, 2009, p. 15), it may be useful to point out the specific performance objectives of a
task in addition to the broader conceptual objectives, and being careful not to put excessive
pressure on the parents to adopt the teacher's methods (it is better to leave the home/school
cultural gap where it stands rather than stifle diversity and cause further distrust in the school
system by patronizing them). Finally, having Chinese-Canadians present on staff or access to a
bicultural counsellor in schools where Chinese students form a significant part of the population
would be indispensable – both in facilitating communications with parents in their home
language, or sharing their cultural knowledge, expertise and experiences with non-Chinese
teachers.
References


