

Chapter 6

Chinese Immigrant Parents' Involvement in Their Children's School-Based Education: Behaviours and Perceptions



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Abstract This chapter explores how Chinese immigrant parents are involved in their children's school-based education and what factors shape the formats of their involvement. Twelve Chinese immigrant families were interviewed. Data analysis revealed that Chinese immigrant parents believed that parental involvement was beneficial to both the school and children and they involved themselves in school-based activities regardless of personal experiences. However, generally speaking, participants did not go to their children's school without teachers' invitation. Language barrier, lack of time and energy and unfamiliarity with the Canadian school culture were reported as the main factors that limited participants' involvement in school-based activities. Particularly, new immigrants often felt intimidated to talk to teachers since they did not know what they can say and what not to say given their unfamiliarity with the Canadian school culture.

Keywords Parents' school involvement · Chinese immigrant parents · Culture Language barrier · Parent–teacher relations

Introduction

Education should not take place only between teachers and students. Parents can play a significant role. Involvement of parents in education can happen both in school and at home (Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, & Hoover-Dempsey, 2005). It can take

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different formats such as parenting, communicating between home and school, volunteering in school events, home learning, participating in school decision-making and collaborating with the community (Epstein, 2001). The impacts of parental involvement in children's education have attracted much attention from scholars for decades (Brough & Irvin, 2001; Epstein, 1995; Taylor & Lopez, 2005; Zellman & Waterman, 1998). Relevant studies have documented that effective parental involvement leads to students earning higher grades and test scores (Brough & Irvin, 2001; Fan & Chen, 2001; Jeynes, 2007), reducing the achievement gap between high and low performing students (Lee & Bowen, 2006) and increasing positive behaviour and emotional development of children (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002; Taub, 2008; Taylor & Lopez, 2005). Most recently, Jeynes (2012) conducted a meta-analysis of 51 studies to examine the relationship between various kinds of parental involvement programs and the academic achievement of K-12 school children. Results indicate a significant relationship between parental involvement programs and academic achievement, both for younger and for older students. Parental involvement programs, as a whole, were associated with higher academic achievement.

Up to today, the overall positive impacts of parent involvement have been well accepted in spite of the fact that the type of parental involvement and the context of involvement can generate different impacts on students' school achievement and behaviours (Jeynes, 2005a; McNeal, 1999). As a result, USA has elevated parental involvement in schools to a national priority to address such issues as the large number of failing schools and increased achievement gap between white students and ethnic minority students (Lewis, James, Hancock, & Hill-Jackson, 2008). In Canada, Ontario Ministry of Education issued a parental engagement policy to guide its implementation at schools, boards and the ministry (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010; Wong, 2015).

Within the past two decades, there has been a rapid growth of Chinese immigration in Canada. For example, Citizenship and Immigration of Canada (2015) reported that over 314,000 Chinese changed their home residence from China to Canada in the decade between 2005 and 2014. People with Chinese ancestry have become the second largest minority group in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2013). Due to the Canadian immigration policy, most recent Chinese immigrants were highly educated professionals and financially independent before they moved to Canada (Guo & DeVoretz, 2006). As a unique group, the involvement of Chinese immigrant parents deserves special attention given their different views and practices in education and parenting (Jiang, Zhou, Zhang, Beckford, & Zhong, 2012; Liu, 2015). Howard and Reynolds (2008) stated that most of the general parental involvement literature fails to fully consider the role of race and class when examining parenting practices within schools. This study of Chinese immigrant parents' involvement in education will address such a gap in the literature.

Our research team have been conducting comprehensive studies to examine how Chinese immigrant parents get involved in their children's education, home-based and school-based. Topics explored have included parent-teacher communication (Jiang et al., 2012), parent-children communication (Liu, 2015), parental involvement in afterschool music education (Zhang, 2016), parent involvement in home-

based activities (Zhou & Zhong, in press) and parental involvement in school-based activities. The demographic, social, language and cultural factors were explored to understand the behaviours and perceptions of Chinese immigrant parents' involvement in education. This paper reports the findings regarding their school-based involvement. The central research question for this study was how Chinese immigrant parents engaged themselves with schools for their children's education. Insights of the study will inform school administrators and teachers to develop better partnership with immigrant parents.

Literature

Parents' socio-demographic factors such as family income, occupational status, educational level and relationships influence the ways they get involved in their children's education (Coleman, 1998; Perna, 2004). Studies have identified a correlation between parents' socio-economic status (SES) and their involvement (Benson & Martin, 2003; Inaba et al., 2005; Shumow & Harris, 2000). For instance, in a study exploring the correlation between parents' school involvement and their work status and family income, Benson and Martin (2003) found that parents holding low SES participated less in the schools than their higher SES counterparts due to inflexible work schedules, the need to take more jobs and/or fatigue from work. Lareau (2003) found that middle-class white and black parents were more strategic in intervening in their children's schools than were black working-class parents.

Studies have suggested that parents from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds may view and interpret the meaning of parental school involvement differently (Jeynes, 2005b; Juang & Silbereisen, 2002; Mau, 1997). For instance, some cultures such as Chinese culture (Guo, 2011) and Hispanic culture (Espinosa, 1995) view it as rude for a parent to intrude into the life of school and the parents from these cultures prefer to get involved in their children's education at home (this is changing in Chinese culture. See Guo, Wu, & Liu in Chapter 6 in this book). In contrast, parents from Western cultures may spend much time in their children's school because their cultures encourage establishing a closer parent-school relationship (Hill & Taylor, 2004). Regardless of their socio-economic statuses, Chinese American parents are more likely than European parents to spend time helping their children at home (Kao & Tienda, 1998). Similarly, Li (2005) pointed out that Asian immigrants tend to be more involved in their children's education outside school than in school.

Chinese usually see education as the most important means to acquire personal advancement, high social status, wealth and respect. Particularly, they place great emphasis on academic achievement to achieve such social mobility (Dyson, 2001; Li, 2001; Zhou, 1997). This value about education is carried into their new places of residence. They do not only actively re-educate themselves, but also hold high

expectations of their children's education. They promote high levels of educational attainment for their children to compensate for the anticipated discrimination in the job market (Kao, 1995).

With high expectations of their children's education, Chinese immigrants often get actively involved in their children's education (Guo, 2006). It is well known that Chinese parents assign extra homework to their children and register them in many afterschool programs (Li, 2001; Louie, 2001). However, less is known about how they are involved in the school-based activities. Studies of Latin American immigrants' education involvement have shown that immigrant parents often get less involved in school-based activities and that could be mistaken as lack of interest in their children's academic work (Commins, 1992). Guo (2006) also noticed that it was difficult to get English-as-a-second language (ESL) parents, including Chinese parents, involved in K-12 education, and the absence of ESL parents from school was often misinterpreted as parents' lack of concern about their children's education.

Theoretical Framework

Sociocultural Theory

This study employed sociocultural theory as its theoretical framework. Sociocultural theorists argue that human development is essentially social, deriving from human social relations and situated in interpersonal, socio-historical as well as sociocultural contexts (Rogoff, 2003; Rogoff & Angelillo, 2002). A key feature of the sociocultural approach is an examination of human development that is based on not only the qualities that reside within an individual, but also the social interactions in broader social and cultural contexts.

Sociocultural contexts affect human development at an interpersonal level through face-to-face interactions and at a sociocultural level through participation in cultural activities. John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) state that human activities take place in cultural contexts, are mediated by language and other symbol systems and can be best understood when investigated with regard to their historical contexts. Also, different social and cultural contexts create and reflect different outcomes in terms of human behaviour (Rogoff, 2003; Vygotsky, 1987).

Sociocultural theorists examine what kind of social practices provide the proper context for the development of human mind and how human beings construct contexts (Li, 2001). In the process of adapting themselves to the host society, Chinese immigrants' values and behaviours, including their perspectives and behaviours of involvement in their children's school education, will shape and be shaped by the new social and cultural system. Sociocultural theory is helpful in understanding how Chinese immigrant parents construct their parental practices based on their previous experiences, Chinese cultural values, a new cultural context, as well as how they pass on their cultural values through parenting.

Parental Involvement Model

While sociocultural theory helps us explain human behaviours and development at the macro-level, an in-depth understanding of human behaviour requires psychological analysis (Mishra, 2013). Therefore, our study referred to a psychological model of parental involvement developed by Walker et al. (2005). Modifying the model of parental involvement proposed by Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997), Walker et al. (2005) classify parental involvement as two types: school-based and home-based (Fig. 6.1). They explain parents' involvement decisions from three psychological aspects: (a) parents' motivational beliefs, (b) parents' perceptions of invitations for involvement from others and (c) parents' perceived life context. Parents' motivational beliefs are defined as their self-constructed role and self-efficacy for getting involved in their children's education. Parents' perceptions of invitations for involvement from others entail their perceptions of the general invitation for involvement from the school and the specific invitation from the teacher and children. Parents' perceived life context refers to their beliefs about whether they have time, energy, skills and knowledge to get involved in children's education.

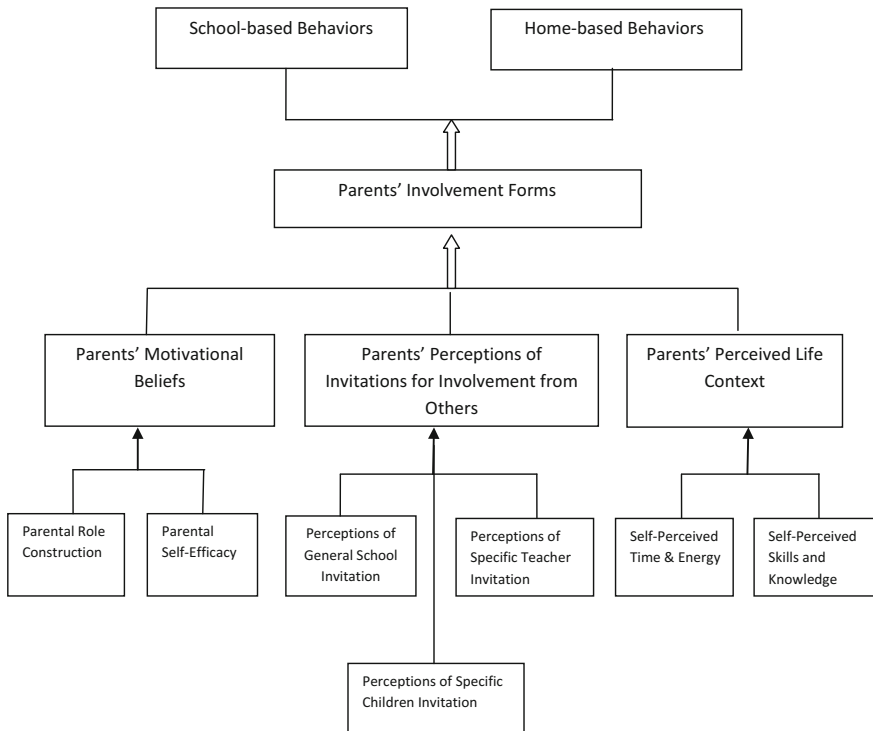


Fig. 6.1 Walker et al.'s (2005) model of the parental involvement process

Walker et al.'s (2005) model was developed largely from the studies of white parents. Compared with these parents, immigrant parents have a unique social and cultural context. Chinese parents face various challenges due to the discontinuity they experience in multiple areas including language, cultural values, employment, and different social and education systems. Their Chinese cultural values, education backgrounds, financial resources and ability to cope with the challenges will exert influence on any one of the three psychological constructs and consequently have impact on their involvement in children's education. Past studies have actually provided some evidence for this impact (Jeynes, 2003; Li, 2005). Therefore, while this model of parent involvement provides us general guidance for our study, we simultaneously examine its feasibility in explaining Chinese immigrant parents' behaviours and perspectives in school-based involvement.

Methodology

The study was conducted in a south-west Ontario city, which is the fourth most ethno-culturally diverse city in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2013). With a relatively mild winter, its proximity to the USA, low costs of living and the existence of a large Chinese community, this city has attracted an increasing number of Chinese immigrants. Since Chinese children have appeared on almost all school campuses across the city, the region becomes a significant location for studies of Chinese parents' school involvement.

The nature of this study is qualitative, using interview as the main data collection method. Strauss and Corbin (1990) define qualitative research as "any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification" (p. 17). Qualitative research is interested in the process and meaning of experience rather than outcome (Creswell, 2012). It attends to the rich descriptions that emerge from participants' contextual experiences and helps the researchers understand their participants and the sociocultural contexts within which they live (Creswell, 2013). It benefits researchers in gathering in-depth data by asking questions and listening to participants' descriptions in their own language and on their own terms in an authentic world (Patton, 2002).

Participants

With assistance from a local Chinese association, twelve Chinese immigrant couples were recruited to participate in this study on a voluntary basis. All participants were from mainland China and had at least one child attending elementary schools when the study took place. The rationale for selecting participants from mainland China was because it had taken over Hong Kong and Taiwan as the largest single source of Chinese immigrants to Canada since 1997, and this trend has continued to today

(Citizenship and Immigration of Canada, 2015). The major reason we chose parents of elementary school age children was because studies have indicated that parents tend to become less involved in their children's schooling at the high school level (Adams & Christenson, 2000; Grolnick, Kurowski, Dunlap, & Hevey, 2000; Simon, 2004). In addition, we selected participants from those Chinese couples who had at least one work income and intentionally excluded those families with no work income. The families without work income normally come to Canada with financial resources, which pull their adaptation process off the main track of most Chinese immigrants' acculturation.

Table 6.1 presents the background information of the twelve participating families at the time of data collection, including their education, occupation in China and Canada, years of residence in Canada and their children. Six of the twelve families had one child, and the other six had two children. For the families with one child, one family had a son and five a daughter. Among the six families with two children, four families had one son and one daughter and two families had two sons. The majority of the families were highly educated professionals. Except for one mother who had a college diploma, the rest of the parents had received university degrees before they came to Canada. At the time of data collection, four parents had obtained a doctoral degree, eight a master's degree and two a bachelor's degree from Canadian universities. One father was finishing his master's degree, and two mothers were completing a bachelor's degree from Canadian universities. Seven parents did not pursue a Canadian degree. Seven families had resided in Canada for more than ten years and five families for less than five years. For the convenience of reporting, we use FF1 referring to the father from family one, and MF1, the mother from family one. Such abbreviation goes through the 12 families.

Data Collection

Rubin and Rubin (1995) stated that the researcher using qualitative interviews is "not looking for principles that are true all the time and in all conditions, like laws of physics; rather the goal is understanding of specific circumstances how and why things actually happen in a complex world" (p. 38). Typically, the researcher develops a set of related questions geared towards discovering what people do, think and feel, how they account for their experiences and actions, and what opportunities and obstacles they face (Berg, 2009; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data in this study. A set of open-ended questions were developed to collect self-reported information about participants' experiences with, perspectives of and expectations about their involvement in their children's school education. Particularly, the challenges and confusions they had in their attempts to become involved in school education were explored. Semi-structured interviews provided enough room for participants to interpret the questions asked and express their general views or opinions in detail, and meanwhile allowed the researchers to maintain some control over the flow of the topics (Berg, 2009).

Table 6.1 Background information of the 12 families

Participants		Education	Occupation		Years in Canada
			China	Canada	
Family 1	Father	Ph.D.*	Science researcher	Mechanical engineer	13
	Mother	B.Sc.	System engineer	Homemaker	
	Son	Grade 2			
	Daughter	Sophomore			
Family 2	Father	B.Sc.	Engineer and manager	Labour worker	4
	Mother	B.Sc.* (finishing)	Accountant	University student	
	Son	Grade 1			
Family 3	Father	Master*	Software engineer	Technician	4
	Mother	B.Sc.* (finishing)	Software engineer	University student	
	Daughter	Grade 3			
Family 4	Father	Ph.D.*	Professor	Electrical engineer	15
	Mother	Master*	Professor	Mechanical engineer	
	Son	Grade 4			
	Son	Grade 11			
Family 5	Father	MBA*	Department manager	Labour worker	3
	Mother	College diploma	Technician	Labour worker	
	Daughter	Grade 7			
Family 6	Father	Master*	Science researcher	Computer engineer	14
	Mother	Master*	Science researcher	Accountant	
	First Son	Grade 4			
	Second Son	Grade 11			
Family 7	Father	B.A.	Businessman	Self-employed	13
	Mother	Master	Medical doctor	Massage therapist	
	Daughter	Grade 7			
Family 8	Father	Master*	Professor	Computer engineer	4.5
	Mother	Master*	Journalist	Homemaker	
	Son	Kindergarten			
	Daughter	Grade 5			
Family 9	Father	Ph.D.*	Scientific Researcher	Computer engineer	14
	Mother	B.Sc.*	Medical doctor	Public health consultant	
	Daughter	Grade 3			
	Son	Freshman			
Family 10	Father	M.B.A.* (finishing)	Marketing manager	College student	3
	Mother	B.A.	Interpreter	Self-employed	
	Daughter	Grade 6			
Family 11	Father	B.Sc.	Computer engineer	Mechanist	11
	Mother	B.Sc.*	Librarian	Learning commons specialist	
	Daughter	Grade 7			
Family 12	Father	Master*	Editor	Homemaker	13
	Mother	Ph.D.*	Professor	Professor	
	Son	Grade 3			
	Daughter	Freshman			

Note * = degree obtained in Canada

Participating parents from the same family were interviewed together. Interview locations were chosen based on the convenience and comfort of the participants. Participants were informed that they could choose to be interviewed either in English or in Mandarin. All participants chose Mandarin since it is the mother tongue of the participants and the researchers. This assured an effective and accurate communication between the researchers and the participants.

Most interviews lasted approximately 60–90 min and were audio recorded. However, two couples felt uncomfortable to have their voices recorded. Each of their interviews took about two hours so that the researchers had time to note down their responses. Primary data analysis began “immediately after completing the first interview” (Maxwell, 2004, p. 77) so that the following interviews were informed by what was learned from previous ones regarding what questions were asked and in what ways they were asked. The themes in early interviews were clarified with more probing in later interviews.

Field notes were taken to record the information that the audio recorder could not catch, such as interview time and location, participants' gestures and specific expressions during the interview, and the quick insights the researchers might come up with during the interview. These field notes served as a reminder for the researchers to recall what happened in the interviews when transcribing and analysing the interview recordings. Some information revealed from informal dialogues before or after the interview was recorded in the field notes as well, which provides additional data beyond the tape recording.

Data Analysis

After each interview, the researchers listened and transcribed the recording if time permitted. Follow-up phone calls were made within one week of the completion of the face-to-face interview to check whether participants had any information they wanted to add or to ask them to elaborate on some points they talked about during the interview. The interview notes of those two non-recorded interviews were sent back to the participants to confirm the accuracy. Interviews were transcribed and analysed in Mandarin. Some typical statements participants made during interviews were translated into English when we decided to include them in the report as quotations. The data analysis was cross-checked by both researchers who were each proficient in English and Mandarin.

Berg (2009) suggests that researchers conduct both qualitative and quantitative analyses on content in order to produce a comprehensive understanding of the data. While qualitative analysis deals with the themes and antecedent-consequent patterns of theme, quantitative analysis deals with duration and frequency of theme. In this study, we conducted quantitative analysis to collect information about questions such as how many participants participated in parent–teacher conferences and how many of them had overall positive experiences with their contacts with schools. It was simply to tally participants' responses embedded in their interviews. Qualitative analysis was

used to answer questions such as why participants participated or did not participate in parent–teacher conferences and what their experiences, concerns and expectations looked like with their involvement in school education. Qualitative analysis was much more complex than the quantitative process since it involved a process of coding and recoding. Berg states that the process of coding can employ both deductive and inductive approaches. The deductive approach uses some categories suggested by a theoretical perspective, literature review, research questions or interview questions. It creates analytical categories for the researcher to start assessing data. In contrast, the inductive approach begins with the researchers immersing themselves in the documents in order to make sense of them. When analysing our data, we were aware that we looked for the evidence of participants’ experiences and challenges with school involvement, which served as analytical categories. However, our coding followed an open process (Strauss, 1987). When we initially read over the data, we noted down any significant items on the documents without limiting our attention to any preset topics. In later stages, initial codes were merged into significant themes. For each theme, there were a few subthemes to support the main concept. In the process of data coding, a constant comparative analysis was used (Schwandt, 2001). It involved taking one piece of data and comparing it with all others that might be similar or different in order to develop assumptions about the possible relationships among various pieces of data.

Findings

School-Based Involvement

Responding to the question about their perspectives on school involvement, all participants expressed a belief that school involvement is positively associated with their children’s educational development. They listed the following potential benefits of parental involvement: (1) parents get information about their children’s academic performance and behaviours at school; (2) parents and teachers know the expectations of each other; (3) parents have a chance to meet other parents and share experience in educating their children. By gaining this information, participants believed they could provide better support to their children. For instance, when asked about the connection between parental involvement in school activities and their child’s development, MF12 said, “Through attending school activities, we know our child’s school performance and know what is going on in the school. Thus, we can offer better help for our child’s development”. MF9 stated, “I like to talk with other parents when I meet them in school. I talk to them about how they educate their children. I also get more information about the school by talking with them”. The types of school involvement participants reported included parent–teacher conference, fund-raising, attending school performances, volunteering and serving on the parent council.

Parent–Teacher Conference

All participants reported that they attended parent–teacher meetings regardless of whether or not language was a barrier. MF5 stated that her English was not good, but she still attended the conference with her husband: “Although my English is not good, I like to go, sitting beside my husband. I want to know all the information about my daughter instead of staying home waiting for a report from my husband”. Sometimes, both parents went to the meeting together. Other times, only one parent had time to go to the meeting. For instance, MF9 said, “My husband and I tried to arrange the time to attend the parent–teacher conference together. However, most of the time, I attend this conference on my own since my husband is too busy”.

The number one topic that participants often asked about during the parent–teacher conference was their children’s academic achievement. For instance, MF8 responded, “I asked about my daughter’s academic performances in school, her weaknesses and strengths in each subject. I asked for teachers’ suggestions about how I can assist her at home”. Similarly, MF9 said:

I asked the teacher about my daughter’s academic achievement such as whether she likes to ask questions in class, whether she is actively involved in group work, what kind of things I can do to help my daughter’s academic development at home, and so on.

The academic emphasis was particularly strong for recently arrived families (F2, F3, F5, F8 and F10). For instance, MF2 had been in Canada for four years at the time of data collection. She remarked, “I always ask my daughter’s academics. Academic is the most important thing for school children”. MF3 had been in Canada for four years. She said:

I asked the teacher about whether my daughter could catch up with her peers in academics, and whether she had any language difficulty in school. When we moved to Canada, she had finished grade 3 in China. My English is not good, so I am concerned about my daughter’s language proficiency.

Besides academic achievement, participating parents who arrived in Canada earlier also asked about their children’s social and moral behaviours. For instance, MF4, who had resided in Canada for fifteen years, said, “In addition to asking my son’s academic performance, I also ask whether my son respects teachers, whether he follows school rules, and whether he is getting along with other children”. These parents were found to be more concerned about school events as well. For instance, family 1 arrived in Canada over thirteen years prior to the study. FF1 said:

We also want to know what and when school events are going to take place, such as children’s show, swimming competition, and fundraising. When I get this information, I can arrange time to attend these activities, or my wife can take part in these activities according to her availability.

Family 6 had been in Canada for fourteen years. MF6 said:

I am not concerned much about my son’s academics because the teacher always tells me that my son is doing very well. He always gets A’s. Beside academics, I also want to know what is happening or what is going on in the school so that I can manage to get actively involved in these activities. As well, I can give my child some instructions.

Fund-raising

Participating parents actively supported their children to participate in different types of fund-raising activities. Some parents encouraged their children to sell chocolates in the community for their schools. Others cooked food at home and let their children sell it to raise fund for their schools. MF8, a homemaker, said, "I learnt from other parents how to bake cookies. My daughter took cookies I made to school and sold them to her schoolmates. Then, she gave the money to school". FF7 said, "Sometimes, my daughter brings home book orders. I usually buy some for my daughter [so that the school can get some money from my order]".

Participants believed that fund-raising contributes to school and they all would like to take part in these activities when they were able to. FF9 remarked, "The public schools in China do not ask parents to raise fund to support school projects. However, since my child's school here expects and encourages parents and children to raise fund and [I believe] it is good for the school, we do our best to support this activity".

Some participants stated that participation in fund-raising activities not only benefitted the school but also provided opportunities for their children to develop their social skills. For instance, FF3 expressed his view on fund-raising:

Participation in school fundraising not only benefits the school, but also the child. To raise funds, children are sometimes required to sell chocolates. We drive her and stand far away. I watch her knocking at the doors and talking to either our friends or strangers to sell chocolates. My daughter is very shy. This activity helps her develop social skills.

Attending Children's School Performance

The majority of parent participants, ten out of the twelve families, remarked that they usually attended their children's school performances such as school concerts and sport events. FF1 narrated his experience of attending a Christmas celebration: "My wife and I attended his Christmas performance last year. While my son was singing and dancing with his peers on the stage, we were so proud of him. I videotaped his fabulous performance". MF9 said, "My husband and I often go together to attend my daughter's shows in school. If my husband is too busy, I will go to the show myself".

Participants commented that to attend children's performance is a way to express how much they care and support their children. They believed that children would have a sense of pride when they knew that their parents were present in their performance, as MF11 stated:

A child needs support and encouragement from parents. When my husband and I took part in my daughter's performance, my daughter was very happy and excited. She even drew a picture, which depicted a couple watching their daughter's show in school. That picture was put up on the classroom wall by her teacher.

Fieldtrips

In terms of fieldtrips, two mothers (MF1 and MF8) and one father (FF12), who were homemakers, stated that sometimes they assisted teachers to supervise students in fieldtrips. MF8 said, "I don't work, so I go to fieldtrips. I feel good that I can do something for the school". MF1 perceived that her English proficiency was not good enough to communicate with native English speakers, but she would like to volunteer herself as a fieldtrip assistant if there were some Chinese children in a fieldtrip. FF12 remarked, "Volunteering makes me feel that I could contribute to the school".

Parent Council

Among the 12 families, only two mothers (MF4 and MF12) reported that they were members of parent council. In regards of her understanding of parent council, MF4 remarked:

The parent council aims to involve parents into a school's decision-making process. Through the parent council, parents can voice their opinions about school issues and contribute to the on-going school plans and events... By being a parent council member and attending its monthly meeting, I get to know what the school is going to do and provide my opinions for many school issues. It also broadens my knowledge and understanding of the Canadian school culture, which will eventually help me take appropriate ways to raise my child.

In regard to her reasons for participating in the parent council, MF12 stated:

My son is a little bit slow in learning. So I pay close attention to what is happening in school. As an immigrant parent, I have realized that Canadian school system is different from China. I hope the school and parents can better understand each other and I want my voice to be heard.

For the rest of ten families, four knew the function of parent council but never joined it, another four had heard of it but were not sure about its exact function, and the rest two had never heard about it. The researchers explained the function of parent council to the parents who had no knowledge about it during the interviews. When being asked whether they wanted to join this organization, these ten families provided a negative response. They believed that it was the school's responsibility to make decisions on school issues and parents should just follow the school's decision rather than voice their own opinions. In this regard, FF1 stated, "I trust the school. As a parent, we try our best to support the decision the school makes". MF10 said:

We are not familiar with the Canadian school system. In China, schools do not ask parents to engage in school governance. It is the school's responsibility to make decisions and tell us what to do. What parents should do is to follow school decisions and to help our children at home.

Limitations for School Involvement

Although all participants got involved in some types of school-based activities, they remarked that they would not do so without an invitation from the school or teachers. They provided several reasons for the limited school involvement: lack of time, language barriers, unfamiliarity with the Canadian school system, and different cultural values.

The lack of time was the most commonly cited reason. Apparently, school activities took place during weekdays when many Chinese parents either were at work or attended university classes. At the time of this study, FF8 just found a position after years of searching for a job. He said:

It is very difficult to find a job now...there is a lot of pressure at work. As a minority here, I have to work very hard and perform much better than mainstream people so that I can keep my job. I really do not have time [for school involvement].

Being a university student, MF2 said, "I am very busy with my university courses. There are many reading and writing assignments. I do not have enough time to attend school activities except for the parent-teacher conference". As a labour worker, MF5 expressed a similar point:

I do labour work for 10 hours each day. When I return home, I am exhausted but unfortunately have to do housework. I really have no energy to attend my daughter's school events. If I ask for a leave from my work, I will lose salary. As a new immigrant family, seven or eight dollars are important to my family. I need the time to earn a living.

Language barrier is another reason that prevented some Chinese immigrant parents from getting involved in school-based activities. MF1, a homemaker, talked about her intention to volunteer in school fieldtrip: "I have time, but my English is not good. I would volunteer only when I knew there were some Chinese children attending the fieldtrip. So, I can offer help in my mother tongue". This holds especially true for the recently arrived parents. FF2 had been in Canada for four years. He said, "My English is not good. My wife talks with the teacher during the parent-teacher conference. Although her English is not very good either, she is a university student after all. She is better than me". MF5 has been in Canada for three years. She explained:

My English is not good. I cannot completely understand what the teacher talks about during the parent-teacher conference. So, I just listen to my husband talking with the teacher. If my husband could not go for the parent-teacher conference, I do not think I would go.

The unfamiliarity with the Canadian school system was reported as another reason that hindered participants from getting involved in school-based activities. As FF5 remarked:

In China, parents are not required to volunteer or do fundraising for school. What parents can do is to accompany the child doing homework, provide supplementary problem solving exercises, and buy whatever resources that benefit the child's learning. In Canada, the school system is different... I don't go to school that often. I am not sure what I should say and do, and what I shouldn't. I am afraid that I might get into trouble by saying or doing some things inappropriately.

MF3 echoed the similar concerns: "I do not often get involved in school activities although I would like to. I am not familiar with the Canadian school culture. I do not know how to do it in a proper way". MF4, who is one of the two mothers attending parent council meetings, provided a good explanation about parents' lack of involvement in parent council:

I do not see other Chinese immigrant parents attending parent council meetings. They are not aware of their rights. This may be because of the Chinese culture. China is a highly hierarchical country. In China, someone above you makes the decision. At work, you obey the boss. In school, you obey the teacher. Growing up in such a culture, Chinese parents become used to following the rules but not providing suggestions or expressing opinions.

Some participants (F2, F7 and F10) maintained that they trusted teachers would take care of their children well so that they would not go to school if they were not invited. FF2 expressed, "I seldom go to school to talk with teachers without invitation. We Chinese highly respect and trust the teacher. I believe the teacher would take care of my daughter very well". Parents (F7 and F10) also expressed that it was unnecessary to go to school often if their child was good at academics. FF10 commented:

We do not think we need to go to school that often. My daughter's average score is over 90. She is doing very well in reading and math. You know, in China, only when a child is in trouble or is not good at academics, the teacher asks the parents to visit the school.

Discussion

Participants in this study acknowledged the importance of parental involvement in school. They believed that their involvement in school activities would keep them updated about their children's school performance, provide them opportunity to learn about the school and teachers' requirements and inform their ways of parenting at home. Although parents are not expected to participate in school fund-raising nor volunteer in fieldtrips in China, all participants of this study made an effort to take part in some kinds of school-based activities. These activities included parent-teacher conferences, school fund-raising and attendance of children's school performances. A few participants who were homemakers sometimes volunteered for school fieldtrips. Two participants joined parent councils.

Chinese people highly value education since education is seen as a means for social mobility in the past and present China (Li, 2001). This viewpoint of education does not go away after they move to Canada. This cultural inertia is actually reinforced by their life experiences as immigrants. As Table 6.1 indicates, a majority of participants had to receive education in Canadian post-secondary institutions in order to find a job in spite of their strong education background and rich work experiences in China. For example, the couple of F3 both had a bachelor's degree in science and were software engineers in China before moving to Canada. After spending one year to find a job without success in Canada, the husband had to obtain a master's degree in computer

science from a Canadian university. At the time of interview, he had just received a job offer as a computer technician in a private company. Similarly, in order to get into Canadian job market, his wife was pursuing a nursing degree in a Canadian university. Such experience may lead participants to believe that education was the best way to overcome barriers and compensate for anticipated discrimination in the job market as Kao (1995) reported. Therefore, they usually had high expectations of their children's education. This explains why all participants reported that children's academic performance was the greatest concern at the teacher-parent conference.

Past studies (Amatea, Smith-Adcock, & Villares, 2006; Muller, 1995) have documented that some white parents tend to get actively involved in school activities even without invitation from teachers. They like to take part in school decision-making processes, governance and advocacy. In contrast, this study found that most participants did not actively get involved in school activities if they did not receive an invitation from the school or teachers. The majority of participants reported no interest and action in getting involved in school decision-making processes and governance. This lack of involvement can find an explanation from the following aspects: socio-economic status, language barrier and cultural differences.

Socio-economic Status

Studies have documented that parents with a low SES participated less in school involvement than the parents with a higher SES due to inflexible work schedules, need to take more jobs and fatigue from work (Benson & Martin, 2003). This applied to Chinese immigrants as well. In our study, a majority of participants who were most infrequent in school involvement were from low-income and labour work families. Some of them had to have multiple jobs to support their families. They stated that when they returned home they were exhausted and had no time and energy to participate in their children's school activities although they desired.

Language Barrier

Besides the socio-economic status, language barrier was another factor that had impacts on parental school involvement. The real or perceived low English language proficiency hindered some parents from communicating with school and caused them to be less involved in their children's school activities. This finding is consistent with Mapp's (2003) study that shows parents who spoke languages other than English might experience fewer opportunities to volunteer in the schools. It is also consistent with Constantino, Cui and Faltis' (1995) study of the influence of the language barrier on Chinese parental involvement in schools. Their study indicates that the language barrier prevented Chinese immigrant parents from communicating with their children's teachers.

Cultural Differences

Epstein and Dauber (1991) state that white middle-class teachers may value and reward independence and assume that parents will involve themselves in the school activities of their children. But other cultures may view it as rude for parents to go to school without invitation. Thus, parents' low involvement in school cannot be universally understood as an indicator of less interest in their children's education. In Chinese culture, teachers and parents are expected to play different roles with respect to children's education (Gu, 2008; Huntsinger & Jose, 2009). Parents are responsible for their children's behaviours at home, while teachers are expected to be responsible for student's learning and behaviours at school. Only when a child is in trouble or is in need of extra help in academic work, are parents contacted. If students perform well in school, both teachers and parents do not feel the need for parents to go to the school.

A Chinese proverb, 师徒如父子 (master and apprentice are similar to father and son), illustrates the Chinese teacher's authority role in education. Teachers are not only considered as experts in subject knowledge but have the power to discipline students. Therefore, there exists a hidden hierarchical relationship between teachers and parents in children's education in China. In addition, the long history of feudalism in China together with Confucius' philosophy on social structure has a profound influence on Chinese people's respect for authority (Bush & Qiang, 2002). Therefore, although Canadian school culture encourages a closer parent-school relationship nurtured by parents spending more time in school (Hill & Taylor, 2004), the majority of Chinese immigrant parents may not realize or grasp this opportunity. They tend to take a passive role in getting involved in school and allowed one-way communication to take place. In other words, Chinese immigrant parents tend to adapt and adjust themselves to meet the needs of the school rather than to voice their opinions regarding their children's education (see an exception in Guo & Mohan, 2008). This is particularly true for new Chinese immigrants who are less familiar with the North American culture and school system. In this study, participants who live in Canada less than five years were not sure about what to say and whom to talk with. They were afraid that they might offend the teachers if they asked or said something inappropriate. They choose to remain silent. 沉默是金 (silence is gold) is actually a life philosophy in Chinese culture, which is related to Confucius' philosophy 中庸之道 (the middle way). It warns people that when you do not know the appropriate thing to say, do not say anything. This life doctrine guides many Chinese people's behaviour in a social context.

Conclusions and Implications

In this study, all participants shared a belief that their school involvement would benefit their children's education. In other words, they did see their roles in their children's education as beneficial. However, some participants reported low self-efficacy for

actively getting involved in school-based activities due to the language barrier. This finding supports the model of Walker et al. (2005) in regard to the significance of parents' motivational beliefs. The main school-based activities that participants were involved in included attending parent-teacher conferences, volunteering on field-trips, fund-raising and attending school concerts and sports events. For these events, the parents often received invitations from schools or teachers. This finding supports Walker et al.'s model regarding the significance of parents' perceptions of invitations for involvement from others, more specifically the invitation from the school and teachers in this study. As far as the factor of parents' perceived life context described in this model, this study also provides evidence. In this study, the lack of time and energy was reported as a major reason that impeded Chinese immigrant parents' involvement in their children's education, particularly for newcomer participants. In addition, their inadequate knowledge about the English language and Canadian culture kept them from getting actively involved in many school-based activities. They felt intimidated to talk to teachers since they did not know what they could say and what not to say given their unfamiliarity with Canadian schools.

This study not only provides evidence to support the model of Walker et al. (2005), but also enriches this model with a cultural dimension. By exploring the perspectives and practices of a group of Chinese immigrant parents' involvement in their children's school education, this study demonstrates that in addition to the three categories of factors portrayed in Walker et al.'s model, Chinese cultural values played an important role in defying how participants got involved in their children's school education. Teachers are considered as the authority of education in Chinese culture. This view of teachers' role in education stopped Chinese immigrant parents from actively voicing their views or concerns. Chinese parents' emphasis on academics assures that their most significant concern during the teacher-parent conference was their children's academic records. Recent literature has criticized Walker et al.'s model of parental involvement for its missing the component of education achievement values that parents hold (Hayes, 2012). We would like to argue that the education values of parents influence their behaviours of parenting at home and communications with the school or teachers. It should be considered as an embedded factor when examining parents' engagement with children's education rather than an independent format of parental involvement behaviours in addition to the home-based and school-based categories. This study sheds light on our understanding of how parents' education values influence their school-based involvement.

The findings of this study have practical implications for schools to make an effort to involve immigrant parents. Since time is a challenge for many immigrant parents due to their work or study schedules, teachers can use various methods to keep in touch with parents. Besides arranging face-to-face meetings, teachers can use emails, written notes, as well as phone calls to exchange information with parents on their children's school performances, school events and activities, and listen to parents' concerns, suggestions and expectations about their children's education. In order to help new immigrant parents to resolve the language barrier, school can provide translators with a bilingual background. Schools could also create opportunities for parents to understand better the Canadian school system and its expectations for chil-

dren and parents by hosting workshops with interpreters and distributing brochures in different languages. It will be a good idea as well for teachers to learn the essence of different cultural values in educating children so that they can be more effective and proactive in communicating with immigrant parents. Even further, we agree with Guo (2012) who suggested that teachers and school administrators should recognize and make use of parent knowledge. In today's school practice, environmentalists, scientists, police officers, fire workers and so on are invited to classrooms for a variety of educational purposes. Similarly, schools should invite immigrant parents to share their cultural knowledge with teachers and staff as part of their professional development. Immigrant parents can be invited into the classroom as well for students to develop understanding of different cultures. Besides the cultural knowledge, parents' knowledge about their children is significant as well. Children could perform differently in school from at home. Listening to parents' description should be insightful for teachers to understand children's behaviours in school and find solutions for student issues. Considering the cultural barrier Chinese parents have for school involvement, schools can organize information sessions to express explicitly their willingness to hear immigrant parents' voices about the school's curriculum and administration and as well to inform them about their rights to get involved. Such empowering process can be a significant effort to improve immigrant parents' involvement in school, as Bernhard (2010) reported.

All participating parents in this study are professionals with strong education backgrounds. Therefore, this study cannot represent other Chinese immigrants who are less educated. More research is necessary to examine the experience of the Chinese immigrants with less education although they only represent a very small portion of recent Chinese immigrants. Future study can also include the voices from teachers and immigrant children, which will provide different perspectives on immigrants' parental involvement in their children's school-based education.

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