The nature of interactions between Chinese immigrant families and preschool staff: How culture, class, and methodology matter

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Citation: Heng, Tang T. 2014. "The nature of interactions between Chinese immigrant families and preschool staff: How culture, class, and methodology matter." *Journal of Early Childhood Research* 12 (2):111-127. doi: 10.1177/1476718X13515423.

Abstract

While the parental-involvement field has progressed from asking what the impact of parental involvement is to how we can better involve parents, research has lagged in finding out how sociocultural and class differentials between homes and schools affect immigrant families' interactions with schools. This case study uses ethnographic tools to examine the nature of interactions between 11 Chinese immigrant families and staff at a low-income preschool. Interview, participant observation, and textual data revealed that the nature in which staff interacted with parents was didactic and one-directional and depended upon parents' economic-cultural-linguistic capital. Sociocultural differences between staff and parents complicated the interaction, and parental resistance was often misinterpreted. These findings are discussed in light of methodological issues in research as well as how to avoid letting stereotypes, and sociocultural and class differences, hamper the establishment of successful partnerships between schools and immigrant families.

Key words

parental involvement, family school partnership, immigrant families, Chinese immigrants, sociocultural, forms of capital

Introduction

Educational partnerships with families were initiated over 30 years ago in the U.S., beginning with parent-teacher organizations/associations in the 1970s, to school-based management emphasizing decision-making for families and school stakeholders in the 1990s, to community, family, and school partnership mandates in the present (Cox-Petersen, 2010). The federal guidelines for active partnerships of families with schools are predicated on the findings that family involvement in school has a positive impact on students' learning, and that schools and families have shared responsibilities in educating, socializing and preparing the child for life (Chang, Park, Singh, and Sung, 2009; Weiss, Caspe, and Lopez, 2006). Educational agencies are required to consult with parents to jointly develop school programs, activities, and procedures their children will participate in, with particular attention paid to including the voices of under-represented populations, such as the economically disadvantaged or racial/ethnic minorities (NCLB, section 1118). Family involvement may include building home-school relationships and supporting parents' guidance of their children's academic learning at home (Weiss et al., 2006).

Head Start[1] programs, in particular, have had a long history of working with families from lower socio-economic backgrounds in the U.S. While the Head Start and parental partnership fields have been repositioned from investigating the effects of parental involvement on children's development and academic outcomes to finding

[1] Head Start is a U.S. government-funded preschool program aimed at improving school readiness of children from low-income communities.

ways to better involve parents in school, Head Start programs continue to face challenges in partnerships with parents (Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, and Skinner, 2004; Lamb-Parker et al., 2001). Barriers to parental involvement in school include individual factors (e.g. parents' long working hours), classroom factors (e.g. teacher experience), language challenges, and sociocultural differences (Adair and Tobin, 2008; Castro, et al., 2004; Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Lamb-Parker et al., 2001; Ramirez, 2003).

The few quantitative studies conducted focused mainly on parent characteristics like their educational levels and marital status as predictors of and barriers to their involvement in their children's education at home and in school (Chang, et al., 2009; Lamb-Parker et al., 2001; Waanders, Mendez, and Downer, 2007). This created a one-sided, and potentially deficit, perspective, as institutional, structural, and sociocultural factors were omitted, with the responsibility of parental involvement solely laid on parents. Qualitative research affords a more balanced and nuanced account by examining challenges from institutional, sociocultural, and parental dimensions (Delgado-Gaitan, 1991; Driebe and Cochran, 1996; Graue and Hawkins, 2010; Lareau, 1987; Ramirez, 2003), yet there is a scarcity of research that closely examines the nature of interaction between parents and staff in school and how this interaction affects parents' involvement with schools. Interaction here refers to the content, tone, frequency, motivations, and comfort level of both teachers and parents during their communication with each other. Lareau's (1987) research demonstrated that observing the quality of interaction addresses the problem of exclusively evaluating parental behavior when assessing home-school relationships. This research aims to study the nature of interaction between school staff and families at a Head Start center as a proxy to understanding family-school relationships and family involvement. This will allow us to determine the implications of these interactions and, thereupon, how to create successful family-school partnerships.

In particular, this study investigates Chinese immigrant families' experiences for several reasons. First, in the field of early childhood education, there is a paucity of research investigating the quality of immigrant families' experiences with school despite increased human movement and migration worldwide accompanying globalization (Adair and Tobin, 2008; MacNaughton and Hughes, 2007; Ramirez, 2003). Second, since 1965, the two fastest growing immigrant populations in the U.S. have been Latinos and Asians (Batalova and Terrazas, 2010), with Chinese immigrants being the third largest single source of immigrants. Africa, Australia, and Europe have also seen large increases in Chinese immigrant population, which are projected to continue (Skeldon, 2011). For instance, in 2010, Chinese immigrants formed the second largest immigrant group in New Zealand (New Zealand Department of Labor, 2011), third largest in Australia (Australia Government Department of Immigration and Citizenship, 2011), and fifth largest in the U.K. (UK National Statistics, 2011). The rapid increase in Chinese immigrants has produced a demand for educational services for their children, many of whom are grappling with school language and expectations that differ from those at home. Yet, research on the education of children of Chinese immigrants is meager across these countries. Moreover, the little prevailing research on Chinese immigrants and their children's education mostly focuses on adolescents and the middle-income group (Dyson, 2001; Li, 2002; Li, 2006). Thus, this case study aims to highlight the divergent experiences of Chinese immigrant families from low socioeconomic status (SES) to reveal the nature of interaction between Chinese immigrant families and staff at a low income preschool center.

Conceptual Framework

This study is grounded in a conceptual framework that draws predominantly from sociocultural approaches and partly from theories of sociocultural, linguistic, and economic capital. Cultural processes are "practices and traditions of dynamically related cultural communities in which individuals participate and to which they contribute across generations" (Rogoff, 2003: 77). Preschools are sites where children are socialized into the school culture, as illustrated by Tobin, Wu, and Davidson's (1991) observation that pedagogy and content in preschools in China, Japan, and the U.S. reflect the dominant cultural values of these countries. However, when students' cultures differ from the dominant school culture—as is the case for minority or minoritized students—conflicts or challenges may surface (Au and Mason, 1983; Delpit, 1995/2006; Li, 2006). To illustrate, Li (2006) observed that middle- and upper-class Chinese parents held onto their sociocultural norms of learning despite migrating to Canada. These parents' involvement in schools vis-à-vis demands for more rigorous academic standards and direct teacher instruction were contested by mainstream

Canadian teachers, revealing deep-seated sociocultural differences in views about learning. Furthermore, language barriers and divergent understanding of school processes interfered with middle and higher SES Chinese immigrant parents' interactions with their children's schools (Dyson, 2001; Li, 2006). This situation is worse for low SES families as mainstream socioeconomic-cultural values and practices in school are often associated with the belief that low SES and immigrant families are deficient and obstruct productive school-family partnerships (Souto-Manning and Swick, 2006).

Increasingly, many sociocultural scholars have moved away from the cultural difference approach above to stress the importance of contemplating culture as a practice, rather than a trait (Gutierrez and Rogoff, 2003; Nasir and Hand, 2006). They point to the fluidity and dynamism of culture as well as the need to highlight participants' attempts at resisting and remaking culture in different environments. In a follow up to their 1991 cross-country preschool study, Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa (2009) found that more than a decade later, changing social, economic, political, and historical contexts in China, Japan, and the U.S. intersected with changing cultural values to shape pedagogy and content that differed from their previous findings, pointing to the fluidity of culture and agency of participants. Scholars also found that preschoolers' physical, social, verbal, and emotional resistances could be seen as a form of institutional resistance just as silence itself could be a tool of dissent (Markström, 2010; Pang, 1996).

Other than a sociocultural lens, the fact that a large proportion of Chinese immigrant families are from lower SES or experience a fall in social status upon migration necessitates an examination of various forms of capital and their influences on family-school interactions. Bourdieu (1986) argues that individuals are socialized differently because the economic, cultural, and social capital they can rely on vary according to class. For instance, privileged individuals leverage on their wealth (economic capital), acquire preferences and dispositions (cultural capital), and tap into kin-peer-work relationships (social capital) when they are socialized into their contexts. Applying Bourdieu's work to educational research, scholars pointed out that social class differences contribute to how parents relate to school because of the different linguistic, sociocultural, and economic capital from which they can draw (Carreón et al., 2005; Horvat, Weininger, and Lareau, 2003; Lareau and Horvat, 1999). Families from a higher socioeconomic class may depend on their social networks and economic status to mobilize support to contest school personnel's decisions (Horvat et al., 2003), while families from a lower socioeconomic class have "poor educational skills, relatively lower occupational prestige than teachers, and limited time and disposable income to supplement and intervene in their children's schooling" (Lareau, 1987: 81). Furthermore, parents from lower SES who are also immigrant parents are less familiar with the norms of school interaction, and when a common language is lacking, misunderstandings between families and schools are not uncommon, resulting in the consequent exclusion and isolation of families (Carreón et al., 2005; Ramirez, 2003).

Thus, it is productive to adopt a sociocultural and forms-of-capital framework to lend depth to how issues of culture and class affect family-school interactions.

Research Setting and Inquiry Approach

Research Setting

The research site was Hope Center, a multi-service agency that provides preschool, housing assistance, and senior services, amongst others, to the community. Located in a predominantly Chinese neighborhood in New York, a large proportion of the families Hope Center serves in its preschool program are recent mainland Chinese immigrants from low socioeconomic backgrounds. Hope Center's Early Head Start was evaluated as a "program of excellence" by its tri-annual federal funding review and has been fast expanding its services into other neighborhoods because of the quality of its programs (Annual Report, 2008). Hence, the Center was chosen for the study for the population it served and its program quality. Upon my request, the administrative personnel nominated a three-year-old class taught by Manuela (pseudonym used). Manuela's classroom was chosen because the classroom had scored high on most domains of the Center's evaluation, and she was very experienced. More information on the 11 Chinese children and their families, on which this research is based, can be found in Table 1.

Table 1

Summary of Participants and School/Classroom Setting

School Context		
• Head Start classroom in a multi-service agency: Hope Center • Hope Center serves a large proportion of recent mainland Chinese immigrants from low socioeconomic backgrounds and with limited English • Hope Center is staffed by a fairly equal mix of Latina and Chinese staff, and a comparatively smaller number of White and African American staff.		
Classroom Context		
• Head teacher is responsible for most of the classroom instruction, decision-making, and communication with parents • Assistant teachers support small group work, gym, etc. • Classroom walls are filled with students' school work and photos. Artifacts, toys and manipulatives are labeled in English, Spanish, and Chinese.		
Classroom Staff		
Head teacher	Manuela*	• Latina • Bilingual in English and Spanish • Over 12 years teaching in the school
Assistant teacher one	Esther*	• Chinese • Bilingual in English and Cantonese • First year teaching in the school
Foster grandparent	Grandma	• Chinese • Bilingual in Cantonese and Mandarin • Volunteering in the school for four hours daily
Students		
• Eighteen students: 13 boys, five girls • Eleven Chinese, six Latinos, one African American • Ten speak Mandarin, Cantonese, Toisanese or Foochowese at home; one speaks mostly English and some Cantonese at home • Ten Chinese students are from low SES background, one from middle SES background • All Chinese students' parents are first generation immigrants		

* Pseudonyms

Data Collection

Qualitative inquiry, via a case study approach, was chosen to lend nuanced insight into the complex processes by which participants make meaning in a given context (Dyson and Genishi, 2005), the context here being a preschool classroom in a low-income high-immigrant population neighborhood. Given the focus on the nature of interactions between immigrant families and preschool staff, this approach was adopted as it allowed me to focus on the nuances and details behind how interactions take place, in order to reconstruct a more complex picture of participants' perspectives and experiences (Creswell, 2007). Furthermore, participants' perspectives and experiences could be reconstructed and interpreted within their natural sociocultural settings, allowing for more holistic and complex understandings to emerge (Hatch, 2002; Lincoln and Guba, 2000). However, one caveat of this interpretive case study is that it does not claim to represent the nature of all Chinese immigrant family-school interactions; rather, it investigates the experiences 11 families encountered in one school, to illuminate the experiences of similar groups within different contexts.

I adopted various ethnographic tools in the data collection process. First, three- to four-hour long participant observations were conducted weekly over seven months, focusing on family-staff interactions during drop-off/breakfast/pick-up time as well as during events that involved parents (e.g. school outings, graduation ceremonies). Teachers' dialogues with students about their families were also included to understand staff's attitudes towards parents. Second, to cater to staff and parents' tight schedules, I conducted a combination of formal and informal semi-structured/unstructured interviews. Five parents were interviewed using a semi-structured protocol while informal conversations were carried out with the rest to help parents feel at ease. As a non-staff, female Chinese conducting interviews with parents in Mandarin I appeared to be seemingly harmless, as parents often referenced in-culture values and practices when we spoke. Finally, in addition to observational field notes and interview data, I collected textual and visual evidence, such as parent handbooks and newsletters.

Data Analysis

Being a "partial insider" (Sherif, 2001: 446) was extremely helpful not only in the data collection but data analysis process. As an ethnic Chinese and a first generation sojourner in the U.S., I leveraged on sociocultural practices familiar to me and the families to interpret the data against a background of shared understandings, practices, and language. Yet, being outside the community and school afforded me the distance to interrogate the data.

I engaged in exploratory data analysis by reading fieldnotes, interviews, and textual/pictorial evidence, and manually coded the data for ideas that appeared to answer the research questions. Then, a draft coding scheme from the open codes and literature I read was created and the data recoded with Atlas.ti by looking for items or events that matched codes. Thereafter, I set aside the data for a few months and continued to read relevant literature, before recoding the data using the previous coding scheme. This deliberate break refreshed my mind with new perspectives. During post-break coding, codes were refined and analyzed for recurring patterns, and eventually major themes, following LeCompte and Schensul's (1999) data analysis approach.

To enhance the credibility of the analysis and reduce the researcher subjectivity that qualitative work has often been accused of, I adopted some of Shenton's (2004) recommendations. Firstly, I ensured that items informing patterns were triangulated across field observations, parents' interviews, teachers' interviews, and textual/pictorial evidence. The use of different methods and data points "compensates for their individual limitations and exploits their respective benefits" (Shenton, 2004: 65). In the triangulation process, I also searched for negative or conflicting cases, and attempted to understand these discrepancies as they lent dynamism to the data. Secondly, peers reviewed sections of data and shared their interpretations, many of which broadly confirmed my own. Finally, I enlisted a staff member at Hope Center to read my findings and discussion. She had two years of working experience at Hope Center, and collaborated closely with families and children, but was involved in another program. Hence, she was able to provide feedback on my interpretation of participants' experiences using her intimate knowledge of the school context without conflict of interest.

Findings

Data revealed that the school made a variety of efforts to involve families in school. To overcome families' language barriers, each class consisted of at least one staff member who was able to speak either Mandarin or Cantonese, translation was offered during parent-teacher conferences, and all notices and newsletters to caregivers were translated into Chinese. Each month, families were invited into the classroom to learn about students' schooling activities, and workshops on parenting were conducted on topics such as positive discipline and nutrition. On cursory examination, it appeared that the school was making extended and commendable efforts to include families in school. However, closer investigation of the nature of interaction revealed more troubling patterns. Four themes that encapsulate these patterns are presented below.

Theme One: One-Directional Didactic Communication With Families

Teachers' communication with parents and caregivers was one-way rather than two-way. Teachers often told me how they "tell the parents" appropriate rules of behavior and parenting at home and in school.

> I tell my parents to let the children do things themselves (Manuela, 06/08/10)
> We will tell the parents: "Can you please tell the child to not do this in school or things like that" (Esther, 04/07/10)

The same style of communication was observed during participant observation. For instance, during a monthly classroom meeting with parents, when parents entered the classroom to drop their children off, the teacher told parents to "go and see the children's schoolwork" rather than inviting them into the classroom by explaining the benefits of viewing their children's work. Imperatives like "you need to" or "you should" were often used, especially regarding health-related matters such as giving children lotion or chapstick. Yet, there were no explanations for the purposes of certain procedures, and communications were short in length and didactic in tone. In some instances, when teachers lost their patience, parents were outwardly scolded:

> Just before naptime, Randy's mother gave Randy some candy. Grinning, Randy showed the candy to me and Manuela.
> Manuela frowned and said: "No, no candy. Give the candy back to mummy. You're going to sleep now." Randy pouted.
> Manuela insisted firmly: "You have to give the candy to mummy."

> Randy handed it to his mother, who shoved a few candies down his pocket. Manuela's eyes grew wide in surprise, and she raised her voice at Randy's mother's: "Randy's mummy! I just said NO CANDY!!! He's going to sleep now! (Fieldnotes, 07/13/2010)

In this anecdote, the teacher did not want candy to be given to the child before naptime but did not thoroughly explain her rationale. There was a reference that the child should not eat candy before napping, however the parent did not make the connection. Rather than yelling at the parent, the teacher could explain that candy was discouraged because it would stimulate the child and keep him awake. If rationales for procedures were not given to parents, sanctioned behaviors might be repeated because of a lack of understanding on the parents' part.

During events that involved parents, similar one-way communication—purely functional, and exhibiting a lack of inquiry into parents' reasons for their actions—was observed. On several field trips, teachers instructed parents and caregivers to hold onto their children and stay close, without explaining what they were to expect on the trips or asking if they had any questions. Often, parents and caregivers blindly followed teachers, muttering in Mandarin or Cantonese that they had no idea what was happening. During one such field trip, a huge downpour ensued, and the head teacher decided the best option was to cut short the trip and return to school. Without asking if parents and caregivers had umbrellas or minded shortening the outing, the teacher led the group into the rain, causing parents and students to get drenched. One parent later told me that "we should have waited until the rain stopped, it'll be better" (Sally's mother, 07/30/10). Yet, parents did not speak up possibly because they were not invited to co-solve problems. As another parent observed, other school events, such as a parent council meeting, were “less about giving feedback. We are there to listen to their report” (Casey’s mother, 07/30/10).

In summary, multiple data sources corroborated the one-directional nature of communication between teachers and parents (see Table 2 for more evidence). Communication was didactic with teachers telling parents what they ought to do, and imperatives were often used. In instances where teachers lost their patience, tones turned disrespectful as parents were openly chided. Seldom were parents given explanations for recommended practices, and even less often were parents asked for their opinions or feedback. When asked how often they communicated with parents, teachers often explained that they and the parents were “too busy to talk.”

Table 2

Further Evidence Substantiating Theme One

Theme one: One-directional didactic communication with families
Students were entering the classroom from the playground. Their parents were waiting outside the classroom to attend the graduation ceremony. Sally saw her mother standing right outside the door, ran to her and pointed at her hair. Sally’s mother nodded and tightened Sally’s ponytail. Manuela stepped out of the class, saw them both, and became furious. She scolded Sally’s mother, in front of all the other parents, for bringing Sally outside the classroom, and emphasized that there were rules in school. Sally’s mother shrunk back and hunched over, like a child who had been reprimanded. The rest of the parents stood around awkwardly; no one said anything. (Fieldnotes, 08/06/10)

Theme Two: Interactions With Parents Varied With Families’ Economic-Cultural-Linguistic Capital

Although one-directional, didactic communication was common, it was applied unevenly across parents. Teachers interacted more frequently and positively with parents who were more familiar with middle-class American culture or from comparatively higher SES. Parents who were accustomed to middle-class American cultural values and interaction patterns (e.g. being chatty, jovial, and positive) were more warmly welcomed in class; teachers also took more initiative to speak with these parents. For example, it was not uncommon to see Brad's father—a first generation Chinese immigrant who appeared better acculturated than other parents[2] and often bought expensive treats for Brad's classmates—sitting in the classroom with the teachers sharing stories about Brad. On the other hand, it was rare to see teachers having extended conversations with parents who were less familiar with U.S. culture. Sasha's parents, recent Chinese immigrants who appeared quiet and awkward in the classroom, were seldom addressed: interactions between Sasha's parents and the teachers were characterized by teachers' instruction of health- or administration-related matters. Furthermore, in class, Sasha's parents displayed a body language that was at times awkward (shrinking back, standing in corners) and respectful (bowing slightly in conversation with staff).

Language likely played a large part in the frequency and nature of interactions of teachers with parents. To bridge the language barrier, the Center ensured that there

[2] Brad's father spoke English fluently, was as comfortable feeding Brad American food (like burgers and cheesecake) as Chinese food, and was relaxed and chatty with strangers.

were always translators present in the classroom. Despite their presence, it was not infrequent to see teachers speaking to non-English-speaking parents in English, expecting them to understand without enquiring if they needed translation help.

> Manuela picked up Sally's assignment folder and handed it to Sally's mother. She told Sally's mother sternly in English: "Sally wanted me to tell you not to throw away her things, or let her brother break it. This is all her work. You should sit down and look through the work with her and ask her to talk to you about it."
>
> Sally's mother stood hunched and diminutive, looked at Manuela with her mouth opened and brows knitted, and nodded. Manuela walked away. Sensing Sally's mother's incomprehension, I stepped forward to translate Manuela's instruction.
>
> Sally's mother: "Ahh, ahh (exclaiming in revelation and nodding her head). Ok, I will look at it." (Fieldnotes, 08/06/10)

Sally's mother, a middle-school graduate who spoke barely any English and moved to the U.S. just five years earlier, appeared to be at a loss for how to respond appropriately in this scenario. Manuela had simply assumed that Sally's mother spoke English without checking with the bilingual staff present. Hence, having translators in the classroom could have helped to bridge the language barrier, but only if teachers were cognizant of parents' needs and consistently asked for translation help. It was puzzling that even though teachers were aware of parents' struggles with the English language (as they mentioned in several conversations), they continued to speak with them in English.

Other examples of differing interactions involved teachers giving concessions to children of parents with whom they got along (i.e. who spoke better English or were familiar with middle-class and school cultures). For example, such children were allowed to eat breakfast later than the prescribed time (see Table 3), and their parents were not chided for being late. By contrast, Chinese parents with whom teachers were less familiar were spoken to immediately if they brought their children in late.

Table 3

Further Evidence Substantiating Theme Two

Theme two: Interactions with parents varied with families' human-cultural-linguistic capital
Keegan arrived at 9:25am. Keegan told his mother: "Mommy, I want to eat." Keegan's mother: "You wanna eat? But you ate at home." Manuela looked at the clock and said: "There's still 5 minutes to eat. Sit down and eat."
Joaquin arrived at 9:28am. Joaquin's father spoke to Manuela in Spanish and gave her a container with two cookies. Manuela bent down, hugged Julian, thanked him in Spanish, and told Grandma to serve Julian oatmeal. (Fieldnotes, 03/16/10)
Kaleb's mother arrived at 9:23 am, and he sat down for his breakfast. Manuela told Kaleb's mother: "You need to come earlier if he wants to eat breakfast. Class starts at 9:30am." Kaleb's mother nodded and did not say anything else. (Fieldnotes, 08/03/10)
NB: Keegan's mother is African American and chats often with Manuela. Joaquin's father is Latino and extremely friendly with Manuela and the rest of Hope Center's staff. Kaleb's mother is Chinese and speaks to Manuela only occasionally.

Theme Three: Sociocultural Differences Affected Interactions

Sociocultural differences, particularly pertaining to health and learning, seemed to contribute to teachers misunderstanding students and their parents. In conversation with Manuela, she mentioned that she found it "very silly" that parents often worry about whether or not their children drink water in school. In another conversation, Vincent's mother mentioned that Esther once rebuked her for requesting the teacher to remind Vincent to drink water throughout the day. Vincent's mother explained to me that

> the children run around a lot and perspire a lot….so many parents want their children to drink more. Because we feel that in school, the food that they eat is fried and *heaty*, so they need to drink more water to dispel the heat. (Vincent's mother, 08/04/10)

The Chinese philosophy of health emphasizes the balance of *yin* (cool) and *yang* (heat) (Kaufman-Kurzrock, 1989). Fried food is believed to heat up the body, and one way to neutralize the heat is by drinking water. This explained why many parents were very concerned about their children's water consumption. However, it appeared that the teachers' lack of inquiry into parents' health beliefs led them to belittle parents' requests and assume that parents were being nonsensical.

In another example, teachers were frequently observed to ask students to wear their jackets en route to the playground even on warm days, "otherwise your mummies will be angry." One-way, rather than two-way, communication with parents might have contributed to teachers' obliviousness to the underlying reason stoking parents'anxiety. In conversation, two parents separately mentioned that the Chinese believed their children did not have as strong a body constituent as non-Chinese students, and one parent commented that traditional Chinese medicine stressed the avoidance of overexposure to dampness or cold to prevent rheumatism. Hence, she did not like her child to be wet or cold.

As for learning, Chinese parents were dissatisfied with the school for not being academically rigorous enough, which may be attributable to a conflict with the school's philosophy of learning through play. When asked to recommend changes for the school, three out of five parents contested the school's policy and requested that the school emphasized less play and more structured learning.

> I feel that, if the children can have more practice at writing, then they can learn more…. Over here, they spend more time letting children play. They do let children write a little over here, but like the teacher said the other day, she wouldn't force the child. This is why many of the three-year-olds are still unable to write their names. (Kaleb's mother, 08/03/10)

One mother resisted the school's practice by transferring her daughter to another school in the next academic year because she wanted her daughter to "learn more." Two parents mentioned that a common conversation topic amongst parents was whether or not to transfer their children to public schools that have more rigorous curricula. These findings are not surprising, as scholars have found that Chinese parents tend to emphasize structured learning, reading, and writing more than western educators (Li, 2002). In sum, it appeared that a misalignment of sociocultural values in learning and lack of two-way communication fueled parent-teacher tensions (see Table).

Table 4

Further Evidence Substantiating Theme Three

Theme Three: Sociocultural differences affected interactions
Manuela told Sasha's mother: "You need to give her [Sasha] chapstick. Her lips are very dry." Sasha's mother told Manuela "it's ok, she needs to drink more water." Manuela knitted her eyebrows and looked perplexed. She did not understand that Sasha's mother believed that dry lips were a symptom of a lack of water in the body, an idea common in traditional Chinese medicine. Sasha's mother, on the other hand, mumbled that she didn't know children could use chapstick and thought water would suffice. (Fieldnotes, 04/14/2010)

Theme Four: Chinese Parents Downplayed Their Own Needs And Resisted Through Silence

Most Chinese parents appeared to be compliant with the schools' preferences, downplaying their own needs. When asked for recommendations of what they would request the school to change, most parents required extended probing before hesitantly recommending improvements like menu changes to include more Chinese food in school, increased flexibility in participation of schooling activities, and more academic work (see Table 5). When asked if they had given this feedback to school, parents explained that they had not for several reasons.

First, they did not want to seem antagonistic and cause trouble for the school. Many felt that it was better to avoid conflict and remain silent to maintain group harmony.

> I feel that it's too troublesome and didn't want the school to think that we were creating trouble, so that's not good. Aiyah, I just thought: Forget it, we'll just let the year pass and let it be. (Cathy's mother, 07/30/10)

Esther, a second generation Chinese who taught in the school, suggested that "it has to do with culture a lot."

> In terms of Asians, you know (frowns, struggling to express herself), we don't--they just don't get involved--I guess they're not, I wouldn't use the word hostile, you know. (Esther, 04/07/10)

Frequently, parents preferred to let their desires take a back seat because they felt that the teachers were busy and did not want to encroach on their time. This may have been compounded by their respect for the school's authority and fear of vexing the teachers.

> Over here, the teachers are all very busy. They don't have time to talk to parents and chat. So we seldom talk to the teachers. (Vincent's mother, 07/30/10)
>
> If there's a need on my end, I'll talk to them, but it's infrequently…. If I keep asking the same questions over and over again, I wonder if it'll make the teacher annoyed. (Casey's mother, 07/30/10)

An interesting contradiction in the data surfaced that might shed light on parents' sociocultural norms in communication: all five parents interviewed reported that they felt very at ease in school, rating their comfort level when interacting with staff seven and above on a scale of ten. However, during participant observations, they appeared awkward (e.g. stammering), deferential (e.g. bowing head), and uncertain (e.g. looking puzzled) when interacting with teachers. A possible explanation is that parents wanted to maintain group harmony and were thus reluctant to report what they truly felt. Or, it may be that being awkward or deferential with teachers was a phenomenon they were socialized to accept.

Other than sociocultural factors, a perceived lack of follow-up from the school dampened parents' desire to approach school authorities. Parents indicated that they were disappointed that previous feedback was not acted upon, that they received no updates, and thus believed there was no point in giving any.

> During the Parent Policy Meeting, I spoke up. But whether or not they did anything I have no idea. Regarding this feedback, they didn't keep us posted with any information. (Kaleb's mother, 08/03/10)

Thereafter, parents marked their resistance by refusing to articulate their concerns further and withdrawing their participation. Often, parents chose to resolve any dissatisfaction on their own instead. For instance, it was not uncommon to see parents bringing food to feed their children in the common lounge at the end of class. Sally and Cathy's mothers separately mentioned that they brought a snack for their children because they noticed that their children were not used to the school food and sometimes did not eat it.

In addition, unfamiliarity with the school norms in the U.S. might also explain parents' compliance and reticence. When asked what changes she would recommend, Cathy's mother said: "I don't think I have that capability" [to effect changes], while Sally's mother explained softly: "I don't know if I can tell the administration." Often, it was only upon extended probing that parents would offer any recommendations. Esther, the aforementioned Chinese teacher offered an insight into parents' interpretation of schools in the U.S.

> They [parents] just don't know what to say. . . maybe they might feel like they don't know how this meeting could help. They don't know what can they do there. They probably just don't know how to communicate. (Esther, 04/07/10)

Parents themselves mentioned several times that U.S. schools were so different from China's in areas such as respect for the teacher, schools' expectations, and learning content; consequently, not knowing what to expect and make of the differences may have affected their knowledge of how to react. Besides, parents equated teachers with authority and mentioned that they would seldom dare to challenge teachers. Furthermore, like Portes and Rumbaut (2001) had noted with other immigrants, in comparison with their schooling experiences in China, parents were extremely impressed by the vast amount of resources and support available in the U.S. and felt that there was little to be critical of. This dual frame of reference, comparing the U.S. schools against resource-poor Chinese schools, might further illuminate why parents gave the school little feedback and did not demand for more.

Finally, varying economic-cultural capital might also elucidate parents' compliance with the school and their reticence in communication. Scholars have observed that working-class parents interacted with the schools differently from middle-class parents (Lareau, 1987; Horvat et al., 2003).

> Casey's mother: Casey's school is a low-income school. Us Chinese parents from China don't have very high educational qualifications, we're at the lowest level of society, and our work is manual and tiring, there's not much time. Like me, when I'm working, there's just no time to participate in the activities….
> Author: I'm also trying to figure out why parents need so much probing before giving me suggestions on how the school can improve.
> Casey's mother: I think it's because they don't think about it. If you don't ask me, I wouldn't think about it, until the problem arrives…. So, during the meeting, you don't have the idea in your head.
> Author: Why don't parents think about it?

> Casey's mother: I can only say it's because our level of achievement is limited. Or perhaps our education in the past is different from now, so when we compare it, it's really good now. (Casey's mother, 07/30/10)

Esther made a similar observation that "if the Chinese parents were well-educated, they'll probably be more involved, because… the people you're associating with at that socio-economic status are different. The way you would talk to people, the way you would interact is different" (Esther, 04/07/10).

Table 5

Further Evidence Substantiating Theme Four

Theme Four: Chinese parents downplayed their own needs and deferred to the school's
Sally's mother initially said that she was very satisfied with the school and that there was nothing she would change. After 30 minutes of interview and probing, when asked for her final thoughts, she replied that the school needed to consider parents' feelings. When asked for an example, she said: "This morning, I asked Manuela 'My daughter has a runny nose, can she, CAN SHE (with a begging tone)… not play with water?' I did ask. She can go to the park, but just tell her not to play with water. If the teacher can simply say: 'Oh, sure, that's fine, she has a runny nose and she should not play with water!' (imitated cheerful tone with a smile)… Then that will be much better." (Sally's mother's, 07/30/10)

Discussion and Implications

This case study does not claim that all parent-teacher interactions exhibit similar patterns, nor that Chinese immigrant parents with low SES are a monolithic group. Furthermore, the inquiry process could benefit from collecting even more observation data that could be used to create sociograms or frequency tables to provide a broader understanding of interaction patterns. Interviewing all parents, rather than a subset, would also increase the data available for a stronger analysis.

Bearing in mind the aforementioned constraints, this study nonetheless sought to illuminate the details of parent-staff interaction and provide another data point to compare with studies set within other contexts and involving other groups. The findings in this study revealed that merely examining the presence and quantity of a school's policies of family involvement might not illuminate in depth the actual nature of school-family interaction. While Hope Center had taken great efforts to involve and communicate with families, qualitative inquiry highlighted disconcerting interaction patterns. This points to the criticality of qualitative research as an approach in studying school-family partnerships, as it tends to reveal nuances within participants' natural settings and day-to-day lives that quantitative inquiry may not have been able to detect. Hence, it is hoped that these findings could supplement large-scale, quantitative studies on school-family partnerships, and fill in gaps in other qualitative research.

The study found that communication between schools and low-income immigrant families tended to be one-directional and instrumental in nature. Sociocultural differences obscured the interaction and understanding between school staff and parents regarding preschoolers' food, health, and learning, as neither staff nor parents understood the motivations of the other. Differing sociocultural practices in communication worsened the interaction. Parents' deferential attitudes arising from deep respect for school staff and appreciation for group harmony were interpreted by teachers as parents not caring enough. Parents' resistance to schools' practices—via their intentional silences, choice of non-participation, or individual problem-solving—

were overlooked by school staff, allowing them to continue to feel entitled to their communication style and values without needing to accommodate parents. Pang (1996) problematizes the U.S. mainstream society's equation of silence with compliance or ignorance and argues that silence is negotiated differently in various cultures and is used as a tool of opposition. Empirical data from this case study provided support for her observations. Parents were seen as a barrier rather than aid to early childhood educators, particularly if they held different sociocultural values, corroborating results from MacNaughton and Hughes' (2007) survey of early childhood teachers that saw parents being cited as the second most problematic issue at work and the top reason for difficulties in addressing cultural and racial diversity in class.

In addition, sociocultural differences were further complicated by class differentials in school-family interactions. To begin with, research shows that teachers of students from working class families tend to desire parents to defer to their professional experiences (Lareau, 1987) and find it a waste of time to listen to parents (Graue & Hawkins, 2010), revealing prejudice held by teachers against families with lower status. This study found that teachers' interaction with parents was similarly determined by parental class and access to economic-cultural-linguistic capital. In addition, the study revealed that sociocultural differences are also intimately tied to social class differentials. Teachers gave concessions to parents who spoke English and used their wealth to smoothen relationships with school staff and children (via purchase of treats or donations to school). More interestingly, teachers were closer to parents who held cultural values similar to theirs and more distant and disdainful of parents who were recent immigrants and unfamiliar with the cultural norms in school, thus bringing to the fore the power of cultural capital in a preschool setting. From the perspective of parents, this case study illustrated that differing economic-cultural-linguistic capital stands in the way of Chinese immigrant parents' request for support. Many parents "just don't know what they can do" (Esther, 04/07/10) in part because financial circumstances prevented them from participating further in school, because their social network is not powerful enough to contest schooling practices, and because they are unfamiliar with the sociocultural context they are participating in. When they do make a stand, their resistance gets overlooked because teachers misinterpreted their silences and non-participation.

Teachers' limited understanding of parents and lack of dialogue with parents, in conjunction with parents' silence, resulted in teachers' assumptions that parents "don't know," "don't ask," or "don't care." Yet, as Casey's mother explained, sometimes home circumstances prevented her from implementing the school's recommendations as opposed to a lack of trying. As she shared a rental apartment with several other families, whenever Casey refused to cooperate and put on his own shoes and clothes in the morning, she would rather acquiesce to him than have his cries awaken her neighbors in their tight residential space. Hence, socioeconomic circumstances—not cultural values—impeded her ability to observe the schools' recommendations of instilling independence in children at home, and in this scenario, SES triumphs sociocultural differences. It is important to understand that immigrant parents have lower self-efficacies because of a large number of stressors in their lives (Vidali & Adams, 2006). Thus, the study points to the intersectionality of culture, class, and method in understanding the nature of interaction between school and families. Culture and class intertwine in complex ways with each receding and advancing in different circumstances. Different values and practices held by school staff and families hampered interaction and understanding to begin with. Adding class differential to the equation, teachers' presumed higher social standing relative to low-income immigrant parents' enabled the former to assert their values over the latter. Furthermore, parental interaction with school staff is heterogeneous depending on how upwardly mobile parents themselves are. Finally, a qualitative inquiry approach, that situates participants in their natural setting and gives voice to participants, is indispensable in uncovering these nuances in intersectionality between culture and class.

Implications and Recommendations

Teachers' unchecked deficit-thinking and assumptions about parents from different cultures and classes are problematic. Students may begin to internalize innuendos that their parents are not good enough, that school values and culture trump those at home, and that they should be ashamed of their own parents and culture. Parents may retreat from partnering with the school when they sense disingenuous invitations, feel disempowered about their children's education, or become confused about what values to inculcate in their children. Hence, teachers risk the preservation of deficit and false impressions about parents, and the school may lose valuable partners who can help foster greater educational experiences for students should these misgivings persist (Souto-Manning and Swick, 2006).

It is critical to highlight that these disturbing patterns of interaction were found at a center that had made concerted efforts to involve families and recently received a Certificate of Excellence from New York City's Administration for Children's Services. This begs the question: If a best-practice school exhibited one-directional, didactic communication, what would the nature of interaction look like in other schools? What can schools do to partner with families, and make the school environment more welcoming to immigrant families?

To begin with, having a dialogue, rather than a monologue with parents is helpful. Listening to the voices of immigrant parents (Adair and Tobin, 2008), particularly paying attention to parents' family and community circumstances, cultural values and norms can help to promote understanding between schools and families (Arzubiaga, Ceja and Artiles, 2000; Graue and Hawkins, 2010). Teachers need to question their assumptions that professional experience should always override parental insights, and keep their minds open to parents' different approaches to schooling and the influence of culture. For example, rather than assuming that silence means consent from the part of parents, teachers need to learn that, in some cultures and circumstances, silence may be a sign of assent, confusion, or disagreement. Scholars have observed that Chinese communication styles aim to be as conflict-free as possible by utilizing indirect expressions, formality, avoidance or contextualization in communication (Chen, 2002). Giving parents sufficient time to think prior to eliciting their feedback, persistent in-depth probing rather than being content with parents' initial answers, and providing anonymous feedback channels are some ways to take into account sociocultural differences.

Furthermore, hiring teachers who speak the same language or are from the same culture does not naturally lead to culturally responsive pedagogy. Professionalization and assimilation have forced teachers to shed their cultural values. Manuela and Esther grew up in humble settings, yet that did not automatically make them excellent cultural and class brokers. Thus, administrators need to make explicit the responsibility teachers have as cultural brokers or provide support for teachers to hone their cultural competencies. Additionally, schools can exhibit through words and actions that parents' feedback and questions are valued, and update parents of decisions about their feedback so that parents feel included.

Supportive structures also need to be established within schools. For example, setting aside time for parents and teachers to share about their cultures or engage in non-academic activities can reduce the distance between school and home, as illustrated in this anecdote.

> Once, we made a quilt and the school sewed it up and hung it on the wall. When we go to the school staff room and see it, we think: 'Wow, that's us, parents' achievements!' and that makes us feel satisfied. (Kaleb's mother, 08/03/10)

Other structures include scheduling activities during parents’ non-working hours and providing translation help.

In implementing any of these recommendations, a word of caution is to be mindful of the applicability of transferring recommendations across contexts. This caution similarly applies to the wealth of literature on educational partnerships that has been published and that provides ideas above and beyond the constraints of this article. Constant trial and error in creating culturally-responsive partnerships and being sensitive and reflective are critical in enhancing the viability of recommendations. Yet, above all, the school will need to desire a more equal partnership to begin with, and assume that parents have something to offer. With these measures and mindsets in place, a beautiful partnership may bloom, benefiting schools, parents, and most importantly, children.

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