

## Chinese Sub-culture and Parental Involvement Strategies: An Anthropological Case Study of a Public School in Eastern America

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**KEYWORDS** Chinese Immigrant Families. Cultural Dispositions. Emotional Bridge. Parental Involvement. Social and Cultural Capital

**ABSTRACT** The object of this paper is to reveal the role of subculture in Chinese immigrants in shaping parental involvement strategies at the school. The experimental design of this study relies on participant observation in a public school, located in large urban school district in Eastern America and 34 in-depth interviews to the parents and 8 educators there. The principal observation and conclusion shows the teachers in the school require academic support from the families and the Chinese immigrant families can meet these needs generally through practicing their a large family network and higher expectations for their children's academic achievement. However for the administration perspective of parents' involvement, it requires parents' active involvement in community participation. The Chinese immigrant families tend to fail to satisfy this needs. The subculture of big family network of Chinese immigrants community is lack of tradition of community participation, which impedes them to be active community members within the American school.

### INTRODUCTION

Parental involvement within educational institutions is one of the hottest topics for American sociologists to explore. The debate on parental involvement in schools is an ever going and relevant topic for educators and researchers. The standing point is that educators and parents should establish partnership to work together to civilize their next generation (Everson 2016). For example, a meta-analysis of 42 studies indicates a significant relationship between parental involvement and academic achievement in African American students through pre-school and college freshman (Jeynes 2006). However, the concept of parent involvement has different meanings throughout American education history (Lightfoot 1978). It also contains various meanings for multiple stakeholders in specific contexts (Bu-Hyun and Duk-Byeong 2014).

With the number of immigrants entering America on the rise, questions surrounding parental involvement in immigrant communities have become a meaningful field of study in the context of parental involvement. Several factors are linked to parental involvement within schools. A few presently identified factors of parental involvement include social class, cultural capital (Larreau 1987, 2002; Vincent et al. 2013), time spent living in the United States, race, and even logis-

tical factors, such as providing parking lot and token for transportation (Henderson and Mapp 2002). It is also found that parents' experience becoming an emotional bridge to connect parents' story and their children's present motivation of study and achievement (Suizzo et al. 2016). Culture issues is regarded as potential challenges for parental involvement at school. For example, educators might have different perceptions on cultural identification, including the boundary of personal space and understanding of authority figures (Debra 2015). There is a shift from focusing only on what parents do to engage in their children's education to considering how parents understand the how and why of their involvement (Barton et al. 2004). Through reviewing 31 English learners' (EL) parent involvement study, Simpson (2015) found that most proportion of the studies discussing school and family relationship, but the relationship among families, such as seeking kinship, collaboration among families is on low rate of study. In this dynamic process, the subculture of immigrant communities should be discussed as an important factor that influences parental involvement in schools. This study illustrates how the subculture of the Chinese community is applied to parents, which in turn influences the character of parental involvement for these immigrants. It discusses the interaction between parental involvement and cultural factors in Chinese immi-

grant community by providing descriptions of immigrant cultures in both family settings and public settings. In family settings, the cases of Latino families will be drawn for comparison to reflect the character of Chinese families. In public settings, the cases of native parents will be used to make comparison to state the character of Chinese immigrant situation.

### Literature Review

A large literature body exists pertaining to the topic of parental involvement in schools. Despite the breadth of studies within this subject, the current researcher has identified two key limitations based on literature review, which involve homogeneous needs of parental involvement from schools and the lack of interaction between parental involvement and immigrants' community subculture. The identified limitations can be addressed through three approaches: parental involvement, subculture and cultural capital. These approaches also reflect the key concepts of this study.

Epstein (1995) drew a classic picture on parental involvement, illustrating six fields: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, collaborating with community. His theory provides a holistic view of parental involvement and is widely applied in research. However, in this cooperation among school, parents and communication, the needs from school are considered homogeneously. Moreover, much of the previous literature strengthens the various situations in parental involvement in terms of social class, races, parent education background, etc; they always identify the common needs of parental involvement from school (Lareau 1987, 2002; Vincent et al. 2013; McGrath and Kuriloff 1999; Horvat 2003; Hassrick and Schneider 2009). Some scholars identify the conflict between schools and parents organizations (Lewis and Forman 2002; Lareau and Munoz 2012; Posey-Maddox 2013; Lightfoot 1978). For example, Lareau and Munoz (2012) used qualitative data from an elementary school in an affluent community to discuss the main sources of conflict between parent-teacher organizations (PTOs) and the school: different favors on school's environment, battle on authority and difference on the communication structure between PTOs and the school. They identified the different structures between PTOs

and the school. Some researchers regard these conflicts as temporary and amenable (Epstein 1990; Protheroe 2006; Wanat and Zieglowsky 2010). These researchers appreciate the value of communication between parents and educators (Lightfoot 1978:189) and show optimistic attitude to the function of program intervention (Swap 1993). However, some scholars consider the conflicts between parents and educators are repetitive and inevitable (Waller 1932). However, the various needs from the different positions of the school were ignored. It appears that all the faculty members at the school held the same perspective in these conflicts. In spite of the fact that some scholars perceive the conflicts between parents and schools to be inevitable, while other scholars believe conflicts are amendable, the understanding and needs of educators' side on parental involvement tend to be homogeneous. Although Lareau and Lopes Munoz specifically discussed issues of conflict between principle and PTO, they failed to recognize that varying perspectives on this topic exists among people with different positions within the schools. The underlying assumption is that all the faculty members within the school have the standard needs for parental involvement (Lareau and Munoz 2012).

Moreover, there is a large body of literature discussing parental involvement in immigrant communities. Immigrant families, especially the ones from low level educational background, tend to be described as vulnerable and disadvantaged groups. It is reported that compared with Anglo and U.S.-born parents, immigrant parents have a lower rate of participation in schools (Turney and Kao 2009). Immigrant parents who must work long hours do not know enough about the US educational system and cannot manage the schools' expectations (Adult Learning Center 2003; Jones 2002). Language barriers are apparent concerns in parental involvement for immigrants (Sileo and Sileo 1996; Lowenhaupt 2014; Bu-Hyun 2014). There are nearly 10 million English Language Learners (ELLs) in the US's public school system. While research continually finds that schools face challenges in communicating ELL parents. Due to the weak communication, ELL parents may have negative experiences with educational institutions or less exposure to formal schooling (Tarasawaab and Waggonerab 2015). Beyond the language barriers, immigrant parents are found

to have less knowledge than others of the invisible codes of power embedded in school cultures (Perez et al. 2005). In fact, it is partly rooted from the different backgrounds of educator and parents. For example, in Turkish culture, parents would view the teacher as part of the family and assume personal relationship with teachers. While the teachers' lack of awareness of Turkish culture precluded the kind of personal contact that would have been welcomed. That impedes their better cooperation (Debra 2015). Some studies report that Chinese immigrant families hold higher educational expectations on their children (Louie 2004). These immigrant parents were found to be more willing to help children with homework and learning at home, but remained relatively uninvolved in terms of participating in volunteer or decision making opportunities at schools (Cheng and Koblinsky 2009). However, these research projects, scholars failed to analyze how the specific cultural dispositions of immigrant communities influenced parental involvement in schools.

In addition, the concept of social and cultural capital is widely applied to education study, including the study of parental involvement (Tian and Liu 2015). Many analyses are based on social class. Some scholars discuss the issues across races, while there is limited link between social and cultural capital and subculture of specific of immigrant groups. Lareau and Elliot (2003) published an influential paper on the interpretation of cultural capital in education. Based on the theoretic review to the English language version of cultural capital, they argued that instead of "highbrow" aesthetic culture and distinct from other technical skills or forms of knowledge, cultural capital means the ability of advantageous social class imposing evaluation standards to the education practice. Lareau and Shumar (1996) also pointed out several factors on parents' and guardians' individual level can affect parental involvement, including educational skills, occupational and economic flexibility, social networks, and positions of power in home-school encounters. Lareau (2000) argues that working class parents were constrained by their inflexible working schedule which impeded their ability to participate in their children's education.

Some scholars address the presence in formal or informal space of education settings as an important strategy in engagement (Perez et al. 2005). Based on the literature review of parental

involvement, Mitchell (2008) drew a whole picture of social and cultural capital in education. She points out that capital refers to the resources which parents have to draw upon when they navigate various settings. In parental involvement field, it refers to pre-dispositions, attitudes, and knowledge gained from experience, particularly education related experiences. It also includes connection providing access to information and resources to navigate education system and practice which support their children get success in education.

Much of the existing literature discusses social and cultural capital based on social class. There is limited discussion on how these elements interact with the cultural dispositions of specific immigrants groups to shape the strategies of their engagement with the education system. Perez discovered that the Latino participants would draw the experience in their home countries to perceive their children's situation in the school (Perez et al. 2005). Lee and Kao (2009) applied nationally representative samples of kindergarten to find that not only Asian, Hispanic, and African American children of immigrants are less likely to participate in extracurricular activities than their ethnic peers whose mothers were born in the United States, but also that other-race children with immigrant mothers fared the worst when compared to White children with native born mothers. These studies brought the immigrants status and context on board, but lack of reflection on how their subculture affecting their participation in their children's education through social and cultural capital.

In sum, the limitations for the literature of immigrant parental involvement can be reflected in the following two points. First, most of literature takes the value of parental involvement for granted, but these scholars did not pay plenty of attention to the multi-function and needs of parental involvement from school side. Second, many studies have identified the barriers of immigrant families engaging with the educational system in the U.S. Meanwhile, social and cultural capital is a convinced conception to interpret the disadvantage position in parental involvement. However, the existing literature did not demonstrate how the cultural disposition of specific immigrant communities interact was transferred to specific status of the social and cultural capital to shape their involvement of their children's education.

## METHODOLOGY

The research presented here involved participant observation of one third-grade classroom in Angela school, a public school, located in large urban school district. Additionally, in-depth interviews of parents, teachers, and principals were conducted. For the confidential issues, all the names of school, parents, students, and teachers are fictitious. The school contains more than 400 students from grades K-8. 89.4 percent are classified by the school district as economically disadvantaged. The school is culturally diverse, with 35.4 percent Latino students, 28.6 percent African American students, 16.2 percent White students, 13.5 percent Asian students, and 5.9 percent of students who identified as other, 19 percent of students are in English as a Second Language (ESL) learning programs, and 10.7 percent students are in special education program.

From January to June 2014, the current researcher visited Mr. Kevin's 3<sup>rd</sup> grade classrooms regularly. Before that, the current researcher has been doing volunteer work to host Chinese Club in the school since the autumn in 2013. The researcher's visits to the school averaged 2 days per week. During that time, the current researcher observed the classroom and acted as a volunteer in the class, passing out papers and helping the children with math and group study. At the end of the school year, the current researcher expanded her interviews to incorporate parents across the school to cover more cases. It is believed that the ethnographic approach is the best when giving a very specific investigation that explores a circumscribed social setting (Tian et al. 2015; Tian 2010). Asking open-ended questions can broaden the understanding of a problem beyond what could have assumed the issues to be at the beginning of the study (Jordan 2010). In this study, 34 parents and 8 educators were invited to participate. Under the classification of "parents", parents, grandparents and great grandparents who lived with the students and involved in their school life were included. For the educators, it covered classroom teachers, special education teachers, the principal, the admin staff and the substitute principal. Among the 34 parents, 17 parents are Chinese immigrants, 7 from Latino families, 6 white parents, 2 immigrants from North Africa and 2 African America parents.

All the interviews were semi structured and lasted about one hour. The Chinese parents were interviewed in Mandarin Chinese. The native parents and the immigrant parents from North Africa were interviewed in English. A Spanish interpreter was recruited to translate the interview from English to Spanish. All the interviews were tape recorded, and all participants were promised confidentiality.

## RESULTS

Through investigating the interaction between the Chinese immigrants' parents and Angela School, this study discovers that the Chinese subculture plays an active role in parental involvement. Firstly, the school has various needs to parental involvement. The teachers require parents providing academic supporting for their children's learning, but the administration staff emphasis community participation from the families. While comparing the Chinese immigrant community with Latino's community and Native American community, it can be found that the family network of the Chinese immigrant families can share time resource, language skills across the big family to contribute academic learning support to the student. When comparing with native parents it is easy to find out that the Chinese immigrant parents are generally not used to participate in community activities. They will engage in language barriers, inflexible working hours which could not be coped with cultural resource sharing across the family network. That impedes their participation in the school events. As such, the subculture of Chinese immigrant community bears both advantage and disadvantage in terms of parental involvement.

### The Different Needs in the School Settings to Parental Involvement

When schools are regarded as organizations; they must have kept various functions to survive (Schein 2004). Schools have to keep regulations, balance budget, and maintain social exchange with community to survive. At the same time, passing knowledge and learning skills to the students are also crucial function for schools. Facing the limitation of literature discussed above which indicates the standard understanding of parents' involvement in the school settings, this research finds that teachers and administrators have different needs of parental involvement.

In the current study, the classroom teachers and special needs education teacher expressed similar needs to parental involvement. They stress parent should reinforce academic learning in the school, especially following up the one hundred books challenge program at home. In the two report card meetings in February and May, Mr. Kevin, the classroom teacher in grade 3, continuously told the parents to practice flash cards with the kids at home to help them get more skillful with multiplication table. Special needs education teacher Ms. Denis stressed the importance of parents reading together with their children at home. She said it is crucial to expose students to readings at home for making academic progress. The problem of most of her students in the special education program is that they are lack of support from parents, accompanying them to read on regular basis.

The classroom teachers stressed that they hope to get support from parents to correct students' behavior problems and complying with the school's rules. Ms. Charles, a classroom teacher in Grade 1 said she had a student named Rador who has behavior problems. She told the current researcher: "Rador always fight with others. We went through special education assessment to see if he has psychological problem. The result indicates he has no psychology problem and did not need special intervention. Then his great grandma got involved in the classroom activities as a volunteer. She can look after him in some way. That helps a lot." Beyond the behavior problems of students, classroom teachers also require parents themselves to obey the school rules.

Ms. Laiden, an experienced teacher in kindergarten, provided another story about the teachers' exception on parents' obeying school rules. The school requires all parents to sign out when picking up their children at backdoor of the kindergarten to record that the kids are with their parents. One day, a friend of a student's mom came to the kindergarten. Mr. Laiden asked her to show ID and sign out. She was angry and refused to show the ID card until the police was called. The principal announced that this parent was forbidden to entrust others to pick up the kid any more. The mom was specially directed to pick up her child at main office every time instead of at backdoor of the school where is the regular picking point for other parents. After one month, the mom transferred her child to an-

other school. However, in the dialog with the administration staffs, including the principal, the most salient patterns need of parents' involvement refer to fund-raising and participating school activities as community members. The needs of reinforcing academic learning were mentioned at some point, but they did not discuss it as main points as classroom teachers did. The school administrative staffs stressed the contribution from the parents and Home School Association (HSA). They also need the parent representatives to speak out for the school and negotiate with the school district. Money donation was also mentioned by the administrative staffs.

In May of 2014, the budget of the school district was cut, and the Angela School was informed that the 2 days per week budget for the Chinese interpreter will be cut off. The principal told the current researcher: "*(the budget being cut year by year is) very terrible, I have to tell you...It is so frustrating to me. For the kids, just like what I am saying that the parents have to get more involved and get informed what is going on in school .I cannot protest as I am an employee of the school district. The parents have the rights. They are the tax payers, you know? They are the ones who get to elect people ..... If you are not happy...(if) ou want to change. You can protest. But the Asian parents just keep silent for it...*"

In June of 2014, it was graduate seasons. Many activities were carried out to celebrate. During the process, the administrative staff would discuss the value of donation from the parents. The secretary in the main office said: "*All the graduated students were invited have dinner at Louis church. It was very nice that the church donated this event. Everyone was required to dress up for this ceremony. But you know where St. Petersburg School had the ceremony? They had dinner at The Great Grant Hotel. It was a spectacular venue! They could make it, because they had parents to donate. We do not have those parents.*"

On the contrary, the classroom teachers seldom talked Home School Association; they could hardly identify the president of the organization. As Ms.aiden said: "*it was nice to have parents working on the community, but for my daily work, it was not related directly. For the request I want the parents know, I always send them written notes when they pick up the kids. No need to go through the HSA.*" Ms. Leffe, a

classroom teacher in grade 3, told the current researcher: *"The only thing I know about HSA is that they hosted appreciation dinner for the teachers. There were some parents but I did not know them. I have no idea what they are working on for HSA and I don't know the president of it either."*

The existing literature described that the educators in schools had homogeneous needs to the parental involvement. Though Epstein (1995) identified six fields of parental involvement, including parenting, learning, collaborating with community etc., she has not mapped out these different elements of parental involvement attaching to different needs of various roles in the schools. In fact, the current study found classroom teachers emphasized on academic learning and obeying school rules. However, the administrative staff had stronger needs for fund raising and community involvement. Both of these two tendencies are rooted from the function of school as an organization. It can also be interpreted that on individual level, the classroom teachers need parents to enforce the academic learning at home and well prepared the kids for school. At institution level, especially facing the budget crises, the school needs more human resources and funds to run the school. Like two wings of the birds, they both make sure school can fulfill their scope of work: passing academic knowledge and running as an organization with plenty funds and community support, which are equally important. According to these two functions, it requires two strategies of parental involvement: to interact with the classroom teachers for the academic learning and to interact with the administration system to make contributions to the school as community members.

### **Culture Disposition in Chinese Immigrant Community**

When discuss about the parental involvement in immigrant families, the sub culture of the ethnic groups should always be considered. Anthropologist Francis L.K. Hsu (1967) pointed out that Chinese family culture tends to appear in vertical direction by generations. For the Chinese community the cohesion of families is reflected in many ways, including running family business, social integration and self-identification (Fei 1946). The paternity requires fathers take full responsibilities for the next generation, the

next generation is supposed to practice filial piety to their parents. The cohesion of families heavily relies on the relationship between husband and wife in horizontal position rather than between parents and children in vertical position. Thus, the big family culture becomes a unique character of the Chinese community. Interaction among kinship is quite strong and intensive. It also has special function beyond emotional support (Tian 1999).

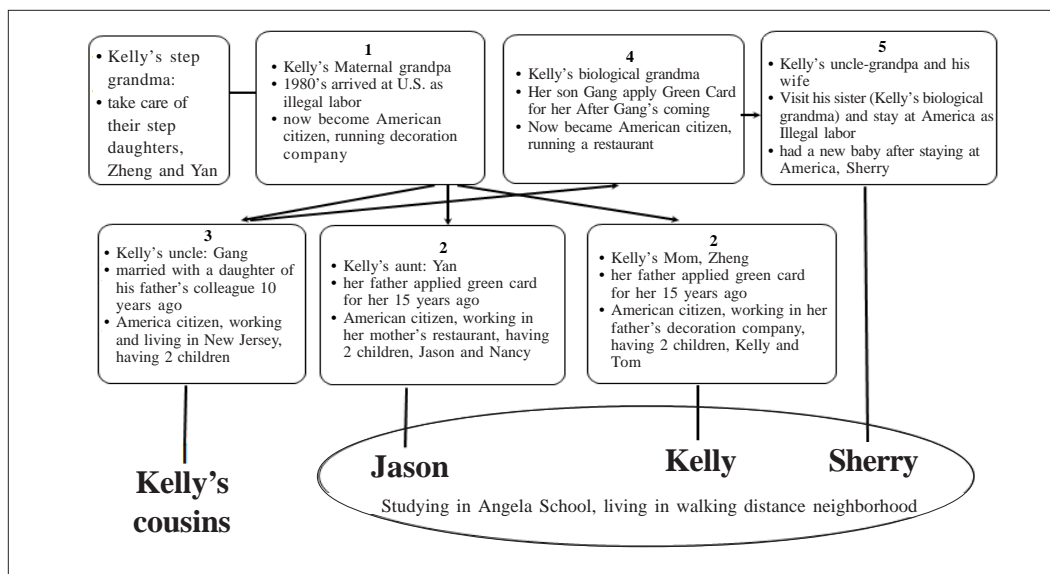
For example, Brandon is a boy at kindergarten at Angela school, who stays at his grandparent's house on weekdays. The grandpa takes him to go to school and picks him up every day. The grandma does housework, cooking for them. Brandon's parents live close to Brandon, who will come to see him every day and pick up him to spend weekends. Brandon's uncle, who is 31 years old and working in property field, is single and still living with his parents, Brandon's grandma and grandpa house. Brandon's grandma regards taking good care of Brandon as their duty and said: *"We, Chinese, are not like the Western people. Once the child steps into 18 years, they are regarded as independent one and separated with his parents. We, Chinese are living for the sake of our descents. If we cannot see our children and grandchildren around, that would let us feel empty. We keep on taking care the children and grandchildren. If we did not do it, we would feel guilty and irresponsible. It is nice that we are fulfilling our responsibility. We are happy on that. Our children are happy on that. Then we all are happy to do what we are supposed to do."*

Meanwhile, the immigration status of Chinese in America maintains the possibility of the big family culture exiting in American. Comparing with Latino families, Chinese immigrants have experienced several waves and generations to make living in the U.S. However most of Mexican immigrants in Angela school come by illegally crossing the border of America and Mexico with extraordinary physical striving. Ms. Yong, the Spanish interpreter at the school introduced that more than 90 percent Latino parents in the school did not held legal documents in the U.S. Crossing the broader or holding tourist Visa to get into America require extremely physical endurance or huge amount of money, most of Mexican parents have to leave the elder generation and their original family network behind their home country. To some extent, the family network across the generations has been destroyed.

While for the Chinese immigrants, it is almost impossible for them only through climbing the mountains and cross the rivers to get to American. They have to navigate the visa status to be kept in America. For the illegal Chinese immigrants, beyond the help of human smugglers, most of them have relatives or town fellows who already stayed in America. The earlier immigrants not only motivated them to come to American, but also provided them support once they got to America. Then they will try to get all their kinship to America. Eventually the big family could be moved to America. That explains the reason that the strong ties of big families of Chinese immigrants are booming in America. Kelly is a girl in Kindergarten at Angela School. She lived close to her relatives. The following statement summarized from the fieldwork describes how the big family navigated their visa and moved to U.S. eventually and what kind of kinship network behind Kelly.

*Kelly is a girl in Kindergarten at Angel school. Kelly's mom, Zheng, and aunt, Yan, moved to America 15 years ago, when they were in middle school. Kelly's grandpa came to America illegally in 1980's, with their town fellow-villagers and relatives from Fujian Province in China. He worked as labor in house decoration field for years. Then he became an owner of a small decoration company. He devoiced with*

*his wife years ago. The couple had 3 children: Zheng (Kelly's mother), Yan and Qiang. As guardian of the two daughters, Kelly's grandpa applied green card for Zheng and Yan, who came to the city living with their father and step mother, finished high school and then went to the community colleague. Kelly's grandpa arranged marriage for Qiang (Kelly's uncle) with his working partner's daughter in China town, who had become an American citizen for years. After marrying with the lady, Qiang became an American citizen too, who then applied green card for his mother (Kelly's grandmother). Later, Kelly's mom, aunt and uncle were each given a property by Kelly's grandpa. Kelly's mom and dad became employees at Kelly's grandpa's decoration company. Zhen and Yan's house is about 8 minutes walking distance in Agela School's neighborhood. Qiang's family lives in New Jessy. The three siblings will gather together at their mom's house almost every weekend. Beyond that they have an uncle from their mother's side illegally moved to America more that 10 years ago, whose wife moved to the city a few years later. The couple in their forties had a new baby in U.S., named Sherry, who and Kelly are at same age and study in the same classroom at the Angel school. There are frequent family gatherings on family members' birthdays, American holidays and Chinese festivals (See Fig. 1).*



**Fig. 1. The network of Sherry's Big Family**  
Source: Author

Figure 1 shows how the big Chinese families moved to America eventually in the passed decades. In this process, grandparents of Kelly passed their property to their children, which help Kelly's parents get relative solid material foundation. Meanwhile, the new generation of Chinese immigrants, Kelly's mother and aunt got education in America, which contribute their language ability. There close location of house and active interactive among the kinship offers great opportunities to share resources cross the kinships.

Another unique cultural characteristic of the Chinese community is that people value academic accomplishments. The Chinese people believe that excellent academic performance is a crucial ladder to actualize vertical social mobility (Tian 2009). In general, Chinese communities take educations seriously and are longing for good result. It emerges as collective pattern in Chinese (Kipnis 2011). In contrast, rooted from different educational history background, the initiating factor for teaching in America was for religion education or managing slaves (Lightfoot 1978). Facing the two specific cultural factors in Chinese community, combing with their immigration status, Chinese immigrants are generally motivate to concern their children's academic performance at school; the ties among kinship through generations can be mobilized as resources for children's schooling. It can be observed in at least three perspectives.

### **Chinese Immigrants Parental Involvement in Private Settings**

Private settings here refer to the students' family environment. Comparing with interaction with schools, school district and other public institutions, the parents' involvement in family settings has specific features. As primary social organization, family is featured as privacy and intimation. Applying parental involvement to family settings, the culture capital of parents plays implacable role (Laureau 2000). In the Chinese immigrant community, the education background is found as a key factor to shape the strategies of partnership between parents and schools. For the parents with bachelor degree or above level, most of them can speak English well, clearly understand the academic requirements at the school and be able to help their kids' with reading at home. For example, Grace is a student

in Grade 3 at the Angel school. She is the top student in the class and always gets the most stars on "one hundred book challenge" classroom logs. The current researcher walked with her and her mom to the park where they were supposed to conduct the interview. When chatted with her mom that the current researcher is a visiting scholar from UPENN, the 9 years old Grace immediately identified it as "an Ivy University?" The interviewer found that her mom graduated from a university in China and went to America as a dependent of her dad who was a PhD student at UPENN medical school. The parents always check and sign calendar from school and they cultivated reading habit since Grace was at pre-K school. Parents also got information from the daily communication with child that there were kids with behavior problems in the class always broke the rules. By the end of this school year, they decided to move the apartment to transfer Grace to a better academic performance school. And Grace set her target to get to one of the best middle school in the city in a few years. It can be observed Grace's parents had strong education background. Like native parents in American, the cultural capital of the well-educated parents in Chinese community can be transferred in schooling by regularly checking classroom teacher's calendar, developing learning habit, choosing better schools. In this way, they meet the requirements of classroom teacher for academic support.

While for the Chinese immigrant parents who are not equipped with elite cultural capital, the big family culture and high expectation of academic performance in Chinese community plays a hidden but important role in their involvement at school. It can be observed in three ways:

#### ***1. Providing Stable Family Environment for the Students: Life Burden Sharing***

First, as the starting point of parental involvement, the parents are supposed to provide safe and stable family environment to the children (Epstein 1995). This stability can be interpreted in three perspectives: maintaining basic financial standard, making sure time resource input to the children's education, and sharing the value of family solidarity. If the families are in desperate poverty, it will be hard for parents to respond the needs from schools. On this point, the big family culture in Chinese immigrant community



offers welfare sharing across generations and among siblings. In this study, among the 16 Chinese interviewees 13 of them own a house. Taking Kelly's grandpa as an example, he was able to spread his property to all of his three children. That lays a solid material foundation for the students' family life. Also, many Chinese families borrowed money from their parents, siblings when they made the down payment of property. None of the 8 Latino families in this study owns a house. They cannot get financial support from their hometown. Instead, they sometimes have to send money back to their parents in home country. It can be regarded as financial burden for the family.

As to time resource, it can be observed that in the school yard there were always Chinese grandparents. They are responsible for sending the kids and picking up them every day. However, it is rare to see the grandparents of Latino families at school. A typical scene of Latino family is that a mom taking a younger baby in arms or in baby chair to come to the school to pick up other kids. It is common to see the Latino moms lead two or three children and a baby to go home. In Mexico culture, husbands are responsible for making a living for the family and wives are responsible to run the house. It is common in this study that the fathers of Latino families have to go out work for 7 days a week to raise a family with 3 to 4 kids. Ashima's family is a typical case in Latino community of Angela School.

For instance, Ashima is a 9 years old, tiny girl in Mr. Kevin's classroom. She is the oldest child in her family and was born in Jefferson Hospital in the city. She has a younger brother, Alex, in Grade 1, a younger sister, Kimberly, in Kindergarten, and another 13 months old younger brother. Ashima's dad works in a pub, around 30 minute's public transportation away. When he is busy with the work, he can only come home every Monday. He can speak some English and help the homework. But when he has to do something else, like paying the bills, he has to go. Ashima's mom, Malana, cannot speak in English. As a housewife, she is doing almost all the housework and taking care of the four kids. When Ashima has difficulties in homework, most of the time, no one can help her. Generally, she can hand in the homework with neat layout, but most time with wrong answers. Or sometimes, she copies the answers on the homework sheet from her classmates.

As per Lareau's opinion (Lareau 2000), in this situation, parents are short of time resource and flexibility schedule to deal with the schooling issues. While in Chinese community, at least the task of picking up the kids can be shared by grandparents or siblings around. That releases time pressure for the working parents and keep the energy and time for parents to concentrate helping homework after work. For example, Brandon's grandpa picks him from school every day. Brandon's mom will come to supervise his homework every night after dinner. Another case is that Ellen's family. Ellen has a 6 month old younger sister. They live with their parents and grandparents in one house. The grandma sets her to school and also shares the housework with Ellen's mom. So Ellen's mom can have time to check her school bag every night. Amy's story serves as another example, her family bought the house 2 years ago, which is located on the across corner of her aunt's house. That allows Amy's mom and aunt sharing the picking up task. When Amy's mom is busy working in the restaurant, Amy's aunt will come to pick Amy and her brother and 2 cousins together.

Financial status and time resource are regarded as important foundation for parental involvement. Beyond that, the value of family cohesion offered stable emotion support to the children. In the confusion, gentleman are always instructed to have self-cultivation at first, then maintaining family at the highest level as serve the nation. Therefore, maintaining family is regarded as an important factor in family education. Amy's mom exposed herself to the current researcher about her illegal status. She said: *"because of this, I have to do everything cautiously. We decide not to buy a car, even we have the money. Once you were caught by the police, they will deport you back to China. Then, what happens to my family. My family will be broken! A family cannot run without husband or wife. If in that situation, how do you talk about educating your children, without dad or mom?"*

On the contrast, the Latino families have weak concern on the link between family and education. When talking about the illegal status in America, they are not as cautious as Chinese immigrants. Yakee is a girl in Mr. Kevin's classroom. Her mom crossed the mountain by feet to come to America 11 years ago. She said at the beginning, she was always fearful of polices: *"When I saw the police on the street, I always*

worried I will be caught and set back to Mexico. After a few years, I know it does not work like that. Now I am waiting for working permit and will not be fearful of police anymore.” In the interview to Ashima’s parents, they shook their heads and said: “we are not fearful of the police. My kids were born here. They are American! In case we are sent back, they can stay with my sister. She has the (legal) paper. We are backing home, but my kids can keep staying here. It doesn’t matter.”

## **2. Sharing Culture Capital in the Family Network: Information Sharing**

When probe the factors that impede parental involvement, the language barriers of immigrants can be easily identified. Poor communication skills in English blocks most of the lower educational background immigrant parents to get information from the school and response efficiently. Many evidences show the immigrants’ parents with language barriers have difficulties in reinforcing the learning at home.

*Amy’s younger brother, Jack, is in grade 2 at the Angel school. The mom moved to America about 10 years ago. She dropped off high school when she was in China. One day, after she walked the two kids’ home, the mom required the kids to finish the homework before dinner. Then the mom was busy in the kitchen for cooking. In the past 40 minutes, Jack always murmured to himself “I don’t know how to write”, and then played by himself for a while. When he went back to his seat and tried to write something, he murmured to himself again “I don’t know what to write. It is hard”. Then he played around in the sitting room until his mom found him still could not finish the homework, she asked “why you are so slow? What homework are you supposed to do today?” Jack said “write a journal about your favorite outdoors activities”. Mom asked “what the meaning of ‘outdoors?’” Jack tried to explain to his mom with half English and Chinese “‘outdoor’ jiushi (Chinese way to express “it is”) “outdoor” (“outdoor” means “outdoor”), at the same time, pointing to the outside with his hand. It was not a clear explanation. The mom was confused, being silence for a while, and then repeated her request “Hurry up for your homework.”*

Ella, moved to America about 10 years ago after graduation from high school in a small town

in Mexico. She has four children; Finanda is the oldest one who is in the grade 3. Ella said: “it is hard for me to help Finanda’s homework. Even she tried to look for the words with dictionary in her phone, translating them words by words, she still cannot understand Finanda’s homework quite well. For the ‘100 Books Challenges’ program, the parents are requested to sign on the reading log of ‘100 Hundred Book Challenges’ every night in weekdays. Students are supposed to read at home at least 2 sessions. Each session lasts for 15 minutes. Finanda just imitates her mom’s handwriting and signs the log by herself.”

In fact, the immigrant children are mostly exposed to both of English and their parents’ original language. In this study, the parents who do not have good education background will always have serious language barriers. In these cases, the parents’ native language level is also low. Thus, the children can only imitate their parents’ native language poorly. They always mix English and their parents’ native language. They are not able to translate and explain the information from school to their parents. Facing this difficulty, the family network plays active roles to respond.

*For the Chinese immigrants who come to America for generations, it is common for young generation to get better education in America. Then they were equipped with language abilities to interact the school. Meanwhile, embedding the family network, this language ability can be shared with other family members who do not have. Then, the benefit can be spread in the big family. Unlike the domestic migrants in China, they lives in the big city and have to rely on new media to communicate with their family members at hometown (Tian 2015), most of Chinese immigrant families live close to each other. This situation makes the language abilities sharing possible. For instance, Sherry’s parents used to be peasants in southeast China before coming to America. Now the couple is working as labor in construction industry and restaurant. During the interview, Sherry’s mom scratched her bare feet frequently. They cannot speak English. Sherry is always picked up by Zheng or Yan, who are nephews of Sherry’s dad. When Sherry has notices from the school, her mom will get help from Zheng or Yan when they drop Sherry home. Sherry’s mom remembered when Sherry started the Kindergarten; she got a homework sheet from the classroom teacher*

on Monday. Sherry assumed the homework was required to complete on Tuesday, but she could not make it. For that, she cried before going to school on Tuesday morning. Her mom then took her to Yan's home in the early morning. Yan translated the homework and told Sherry that the homework sheet was for the whole week. Then Sherry was in a happy mood. When asked Sherry's mom if she worried her language barrier would set Sherry back at school, she answered that "No, not at all. The young generation, like my nephews, Zheng and Yan, can help on that."

Like the family members sharing the life burden in the Chinese family, the information from school can be transferred in the big family. There are three points to make this information sharing possible. Firstly, the young generation with better education background and language skills is available in the family network. Not like the first Mexican generation who are lack of family members to support, the Chinese immigrants in this study come to America for more generations and have young generation getting better education. In this case, Yan moved to this city with her sister 15 years ago and their dad and step-mom took care of them. She graduated from high school in the city center and went to community college. So she has ability to help Sherry's schooling. Secondly, the young generation's knowledge and language abilities can be shared across the nuclear families because the close relationship and frequent interaction among the big family members. Thirdly, it can also be observed that this information sharing has flexible form and schedule. Sherry's mom can ask help from her nephew in the early morning. Comparing with the strict schedule of institutions, for example, school, family members can share relative flexible schedule and direct social exchange, for example cooking and feeding, labor helping to each other. In this case, the support can happen heavily depending on the family settings and intensive interaction among family members.

### **3. Early Training on Math: Knowledge Transferring**

The Chinese parents tend to give training to their kids on math in early stage. Sherry's mom always repeats addition and subtraction with Sherry on their way to school. For the mom and the kindergarten aged daughter, it seems like a game. According to the scope of math learning

in Grade 3 for the school district (2013), students are required to "Multiplication Identify patterns in arithmetic (including multiplication tables or addition tables) and/or explain the using properties of operations." It does not require that students remember multiplication table. However, Amy's mom required Amy to recite it every day when she was in Grade 2. When Amy got to Grade 3, she was one of the top students on math. It can be observed in various math contests. She does not need to look at the multiplication table on the wall and rarely made mistake on calculation. The classroom teacher identified Amy as one of top students in the class. In the report card meeting, the classroom teacher always strengthens parents can play flash card with kids to help their kids for math. While in Amy's case, the teacher did not mention this point to the mom, instead he suggested Amy should be more exposed to English TV program, native speakers, and social activities. When Amy's mom was interviewed why she would like to do it. She said:

*"That is almost the only thing I can do for my kids. I cannot help them on English. When Amy got to Grade 3, I do not know many the vocabularies in her homework and reading assignment. How can I help her? But for math, you know we have our Chinese multiplication table, that is the foundation of math and very important. I can help the kids on that. Why not do it?"*

This reflection can be analyzed with two aspects. On one hand, comparing with Latino parents in the community, it can be observed that the Chinese immigrant parents have strong motivation to help their kids to get academic success. For that end, they are willing to offer their efforts. In the interview, the Latino parents of the students in Grade 3 were asked if they would repeat multiplication table for kids at home or play flash card with the kids. As one parent put it: "well...sometimes, but you know, we are too busy with working, cooking, taking care babies, bathing them....It is too hard to do it every day." In spite of the hardship of the lives, the Chinese immigrant parents still can offer help to the kids on math. It reflects the strong motivation of parents to help their children to be successful at school.

On the other hand, the parents make use of their knowledge of math, conquering language barriers to meet classroom teachers' need on re-

inforcing academic learning at home. In DiMaggio's version of cultural capital, math can be regarded as technical skills rather than cultural capital. Lareau (2003) argues that the status and quality of the power relationship between families and educational institutes are important strategy to apply culture capital. In this study, the parents in Chinese immigrants' community take the advantage of technical perspective of math knowledge to set their kids in advance in learning. That practice exactly meets the classroom teachers' requirement. As such, working on math offers the opportunities for Chinese parents to avoid language barriers, involving schooling, and to establish active cooperation with the classroom teachers.

### **Chinese Immigrants Parental Involvement in Public Settings**

While facing the needs of school to play an active role in community and get support from the community, the Chinese immigrants' families tend not to be so active. As for the interaction with administration system, the subculture of big families' network in Chinese immigrants' community cannot help much. It can be observed at three public settings: the passive mood in report card meetings, the inactive involvement in Home School Association, and the lack of participation in volunteer work. In one case, Mr. Kevin made appointment with Addy's mom at 2:00 pm on Wednesday afternoon as he knew the current researcher would be there to do the translation for the mom. When Addy's mom arrived at 1:55 and waited for the classroom teacher wrapping up with the parents in the conversation, she talked to the current researcher with her worry in Chinese: *"I cannot speak much in English; even I can listen and understand most of the conversation. His dad's English is better than mine, but he is too busy to come. So I am here. I found Addy's performance got worse. I do not know why. If this school cannot work for him, we would like to transfer him to another school..."*

When Addy's mom met the classroom teacher, the teacher showed her the homework record sheet which indicated that Addy did not complete his homework in 2 school days. The mom stared at the son and questioned him angrily. The son was with tears in the eyes immediately

and said he was always interrupted by his younger sister and could not concentrate on his homework. The mom said to his son in low and angry in Chinese "That is an excuse!" Then she turned to the teacher to keep on the conversation. The teacher asked if the parents checked calendar and homework sheet every day. The mom kept her silence and gave no answers to that question. Then the classroom teacher reminded the mom to do that frequently. The mom nodded.

In the meeting, the mom relied on the translation offered by the current researcher. She cannot clearly express herself to the classroom teacher in English. In fact, she has questions for the school and classroom teacher, but during the report card meeting, she did not mention it. Even the meeting guided the parent to make use of calendar and homework sheet as useful tool to follow up their kids at home, the teacher had no way to know about the concerns Addy's mom had. In this perspective, the report card meeting did not fulfill the communication function between the parent and teacher.

For the Home School Association, the principal delivered his suggestions the current researcher: *"I hope the Chinese community can be more active in Home School Association. We have representatives for Latino families, American parents. We do not have representative from Chinese families. For Latino families, they are either extremely involved or are not involved at all, but for the Asian Group, they almost do not participate. I do not know why."* In the two home school associate meetings in November, 2013 and March 2014, no Chinese parents showed up. When asked why they did not participate in Home School Association, the most common answer was *"We can't speak English. If Ms. Wang is not there to translate, what is it doing with us?"* Ms. Wang is the Chinese language assistant at the school, who was assigned by the school district to work at the Angela School every Wednesday and as such, she might not be available for the home school association meeting time.

Lack of language support is counted as one of the factors that block the participating Home School Association by the Chinese parents. One of the Chinese parents, Michel's father, gave the explanation in the interview: *"Those meetings talk about nothing but school budget. What can we do for that? If they have specific activities needing hands, we can contribute, but for those*

*meetings, either for fund raising, or selecting the chairman of the Home School Association board, it has nothing to do with us. I cannot speak English and do not know the chairman. Who Cares? We have no idea about what they are talking about without Ms. Wang's translation. How can we vote? Is it meaningful for us to be present there?"* In fact, this explanation does not only reply the question why they are not active in Home School Association, but also to demonstrate their attitude to volunteer work.

The current researcher discovered that from the opinions on Home School Association and volunteer work, the concept of "community" is rarely mentioned. On the contrast, "community" is always raised up in the middle class white parents. Maura, a mom of daughter in Grade 2, a musician, is the secretary of Home School Association of the school. She indicates: *"If I do not do volunteer work at Home School Association, it won't change the education of my kids. We did enrich program for them, sending the kids to play instruments, going to the museum. I did these for the community. We should contribute our community, and then everyone can get benefit."*

Susan is the vice chairman of the Home School Association of the school, in the kindergarten. She was almost presented at all the home school meetings. She said: *"Lily (her daughter) also enjoys the network. Yes, we formed a community...I did not anticipate I would be involved so deeply. I surprise myself."* In fact, parental involvement in school is used as an important indicator to show the democracy level in America and serves as a unique feature of American culture (Putman 2000). While in the Chinese culture people are organized through a hierarchy of various relations, such as between parents and children, husband and wife, supervisor and subordinate, etc. Moral rights and duties are defined and fulfilled differently in accordance with one's position in a given relationship. There is a sharp distinction in the attitudes and social interactions between the people in and outside the social networks (Fei 1946). Among these various social networks, responsibility to the family tends to take priority. While in the Chinese immigrants' community, the language barriers impede the Chinese immigrants to form new relationship beyond their big family network.

The school and Home School Association cannot be accounted into the network of the

Chinese people there. Thus, the network of family cannot be extended to the school administration system directly. The subculture of big family's network cannot contribute to their participation at the Home School Association. Further studies indicate that institutional limitation plays an important role as well. School, as a formal organization, must go with rigid schedule, while the schedule in the family is with more personal and flexible style. For example, the report card meeting time might not avoid conflict with the parents' working schedule. The home school meetings may not match the time when the translator is available. In this way, the Chinese big families' network and resources can be shared more freely with the flexible schedule in the big family lives, but it cannot be further shared with this strict schedule of the school. As such, even the Chinese big families' network can contribute to the time, information and knowledge sharing for the Chinese immigrants; it cannot help the group to have more active interaction in the public spheres to respond school's administration system and its needs.

## DISCUSSION

This case takes Chinese immigrants community as an example to describe how the subculture of immigrants community working on shape their specific strategies of parent involvement. It reveals on one hand, the subculture of Chinese immigrants can be summarized as big family network and strong motivation for the academic success. It can be found that these characters can fulfill the needs of academic learning through sharing resources in big families' network, providing stable family lives for the kids and making full use of the technique of math to set the kids in advance. However, the subculture of Chinese immigrants cannot support them to be active community members in the schools. The difficulties behind the language barriers are the lack of community participation tradition and the conflict between flexible resources sharing within big family network and inflexible schedule of the school as a bureaucratic organization.

Three elements can be extracted in the context: time, knowledge and network. At the same time, two types of spheres can be clarified: private sphere and public sphere. The former one mostly refers to family settings. The latter one means school, home school association, community, etc. (See Table 1). Time, knowledge and

**Table 1: Chinese sub-culture: Private vs. public settings**

<i>Elements</i>	<i>Private sphere</i>	<i>Public sphere</i>	<i>Fulfill the needs of parental involvement</i>
<i>Time</i>	Flexible schedule in family life	Fixed schedule in school and community events	1. Time resource can be shared within big families with flexible schedule to provide stable life for the students 2. The rigid schedule for the school and community events cannot be adjusted to the families' schedule
<i>Knowledge</i>	Sharing and transferring academic knowledge within big family network	1. Engaging into language barriers while communicate with school 2. Lack of knowledge of the community	1. Family members can help each other to reinforce academic learning, especially math practice, to fulfill parental involvement needs from academic perspective 2. Language barriers and lack of knowledge of the community impede Chinese parents to contribute to the school with participatory approach.
<i>Network</i>	Strong connection within big families	Lack of connection in the school and community as immigrants	Being lack of community participation cannot contribute to the community involvement

network can also be identified as important pathways for parent involvement. To understand the role of subculture of immigrants group in parent involvement, it is meaningful to observe in what way these elements can or cannot be motivated to respond schools requirement of parent participation. In this way, the role of subculture of immigrants in parent involvement can be given deeper insight.

Latour (2005) point out the world has to be understood in a consistent network. It is not proper to grasp the picture with rigid cause and effect link. There are many factors to be knitted in this specific context. Accordingly, it is hard to say that the subculture of Chinese immigrants is the only factor to shape their involvement in the school. However, at least it is one effective dimension to study the factors influencing parental involvement in the Chinese community.

### CONCLUSION

The current study has discovered that the teachers and administrative staff at schools have different needs on parental involvement. The teachers emphasize on strong learning supports from the family beside stable condition of raising the children. While the administrative staff have more needs to the parents on community participation, including donation, making voice of parents to the school district.

Through the comparison between the Chinese immigrants' families and Latino' immigrants' families, it is found that the big family network and higher academic expectation of Chinese im-

migrant community can be applied to meet the needs of learning support requirement from classroom teachers in the school. These two elements can be regarded as cultural capital in the Chinese immigrants' community. The understanding of cultural capital cannot be limited to high-brow aesthetic culture. It is transferred to time resource, language supports and economic supports in the private life of big family network in the Chinese immigrants' community. Through this mechanism, the Chinese community culture capital can be mobilized to meet the teachers' requirement of academic learning support from the school.

The Chinese immigrants' community is weak in terms of community participation experience and value, especially comparing with the native middle class parents. In the public sphere of community participation, the rigid schedule of events and fluent English is required for the participation. The big families' network resources of the Chinese immigrants cannot be applied in these formal settings without flexible time resource and language skills sharing in their network. Moreover, in traditional Chinese culture, people were requested to make more contributions to families rather than to their communities, which impedes Chinese immigrants' parents participating more in the community service and donation.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Applying the findings to motivate the Chinese immigrants to have better involvement at school, getting better connection with the Chinese im-

migrants families through covering their family and individual level concerns might be a practical strategy. The parents can be invited to their children's classroom. The chance of staying with their kids at school might increase their ownership of the school. It is also a good way to make the interpreter available at home school association. The more the parents learn about the organization, the more possible they will establish the connection with the school. Once the school is included into Chinese immigrants' hierarchy of various relations, the Chinese families are able to give more input to the parental involvement.

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**Paper received for publication on March 2016**  
**Paper accepted for publication on July 2016**