

Navigating the Doublespeak of Parental Involvement in Canadian Schools: Perspectives of Chinese Immigrants

Yan Guo, Ph.D.

Associate Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Calgary

Abstract

Parent involvement is a norm in Canada. Parents are expected to attend parent-teacher conferences before or after report cards, volunteer at school functions, attend the school council meetings, help their children with their homework, and initiate parent-teacher meetings if they have any particular concerns (Epstein et al., 2002). However, “parent involvement” is mainly a North American concept. It is neither expected nor practised in China. In fact, there are negative associations to parents’ presence in schools. Chinese parents seldom attend school functions, because if the school asks to see parents, it means their children are in trouble.

After immigrating to Canada, many parents are unable to intervene in their children’s education in schools due to linguistic and cultural factors (Li, 2002). The parents’ absence from school is often misinterpreted as parents not caring about their children’s education. However, many parents indicate that they care passionately (Ran, 2001; Guo, 2006, 2009).

Many Chinese immigrant parents are engaged in informal learning activities on their own (Livingstone, 1999). Their informal learning is often unrecognized. This study explores how Chinese immigrant parents construct and mobilize their knowledge in informal learning in order to support their children’s education. It is based on individual interviews with parents who had recently arrived in Calgary, Alberta from China.

The study reveals that many participating immigrant parents learned the meaning of parental involvement primarily through trial and error. They had to learn to navigate the doublespeak of the Canadian education system: parental involvement is encouraged, but only forms of parental involvement that support existing school policies and instructional practices are actually welcome in schools (Auerbach, 2007; Cline & Necochea, 2001). They learned Canadian curricula by using the Internet, passed on their first-language knowledge, instilled the best values of both Canadian and Chinese cultures, and learned how to advocate on behalf of their children, who were often marginalized at school.

The results of this study illustrate the significance of the need to expand conventional models of parental involvement to recognize immigrant parent engagement (López, 2001). The study suggests that even though Chinese immigrant parents did not volunteer at school functions or attend school council meetings, they supported their children’s learning at home in the form of

passing on cultural and linguistic values, which has rarely been documented in the literature as a type of parental involvement (see López for an exception). This research suggests that the Chinese immigrant parents saw transmitting their first-language knowledge, negotiating the terrain of both home and school cultures, and helping their children combat various forms of racism as important forms of involvement that their children needed. These hidden forms of parental involvement expand narrow conceptions of parent–school relations that tend to reinforce and serve the interests of white, middle-class families. This significant expansion to parental involvement has important implications for Canadian schools and education practitioners.