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# A contextual understanding of Mainland Chinese parent involvement in their children's primary school years' education

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# A CONTEXTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF MAINLAND CHINESE PARENT INVOLVEMENT IN THEIR CHILDREN'S PRIMARY SCHOOL YEARS' EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

*Although parent involvement has received long-standing attention in the literature, there is limited research about Chinese parent involvement, especially, in mainland, China. With Chinese immigrant students' high academic success having been repeatedly reported, more attention has been given to Chinese parent involvement, however it was restricted to Chinese overseas, or in Taiwan and Hong Kong. It is unclear whether findings obtained accurately described Chinese parent involvement, and can be generalized to Chinese in Mainland.*

*This research attempts to add an in-depth contextual understanding of mainland Chinese parent involvement. Based on face-to-face interviews, this study investigated Chinese parents' involvement in, expectations for and perceptions of their children's education. Participants were 30 parents, randomly selected from 5 primary schools in Changsha, China.*

*Results indicated that parents: 1) are highly involved in their children's education, with daily homework supervising; frequently communicating school issues to their children and generously investing time and money in children's extra-curricular training; 2) hold high expectations for their children with more than 70% parents expecting their children to complete "at least" university education; 3) mostly attribute their educational involvement to the realistic need of well preparing their children for the fierce workforce competition, and passing the university-entry exams.*

**Key words:** Chinese parent involvement, context, interview, Mainland China,

## INTRODUCTION

Stemmed from Sociological theories noting the impact of family background on children's school achievement, "parent involvement" has received numerous attentions from researchers in different areas during the recent decades. To date, it has been widely recognized as a strong predictor of students' academic achievement and other positive school behaviours (Anderson and Minke, 2007, Flouri and Buchanan, 2004), i.e., higher grade point averages and better scores in reading and mathematics (Senechal and LeFevre, 2002); reduced special education placements and grade retentions (Miedel and Reynolds, 1999); lower student dropout rates and higher levels of social skills (McWayne et al., 2004); and increased ability to self-regulate behaviours (Brody et al., 1999). If pupils are to maximize their potential from schooling they will need the full support of their parents (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

Despite extensive attention on parent involvement in western contexts, there is currently a deficit of research about Chinese parent involvement (Kim and Wong, 2002), except the limited literature focusing on Chinese overseas, or in Hong Kong and Taiwan (Chao and Tseng, 2002, Shek, 2006, Li, 2001). It is inexplicit whether findings obtained accurately described Chinese parental involvement, and could be generalized to a broader population, especially, in Mainland, China.

However, with Chinese immigrant students' academic outperformance having been repeatedly reported by cross-cultural studies (Stevenson et al., 1994), and with the best results in mathematics, science and reading achieved by students from Shanghai in the 2009 test of the *Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)* having been revealed (Dillon, 2010) more researchers have been interested in Chinese parent involvement. As Huntsinger and Joseb (2009) wondered "Do Chinese parents manifest their involvement in their child's schooling in the same ways as do parents from other ethnic groups or not?" (p. 400) It would be interesting and valuable for educators and researchers to know more about and to better understand how and why Chinese parents involve themselves in children's education.

### *Aim of the present study*

This study attempted to address the current gap and add an in-depth understanding of Chinese parent involvement to the literature. Using face-to-face interviews of 30 parents, the present study investigated the pattern, and the context of Chinese parent involvement. Then it further examined the contextual impact on parents' involvement in and perceptions of children's education. Research of this study was guided by questions as below:

- 1) How do Chinese parents involve themselves in their children's education?
- 2) Why are they involved in children's education in this way?

## RESEARCH DESIGN AND MEASURE

### *Method*

This study employed a mixed method of using semi-structured face-to-face interview, with three sections included and both quantitative and qualitative items examined. The first section of the interview was designed to collect parent's demographic characteristics, i.e., education level, occupation, and yearly income, etc. In the second part, variable about the pattern of Chinese parent involvement was examined by investigating the question "How are you involved in your children's education"? Inspired by Epstein's (1986; 1995) six-level model of parent involvement, meanwhile, grounded in the educational and cultural Chinese context, this study particularly examined three quantitative items related to parent's involvement: homework supervising, talking with children about school issues, extra-curricular lessons their children currently had. At the end, the interview further examined two questions, "What do you expect for your children's education?" and "Why do you have such expectation/s"? Quantitative data and qualitative information was respectively analysed by descriptive statistical technique and content analysis method (Johnson and LaMontagne, 1993).

### Research site

Changsha is a capital city of Hunan Province, located in central South China, with a population of 6 million. It has been highly reputed for its successful basic education, with higher rate of graduations enrolled into universities. Parents in Changsha have been traditionally highly motivated to scaffold their children's education achievement. Findings obtained here, can be generalized and added into the literature for better understanding of Chinese parent involvement in mainland, China.

### *Participants*

Follow the criterion of having students from different family backgrounds, 4 public schools, plus one private school were purposively selected to serve as an unbiased sample for this study. From each school, 6 parents, 30 in total, with children in grade 3 were randomly recruited to complete the face-to-face interview. Of the group, 28 are mothers, 2 are fathers, all from different levels of family Socioeconomics (SES) background.

### *Procedure*

From 1024 primary schools in the urban area, 10 primary schools were purposively selected under the standard of having students from different family backgrounds. Then principals of these schools were contacted with by telephone and email for their consent to attend the research, and for information of classes in grade 3. 5 principals agreed to participate in the study. One class in grade3 from each school was randomly selected to be the sample and information sheet was then sent to the classroom teacher, to be handed over to parents. In each class, among those who consented to participate in the research, five parents were randomly selected to attend the interview, and further contacted with about the schedule of interview by email or telephone.

All interviews were conducted in Chinese by the first author, at suitable times and in places nominated by parents, such as at home, or in school office, etc. 90% of them were completed within 1 hour. Before interviews started, parents were promised that the information they provided would be confidential; no name of participants, their children, or schools would be reported.

## **MEASURES**

### *Instruments of Parent involvement*

Parent involvement is a multifaceted concept encompassing a broad range of parenting practices (Fan, 2001). It can take forms, such as parental aspiration for children's academic achievement (Bloom, 1980), parents' communication with children about school (Walberg, 1986), parents' participation in school's activities (Stevenson and Baker, 1987), parental rules of education imposed at home (Marjoribanks, 1988), parents' volunteering in children's school and helping with their homework (Carlisle et al., 2005).

Throughout most of the literature, Epstein's Model (1986, Epstein, 1995) has been widely recognized as a typology and fundamental framework for investigating parenting activities and educational practice (Cheng and Sally, 2009). According to this model, parents engage in children's education at six levels: parenting, addressing children's basic needs and support as students; communicating, talking with teachers/schools about school programs and children's progress; volunteering, assisting or participating in schools; learning at home, supervising children's home learning; decision making, being involved in school's decision-making; collaborating with community, working with community programs to access education-related services.

### *Parent involvement Instrument in this study*

Previous studies have suggested that Chinese parents practiced more home-based involvement and tended to conform to the school requirements and supervise their children's learning at home (Ho and Willms, 1996). Based on Epstein's model, meanwhile, grounded in China's educational and cultural context, this study particularly examined three types of parent involvement which are significant in Chinese context: homework supervising, communicating school issues to children, extra-curricular lessons currently registered for their children.

***Homework*** has been world-widely recognised as an effective way for students to practise academic skills, increase learning-task involvement, and to foster their self-discipline as well as responsibilities (Epstein, 1988). However, the significance of homework is particularly pronounced in Chinese communities where children spend substantial amount of time on take-home assignments everyday (Chen and Stevenson, 1989, Tam, 2009). Therefore it is fundamentally important for this study to investigate how Chinese parents' homework supervision.

***Communication with children about school issues*** Rather than general parenting, parental communication with children about their school progress was found to be more strongly related to student motivation (Marchant et al., 2001). Parental communicating the importance of education to children helps them learn strategies to enhance their perceptions of competence and control over achievement outcomes (Lareau, 2000); and structure learning experiences that result in skill development (Keith et al., 1993). When parents communicate with their school-aged children about school issues, children are more satisfied with the school and have higher academic achievement (Coleman, 1998).

***Extra-curricular lessons*** Extra-curricular lessons were valued by researchers as a vital and essential supplement to general school curriculum, with benefits to enhance and strengthen the content and quality of the curriculum (Fung and Wong, 1991, Dentemaro and Kranz, 1993); to greatly contribute to students' growth, school administration, and society (Miller et al., 1956). In this study, it refers to supervised training sessions for voluntary participation in order to facilitate children's learning and improve their achievement in some area(s). These lessons are student-centred, scheduled outside normal school hours, formally organised and planned in accordance with students' ability and interest (Chow and Wong, 2000).

Other studies found that extra-curricular lessons participants demonstrate positive effects on academic performance, personality, and peer acceptance (Fung, 1992, Shi, 1996). They are able to attain higher academic achievements (Holland and Andre, 1987, Camp, 1990); express much stronger career aspirations (Crittendon, 1998); develop their potential to a greater extent (Shi, 1996); enhance their leadership skills (Hollingsworth, 1996); develop their character, and improve behavior (Hollingsworth, 1996) as well as their social skills.

In China, it's very popular for students to attend extra-curricular lessons, for the potential positive effects, more frequently for their utilitarian benefits. In most areas of China, local policies entitle students the priority or extra scores as a reward added to the gross results of entrance-exam to gain admission into key schools or universities. However the admission into key schools or universities is fiercely competitive with every point being crucial to distinguish students the winner from the loser. For Chinese children, having extra-curricular lessons is somehow a divide for them to study in key schools or universities or not. Only if looking at children's extra-curricular lessons can we relatively accurately describe the scenario of Chinese parent involvement.

#### *Parent expectations for children's education*

Parent expectations are beliefs that parents hold about the future performance of their children and are often focused on achievement-related areas such as educational, professional (Barber and Rao, 2005). Of many family variables that contribute to children's school achievement, parent expectation was singled out by researchers to be the most salient and powerful force (Patrikakou, 1997, Seginer, 2006). Especially parental expectations for children's educational attainment (e.g., whether or not attend college) have been shown to be significantly related both to the child's current achievement and to later achievement (Fuligni, 1995, Marjoribanks, 1988).

Chinese parents are reputed to not only have higher expectations for their children's academic achievement (Li, 2001), view academic success as having multiple benefits for the family (Cheng and Sally, 2009), but also place a high premium on education and academic success, and actively engage in children's learning (White, 1993). Examining such expectations is not only essential for this study but also necessary for us to have in-depth understanding of Chinese parent involvement.

## **RESULTS**

Results presented in the following subsections focus on: (1) presenting the profiles of participants of this research; (2) describing the pattern of

Chinese parent involvement; (3) contextual understanding of Chinese parent involvement.

### *Demographic characteristics*

Parents' demographic information can be found in Table 1. As it showed, 93.3% of the sample was mothers, with the rest 6.7% falling to be fathers. All parents were -aged ranging from 30 to 43 years old, with 35.7 years as the median age. Except two parents, most of them have completed at least high school level education (equivalent to 12 years), with 36.7% holding bachelor degree, and another 20% respectively having 3 or 2 years diploma.

Slightly more than 30% parents had income less than ¥50,000/year, falling to the lower SES group (the National Bureau of Statistics, 2002). However, there was nearly one-third of the group earned annually more than ¥100,000, with 3.3% of them even had yearly income higher than ¥200,000 per year. Another one-third of parents belonged to middle class with income ranging from ¥50,000 to ¥100,000.

Data of parents' occupation also clearly showed that parents were from diverse family background. Except 5 parents declined to reveal their career, 33.3% parents defined themselves as professionals, e.g., engineers, doctors, teachers, accountants, etc. Another 6 parents were working as managerial staff, with 2 as senior managers, 4 as administrative staffs. Another 4 parents were from business background, with 1 parent claimed to be "businessman", another 3 as "self-employed". Except 3 housewives, there was 1 labor and 1 unemployed parent.

**Table 1** Demographic Characteristic of Parents (n=30)

|                 | Variable           | Number | Percentage % | Median  |
|-----------------|--------------------|--------|--------------|---------|
| Gender          | Father             | 2      | 6.7          |         |
|                 | Mother             | 28     | 93.3         |         |
| Age (30-43)     |                    |        |              | 35.7    |
| Education Level | 4 years University | 11     | 36.7         |         |
|                 | 3years College     | 6      | 20           | College |
|                 | 2years College     | 6      | 20           |         |
|                 | High School        | 5      | 16.7         |         |
|                 | Middle School      | 1      | 3.3          |         |
|                 | Primary School     | 1      | 3.3          |         |

|                                |  |      |      |      |
|--------------------------------|--|------|------|------|
| Yearly Income<br>(¥1.0=10,000) | < 5.0  | 11   | 36.7 | 6.81 |
|                                | 5.0 ~10.0  | 10   | 33.3 |      |
|                                | 10.0 ~ 15.0  | 8    | 26.7 |      |
|                                | >20.0  | 1    | 3.3  |      |
| Occupation                     | Professional (doctor,<br>teacher, engineer,<br>accountant, etc.) | 10   | 33.3 |      |
|                                | Professional manager   | 2    | 6.7  |      |
|                                | Administrative officers  | 4    | 13.3 |      |
|                                | Businessman  | 1    | 3.3  |      |
|                                | Self-employed  | 3    | 10   |      |
|                                | Housewife  | 3    | 10   |      |
|                                | Labor  | 1    | 3.3  |      |
|                                | Unemployed   | 1    | 3.3  |      |
| Information missing            | 5  | 16.7 |      |      |

*The pattern of Chinese parent involvement*

Information about how parents participate in children's education; and what expectations do they have for children's education are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2** Parents' Involvement in & expectations for Children's Education (N = 30)

| Involvement Area                        |                       | Scale      | Number | Percentage % | Median |
|---|-----------------------|------------|--------|--------------|--------|
| Home-work supervising                   | Frequency (Every day) | Yes        | 29     | 96.7         | 1-2hrs |
|   |                       | No         | 1      | 3.3          |        |
|   | Time spent (Daily)    | (0,30mins) | 12     | 40           |        |
|   |                       | 30-60mins  | 10     | 33.4         |        |
|   |                       | 1-2hrs     | 6      | 20           |        |
|   |                       | 2-3hrs     | 1      | 3.3          |        |
| Communication school issues to children | Frequency             | ≥3hrs      | 1      | 3.3          |        |
|   |                       | Daily      | 11     | 36.7         |        |
|   | Frequency             | Often      | 16     | 53.3         |        |
|   |                       | Seldom     | 2      | 6.7          |        |
|   |                       | Rarely     | 1      | 3.3          |        |

|                           |                                      |                                  |     |      |                      |
|---------------------------|--------------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----|------|----------------------|
| Extra-curricular lessons  | Amount                               | (,2)                             | 3   | 10   | 3 [1, 5]             |
|                           |                                      | [2,4)                            | 16  | 53.4 |                      |
|                           | Tuition ¥ (half year)                | [4,6)                            | 10  | 33.3 | 2,200 [600, 100,000] |
|                           |                                      | [600, 2000)                      | 5   | 16.6 |                      |
|                           |                                      | [2,000, 6,000)                   | 16  | 53.4 |                      |
|                           |                                      | [6,000, 8,000)                   | 3   | 10   |                      |
|                           |                                      | [8,000, 100,000]                 | 4   | 13.3 |                      |
|                           | Weekly hours (children)              | Missing                          | 2   | 6.7  | 5 [0.5,12]           |
|                           |                                      | [0.5, 4)                         | 8   | 26.7 |                      |
|                           |                                      | [4, 8)                           | 12  | 40   |                      |
| [8, 12]                   |                                      | 9                                | 30  |      |                      |
| Missing                   |                                      | 1                                | 3.3 |      |                      |
| Expectations for Children | Clearly-mentioned eventual education | At least bachelor                | 9   | 30   |                      |
|                           |                                      | Key university                   | 2   | 6.7  |                      |
|                           |                                      | First-class/Overseas university  | 5   | 16.7 |                      |
|                           | Other                                | Master                           | 2   | 6.7  |                      |
|                           |                                      | PhD                              | 1   | 3.3  |                      |
|                           |                                      | To be a professional             | 3   | 10   |                      |
|                           |                                      | Good study habit                 | 1   | 3.3  |                      |
| Not clearly-mentioned     | To be healthy & happy                | Be healthy & happy               | 4   | 16.7 |                      |
|                           |                                      | To be financially self-supported | 3   | 16.7 |                      |

**Homework supervision** As indicated in the table, 96.7% of parents, are actively involved in daily supervising their children's homework from less than 30 minutes to even more than 3 hours. 40% parents claimed the time spent on children's homework less than 30 minutes; while to another 10 parents, the time was doubled to about 1 hour. However, there were 6 parents needed 1~2 hours a day to help children with home learning, while to another 2 parents it was respectively 2-3 hours and more than 3 hours each day.

**Communication school issues to children** Information in the table revealed that Chinese parents highly concerned their children's school issues by com-

municating with them frequently. 90% of them talked with their children about school progress in a frequency above the level of “Often”. Among them, nearly 40% did it every day, while presumably another 50% did it “often”. Only 10% of these parents seldom or rarely mentioned these issues to their children.

***Extra-curricular lessons*** As Table 2 shows that registering extra-curricular lessons for their children is a must-do for Chinese parents. 100% of parents currently registered from one to five extra-curricular lessons for their children. Their children slightly more than 50% were engaging in 2-4 training lessons. Another 33.3% had 4-5 subjects. Only 10% of the sample registered lessons for their children less than 2 lessons.

The money parents spent on children’s extra-curricular could be found in Table 2. The median tuition is ¥2,200/half year, with ¥10,000 on the top and ¥600 at the bottom. More than 50% of the group invested ¥2,000~¥6,000 per six months for their children’s extra-curricular learning. Within them, only 5 parents spent less than ¥2,000, however, another 4 parents spend ¥8,000~¥10,000, with 3 spend ¥6,000 ~ ¥8,000 per half a year.

Meanwhile, parents spend plenty of time on their children’s extra-curricular learning. As demonstrated, the median weekly time is 5 hours. 40% of this group, 12 parents, spent 4~8 hours per week on children’s extra-learning. The weekly time for another 8 parents, 26.7% of the sample, is more than half hour but less than 4 hours. However, another 30% parents spend 8~12 hours a week engaging in their children’s out-school training.

***Parent expectations*** While asked about their expectations for their children, 63% parents clearly claimed that their children should complete university education. More than a quarter clarified it as “at least” a university level. Another 2 parents expected their children to study at a “key university”; while another 5 parents hope it should be a “first-class” or an overseas university. There were 2 parents who wanted their children to have master degree, while another 1 parent hopes it to be doctoral degree.

Among those not clearly expressed their expectations, 10% preferred their children to be a professional, such as lawyer, doctor or engineer. 1 parent hoped his child to form good learning habits. Another 4 parents emphasized more on children’s non-academic development, such as happiness and health. Different with others, there were 3 parents only wanted their children to be financially self-supported.

*Parents' perceptions*

Parents' views about the load of study, the significance of education, were described in Table 3. Numbers and percentages were calculated by content analysis according to the frequency of words/phase used by parents.

**Table 3** Parents' perceptions

| <b>Variables</b>                       | <b>Parents' perceptions</b>                                      | <b>Number</b> | <b>Percentage %</b> |
|--|--|---------------|---------------------|
| <b>Load of study</b>                   | Heavy (too much many homework)                                   | 9             | 30                  |
|  | Sound  | 18            | 60                  |
|  | Not heavy at all   | 3             | 10                  |
| <b>significance of education</b>       | Means of enhance social status                                   | 16            | 53.3                |
|  | The way to learn, know the world                                 | 4             | 13.3                |
|  | Crucial for children's whole life                                | 10            | 33.3                |
| <b>Reason of emphasis on education</b> | cultural tradition: respect education, parents' high expectation | 9             | 30                  |
|  | preparation for the competitive workforce                        | 15            | 50                  |
|  | Impact of university-entry system                                | 6             | 20                  |

As Table 3 revealed, 18 parents regarded the load of study as "sound"; although another 9 parents, considered it was "too heavy". To another 10% parents, it was "not heavy at all". However, almost all parents understood education is significant to their children. More than 50% parents took education as a means to enhance social status. For another 4 parents, education is a way to know more about the world. Although not clearly stated, to another 33% of this group, education is crucial for children's whole life.

Why parents emphasize their children's education? 30% of them attributed it to the influence of Chinese cultural tradition of respecting education, and highly expecting for children's future. However, another 15 parents understood it more practically as the need of well preparing their children for the fierce competitive workforce. 20% of this group thought it was led by the university-entry system where children have to pass complicated examinations to study continuingly in universities.

## DISCUSSION

Different with previous studies focusing on Chinese parent overseas, or in Hong Kong, and Taiwan (Chao and Tseng, 2002, Shek, 2006, Li, 2001), this exploratory study shed lights on mainland Chinese; aimed to explore an in-depth contextual understanding of their involvement in children's education. Based on Epstein's model, and information collected from face-to-face interviews, this study investigated the pattern, the context and the self-perceptions of Chinese parent involvement.

Consistent with previous findings about that Chinese parents overseas regarded education as their top priority (Li, 2001), seriously concerned with their children's learning and actively participate in their children's education (Pearce, 2006), this study shows that Chinese parents at home put their children's education in a critically important position. More than 50% parents interviewed regarded education as means to enhance social status, with another one-third closely supposed that education is "crucial" to their children's whole life.

Consequently, parents in this study were found to be highly committed to their children's learning and school success. Most of them, about 90%, not only supervise home-learning more than 30 minutes a day, but also communicate school issues to their children quite frequently. Besides highly being involved in children's home-supervision, parents in this study actively engage in their children's extra-curricular activities. 100% of this group registered 1~5 training lesson/s for their children, with averagely 5 hours/week spent and ¥2,200/half year invested in these training lessons.

While asked about why education is so significant to their children? 50% parents attributed it to the realistic context where the young generation is under the overwhelming pressure from the workforce. With the technology improving and university education more affordable, it becomes fiercely competitive for undergraduates to find a satisfactory job, then to live comfortably. For the sake of their children to stand out in the fierce competition, to lead a decent life, what parents wanted to do, in this study, is to push their children study hard and study well. "Not to lose at the start-point of your children" is somehow an alarm clock ringing to parents at all the time. Parenting cannot be understood unless it is placed within its economic, social, political, and historical context (Taylor et al., 2000). In Chinese context, education is somehow a business with the whole family as cooperators.

As parents noted, the current university-enrolment system is another powerful force pushing them actively engage in their children's education. Policies in China entitle no access for children to study in universities, especially "key universities" unless they pass the difficult university-entry exams and

get a score greatly higher than the requirement. However, as an interviewee said, “Nowadays, if you want to find a relatively good job, most basically you have to graduate from a good university”. That could partly explain why more than 50% parents in this study expected their children to complete “at least” university education. Slightly inconsistent with previous research, where Chinese parents’ high educational engagement was attributed to Chinese culture tradition; in this study, only 30% parents claimed to be culturally motivated to participate in their children’s education, following the cultural tradition of respecting education and people well-educated, and highly expecting for their children’s success.

In summary, Chinese parents in this study not only highly expect for their children’s education, but also actively engage in their children’s learning by extensive homework supervision; frequent communication school issues to their children and generous investment in their after-school training. The most powerful force driving them to practise all these parenting is to well prepare their children for the fiercely competitive labour market, and to pass the complicated university-entry exams, a high bar towards the entry of better life.

However, considering the cultural and economic diversity in mainland, China, and the limited sample of this study, it would be better to be cautious while generalising the findings to a broader population of Chinese.

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