

# Home-School Communication and Expectations of Recent Chinese Immigrants

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In this study, I investigated the nature of communication between home and school in families who recently immigrated to Canada. I used an open-ended questionnaire in interviews of 21 Chinese immigrant families and 19 non-immigrant European-Canadian families. The immigrant parents' pattern of communication differed from that of non-immigrant parents: immigrant parents communicated less frequently, had more difficulty comprehending the communication, and were less satisfied with the communication. The immigrant parents especially emphasized the academic progress of their children and were concerned with the quality of teaching.

L'étude porte sur la nature des communications entre la famille et l'école dans le cas de nouveaux immigrants chinois. À l'aide de questions ouvertes, l'auteure a interviewé 21 familles d'immigrants chinoises et 19 familles de non-immigrants européo-canadiennes. Le mode de communication des parents chinois diffère de celui des parents non immigrants : les parents chinois communiquent moins fréquemment, ont plus de difficulté à comprendre la communication et en tirent moins de satisfaction. Ils mettent surtout l'accent sur les progrès scolaires de leurs enfants et se préoccupent de la qualité de l'enseignement.

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Home and school form the microsystems of a child's educational development. The connection between home and school is integral to a cohesive and effective learning environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Central to this connection is the communication between home and school. Scholars such as Epstein (1990) and Healey (1994) have stated that communication with parents increases many forms of parental involvement in school or at home; others (Norris, 1999; Watkins, 1997) have linked children's academic achievement and motivation to home-school communication. Watkins (1997) confirmed that the amount of teacher-initiated communication that parents perceive predicts parent involvement. Bowman (1989) suggested that effective home-school communication facilitates teachers' responsibility to interpret and relay the school's agenda to the parents. Bhattacharya (2000) identified a strong link between parents and teachers as a factor protecting children from dropping out of school.

Parental involvement in education is particularly important for elementary school children whose native language is not English (Constantino, Cui, & Faltis, 1995; Swap, 1990). Unfamiliar with the English language, these children need additional educational support, which in turn requires the involvement of the home. Yet cultural and linguistic differences may prevent effective home-school communication, and hence hinder parental involvement in school activities. Parents who have grown up in a culture outside North America may hold different views of schools and children than those of their children's teachers (Theilheimer, 2001). A study of Latin American families in Canada found that, despite parents' high aspirations for their children and despite the great value they attached to education, their children's teachers showed little awareness for their concerns (Bernhard & Freire, 1999). The language barrier also deters immigrant parents' communication with and involvement in the school (Bhattacharya, 2000; Gougeon, 1993). Intimidated by the linguistic barriers they face in the English-speaking school environment, such parents may be especially unable to participate actively in their children's education (Commins, 1992). Yet immigrant minority parents' lack of involvement is often misinterpreted by school personnel as a lack of interest in their children's academic work (Commins, 1992). Immigrant families' communication with their children's schools becomes a major educational concern, which constitutes the focus of the present study with recent Chinese immigrants.

Herrera and Wooden (1988) have suggested that miscommunication between home and school prompted minority children's failure in school. However, socio-economic disadvantages often associated with the minority and immigrant status may have confounded such a finding. Social class disadvantages provide parents with fewer resources for participating in their children's education (Lareau, 1987). Economic hardship, however, is not invariably the experience of immigrants. Immigrants with no socio-economic disadvantages would serve as a less unbiased sample for the study of home-school communication.

Even in the absence of economic disadvantages, Chinese immigrants who recently arrived in Canada or the U.S.A. may face barriers against effective communication with schools. Both parents and teachers in the study by Constantino et al. (1995) confirmed that language barriers caused Chinese parents' lack of communication with their children's school. Recent Chinese immigrants in Canada or the U.S.A. encountered another barrier: the gap between their native culture and that of mainstream North America. In general, Asians tend to value the needs of the group and emphasize duty and obligation (Hui & Triandis, 1986). In their

communication style, Asian people are generally succinct whereas North Americans tend to favour eloquence of speech (Yang, 1993).

Moreover, Chinese culture emphasizes education (Ho, 1981). Grounded in a cultural belief in human malleability and effort (Chen & Uttal, 1988) and in education as a means for social advancement and the procurement of wealth (Ho, 1981; Stevenson, Lee, & Chen, 1994), Chinese parents value academic achievement (Lin & Fu, 1990) and set high expectations for their children (Ran, 2001). Chinese mothers also believed in direct intervention in their children's learning (Chao, 1996). Such an educational emphasis conflicts with the child-centred approach generally practised in Canada (Holmes, 1998) and hence might confound Chinese parents' communication with their children's schools.

North American schools have increasingly emphasized multicultural education, which Sleeter and Grant (1994) defined as "education policies and practices that recognize, accept, and affirm human differences and similarities related to gender, race, disability, and class" (p. 167). Governments and schools have introduced such a policy to reduce prejudice and discrimination toward ethnic and racial groups, and to promote ethnic identity and educational and career equity for minorities (Valencia, 1992). To achieve this policy, parents, especially those of an ethnic minority, need information about schools' policies and practices on multicultural education. Parents' knowledge of school practice of multicultural education depends on the effectiveness of home-school communication and thus constitutes a logical measure of such effectiveness.

Because of language barriers and their unique cultural values, recent Chinese immigrant parents would engage in a pattern of communication with their children's schools that differs from that of non-immigrant, European-Canadian parents, a basic pattern that includes frequency, method, and content of communication (Prescott, Pelton, & Dornbusch, 1986). In practice, Chinese immigrant parents communicate less frequently with schools, have difficulty understanding the communication, and are less informed about school programs such as multicultural education. Moreover, because Chinese immigrant parents incline towards a cultural emphasis on group well-being and educational achievement, their communications with the school tend to focus on public affairs such as school events and benefits and on their children's academic achievement. However, these characteristics of Chinese immigrants' communication with schools are yet to be verified as a distinctive trait in relation to parents in general.

No Canadian researchers have studied recent Chinese immigrant

families who are free from the confounding effect of socio-economic disadvantage. Such a study would be particularly timely because of the dramatic increase in recent years of Chinese immigration to Canada (Badets, 1993) and the U.S.A. (Zhou, 1997). The information would help schools develop effective communication with Chinese immigrant parents. To examine the home-school communication of recent Chinese immigrants, I investigated: (a) the pattern of communication in terms of frequency, method, and content; (b) parents' understanding of and satisfaction with the communication; and (c) parents' knowledge of the school's multicultural policies. In this paper, I refer to "recent Chinese immigrant" as "Chinese immigrant" or "Chinese," whereas "non-immigrant European-Canadian" is interchangeable with "non-immigrant" or "Caucasian."<sup>1</sup>

## METHOD

### *Participants*

The participants were 40 parents: 21 recent Chinese immigrants and 19 non-immigrant Caucasian-Canadians, each from a different family. These families had a combined total of 46 children, 21 Chinese and 25 European-Canadian. Only one father took part in the interview and only one family involved both parents in the interview; mothers represented the rest of the families. The families lived in a medium-sized Canadian metropolitan city. The Chinese families, who originated from Taiwan, China, and Hong Kong, had immigrated to Canada within the last 10 years, the majority (18) within the last 5 years. Members of the non-immigrant families were all Caucasian, having been born and having always resided in Canada.

On the basis of the Canadian socio-economic index for occupations (Blishen, Carroll, & Moore, 1987) and drawn on the major income earners, the majority of the Chinese (15 of 21) and non-immigrant (14 of 19) families obtained a socio-economic score of 50 and above, representing professional, technical, managerial, or small business categories. The rest of the Chinese and Caucasian families obtained a score of 25 to 49, which represented skilled and semi-skilled workers. Four families did not provide occupational data.

All the Chinese parents spoke some English; the most recent immigrants (one third of the group, immigrating within the last two years) spoke only limited English and had difficulty comprehending ordinary conversational English. Except for four parents who had completed high-school education, the Chinese parents had completed at least 14 years of

formal education. All the Caucasian parents had at least a high-school education, the majority (13 of 19) having 14 or more years of education. Respect for privacy prevented the collection of the parents' specific ages. Estimates suggested that the majority of the mothers were in their mid-30s to early 40s, with only one non-immigrant father in his early 50s. All the children were attending elementary school in grades 2 to 7, with ages ranging from 7 to 13 years. According to the parents' reports, none of the children had any school difficulties. The schools involved were distributed throughout the city, the majority in middle socio-economic neighbourhoods.

#### *Procedure*

I recruited immigrant families from various sources: a local intercultural society; ethnic associations that included families originating from Taiwan, China, and Hong Kong; English-as-a-second-language (ESL) classes for children; and a regular elementary class. Community members or participants also suggested other possible participants. I distributed a Chinese version of the recruitment letter to potentially eligible Chinese families through these recruitment sources. I also recruited non-immigrant families from elementary schools and preschools, and through parents who had already participated in the study. These sources distributed letters to eligible families explaining the nature and requirements of the study. I also distributed the letter in preschool and elementary schools at their parent meetings. From this variety of sources, I obtained a broad representation of both the Chinese and Caucasian families in the city.

Using purposeful sampling (Coyne, 1997), I restricted the sample to families of Chinese origin who had immigrated to Canada within the 10 years prior to the collection of the data and who had children aged 7 to 14. I chose families not under any apparent economic stress. I also applied the same child and family demographic eligibility criteria to non-immigrant participants. In addition, I restricted non-immigrant families to those with a European background who had always lived in Canada. A total of 53 families gave their initial verbal consent; of them, 52 (27 immigrants and 25 non-immigrants) completed the study. I had to reduce the final sample to 40 families (21 immigrant families and 19 non-immigrant families) because of the target child's age (too old or too young) or the length of residence in Canada (over 10 years). After participants completed a written consent form, graduate research assistants in education and psychology and I interviewed families in their homes.

Prior to the actual interview process, we practised interviewing to ensure our proficiency in interviewing.

#### *Instrumentation*

In this study, I used structured interviewing, with an open-ended questionnaire to allow variation in responses (Fontana & Frey, 2000). I developed the questionnaire on the model of communication proposed by Prescott et al. (1986), which included frequency, method, and content as the major elements. Additional questions regarded (a) the extent of understanding of and satisfaction with communication with the school, and (b) knowledge of multicultural education as practised by the school. I had the interview questions (see Appendix) translated into Chinese using the "back-translation" method (Bracken & Barona, 1991). Thus, the English questionnaire was translated into Chinese and then the Chinese text was translated back into English to examine its equivalency to the original English version. I adjusted the discrepancies before I finalized the Chinese version.

To ensure parents' comfort and understanding, Caucasian and Chinese interviewers interviewed the group corresponding to their racial origin. The Chinese interviewers were fluent in Mandarin and Cantonese, using the language of parents' choice. The interviewers audio-recorded participants' responses; Chinese interviews were later translated into English for analysis.

For the purpose of this study, I defined communication as: "speaking or interacting in person, by phone, by writing, or through shared activities, such as parent-teacher interviews, or school events." During the interview, the interviewers further elaborated communication for the participants as: "talking to or interacting with your child's teacher about your child, either in person, by phone or by note, attending school activities such as parent-teacher interviews and school fairs, or getting involved in school events such as fund-raising or sports." The interviewers also advised the respondents that the definition of communication included "interaction initiated by the teacher or the parents" and "parents' response to the school's communication, such as a note or newsletter."

#### *Data Analysis*

A research assistant and I analyzed the data for each research question, using content analysis (Johnson & LaMontagne, 1993). Each word, phrase,

or sentence that related to the topic being studied constituted a unit of analysis. Examples of units of analysis were: a word (“[I communicated with my child’s school] in-person”); a phrase (“[the communication was about] peer pressure or decision-making, grades and achievement”); or a sentence (“I understood the communication with my friend’s help”). Initially, we identified a small, randomly selected sample of the participants ( $n = 10$ ) and analyzed their responses for the basic idea within each unit of analysis. Through repeated comparisons, we integrated similar ideas until we identified the final, mutually exclusive, major themes. After we established major themes for each question, we used them for coding the rest of the data. We repeated this procedure with each study question. To examine the reliability of coding, another coder independently coded all of the families’ responses to three of the questions. We then compared the two sets of themes generated for each question and the number of families who gave the response under each theme. When discrepancies in the wording or phrasing of a theme occurred, we discussed these differences; when coders reached unanimous agreement on the meaning, we then coded the theme. Otherwise, we left discrepancies as disagreements. We calculated a percentage score for the number of agreements by the sum of the number of agreements. The score for the three questions, respectively, was 76%, 90%, and 84%, with an average of 83%.

## RESULTS

Five themes emerged that corresponded to the research questions from the analysis of the coded data: (a) pattern of communication, (b) understanding of communication, (c) satisfaction with communication, (d) understanding of school’s valuing of child’s culture, (e) knowledge of the school’s multicultural education.

### *Pattern of Communication*

*Frequency of communication.* Table 1 shows how Chinese and non-immigrant parents communicated with the school. Chinese parents communicated infrequently: the majority one to four times a year, almost half of them one to two times a year, and two once. In contrast, almost all non-immigrant parents communicated with their children’s schools at least once a month, and almost half of them one to three times a week. Chinese parents volunteered reasons for their infrequent communication: lack of time, no specific matters to discuss, unfamiliarity in

communicating with the school, and the availability of school newsletters. The most common reason, however, was a lack of English speaking skills and hence the inconvenience of having to rely on interpreters. One mother explained:

I have gone to my child's school only once since we came here because I cannot speak English. I cannot talk with his teacher directly. I had to ask my friends to go with me and help me to communicate with the teacher. So I have not initiated any meeting with the school. (Chinese mother)

*Method of communication.* Table 1 also shows the various methods parents employed to communicate with their children's school. Both groups of parents used in-person communication most often. A combination of in-person contact, written messages, and telephone conversations was the second-most popular option, followed by an augmentation of this mixture with newsletters or formal interviews.

TABLE 1

*Home-school Communication by Group: Frequency and Method*

Category	Immigrant ( <i>n</i> =21)	Non-immigrant ( <i>n</i> =19)
Frequency of Communication		
Very often/1-3 times per week	0	9
1-3 times per month	0	9
3-4 times per year	7	1
1-2 times per year	10	0
Not often or rarely (once for all time)	2	0
Often before but now only at parent meeting	2	0
Method of Communication		
In person alone	8	6
In person plus message/telephone	6	5
Letters, notes, newsletters plus interview/telephone	4	4
Telephone	0	2
Newsletters	1	1
Others	2	1



However, unlike non-immigrant parents, immigrant parents did not use the telephone alone as a method for communicating with schools.

When asked about the best means for the school to communicate with them, one third of the Chinese parents did not show any preference. For another third of these parents, the most preferred method was in-person contact alone, followed by in-person contact combined with other means such as notes, newsletters, or phone calls. Non-immigrant parents shared this pattern of preference (seven for in-person contact alone and eight for in-person contact combined with other means, such as notes, newsletters, or phone calls). None of the immigrants desired newsletters as the only way of home-school communication.

*Content of communication.* Chinese parents communicated with their children's schools for reasons largely different than those of Caucasian parents. Table 2 shows that most Chinese parents communicated solely about their children's academic progress to determine what extra academic support to provide at home. Referring to communication with her son's teacher, one Chinese parent revealed, "We talked about my son's study, his progress in English. I want to make sure that my son is doing fine in school." Another Chinese parent elaborated on her communication with the school:

It is mostly about my son's learning attitudes, academic scores, and behaviour in school. I would also like to get advice from the teachers about how we, as parents, can help our child, about any good books for our son to read, and also about what we should emphasize at home to help our child learn more effectively at school. (Chinese parent)

TABLE 2

*Content of Communication by Group*

Category	Immigrant (n=21)	Non-immigrant (n=19)
Academic activities only (study, work, progress, report card)	17	0
School and relationship with others, general behaviour	4	4
General school activity and social events	0	5
School events plus child's progress	0	6
Others (school events plus fundraising or child attendance)	0	4

A smaller number of Chinese parents discussed both their children's general academic work and social relationships. A Chinese parent remarked, "We talked about my daughter's study and behaviours. I want to know whether my daughter is getting along with her classmates, whether she respects teachers, and how her study is going." One Chinese parent communicated only for the school's public events, such as fundraising.

In contrast to Chinese parents, none of the Caucasian parents communicated with schools about their child's academic progress alone. The same number (four) of Caucasian parents as the Chinese parents discussed their children's academic work and social relationships together. However, the Caucasian parents devoted much more of their communication to the school's public events and welfare (e.g., sports events, school concerts, and fundraising such as bake sales) or a combination of their children's academic progress and the school's public and social events. A Caucasian parent estimated her communication with the school to be "60% about the school activities and 40% about my daughter." Another Caucasian mother reported her communication with the school to be "two thirds about my daughter and one third about the Christmas hamper, Mustard Seed, and community issues." Several Caucasian parents communicated solely about school social events.

#### *Understanding of Communication*

In response to the question, "Do you understand the communication from your child's school," most (18 of 21) Chinese parents responded that they did, although some required assistance. One mother reported, "Yes, because I have an interpreter, either my eldest son or my friend." Another parent reported a similar experience: "I understand because of the translator. It's good they [the school] have a translator." Still another Chinese parent explained, "I told the teacher at the very beginning that my English is not so good. So, he would use easy words to talk to me." Three Chinese parents reported not understanding the communication from the school. Some Chinese parents also reported difficulties with large group meetings because of a language barrier. A problem arose for another parent when the regular class teacher who, unlike the previous ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher, spoke too fast to be understood. As expected, all the Caucasians responded that they understood the communication with their children's school.

*Satisfaction with Communication*

Table 3 summarizes the parents' responses by group to the question of whether they were satisfied with the communication they had with the school. Half of the Chinese parents responded affirmatively. One satisfied Chinese parent stated, "Yes, I was happy. The teacher was very nice and she pointed out my son's problem. I appreciated it because she cared about my son; she noticed his problem and told me in time." However, a few (three) happy Chinese parents requested more information about their children or more communication with the school. Two of these parents also suggested that the teachers and the school administration should use "easier words" in newsletters and initiate more meetings or other kinds of communication with parents.

Table 3 also shows that a number of Chinese parents expressed both satisfaction and dissatisfaction with their communication. They were satisfied with the teachers' availability for parent-teacher communication and the school's newsletters, which briefed them on school events and filled in the communication gap. However, these parents were also unhappy with the content of communication, which, to them, gave unrealistically positive reports of their children's academic progress. One parent remarked, "I am not happy with the

TABLE 3

*Parents' Response by Group to the Question: Are You Happy with the Communication you have with the School?*

Category	Immigrant (n=21)	Non-immigrant (n=19)
Happy (teacher cares, is open accessible)	8	15
Happy but would like more information or communication	3	0
Unhappy (due to lack of English-speaking skills and school's failure to provide real information on child's academic performance)	4	0
Happy and unhappy (happy with some aspects of communication but unhappy with teacher's not providing real progress of child; happy with teacher or with school only)	6	4

content of the communication. There is too much good news. The reports were too good to be true. For example, the report cards seldom mention my son's mistakes."

Of the few Chinese parents who felt completely unhappy, one said she lacked the English skills to communicate with the school. Other completely unhappy Chinese parents (3) were dissatisfied for other reasons. Tellingly, one parent regarded the school's information about children's school performance as ambiguous and superficial because it did not identify children's weaknesses. This parent argued that children and parents would not know how the children could improve and develop their skills for coping in the future in the more demanding world outside of school. This parent expressed her frustration, disappointment, and concern forcefully.

I would like to know whether my daughter is good at something or not so good at some subjects. I would like to know whether and how my daughter is progressing in learning and intelligence. But I really feel disappointed, even angry, about the comment from the school. The school will never tell me anything that I am really concerned about. I think it is because the philosophy of education here, the school seldom tells parents about their children's weakness. Even though a child does something not so good, not so perfect, the school still makes positive comments about his or her work. If children always hear the school talk about them positively, how can they encounter the society later on? In the real society, there is nothing that is always perfect. They will, of course, hear negative remarks about them. How can the children manage the contradiction between what they hear from the school and what they encounter in society? The school is not preparing them to face the reality outside school. (Chinese parent)

Non-immigrant parents did not share the dissatisfaction that some Chinese parents expressed. Instead, most of the non-immigrant parents were satisfied because of the open and prompt communication from the school. Satisfied European-Canadian parents commented that "the school philosophy encourages input from parents," and that "the school is always good with notices, returning phone calls, and quick chats in the school's hallway." Several non-immigrant parents indicated that they were both happy and unhappy with either the teacher or the administration. A Caucasian parent, unhappy with the teachers, expressed her frustration this way: "I find it difficult to explain my concerns in such a way as to ensure that the teachers understand and will take the appropriate steps if necessary." Other non-immigrant parents felt dissatisfaction with administrators when they failed to communicate ("the administrator was not very communicative.") or when administrators introduced funding cutbacks.

*Understanding of School's Valuing of Child's Culture*

To obtain specific information about the degree of effectiveness of home-school communication, I asked questions about parents' knowledge of the school's policies of multicultural education. The first question was, "From what you know, does your child's school value your child's race and culture? What evidence is there for your answer?" I defined valuing for the participants as, "showing respect in word or action" or "considering as important or valuable." Table 4 shows the participants' responses. Two thirds of the Chinese parents considered that their race and culture were valued at school. Two Chinese parents stated that their culture was not valued and that the school treated the child's culture just like traditional Canadian culture. Most Caucasian parents responded that schools valued their race and culture and treated their children equally. Only one such parent reported that individual children were not valued. A few Chinese and Caucasian-Canadian parents indicated that they did not know whether

TABLE 4

*Response by Group on the School's Practice of Multiculturalism:  
Valuing of Race and Culture and Practice of Multicultural Education*

Category	Immigrant (n=21)	Non-immigrant (n=19)
<b>Valuing of child's race and culture</b>		
My child is treated equally and fairly; race, culture and language are respected	14	16
Culture is treated fairly but child has been picked on by peers.	2	0
Culture is not valued, child is treated like a Canadian	2	1
Don't know how	2	0
No/unclear answer	1	2
<b>Practice of multicultural education</b>		
Good multicultural education programs	4	15
Unaware of any multicultural education programs in school	13	0
Inadequate emphasis (could be more, lacks respect for Asian or other cultures)	3	0
Not emphasized	0	4
No clear answer	1	0

the school valued their race and culture because they saw no evidence.

*Knowledge of the School's Emphasis on Multicultural Education*

With the second question, related to multicultural education, I asked parents, "From what you know, does your child's school emphasize multicultural education? What evidence is there for your answer?" I defined multicultural education for the parents, using the definition presented earlier. Table 4 shows that four Chinese parents reported that their children's schools emphasized multicultural education as evidenced by a good multicultural education program. However, the majority reported that they were unaware of any multicultural education programs in their children's schools because the school either did not have such a program or did not communicate it explicitly to children or parents. One Chinese parent's remark typified the sentiment of the parents: "I have no idea about multicultural education. I don't know whether his school has this kind of program or activity. I did not hear my son talk about it. Usually my son tells me everything that happened in school." Three of the Chinese parents responded that there was either inadequate or no emphasis on multiculturalism. One of these parents suggested that multicultural education was superficially practised with only token events, such as "a multicultural week," while history or social studies remained "very much European or North-American" with little Asian content.

Unlike immigrant parents, the majority of non-immigrant parents reported that their children's school emphasized multicultural education and had a good multicultural education program as evidenced by events celebrating international scenes or holidays. A non-immigrant parent answered:

Yes, lots are being done about other countries, foods, etc. The school also has flags from all over the world. I think schools are making good efforts despite the negative views in our society such as that about the RCMP — they were not allowed to wear turbans. (Non-immigrant parent)

A few non-immigrant parents considered that multicultural education was not being emphasized in their children's schools. Referring to multicultural education, a non-immigrant parent remarked, "I have not really seen evidence of emphasis, even though the school is one-third Indo-Canadian." Both immigrant and non-immigrant parents indicated their wish for schools to balance their recognition of the main culture with that of minority cultures. Chinese parents especially desired to have their children

integrated into the mainstream while maintaining their cultural heritage. A Chinese parent expressed this wish:

We would like our son integrated with the local culture as soon as possible. Our son also likes being integrated with the local people and local culture. But as parents, we would also like him to keep our Chinese culture — the values of Chinese culture. As overseas Chinese, we need, and have the responsibility, to pass our traditional values down to the next generation. (Chinese parent)

#### *Other Comments*

The participants, especially the Chinese, volunteered additional comments during the interviews (30 by the Chinese and 21 by the non-immigrant parents). Their comments focused on curriculum, instructional methods, and student discipline in the school. In general, most parents perceived that the curriculum lacked stringent academic standards because students did little homework and much of it was unproductive or non-academic work. The curriculum especially did not teach critical thinking skills, which to some parents involved such exercises as analyzing a phenomenon and understanding its underlying causes and processes. The following quotation from a Chinese father provides a summary of these criticisms.

Students here are too relaxed because they do not have much schoolwork; students in Grade 5 still do not have much homework. Children also do not get sufficient teaching. Today my daughter brought home some insects because the teacher wants the class to observe the insects. That is all she has to do. A similar thing happened that my daughter's class spent several weeks blowing bubbles just to find out what kind of detergents can produce bigger bubbles. The teacher did not tell students [to find out] *why* and *how* detergent produces bubbles, which we think is more important for students to learn. (Chinese parent)

Parents who volunteered comments also criticized schools for their methods of instruction. Chinese parents were especially concerned about the lack of a well-defined instructional framework, guided by a systematic teaching model that co-ordinated with learning and that linked new knowledge to that previously learned. These parents further expressed their discontent with the weak mathematics instruction. Consequently, they were worried that their children would not be adequately prepared for future challenges in work and life. Referring to the lack of instructional framework, a Chinese father reported, "My son started learning French, but several weeks later, he switched to Italian since his teacher started

teaching Italian. We don't know why." Another Chinese mother articulated a greater concern that the instruction at school limited children's future success.

Instruction is not systematic, for example, in mathematics. Mathematics is too easy, and sometimes what the school teaches is not relevant to what children have learned. There is no connection between new learning and old knowledge. It seems there is neither framework nor a systematic instructional plan . . . . Students may not have much to do with their study now. But later, when they enter college or university, they will meet a big challenge. Since the school does not prepare students for the future, how can they adjust to the new and more challenging situation in universities and how can they adjust to competitive society in the future? (Chinese parent)

Both immigrant and non-immigrant parents considered the lack of discipline in school to be problematic. These parents were also concerned about unsatisfactory teaching practices, such as not marking students' assignments. A Chinese parent added another concern about school sports that did not accommodate Asian students' physical build.

Both groups of parents recommended greater emphasis on student discipline and academic learning. One Chinese parent recommended that "education administration should be more stringent and discipline should be better set [established]." Non-immigrant parents requested teacher models in which teachers are "well-disciplined" themselves and do not threaten to go on strike as a means of resolving conflicts. Chinese parents, in particular, advocated more homework, more interesting assignments, and more emphasis on basic skills such as reading, writing, and mathematics. Finally, Caucasian parents requested better-defined criteria for the evaluation of schoolwork and asked that there be no strike action in schools, thereby allowing greater attention to children's learning.

## DISCUSSION

In this study, I examined the home-school communication of Chinese families who recently immigrated to Canada. As expected, even in the absence of socio-economic difficulties, cultural and linguistic uniqueness created a largely distinct pattern of parental communication with schools. Thus, in comparison with non-immigrants, immigrant parents communicated with schools less often, had more difficulty understanding the communication, and were less satisfied with the school's communication style and multicultural education program. However, immigrant parents also circumvented the language barrier by using an interpreter (e.g., their own children, friends, or school appointee) to



facilitate their communication with schools.

The most distinctive feature of Chinese parents' communication was their high level of expectations for their children's academic achievement. Chinese parents communicated more for the sake of their children's academic progress than for the school's public events, such as fundraising, which was more the focus of communication for non-immigrant parents. Emphasis on education as a means for an individual's advancing in society (Stevenson et al., 1994) may have distracted the Chinese parents from their traditional valuation of group well-being, and hence from contributing to such public school events as fundraising. Real and perceived language barriers may also have reduced Chinese parents' involvement in school events. Researchers have observed that Asian-American parents often feel reluctant to participate in school functions because of their lack of confidence in English (Lee & Manning, 2001).

Drawing on their cultural philosophy and practices, Chinese parents expected teachers to communicate more factual appraisal of their children's school progress. These parents were thus dissatisfied when schools conveyed what they considered to be superficial and exclusively positive, "feel-good" generalizations about their children's performance. With their traditional belief in academic excellence as reflected in discipline and achievement (Mitchell, 2001), the Chinese parents also criticized schools for the lack of student discipline and the lower quality of curriculum and instruction in comparison to schools in China.

The Chinese parents' response to the issue of multicultural education further reflected ineffective home-school communication. Many Chinese parents were dissatisfied because the school did not value their race and culture; others were unaware of multicultural education at school. There were also Chinese parents who did not consider the multicultural education practised in schools adequate, especially to fulfil their desire to integrate their children into the mainstream Canadian life while preserving their ethnic distinction. The Chinese parents requested a multicultural education program that not only valued their ethnicity and culture but also contained substance that went beyond occasional, ceremonial festivals. Such a program would involve the ample inclusion of Chinese or Asian culture and history in the regular curriculum and the daily practice of multicultural education at school. However, Chinese parents' dissatisfaction may have been caused by their lack of knowledge about the school's existing multicultural education.

The present study clearly demonstrates the interplay between culture and home-school communication for immigrant parents. In their communication with the school, Chinese parents conveyed their

educational expectations for their children, which were rooted in their culture of origin, and sought genuine information about their children's academic performance. Notwithstanding differences between immigrant and non-immigrant parents in the style and content of communication with the school, a common parental expectation for schools existed. Parents expected quality communication and education. Immigrant or not, parents valued the kind of home-school communication that readily responded to parental concerns and that showed care for meeting children's needs. Parents especially requested the type of education that emphasized academic excellence, critical thinking, practical skills, and behavioural discipline.

The results of this study corroborate previous research indicating that language differences may hinder immigrant families' effective communication and involvement with schools (Commins, 1992; Constantino et al., 1995; Gougeon, 1993). The results further highlight the impact of the language barrier and cultural differences on recently immigrated parents' communication with and expectations of their children's schools. Of interest, the discontent of immigrant parents with the school's curriculum and instruction alludes to the difference between Chinese parents and Canadian schools in pedagogical philosophy. The dissatisfaction also suggests that, perhaps for lack of adequate communication, immigrant parents fail to understand the school's philosophy.

The results indicate the need for improving home-school communication for Chinese immigrant families. Schools may meet this need by attending to parents' desire for responsive communication that shows care for children and for quality education that cultivates critical thinking and student discipline. Schools may also consider practising a style of communication with parents that is sensitive to their idiosyncratic linguistic and cultural heritage and to their educational expectations. Additionally, schools can incorporate multicultural education activities into the curriculum and daily life, while at the same time inform parents of school policy and practices related to multicultural education. Such practices would improve home-school communication, perhaps leading to greater involvement in school events by immigrant parents. Effective home-school communication, however, requires communication skills on the part of school administrators and teachers, which can be enhanced through in-service and pre-service teacher-education programs, focusing on cultivating respect for and understanding of cultural diversity. Teachers' educational institutions may provide such programs.

The inclusion of families mainly with socio-economic advantages

delimits the results of this study. Parents with less economic resources may have different experiences in communicating with the school and should be included in future studies. Research may further involve teachers and children as informants to study the bi-directional process that characterizes home-school communication (Theilheimer, 2001). Future research may also consider the pedagogical orientation of schools and immigrant parents as a factor mediating the communication between home and school.

The present study has produced a preliminary set of interview data and new knowledge about home-school communication of recent immigrants such as Chinese. The results suggest other immediate research questions such as: (a) are these findings replicable in other urban centres and with other cultural minorities? and (b) what practices have been shown successful to improve home-school communication?

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#### APPENDIX

##### *The Questionnaire for the Interview*

1. How often do you communicate with your child's school?
2. How is the communication carried out between you and your child's school?
3. What is the communication with your child's school mostly about?
4. Do you understand the communication given by your child's school?
5. What is the best way for the school to communicate with you?
6. Are you satisfied with the communication you have with the school?
7. From what you know, does your child's school value your child's race and culture? What evidence is there for your answer?"
8. From what you know, does your child's school emphasize multicultural education? What evidence is there for your answer?