

Research Notes

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Affordances and Constraints of Immigrant Chinese Parental Expectations on Children's School Performance

More than three decades ago an experimental demonstration of the power of expectations known as the "Pygmalion Effect" revealed that teachers' expectations could actually serve as an educational self-fulfilling prophecy for students' intellectual performances (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). Further research on interpersonal expectations has led to a basic assumption that person A's expectations can potentially influence person B's performance (Blanch, 1993).

Parental expectations have been identified as the most important contributor to children's school achievement (Hoge, Smit, & Crist, 1997; Patrikakou, 1997; Seiginer, 1983). Although positive effects of parental expectations are prominent in Asian cultures (Hirschman & Wong, 1986; Peng & Wright, 1994; Schneider & Lee, 1990), studies on immigrant Chinese families, the largest visible minority in Canada, remain rare. In my recently completed doctoral work I examined affordances and constraints of immigrant Chinese parental expectations on their children's school performances.

The qualitative data obtained from open-ended interviews with seven recent-immigrant Chinese families, both parents and their adolescent children, allowed me to infer four common themes on the potential affordances of parental expectations: goal orientation, mastery learning experiences, internal control beliefs, and study habits.

Planning for the Future: Goal Orientation

The participants affirmed that parent-child shared expectations such as school achievement, science-oriented career aspirations, moral character, and cultural integration served as the children's life goals and guided their everyday practice. Future planning and goal-setting motivated the children to pursue excellence and actively engage in learning. An adolescent commented that she had greatly benefited from this goal orientation: "I always have goals for life because it just makes life interesting. Objectives in life just make life clear."

Enhancing Self-Efficacy: Mastery Learning Experiences

In order to help their children realize these expectations, the parents closely supervised their children's schoolwork and provided tutoring assistance at home. They not only taught their children advanced knowledge, but also

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helped them analyze their previous academic success and failure. The children felt that their parents' involvement and support had optimized their mastery learning experiences in various subjects and greatly enhanced their self-efficacy and competence in dealing with difficult learning tasks.

Constructing Internal Control Beliefs: Effort Feedback

With a firm belief that achievement resulted from diligence rather than intelligence, the parents continually provided feedback on effort in their children's schoolwork. "The ability to make full use of intelligence is the key to success," a parent stressed. The children also believed that the school achievement of Chinese immigrant students was not the result of intelligence, but the fruit of effort. An adolescent clearly stated his internal control beliefs: "If you want to succeed, you should make an effort first. The reason is simple: You can control if you make an effort or not, but you cannot control if you are going to have a good luck or not."

Fostering Study Habits: The Earlier the Better

The parents believed that their high educational expectations, along with the early academic training their children received in China, had nurtured their children's study habits. These habits not only turned their children into self-regulated learners, but also saved the parents time and energy in parenting. "It's very important to nurture good study habits when the child is young," a parent offered, "the earlier the better." The children also felt that their educational accomplishment in Canada should be credited to their upbringing in China and the demanding parenting they received in their early years. An adolescent told how cultural and parental expectations had gradually become her self-expectations and habits:

Since I was a child, I was taught to do my best, try to get A's, and try to get perfect. It just became my habits, it became part of me.... Now even though they still have these expectations, I have these expectations for myself too. As I was growing up, these habits formed in me. Since I keep on getting good marks, I just expect myself to get good marks.

In addition to the positive effects highlighted above, some participants expressed concerns about potential constraints of parental expectations, that is, parental pressure and tunnel vision.

Parental Pressure

A few families pointed out that unrealistic parental expectations could exert excessive parental pressure on their children and damage their self-esteem and confidence. Parental expectations, therefore, could become counterproductive to their desired outcomes. They contended that immigrant Chinese parents must align their expectations, especially their academic standards, with their children's talent potential. Some adolescents experienced anxious thoughts and feelings under parental pressure, especially their parents' extreme concerns about their academic achievement and future career. One adolescent, for example, complained that her parents cared about nothing else but her grades. Another suffered from his father's excessive daily directives and gradually distanced himself from his father.

Tunnel Vision

An adolescent observed that compared with Western openness, Chinese parents generally held narrow views. She referred to it as tunnel vision. The constraint of parental expectations rested on their control and unwillingness to be open to alternatives: "We are always taught what we are supposed to do and never have a chance to discover it by ourselves." This adolescent felt that her parents would always assume the worst when confronting controversy, especially on the issues of teenage dating and varying career aspirations. Some adolescents felt that the generation gap was widening in the presence of the conflict between the home culture and school culture.

In summary, the study suggests that parental expectations have both positive and negative effects on children's school performance. Parental expectations of these Chinese immigrants have enabled their children to pursue goals with hard work, which has ultimately enhanced self-efficacy and nurtured good study habits. However, high parental expectations and unwillingness to accommodate alternatives are likely to exert excessive pressure that may result in anxiety in their children, which may be counterproductive to what the parents expect.

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