

# School Selection for Their Children in Canada: What Do Chinese Parent-Students Consider?

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*In recent years, more and more Chinese students have come to Canada for their education. Some of them are parents, and they bring their children with them. Using a multiple case study design, this study explored these international parent-students in regards to how they select schools for their children. Six participants were recruited. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Data analysis reveals that participants viewed school selection for their children as their responsibility and thus they were highly engaged in the process. No significant challenges arose in the process of school selection as parents adopted different strategies. Participants considered five key factors when selecting schools for their children, including peers' family background, school rank, language of instruction, impression of the teachers, and parents' religious background. These factors were shaped by the Chinese culture, the participants' class identity, and their anxiety and expectations towards their children's future.*

*Ces dernières années, de plus en plus d'étudiants chinois sont venus au Canada pour y faire leurs études. Certains d'entre eux sont des parents, et ils amènent leurs enfants avec eux. À l'aide d'un modèle d'étude de cas multiples, cette étude s'est intéressée à ces parents-étudiants internationaux et à la façon dont ils choisissent les écoles pour leurs enfants. Six participants ont été recrutés. Les données ont été recueillies par le biais d'entrevues semi-structurées. L'analyse des données révèle que les participants considèrent le choix de l'école pour leurs enfants comme leur responsabilité et qu'ils sont donc très engagés dans le processus. Aucun défi significatif ne s'est présenté au cours du processus de sélection des écoles, les parents ayant adopté différentes stratégies. Les participants ont pris en compte cinq facteurs clés lors du choix de l'école de leurs enfants, à savoir le milieu familial des pairs, le classement de l'école, la langue d'enseignement, l'impression des enseignants et l'appartenance religieuse des parents. Ces facteurs ont été façonnés par la culture chinoise, l'identité de classe des participants, ainsi que leur anxiété et leurs attentes quant à l'avenir de leurs enfants.*

The Canadian Bureau for International Education (CBIE; 2019) reported that there were 572,415 international students in Canada in 2018, of which 435,415 were enrolled in post-secondary institutions. Ontario was the most popular destination among all the provinces and territories with 140,115 international post-secondary students studying in this province (Statistics Canada [StatCan], 2020). Among all of the source countries, China is second, with 142,985 students in Canada (CBIE, 2019). Statistics Canada similarly reported that 14% of postsecondary students in Canada were from other countries and 28% of them were Chinese in 2017/2018 (StatCan, 2020).

International students choose Canada as their destination of study for complex reasons. The possibility of immigration is one of the key considerations (Li, DiPetta, & Woloshyn, 2012; Li & Tierney, 2013). Such choice is fueled by provincial government policies that provide incentives. International students studying full-time with a valid study permit at a publicly assisted Ontario university or college can send their school age children to Ontario K-12 schools for free (Government of Ontario [GO], 2017). This is an appealing policy for international parent-students as they can bring their children to Canada and enroll them in schools with no costs. A further inducement for international students is the eligibility to stay in Canada permanently upon graduation (Immigration, Refugees, and Citizenship Canada [IRCC], 2017). According to the *Canada-Ontario Immigration Agreement*, “Canada and Ontario share a mutual interest in attracting international students to Canada and recognizing them as prospective immigrants” (Government of Canada [GC], 2017, Section 1.13[g]). The Masters Graduate stream of the Ontario Immigrant Nominee Program (OINP) is a pathway which gives international graduate students the opportunity to become permanent residents in Ontario (Ontario Ministry of Citizenship and Immigration [MCI], 2020). These appealing policies have been attracting international students who have children to make their move to this country. For these newcomer parents, school selection is the essential step to help their children get their desired education.

Using a multiple case study design, this study explored Chinese international parent-students’ perceptions and behaviours in school selection for their children, the challenges they may have encountered, and how they coped with them. This study is worth conducting because the research of this group of parents is missing in the literature: the unique needs of these parents and their children have been overlooked. The findings of this study will help universities, school boards, and settlement agencies to better understand this group of parents’ needs, and accordingly, help them to navigate their children’s education in Canada.

### **Literature Review**

Epstein (1995, 2010) stated that parents, students, and teachers could work together as partners in education. She developed an ecological framework with six types of involvement that aims to create successful partnerships between school, family, and community. These involvements are parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with community. Communicating represents one dimension of involvement, and it can start with the process of school selection. For instance, parents will visit schools and interact with teachers before making a decision. Epstein (2010) also indicated that communicating can equip parents with “clear information on choosing schools or courses, programs, and activities within schools” (p. 85). From this angle, school selection can be viewed as an early stage of parental involvement in their children’s education.

Enrolling children in a different educational system is hard for immigrant parents. The existing research found that low socioeconomic status, language barriers, and lack of knowledge of the host school’s culture are some of the obstacles that hinder immigrant parents from engaging in their children’s education (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001; Turney & Kao, 2009; Zhong & Zhou, 2011). The participants of this study are international graduate students. Their educational, linguistic, and financial backgrounds are different from the immigrant parents and the ways they get involved in their children’s education may also be different. All of the participants of this research had decent jobs in China before becoming fulltime students in Canada. This change in social identity and how participants use their resources to respond to this

change may influence parents' thoughts and behaviours in school selection. Therefore, it is worth reviewing Pierre Bourdieu's (1977, 1986, 1991) theory of social practice and understanding the relationship between different powers.

### **Bourdieu's Framework of Social Practice**

The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1991) developed a theory of social practice to interpret how relations of power are produced and reproduced in schools. His framework includes three key concepts: habitus, field, and capital. *Habitus* is "understood as a system of lasting, transposable dispositions which, integrating past experiences, functions at every moment as a *matrix of perceptions, appreciations, and actions*" (emphasis in original; p. 83). Huppatz (2015) explained that family and school experiences are shaped by the habitus, and there is a mutual connection between the family structures, the habitus, and school experiences. On one hand, the family structures and the habitus shape school experiences; on the other hand, school experiences impact the habitus. Bourdieu's (1991) concept of *field* is constituted in the multi-dimensional form of the social world, in areas such as "education, law, health, the arts, media and popular culture" (Ferfolja, Diaz, & Ullman, 2015, p. 12). "Those who construct the field have the greatest power within that field," because they understand the "rules of the game" to ensure that they will take advantageous positions in the field (Ferfolja et al., 2015, p. 12). Bourdieu's (1986) concept of *capital* consists of three unique forms: economic, cultural, and social. Economic capital can be directly changed into an objectified form, such as money or property. Cultural capital can occur in three states: a) the embodied state, which may include "long-lasting dispositions of the mind and body"; b) the objectified state, which includes the transmissible cultural goods such as "books, pictures, or instruments" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243); and c) the institutionalized state, which includes "educational qualifications." Social capital is an integration of resources "within a network of social connections" that can be organized for special purposes (Nash, 1990, p. 432). The three kinds of capitals can be converted from one kind to another, and the convertibility serves as "the basis of the strategies aimed at ensuring the reproduction of capital" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 253). Bourdieu posited that economic capital is the base of other types of capital and the transformative effects. In his description, the "scholastic investment takes account only of monetary investments and profits, or those directly convertible into money, such as the costs of schooling and the cash equivalent of time devoted to study" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 243). This explains that economic capital (such as money) can be converted into cultural capital (such as educational qualifications). Moreover, Bourdieu (1986) indicated that cultural capital is "the best hidden and socially most determinant educational investment" (p. 244). The cultural capital one occupies is associated with the extension of his/her social capital. In other words, "If one [has] access to a network of people in powerful positions, one has the advantage of possibly accessing privileged information or opportunity" (Moustakim, 2015, p. 133).

Ho (2007) explained how educational inequality is produced among parents who are from two different socioeconomic groups, and how parents from the socially advantaged group exchange their cultural resources to power and privilege. Ho believed that the upper-middle-class parents are more likely to be familiar with the language and customary codes of polite behaviour that are used in their child's school. They have a comparatively favourable position in regards to helping their children obtain achievement in schools compared to those parents from a lower socioeconomic status. Thus, "the scholastic yield from educational action depends on the cultural capital previously invested by the family" (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 244). In addition, Bourdieu's

framework provides an opportunity for educators to understand “the family orientations to parenting and schooling that are implicated in reoccurring education divisions” (Huppertz, 2015, p.167). The reproduction of privilege in education is exemplified by instances where parents convert their economic capital to cultural capital by purchasing schooling, which may include sending children to private schools (Huppertz, 2015).

### **Walker et al.’s Psychological Model of Parental Involvement**

Coming from a culturally dissimilar country with a different educational system, international parent-students may have their own ideas towards Canadian education and school cultures. The parents’ educational, linguistic, and financial backgrounds may also influence their perception on how capable they are in dealing with their children’s schooling. Thus, it is worth taking a closer look into Walker, Wilkins, Dallaire, Sandler, and Hoover-Dempsey’s (2005) model in parental involvement as it will help, from a psychological angle, to understand this group of parents’ school selection experiences.

Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (1995, 1997) initially proposed a psychological model of parental involvement. In this model, they described factors that influence parents’ decisions to be involved and the forms of involvement they choose, which include parents’ role construction, parents’ sense of efficacy for helping the child, general and specific invitations from the school and the child, parents’ skills and knowledge, and other demands on parents’ time and energy. Walker et al. (2005) revised and modified this model by focusing on psychological and contextual factors. They defined parents’ involvement forms as school-based behaviours and home-based behaviours. They also reorganised the aforementioned psychological factors into three sections that contribute to the parent involvement forms, namely parents’ motivational beliefs, parents’ perceptions of invitations for involvement from others, and parents’ perceived life context, as shown in Figure 1.

**Parents’ motivational beliefs.** Walker et al. (2005) combined the parental role construction and parental self-efficacy into an umbrella construct of parents’ motivational beliefs. Parents’ personal construction plays a role as a motivator in deciding what parents should do in relation to their children’s education. These motivators come from parents’ imagination and anticipation of what actions they can take to foster their children’s educational success. If parents recognise and understand that they have the responsibility to be involved in school-related activities, they will be willing to participate. Self-efficacy refers to the parents’ confidence in their capabilities of taking actions to foster their children’s positive school outcomes. It is a psychological explanation of how one’s ability shapes his/her behaviours.

**Parents’ perceptions of invitations for involvement from others.** In Walker et al.’s (2005) revised model, parents’ perceptions of invitations include general invitations from school, and specific invitations from the child and teacher. On the topic of general invitations from school, an inviting school climate carries out a message to parents that they are “being needed and wanted in the educational process” (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997, p. 30). Specific invitations from the child means that the children have existing needs and they are willing to accept parental help. Parents often offer involvement in response to their children’s needs (Walker et al., 2005). Specific invitations from teacher refer to teachers’ encouraging attitude. When parents are invited to assist their children’s education, they tend to engage more, for instance, in homework involvement or parent-teacher communication (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1995). These motivators influence parents’ decisions to become involved in their children’s education. Turney

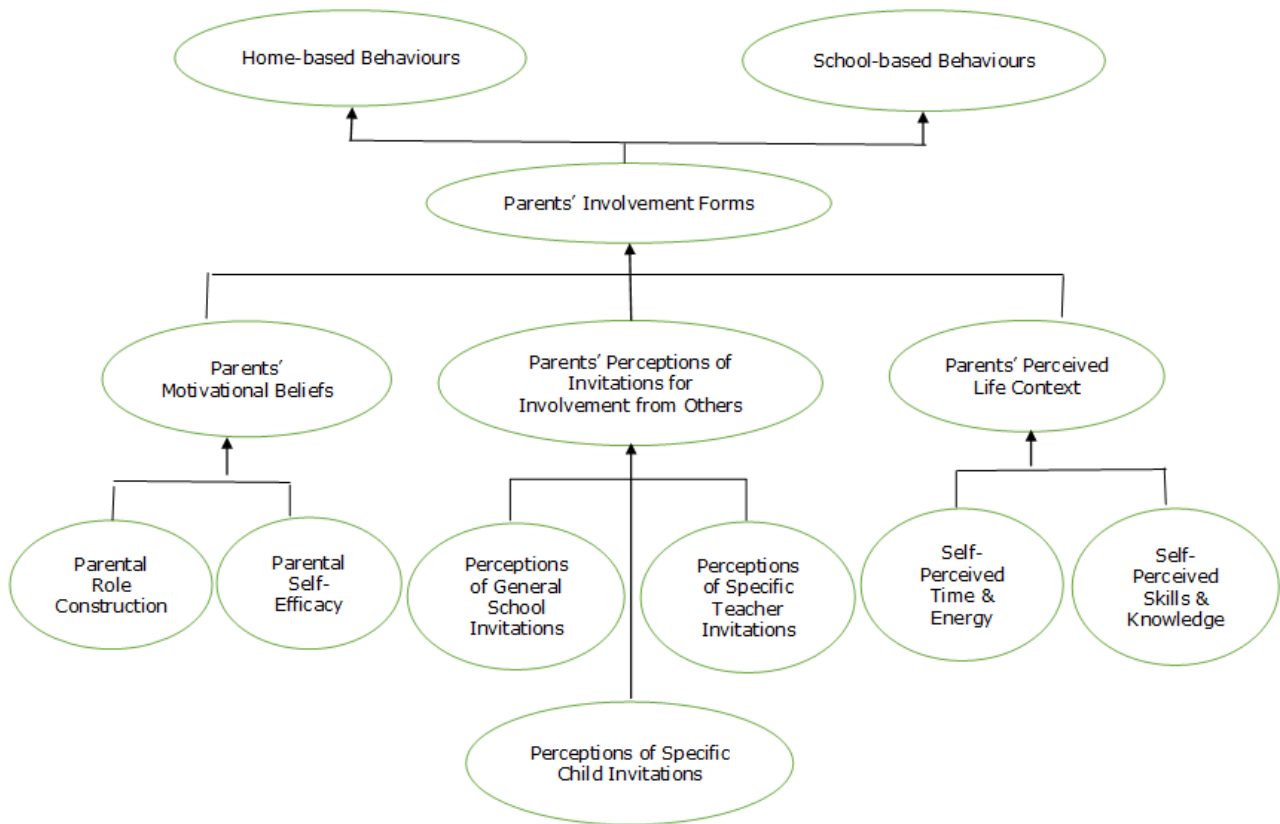


Figure 1. A theoretical model of the parental involvement process (Adapted from Walker et al., 2005, p.88).

and Kao (2009) indicated that not feeling welcomed by their child's school is one of the obstacles that hinder immigrant parents from being involved in their children's education. To Chinese immigrant parents, the invitations are culturally important because they believe that it is rude to go to their children's school without teachers' invitations (Zhong & Zhou, 2011).

**Parents' perceived life context.** In Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler's (1995) hypothesis, the involvement forms that the parents choose are influenced by the total requirements of their time and energy, and the special skills and knowledge that they have. Walker et al. (2005) reorganised these two factors under the construct of parents' perceived life context. In fact, parents reported that lack of time and energy was the most common obstacle influencing parental involvement. Such obstacles include inflexible working schedule and long working hours (Gettinger & Guetschow, 1998; Zhong & Zhou, 2011). Other possible obstacles that affect involvement are parents' skills and knowledge. Guo (2006) found some major reasons that obstruct English as Second Language (ESL) parents' communication with teachers included their low proficiency in the English language, lack of knowledge of the school system, and cultural differences. Immigrant parents who perceive themselves as having insufficient language skills may tend not to participate in their children's school activities (Zhong & Zhou, 2011).

## Methodology

A qualitative research design with a focus on a multiple case study was utilized in this study. The

multiple case study design enables researchers to see “processes and outcomes” among all of the cases and allows researchers to “gain a deeper understanding through powerful descriptions and explanations” (Creswell, 2015, p. 44). In appliance to this research, each participant was interviewed individually and each case was analyzed separately and then a cross-case analysis was conducted to help researchers gain a deeper understanding about common issues and differences across all cases.

This study was conducted in Southwestern Ontario. A snowball sampling technique was used to recruit participants. The first author approached a potential participant who she met in the English Language Improvement Program (ELIP) run by an Ontario university. This student was willing to participate in this research, and she was also able to help recruit five more participants. A total of six Chinese international students from the same university were recruited. Five of them had stable professional careers in China while one owned a private business. At the time of data collection, they had just finished or were working on their masters’ degrees at the university, and they all had children enrolled in government funded elementary or high schools in the city where the university is located in. Participants’ background information and their children’s school placement are summarized in Table 1. All six of the participants were women. Five of their husbands remained in China in order to provide financial support for the family. The one who did come to Canada was not in the participant pool as he was not a university or college student. Although the fathers did not participate in this research, according to the mothers, some fathers were involved in the school selection process. They visited schools when they were in Canada and frequently communicated with their wives.

Table 1:

*Participants’ Background and Their Children’s School Placement*

Participants	Children’s Grade Level and School Placement	The Length of Time in Southwestern Ontario	Educational Background in China	Former Occupation in China	Degree and Major in a Canadian University
A	Grade 1 daughter in a public French immersion school	Nearly 1 year	Bachelor’s Degree	Kindergarten Owner	Master of Education
B	Grade 2 son in a public French immersion school	4.5 years	Master’s Degree	Medical Laboratory Professional	Master of Medical Biotechnology
C	Grade 1 son in a public French immersion school Grade 7 son in an English Catholic school	1 year and 8 months	Bachelor’s Degree	Senior Software Engineer	Master of Applied Computing
D	Grade 10 daughter in an English public high school	2 years	Bachelor’s Degree	Secondary School Teacher	Master of Education
E	Grade 1 son in a public French immersion school	1 year and 8 months	Bachelor’s Degree	Accountant	Master of Management
F	Grade 1 son in a public French immersion school	1 year and 9 months	Master’s Degree	Government Employee	Master of Education

Data were collected through interviews. A list of questions was developed to guide the interviews. These interview questions were designed according to Walker et al.'s (2005) psychological model and Bourdieu's (1986) concept of capital conversion. The participating parents in this research may have different socioeconomic backgrounds when compared to the immigrant parents. The differences in their life context may lead to a different perception in self-efficacy and role construction in parental involvement. Therefore, the first part of the interview guide consists of several questions to collect background information from participants, such as the length of their stay in Canada, the school placement of their children, the participants' former occupation, and their education level. The second part of the guide consists of mainly open-ended questions which helped the interviewees stay focused on the covered topics and also allowed them to express themselves without pre-set limitations by the researchers. These open-ended questions were developed to collect information about participants' rationales for selecting a particular school and their experiences and challenges with the decision-making process. Such information will be utilized to analyze how participants used their resources in serving their goal of selecting the "best" school for their children.

In order to protect participants' privacy, participants were interviewed individually. Interviews lasted from 30 to 150 minutes and were conducted in Mandarin because it was the participants' native language. The interviews were audio recorded. Field notes were taken to record the information that the audio recorder could not catch, such as body language and facial expression. From time to time, researchers had some quick relevant thoughts while interviewing participants. Brief reflective notes were taken to record such thoughts. These notes were revisited and finished right after the interview was over and while the memory of them was still fresh.

The recorded interviews were transcribed in Mandarin and then translated into English. In the process of data preparation, follow-up phone calls were made to the participants for clarification. All participants got a chance to read their interview transcripts in English to ensure accuracy. The content analysis approach was used to analyze data. It involved a process of coding, recoding, and theme generation. First, the researchers read the interview text and field notes for a few times. Key words were marked or noted along the texts. Later, the key words were revisited and grouped into different categories.

## **Results**

Data analysis reveals three major themes around the reasons that participants brought their children to Canada, the factors that they considered when selecting school for their children, and their satisfaction with the process of school selection.

### **Reasons to Bring Children to Canada**

When participants were asked why they brought their children to Canada, participants expressed their beliefs that Canada could offer better education opportunities for their children, their overall positive impression of the Canadian society, and their desire to avoid China's air pollution. It is worth noting that five participants out of six either directly responded or implied that they planned to apply for permanent residency upon finishing their master's programs. This indicates that the possibility of staying in Canada after their graduation was among the factors that pulled them to Canada.

To explain why they believed that Canadian education is better, all participants responded

that they brought their children here for pressure free education. Participant C disagreed with the exam-oriented education in China as “it does not benefit children’s all-round development.” She brought her sons to this country at their young age to avoid the pressure and for a smooth integration into Canadian society. Participants D and F both also had negative perspectives on education in China. D was an experienced Chinese educator. She complained that both teachers and students were overloaded. She described education in China using a phrase of “teachers’ weariness in teaching and students’ tiredness of studying.” Participant F had similar worries as D towards China’s education as she witnessed a little boy from her extended family being forced to do homework every vacation. F feared that her son would have to face the same pressure at his young age. She brought her son to Canada because “it is child friendly and the level of education in Ontario is relatively high” among the whole country.

### **Factors for School Selection**

All participants believed that school selection was an important component in their children’s education. Thus, they collected necessary information about potential schools, school zones, and housing prices in the school neighborhoods as the initial step in school selection. Participants mainly used the internet to obtain information. Consulting educational agents was another way as the agents understood the Chinese parents’ common needs and expectations. After settling down in the city, participants also consulted local Canadians, Chinese immigrant parents, and settlement workers. As Participant F indicated, that those consultations were helpful: “The Chinese settlement workers were very responsive, the Chinese immigrant and local Canadian parents gave me direct and positive suggestions about school choices.” For other participants, such as Participant D, who lacked opportunities to get to know local Canadians, only Chinese immigrant parents were consulted with because she believed “they have similar values and beliefs.” In short, the study participants carefully balanced different perspectives, chose what they felt was useful, identified potential schools, and conducted school visits. They then made a choice based on multiple considerations. The factors they considered can be summarised as follows: peers’ family background, school ranking, the language of instruction, impression of the teachers, and parents’ religious background. No single participant was influenced by all the factors and the level of influence depended on their children’s grade levels and the parents’ level of expectation.

**Peers’ family background.** This was the most frequently mentioned influential factor arising from five out of the six participants’ responses. They believed that parents’ attitudes toward education influences their children’s academic performance and school behaviours. From this point of view, participants emphasized the importance of peers’ family backgrounds because they believed that children with professional and well-educated parents were innately different from others. Hence, they viewed peers’ family background as an important indicator of a child’s academic success. Take Participant C’s representative answer as an example:

School district is very important because there is a correlation between parents’ intelligence levels and students’ intelligence levels. Children inherit their parents’ abilities. By being with intelligent peers, my children may be influenced and they will become polite, self-disciplined, and they will never interfere with others.

Participants C moved from the city’s downtown and bought a house in a nice neighbourhood hoping that her sons can get along with children from “high class families.”



Participant B held a similar view with C and believed that students' family background was important. Her son initially went to a school located in downtown where she later found that the environment was chaotic and students were new immigrants with low socioeconomic backgrounds. Participant B, while appreciating the new immigrant families' situations, felt that the students were not well disciplined and they were not familiar with the new school's rules. B was not aware of this influence until her son complained that he was bullied by peers. Another incident that shocked B was that some students had head lice. B has a medical background, and she could not imagine that "this could happen in Canada, in such a developed country." She was worried that the health and hygiene issues and other students' disturbing behaviours could influence her son's development. To avoid the negative influences, B and her husband decided to transfer their son to a school located in a suburban area. In order to fulfill the admission conditions, B paid higher rental for a house within the school boundary.

Participant E did not want to go through the difficulties that B had experienced, therefore, she took careful actions. She spent four months choosing the first school for her son. She and her husband rented a place near the university, but she soon discovered that it was not an ideal environment as "adults in this area were not motivated and they didn't look like they had a job." Although E's husband did not mind placing their son in a school in this district, E was reluctant to do so. She collected as much information as she could. After having a full consideration, they moved to a nice neighbourhood and enrolled her son in a school next to her house. Although she later transferred her son to a French immersion school, her family remained in this neighbourhood. E preferred that district because her son could relate to other Chinese immigrants who resided there, and the residents in this area seemed to be educated and decent people. E explained why she had such a concern:

I believe that peers' family backgrounds are very important. I would be very worried if parents did not attach great importance to their children's education. I don't want to put my son in an elementary school within a district where parents do not share the same values as me.

The other participants made every effort to settle down in the same suburb where good schools were located. Participant D rented a place before leaving China to ensure that her daughter would be registered in a targeted high school. When D arrived at the city, she promptly bought a house within that school boundary. She was satisfied with the living area as she was surrounded by "high class neighbours." F took further action than D, because she paid a high price to buy a house located in a cross-school zone where her son could have two good school options. She explained why she moved to this suburb:

I used to live near downtown. There was a school there but I heard that students were aggressive, and I was afraid that parents might have not cared about education much. I was afraid that my son would have had negative influences in that area because there were beggars and drug addicts.

Participant F even revealed that she would not mind switching houses for a better high school in the future "just as Mencius's mom did" (Mencius was a Chinese Confucian philosopher and his mom relocated their residence three times for an ideal education environment). In sum, the six participants took similar actions to ensure their children's eligibility of school enrollment. Five participants bought houses and one participant rented a house in the same district, because they believed that the investment could lead to their children's access to a safe environment, gentle and

disciplined schoolmates, and educated and decent neighbours.

**School rank.** School ranking was the second most frequently mentioned factor that influenced the participants' school selection. There was a common belief among the participants that higher ranking schools signified academic excellence. These parents believed that if their children were in these schools, they most likely could learn more and perform better academically. Participant F first preferred an English school but the outstanding rank of a French immersion school changed her mind. She explained why she selected this school for her son: "Simply, we looked at the school rank and picked the one at the very top ... I chose this school because its rank is much higher than other schools. I think this school is superior in teaching." Though F was not sure if her son will need to go back to an English school, she will always have a backup option.

Similar to F, Participants C and D also expressed that a school's rank really mattered to them. Participant C clearly indicated that, "We Chinese love to see the school rank." She did some research before coming to Canada and chose a highly-ranked English elementary school for her sons. C promptly bought a house located in a nice neighbourhood after moving to the city, but she later realized that this house was not inside the zone of her preferred school. In other words, her sons could only be enrolled in a school with a much lower rank. C tried to make up for this mistake by transferring her sons to the schools with higher ranks, although she was not dissatisfied with their previous schools. She was very cautious this time. Before switching, she consulted her friends and neighbours (with different ethnic backgrounds). After carefully weighing and comparing several opinions, she selected a Catholic school (with an acceptable rank) for her older son and a French immersion school (with the highest rank) for her younger son. Participant C's actions reflected that a school's rank was the most important factor for her. Because she had a strong mindset that putting her sons in the highly-ranked schools means that they can excel academically. Participant D shared the same belief as C. She is the mother of a girl who was entering 9<sup>th</sup> grade at the time data were collected. As an educator in China, D put the quality of education as her top priority. She also highly values ranking as she believed that it indicates a school's quality of instruction. Therefore, she chose the top-ranked high school in the city for her daughter.

**Language of instruction.** Besides school neighborhood and school rank, participants considered the instructional language as an influential factor. Five out of seven children were enrolled in the same French immersion school. According to these participants, enrolling their children in a bilingual school meant that their children would learn both French and English. However, the participating parents shared a major concern, which was that they did not understand French and would not be able to assist their children in learning this language. The participants were struggling between two beliefs. On one hand, they believed that knowing French, in addition to English, would help their children with their future career. On the other hand, they were afraid that extra work might lead to a failure in both languages. Participant F provided a typical response as to why she made the school choice. F had several discussions with her husband before putting their son in the French immersion school. They concluded that mastering French could enhance their son's future career opportunities. But it was still hard for F to make a decision as her son demonstrated some difficulties in learning English when he was in China. F recalled a conversation that she had with her six-year-old son, which illustrated that she was trying to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of studying a new language: "I have to tell you that learning two languages is very difficult, but if you succeed in mastering them, it would be easier for you to find a good job, and earn a higher income in the future. You may also have connections with people from the higher classes."

Unlike the other participants, B had different thoughts but she still chose the French immersion school due to a special reason. She was reluctant to switch her son from an English school to the French immersion school as her son struggled learning English, a second language to him. She had no intention to give him extra burden in learning another new language. B and her husband had considered several English schools but still the French immersion school was their final choice because this was the only school that could balance her studies and her family duty. B worried that her son's reluctance to learn French would become an obstacle to his education. Fortunately, B reported that the "Grade one teacher was very helpful. She helped my son catch up with his peers in French, in just one year." Therefore, B did not regret her school choice. Participant E took a similar action as B. She also switched her son from an English school to the French immersion school even though she was not sure if this was good for her son. She was not only worried about his French abilities but also concerned that it would impact his adaptation to the new school. To deal with her worries, E initiated a meeting with the teacher and addressed her concerns. The teacher was responsive and even helped her son find a French tutor. Participant E was satisfied with this help.

**Impression of the teachers.** Three out of six participants shared that the teachers' attitudes were an important factor to consider in school selection. They all conducted school tours in order to choose a suitable school for their children. These parents were eager to gain information regarding how teachers treated newcomer students and how they taught these students. However, as new comers, participants admitted that they lacked the pathways to obtain such information before school enrollment. They could only acquire this information at a later time. Participant C believes that "Teachers are the strongest factor that influences students because students directly learn from them." Her older son took the ESL program. Participant C liked the teachers there as "they are responsible." They gave students daily homework and also helped with their mistakes. C's sharing revealed that her actual concern was the quality of education. Compared to C, Participant E's story was different. E received complaints that her son showed aggressive behaviours. E disagreed with how her son was treated and she attributed it to the teachers' lack of experience in dealing with newcomer students. Therefore, she considered switching her son to a school that are friendlier to newcomer children. Before transferring her son, E visited the French immersion school that was recommended by her friends. In the school tour, E sensed a positive atmosphere, "the teachers dressed appropriately, and they were gentle with smiles on their faces. I also met the principal and she showed me around the school. It was pretty good." E eventually switched her son to this school.

Similar to E, Participant B switched her son to the French immersion school. Before the switching, she conducted many school visits and had thorough interactions with the teachers. She could sense their' attitudes towards newcomers, and she viewed it as an indicator of how her son would be treated in school. The principal and teachers in the French immersion school impressed her: "The principal briefly and clearly introduced the school. I could sense that she is professional, experienced, and respectful. A teacher that we met in the school seemed intelligent, capable, and respectful. I felt good about them." B particularly mentioned that the teacher switched from greeting her in French to English after realizing that she could not understand French. She felt that this teacher cared about her feelings. These positive impressions reassured B's choice of putting her son in this school.

**Parents' religious background.** In addition to the above mentioned four factors, participants B and E both indicated that religion was a factor they had considered during school selection as they were both Christian. They considered the importance of Christian ethics and

concerned their children's spiritual development. Thus, a Christian-based school was their first option. However, as international students, they were unable to afford private schools. They eventually chose a public school that offered free education. B found a house in her preferred school zone and the Chinese house owner was a Christian too. This made B feel good. Participant E felt relieved when she found out that her son's teacher was a trustworthy Christian.

### **Satisfaction in the Process of School Selection**

When participants were asked whether they were satisfied with the schools that they selected, participants A, D, and F answered that their children's schools were their best choices. The rest answered that they did not like their children's previous schools but were satisfied with their current school choices. It is worth noting that participants A, D, and F all took the Master of Education (M.Ed.) program at the same university. They both indicated that the program provided them with an opportunity to understand the local schooling system. They also gained deeper understandings about schools and curriculum from the in-class discussions with the local teachers. Moreover, the internship component of the M.Ed. program also gave them a chance to meet with educational professionals who were working in the field. As a result, they picked up "ideal" schools for their children at the first time so that it avoided school switching. The three participants' school selection experiences proved that learning more about the local educational system benefits parents' school selection.

Participants B, C, and E had switched schools for their children for differing reasons. Participant C switched schools simply due to the school's low rank. C believed that the school she later selected (the French immersion school) for her younger son was for his greatest benefit, but the school that she chose (an English Catholic school) for her older son was acceptable. C had to accept these two schools because she had difficulty meeting the admission requirements for two sons to go to ideal schools. Participants B and E switched schools because they disagreed with the teachers' ways of handling their children's behavioural problems in the previous schools. As newcomers, they expected teachers to pay sufficient attention to their children and understand the aggressive behaviours may be attributed to their children's difficulties in adapting to a new environment. However, they felt that there was a lack of response to their concerns from the school, hence, they decided to make a school change. The school selection journey eventually led them to the same French immersion school located in a suburban area. They both believed that this was a pleasant change as they found that the "teachers and the principal were professional" in the new school. They were confident that their children would receive better attention in this school.

Participants recalled that the whole process of school selection was very smooth. They were capable of handling inquiries, school visits, and registrations. Although English is not their first language, it did not create any significant challenges during school selection. The school staff also handled their inquiries and the paper work professionally.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Previous studies reported that there is a common belief in Chinese families that parents have responsibilities about their children's education (Huntsinger & Jose, 2009; Zhong & Zhou, 2011). This clearly was the case among our study participants. All six participants believed that they had responsibility for their children's education and they were deeply engaged in the process of school

selection. In the light of Walker et al.'s (2005) psychological model for parental involvement, the study participants had confidence in their own linguistic, social, and financial abilities, which motivated them to navigate through the whole process. This is different from many Chinese immigrant parents who perceived themselves with a limited ability to support their children's learning (Ji & Koblinsky, 2009). Participants had the required time and energy to get involved in school selection as they were graduate students and were able to allocate their time for conducting school visits and communicating with others. The participants' university education also equipped them with required skills and knowledge, such as the M.Ed. program, that could benefit them in deepening their knowledge towards Ontario's education system. Moreover, the frequent usage of English in their daily studies improved their ability in communication. Therefore, participants did not view English as a barrier in school selection. This finding is inconsistent with Ji and Koblinsky's (2009), who determined that one of the major communicative barriers for urban Chinese immigrant parents was their limited English skills. The participants in this research highly valued education and they had a clear goal in mind: they were determined to find a school which fulfilled their expectations. Their school choices were shaped by their cultural heritage, anxiety and expectations towards their child's future, and their social class identity.

### **Influence of Chinese Culture**

Participants were relatively new to the country when they participated in this research. Their perspectives towards education may still be deeply influenced by the Chinese culture. Confucian Analects (Lun Yu) states that "He who excels in study can follow an official career" (Xue Er You Ze Shi). This passage advocates for the advantages of academic excellence and is consequently a view held by many Chinese parents. A famous poem stated, "To be a scholar is to be at the top of society" (Wan Ban Jie Xia Pin, Wei You Du Shu Gao). This passage places scholars at the top of China's social hierarchy. For Chinese people, becoming a scholar is the ultimate goal a student can reach. Education is considered as the means through which people can achieve upward mobility in the social hierarchy in China. Therefore, Chinese parents have a high expectation on their children's education and are willing to sacrifice themselves for it. The fact that the participants moved from their hometown to another country and were willing to pay a high price buying a house located in the boundary of highly-ranked schools reflects their insistence. Such behaviours remind us of what Mencius' mom did for his education. Mencius was a famous philosopher who lived in ancient China, and whose mother moved three times in order to create a conducive learning environment for him. In the two previous places, Mencius learned from lower social class people's behaviours. In the final place, which was near a school, Mencius could imitate the courtesy behaviours and study the students' habits. This became a well-known story in China, titled *The Mother's Wise Home Moving* (Meng Mu San Qian). On one hand, this story delivers a Chinese belief that social environment heavily influences a student's development. On the other hand, it reveals social stratification division and class superiority. In this study, the participants' reluctance towards enrolling their children in schools located in low socioeconomic areas and their preference to reside in affluent neighbourhoods may stem from this perspective. With an endorsement of the class superiority, participants concerned about the peers' family background, because they believed that their children could become successful in society by attending academically highly-ranked schools and getting along with peers with superior backgrounds.

## **Parents' Anxiety and Expectations**

Besides cultural influence, our data suggests that parental anxiousness towards their children's future may be another factor which urges them to engage deeply into school selection. China's educational resources are scarce and unequally distributed, where children compete for limited seats beginning in kindergarten, and occur all the way into university (Wang, 2008). Yang, Huang, and Liu (2014) reported that most educational opportunities and resources stem from family background and social power. This inequality not only influences a Chinese student's academic achievement but also has a long-term impact on his/her career and income. This explains why participants focused on peers' family background in Canada, as they understood how social stratification played a critical role in China's education inequality from their experiences.

Participants' narratives also revealed that they were facing enormous stress in their children's education in China. Bringing their children to Canada is an escape from the suffering and an opportunity for better education. To manage their anxiety and create a better future for their children, participants spent a great deal of time as well as adopted different strategies in the process of school selection, including relocating homes, consulting experienced parents, and visiting schools. These three useful strategies helped participants to control risks and prevent making mistakes. Relocating homes and consulting experienced people were two approaches that they learned in China and that they used in Canada. Relocation ensured enrollment in an academically highly-ranked school and allowed their children to connect with people from higher socioeconomic classes. Consulting experienced people was a way parents obtained useful information about schools. Participants made good use of the social resources that they had accumulated in the new land in order to collect such information. Visiting schools was a new and effective method that they learned in Canada. It allows for parents to obtain first-hand information about schools and teachers. Data show that parents were concerned about teachers' attitude towards newcomer students and how they taught their children. The multiple strategies that participants used demonstrated that they were intelligent and capable parents with flexible mindsets. They knew how to make practical choices for their children according to the situation that they were in, and they made use of all their social and financial capitals to ensure that their children received the best education possible. This is consistent with Yang et al.'s (2014) finding that parents with social stratification advantages translate their social power and economic resources into better education opportunities for their children.

In this study, all the younger children of participants were enrolled in the same French immersion school. This has something to do with the school's excellent academic outcomes, and more importantly, it reflects parents' expectation that mastering two official languages could benefit their children's future. Aydemir, Chen, and Corak's (2013) found that the education of immigrant children often signals an important outcome related to the mainstream value and the capabilities to succeed in the labour market. In accordance with this research, participants expected their children, through English-French bilingual education, to integrate into the Canadian mainstream society and have a successful career. These expectations have a connection with one's social class identity. It also gives the evidence that schooling is not only about securing a good job in the labour market, but also the acquisition and accumulation of social capital.

## **Social Class Reproduction**

The participants' narratives demonstrate a certain orientation in school selection. They all

happened to choose to live in the same district where the highly-ranked schools were located. Each of them used a similar set of standards when choosing their child's school, and as a result, most of them chose the same school. This is what Bourdieu (1977) described as "homology" (p. 86), where participants' identification with social class determined their high level of involvement in school selection. The participants, being mature and educated mothers who belonged to an advantaged group in China, found that their habitus did not fit with the dominant culture in the city's downtown. Hence, they chose to live in the suburban area, avoiding having to enroll their children in the downtown schools. This was essential to the participants because they felt secure connecting with people who had a similar habitus as them. Participants' satisfaction with their selected school stemmed from the neighbourhood environment and the social class of their child's peers. The participants' school choices demonstrated a process of capital conversion and power reproduction. They invested their financial resources to exchange for an opportunity for (what they viewed as) better education. The costs of owning property (in order to secure a seat in a highly ranked school), as an alternative form to the cost of schooling, is perceived as a "scholastic investment" by the participants (Bourdieu, 1986, p.48). In other words, participants tried to reproduce their middle-class identity through selecting a school for their children. During this process, participants translated their social and economic powers into their children's educational privileges, which reproduced the social class inequality and education divisions. Transferring schools and relocating homes were the actions that participants took in order to create a geographical distance between their children and the students that were not in their social class. Bourdieu (1977) implied that social distance is a key aspect of stratification: "so many reminders of this distance and of the conduct required in order to 'keep one's distance' or to manipulate it strategically" (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 82). Participants' school choice clearly demonstrates this class stratification division.

### **Implication**

Participants viewed that selecting a school for their children was their responsibility, hence they were highly engaged in the whole process. Although they only had limited information when they were new to Canada, these parents adopted different strategies and made good use of the multiple resources that they had. Eventually, they were all satisfied with their school choice. Participants' perceptions on school selection were influenced by their Chinese culture, class identity, and the anxiety and expectations towards their children's future. They carefully selected the highly-ranked schools, with the expectation of their child's excellent academic attainments, and through that they can become a member of the social class that their peers and teachers are from.

Results of this study lead to a better understanding of the current educational phenomenon of "school selection" with a focus on this unique group of newcomer parent-students. Findings showed that international parent-students can benefit from more knowledge about the Canadian education system. Their university should help them to access necessary information. For instance, the international student recruitment package should include information about government funded schools in the city where the university is located in. The university can also post the school board's link on its website and train staff to assist the international parent-students, so that they can handle inquiries related to children's school enrollment. The university can also make itself a better platform to assist this group of parents access educational and settlement services as well. For instance, they can invite settlement workers and school board professionals to conduct joint workshops which can help parent-students understand local

schools and curriculum, school culture, parent-teacher communication, process of registration, and the placement for ESL learners. The workshop facilitators can also invite volunteer parents to guide the newcomers as they will be able to give suggestions from the parents' perspectives. These workshops do not occupy too much of the university's resources but they are beneficial to the international students and their children because the newcomer parents can gain a throughout understanding of the Canadian schooling system, the possible school choices, and how to enroll their children in a preferred school. These will help parents to improve their involvement experiences in the long run.

The data of this research were collected from a group of international parent-students, which means that the findings only reflected this unique group of parents' perspectives in terms of selecting a school for their children. Caution needs to be taken when generalizing the findings to other Chinese immigrant parents. Due to the limited scope of this study, the children's voices were not included. Children's experiences and views about school selection are worth exploring in future research since they are attending the schools selected by their parents and some of them may experience school changes. Listening to both parents and their children's points of view will certainly deepen our understanding of the phenomena of school selection.

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