

Home-School Partnerships – A Comparison between American and Asian Approaches

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Abstract. This literature-based research compared and contrasted parental styles of involvement in children's education between America and Asia. Teachers and parents in Japan, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Korea showed significant differences in their perspectives and practices from American teachers and parents. In the US, playing was viewed as a developmental motivation, but it was viewed as a barrier to learning for Asian children. Asian parents considered their children's academic success to reflect the whole family, and therefore pressured their children to succeed. In contrast, American parents valued learning to develop a fulfilled life. To the American, being creative meant being new and different, while it also included being morally good to Asian people. Asian schools and teachers encouraged parents' home-based involvement, but did not invite them into schools' activities, while American educational laws mandate that parents get involved in schools' activities, and schools' programs are planned to engage parents. The study concluded that as long as parental involvement harmonized with the culture, it was helpful and effective to children's education.

Keywords: Education, Family Involvement, Culture, Asia, America

1. Introduction

The family has never been an unimportant element in the success of education. It is hardly possible for a child to only receive school education and grow up healthy. School education, no matter how wonderful it can be, is limited without a collaboration with the family. Therefore, the partnership of school-family is one of the major topics of inquiry in the field of education. It may also be a factor that raises scientists' curiosity about how to design and develop the best model of home-school connection. The fact that the East and the West have different philosophies regarding collaboration between home and school raises the question about which method is best. In this paper, the writers make an attempt to examine this controversial topic. In comparing and contrasting the two parental involvement approaches of America and Asian education, this paper aims to investigate which type of home-school partnership is better for children's learning and development.

The writers expect that American and Asian continents tend to manifest differences in how their schools involve parents, probably ranging from harmoniously sharing rights and responsibilities to distantly respecting each other's zones. As parents' perspectives are rather socially, historically and culturally bound, the major content of this writing is about differences in parents' views. The paper is going to explore five elements related to parental involvement in America and Asian countries. They are parents' views on the roles of playing and learning, the beliefs parents have in their parenting roles, parents' expectations of children's academic outcomes, and schools' expectation for families in getting academically involved. The intention of this inquiry is to discover motivational factors that are unique to each style of parental involvement. Based on an understanding of this uniqueness, the study will suggest an answer to the above question: which type of home-school partnership is better for children's learning and development. At this point, the hypothesis is that American parents are more involved than Asian parents.

2. Cultural Views on Children's Learning And Playing

In a study of parents' views on playing, Harkness (2004) found that European American parents highly value the importance of play. They believed that there is a close connection between playing and children's overall development, and saw play as "an important vehicle for early development" (p. 97). European

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American parents believed that through playing, children's physical, social, emotional and cognitive skills grow. Therefore, American parents not only spend time and money on various types of toys and entertainment activities for their children, but they also play with their children and encourage them in school activities.

On the contrary, the same author reported that Asian parents did not think play could be helpful to children's readiness for school. Asian parents stressed the importance of cognitive development and saw a separation between cognitive development and playing. For Asian parents, playing tends to be viewed as having little relationship to children's learning, or even as a disturbance to academic work, and should be limited and carefully controlled. Asian parents were convinced that it is better for children to be academically trained at an early age. As a result, Asian parents restricted their children's play time, bought fewer toys which were more educationally oriented, and did not join in the games as playmates with their children. Instead, Asian parents taught and coached their children in those activities.

Parents in different cultures treat and concern themselves about their children's education in different ways. It is probable that parents' beliefs in their parenting roles can partially explain how they are engaged in their children's schoolwork.

3. Parents' Beliefs in Their Roles

East Asian parents consider taking care of their children's education as the most important task of their parenting. Japanese mothers "value the rearing of children as a more noble responsibility than being a career woman" (as cited in Hiatt-Michael, 2005, p. 165). Asian parents are willing to make sacrifices for their children. According to Chao (1996), as long as a child is capable of learning, both Asian parents will work hard to provide a better study opportunity for their child, including sending members of the family abroad with the child to provide additional educational opportunities. According to Hiatt-Michael (2005), Japanese parents believed they should get involved in their children's education as early as possible, because what happens to the heart and mind of a child in his/ her very early age will stay with that child for the rest of his/ her life. Taiwanese, Chinese and Japanese parents often send their children to preschools and kindergarten so that children are taught to behave morally and are prepared for schools. Moreover, East Asian parents think they are responsible for their children's future. Consequently, Asian parents take strict control of their children's learning. For example, Chinese parents assign their children extra work to do at home, hire tutors for them, take the children to after-school study groups, review the lessons in class with their children everyday, and only allow children to watch TV or play after the homework is done. They also seek the best educational conditions for their children. Asian parents often believe that family problems and breakups could negatively affect their children's academic focus, and thus lead to undesirable results, affecting their future lives. Therefore, to avoid obstacles to children's academic achievements, Asian parents make an effort to avoid divorces. Japanese parents, for example, try their best to stay together to keep the family structure undamaged (Hiatt-Michael, 2005).

American parents have different views on their roles. According to Chao's (1996) study, European American parents did not emphasize the importance of academic success to their children. They considered the major work of parenting to be as an effort to build up children's self-esteem and help them develop social skills, not as a focus on their children's school performance. One way to do this is through making learning fun and exciting. In assisting children's learning, American parents act as facilitators to provide "a creative environment for the child to explore from" (p. 420). They let learning happen as a natural process for the child. American parents do not force their children to learn, since they believe this action may have a negative effect and erode the children's appreciation for learning.

In a comparison study on Asian and American parents' involvement in children's homework, Cheung (2011) reported that American parents used fewer commands and directives in guiding their children, and did not insist on checking homework. They let their children decide in what way they wanted parents to get involved. On the contrary, Chinese parents were persistent in checking homework. "Regardless of children's desires, letting children know that what they want children to do is best for children and should not be questioned" (p. 2). In another cross-cultural comparison of parents' beliefs in their roles, Chao (1996) stated that Chinese mothers conveyed their belief in the "high investment and sacrifice they [felt] they need[ed] to

offer” and a “more direct intervention approach to their children's schooling and learning.” European American parents showed “a less "directive" approach to learning that could be explained as a "facilitative model” and “a concern for building their children's self-esteem” (p. 420).

4. Parents’ Perspectives Toward Children’s

The reason why Asian parents are so protective and serious about children's education may originate from their perspectives toward learning. As found in Chao’s (1996) study, Asian people have a very high value for education, which is considered "the most important way to bring honor to your ancestors" (p. 412). According to a Taiwanese mother: "In Taiwan, everything is based on the examination process, and you can't get anywhere unless you do very well" (p. 411).

In Chinese society, it is the scholars who have always been respected as the "virtue" (Chao, 1996) of the society. They are the persons who receive the highest social status. Therefore, from kindergarten, a child already carries a lot of responsibility in keeping the family's face by doing well at school. The child's academic success is the success of his/her mother and the whole family. The child’s academic failure means his/her parents are not doing their jobs. It is also common that Asian children are warned about the catastrophes that academic failure can cause: "If you do not study, you will have no future; you will not get a good job, and you will not have a good life" (p. 413).

American parents also have a high value for education, but they do not see education as the one and only way for children to be successful, gain social status and bring honor to the family. For the American, the aims of learning are to “understand the world, develop one’s skills, and accomplish one’s goals” (Cheung, 2011). In an individualistic society, American children are not expected to live for the family as much as in collectivistic countries. American culture appreciates the sense of autonomy in children’s learning. This leads to the fact that children’s emotions and interests are respected by parents. Parents tend to “assist children in becoming engaged learners, while also enhancing their emotional functioning” (p. 934). American parents stress a "more global and well-rounded learning in which the process of learning is more important than the outcome" (Chao, 1996, p. 419).

5. Parents’ Expectations Of Children’s Academic Achievements

As American parents wish to develop “well-rounded children,” while Asian parents want “well-performing children” (Chao 1996), these parents also differ in what they expect from children’s learning outcomes. In Shek & Chan’s (1999) study of Chinese and Hong Kong parents, an “ideal child” is the one who can satisfy:

Family-related attributes (good parent—child relations and fulfillment of family responsibilities), academic-related attributes (good academic outcome, positive attitude toward studying, fulfillment of responsibility in studying, and high education attainment), conduct-related attributes (good character, self-discipline when going out, obedience to the law, no acquaintance with undesirable peers, and no naughtiness), and other attributes (such as having good relations with others and being mature) (p. 291).

Belonging to a society characterized by individualism, American parents do not bind their children with those many strings of expectations. Davies (2010) reported that US parents focused their concerns on two aspects. First, they highly expected their children to go to university, in order that later the children could find good jobs. Then, US parents also wished that their children would take up their own interests, would pursue what they enjoyed doing, and would allow their interests to lead them into careers and opportunities. While US parents hoped that their children could get into university, children’s performing well at school was not the major concern of most parents in Davies’s study. Instead, the fact that children developed positive attitudes towards life, felt confident to make choices, had motivation to follow whatever path they wished, and became “successful adults” in their own ways was more important.

6. Students’ Creativity – Two Interpretations

In many international contests, Chinese students perform better than American students in mathematics and natural sciences. This is because Chinese educators more strongly emphasize analytical skills than

American teachers. However, this overemphasis, at the same time, limits students' creativity. In other fields such as art, Chinese students do not seem that creative. They need more detailed instructions than American students. According to Niu and Sternberg's (2003) explanation, this effect could be the result of high-stakes standardized tests. Moreover, the interpretations of creativity are different between the US and China. In Americans' definition of creativity, "novelty" is the core feature. In China, collectivism is highly valued; therefore, people include both righteousness and the self in judging creativeness (Niu & Sternberg, 2003). For example, a smart and creative student can win teachers' and peers' praise only if she/he is also a well-behaved and morally good student.

Different as they are, these factors are not yet adequate to explain why American parents are more involved in school-based activities than Asian parents. Examining the views and voices of schools and teachers about the involvement of parents in children's education can clarify parents' different levels of engagement in school functions.

7. Perspectives of School and Family Toward Each Other

Worldwide, wherever children's learning takes place, there are family and school interventions, but in different cultures, this involvement takes different forms and is based on different perspectives. In Asian countries, such as China or Korea, parental involvement is expected to be more home-based. According to Gu & Yawkey (2009), teachers believe that "only school personnel could make appropriate decisions regarding the educational program, decisions which would be beyond the realm of the parents" (p. 54). No matter how positive parental involvement could be in school, if not encouraged by teachers, it will not occur. This maintains positive home-school relationships. In addition, Chinese parents, who hold teachers in high respect, may find themselves with a lack of confidence and a "common unfamiliarity... with school operation" (p. 50). This experience confirms to them that home-based involvement is better. Therefore, what is typical of these Asian parents' engagement is to provide their children with extensive academic supports at home, and to withdraw from almost all school-based activities when they are not invited. As schools and families become familiar with this type of parental involvement, the lack of parents' roles in schools is considered a positive sign of parents' involvement in their children's academic success.

In America, the situation is different. Not only are the school and the family itself important, but also the partnership between schools and families is influential in children's learning and development. American educational laws mandate that parents get involved in schools' activities. Epstein (2004) found that parents' participation in schools is one cause of children's academic success. Often, parents who do not participate in school also do not support their children at home. In American educators' perspectives, the home-school relationship should be a collaboration, because it functions as a "network of support" for the child and his/her family (as cited in Daniel, 2011, p. 167). American people believe that "children learn and grow at home, at school, and in their communities," so when schools include families, children will be more engaged in schools' activities, and thus their learning outcomes will improve. Therefore, only home support from parents is not adequate for effective learning and teaching to take place. Instead, American schools welcome parents' active interventions at school. Schools are also expected to have plans for parents to be involved.

8. Discussion

Most of the theories about parental involvement in children's education are initiated and developed in Western countries. Therefore, they reflect the Western culture of including parents. Asian parents' involvement, although seeming to be on the other extreme from the Western perspectives, is still a good match with its own culture and educational system. The Asian approach of parental involvement has also proved to be effective for children's academic outcomes. Therefore, although American education is strongly desired by international parents and students, its home-school link, which is one part of numerous successful strategies, cannot be said to be the best model for other cultures to apply. It is harmony with the culture that makes these two different parental involvement approaches work. Suppose Asian home-school partnerships take place in America, there would be a mismatch with educators' expectations and educational quality would likely be affected. Conversely, if American parental styles occurred in Asian countries, education could suffer because parents would be unsuitably active. It should be acknowledged that in seeking a better

approach, there is a common pitfall of rejecting other methods and being blind to differences. Therefore, a challenge for educators is to maximize educational progress through preserving positive cultural values and national traditions.

In an attempt to preserve the strengths of each culture, the authors make some suggestions about both American and Asian parental involvement. An increase in American and Asian international student exchange programs could result in greater understanding of differences and similarities. Through exchange programs, students can develop awareness of parental support including the importance of play and the importance of high parental expectations for children's academic achievements.

9. Conclusion

After studying various differences in parental perspectives about their roles, the importance of academic learning, the meaning of play, definitions of creativity and what parents expect in children's learning outcomes, we discovered that the comparison does not lead to a conclusion of one method being better than the other. As long as the form of parental involvement works with the culture, it can be helpful and effective. However, home-school partnership that prioritize children's happiness and academic achievements could perhaps be improved through more international student exchange programs between America and Asia. Despite real differences in Asian and American partnerships with the school, better understanding of these differences will benefit their collaboration.

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