Asian Immigrant Parents’ and New Zealand Early Childhood Teachers’ Views of Parent-Teacher Relationships

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The growing number of Asian children entering the New Zealand early childhood education system means that teachers can not ignore the need to develop an understanding of Asian cultures and practices that support working collaboratively with Asian families. This paper examines the views of a small number of Asian immigrant parents and New Zealand early childhood teachers about parent-teacher partnerships in children’s early education and care. The findings point to challenges for both parents and teachers. The paper highlights some major problems or barriers to the achievement of effective partnerships between Asian immigrant parents and New Zealand early childhood teachers, namely parental and teacher confidence, time, and willingness or perception of need to develop a partnership. Some recommendations for improving teacher practices are outlined. It is concluded that given the limitations of this study and yet the issues it has raised, that this is topic which needs to be more systematically researched.

Introduction

The research literature is clear on teacher-parent partnership as a key influence on children’s learning and other outcomes (Powell, 1998; Riojas-Cortez, Flores & Clark, 2003; Whalley, 2001). In New Zealand early childhood policy documents and early childhood service group philosophies generally support parent involvement and parent-teacher relationships. For example, Quality in Action published by the Ministry of Education (1998, p.6) proposes that early childhood services “work in partnership with parents/whanau to promote and extend the learning and development of each child who attends or receives the service”. The national early childhood curriculum Te Whaariki (Ministry of Education, 1996, p.14) states that “the wider world of family and community is an integral part of the early childhood curriculum”. Overseas research suggests that cultural differences between teachers and parents can be an obstacle to effective communication and the achievement of positive teacher-parent relationships (Ebbeck & Glover, 1998; File, 2001; Riojas-Cortez, Flores & Clark, 2003). In New Zealand, however, this is an aspect that has received little research attention.

The study reported here focused on Asian immigrant parents and New Zealand European early childhood teachers. It is a small study that provides a tentative look at parent and teacher views of working together for children’s learning in the context of the early childhood centre, and explores whether and how cultural differences may be a barrier to parent-teacher partnership.
Asian Immigrant Parents and New Zealand European Teachers

“Asian” people are defined in this paper as people from East, Southeast and South Asia. They include Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, Philippine, Indian and Pakistani. According to overseas research, the factors influencing the ability of Asian parents and Western teachers to work collaboratively can include differences in attitudes to education, differences in beliefs about child development, as well as linguistic and communication differences (Ebbeck & Glover, 1998; Huang, 1993; Lee, 1995; Lee & Manning, 2001).

Education Attitudes

In New Zealand research suggests that early childhood teachers regard education as a learning process in which children carry out “educational and socially and culturally valued activities” (Hedges, 2003, p.7). Teachers follow children’s interests and extend children’s interests through provision of both planned and spontaneous learning programmes. Research on Asian parents’ views of education suggests they prefer more formal teaching approaches in which children engage in repetitive and organized teaching exercises with teachers determining or actively shaping both the content and the context of learning (Hadley, 2003; Stigler & Stevenson, 1991). In Asia, children are taught didactically from an early age and Asian parents show a preference for this method no matter where they live (Ebbeck & Glover, 1998; Okagaki & Diamond, 2000).

Learning through play appears to be valued by teachers in New Zealand (Somerset, 1994). In Asian cultures play does not necessarily support learning; learning is synonymous with working on tasks (Beckert, Strom, Strom, Yang, Huang & Lin, 2004). It is a common picture as portrayed by Huntsinger, Huntsinger, Ching & Lee (2000, p.11) that “in Chinese American families, children often do their homework in the presence of family, all seated around a table”. Children included in this study were preschoolers. In New Zealand childcare settings, play permeates through children’s learning programmes. Children are encouraged, for example, to use clay to learn skills and working strategies (Simpson & Turner, 2000).

Both Asian immigrant parents and New Zealand local parents actively participate in their children’s learning activities at home. The activities they tend to do with children are however different. Chiang (2000) and Lee (1995) report that Asian parents assign their children a variety of lessons, such as piano, maths and science. New Zealand parents spend time with their children on many activities embeded in play (Sunday Star Times, 2002). Asian parents believe they have full responsibilities for children at home and teachers have full responsibilities for children when they are at school (Collington, Men & Tan, 2001). Teachers, from their perspective are trained experts in education and should have adequate and sufficient knowledge about teaching (Chiang 2000). Huang (1993) reports that Asian parents perceive teachers who seek parent involvement in the programme to be incompetent. Parents in New Zealand do not trust teachers’ competencies as much (Vining, 1998) and they usually play a more active role in children’s school activities (Patterson, 2002).
Beliefs about Child Development

Asian people give priority to the development of cognitive abilities over other abilities and skills such as social and physical (Okagake & Diamond, 2000). Higher expectations for academic achievement amongst many Asian parents could be one reason for prioritising cognitive development in the early childhood years. In Asian cultures cognitively able people are perceived to be better able to motivate themselves and carry out hard work to achieve their goals (Okagake & Diamond, 2000). Lower cognitive ability and academic achievement tends to be viewed as a problem of not working hard enough and a lack of diligence (Huang, 1993; Lee & Manning, 2001). In New Zealand society cognitive abilities tend to be associated with thinking capacities including problem solving and creativity (Drewery & Bird, 2004). The national early childhood curriculum emphasises ‘holistic’ development as a goal for children (Ministry of Education, 1996). In early childhood teaching practice a child’s cognitive development tends not to be viewed in relation to the effort and diligence of the child but in relation to opportunities to engage in and performance within a range of activities and other contexts such as social play. When children’s cognitive development lags teachers tend to seek explanations other than whether the child is trying hard enough, for example whether the child has a special learning difficulty or emotional or psychological problems.

Communication Behaviours

Huang (1993) explains that Asian and Western peoples have different communication behaviours and communication contexts are therefore important to consider. For example, Asians tend to pay attention to situational clues, such as nonverbal signals and the speaking atmosphere while Westerners understand messages primarily through clear verbal articulation. Asian people rarely use the word ‘no’ to express disagreements but favour verbal hesitancy. Because of their high sensitivity to nonverbal clues, Asians avoid showing inappropriate body expressions and instead use head nodding and avoid eye contact. The mismatch in communication behaviours can mean that Asian people are open to being ignored, misinterpreted or misunderstood by Westerners (Huang, 1993).

The Study

Data Collection Technique

A small-scale study was conducted with six Asian immigrant families and 26 early childhood teachers for their views on parents and teachers working with each other for the benefit of children’s learning. Parents were interviewed in their own homes using an unstructured interview format. In three of the six families both parents participated in the interview, so in total the views of nine parents were recorded. Time constraints meant that teachers could not be individually interviewed and instead their viewpoints were elicited and noted by the researcher during a discussion activity as part of two
professional development workshops. The responses were noted down on paper by the researcher.

The questions asked of parents were:

- Why did they place their child/ren in childcare?
- What role did they consider they should play in their child/ren’s early childhood education?
- What role did they think teachers should play in their child/ren’s early childhood education?
- How did they feel about working with New Zealand early childhood teachers?
- Under what circumstances was it important for them to work with teachers?

The questions posed to the teachers included:

- What was their general impression of Asian parents?
- What was their general impression of Asian children?
- How did they feel about working with Asian parents?
- What were, if there were any, the main obstacles in their work with Asian parents?

**The Participants**

All participants, families and teachers, were sampled from the Auckland region. Among the participating families, two had come to New Zealand from Mainland China, one from Taiwan, one from Korea, one from Indonesia and one from India. They all had at least one child enrolled in an early childhood service at the time the study was carried out. Two had children in kindergartens and four had children in childcare centres. The age of their children ranged from two years and seven months to four year and nine months. The length of their residence in New Zealand ranged from two to six years. The mothers from three families were in paid employment, two were studying and one was taking care of a baby at home. All the parents interviewed were able to speak English but none could do so fluently or confidently.

The early childhood teachers were all female, Pakeha New Zealanders, and had trained in New Zealand. The majority were employed as supervisors and all worked in childcare centres. None of the teachers spoke an Asian language.

**Ethical Considerations**

After verbally communicating with parents about the research topic an information sheet was posted to them which explained further about the purpose of the study, what their participation would involve and their rights in the study. The parents were assured of confidentiality and all gave their written consent to participate.
Teachers at two professional development workshops were asked for permission to record their responses to the questions for use in the research study. They were assured of confidentiality and their rights not to participate and not to have any one of their responses recorded if they chose. All teachers gave their written consent.

Results

The Parents’ Opinions

When asked how they felt about working with early childhood teachers the parents stated that they did not want to play an active role for various reasons, or they did not know how to play an active role in the learning activities of their children’s childcare settings. Here are some representative responses from them:

Min: It’s the teacher’s job to take care of children. We don’t think our help will be of any use.

Xu: We only stay with our children at the childcare when they have problems.

Tian: To avoid doing anything silly we have to try not to approach the teachers.

Shsmal: The teachers don’t look all friendly. I cannot make myself open to them. Also, I do not think they respect our opinions.

Andise: We put the child to childcare because we have no time to him. We’d rather keep him at home if we can not totally leave him in the childcare centre.

Liue: Well, what can we do? We are in another country. I prefer just leaving him there and do some make up work with him at home. He is three now and is big enough to take some academic learning. I don’t think the teacher would help that. My child doesn’t learn much at the centre.

Zimes: I would like to do something but don’t think I can contribute too much.

Jen: I want to express my viewpoints at times, but what if the teachers are offended?

Deen: I don’t know how I would be able to help. Our experiences are so different from the teachers. It would be good that we keep ours away from them in order not to confuse the children.
The Teachers’ Opinions

The teachers described Asian parents in general as respectful, interested but passive. Many of the teachers claimed that language and cultural differences made their work with Asian parents challenging. Teachers were confused by some behaviours shown by Asian parents at their centres which for them presented specific difficulties.

Sam: They don’t talk to the teachers unless teachers talk to them.

Petra: They make a big fuss about a minor illness of their children, such as a light running nose.

Gwynne: They take their children out without telling the teachers.

Lisa: Asian girls are very independent but boys lack self help skills. Some Asian young boys even need to be carried to the toilet.

Mary: They parents behave very harshly when separating with their children. They leave even when the children are crying.

Bev: They think their children are not learning anything.

Vivian: They don’t want their children to play with those from their own cultural groups.

Cindy: It’s really difficult to communicate with them verbally and nonverbally.

Ellen: We don’t really have too much time for them. We are busy with other children and parents too.

Wendy: We are trying hard to give their children the most appropriate education and it will be good if they can be our partners but it is okay if they do not bother. Asian children don’t give us too many problems.

Discussion

The results suggest that there are challenges for both Asian immigrant parents and New Zealand early childhood teachers in the development of an effective partnership in children’s education. The parents’ answers contained three general messages. They did not: (a) feel confident to work with New Zealand teachers, (b) think it was necessary to work with them and (c) have time to work with them.

The parents’ comments all indicated a lack of confidence and willingness to work with teachers, for various reasons including: distrust of teachers, unfamiliarity with the
different education systems and difficulties with verbal communication. Implicit in their views was also the parents’ cultural preferences and values. In Asia because work usually follows instructions, Asian parents in New Zealand could have trouble finding out how to help their children and assist in the centre programme if they are not given clear instructions by the teachers. Support for this explanation can be found in Hughes and MacNaughton (1999) who state that even when parents hold positive attitudes regarding participation in children’s school activities, some parents can feel useless.

Three parents subscribed to the non-intervention attitudes described in the literature towards children’s out-of-home education as seen in their statements that they did not think it was necessary to work with their child’s early childhood teacher. Reliance on New Zealand teachers for these parents does not seem to be synonymous with trust in the same way that Asian parents in their own countries tend to hold trust in teachers for their child’s education. Reliance on teachers and non-interference/non-involvement in the teachers’ teaching appears to be due more to Asian immigrant parents’ wish to avoid conflict than to trust. Although holding different expectations the parents did not think it was appropriate to discuss these with teachers. Parents quietly went about doing what they considered to be best for their children at home and hoped that this would compensate for what couldn’t be done by teachers in the centres (Lee & Manning, 2001).

Opportunity for parent-teacher partnerships was also impeded by practical issues for Asian immigrant families settling in New Zealand. Andise’s opinion cited above illustrated this. As new settlers, Asian parents need to deal with a variety of individual and family challenges. Many Asian immigrants need to cope with financial pressures by working very hard (Lee, 1995). Asian parents, especially recent Asian immigrants and refugees, simply do not have time to actively participate in their child’s early childhood centre programme.

New Zealand early childhood teachers’ opinions mirrored the issues for parents. The teachers did not feel confident in working with Asian parents, they did not think it was necessary to work with Asian parents, and they also lacked time to interact with and work with Asian parents.

The teachers’ lack of confidence was related to their difficult communication with Asian parents and confusion regarding the parenting practices of Asian parents. As noted from Cindy’s statement, communication with Asian parents seemed to be an intimidating task for the teachers. It calls into question issues associated with their different languages and communication behaviours in line with the previous studies mentioned in this paper. Sam, Petra, Gwynne, Lisa, Mary, Bev and Vivian identified some behaviours of Asian parents that they thought confusing. According to the literature it is possible for teachers working with families from diverse cultures to feel overwhelmed by this, limiting their ability to understand and take differences on board (Strum, 1997).

Teachers’ busy working schedules seemed to be an obstacle for spending time in interaction with Asian parents. Ellen stated that they worked at a busy pace and felt it
was hard to spend too much time with Asian parents. When teachers are too busy, they may not feel like putting in the extra time that may be needed to develop effective partnerships with parents from cultures that are different from their own.

Some teachers, as expressed by Wendy, did not think it was necessary to work with Asian parents. Asian parents’ help, for them, did not matter much as Asian children were easy to work with and the teachers believed they had appropriate strategies for them. This opinion suggests that the teachers viewed themselves as experts, as knowing more than parents and knowing better what is best for children (File, 2001). Teachers who take the stance of ‘experts’ instead of ‘partners’ may see working with parents as a waste of time since it is they and not parents who know about children’s development and learning and are best qualified to teach.

**Recommendations for Practice**

Reflecting on the findings of this small-scale study and the literature on parent-teacher partnerships there are at least four ways that teachers may go about improving how they work with Asian parents.

Firstly, teacher may need to identify and be clear about the values they hold in relation to teaching, learning, and their role as teachers. They might also need to familiarise themselves well with the values and beliefs of the Asian immigrant families.

Secondly, to smooth and enhance their communication with Asian parents, teachers may need to adopt some specific communication strategies, such as using written messages (Lee, 1995), clear speaking techniques and interpreters.

Thirdly, teachers may need to put more time into building relationships with Asian parents through regular and informal interactions with them (Koch & McDonough, 1999). In addition teachers could regularly request parents’ views of their children’s education, and when doing so try to indicate a clear desire to learn from the parents. Lee (1995) suggests that parent involvement in the early childhood programme is helped by teachers’ visits to children’s homes. Asian parents feel honoured when teachers take time to do this due to their respect for teachers. When realising that teachers are sincerely interested in them and their child, parents may be more likely to approach teachers, and to discuss their child’s learning and needs.

Fourthly, teachers may need to act as a resource to Asian parents. Teachers need to be mindful of the range of needs of Asian immigrant families and what support services parents may or may not be able to access. Making time available for parents and for teachers to interact with parents and get to know the family and cultural contexts of children is an important management and programme issue in early childhood services.
Conclusion

The growing number of Asian children entering the New Zealand early childhood education system means that teachers can not ignore the need to develop an understanding of, and practices that support working collaboratively with, Asian families. The present study has highlighted some major problems or barriers to the achievement of effective partnerships between Asian immigrant parents and New Zealand early childhood teachers, namely parental and teacher confidence, time, and willingness or perception of need to develop a partnership.

Further research is needed. The sample size of this study was small and it represents only a first look at the issue. More systematic, well-designed studies with representative sample groups would be useful to explore how persuasive problems of communication and relationship-building are among Asian immigrant parents and teachers in various types of early childhood services in different regions in New Zealand. Further research could explore problems for New Zealand teachers that are particular to working with immigrant Asian parents in difference to parents of other nationalities. There is also a need for research to examine diversity amongst Asian immigrant parents in attitudes toward and relationships with teachers.

References


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Karen Guo is currently employed at Christchurch College of Education. She has two children. Karen become interested in the topic of relationships between Asian parents and teachers in New Zealand early childhood services because of her appreciation of the cultural differences between these two groups of people. Her research interests include young children’s first and second language acquisition, co-constructive teaching and learning, and multiculturalism in early childhood education. Karen is studying toward her PhD.