

Understanding Early Childhood Socialisation in Immigrant Families: Malaysian-Chinese Parents' Perceptions on the Importance of Ethnic Identity and Cultural Maintenance

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Abstract

This pilot study was designed to shed light on Malaysian-Chinese parents' beliefs about ethnic identity and cultural maintenance in children's socialisation following migration. Three Malaysian-Chinese families residing in Sydney, Australia, with at least one child within the early childhood age range of 4 - 8 years, participated in the study. Semi-structured interviews involved parents sharing information about their demographic and cultural backgrounds, expectations and hopes for their children, and the importance they attach to cultural beliefs and practices. The findings of this study indicate that parents' socialisation practices are inherently geared towards maintaining culture. However, whether or not this reflects a conscious emphasis on the importance of ethnic identity among parents is less clear because, as the findings presented here suggest, the concept is complex and often implied rather than overt. The paper concludes with suggestions for future research that seeks to reveal further insight into this important but complex area.

Introduction

Children are shaped by the teachings instilled in them by their parents. Hence, parents play a significant role in fostering behaviours in children that uphold cultural values and expectations (Downie, Chua, Koestner, Barrios, Rip & M'Birkou, 2007). There are many factors that influence parents in making decisions about how to socialise children to function effectively in society (Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan & Buriel, 1990) and the process of deciding on which customs and practices to prioritise in child socialisation into host culture is further complicated for parents who migrate outside of their heritage culture (Phinney, Romero, Nava & Huang, 2001).

Immigrant parents face what is referred to as a binary dilemma due to their situation of having an 'old' culture and living in a 'new' culture. Do they continue their practices from their home culture? Do they maintain their own ethnic identity whilst adapting to the practices of the new country? How do the complexities of juggling two (or possibly more) identities affect the way they bring up their children? These issues are raised in the extant literature and are important in terms of heightened understanding for early childhood practitioners working in increasingly culturally diverse settings (Mac Naughton & Williams, 2004; Rhedding-Jones, 2001). It is on the basis of these questions that the current study sought to explore the nature of a small group of immigrant parents' beliefs about maintenance of cultural heritage and children's socialisation.

The paper begins by briefly acknowledging complexities in defining 'culture' and 'ethnicity'. An overview of ethnic identity development in different contexts is then discussed, highlighting the focus of the research. Following description of the study and findings, the paper concludes with a

discussion about how the results shed further light on parents' beliefs about ethnic identity and the maintenance of culture in children's socialisation.

'Culture' and 'Ethnicity'

Concepts related to 'culture' and 'ethnicity' have both been found to impact significantly on the process of identity change among groups of people who have migrated away from their country of origin, but in differential ways (Anderson, 2001). Both concepts are highly complex and often contested. It is therefore important, in linking 'culture', 'ethnicity' and 'identity', to briefly explain the interpretations adopted for the purposes of this study.

Culture and ethnicity have both been used to describe social groups that are distinguishable by their attachment to a particular set of values, goals and practices. Whereas culture may be seen to intimately shape attitudes and practices from within a social group, ethnicity provides a more overt source of identification that is sometimes imposed by external forces. The concept of ethnicity is defined in many different ways across disciplines but in Australia (where the study was conducted), for example, 'ethnicity' is often used in reference to non-English speaking background immigrants and associated with membership of a 'minority' or non-mainstream cultural group (Vasta, 1994). People of the same ethnicity, or shared heritage, tend to identify with one another or are identified by others on the basis of a boundary that distinguishes them from other groups (Phinney & Ong, 2007). This boundary may take any of a number of forms - cultural, linguistic, religious - and is often flexible rather than fixed.

This study adopted the view of ethnicity as representing shared heritage of a particular cultural group by targeting Malaysian-Chinese families. As Berry (2001) points out, the value attached by any particular ethnic group to maintenance of cultural values and customs is likely to impact on the degree of identification felt by individuals within the group. Hence, a primary goal of the study was to conduct preliminary explorations into links between parent perceptions regarding the importance of ethnic identity and value attached to maintenance of cultural heritage.

Geertz (1973) refers to culture as representing 'webs of significance' in daily lives, highlighting that the process of studying culture involves a process of navigation and interpretation. Indeed, the view that culture cannot be viewed in terms of a series of 'residual' factors in people's lives is now well established (Lachman, 1997). This study therefore took as a critical point of reference in considering the impact of culture on early childhood socialisation, Shweder, Goodnow, Hatano, LeVine, Markus, and Miller's (1998) conceptualisation of culture as representing an "intimate association between... mentality and... practice" (p. 872). Our interest was in exploring what parents from a specific ethnic group living in Australia might see as important cultural values and customs and linking these with views on the importance of incorporating those values into daily socialisation for the purpose of promoting a sense of ethnic identity in their children.

Cultural maintenance and ethnic affiliation are widely accepted as fundamental aspects in identity formation, particularly in research involving members of 'minority' ethnic groups (Anderson, 2001). There is less consensus, however, about the nature of their impact, perhaps due to the range of interpretations attached to the concept of identity. Some perceive identity to be a construct (Giese, 1995), something that is fixed and constant throughout time, or primordial (Anderson, 2001). Identity has also been described as something that is flexible and responsive to context (Anderson 2001; Bhabha, 2004), but contains both fixed and malleable constructs, that promote constant negotiation of boundaries and meanings (Luke & Luke, 1999). While there is a degree of debate about how ethnic identity develops, there is wide consensus, within the literature and across disciplines, that attaining a positive sense of identity is important for healthy all-round

development. For children of migrant parents, ethnic group membership accords the individual an ethnic identity, a sense of belonging and group pride, a set of prescribed norms, values and social behaviours. Ethnic affirmation also, therefore, plays a crucial role in building self-concept because if individuals feel affirmed of their ethnicity, s/he is likely to feel a sense of group pride (Phinney, Romero et al., 2001). Group identification and a positive sense of ethnic identity are more achievable with the consistent guidance of important socialising agents (Downie et al., 2007), such as parents, who expose children and group members to specific cultural influences and may even pressure group members to conform so that their culture continues to be personally relevant (Cox, 1987). Understanding the views and approaches of parents towards early ethnic socialisation and cultural maintenance, is therefore likely to facilitate practitioners in supporting this process.

Ethnic Identity in Context

Different perspectives on identity and its formation have been seen to influence attitudes towards ethnic identity and how it is influenced following migration. An assimilationist approach to understanding ethnic identity among minority ethnic groups is likely to adopt the interpretation of identity as fluid and malleable, responsive to context. Those who view identity as less mutable and more a reflection of inherent cultural values, however, are likely to argue that essential aspects of identity do not change following migration (Anderson, 2001).

Few ethnic identity researches take into account the importance of situational contexts in shaping the process of developing ethnic identities, specifically following migration. To overcome this limitation, some authors have put forward the argument that ethnic identity is responsive to situational influences and provides different meanings in different social settings for different individuals (Yip & Fuligni, 2002). For example, Campbell (2000) suggests the possibility that individuals may identify with more than one ethnic group, change their identity in a new cultural context or develop the ability to move between different cultural contexts without losing their sense of individual identity.

Notwithstanding the variety of models for understanding ethnic identity development, recent literature indicates that the best outcomes for balancing multiple identities result from providing immigrants the opportunity to decide the way and extent to which they maintain their ethnic or cultural identity and develop a new identity as part of the country of settlement (Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind & Vedders, 2001). Supporting this process requires some understanding of the actual process by which ethnic identities are constructed. This study therefore sought to provide a starting point from which to build understandings by exploring the extent to which cultural beliefs and customs are valued and applied by parents of young children as tools for development and maintenance of ethnic identities.

Method

As Chao (2001) indicates, it is important to distinguish between groups that might ostensibly share an ethnic identity. For example, Vietnamese-, Taiwanese- and Malaysian-Chinese may not share the same practices, which is why it is important to not consolidate all ethnic groups such as “Asians” into one category. Further, it cannot be assumed that all ethnic and cultural enclaves will equally benefit from ‘one-size-fits-all’ approaches (Chao, 2001). Therefore, this study specifically targeted Malaysian-Chinese parents. The participants were approached informally through a personal network, as it has been found that people are more likely to respond positively to direct, interpersonal requests and, as a result, the researcher is likely to be trusted more (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993).

They comprised three Malaysian-Chinese families living in the Australian metropolitan city of Sydney with at least one child within the early childhood age range of four to eight years old.

Malaysian-Chinese constitute about 26 per cent of the total Malaysian population in Australia and they have managed to preserve a distinct identity and culture in Malaysia (Freedman, 2001). Their sub-identities are differentiated according to various dialects, for example, Hokkien and Cantonese among others (Tan, 1999, as cited in Lam & Yeoh, 2004). They have distinctive accents, mannerisms and lifestyles and are also multilingual, with the ability to speak Malay, English, Mandarin and their respective dialects. The intention of this research was to contribute to developing understandings of the nature of ethnic identity formation in early childhood by exploring the parents' perceptions of both the importance of cultural maintenance following migration and how best this might (or might not) be carried out.

The families were also approached based on the length of time they have spent in Australia, falling within the ranges of less than five years, between five and ten years, as well as more than ten years. These families will be referred to as Family One, Family Two and Family Three.

Data was collected via six semi-structured interviews comprising a series of questions constructed around four themes: 1) participants' background such as, professional qualifications, length of residence and occupation; 2) expectations and hopes for children; 3) importance attached to cultural beliefs and 4) importance attached to the actual practice of promoting ethnic identity. While there was a structure to these interviews whereby focus topics and issues were outlined beforehand, the intention was to give priority during the interviews to parents' 'stories' of immigration and parenting, in order to capture the value of details that might be included in parents' narratives (Shacklock & Thorp, 2005). With each interview lasting for approximately one hour, fathers and mothers were interviewed separately so that potential gender-related beliefs could be examined. The interviews were conducted in the families' homes to allow participants to feel at ease in a familiar setting where they would feel comfortable.

Results: Participants' Background / Analysis of Interview Data

Participants' Background

At the time of data collection, Family One had just arrived in Australia as Permanent Residents (PR) and it was their second week in their new country. Both parents had professional qualifications but the father is the sole breadwinner of the family. They had four children; three boys and a girl aged between seven and sixteen at the time of data collection, three of whom attended a private school in Malaysia. For them, the main reasons for immigration to Australia were related to their children's education, (as schools in Australia were perceived to be better than in Malaysia) and the need for more family time.

Family Two had lived in Australia for a number of years. Mother Two had been in Australia since her days as an undergraduate student and had travelled regularly between Australia and Malaysia. Both parents had professional qualifications. Father Two resigned from his post as an investment analyst in Singapore and so both parents were unemployed during the period of data collection. Their daughter was five-years-old at the time of the study and was attending a local public school. Returning to Australia to maintain her Permanent Residency (PR) status and to apply for a PR visa for her daughter were the reasons Mother Two cited for choosing to live in Australia. She, and her husband, also referred to quality of life as an important factor in their decision to immigrate, describing Australia as a 'better environment' to raise their daughter.

Family Three had resided in Australia as PRs for 18 years. They had three children, including their seven-year-old son. Father Three had a qualification from a Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institute and had been a process worker in a factory since his arrival in the country. Mother Three had a post-secondary secretarial diploma and managed her own real estate firm. Both parents cited their children's future as their primary reason for immigration.

All interviews were conducted and transcribed by the first author. The transcriptions were examined by both authors separately and then together, for emerging areas of particular focus or importance. Each author identified apparent areas of shared focus across all interviews, through repeated mention of particular matters. The first author also made note of emphasised intonation during the process of transcription (Braun & Clarke, 2006). As a result of this process, three main themes emerged as important to parents in relation to socialisation and maintenance of ethnic identity in their children: Parenting Style; Language; and Education. These three themes are presented below, with extracts from the transcripts for further illustration.

Analysis of Interview Data

Cultural maintenance through Parenting Style: Respect and filial piety.

Respect was a prevalent theme for the participants, as they either embedded this notion within other values or explicitly acknowledged it as an important value:

The most important thing... respect for parents... (Mother One)

Actually, there are some major differences among the Asian cultures. We are of course, used to the Asian cultures like respect for elders. Others also have respect but they view it, they define it differently. Like the elders have the freedom, for example. Like in Malaysia, elders are viewed as superior. The younger generation is more inferior to their elders... the elders would still view there's something due from the younger generation. So, if she's (daughter) here, if she can understand her obligations, it would be good. Of course, yeah. (Father Two)

... we do tell her (her daughter) a lot about that (respect for elders)... We do tell her. Obey, not only just to the parents but also listen to the adults. They know better than you... (Mother Two) [her emphasis]

They (the children) have to behave in the school, that's one thing. They have to respect and listen to the teacher and second thing is, they don't have to 100% obey to the parents if the parent is not right. They have the right to tell but not arguing. Not like shouting back, that's what I don't like... There is not respect. (Father Three) [his emphasis]

We tell them (the children) have to respect the father. Listen to the father... But... we just say that we have to respect the senior. This is my culture... not saying that the kids must listen to whatever their parents are saying. Some of the cultural aims, some of the cultural difference, it depends on what sort of country you're talking about. For me, it's a bit freedom. But of course, my mind here, is definitely have to respect the senior. (Mother Three)

These excerpts reflect the importance attached by all three families to respect and filial piety, which are widely acknowledged as constituting essential aspects of Chinese culture and socialisation (Pearson & Rao, 2003; Chao 2001; Yip & Fuligni, 2002). In the Chinese family, children are socialised to accept what their parents say. The cultural belief is that a good child is one who shows "listening-centredness" (Gao, Ting-Toomey & Gudykunst, 1996, p. 282). Children are socialised to respect but not challenge their elders. The importance of listening supports the non-confrontational

way of life in Chinese culture, inspired to live in harmony with family members, be on good terms with neighbours, achieve unity with the surrounding environment and make peace with other nations (Gao et al., 1996). This is reflected in childhood socialisation; parents' role in bringing up their children and teaching them to become acceptable members of society is perhaps the most persistent aspect of Chinese culture (Chao, 2001; Phinney, Ong & Madden, 2000). Respect was also reflected in the language used, as described earlier. However, there is room for negotiation for some parents. Father Three, and Mother Three, felt that their children have the right to voice their opinions should the thoughts of the children differ to those of the parents:

... Ah, as myself, I've got some experience with my parents. I'm not happy with their decision, too, but in our generation, you're not allowed to tell but since we're in a different country now, in a Western country, I'd like to change a bit of this attitude. So we can listen, sitting down and talk about it... yes, yes, more discussion. We've got more democracy. (Father Three)

... If they are right, we don't mind. This is called discussion. It's not saying that the father is always number one, always right. No one is perfect. So, if they're saying they are right, of course they can talk back but if we felt that they are wrong, then we can fight back (laughs). (Mother Three)

This family's view of children having the rights to voice their opinion is unique and may be the result of their relatively longer period of residence in Australia (Phinney et al., 2000). The association of open discussion with a 'Western country' indicates that the parents have redefined the traditional meanings attached to the notion of respect. They have adapted meanings to incorporate aspects of the host society, reflecting Anderson's (2001) arguments regarding the fluidity and responsiveness of identity development. It is important to note, however, the continued value attached to respect. Consideration of the extent to which parents are aware of adjustments in their own ethnic identity and whether this influences the way in which they socialise their children permeates the following sections on Language and Education as socialisation and cultural maintenance tools.

Cultural maintenance through Language.

The importance of mother tongue language emerged strongly across all interviews. All parents expressed a wish to maintain mother tongue language skills in their children, both for pragmatic reasons and in relation to ethnic identity. Language is perhaps the most frequently cited contributor to ethnic and cultural identity in relevant literatures. It reminds speakers of their cultural heritage, transmits group feelings, is capable of excluding 'outsiders' (Phinney, Romero et al., 2001) and is central to cultural transmission, as it is the primary vehicle used to convey culture from one generation to the next.

Due to Malaysia's background as a Commonwealth country, English is taught in school and is widely spoken in the country (Smolicz, Secombe & Hudson, 2001). Thus, it was not surprising that Families One and Two felt more comfortable interacting in English. It was also felt that a strong command of English is imperative for children to succeed in life, especially in Australia:

... if... you don't have better English background or better education, you can't compete with other nations or other people... (English knowledge is) very, very important. (Father Three)

This is echoed in the finding that English language proficiency is in the interest of some immigrants and their children as it is important for their successful integration into the labour markets of English-speaking countries (Khoo, McDonald, Giorgas & Birrell, 2002). However, all families also indicated their preference for their children to have the ability to converse in Chinese, especially the main dialect of Mandarin, as illustrated in the next section, which presents the participants' views on their native language. This supports the notion that the new generation of immigrants to Australia regard loss of language as loss of culture (Giese, 1995; Pattnaik, 2005).

Despite their fluency in English, all three families wanted their children to be able to speak Chinese. The children from all families are either learning or have been enrolled in Mandarin classes. Mothers One and Two are learning the language now to assist in their children's acquisition of the language. Fathers Two and Three, as well as Mother Two, felt that the Chinese language signifies them as Chinese:

Chinese (identity is) not (talked about) so much but she knows that now. That's why she speaks Mandarin, that's why she has Chinese name. (Father Two)

...I want them to remain like, their second language at home... At least, they should know they are still Chinese. Australian-Chinese. (Father Three) [his emphasis]

...she must know that she is still a Chinese even though, she may think that, she speaks English, doesn't mean that she's English! They do think like that. I mean, I do come across many Chinese children, "Oh, I'm English 'cause I speak English. At home I don't speak Chinese". But, as a race, she must know that she has a Chinese background living in Australia... (Mother Two)

Retaining a Chinese dialect, especially Mandarin, was also perceived as beneficial in providing wider employment opportunities and more sophisticated cognitive abilities (Campbell, 2000). This was reflected in feedback from Families One and Three, who cited economic gains such as job opportunities as their reason for wanting their children to learn the language:

I would send them for extra classes, yes, yes... China is opening up... there's a lot of potential for them to go and work overseas. (Mother One)

I do encourage them (to speak), not only Cantonese. Even like French, German, Japanese or Mandarin especially nowadays China is getting stronger and stronger. Just because I think... you got more advantage when you're looking for a job. (Father Three)

Multi-language... When you go to... find work, you get the benefits and advantage with that... The same thing as multi-skill, more people want to employ you... (Mother Three)

Father Two also expressed highlighted the cognitive benefits associated with knowledge of the Chinese language:

But there is so much richness in the Chinese language – the history, if you read more of the Chinese literature or The Romance of the Three Kingdoms, stuff like that, China history, then it can affect the way you think your things... So, the language skills, besides the linguistic capability, is the thinking capability. (Father Two)

He went on to elaborate how it is more convenient to use Chinese to differentiate between the generations and families:

I... prefer to speak English but for her sake... we have Chinese VCDs, things like that... (Mandarin is important) for the practical use of it in society, not just because of her future potential career options or things like that... And it helps broaden one's... options in life... English however robust the language is, you still have some limitations... grandfather, grandmother in Chinese we can easily say it to whether it's a maternal grandfather or paternal grandfather... (Father Two)

This Father's perspective, which explains inherent links between cultural values, identity and language specifically in terms of Chinese communication behaviours, highlights both theoretical and practical justifications for retaining the Chinese language. It is interesting to note in these conversations a combination of both parental concern about retaining ethnic identity through maintenance of mother tongue and eagerness for children to become fluent in 'other' languages. This pattern reflects, once again, the process of identity 'responsiveness' referred to in literature outlined in the introduction section of this paper.

In terms of providing insights for practitioners, this pattern is significant and warrants further attention. There is substantial evidence that knowledge and usage of ethnic language has positive effects on developmental outcomes for children and adolescents in immigrant families (Phinney, Romero et al., 2001). Those who maintain their mother tongue perform better academically than monolingual migrant children (Pattnaik, 2005). These benefits are now widely recognised through early childhood education policies that promote the use of mother-tongue languages in early childhood settings. However, recent evidence suggests that early childhood practitioners may misinterpret parent expectations for their children, if communication between practitioners and parents is not open and detailed (De Gioia, 2009). In the case of language development, for example, it is important for practitioners to understand that parents who expect their children to use English in early childhood settings do so because they see the role of formal settings as supporting assimilation to host culture customs. However, they may at the same time attach significant importance to their own mother tongue and cultural heritage, which are supported at home.

Other parents in this study highlighted the importance of maintaining Chinese language for the purposes of socialising children towards cultural values and customs. There is a strong emphasis on the use of prescribed terms for people on the basis of their relationship. These terms signify and show the hierarchy of the relationship, especially marking a person's position in a family. Instead of referring to a member of the family by name like in most English-speaking families, children refer to other members of the family 'somebody' using the Chinese language, for example, 妹妹 (mèimèi) for younger sister and 哥哥 (gēge) for older brother. These 'titles' show the generation and the position in the family a particular member of the family belongs to, commanding respect and filial piety and are further highlighted by Mother Two:

Our culture is we call people 'aunty' or 'uncle' even though they are not blood-related. But we still call 'aunty' or 'uncle' as a form of respect.

As this excerpt indicates, using 'titles' bestows a certain status to a member of the family or society and this status commands a level of respect that is related to how much older (which generation) you are and who you are (position in family, i.e. father or youngest son; or position in

society, i.e. teacher or master). Unique to Chinese culture are five major characteristics of the communication process: implicit communication; listening-centredness; politeness; a focus on insiders; and face-directed communication strategies (Gao et al., 1996). Implicit communication helps maintain existing relationships among individuals without destroying group harmony. Children learn the distinction between 'insider' and 'outsider', helping to position themselves in established hierarchical role relationships and subsequently determine what is communicated and how information should be transmitted (Chao, 1994; Gao et al., 1996). The suggestion by Harrison et al. (1990) that children of ethnic minority families are socialised according to their role in the family and society in terms of relationships and the ancestral worldview of collectivism supports this. As Father Three explains:

...I'm always thinking like, without the grandparents, without my parents. Without my parents, without me. Without me, without them (the children). So, they have to respect the elders more than the others. If you like, without respect, there is no difference in between...

As explained earlier, early socialisation involves parents in teaching their children about customs and values that are inherent to their cultural backgrounds. These excerpts highlight the role of mother tongue in supporting critical aspects of socialisation that also promote understanding of and identification with cultural practices.

Notably, the families seemed to be unconscious of their use of language specifically as a tool for cultural maintenance until asked. Father One even went as far as to make the following point:

They will learn Chinese in Australia, yes... but that said, I want them to learn Chinese not because of any cultural identity or anything like that...

It is interesting to find that Family Three, being the family that has spent the longest time in Australia, appeared least concerned about their children learning Mandarin formally. They were also the only family that converses in their mother tongue (Cantonese) and appeared to emphasise the significance of customs.

Cultural maintenance through Education.

The emphasis on education that has been found to symbolise early childhood socialisation in Chinese families, regardless of social status, reflects the Confucian belief that all individuals have the potential to succeed academically. Based on the Chinese belief of human improvability advocated by Chinese philosophies, Chinese parents put more emphasis on hard work (Chao, 2001) and less on innate ability, unlike their Western counterparts (Leung, 1996).

In line with the Confucian emphasis on education mentioned above, Chinese participants from previous research (Pearson & Rao, 2003; Ying, Lee & Tsai, 2004) considered acquiring good education for their children of fundamental importance, as in their opinion, the higher the level of education, the more the potential for success and satisfaction. Moreover, success in school reflected well on them as parents and on the family, bringing honour to the family name (Chao, 2001), thus explaining the higher school retention rate of immigrant children from Asian backgrounds (Khoo et al., 2002). Academic achievement also signifies efficient parenting (Chao, 2001).

The views of our participants, in regard to the importance of education in relation to ethnic identity and cultural maintenance, raise some interesting and noteworthy points that we would argue deserve further study. These findings, presented below, provide support for previous arguments regarding the flexibility and complexity of identity formation (Anderson 2001; Bhabha, 2004). The findings also point to the possibility that immigrant parents are often not explicit or consciously aware of the extent to which importance attached to cultural values and beliefs influences their decisions and approaches in raising children.

Comparing the Malaysian and Australian education systems.

Across all interviews, there were expressions of dissatisfaction with the Malaysian education system, which emphasises rote learning instead of understanding (Joseph, 2005):

... I compare with Malaysia, Malaysia is too much. It's making the kids crazy... here, not enough homework. They have too much time to play... But I mean Australia education is good, you know. Kids should have a childhood instead of sticking with all this writing. (Father Three)

The emphasis on education was also reflected in shared stories of personal experiences in Malaysia during informal conversations, when describing 'pitiful' nephews or nieces, whose parents enrol them in various extra-curricular activities (e.g., mental arithmetic, art). One mother disliked the 'peer pressure' she feels:

Even in my family there is peer pressure system. "Ooh, this one is doing better than your child. Can talk, can walk and all that". I feel that children have to develop naturally... (Mother Two)

Parents' decision to relocate seems to have been driven by their perception of Australia's capacity to offer better education opportunities and quality of life. Children are allowed to develop naturally because they are not 'pushed' into learning things when they are not 'ready'. It is therefore less stressful for both the children and parents. Mother Two and Mother Three particularly enjoyed the personal attention they received from teachers and that their children came home every day from school happy without a large amount of homework.

While the participants underscored their preference for the 'less stressful and less academic' pedagogy of learning that is practiced in Australia, a number of comments made appear to reflect underlying and somewhat strong beliefs regarding maintenance of academic excellence. These comments, which apparently contradict views expressed above, provide support for Anderson's (2001) description of the primordial transmission of culture. These comments are discussed in detail through the next section, with reference to the use of education as a cultural maintenance tool in Chinese families.

Cultural beliefs about Education.

Despite having delineated their reasons for favouring the Australian education system, the participants were found to retain some of the Confucian teachings on education mentioned above, explaining that they still wanted their children to excel academically. They reported enrolling their children for extra tuition, as well as other classes such as music and dance. When taking his children

to tuition, one father disclosed how most of the children observed are Asian, generalising that Asians are 'too academic'. These reactions are reflective of Anderson's (2001) notion of identity as primordial – these parents were not aware of how intrinsic the significant value of education was embedded in their belief systems.

The children of Family One were enrolled in a school with a majority of Asians because it is felt that this would raise academic standards within the school. As the mother explained:

...rather than strictly angmob (Caucasian in Hokkien)... I think basically, that would bring up, prop up the... standard of education there... a lot of Asian kids there, they tend to be more competitive...

Father Two, however much he pitied his nieces and nephews, lamented about the lack of work his children brought back from school. During the interview, both his sons were playing games on the PlayStation 2 (PS2) and he pointed at them saying:

Here, too relaxed. Look at them. This is Australian kid lifestyle – game whole day.

Despite wanting his daughter to have more freedom in her learning, Father Two stated his preference for international and religious schools for his child:

If there was an international school set up by the Singapore government here, I think it will be very popular with the Singaporean and Malaysian people here, don't you think? Because we feel that at least, the teachers will be dedicated, the system is a good one. Even though it can be pressuring, immigrants are generally not too shy of a certain kind of academic standard for their children.

It seemed that the parents had contradicting views on educating their children. However, the themes presented above does support the notion that academic success is fundamental to Chinese socialisation. Chinese around the world are concerned to retain some basic elements of Chinese culture and believe that socialisation in this direction during early childhood is the key to maintaining Chinese identity (Wu, 1996).

Conclusion

The findings from this study should be viewed as exploratory. The small sample size and limited time span of the study restrict generalisability. However, some implications from the findings may be taken to inform future, more substantial research. Yet, through its 'snapshot' format of enquiry, it elicited provocations for further research. Perhaps the most noteworthy finding that has emerged from these interviews is the apparent ambiguity that exists among parents, in relation to ethnic identity and maintenance, providing some support for conceptualisations of ethnic identity that emphasise both its primordial nature and its responsiveness to context (Anderson, 2001). Across each of the three themes outlined above, parents at times expressed a strong wish to facilitate their children's assimilation into Australian mainstream culture, but at others indicated concerns about the negative impact of this same culture. This ambiguity is reflected most clearly in parents' motivations for moving to Australia (often attributed to the relatively relaxed approach to schooling here) contrasted with their parallel concerns about a lack of homework and children having 'too much

time to play'. These findings fit closely with recent discussions that point to the complex, malleable nature of identity formation, particularly among immigrant families (Anderson 2001; Bhabha, 2004). They also indicate that 'acceptance' and 'rejection' of host and home identities, respectively, are not straightforward or simple concepts.

Language conveys culture from one generation to the next and reminds speakers of their cultural heritage and transmits group feelings (Phinney, Romero et al., 2001). The participants in this study possessed specific ideas about the importance and usage of Chinese and English language. English efficiency was viewed as crucial in Australia and with English being a commonly used language in Malaysia, English was also used as the main language of interaction within the families. Referring to the Chinese dialects of Cantonese and Mandarin, some participants posited that language is a necessary socialisation tool as it helps to position people in established hierarchical role relationships and subsequently helps determine what is communicated and how information should be transmitted (Chao, 2001; Gao et al., 1996). Yet to some, being able to speak the language also helps to support ethnic identity because it signifies them as Chinese, maintaining their cultural heritage (Pattnaik, 2005; Phinney, Romero et al., 2001). Despite language being used by some parents as a cultural maintenance tool, others associated the ability to speak both English and Cantonese / Mandarin with job-related prospects. This was reflected in the words of one participant, who explained that he did not consider maintenance of mother tongue to be important for Chinese identity.

Some argue that when parents begin to adopt acculturated notions, their practices may reflect values generally associated with the host culture. However, this does not necessarily result in less value being attached to the fundamental principals in their 'home' culture. The reconstruction of the notions of parenting seen here reflects a constructionist (Anderson, 2001) approach to identity where meanings are reconstructed according to the cultural context. The participants described a level of compromise in decisions they make regarding their parenting styles. One family still thought that children should listen to the adults, as 'they know better' but also strive to explain and model reinforce behaviours through negotiation, indicating a more authoritative style of parenting; one most would not affiliate with Chinese parenting (Ying et al., 2004). Another family also reflected a 'loosening of cultural boundaries'.

In terms of links between value attached by parents to the themes of Education, Language and Parenting Style and their concepts of ethnic identity, education emerged as the most persistent theme across the participants and its significance is reflected consistently throughout the data. Parents' beliefs about the importance of attaining good education are clearly reflected in their parenting and in children's socialisation. As highlighted earlier, the six parents provided seemingly ambiguous explanations regarding the educational reasons for their move to Australia. While wanting their children to learn in a more natural, less stressful environment, they still enrolled them in schools practicing competitive pedagogy and socialised their children to excel academically. In terms of development and awareness of identity, these views reflect the theory of primordialism (Anderson, 2001), as these parents appeared to retain the focus on academic success, which is inherent in Chinese culture (Chao, 2001; Pearson & Rao, 2003), despite efforts to 'ease' the pressure put on their children as a result of this focus. Once again, this finding indicates that, in order to support the development of positive cultural identities in young children from immigrant families, practitioners need to acknowledge the complexities that underlie parents' decision making.

Also in need of further study is the possibility that parents may not themselves be clear about the degree to which they wish their children to 'assimilate' or 'resist' mainstream cultural practices. Evident across all interviews was (i) a strong desire among parents to support their children in adapting to and being successful in their host culture, and (ii) an interest in supporting children to

maintain aspects of their ethnic identity, based on innate preferences related to cultural value systems. Less clear was an understanding of the extent to which each of these might hinder and / or support the other.

Presented above are some of the varying beliefs about the use of education, language and parenting that were expressed by the participants in this study, which imply different understandings of ethnic identity and the importance of maintaining cultural values or customs. Among the parents involved in this study, there were mixed responses regarding notions of ethnic identity. The concept does not seem to be one that parents think or talk about in an explicit way, indicating that parental support for development of a positive ethnic identity may be largely unintentional. The implication of this, once again, is that if early childhood practitioners are to effectively support a positive sense of ethnic identity among young children from 'minority' backgrounds, some understanding of the complex processes involved is required. Future research that sheds light on this process would be timely and valuable.

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