Does Parental Involvement Contribute to Students’ Development? The Parent-Child Homework Experiment at a Shanghai Migrant School

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Migrant students’ education and well-being are the hot-button issues in Chinese education. Collaboration between parents and teachers to support migrant students is greatly needed. The purpose of this research is to better understand the influence of parental involvement on the development of the students through findings from the Parent-Child Homework Project at a migrant school in Shanghai, China from December 2013 to June 2015. This paper explores the following research questions: What are migrant students’ perceptions and experiences in the Parent-Child Homework Project (PCHP), what have the migrant children gained from the PCHP by working with the parents directly, and how do teachers evaluate the PCHP? The authors distributed 362 student questionnaires, interviewed 8 teachers and 28 parents, and visited the parent-child homework show. The authors find that the migrant students highly valued the parent-children homework, and demonstrated improvement in aspects of academic, emotional and social development. Parent and teachers value the project too. The paper discusses the collaboration between teachers and migrant parents, and puts forward some suggestions to make additional positive differences in migrant students’ education.

Keywords: student development, migrant children, parental involvement, homework, school-family collaboration

Introduction

Rapid economic and social development has spurred the phenomenon of rural-to-city migrant students, both in China and worldwide (UNICEF, 2012). According to the All-China Women’s Federation, 28 percent of children between six- and 11-years-old and 13 percent of children between 12- and 14-years-old in the city schools are migrants (2013). Another report said that 34 percent of elementary school students and 24 percent of junior high school students in cities are migrant students (United Nations Children’s Fund, National Working Committee on Children and Women & National Bureau of Statistics, 2014).

By the end of 2014, in the city of Shanghai there were totally 9,964,200 migrant people (Shanghai Municipal Statistics Bureau & NBS Survey Office in Shanghai, 2015). Shanghai public schools have enrolled most of the migrant students, while the rest are included by private schools. If we take the private elementary schools as an example, in 2014 there were totally 174 schools with 156,000 students, and most of them are migrant students (Shanghai Municipal Statistics Bureau & NBS Survey Office in Shanghai, 2015). Many of these students are of compulsory education age.

Executive Director of UNICEF, Anthony Lake, said: “We must do more to reach all children in need, wherever they live, wherever they are excluded and left behind” (2012, pp.v). Migrant students’ education and well-being are becoming primary foci among Chinese policy makers,
scholars, educators, and parents. Of serious debate is the extent to which migrant students’ educational experiences are equitable and of high quality. Migrant students have the right to education from grades one through nine, and public financial support is meant to be channeled toward migrant students’ education (The State Council, 2001; CPC Central Committee and the State Council, 2010).

In the area of school-family collaboration, migrant parents are especially regarded as exhibiting low involvement in children’s schooling and home education. One survey showed that both teachers and parents regard limited time as the most important factor in home-school partnerships, and 40 percent of the teachers regarded the parents’ uncooperative attitude and spite as the second important factor (Yang, 2013-07-08). Research by Li and Li (2015) found that educators often criticized parents of migrant students and regarded them as “non-professional.”

Based on educational experiments in Shanghai, the authors are trying to develop a deeper understanding of Chinese parental involvement in schooling (Li, Wang, & Chen, 2013). The authors conducted the Parent-Child Homework Project (PCHP) from December 2013 to June 2015, at a Shanghai private school that serves migrant students. In this experiment, migrant parents and students completed homework that was mainly designed, distributed, and evaluated by the teachers (Yumiao Elementary School, 2014). The main goals of the PCHP were to use homework as a tool to strengthen home-school partnerships and the involvement of migrant parents in schooling. The researchers and teachers put forward the idea of the PCHP in December 2013, and designed the program alongside parents in the beginning of 2014. From March to June 2014, all classrooms participated in the PCHP (see Table 1).

Table 1.
The content of parent-child homework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Grade 1</th>
<th>Grade 2</th>
<th>Grade 3</th>
<th>Grade 4</th>
<th>Grade 5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>P.E.</td>
<td>parent-child playing</td>
<td>parent-child dancing</td>
<td>parent-child chess</td>
<td>parent-child Kung Fu</td>
<td>parent-child badminton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art</td>
<td>parent-child drawing</td>
<td>parent-child singing</td>
<td>parent-child leaf-picture making</td>
<td>parent-child handwriting</td>
<td>parent-child music appreciation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>parent-child English rhyme</td>
<td>parent-child reading aloud</td>
<td>parent-child English learning</td>
<td>parent-child reading</td>
<td>parent-child writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure</td>
<td>parent-child tour</td>
<td>parent-child tour</td>
<td>parent-child tour</td>
<td>parent-child photographing</td>
<td>parent-child video-making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society</td>
<td>parent-child shopping</td>
<td>parent-child buying food</td>
<td>parent-child vocational experience</td>
<td>parent-child volunteer</td>
<td>parent-child survey</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This article explores findings from PCHP through the exploration of three key questions: What are migrant students’ perceptions and experiences in PCHP, what have the migrant children gained from the PCHP, and how do teachers assess the PCHP? The article focuses on the achievement of migrant students with very low SES, discusses the practice of migrant parents’ involvement, and puts forward some suggestions to make more differences on migrant students’ development.

Background

The research is related to inclusive education, social equity, student development, and school-family collaboration.

Social Equity and Inclusive Education

With the process of modernization, educational equity, as a critical part of social equity, is receiving increasing attention from scholars (Zhang, 2002; Huang, 2010). Since the end of the 20th century, building an educational framework without exclusion or segregation is given increasing priority (Parrilla, 2002). Many education
researchers are giving inclusive education greater emphasis (Mitchell, 2005). Inclusive education advocates that education should be for all children, regardless of race, ethnicity, socio-economic status, gender or ability (Peters & Oliver, 2009). Fulfilling students’ special needs in inclusive settings is a top priority for Western governments as they try to create more inclusive societies (Tkachyk, 2013).

But challenges remain. Until the early 21st century, 72 million school-age children worldwide dropped out of school, and there were 770 million illiterate adults, 64 percent of whom were women (Acedo, Amadio, & Opertti, 2009). In China, the migrant students or disadvantaged groups are often excluded from high quality education resources (Zhang, 2002; Huang, 2010). Thus, quality education and research are urgently needed to contribute to children’s development, especially those who are in disadvantaged situations.

**Student Development**

Student development is a core issue of education (Liu, 2008; Li, 2015). Recently, growing emphasis has been given to students’ personal and social development (Schmidt, 1999; Shu, 2014). Some research highlights that the teacher’s guidance has to meet the responsive needs of students (Gysbers & Henderson, 2000), based on these students’ perceptions (Goh, Chai, & Tsai, 2013), and strengthen links with the living world (Liu, 2007). What is more, student development is influenced by many external and internal factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1993), so it is necessary to explore the values of student-student and teacher-student interaction, problem-based learning, parental involvement, and so on with the complexity mindset.

Chinese basic education reform that aimed to transform education from being examination-oriented to quality-oriented has changed the roles of school teachers (Rao, 2013). The student-centered conception is deeply rooted in the hearts of the people (Liu, 2012). For example, the New Basic Education (NBE), which has been conducted by professors, principals and teachers since 1994, advocates that human development takes place in an ecological system and through practice (Wang & Ye, 2003).

In today’s China, the quality of student development is highlighted by government and schools. In the social background of focusing on equity, every child is unique, which requires education which respects the diversity of students and provide equal access for every student to achieve personal values (Shao & Liao, 2006). The amount of research on student development is increasing year by year, with more and more focus on issues such as leadership, teaching, textbooks, curriculum, evaluation, and class size.

**School-Family Collaboration**

At the beginning of the 20th century, with the introduction and development of modern school education, the educational function of formal school was expanded gradually. Unfortunately, family has been long neglected in Chinese education system. Together with teachers, parents are very important for students’ growth, and can make key contributions to children’s achievement (Epstein, 2009). Researchers have concluded that parent involvement can influence children’s and adolescents’ learning and academic performance (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Some researchers found that when the family is actively involved, students’ outcomes are more positive (Gonzalez-DeHass, Willems & Holbein, 2005). The collaboration between school and family can create harmonious environments to contribute to children’s development.

But in China, research on school-family collaboration is limited to situational analyses and conceptual literature, with little empirical research concerning relationship on student development. Parent-child activity is one part of school-family collaboration. Parent-child activity emphasizes interactions and communication among parents and children, until completing the task without directly focusing on the parental role (Simon, 1982). Oftentimes parents lack guidance from experts on such activities. In China, parent-child activities are limited to the kindergarten level, albeit in a limited fashion. Focusing on parents’ participation and interaction for children’s development is therefore urgent.

**Methodology**

To answer the abovementioned questions, the authors adopted quantitative and qualitative methods. The first author and the principal of Y Elementary School, which was founded just for migrant children in Shanghai, had worked together in previous partnerships, which led them to embark on this research. The researchers worked with Y Elementary School on designing student questionnaires in order to better
understand migrant students’ perceptions and evaluation of parent-child homework. The questionnaire consists of four parts: children’s understanding and attitude to parent-child homework, performance in practice, the state of relationship between parents and children, and children’s development. The questionnaire’s objective items were analyzed by use of SPSS by the second author.

Y Elementary School held a parent-child homework show on June 12th, 2014. During the show, the authors conducted on-site observation from the beginning to the end for over 3 hours, and recorded the whole process by video recorder. The purpose of the on-site observation was to watch the performance of children and parents and experience the environment. The authors randomly selected two classes from each grade, altogether eight classes from first- through fourth-grades, and then distributed 362 student questionnaires to these eight classes at the end of parent-child homework show. The authors obtained 340 valid questionnaires.

The authors designed the parent questionnaire, which contains issues related to children’s practices, development, and the relationship between parents and children, in order to be able to compare with children’s own perception. The parent questionnaires and child questionnaires were distributed at the same time. The researchers distributed 254 parent questionnaires, and collected 152 valid parent questionnaires by selection from two groups. The survey shows that the majority of the parents have limited education background (see Figure 1).

Findings

Student Understanding and Attitude

Students’ understanding and attitude to parent-child homework can affect the quality of homework. Though some students found the homework challenging, most regarded parent-child homework as very interesting work, and were willing to participate in it.

Firstly, about 45 percent of the students agree that doing parent-child homework is to complete the task assigned by the teacher and are involved in doing the homework for more than 1 hour during one session of PCHP. 94 percent of the children find doing parent-child homework very interesting, feel that it can contribute to their development, and are willing to spend time on doing parent-child homework. Also, 94 percent of
the children enjoy finishing parent-child homework with their parents. Thus, it appears that migrant students have a positive attitude to parent-child homework.

The authors also find that nearly 92 percent of the migrant students are satisfied with their own and their parents’ performance in parent-child homework, which demonstrates that the parent-child homework has helped these students gain a sense of accomplishment and enhanced self-efficacy. About 75 percent of the children are opposite of the opinion that “I don’t prefer school to assign parent-child homework again”. 92 percent of the student participants are willing to spend time doing parent-child homework. 97 percent of the parent participants agree that children complete the parent-child homework actively, and 96 percent of the parents disagree that children are not willing to finish homework. Thus, the children seem to be willing to participate in the parent-child homework.

Children report that completing the homework is a challenge. The data show three major barriers to completion, including parents’ lack of time, sparse resources, and parents’ lack of ability or knowledge. Though it is a challenge to some parents, the majority of parents participated in and finished the parent-child homework.

**Student Practice and Relationship with Parents**

The data suggests that Parent-Child Homework is a platform for parents to interact with children. Approximately 90 percent of the student participants think they actively interact and collaborate with their parents in the process of doing parent-child homework. Besides, 74 percent of the children revealed that they repeatedly modify after finishing parent-child homework. Meanwhile, 78 percent of the parents disagree that children in the process of parent-child homework cannot collaborate with parents well. 90 percent of the parents report that they discuss with children before beginning the homework.

Teachers offered important insights into child-parent interactions. One teacher proposed, “Most children can actively participate. Some children and parents did three or four times until they were satisfied with it” (T1). Another teacher added, “Due to the younger children’s abilities of comprehension and language expression, the forms of the parent-child homework are relatively limited” (T2). Another teacher recalled a specific example: “The topic of parent-child cooking is familiar for the children. One boy did it quite creatively: putting the fruit and vegetables together, and distributing a nice name.” Teachers’ comments suggest that many children are enthusiastic about parent-child homework, but some still need to be encouraged and awakened.

At the conclusion of the experiment, some students reported that their parents had become more communicative, invested in their education, concerned about their learning, intimate with their children, and playful. This is also reflected in some of the comments from parents: “Parent-child homework is an opportunity to communicate with our children. In the process, I also discovered that my child possessed some positive qualities that were neglected before” (P1). Another parent remarked, “In the process of completing the homework, parents and children are equal, just like friends” (P4). Some teachers commented (P6, P7, P9, & P10) that children seldom had the opportunity to interact with parents like this, so children displayed a great deal of positivity and happiness.

**Students’ Development**

Young children learn best through practice and actual experiences (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Many teachers reported that PCHP positively and significantly contributed to student engagement. The students also reported that through the PHCP they gained knowledge, became more grateful towards their parents, and improved their practice ability (see Table 2).

Students also reported that the program improved skills of collaboration, creativity, and responsibility. Parents reported that the program provided children with the opportunity to learn by doing and improved their children’s love for learning, consciousness of learning, imagination, and their ability to practice.

One parent indicated, “When children think that parents are very concerned about their homework, they will also have a strong enthusiasm for learning” (P14). Another parent remarked, “My child is becoming confident. She has a sense of accomplishment and is very happy” (P16), and a mother commented, “Parents can set an example to the child and cultivate the children’s sense of responsibility. At the same time, we can help the child understand the importance of persistence” (P17).

In addition, some teachers suggested that homework activities activated different areas of development. For example, shopping exercises the
skill of independent choice. Teachers suggested that shopping lists designed by children are positive because this helps develop students’ artistic and writing skills (T4). Painting and photography help improve students’ imaginations and capture students’ hard work (T5).

**Teacher Evaluation of PCHP**

In teachers’ opinion the influence of one session of parent-child homework is limited, so it would be important to generate a series of parent-child homework based the requirements of children’s development. Parents and children seldom have enough “quality time” to spend together (Trahan & Lawler-Prince, 1999). The students are also willing to participate in the activity instead of paper and pencil homework. So parent-child homework is appropriate for parents to help children at home and in turn to promote the development of the parents besides the children.

**Table 2.**

What are your top three of your greatest achievement by doing parent-child homework?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Options</th>
<th>The first greatest achievement</th>
<th>The second greatest achievement</th>
<th>The third greatest achievement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I learn more knowledge</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My responsibility is improved</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I become more confident</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My creativity is improved</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am more grateful to parents</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can collaborate with parents better</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My ability of practice is improved</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can actively resolve problems</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can learn from doing things</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I can express myself better</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total number</td>
<td>333</td>
<td>330</td>
<td>331</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What is more, parents are eager to develop themselves. One parent commented, “We can use our intelligence to do parent-child homework, at the same time we can develop ourselves” (P19). Another parent added, “The relationship with my child was not very good. Parents should make more reflection and learning” (P20). Thus, it is necessary to further explore the benefits afforded to parents through parent-child homework, as parent development will further strengthen school-family collaboration.

**Discussion**

Overall, we find that the parent-child homework program is a worthwhile avenue to support migrant students’ development. Even struggling schools can make a difference through collaboration with children, and student development should be at the center of school reform. This demands the joint efforts of teachers and parents – both groups should understand their distinct roles and challenges and develop themselves by learning from each other.

Teachers’ perspectives suggest that they see positive student development through parental involvement, and increasingly parents are trying to spend more time with their children at home on new skills. By working with teachers, parents are becoming more familiar with child development principles (e.g., positive encouragement at home).

**Implications for Praxis**

This research investigates how parent-child homework impacts student development. The findings highlight a positive relationship between parental involvement and child development in the context of migrant families. Participating students
and families in Shanghai overcame steep barriers such as time and resources. Teachers supported them by designing homework that was inexpensive and accessible. Teachers should explore different activities based on considering group differences and maintaining their needs.

In many cases, parents with very low SES will view teachers as experts. The findings show that through the homework and witnessing their child change, parents developed their own knowledge and skills, and also are becoming experts of their children’s education. This new role may in turn demand more parental involvement (DeLoatche, Bradley-Klug, Ogg, Kromrey & Sundman-Wheat, 2015). What is more, in China, as children are burdened by too much homework, parent-child homework can be a new form to reduce children’s burden.

Limitations and Future Research

The conclusions drawn from this research are limited by a small sample size and the fact that this experiment was a pilot that took place at a school of migrant students. As similar experiments are currently being conducted in Changzhou and Hefei, future research will be able to draw comparisons between student outcomes at all three sites. The schools are also trying to improve the homework and invite the parents to co-design and evaluate the homework.

Student development is dependent on many external and internal factors such as environment or context (Bronfenbrenner, 1993). The control variable that can influence student’s development is complex. This kind of development occurs slowly and differently for each individual, which makes development difficult to measure and to use as an outcome variable (Torres, 2011). Though quantitative and qualitative methods were used, perspectives from parents and teacher are subjective. Meanwhile, the findings are only the response of the experiment’s result. It is necessary to demonstrate the sustainability of development base on more data and information.

The results of this study point to areas that warrant further research. The study should be extended with a larger sample to heighten confidence in findings. Future research should examine the effects of the parent-child homework experiment at different grade levels and on students with varying levels of SES. Additionally, future research should compare effects with children and families who do not participate in the parent-child homework, investigate whether parents’ early education and prior attitude to education affect their participation, and also investigate whether parents can benefit from involvement.

Conclusion

The parent-child homework experiment appears to have positive academic, behavioral, and social development outcomes for migrant children at Y school in Shanghai, China. This pilot study provides a new perspective for understanding the relationship between parental involvement and child development in the context of migrant families. The findings underscore the importance of child-parent interaction through the homework experiment.

Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful for the funding support from the Institute of Schooling Reform and Development of East China Normal University (Funding Grant: 11JJD880013), Shanghai Municipal Education Commission (Funding Grant: A1306 and 13SG27), Shanghai Pujiang Program (Funding Grant: 14PJJC029), and the help from Ms. Yan Qin from Save the Children, Dr. Xiaowei Yang from East China Normal University, and Ms. Xiaojuan Ruan and all teachers from Yumiao Elementary School. The authors are also grateful for the proof reading by Priya G. La Londe from University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Many thanks for the kind and helpful advices from the reviewer.
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