

## A Qualitative Study of Vietnamese Parental Involvement and their High Academic Achieving Children

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*Vietnamese parents in the current study do not belong to school parent organizations, rarely visit the school or contact the teachers. However, the ten students in this qualitative investigation of parent interviews performed well academically, completing their high school educations with a 4.0 G.P.A. This article presents an examination of how Vietnamese parents acculturate their children, leading to high academic achievement without using the traditionally defined parental involvement methods. Specifically, Vietnamese families provided a structured home learning environment, high academic expectations, attention, love and emotional support, traditional family values, stories of cultural heritage and parental sacrifice, and control of children's social lives.*

### *Parental Involvement*

Parents have been identified as a critical force in their children's education. Gonzalez (2002) found that parental involvement was positively related to students' mastery orientation. That is, when parents showed an interest in their child's education by being actively involved, students were more likely to seek challenging tasks, persist, and experience satisfaction in their schoolwork.

Gonzalez (2002) also cited several studies that found the positive relationship between high school students' achievement and parental involvement in schools. Parental involvement theory states that parents with high expectations for their children cooperate actively with schools, thus improving their children's educational opportunities and attainment (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Hickman, Greenwood, & Miller (1995) determined that home-based parental involvement was positively correlated to grades, while school-based involvement was not. Furthermore, Masten and Coatsworth (1998) noted that parents influence academic achievement through their parenting styles and parental involvement.

### **Literature Review**

Feuerstein (2000) explored a variety of school-level factors and their relationship to parent involvement. He suggested that schools can and do influence the level of parent participation in their children's education. His conclusion is that "the amount of contact that parents have with school, the amount they volunteer, and their participation in PTA (Parent Teacher Association) can be influenced positively by more proactive communication by the school" (Feuerstein, 2000, p.34).

Keith, Reimers, Fehrmann, Pottebaum, and Aubey (1986) found that an important part of being involved in a child's education is for parents to have high expectations for their children to do well and, more importantly, to communicate these expectations to the child. Reinforcing these expectations by inquiring about what the child learned in class helped plan for future education and provided a home environment that was conducive to learning. Halle, Kurtz-Costes, & Mahoney, (1997) found that parent's education-related beliefs, parents' expectations for future scholastic attainment, and parents' perceptions of their

children's current abilities were reliably related to achievement.

Garg, Kauppi, Lewko, & Urajnik (2002) measured parental involvement through parents' home-based involvement and parents' school-based involvement. They found both of these types of involvement to be important in the development of positive educational self-schema. More importantly, they found the parental involvement factor to be of greater importance as a predictor of adolescent educational self-schema than the SES (socioeconomic status). Results for adolescents from low SES backgrounds found that educational self-schema was higher for those experiencing a greater degree of parental involvement than for those students with parents who were less involved. Similar results were found for students from a high SES background (Garg, et al., 2002).

Explaining the academic performance of minority students has been of great interest to many educators. Children from minority homes continue to fall behind non-minority peers in written language (Madden, Slavin, Karweir, Dolan, & Wasik, 1993).

Daniel-White (2002) described parental involvement programs as having been funded and structured to involve all parents in schools in ways valued by middle class parents to the exclusion of minority families, their language and culture. According to Daniel-White (2002), these middle-class based programs, which are founded upon a cultural deficit approach to parenting, do not provide Latino and other immigrant families with the tools they need to help their children empower themselves. Thus, she suggests that parental involvement programs need to find ways to make parents feel and know they are valued and that they play an important role in their children's school and family life. Focusing on family goals rather than school goals has the

potential of transforming the school experience and helping children to succeed.

Researchers on parental involvement such as Gonzalez, Moll, Tenery, Rivera, Rendon, Gonzales, and Amanti (1995) and Valdés (1996) emphasize the importance of family knowledge to educating language minority children. By looking at funds of knowledge in language minority homes, Valdés (1996) says teachers can explore with their own students how their families survive and the types of knowledge and skills needed to function in these households.

In addition, teachers need to consider child rearing practices of minority families and should not be quick to prescribe changes in the ways children and parents interact in these homes. Rather, care should be taken to provide homework assignments that support parents' own ways of raising their children and that do not, necessarily, reflect middle class perspectives so that these parents feel less threatened by schools (Valdés, 1996).

#### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study was to explore family practices and the informal activities the Vietnamese families engaged in to promote academic success for their children. The dimensional approach of family process used in current investigation lends itself to the overall research question: "What kind of parenting practices do Vietnamese families use to support the academic development of their children?" This study sought to identify effective family and parenting processes that support academic socialization; therefore, the data collection focused on the families' and students' activities and the daily routines of the parents' that appeared to contribute to their children's academic achievement. There were four parts to the questionnaires: (a) parental interaction and everyday activities, (b) family climate, (c) parental

control and peer relationships, and (d) parental input and academic achievement orientation.

## Methods

### *Sampling strategies*

I used purposeful, criterion-based sampling strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) to recruit the participants, comprised of 10 Vietnamese-American students who were graduating from high school with a 4.00 grade point average (GPA) and their parents. In order to recruit the students, I started sampling by attending Vietnamese cultural festivities, religious institutions, and Vietnamese language schools in Southern California to introduce my research to these organizations. I announced the project, distributed the research description handout and asked for volunteers.

I also employed 'snowball' or 'chain sampling' (Patton, 1990). That is, before or at the end of each interview, I asked the participants if they would identify others who fit the study's selection criteria. I telephoned those who expressed interest, standardizing contacts by using the same information handout.

### *Participants*

This paper presents data that were collected from the parents of five boys and five girls. The boys' names are Khoa, Binh, Quan, Don, and Trung, and the girls' names are Ngoc, Kim-Anh, Nga, Lien, and Hoang. These students were also actively involved in extracurricular activities and did volunteer work in their community. All of the students came from poor, working-class families and lived in low-income neighborhoods of Southern California. The parents (the families' spokespersons were four fathers and six mothers) of the ten students discussed in this paper were refugees and came to the United States at

different times after the Vietnam War in 1975 (a.k.a. the American War). The youngest parent participant was 40 and the oldest was 55. The four fathers had graduated from high school in Vietnam. Two of the mothers had completed grade 5 and four of the women had finished grade 10 in Vietnam. The parents had annual incomes of \$10,000 to \$20,000.

### *Procedure*

At the end of each interview with the students, I asked the parents if they would meet with me for an interview. The parents were willing to do so at their convenience. All interviews with the parents were conducted in Vietnamese at their homes (I am fluent in Vietnamese). The interview questions were semi-structured and open-ended, and the interviews took between two to four hours to complete.

### *Data analysis*

Data were analyzed throughout the study, rather than relegating analysis to a period following the data collection. This type of analysis served two purposes: a) to make decisions on the data collection process and b) to identify emerging topics and recurring patterns. The data from each of these sources was analyzed through a process of analytic induction (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) in which field notes and interview transcripts were compared to identify an initial set of coding categories based on emerging patterns in the data. Field notes included descriptions and my reflections of observations, as well as conversations before, during, and after each interview. The interview transcriptions and documents were read and reread for relevant themes.

## Results

The comments made during the interviews provided an understanding of the methods Vietnamese parents use to build resiliency in their children without engaging in the traditional parental involvement activities. Whether it is the daily routine of performing household chores, participation in cultural activities, life stories and peer relationships, Vietnamese parents who participated in this study clearly provided their children with a conducive environment that supported learning. The following are the most salient comments that capture the ideas as expressed by the participants.

### *1. Parenting Practices: Everyday Activities.*

The everyday routines or activity settings in which children and families participate – such as mealtimes, household chores, sleeping patterns, doing homework, and educational practices – are observed in the context of everyday lives. The rich information gleaned from the interviews brings these processes to life. Mrs. Hong described her family's activities as follows:

In the morning I make breakfast and pack lunch for the kids, and their father drives them to school. Then I clean up the kitchen and prepare dinner, while my husband cleans the kids' room, the house, and washes clothes. The children have lunch at school. I then start sewing [as a seamstress] until 3:00 pm. I then stop to prepare snack for the kids and look through the window to watch them as they enter the front door.

The boy plays soccer, and the girls play volleyball or tennis so they usually practice after school. So when they get home from school they are usually very hungry. They watch TV a little bit and then go directly to their bedroom to do their schoolwork. I

then prepare dinner, tailoring the menu to each child's preference.

### *2. Endless Love.*

The Vietnamese parents offered their children a wonderful source of unconditional love. Mr. Ho stated:

In this new culture [in the US], I only give my children love. I believe love is powerful, which will guide my children to accomplish and to take responsibilities as a good citizen. With my love I wish I could guide them based on the ethics of love and caring relations. Love will keep us together. I give to my children with all my heart and soul. To us the most important thing for our children is love. They are loved. I believe that the reason why children don't do well, or go against their parents' wishes is because these children don't receive enough love.

The depth of the love of the children for their parents, and of the parents for their children, is apparent throughout these narratives. The narratives provide evidence of a different way of understanding these issues, and of thinking about direct parental involvement and parenting practices. The children's academic performance records attest that they have internalized their parents' messages about the importance of academic achievement. Mr. Ngo shared his view:

I believe that if they disobey you, it was meant that, perhaps, you were not close to your children. If you love your children, you would try your best to discipline them for their best interest. Your children would not rebel if you loved them enough. My children trust us.

Preparing special foods for their children is the parent's sign of love and affection. The children are raised not to

expect spoken expressions of love. Mrs. Kim said:

I love to make breakfast for them. I want them to have a little bit more sleep time. I make sure they have dinner at 6:00 pm. So no matter how busy I am, I drop everything and make dinner for them. There are always snacks, cold meat, sandwiches, ice cream, etc. I check the fridge everyday. I use love to train, guide and teach them. I know that they [the children] wouldn't do anything to disappoint me.

Mr. Khanh, a former navy officer in South Vietnam, claimed:

I'm their mother and father. Sometimes I'm very tough as if we were in the military, but sometimes I'm very soft and sweet. I pay attention to manners. They have to have grace and good behavior, respect for the older, be modest and compassionate. I encourage them to work hard.

Parents focused on improving the quality of daily life for their children and monitoring their children's learning activities. Mrs. Hong told:

Every night, I keep them inside. I lock all the doors and windows. I check them to make sure they are warm, make sure their windows are closed, and make sure they don't have nightmares. I remind them to go to bed on time so that they will not be tired. They [the children] study very hard. They often ask my advice and tell me about their friends, their conflicts and their struggles as teenagers.

### 3. *Unpacking Culture.*

Educational difficulties of low-income and minority students are often portrayed as stemming from 'cultural mismatches' between families and schools,

particularly in the families' goals, aspirations, and guidance. Although psychological theories often define personal maturity in terms of individual values of autonomy, self-reliance, and emancipation from parents, Vietnamese culture accord a central role to familism, which can be defined as lifelong expectations to provide support and allegiance to one's family and community (Phan, in press). Parental influence can also transpire in parents' involvement in their children's educational activities. In the Vietnamese tradition, younger people are expected to show respect and deference to elders. Their achievements or failures bring pride or shame to the family as a whole.

The Vietnamese parents in this study speak little English but demand traditional behavior from their children. The parents expect that their children will assist families by doing well in school, positioning them to access better paying jobs. Many of the parents are ex-soldiers and re-education camp or refugee concentration camp survivors. The struggle to adjust to the new environment frequently produced attempts to preserve and adapt images of the traditional family.

The parents encouraged their children to speak Vietnamese. When their children were younger, they had their children take Vietnamese language lessons. Also, their children are required to speak Vietnamese at home because of the parents' limited English language skills.

Nevertheless, the non-English speaking Vietnamese parents pushed their children to do well in school. Many of the parents reported that they viewed education as being associated with financial success and prestigious careers. Thus, their descriptions of their daily activities are the emergent themes of creating an environment that is conducive to learning. The traditional Vietnamese view education as a source of

prestige, which has made parents eager to have their children successful in this educational system. Education is associated with an intrinsically higher purpose and, consequently, the learned individual is admired and esteemed by community members regardless of material status or wealth.

Here in this new environment, the parents emphasize education to both their sons and daughters. They further their goals for high quality education by making strategic choices that they believe will best benefit their children. The strategies they employ in their daily lives are relative to their conditions. Mr. Khoa recounted:

In San Diego, at first, I worked as a bus boy in a restaurant. I liked the job. I had two jobs. I managed to organize my work hours so that I could be home with the kids in the morning before school and after school. I then had an accident, which broke my arm. Now my right arm is weak.

While the parents tried acquiring knowledge and competencies necessary to survive and prosper in a new society, they were equally committed to maintaining fundamental aspects of their heritage. Their children's home world was characterized by clearly defined rules and explicitly delineated norms of acceptable behavior appropriate for young Vietnamese. The parents emphasized education, and emphasized striving for a good name for the family, the love of learning, and respect for other people. Mrs. Thu said:

Life here is different than in Vietnam. Here we're comfortable; our children can accomplish their dreams. They are on honor roll every year. I teach my children Vietnamese traditions, customs, and culture. I don't want them to be too westernized because we're Asians. We celebrate

Vietnamese Lunar year. We carry out most of the celebrations. We cherish our values.

In this context, nurturing acculturation, education, and cultural pride becomes a form of involvement, of parenting practices that support their children's academic development for success.

Traditional family values have remained strong. Older children are responsible for the welfare and behavior of younger siblings, as the parents have articulated in their litany of expectations. Mr. Van asserted: "The elder teaches the young. And the younger siblings have to listen to the elder siblings." Mrs. Kim said:

But the brother should be gentle, kind, and proper to his younger sisters. Respect each other. And unite and care for each other. Show solidarity. The youngest must respect the oldest. One time, one of the children showed disrespect so she was immediately punished.

The traditional family values harmony, filial piety, mutual obligation, hard work, obedience, and discipline. Children are expected to be loyal and to respect parents and all elders. Mrs. Khan expressed her opinion: "Absolutely, they have to respect parents and the elder siblings. Now they absolutely respect each other and their parents."

The parents consistently identified obedience, industriousness, and helping others as traditional family values. The themes of education, obedience, working hard, and helping others are consistently echoed. Mr. Khanh said:

Be useful for this society. Have good education. Whatever they want to study, as long as they study, we're pleased. We prefer they get Ph.D.s, so we told them that we are always there for them. We don't force them, but

encourage them. Every morning, I wake the kids, get them to eat breakfast and get them ready for school.

The parents believe success in school depends for the most part on effort. Therefore, they encouraged hard work and participation in activities related to academic achievement. The parents encouraged their children to spend more time on schoolwork and less time in non-school related activities.

#### *4. Parental Control and Peer Relationships.*

The parents preserved their cultural ties. They wanted their children's friends to be Vietnamese because they believed that Vietnamese youth are more likely to hold values and beliefs and practice behaviors in line with what they consider appropriate. Their children's movements are restricted. Mrs. An told: "I ask my children about their friends' families to see if they are decent families; if they care for their children and if they monitor their children. I don't want children who have too much freedom, no guidance and no discipline."

The parents also wanted to rear and educate their children according to Vietnamese customs. They wanted their children to conform unconditionally to a set of unconventional behaviors even though the young do not thoroughly comprehend or appreciate the motives behind their concerns (Phan, in press). Mr. Van said: "My oldest daughter is now 22 years old, but she always comes to see me when she gets home late and tells me where she's been. I stay up and wait for her. I can't sleep until she gets home. So, I wait until she gets home."

The parents wanted to instill the fundamentals of Vietnamese culture in the expectations they voiced and the rules they established for their children. They restricted their children's activities, discouraged or even prohibited them from dating, which

they thought might distract their children's learning. Some parents did not allow their children to date until they completed their university education, because they saw dating as disruptive to their study habits and educational plans.

The parents pressured their children to avoid associating too much with non-Vietnamese children in the neighborhood, and not to become too "Westernized." Some parents, who appeared more acculturated through their ability to speak English, continued to enforce Vietnamese cultural norms that limit the mobility of children outside the home. "We want them [the children] to associate with kids who study hard." The parents in this study are vigilant about keeping the kids inside the house after school to do homework. In preventing children from falling prey to the lure of bad friends, as they grow older, Mr. Khanh described the strategies he used:

When they were in grade 7 or 8, I watched their friends carefully. I wouldn't let them have bad friends. I would make sure that I would meet their friends. I prefer they have Vietnamese friends. I am very strict. My son is very responsible. He comes home after school and studies. I bought him an advanced computer set almost two years ago. I don't smoke, drink, or go out. I save the money for my children to buy their educational needs.

Mr. Khanh admitted: "I am very strict. I sit in the living room and watch them, [the children's] every move." With fears for their children's safety and schoolwork, they are vigilant about keeping the kids "locked in the house" after school. Mr. Ho said:

During the weeknight they don't go out. I also answer the phone. So if their friends call for school homework, then I will let them talk,

but if just for a chat, I would take the message. I would not let their friends disturb them while they are studying; nothing can disturb my children.

The parents emphasize the ethics of hard work and the importance of the learning process. Mr. Ngo explained:

I told my children that they have abilities and opportunities to study. Therefore, they must try to study. We will do anything and everything to support their education no matter how long it takes. In fact, the longer they study, the better. We will support them to the highest level. We are and will always be there to support them financially even if we have to go hungry. I also warned them that we, his mother and I, would stay with each other to support them.

So they must fulfill their obligation unless they don't have the abilities, then we will accept that. There is no excuse for not pursuing an education. As long as they want to learn, they can study whatever they want. We are always and will always be there for them. It's our honor, our obligation, and our greatest pleasure to support our children.

##### 5. *Storytelling: Families' Curriculum.*

The parents spoke of how their limited English ability restricted their ability to help their children with homework. So in academic socializing of their children, the parents reported telling them stories. For example, as Mr. Khanh described:

We can't help them with their schoolwork because our English is limited, so we use story telling. Every night, we tell our children a story about the sacrifices we made so they could have a better life and an education. We lost our homeland and the good old times.

The Vietnamese families used storytelling as a strategy to serve educational purposes as well as to provide a model for curriculum. Mr. Van, for example, said: "We used every opportunity to teach our children moral values and to reinforce the values of education and learning."

The parents' stories also act as a moral guidepost for their children as they provide a belief and value system. In Vietnamese culture, stories are often handed down from mothers to daughters, fathers to sons, and grandparents to grandchildren. The parents' "storytelling" was usually woven into the evening activities after the children's homework. They often integrated these stories into a larger view of a person as a whole. They also told their own personal stories to their children: of their childhood in villages, of family life, of politics, of war, and of the resistance movement. These stories formed an oral tradition, passed on to their children. Mrs. Hong described:

Each night before they [the children] go to sleep, they gather in my bed and I tell them stories. I read a lot of Vietnamese stories, and history stories. I told my children: stories of warriors, of our ancestors, and of our heroes who gave up their lives to fight for our country from the Chinese, French, Japanese, and then Americans. I tell them Vietnamese legends about our famous people and our religion, of our hardships and of our escape, as well as stories of sadness, sorrows, and heartache.

In each story, I also include moral lessons, and life lessons. I never run out of stories because we have 5000 years of history. They love every moment and every story I tell. They should never forget where they came

from. I always want them to remember these stories, and never forget them.

The parents passed their traditions, through storytelling, to their children who welcomed these experiences. This helped the children to be determined to succeed. The parents' stories provide their children with social and cultural tools to protect themselves. Mr. Ngo stated:

Now the older children get home later than 10 pm. They always come to my bedroom and let me know they are home, and tell me where they were and about their friends. They talk; they trust me and even ask for my advice. And as always they want me to tell them stories before they go to bed.

Now that they are big, I only kiss them on their forehead. I miss their childhood. They used to sit on my lap, and listen to my storytelling. The kids like to talk to me more than to my wife. They don't hide anything from me and I talk to them in a very non-judgmental way.

Culture shapes what parents believe and what practices they employ to socialize their children for academic achievement. Mrs. Khan stated:

The girls come down before 6:00 p.m. to help me cook dinner. While we are preparing dinner, I tell them stories about our tradition and history, of my childhood, my neighbors, my town, my parents, etc. They enjoy my stories. I don't let them help me when they have exams. We don't disturb them. We leave them alone. Now and then we knock on their doors to ask them if they need drinks, or snacks, and if they are okay.

In the Vietnamese family, the elder Vietnamese pass this story and shared cultural tradition to the young who welcome these tales that constitute the heart

of cultural survival. These stories also act as moral guideposts and teach life lessons. This is a powerful way to foster academic resiliency (Phan, in progress). The war stories have been repeated hundreds of times by the Vietnamese elders to their children everywhere, with variations on a theme of protection of cultural integrity, of the country, and a devotion to a sacred land. The traumas of repression, the pains of concentration camp and exile, are not an individual story but a shared story that defines experiences of all Vietnamese in North America. This story becomes the myth and legacy, a shared cultural story, of Vietnamese families in North America.

### Discussion

None of the parents in this study belonged to school parent organizations, visited schools, or called teachers because of their language and cultural barriers. Nevertheless, they were very interested in what occurred in schools.

The Vietnamese families provided and structured their home environment to be conducive to learning and held high academic and moral expectations for their children. They gave their children unconditional love and used storytelling to transmit educational, cultural, and moral values. The parents wanted nothing but highest academic performance and would not accept anything less. The parents speak little English but demand traditional behavior from their children and bring pressure on their children to succeed. They expect that their children will assist their families by doing well in school, which will position them to have access to better paying jobs.

Although the families in this study were obviously prominent in the academic success of these students, they are for the most part uninvolved according to the

traditional definition of parental involvement. Through the parents' telling stories the students in this study are surrounded by messages that encourage success. Storytelling encourages communications among family members and encourages interactions within the family. Thus, storytelling is one of many ways that the parents use to support the academic success of their children.

Taken collectively, the findings illustrate the complex interrelation between culture, language, family, and economic barriers that can hinder a parent's direct involvement in rethinking traditional definitions of home-school relationships. Recognizing these barriers might help to suggest programs that would provide a range of activities and paths of involvement for all different types of parents.

The Vietnamese parents have been cited as playing a major role in encouraging and motivating their children into higher education for both pragmatic and social status concerns (Phan, in press). The parents and their children, many of whom can be loosely termed as belonging to the working class, have middle-class aspirations. These aspirations seem unrealistic to some of the teachers and do not fit their stereotype of children of minimally educated, language minority, working-class and unemployed parents. While some teachers are sensitive to their students' ethnic and cultural values, aptitudes and aspirations, others appear to perceive people's ability through the lens of their own experiences, which in most cases is Anglo-Saxon and/or middle-class, and make assumptions accordingly.

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