ACADEMIC ASPIRATIONS AND HOMEWORK STRESS IN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

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ABSTRACT

Immigrant parents typically expect their children to obtain a post-secondary education and are portrayed in the popular press as exerting a great deal of pressure on their school-age children to attain that goal. Native-born parents are equally concerned about accessing what is perceived to be a highly competitive post-secondary system; and they too exhort their children to greater effort in their studies. The locus for much of this pressure is the homework assignment which is an essential feature of home-school relations during the elementary-to-secondary school transition years. This paper employs data from the 2002 *Survey of Approaches to Educational Planning* (N=4205) to explore how immigrant and non-immigrant parents manage the 'home learning environment' in ways that moderate (or exacerbate) the level of family stress associated with the homework task.

INTRODUCTION

Most immigrant children aspire to a post-secondary education and can count on their parents' encouragement and support in pursuit of this goal (Krahn & Taylor, 2005). To be successful, however, they must establish effective study habits early and sustain these throughout the K-12 period. Parental support is often accompanied by demands for high levels of achievement (grades) and extensive monitoring of classroom behaviour and homework. This involvement in all aspects of the child's schooling is frequently described in the academic literature and popular press as excessive. While acknowledging variability among immigrant parents, there is anecdotal support for this assertion and some evidence for its damaging effects on the emotional well-being of children (Louie, 2004; Ma, 2002).

Although immigrant parents may 'pressure' their children to excel in school, Canadian parents also see educational credentials as a necessary, even essential, requirement for social and economic mobility. Moreover, they see schools as increasingly competitive and many have taken responsibility for ensuring the academic success of their children (Sweet & Anisef, 2005). This redefinition of parental involvement and home-school relations has been described from social class, feminist, and cultural perspectives. Each differs in presentation yet all involve the basic dimensions of regulation and connection; and all emphasize the development of personal autonomy in the child. To this extent, they describe variants of the 'authoritative parenting style', a concept that has framed much of the existing research on parent-child relations and, more generally, the connection between home and school (Baumrind, 1991). Research on the authoritative style indicates a close association with school engagement and achievement although there are variations across social groups and conditions (Spera, 2005). The authoritative approach appears to respond to two essential developmental needs of late childhood and early adolescence – autonomy and affiliation. Regulation describes parents' attempts to establish routines and place limits on impulsive behaviour. Interactions between parent and child in the 'home learning environment' often find parents urging children to start or complete their homework, or engaged in helping with a difficult assignment. Behavioural regulation typically diminishes as adolescents begin to establish their own study habits. Connection involves fostering the emotional bond between parent and child through, for example, the encouragement of effort or the discussion and negotiation of differences around topics such as homework study time or assignment completion. Communicating encouragement and acceptance increases the child's willingness to internalize dispositions that are essential to learning –

attending, concentrating, persisting, and the delay of gratification. Both regulation and connection are designed to socialize the child to the role of student which involves (among other things) the acquisition of self-regulating skills (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Self-regulation in volitional school tasks such as homework signals that adolescents have attained a measure of autonomy in their personal lives, much of which revolves around the home and the school.

Parental regulation of children's learning and study behaviour serves as a model and guide during the elementary years. However, by the time teenagers transition to high school a measure of self-regulation in tasks such as homework is assumed. Homework nevertheless continues to be a contentious issue in many homes where children resist demands that they assume responsibility for initiating and completing their assignments (Kralovec & Buell, 2000). Often, parents become too involved or remain involved too long. In these cases, such 'over-regulation' ceases to facilitate autonomy and instead undermines its development.

Other forms of parental involvement can delay, even thwart, development of adolescent autonomy. Barber (2005) describes a pattern of parental beliefs and practices whose effects can reduce the adolescent's view of self and his or her general well-being. Termed 'psychological control' these intrusive interactions diminish the adolescents' sense of personal competence and responsibility in relation to academic activities such as homework. Psychological control has been variously described, but one explanation which has particular relevance to issues of schooling involves parents' conception of intelligence. This forms the basis for their expectations of children's academic performance (Okagaki, 2001). In Canadian schools great emphasis is placed on indicators of cognitive skill as demonstrating intelligent behaviour. However, cultural differences exist in parents' conceptions of intelligence. In many Asian countries, for example, intelligent behaviour is synonymous with effort. In the Anglo-European tradition, intelligence is equated with native ability and effort is viewed as a separate, motivational construct (Sternberg, 1985). Separating ability and effort gives rise to the notion of potential. Ability is assumed to define an upper bound to achievement. Those who work hard to 'realize their potential' exhibit the desired social value of effort and are consequently praised for their attempts. In contrast, parents express their dissatisfaction to those children who are 'under-achieving' or 'not working to potential'. Children typically view this as a form of pressure, especially when parents' assessment of their potential is unrealistic or inaccurate.

Two issues, then, have been raised in relation to employing parenting style constructs in comparative research. The first concerns the effects of regulation on children's emotional well-being. This takes different forms. Although most parents recognize that adolescents need opportunities to exercise self-regulation, many continue to closely monitor their children's school activities, particularly homework. Similarly, parents' complaints about lack of effort (pressure) represent an attempt at psychological control that limits development of the adolescent's sense of personal autonomy. Where parenting becomes (or remains) intrusive around activities such as homework, children frequently resist and family relationships become stressed. The second issue concerns the generalizability of the authoritative style across immigrant groups who differ in their familiarity with Canadian society and the culture of its schools. This refers to not only the regulation and connection dimensions of the authoritative approach but also the use of psychological control. In addressing these issues we examine the following questions:

a. Does homework stress differ among immigrant groups?
b. What is the relationship between specific parenting practices and homework stress?
c. How responsive are parents to children's changing self-regulation abilities across the elementary-high school transition years?

DATA AND ANALYSIS

Data from the 2002 *Survey of Approaches to Educational Planning* (Statistics Canada, 2002) are used to examine the research questions. The information drawn from this survey comprised three categories of variables to describe: the socio-economic status of the family (income, education level, family size and structure); the personal characteristics and school performance of the child (age, gender, grades); and parenting beliefs and behaviours, including the regulation and connection dimensions of the authoritative model as well as a measure of parental pressure. Regulation included indicators of homework supervision and help. Connection included measures of parent-child discussion of school matters and encouragement of academic effort. Psychological control or, more specifically, the parental pressure measure was based on parents' assessment of whether the child was working to his or her intellectual potential. Homework stress in the family was measured on a scale that ranged from 0 to 4 to assess the level of stress and to accommodate those who reported no stress. Immigrant status was based on whether the child's parents (one or both) were born inside or outside Canada. For the purposes of this paper, socio-economic indicators and children's personal characteristics were used primarily as

statistical controls in studying parenting practices and their effects.

RESULTS

HOMEWORK STRESS AND IMMIGRANT STATUS

Table 1 shows there are significant differences in the proportion of families reporting stress across immigrant groups. Fewer families in which both parents were foreign-born reported homework stress. Among families reporting some homework stress, there were no significant differences in mean stress levels by immigrant status. Based on previously published qualitative studies, we would expect to find significantly higher levels of homework stress among immigrant families. This indicates a need to more closely examine homework stress in relation to the specific parenting beliefs and practices of immigrant and non-immigrant parents.

TABLE 1: Homework Stress by Immigrant Status.

HOMEWORK STRESS	IMMIGRANT STATUS		
	2 FOREIGN-BORN	1 FOREIGN-BORN	0 FOREIGN-BORN
Proportion Reporting HW Stress[a]	.58	.63	.66
HW Stress Level[b] (Scale: 1-4)	2.13	2.35	2.27
Sample N	350	390	3,465

[a] $p < .05$ (Chi Square test)
[b] $p > .05$ (F test)

HOMEWORK STRESS AND PARENTING

Table 2 first compares the authoritative dimensions of parenting across immigrant groups. It can be seen that differences exist in PSE aspirations and in expectations to do well in school. These findings are entirely consistent with previously reported research which indicates a distinct preference among immigrant parents for the university option. There are no differences in parental regulation of children's homework. The connection or communication level in families with 2 FB parents is less than in other families. Pressure in families with 2 FB parents is also less than that found in other families. This pattern of parenting suggests that immigrant families are less inclined to adopt an authoritative approach, at least in relation to parent-child communications that involve discussion about school activities and include encouragement of effort. Cultural differences may lead to different priorities in the educational planning and school-related discussions that occur in immigrant families (Louie, 2004). With respect to encouragement, it may be that in many immigrant families homework effort is a parental expectation that is readily met by children so that further motivation is not needed.

TABLE 2: Homework Stress and Parenting Beliefs and Behaviours by Immigrant Status.

PARENTING DIMENSIONS	IMMIGRANT STATUS		
	2 FOREIGN-BORN	1 FOREIGN-BORN	0 FOREIGN-BORN
PSE Aspirations a (university)	.79	.69	.58
Important to do well (very)[a]	.77	.64	.65
Regulation[b] (Scale: 3 – 14)	10.10	10.03	9.98
Connection[a] (Scale: 3 – 13)	10.27	11.05	10.85
Pressure[ab]	.38	.50	.48

[a] $p < .05$ (Chi Square and F tests)
[b] $p < .05$ (Tobit regression)

Table 2 also shows the results of a regression analysis that links parenting to homework stress after taking into account or 'discounting' the effects of socioeconomic and individual difference factors. These indicate a significant relationship exists between homework stress and parental regulation, irrespective of immigrant status. This finding is somewhat at variance with the predictions of the authoritative model that behavioural regulation by parents should moderate homework stress, assuming they do not persist in monitoring children's homework into the high school years. The Pressure variable also is significantly related to homework stress. Given that the analysis controls for children's achievement, this finding suggests that many parents ignore children's actual academic performance while continuing to insist on higher levels of achievement.

REGULATION AND CONTROL PRACTICES

Table 3 illustrates the extent to which parents manage children's study behaviour in a 'developmentally appropriate' manner – that is, the degree to which parents are responsive to adolescents' changing interests, skill levels, and ability to regulate their own homework or study schedule (Dickinson, 2002). All three immigrant groups show surprisingly high levels of behavioural regulation although these levels decrease somewhat by ages 15-16. However, parental pressure increases across the high school period and even intensifies as graduation year approaches. Comparisons across immigrant-status groups indicate that foreign-born parents (2 FB) are least inclined to exert pressure on younger children; and, although this increases somewhat over 4 years, it remains below the levels of the other two groups. The pattern of regulation and pressure found in families where only one parent is

TABLE 3: Developmentally Appropriate Parenting (DAP) and Immigrant Status

	IMMIGRANT STATUS		
	2 FOREIGN-BORN	1 FOREIGN-BORN[a]	0 FOREIGN-BORN[a]
***Regulation* (3-14)**			
Age 9-12	10.78	11.20	11.09
Age 13-14	10.12	9.85	9.74
Age 15-16	8.92	8.12	8.34
	IMMIGRANT STATUS		
	2 FOREIGN-BORN	1 FOREIGN-BORN[a]	0 FOREIGN-BORN[a]
***Pressure* (0.1)**			
Age 9-12	0.33	0.43	0.42
Age 13-14	0.43	0.51	0.53
Age 15-16	0.43	0.61	0.55

[a] $p < .05$ (Chi sq and F tests)

an immigrant (1 FB) closely resembles that displayed by the native-born (0 FB) group.

CONCLUSION

Claims that immigrant parents over-regulate and pressure their children to succeed in school need to be placed in the context of a growing awareness among the Canadian public that school is important and PSE highly desirable. The findings of the current study indicate that immigrant parents do, in fact, establish PSE aspirations for their children and insist on high levels of academic performance yet they experience less homework stress in their families than do native-born parents.

There are nevertheless many similarities in the practices of all parents, irrespective of immigrant status. For example, nearly all parents remain interested and involved in the schooling of their children as they prepare for or adjust to the elementary-high school transition; and these parents continue to monitor their children's homework well into the high school years. Most, however, relinquish a direct supervisory role as they see their children maturing into adolescence and acquiring the necessary self-regulatory skills and dispositions. A willingness to acknowledge adolescent autonomy is important. Parents who insist on regulating their children's homework through the high school years increase the likelihood of homework stress affecting family harmony and well-being. A finding of particular interest in this study was the very strong relationship between parents' attempts at psychological control and homework stress. The measure of intellectual potential used to assess the degree of parental pressure placed on children was based on parents' view of intelligence as 'natural ability'. While only one measure among many possible indicators of parental pressure, this proved a sensitive indicator of intrusive parenting in relation to homework stress.

The results of this study suggest a need to further examine the effects of parenting on children's transitions through our increasingly diverse school system(s). The range of ethnic differences among newcomer youth in the large districts of Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal requires more detailed comparisons than are provided by immigrant versus non-immigrant contrasts. This might be undertaken with improved data that allow 'immigrant status' to be clearly disaggregated by immigrant generation and other ethnic or cultural markers such as home language, or country-of-origin. Constructs such as adolescent autonomy and intrusive parenting could then be examined in direct relation to the home and school experiences of culturally-diverse immigrant youth.

LES ASPIRATIONS SCOLAIRES ET LE STRESS DES DEVOIRS AU SEIN DES FAMILLES IMMIGRÉES

Généralement, les parents immigrants espèrent que leurs enfants feront des études postsecondaires (EPS). On affirme souvent qu'ils pressent leurs enfants d'âge scolaire pour qu'ils atteignent cet objectif. Les parents canadiens aussi sont préoccupés par l'accession aux EPS et exhortent leurs enfants à redoubler d'efforts dans leurs études. Cette pression s'exerce particulièrement au moment des devoirs, qui constituent l'essentiel de l'apprentissage à la maison pendant les années transitoires du primaire au secondaire.

LE STYLE AUTORITAIRE ET LE CONTRÔLE PSYCHOLOGIQUE

L'implication parentale dans l'apprentissage des enfants comporte deux dimensions : les règlements comportementaux et les liens socio-émotionnels. Les premiers définissent les temps libres des enfants et, pour les devoirs, servent de modèles et de guide d'autodiscipline. Le lien parent-enfant est basé sur les échanges au sujet des devoirs et les négociations sur les conditions entourant le début et l'exécution des travaux scolaires.

Les règlements et les liens sont caractéristiques de l'approche parentale autoritaire. Ces deux dimensions favorisent l'autonomie de l'enfant. Toutefois, à cause de la

nature compétitive du cheminement vers les EPS, les parents passent souvent d'une approche autoritaire à une approche intrusive. Cela survient lorsque les parents réglementent trop les temps libres de leurs enfants, incluant les devoirs. Plusieurs s'inquiètent du fait que leurs enfants ne travaillent pas à leur plein potentiel et n'étudient pas assez pour obtenir les résultats correspondant, selon eux, à leurs capacités intellectuelles.

Comme les devoirs exigent initiative, concentration et ténacité, ils constituent une occasion pour les adolescents d'acquérir autodiscipline et autonomie. Si un enfant déjà impliqué dans ses études subit des pressions pour travailler encore plus et améliorer ses performances, souvent il résistera, ce qui créera du stress au sein de la famille.

QUESTIONS

Nous avons soulevé deux questions relatives à l'utilisation du style parental en recherche comparative. La première porte sur les effets de la pression sur le bien-être émotionnel des enfants. Les parents ont parfois des attentes basées sur une évaluation irréaliste du potentiel de leur enfant. Les commentaires sur l'insuffisance des efforts constituent une forme de contrôle psychologique qui limite le développement de l'autonomie chez les adolescents. Les parents ont également tendance à trop réglementer les activités scolaires, particulièrement les devoirs. Dans ce contexte, une implication parentale efficace tient compte du fait qu'à mesure qu'ils mûrissent, les jeunes devraient pouvoir s'autodiscipliner. La deuxième question porte sur la généralisation d'un style autoritaire chez les parents immigrants qui ne sont pas tous familiers avec la société canadienne et la culture de ses écoles. Elle renvoie aux règlements et aux liens de l'approche autoritaire ainsi qu'à l'utilisation du contrôle psychologique. Nous répondrons également aux questions suivantes :

- Le stress des devoirs diffère-t-il selon l'origine ethnique ?
- Quel lien existe-t-il entre certaines pratiques parentales et le stress des devoirs ?
- Comment les parents réagissent-ils aux capacités d'autodiscipline changeantes de leurs enfants pendant les années transitoires du primaire au secondaire ?

ANALYSE ET RÉSULTATS

Nous avons utilisé les données d'un sondage de 2002 sur les approches de planification éducative (N=4 205) pour examiner comment le style de gestion des devoirs à la maison des parents immigrants et non-immigrants diminue (ou exacerbe) le stress des devoirs. Le statut d'immigration est défini par le lieu de naissance des parents (au Canada ou à l'étranger). On a appelé *familles immigrées* les familles ayant un ou deux parents nés à l'étranger et *familles canadiennes*, celles dont aucun parent n'est né à l'étranger. Pour la dimension *lien* du style parental autoritaire, on a évalué combien de temps libre les parents passent avec leurs enfants, à quelle fréquence ils discutent de sujets liés à l'école et si les parents encouragent leurs enfants à faire des efforts à l'école. Pour la dimension *règlements*, on a évalué l'implication des parents dans les devoirs, s'il y a des interruptions pendant les devoirs et si les parents organisent les temps libres en fonction des devoirs. On a également demandé aux parents s'ils pensaient que leur enfant travaillait à son plein potentiel.

Une comparaison directe montre que les parents immigrants rapportent moins de stress de devoirs chez eux. Parmi les familles vivant du stress de devoirs, il n'y a pas de différences significatives selon le statut d'immigration dans le niveau de stress rapporté. Les liens dans les familles immigrées sont significativement inférieurs à ceux des autres groupes. Pour les règlements, il n'y a pas de différences entre les familles. Les familles immigrées sont moins susceptibles de dire que leurs enfants ne travaillent pas à leur plein potentiel.

Toutes les familles tendent à réglementer les devoirs pendant les années intermédiaires et pendant la transition au secondaire. Les règlements diminuent un peu au secondaire alors que la perception que les jeunes n'atteignent pas leur plein potentiel augmente avec les années. Ces deux tendances suggèrent que le type d'implication des parents, peu importe le statut d'immigration, limite la capacité des jeunes à organiser leurs devoirs.

Une analyse multivariée a permis d'établir le lien entre le stress des devoirs et les pratiques parentales, compte tenu du SES familial, des caractéristiques des enfants et des résultats scolaires. Peu importe le statut d'immigration, les parents qui contrôlent trop les devoirs contribuent au stress des devoirs. Les tentatives parentales pour communiquer avec les enfants et les encourager n'ont pas diminué cet effet. L'insatisfaction parentale face aux efforts des enfants et la perception qu'ils ne travaillent pas à leur plein potentiel sont également liées au stress des devoirs.

CONCLUSION

Il faut placer les déclarations selon lesquelles les parents immigrants pressent leurs enfants à réussir en classe dans un contexte où le public canadien prend conscience de l'importance grandissante de l'école et des EPS. Les résultats de la présente étude montrent que les parents immigrants veulent que leurs enfants aient de bons résultats et poursuivent des EPS, mais qu'il y a moins

de stress des devoirs dans leurs familles que dans les familles canadiennes. Il y a toutefois des ressemblances dans les pratiques des parents, immigrants ou pas. Presque tous restent intéressés et concernés par la scolarisation de leurs enfants, dans leur préparation et leur ajustement à l'école secondaire et continuent à faire le suivi des devoirs même dans les niveaux avancés du secondaire. Toutefois, la plupart des parents diminuent leur supervision directe à mesure que leurs enfants mûrissent et savent s'autodiscipliner. Il est important de reconnaître l'autonomie des adolescents. Les parents qui insistent pour réglementer les devoirs au secondaire augmentent les probabilités de stress des devoirs, tout comme ceux qui sont insatisfaits des efforts fournis par leurs enfants.

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