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Cambodian Family-School Partnership: Toward an Evolving Theory

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Abstract

This article explores the current debate around family-school partnerships. Traditional family-school partnership theories do not account for the intended voices of Cambodian families. This article draws from existing research on Southeast Asian families more generally in order to develop a research-based, data-driven family-school partnership conceptual framework for Cambodian American families. It is believed that a pro-ethnic, voice-centric family-school partnership fosters an inclusive, supportive learning environment for Cambodian children. The logic undergirding that belief assumes that this partnership is likely to increase cultural awareness between critical home-school partners. At the very least, the proposed concept model serves as a theoretical building block upon which an empirical research study can be built. That study is encouraged to explore the implications of establishing a family-school partnership that reflects the sense and sensibilities of Cambodian families, particularly those stemming from lower income backgrounds. Implicit in the review is the premium placed on challenging Eurocentric, middle-class partnership paradigms to account for the authentic voices of ethnic minorities, and the utility of disaggregating data for Southeast Asians, given the array of cultural and linguistic differences spanning the Asian American community.

Introduction

Family-school partnerships are one type of family involvement. Family involvement appears to be effective in improving academic outcomes for students (Lopez, 2001; Pho, 2007; Thao, 2003; see also Leichter, 1975, 1997). Some student outcomes include higher grades and test scores, improved behavior at home and school, better attendance, and improved relationships among peers and adults (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). However, despite the growing body of research stressing the importance of family-school partnerships (Epstein, 1995, 2001a, 2001b, 2008; Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007;



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Stevenson & Baker, 1987), it is unclear whether extant family-school partnership literature and research are useful to many lower income families¹ of Cambodian heritage, largely because few, if any, empirical attempts have been made to systematically document the nature of such partnership and its impact on those families. Consequently, there seems to be a void in existing education research and literature with regard to family-school partnership models for Cambodian families, chiefly those of lower income backgrounds, and this article highlights that void. It is worth noting, at this juncture, that while there are many ways to define family-school partnerships, for this review, such partnership refers to the implicit or explicit involvement of family members in any education-related activity or function inside schools and/or in the home or community environment, with the intention of enriching experiences and enhancing various outcomes for their children. Some examples include talking about the importance of education and hard work, in addition to helping young individuals prepare for college.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to challenge existing research and literature with the end goal of advancing a Cambodian-specific family-school partnership concept model. That model is derived from current literature on the experiences of Southeast Asian Americans. To the author's knowledge, no existing literature touches on the implications of family involvement specific to Cambodian Americans. Undergirding the review is the assumption that a pro-ethnic, voice-centric family-school partnership that accounts for the sense and sensibility of Cambodians is likely to foster an inclusive learning environment² for children in public PreK-12 education. A central component is that it listens to and honors their authentic voices. That appears to be important in creating a partnership that appeals to their needs, and it shifts away from making general assumptions about what should be done without direct consultation. One might argue that it is relatively difficult to understand what transpires beyond school walls without first consulting with family members and students directly. Existing literature and research on partnership models appear to avoid this important communicative step. Furthermore, given the general limitation of academic, public, and even political attention on this group of Americans, it remains imperative to produce rich theoretical and empirical work that aims to bring their stories to life, which is arguably long overdue.

This review also has a smaller secondary goal. It aims more broadly to disaggregate data for Cambodian families from larger pan-ethnic Asian groups. Disaggregating data seems to be a prerequisite for establishing accurate information from the perspective of Cambodian family members, chiefly as an admissible basis for improving academic outcomes for their children. Establishing such information challenges Eurocentric, middle-class partnership paradigms by increasing cultural knowledge between family-school partners, which is one possible approach that dispels false stereotypes and myths potentially detrimental to the child and family. For example, some educators believe that *all* Asian students are “model minorities” of academic excellence (see Tang, 2000; Thor, 2008). Probing deeper, one might discover countless Southeast Asian students affected at home and in school by complex forces working together to complicate the child's life (Thao, 2003; for information on risk factors see Nakkula & Pineda, 2005). Some educators also believe that many immigrant parents are not “involved” in their child's academic regimen. However, probing even deeper, one is likely to discover that their conception and understanding of involvement may not coincide neatly with “traditional” forms of parental involvement, including volunteering at school, parent-teacher conference, and

homework assistance at home (Lopez, 2001; Thao, 2003). Perhaps of greater theoretical and normative weight is the premium that *should* be placed on the value of hard work, getting a good education, and being a good role model for their kids, which may not necessarily require being physically active in school-based activities and functions. Thus, traditional forms of family involvement are what this review labels “Eurocentric, middle-class values,” and extant literature and research appealing to traditional models will be challenged as such.

Theoretical Perspectives

The gap in education literature and research on this matter is relatively wide. The most basic indication of the gap is that few empirical studies are available to document and determine how and to what extent Cambodian families are making sense of family-school partnership models. Empirical studies enable researchers to systematically collect, document, analyze, and report data with the intent to measure how certain factors impact targeted individuals under examination (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). To the author’s knowledge, there appears to be at least one major case study on the issue, by the Harvard Family Research Project (i.e., National Coalition of Advocates for Students [NCAS], 2000), which is no longer funded.³ However, that study is focused more broadly on Southeast Asian families. Another indication of the limitation, perhaps from a practical standpoint, is the fervent push for school-based interventions by researchers (e.g., Epstein, 1995, 2001a, 2001b, 2008) educators, and school staff. Examples of those interventions include the premium placed on volunteerism, homework assistance, parent-teacher conferences, and Parent Teacher Associations/Organizations (PTA/PTOs). Those examples suggest that traditional partnership models may in large part reflect the expectations of American middle-class families, because they require families to participate in activities that are mostly led by English-speaking educators and school staff (NCAS, 2000). Research indicates that many Cambodian parents do not speak English proficiently (e.g., Niedzwiecki & Doung, 2004), which could deter them from engaging and interacting with educators, and that could lead to a preclusion of involvement altogether (Aung & Yu, 2007; see also Lopez, 2001; Pho, 2007; Thao, 2003).

Some immigrant families may view involvement in education as providing discipline at home (e.g., Pho, 2007), in addition to the provision of important life skills and values that require little interaction with school officials. However, those skills and values might help their children to acquire important messages of hard work to be used in school (Lopez, 2001). Thus, Cambodians may have different expectations of what parental involvement entails when pegged against the idea of involvement supported by many American school systems and educators. Differences in expectation could be predicated on cultural expectations and values of the homeland (Aung & Yu, 2007; Pho, 2007; see also Fuligni, 2001; Lopez, 2001). Those expectations and values, however, are important factors that could inform a clearer understanding of a family-school partnership model that works for Cambodian families. It may be worth noting that although Cambodian Americans are essentially “American,” these and other immigrants and refugees tend to bring with them old customs, cultural practices, and traditions to the new country that may be difficult to shed away easily (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Those “old habits” in part inform the way they make sense of how to educate their children in the United States.

What Do Existing Literature and Research on Southeast Asian Americans Say?

A small but growing body of Southeast Asian scholars (Aung & Yu, 2007; Kiang, 2004a; Kiang, 2004b; Pho 2007; Thao, 2003; Uy, 2008) and activists (Southeast Asia Resource Action Center [SEARAC], 2006, 2008) are presenting concerns with regard to traditional school-based programs, practices, and policies. They are concerned that traditional models may not be effectively assisting Southeast Asian students and families in school and at home, particularly lower income families, because minimal effort is made to account for their culture, needs, and expectations. Although different aspects of the educational experiences of Southeast Asians are investigated (e.g., dropout policies, community involvement, disaggregating data specific to Southeast Asians, etc.), one common denominator across research is the lack of attention American school systems and educators place on cultural differences and how those differences impact the educational experiences of many lower income Southeast Asian students. It may be important to consider cultural differences, because the Asian American group consists of more than 50 ethnicities, speaking over 100 languages and dialects (SEARAC, 2008). Some scholars have also argued in support of disaggregating data for Southeast Asians from the larger pan-ethnic Asian and Pacific Islander American, given the wide array of differences across the Asian American community (Kiang, 2004a). In this debate, disaggregating data is a statistical terminology that refers to “pulling out” smaller ethnic Asian groups from the larger aggregated population of Asian Americans, with the intent to discern certain differences, based on those particular ethnic groups. The main contention is that it is somewhat difficult to know what certain ethnic groups are facing, namely poor and low-income families of those groups, if they are clumped together with higher income, higher performing Asians (e.g., Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, etc.). Thus, imparting knowledge specific to ethnic groups of lower income Southeast Asians (e.g., Cambodians, Laotians, Hmong, etc.) may be important from a theoretical standpoint, largely given the subtle and substantive cultural, linguistic, class, and historical differences that may shape and impact the new experiences of immigrants and refugees in the United States (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). Those experiences may, to some degree, influence the educational experiences of Southeast Asian children, even decades after having settled into the United States (Kiang, 2004a; Kiang, 2004b; SEARAC, 2008).⁴

Why Focus on the Cambodian Community in Particular?

Significant cultural and linguistic variances remain prominent across the Asian American community. Those differences could, in turn, challenge the learning and living experiences of Asian families in different ways. For example, a clear discrepancy exists in educational attainment by Asian ethnic group of people aged 25 and over. According to Niedzwiecki and Doung (2004), 60.9% of Asian Indians held a bachelor’s degree or higher, followed by ethnic Chinese (46.6%), Koreans (43.1%), Filipinos (41.7%), and Japanese (40.4%). However, data for members of Southeast Asian groups are staggering: Cambodian (9.1%), Laotian (7.6%), and Hmong (7.4%). Per capita income for Southeast Asian groups are equally alarming: Cambodian (\$10,215), Laotian (\$11,454), and Hmong (\$6,613). These figures, compared to the national average of \$21,587, indicate that a large proportion of Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong families live at or near the federal poverty line. Research indicates that a negative correlation exists between family income level and academic achievement (Hill, 2001), whereby “one important mitigating factor on student outcomes is the family’s income level” (Uy, 2008, p. 44). Uy (2008)

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argues that “the challenges that the Southeast Asian community face have not changed over the course of thirty or even the past five years [with] issues of poverty, low educational attainment, linguistic isolation, and parents’ lack of familiarity with the U.S. school system” (p. 46). The confluence of those cultural and linguistic differences and low socioeconomic background suggests that empirical studies should investigate how certain ethnic groups are affected by their environment at home and how risk factors at home may impact performance at school. One possible area of investigation is the role of family-school partnership for lower income Cambodian American families and its ability to assist students academically.

The schooling and socialization experiences of numerous Southeast Asian students lend some credibility to the importance of creating partnerships. Those experiences tend to be complicated by the immediate school and home and community environments (Thao, 2003). These challenges are highlighted in a case study, “Capacity Building for Southeast Asian Family-School Partnerships,” conducted by the Harvard Family Research Project and commissioned by the National Coalition of Advocates for Students (NCAS).⁵

Schools are generally unfamiliar with the groups that comprise the Southeast Asian population and their immigration experiences. This lack of knowledge poses a barrier to their support of students and their families. Although many Asian students are academically successful, a great deal of diversity exists within this population. Students coming from low-income and refugee backgrounds often do not fit the ‘model minority’ stereotype. Their families have limited education and knowledge of the American school system. Families’ potential for involvement is often challenged by cultural and linguistic differences as well as the lack of basic information and skills about how to participate effectively in their children’s schooling. (NCAS, 2000, p. 1)

The socialization experiences of Cambodian families may be influenced by their history and culture. For example, many Cambodian families have settled into the United States in the late 1970s and early 1980s, mainly as a result of the Cambodian civil war, genocide, and failed Cold War politics. Carl Bankston (2009), a renowned sociologist on immigration in America, offers a vivid description of Cambodian life years after their arrival in the United States. He notes poignantly:

Adjusting to American society has been difficult for most Cambodians, who come from rural areas [in Cambodia] and have few relevant job skills and little familiarity with mainstream American culture. One of the difficulties has been the problem of differences between generations, between older people who see themselves as Cambodians and sometimes speak little, if any English, and younger people who have either been born in the United States or have no memory of Cambodia and consider themselves entirely American...many Cambodian young people are plagued by identity problems... and they must often deal with racism from classmates and with being teased about their ‘foreignness.’ (Acculturation and Assimilation section, para. 3)

Bankston also addresses the impact of cultural misunderstanding and low financial status on the learning and living experiences of the Cambodian family. The following is postulated:

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Since their arrival in the United States . . . some unfortunate stereotypes of Cambodians have developed. Because Cambodian culture places a high value on courtesy and avoidance of direct confrontation, other Americans sometimes stereotype them as passive. Among older Cambodian Americans some of this appearance of passivity results from their unfamiliarity with the larger American society or with the English language. . . . Because Cambodian Americans have settled most often in urban areas, they have frequent contact with disadvantaged members of other minority groups. Often these encounters are troubled by cultural misunderstandings and by the social problems frequently found in poor communities. (Acculturation and Assimilation section, para. 5)

Perhaps the most egregious outcome of cultural misunderstanding and under-resourced communities, particularly among Cambodian youth, is arguably the growing popularity of ethnic Cambodian gangs in the United States (Aung & Yu, 2007). This, one might argue, is a factor of self-protection from other ethnic and racial gang members within poor blighted communities. The confluence of many negative risk factors (Nakkula & Pineda, 2005) compels countless young individuals to assimilate into gang life and to adopt a culture of gangsterism, particularly when there is no other way out. Gang members become the troubled child's surrogate family (Aung & Yu, 2007). A prevailing negative implication of joining gangs is the assimilation away from academic achievement and attainment including graduating from high school and entering college. Those academic outcomes have often been associated with upward socioeconomic mobility (Kao & Tienda, 1995). Bankston (2009) also asserts that adolescent and adult Cambodians "often see that they have much in common with their poor Asian, black, and Hispanic neighbors and will frequently distinguish these areas of 'poor people' from the comfortable middle-class neighborhoods of 'the Americans'" (Interaction With Others section, para. 1). It stands to reason that this perception of separating oneself from "the Americans" could be transferred into the classroom, which could further complicate the cultural tension and separation between the Cambodian "poor people" and middle-class American teachers. Instead of drawing summary conclusions of Cambodian students as being unmotivated, disrespectful, or even culturally deficient, it would behoove educators to explore why young individuals fall through the cracks of society. It may also help to seek strategic and practical approaches to narrow the many gaps between Cambodian families and schools. One veritable attempt is to provide families and students multiple opportunities to access critical resources in and out of school in order to better address issues that may arise in those settings. For example, advising and educating the school counselor about how to gain entry into the so-called hard-to-reach Cambodian community is worth considering, chiefly in light of policy action and practical applications sensitive to their cultural needs.

The importance of Cambodian family involvement and culturally-sensitive school policies and practices has been examined by various scholars and researchers. For example, in "Does the System Work for Cambodian American Students?" Khin Mai Aung and Nancy Yu (2007) explore different interconnected factors that impact the educational experiences of Cambodian youth in Lowell, MA. Some factors include the challenges and root causes that contribute to the high dropout rate among Cambodian youth, the cultural and linguistic barriers of parents, the family's financial constraints, the cultural gap between parents and schools, low levels of parental educational attainment, the inability of family members to maneuver within the American education system, and gang life among young individuals.

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Aung and Yu (2007) examine the educational attainment of individuals who were 18 years and over in Lowell. They found that 55.6% of Cambodians were without a high school degree, compared with 46.3% of Hispanic or Latino (of any race), 42.3% Non-Hispanic Asian, 22.1% Non-Hispanic White, and 15.9% of Non-Hispanic Black or African American. Some have argued that educational attainment is a strong indicator of upward mobility (e.g., Kao & Tienda, 1995) and student outcome is strongly linked to socioeconomic background (Hill, 2001). Aung and Yu also note that many Cambodian students “were falling through the cracks of an overcrowded and underresourced public school system – leading many students to be truant or drop out” (p. 88). They go on to note that “out-of-school youth were more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system” (p. 89) and that “Cambodian students . . . don’t know how to seek assistance from their teachers, don’t think the teachers understand them, and sometimes they seek outside help from friends or gangs, or other kinds of support that may not be positive” (p. 102). Aung and Yu (2007) note that some youth often look to gang members as a surrogate family, largely in response to failures or frustration in dealing with the school system “especially if their parents are not engaged in their education and an older sibling is already involved with a gang – offering the ‘instant gratification’ of needed support and belonging” (p. 102). A rich body of evidence suggests that family involvement may have a positive effect on student outcomes including helping students to stay in and graduate from school (Lopez, 2001; Pho, 2007; Thao, 2003), namely young individuals at risk of school failure (see Nakkula & Pineda, 2005).

Aung and Yu (2007) also examine the implications of cultural and linguistic barriers among Cambodian parents and children and the impact of those barriers on the educational experiences. Many Cambodian parents, they note, “lack formal education themselves and/or do not understand how to maneuver within the American education system” (p. 93). Quoting an anonymous youth advocate, the authors state that “some parents themselves never even graduated from middle school, so they don’t push their children at all. . . . Even though they value education, it’s like their dream and reality is a different story” (p. 93). Cambodian parents’ inability to maneuver through the school system may in part be a result of their experiences with the education system in Cambodia. For example, in Cambodia teachers have the authority and parents often defer responsibility of learning to the teacher. As a result, Cambodian parents in America are often uncomfortable interacting and dealing with American educators, particularly if there is a problem at school. Cambodian parents often believe that “the school is supposed to take care of [their] kids when they’re in school and [the parents’ own] job is to discipline the kids” (Aung & Yu, 2007, p. 94). The authors go on to note that “because of these cultural barriers, as well as certain linguistic and educational challenges, many Cambodian parents . . . are unable to advocate effectively for their children in the public education system” (p. 94). The authors suggest that one key solution is to strengthen the communication between parents and the school system. Perhaps one probable method to help strengthen communication is to build a family-school partnership model that listens to and honors the intended voices of Cambodian families. That may enable researchers and educators to identify and address specific concerns more effectively. At the very least, it focuses on what Cambodians believe to be important, and those beliefs are communicated and spelled out in their authentic voices.

Thao (2003) interviewed a small sample of twenty-seven Hmong elementary school students, parents, and the teachers serving those students. The goal of the study was to determine how, and to what extent, home and school factors interact in order to impact the educational experiences of students. Findings from that study suggest that the differences in

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culture (or “cultural clash”) at school and at home tend to complicate the learning experiences of students. For example, teachers and parents tend to experience some degree of difficulty with regard to understanding the other group’s culture. That, in turn, could affect how children learn and socialize. Thao (2003) recognizes that children often find it difficult to negotiate their role at home and in school. However, he goes on to note that families and schools can be empowered by developing a culturally relevant curriculum, in part because “a lack of familiarity with the Mong people and their culture makes contact between educators and Mong parents very difficult [and that] Mong parents feel the people who live in the United States are not very friendly” (p. 38). Findings also suggest that school officials should aim to create a school environment that places a significant degree of importance on learning and respecting the Hmong culture.

Pho (2007) examines the interplay between family education and academic performance among Southeast Asian students, specifically the foundation upon which family education is formulated, how cultural values and family life may influence the academic performance of their children, and the nature of parents and school relationship. The research is composed of a survey of 102 Southeast Asian high school students and a case study of two Cambodian, two Laotian, and two Vietnamese families, from the pool of students surveyed. Students were also asked to keep essays, which the researcher used as a veritable data source. Findings from the data suggest that “the voices emerging from these short stories and poems were more compelling than any available statistical reports” (p. 71), because the challenges and opportunities individuals faced at home and in school were revealed to the researcher. For example, in an interview with a male Vietnamese student, the following was revealed:

What we learned in school sometimes was different from what we were taught at home, because some of the Vietnamese values were different from the American values, and our behavior as a result of the traditional Vietnamese values and parents’ teachings make us different from other students; and most teachers do not understand that. While our teachers wanted us to talk in class and to be independent, our parents wanted us to be quiet and respect older people. (p. 70)

That particular Vietnamese student was attempting to explain some of the cultural differences (or clashes) between the home and school environments. Disparate cultural expectations of parents and teachers compel many immigrant students, and in this case a Southeast Asian student, to negotiate the cultural boundary of two important settings with adult figures.

Regarding the nature of family and school partnerships, Pho (2007) purports that the “notion of parental participation in school was very different between parents and teachers. While teachers complained that parents rarely came to school open houses or attended teacher-parent conferences, parents thought they participated sufficiently in their children’s school education by reminding their children to do homework and teaching them the value of education” (p. 81). Some parents may believe that teaching their children the value of hard work, determination, and a solid work ethic constitute an involvement in the child’s education, without being physically present or active in school-based activities and functions (Lopez, 2001). However, Pho acknowledges that the values of the family as educators may also have some potential adverse effects, including the forceful nature of some parents to dictate what the child should study in college, without the child’s consent, or an overprotective parenting style that limits the young person’s ability to attend college far away from home, which tends to affect girls more than boys. Nevertheless, Pho’s study raises important issues regarding the nature of

family education and academic performance for Southeast Asian families and students, and how parents, students, and teachers could work together in order to improve family education and educational opportunities for these individuals.

Other Southeast Asian scholars have addressed related issues in education. For example, Kiang (2004b) documents a series of strategies developed within an Asian American Studies Program at one urban public university in order to impact the education of K-12 students and teachers. Four critical challenges were presented facing K-12 practitioners in the Asian American Studies field: (a) the complex demographic realities of Asian American populations, (b) the exclusion of Asian American Studies content in the K-12 curriculum, (c) the limited flow of Asian Americans into the field of education, and (d) the confounding impact of high-stakes testing across all these areas. The article then describes six specific interventions by a university-based Asian American Studies program, with one focused on “advocacy capacity-building for Asian-American parents and families” (p. 217). In conceptualizing these interventions, Kiang had to address prevailing issues that confronted Southeast Asian families.

For a variety of reasons, ranging from long work hours and lack of transportation to internalized perceptions about cultural roles and their own English competence, Asian American parents frequently have minimal direct involvement in their children's schools, even though they often express high expectations for students' academic achievement. . . . Schools, in turn, often exclude Asian American parents from meaningful participation as a result of the language barrier, lack of training and cultural sensitivity, poor outreach and follow-up, and lack of respect. Yet, with parents as the initial, most influential ‘teachers’ in children's lives, educators who remain unaware of students' home environments are unable either to make curricular connections to students' lives or to provide appropriate support when students confront difficulties. (pp. 217-218)

With regard to the intervention, Kiang designed programmatic strategies to strengthen the capacity of Asian American parents to intervene in school, specifically by expanding the literature on children's books with specific Southeast Asian themes and characters. The program, organized around an undergraduate course (i.e., Southeast Asians in America), examined the process of migration, refugee resettlement, and community development for Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians. It also examined critical themes relevant to those communities, including issues of trauma, healing and resilience, in addition to the “changing contexts of families, communities, schools, public policies, and homeland relations” (p. 218).

Through the project, students were able to apply what they were learning about Southeast Asian American history, culture, and community life. Their review of extant literature in libraries and bookstores indicated two things. First, it indicated the dearth of texts available regarding the larger Southeast Asian American community. Second, the content of the few books available was restricted to traditional folk tales, war stories, and mainstream immigrant acculturation themes. Consequently, the books that were produced by the students dealt with contemporary issues facing second- and third-generation Southeast Asian Americans, including the influence of the Hip Hop culture and black and Latino peers. Kiang's study reinforces the importance of understanding the culture of Southeast Asian families, specifically how they make sense of educating their kids at home, which is often incongruent to the expectations of American teachers in school.

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The broad assumption of each of the above studies is that family members often play an integral role in the education of their children, but the nature of involvement may in large part be different from the values and/or expectations of mainstream American culture. Those studies demonstrate that families are active in the child's education across race, ethnicity, and perhaps class. However, the type of involvement appears to be incongruent between immigrant families and American teachers, namely in terms of the expectation of how to be involved. For example, some Southeast Asian families educate and stay involved in the child's education by instilling in them strong values and teaching the importance of an education. That does not appear to be congruent with the expectations of many teachers, namely those who expect Southeast Asian parents to be physically active and involved in school-related activities and functions, as suggested in a plethora of extant education research and literature, seen below. The above studies and their findings suggest that research and, indeed programs aiming to improve the educational experiences of immigrant students, should examine the interplay among myriad factors that may impact the nature of family involvement in education for different ethnic groups of students.

The section below examines additional empirical studies related to family involvement and family-school partnerships, but they are not specific to Southeast Asian Americans or Cambodian Americans. Although the author claims that extant literature and research on Cambodian family-school partnerships are scant, these studies are worth investigating, in part because they highlight important work previously developed in the field from which a Cambodian-oriented study can be built.

What Role do Family Members Play in Educating Children?

Academic literature covers a wide array of topics on family involvement. This includes the impact of parenting style and practices (Paulson, 1994; Spera, 2005), family values (Barlow, 2001; Lopez, 2001; Okagaki, Frensch, & Gordon, 1995), beliefs (e.g., Paulson, 1994), and family-school partnerships (Epstein, 1995, 2001a, 2001b, 2008; Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Henderson, Mapp, Johnson & Davies, 2007; Stevenson & Baker, 1987). Each type of involvement impacts how families may influence the way young individuals approach learning in school and at home. For example, some researchers have noted that a child's obligation to the family can be positively associated with a greater belief in the importance and usefulness of education, and this often increases their academic motivation (Fuligni, 2001; see also Barlow, 2001), and may cut across low- and high-achieving students alike, from all socioeconomic and cultural background (Catsambis, 1998). Despite the type of involvement, Leichter (1975) argues that "the family is always a setting in which important educational encounters occur" (p.2).

In educating children, Leichter (1975, 1997) posits that there are many forms of educators in the immediate family that can educate children, in addition to the dense relationships of kin networks outside the nuclear family. Leichter (1975) asserts that the family context cannot be understood or studied in isolation, but rather in what she refers to as "contextual rigor," which is the "rigor that derives from placing the analysis of specific relationships in the context of other significant relationships and influence," in order to consider "cross-pressures that stem both from within the family and from without" (p. 25). From that, one might argue that multiple partners working together toward a common goal are more likely to achieve improvements in student outcome, versus individuals or institutions working alone.

Leichter (1997) also examines the importance of learning from grandparents (see also Mead, 1974). Grandparents often employ wisdom and the benefit of hindsight in transmitting knowledge to their children (now as parents) or directly onto grandchildren. Children tend to benefit tremendously with the support of multiple adults within and beyond the nuclear family. The influence that many adults have on the child, and the meaning they make together based on the positive relationships forged, might foster a relationship of mutual trust and respect (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 2000), and these factors could certainly contribute to helping young individuals develop into successful individuals. At the very least, it surrounds the young person with positive role models and keeps them out of harm's way (Nakkula & Pineda, 2005). Furthermore, Margaret Mead (1974) also reflects on the role of grandparents in the educational process of rearing and socializing grandchildren. She notes that the "presence or absence of grandparents has often been crucial in the ease with which new immigrants related to those around them in the sense of continuity or rejection of the previous cultural styles of family life" (p. 240). Grandparents often play an important role in rearing their grandchildren, particularly as they join forces with parents (and perhaps other adults) to ensure that young individuals learn the requisite moral and ethical skills necessary to develop into healthy adolescents and adults. In the context of immigration, families may opt to tap into the rich resources of grandparents in order to help raise their children, particularly as parents themselves attempt to negotiate their role in the new country.

What Are the Implications of a Family-School Partnership?

The family-school partnership model is an education reform strategy that builds on the idea of family involvement. A family-school partnership refers to a formal relationship established between members of the child's immediate or extended family with school teachers and staff members, often with the primary purpose of linking the family to the child's academic affairs in school (e.g., Epstein, 1995, 2001a, 2001b; Epstein & Jansorn, 2004; Henderson & Mapp, 2002). A partnership of this nature, Epstein and Jansorn (2004) postulate, "recognizes that students learn and grow at home, at school, and in their communities . . . influenced and assisted by their families, teachers, principals, and others in the community" (p. 20). Research on the impact of effective family and school partnership programs indicate positive outcomes on the family and child, including increased parental involvement, increased attendance, reading, writing, and math achievement, improved report card grades, and behavior (Epstein, 1995, 2001a, 2001b; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002).

Joyce Epstein (1995) believes that family and school partnerships have many positive benefits, because "they can improve school programs and school climate, provide family services and support, increase parents' skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and in the community, and help teachers with their work" (p. 701). Epstein (1995) also asserts that family-school partnerships tend to work more effectively when they are influenced by the school, family, and community contexts in which students interact, learn, grow, and socialize. She refers to these contexts as "spheres of influence." These spheres may overlap to some degree based on the activities that involve parents, schools, and community partners, and, perhaps more importantly, levels of inclusive communicative practices between and among partners of all three settings. Epstein further asserts that student learning prospers and grows when there is purposeful overlap of the spheres of influence.

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The spheres of influence refer to the school, family, and community settings and how they overlap with one another in ways that could be beneficial to the learning and growing process of children (Epstein, 1995, 2001a, 2001b, 2008). Furthermore, there are the external and internal models of overlapping spheres of influence. The external model recognizes that the three main contexts may be drawn together or pushed apart. For example, schools, families, and communities may have some practices that they conduct separately and others collectively. These practices shape the child in positive ways, because together or alone they influence the learning and development process. The internal model refers to complex and essential interpersonal relations and patterns of influence built collectively by individuals at school, home, and in community settings. Epstein (1995) acknowledges that the spheres of influence create opportunities for parents and schools to share their experiences with community organizations working to improve the lives of families and children. In this theory, the focal child is at the center of the partnership, and without their voice, input, and involvement, the partnership would not be complete. She goes on to note that effective school-family-community partnerships should not aim to “produce” successful students, but rather “engage, guide, energize, and motivate students to produce their own success” (p. 702).

Are Family-School Partnerships as Family Involvement Related to Academic Achievement?

A growing body of empirical evidence suggests that academic achievement is positively related to strong family-school partnerships (Epstein, 1995, 2001a, 2001b, 2008; Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Stevenson & Baker, 1987) with a great deal of attention centered on teacher involvement (see Stevenson & Baker, 1987). Research also indicates that some immigrant parents overcome certain barriers (e.g., lack of English proficiency) in order to be involved in their children’s academic life (Goldenberg, 1987). That sense of involvement appears to be positively related to the level of optimism and achievement for the children of those immigrants (e.g., Kao & Tienda, 1995; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orozco, 2001). While all parents across income levels seem to care about their child’s academic performance, what appears to be unclear is the channel through which immigrant parents can access a wealth of information in order to continue assisting their child academically. Providing information that speaks to cultural expectation and values is one such channel (Aung & Yu, 2007; Kiang, 2004a; Kiang, 2004b; Pho, 2007; Thao, 2003).

In “A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement,” Anne Henderson and Karen Mapp (2002) provide one of the most exhaustive studies on the impact of family involvement on student achievement. Their investigation made many assumptions. First, parents and family members are deeply concerned about their child’s performance in and out of school, despite race, ethnicity, class, or cultural variation. They also found that white, middle-class families tend to be more involved in the academic affairs of their children in school. Also, schools that succeed in engaging families often share three overlapping themes: (a) relationships are developed based on trust and reciprocity among family, school, and community members; (b) the needs and concerns of family members are respected and addressed, in addition to class and cultural differences; and (c) this relationship shares power and responsibility. Henderson and Mapp (2002) also found that the mother’s level of education affects the level of involvement in school-related activities, and

the younger the child, the more involved the parent is likely to be. Gender is also a factor, namely because mothers tend to be more involved in the academic lives of their sons.

How, and to What Extent, Does Family Income Level Affect Student Success?

Some researchers believe that children are shaped by their surroundings at home and in school (e.g., Thao, 2003). It is also believed that a child's academic performance may be impacted by environmental surroundings, largely because families without immediate access to certain resources may find it difficult to assist their child in school (Hill, 2001). Nancy Hill notes that students from lower income families consistently perform more poorly than do children from middle or higher income levels, given the immediate stresses of under-resourced environments on the child's learning and living experience. Moreover, children from lower income backgrounds are more likely to be identified by their teachers as being at risk for serious academic adjustment problems. In making that argument, Hill (2001) examined the relationships between parenting style and children's school readiness among 103 ethnic African American and Euro-American kindergarten children, mothers, and teachers. The goal was to examine how family income and ethnicity affect relationships between parenting behaviors, parental expectations, school involvement, and school performance. There were two major findings in this study. First, for lower income families, parenting had a much stronger relationship with pre-reading performance. Second, ethnicity affected parental school involvement and children's school performance. Both are explained below.

Family income appears to affect school performance for many lower income students, because of "the stress associated with many low-income environments that often diminishes early school performance [which] may be buffered by supportive parenting" (Hill, 2001, p. 94). All parents, despite their low socioeconomic status, are capable of helping their children and, when given the opportunity, express willingness to assist in any way possible, including lower income immigrant parents and family members (Goldenberg, 1987). One might argue that lower income parents get involved in their child's life because they want to protect and shield them from the stresses of the home and community environment. Thus, it appears that school involvement for these parents emphasizes the importance of keeping young individuals away from the lure of the streets, and that is coupled with the importance of acquiring an education for upward mobility (see Kao & Tienda, 1995). For higher income families, parents appear to get involved so as to provide the support needed in order to do well academically. Hill (2001) recognizes that higher income students often experience "fewer obstacles to interfere with school performance and a greater number of resources to enhance performance or make up for poorer parenting practices" (p. 94). To this end, Hill suggests that parental involvement may buffer some of the disadvantages associated with low income status. In that vein, one might argue in favor of creating rich opportunities that would help lower income families to access resources and information in order to assist their children academically. A family-school partnership that listens to what family members have to say about how to solve certain problems regarding their child's education may be one possible solution to help narrow that gap.

Traub (2000) echoes some of the concerns presented by Hill. Improving educational opportunities for poor or low-income children seems to require increased family involvement, particularly in changing the negative culture and patterns by which these individuals are surrounded, because school "is not as powerful an institution as it seems [and] whom you hang out with, both during and after school, can matter more than what happens in the classroom" (p.

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52). For example, many Southeast Asian families are still caught in the complex web of poverty and urban isolationism decades after their arrival to the United States, and they have settled into under-resourced urban neighborhoods and communities. Uy (2008) posits that “the challenges that the Southeast Asian community face have not changed over the course of thirty or even the past five years [with] issues of poverty, low educational attainment, linguistic isolation, and parents’ lack of familiarity with the US school system” (p. 46). As a result of this complex web, many children of Southeast Asian heritage continue to replicate patterns shared by their parents. Furthermore, their stories, unfortunately, also share an all-too-familiar pattern of urban poverty and isolation experienced by scores of poor urban African Americans and Latinos. Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco (2001) underscore this familiar pattern, indicating that “as more Asian immigrants find themselves in poor and segregated schools, they face the same limited opportunities of other immigrants of color” (p. 135). Parker, Greer, and Zuckerman (1988) argue that children living in poverty experience double jeopardy, given the double impact of certain risk factors that have been generated at home and how those factors are then carried over into other settings including schools. To address this issue, Weissbourd (1996) suggests that educators and other professionals should focus on “the interactions between the child and the environment [in order to stay] faithful to the dynamic qualities and complexities of the child’s life” (p. 33).

Strengths and Weaknesses of Previous Studies

Previous studies have laid the foundation upon which an empirical research study can be built. One such study could focus on a family-school partnership predicated on the perspectives of Cambodian families. Earlier studies indicate the importance of family members in educating children in and out of school. Through shared values of hard work, determination, perseverance, and the value of an education, families transmit important cultural knowledge to the child, which they can use in order to remain engaged and motivated in school (e.g., Aung & Yu, 2007; Lopez, 2001; Kiang, 2004b; Pho, 2007; Thao, 2003). With ample resources and information, some parents can also be strong advocates for their children. Parents can engage educators and school staff regarding matters to improve academic performance, in addition to accessing critical information to prepare their child for post-secondary life.

Seen above, some researchers have argued that families can stay involved in the child’s education by participating in school-based activities and functions. Those events tend to include parent-teacher conferences, volunteering, Parent Teacher Associations/Organizations (PTA/PTO) meetings, and so forth. However, there is reason to believe that parents with access to financial and intellectual resources are more likely to engage educators and school staff members in the school context (Hill, 2001), including feeling a stronger sense of confidence and comfort in engaging and interacting with school-based individuals. That many Cambodian parents do not have a strong command of the English language suggests that those parents are less likely to participate in school-based functions, despite some of the best efforts to cater to their linguistic needs (Aung & Yu, 2007). Although some limited English speaking parents are interested in engaging the school system for assistance (Okagaki et al., 1995), limited research is available to suggest how Cambodian parents and families can access information so as to improve educational outcomes for their children. It would be prudent to determine what a family-school partnership may entail for Cambodian families, from their perspective, as a

precursor to developing the appropriate model for change. A review of the literature on this particular topic of inquiry highlights the void in both education research and literature.

The limitation is relatively clear. For example, despite the importance Epstein places on the interactive forces of the family, school, and community, her model seems to be limited in scope, because it does not account explicitly for the intended voices of immigrant families in general. It is difficult to know what families think about family involvement in school or if existing programs even work without first hearing about those issues directly from them (Pho, 2007). For example, one might question the utility of Epstein's six types of parental involvement on non-middle class immigrants. To be sure, that model highlights the role of parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and collaborating with the community (see Epstein, 2001b; Epstein & Jansorn, 2004). Each "type" of parental involvement is general, and it represents the needs and concerns of families who may have greater access to varying resources to help their kids thrive in school. For example, the "decision making" type recommends observing the following:

Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy activities through school councils or improvement teams, committees, PTA/PTO, and other parent organizations. Assist family and teacher representatives in obtaining information from and giving information to those they represent. (Epstein & Jansorn, 2004, p. 21)

However, these suggestions assume that family members already have ownership in schools, or that they feel comfortable interacting with educators in the school setting. Middle-class families tend to be more involved in the academic affairs of their children, namely when compared to lower income families of color (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Hill, 2001). However, this is not always the case for many parents living at or near the poverty line (Hill, 2001), and the case may be more prominent for Southeast Asian family members not proficient in speaking, reading and/or writing English (Aung & Yu, 2007; Kiang, 2004b; Pho, 2007; Thao, 2003). Language and cultural barriers could prevent them from understanding educators and in becoming a part of the school altogether. That appears to be the case with many low-income Cambodian families (Aung & Yu, 2007; Pho, 2007).

In summary, previous studies have laid the groundwork for an understanding of family involvement theory more generally. However, it appears that extant research and literature ignore how partnerships speak to the needs of lower income immigrant families including Cambodians. Consequently, the article highlights this void in an attempt to contribute to a limited but growing body of knowledge on the importance of enhancing educational opportunities for lower income Cambodian American families. Furthermore, scant data suggest it may be premature to conclude on the idea that existing partnership models work effectively. Those models do not listen to the authentic voices of these families, particularly in regard to its utility and effectiveness. To some degree, it may also be too soon to make predictions about the educational experiences of Cambodian students, largely because little is still known about ethnic Southeast Asians in general. However, information on the Southeast Asian community is slowly developing in research (Aung & Yu, 2007; Kiang, 2004a; Kiang, 2004b; Pho 2007; Thao, 2003; Uy, 2008) and in practice (SEARAC, 2006, 2008). Therefore, there is a clear clarion call for empirical research to examine the challenges of these families in the context of education.

Conceptualizing a Family-School Partnership Framework for Cambodian Americans

Though research continues to lag, honoring ethnic voices in family-school partnerships has gained some ground in practice over recent years. For example, the Montgomery County Public Schools has developed the “Study Circles,” which is a family-school partnership program that honors racial and ethnic differences. Study Circles combine vigorous outreach, facilitated dialogue, and collaborative action among family and school partners with the goal of creating action plans to address racial and ethnic barriers in schools. In the course of five years, this partnership has worked with over 1,700 parents, staff, and students in order to engage partners in “dialogues to develop trust, learn about each others cultures, talk honestly about their different experiences and views, find common ground on the racial and ethnic barriers to student achievement and parent involvement, and create action steps that the group or school can take to overcome the prioritized barriers” (National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education [NCPIE], 2008, p. 1). In the December 2008 issue of the *National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education (NCPIE) Update*, findings from a two-year evaluation of Study Circles reported that the “participants represented 57 countries and spoke 24 different languages. For many parents who participated, this was their first involvement with their child’s school” (NCPIE, 2008, p. 3). Furthermore, 69% of parents increased their understanding of the school system, 70% experienced participation with the school, and 88% increased their connections with school staff and other parents. Additionally, 85% of school staff increased their understanding of different cultural values and beliefs, and two-thirds of the principals reported strengthening their parent outreach strategies, which invariably led to increased parental involvement of many “hard-to-reach” families (Montgomery County Public Schools, 2007; NCPIE, 2008). Findings from the study indicate that providing opportunities for parents and families to share their experiences and to educate others about important cultural values are factors that may improve family involvement for various ethnic minority groups in school related matters.

Southeast Asian American Family-School Partnership

The Harvard Family Research Project provided technical assistance to the NCAS to undertake one of the most comprehensive and current case studies on creating effective family-school partnerships for the Southeast Asian community: *Capacity Building for Southeast Asian Family-School Partnerships*. Its goal was to focus on building the capacity of Southeast Asian American families and the schools serving their children, with a central focus on creating family-school partnership opportunities to improve student success. To realize such goals, the NCAS focused squarely on site development in nine cities with a significant presence of Southeast Asian families (i.e., Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Des Moines, Chicago, Houston, Seattle, San Diego, Richmond, CA, and St. Petersburg). Site developments were based on three specific factors.

First, NCAS leveraged skills and disseminated information to parents in order to more effectively engage education with children. Second, NCAS fostered an environment whereby community-based organizations (CBOs) could mediate and broker family-school relationships, given the cultural and linguistic bridge between them. Third, school leaders and staff members were asked to dismantle old cultural stereotypes and were re-educated to respond to the needs of families and children. Also, NCAS made efforts to support continuous site learning through

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newsletter, annual conference, telephone consultations, and site visits. Relationship building, convening, training, product development, and technical assistance significantly contributed to site developments.

The case study reported that the NCAS site development strategy helped build Asian parents' capacity through education and empowerment. For example, NCAS created ethnic parent-teacher associations and supported the development of existing ones. The study also recognized that "while the NCAS made laudable progress in its sites, its staff members do not underestimate the barriers to family-school partnerships" and that "cultural differences continually need to be addressed, even among the younger generation of parents" (NCAS, 2000, p. 8).

Despite its contribution to the field, the NCAS study presents a few concerns. First, while it seems to suggest that capturing ethnic voices is important, substantive attention was placed on the role of building the capacity of community-based organizations and NCAS staff members in the process of helping Southeast Asian families and children. Family members' voices seem to be secondary to those of CBOs and NCAS staff members. Thus, contradiction might be a contending factor in this respect, because the focus of attention ignores the intended voices of Southeast Asian families. It is difficult to gauge the exact source of the problem or to measure how and to what extent the problem affects certain individuals, without hearing concerns directly from those confronting the problem. And while numerous community-based organizations do advocate for families with the best intention, one might argue that information could potentially get lost in translation or in the transference of information, from one person to the next and so on. Therefore, NCAS could have avoided these potential pitfalls by taking a different methodological approach, particularly one that listens directly to the needs, concerns, and intended voices of Southeast Asian families and their children. This brings us to our second concern.

Another concern is the research method adopted for the case study. Sources of information were based primarily on interviews with the NCAS project staff, in addition to one focus group (consisting of 10 CBO members) at the 2000 annual conference, participants for which included CBO leaders and some Asian school staff members who are active volunteers. The researcher for the 2000 NCAS study also examined internal documents including grant proposals and progress reports.

Sources utilized for the study impel one to infer that the study's findings are mediocre at best. It explicitly ignores and disregards the intended voices of Southeast Asian families and their children. This approach, at the very least, assumes that ethnic parents and family members lack the wherewithal to advocate for their children's education on their own. The study does, however, note that some "parents found it difficult to grasp the information in the brief articles on basic school information" (NCAS, 2000, p. 8), because "language and cultural barriers exclude many Southeast Asian parents from learning about school policies and ways they can participate in home-school activities" (p. 7). While cultural and linguistic barriers are certainly a worthy concern, it seems counterintuitive to circumvent these massive barriers so as to find strategic solutions for target populations.

Perhaps a more effective approach is one that honors the intended voices of different Southeast Asian families in the process of building effective family-school partnerships. These partnerships could potentially improve academic achievement and attainment for those children served by this joint home-school venture. Furthermore, a study of this nature and magnitude should explicitly underscore the importance of disaggregating data for Southeast Asian

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Americans, particularly Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong families, largely in response to the impact of discrete language, cultural and socioeconomic barriers. Researchers could then cross-analyze and compare strains of similarities and differences, across these three ethnic groups, in the context of building partnerships for improving academic achievement. This can be achieved once individual studies have been completed for each ethnic group. Perhaps the NCAS 2000 study could be of greater utility at that particular point. As of yet, the NCAS 2000 study seems to be premature. A conceptual framework is provided below to consider the intricacies of the theoretical foundation upon which an empirical study of this magnitude can be built for Cambodian families.

A Cambodian Family-School Partnership Conceptual Framework

This section presents a conceptual foundation for building a family-school partnership for the ethnic group in question. The following syllogism puts in place the importance of creating this model. If family-school partnerships were to consider the role of ethnicity for low SES Cambodian families, then (a) school personnel and families will be better prepared to assist struggling Cambodian students in school and at home through stronger cultural awareness and sensitivity; (b) traditional, school-centered Eurocentric partnership paradigms will be challenged and shifted to appeal to people of all ethnic backgrounds, versus standard models largely espousing middle-class values; and (c) disaggregated data for this ethnic group of Southeast Asians will be made available to challenge the model minority myth, which assumes that *all* Asian students are exemplars of academic excellence. The underlying assumption is that it is still relatively unclear whether current family-school partnership models are useful to many Cambodian families. Extant literature and research largely ignore the authentic voices of these individuals. To reverse this course of action, one is encouraged to develop a pro-ethnic, voice-centric family-school partnership between Cambodian families and school partners, which fosters an inclusive, supportive learning environment for the children of these families. Table 1 presents a logic model, or conceptual framework, for creating a pro-ethnic, voice-centric family-school partnership for low SES Cambodian families. This model can be adapted to serve partnerships involving Laotian and Hmong families. For clarity, the logic model consists of four factors: input, activities/processes, output, and long-term outcome, and should be read from top to bottom (i.e., input to outcome). Figure 1 illustrates this partnership in action.

Table 1
Logic Model: A Pro-ethnic, Voice-centric Family-School Partnership for low SES Cambodian Americans

Input
1. Ethnic Family Voices
2. Ethnic Child Voices
3. School Personnel Voices
4. Community Member Voices (if necessary to build trust and reciprocity)
5. Resources (Financial, Human, Material, and Intellectual)

Activities/Processes

1. Engage in iterative, on-going discussions between ethnic families/children and school personnel. If necessary, families and educators can tap into community members/leaders/organizations to initiate dialogue. Family members and school personnel may opt to take over (without the presence and/or help of community members) once trust has been built around the family-school partnership, and a level of comfort is available to assist them in creative dialogue.
2. Activities to take place in multiple settings at home, in the community, and at school based on “comfort zone” of families. Prudence is necessary to account for the potential power dynamic between educators/administrators and lower income ethnic families. This unfair dynamic is detrimental to an open, honest conversation between partners, as it might preclude ethnic families from opening up, speaking freely, and challenging the school and school system for change.
3. Families ought to create a learning environment at home that enables them to participate actively in monitoring their child’s homework and other school-related activities, in conjunction with school personnel.
4. Families and school personnel should create multiple opportunities throughout the school year to discuss matters of relevance to both partners, and the child should be present.
5. Create fun activities to stimulate conversation and dialogue.
6. Individuals should attempt to learn significant cultural expectations of one another. This should be a prerequisite before engaging in dialogue, and it should be an on-going process. Certain activities should focus on discussions of cultural expectations of each group and its impact on learning for the focal child.
7. Schools should actively invite parents/family members to school-related activities, and families should consider inviting school personnel to cultural events specific to their community, including Cambodian New Year’s celebration, wedding ceremonies, and Buddhist ceremonies. These activities could expose school partners to the cultural assets and expectations of the Cambodian people.

Output

1. Increased dialogues between partners.
 2. Increased cultural awareness and sensitivity between partners.
 3. Increased understanding of ethno-cultural expectation in regards to educative and parenting practices.
 4. Inclusive school environment welcoming of previously disconnected ethnic students.
 5. Improved academic performance, motivation based on school attendance and participation in class, and behavior among ethnic children with peers and adults in school and at home.
 6. Increased knowledge base of information among ethnic families.
 7. Increased sense of empowerment among partners, especially ethnic low SES families and children.
-

Long-term outcomes

1. Higher high school retention and graduation rates among struggling Cambodian students.
2. Higher college entrance, retention and graduation rates among these students.
3. More parents seeking access to adult education (e.g., ESL, GED, etc.) and other learning opportunities to increase basic skills and improve chances of finding a higher paying job.
4. Generational gap narrowed between Americanized children and Cambodianized parents, thus improving the parent-child relationship for Cambodian participants.
5. Intellectual capital of Cambodian American participants reinvested into the immediate community and back into Cambodia, fostering conditions to support a stronger, more viable, and less dependent economy.

Note. Sources: Aung & Yu, 2007; Kiang, 2004a; Kiang, 2004b; Pho 2007; Thao, 2003; Uy, 2008, see also SEARAC, 2006, 2008

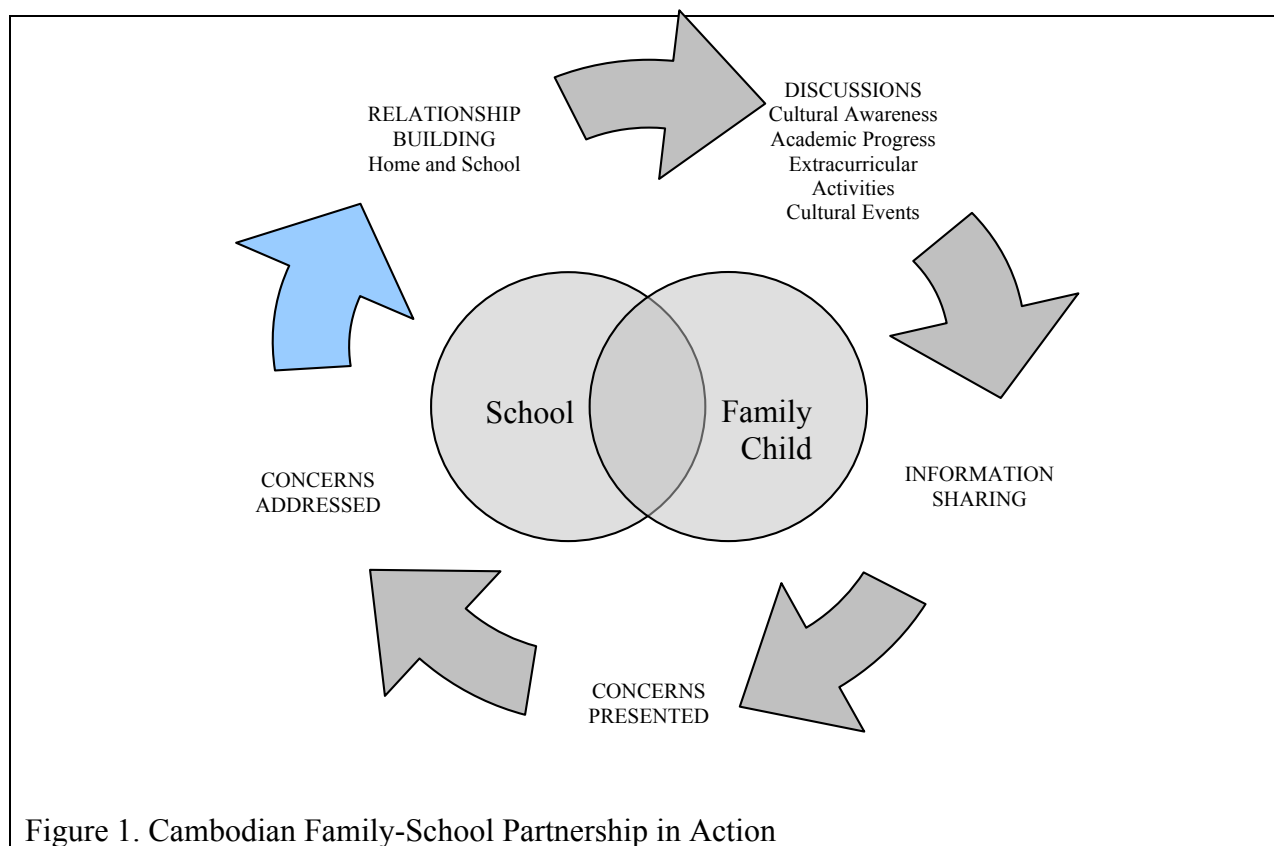


Figure 1. Cambodian Family-School Partnership in Action

Figure 1 demonstrates the family-school partnership model in action for Cambodian families. At the center of this model are the family, child and school, with equal ownership and authority in this relationship. Their socialization process overlaps, despite primary functions of each occurring in different settings (e.g., educators at school, families at home, child at school and home). The overlapping feature denotes, at the very least, that all members care about the

progress and success of the focal child. Surrounding these members are processes that reinforce and connect with one another so that partners are equipped to build an effective pro-ethnic, voice-centric partnership. A partnership should begin by building mutual trust and reciprocity among members in order to develop a strong, healthy relationship, which is denoted with a blue arrow on the far left. Once trust and reciprocity are achieved, partners can begin to discuss matters of mutual relevance regarding the child, share information on cultural, family, and school expectations, and then present and address concerns once information has been disseminated back and forth. The end goal, again, is to listen to the intended ethnic voices of the family and child in order to find a middle ground on which improvements can be made to achieve academic and life success. This middle ground is achieved and represented by the partnership between family members and school personnel.

Conclusion

An extensive review of current literature and research regarding family-school partnerships as parental involvement was provided. It has found that traditional family-school partnership theories do not account for the intended voices of Cambodian families. One possible explanation for the disregard could stem from the notion that Cambodians make up a small representation of the total U.S. population, and, as a result, issues pertaining to older, larger minority groups (i.e., blacks and Hispanics) deserve greater recognition. Their constituent base is larger than the Cambodians, which could explain why their issues receive more attention in public debates and political circles. Another explanation, as laid out above, is that many Cambodians are placed arbitrarily under the larger Asian category. With that comes the assumption that all Asian students are exemplars of academic excellence, and those Asian students who underperform do so out of will and not circumstances. However, a preponderance of data has suggested that academic performance is linked inextricably to family income, and that the stresses and complexities of one's home and community environment need to be factored into the debate. Home and school factors are not mutually exclusive.

As a result of this review, the author has made an attempt to draw from existing research on Southeast Asian families more generally in order to develop a research-based, data-driven family-school partnership conceptual framework for Cambodian American families. It was believed that a pro-ethnic, voice-centric family-school partnership fosters an inclusive, supportive learning environment for Cambodian children. The logic undergirding that belief assumes that this partnership is likely to increase cultural awareness between critical home-school partners. At the very least, the proposed concept model serves as a theoretical building block upon which an empirical research study can be built. That study is encouraged to explore the implications of establishing a family-school partnership that reflects the sense and sensibilities of Cambodian families, particularly those stemming from lower income backgrounds. There is reason to believe that a partnership of such complexity and magnitude lends itself more readily to revealing the authentic voices of these families, which is an important step in finding solutions predicated on what they need and want, versus making normative assumptions about what is best for them.

Future research should examine how Cambodian families are making sense of traditional partnerships and what, if anything at all, requires modification such that those partnerships can coincide with their intended needs and expectations. Future research is also encouraged to explore and document the experiences of other lower income Southeast Asian ethnic groups,

namely Laotian and Hmong families, in the context of parental involvement and academic achievement. Research should consider comparing these groups to one another in order to discern similarities and differences in cultural expectation of family involvement in education. Doing so may yield important findings that could be utilized to build stronger, more effective policy positions to strengthen the educational experiences of this grossly misunderstood population of ethnic minorities. Their voices deserve to be heard.

End Notes

¹ Regarding family income levels, some scholars believe that it might have a positive or negative impact on student outcomes (Uy, 2007), with children from lower income backgrounds affected disproportionately compared to higher income peers, in part because of the type and amount of resources available to help them navigate the tough waters of school (Hill, 2001).

² An inclusive learning environment refers to the essential people and places necessary to make learning optimization possible (Epstein & Salinas, 2004), including student achievement of higher grades and test scores, improved behavior at home and school, better attendance, and improved relationships among peers and adults (see Henderson & Mapp, 2002).

³ The NCAS had a generous grant from the DeWitt Wallace Foundation for about seven years, but ended some time ago. Peter Nien-chu Kiang, Professor of Education and Director of the Asian American Studies Program, University of Massachusetts-Boston, was involved behind the scenes from the beginning (helping write the proposal) till the end (trying to distribute the reports at conferences). In a personal communication with Dr. Kiang, he notes that “it was very unusual to have solid funding support for Asian American K-12 education research/advocacy.” Another personal communication with Bouy Te, Cambodian American and former Director of the NCAS, confirms that the funding for the Asian American family-research partnership program was highly unusual, because Asian American programs rarely get funding. Mr. Te is currently serving as the Director of the National Education Association New Products and Programs Department.

⁴ Ms. Doua Thor, Executive Director of SEARAC, explains that the APIA category, for example, ranges widely from Chinese-American communities who have lived in the United States for multiple generations to Southeast Asian-Americans relatively new to America, forced out of their homeland and arriving as refugees with limited resources including no formal education, even in their native languages. Consequently, many Southeast Asian-American students face a number of risk factors including poverty, language, and cultural barriers. Those hardest hit by poverty and other factors are Cambodians, Hmong, and Laotian families.

⁵ The NCAS began in 1975 as a network of education advocates to address the issues of student suspension and expulsion. Today, the 22 member organization works to improve access to quality public education among disadvantaged students. The organization seeks to strengthen parent roles in school governance so that parents can advocate for changes in school policy and practice. From kindergarten through grade 12, NCAS organizes students and families, focusing especially on communities of color, recent immigrants, migrant farm workers, and people with disabilities. For more information, visit

<http://www.hfrp.org/var/hfrp/storage/fckeditor/File/ncas.pdf>.

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About the Author



Peter Tan Keo is an advanced doctoral student at Columbia University, Teachers College. He currently holds a Master of Education (M.Ed.) from Harvard University and a Master of Arts (M.A.) in the Social Sciences, from the University of Chicago. His dissertation explores perspectival implications of dishonoring authentic voices of ethnic Cambodian American families, chiefly those living in poverty. His work challenges traditional Eurocentric paradigms to appeal to people hidden behind the veil of ignorance and argues that inclusivity is paramount.

Peter has over 10 years of work experience in the public, private, and non-profit sectors. His most recent post was Special Assistant to Mayor Bill White's Office of Education, City of Houston. There he drafted policies, concept models, and data-driven strategies to improve educational outcomes for students. He has also consulted for private management firms and non-profit organizations around the world serving large government agencies, including the United States Agency for International Development and the Department of Defense. He was also Research Fellow and Assistant Director for the Phnom Penh-based Cambodian Institute for Cooperation and Peace, a local think tank with international recognition.

Peter has dedicated much of his life to public service, working with local civic organizations to high-level policymakers in the United States, Cambodia, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and, most recently, Madagascar. He is a proud second-generation Cambodian American eager to mentor kids from troubled backgrounds with great potential. He is fluent in French, Cambodian, and English.



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