Chinese American Students Fight for Their Rights

By Yuxiang Wang & JoAnn Phillion

Introduction

Adolescents in suburban American schools are expected to follow class rules and school discipline policies, and little attention has been paid to their rights. Since young people in schools have little power, they usually cannot challenge school board members and principals. The power hierarchy (Parker, 2003) in schools determines that young people accept school rules and the knowledge that school requires them to learn. Young people's requests for their rights can, therefore, be regarded as "making trouble" (Soto, 1997; Spring, 2002). In addition, schools may deprive young people of their rights (Cooper & White, 2004) through language assimilation and repressive language policies (Sleeter, 2005; Spring, 2007).

Students of color, for example, have little chance of speaking their home languages and some are punished by schools for doing so because of English-only policies (Nieto, 2002; Sleeter, 2005; Soto, 1997). Because white teachers and administrators dominate public schools,

Yuxiang Wang is a graduate student and JoAnn Phillion is a professor in the College of Education at Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana.

students of color encounter few teachers and administrators from their community; students of color may feel that they are marginalized and that no one cares about their rights (Nieto, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999).

Because the voices of students of color in schools have little chance of being heard, students of color often ask for help from their parents, their community, and other groups to fight for their rights in education (Soto, 1997); sometimes they venture outside of the school system to seek support from society (Valenzuela, 1999) because their voices are ignored by school administrators. In order to succeed in gaining the education they want and need, some students must challenge school policies and practices (Nieto, 2002).

The experience of a group of Chinese American students at Riverside High School[1] provides an illustration of the challenges students confront in the struggle for their rights. Located in a small university town in a Midwestern state in the U.S., this school has a diverse population of students with about 13 percent being Chinese, 2 percent other Asian except for Chinese, 74 percent White, 4 percent Latina/o, 5 percent Black, and 2 percent multiracial. Most of the Chinese students are from upper-middle class families with parents who are faculty members at the local university; some work in local high-tech companies. These students felt an urgency to learn Chinese after they learned about increasing trade and cultural and political relations between the United States and China. As second-generation Chinese Americans, however, they can read and write little Chinese, which means that they are losing the Chinese language (Wong Fillmore, 1991); furthermore, they know little about Chinese culture. They expressed their desire to study Chinese as a foreign language to their teachers, who agreed to pass the message to the principal, since only Spanish, German, and French are offered as foreign language options at the school.

The negative response from the principal disappointed the students. They united to seek help from their parents and community members to address their concerns. Students assumed the role of activists; that is they took it upon themselves to effect the change they felt was necessary for them to succeed in school and in the future. In challenging the existing situation, in demanding that their home language be taught in school, students were no longer passively following school rules and regulations. It is no surprise that this form of activism came about as a result of the denial of language rights since language, as an expression of culture and as a meaning making process, is at the center of personal identity (Soto, 1997). Thus, as students advocated to have their home language taught in their school, they were striving for recognition of who they are. They wrote a letter stating the importance of studying Chinese as their foreign language and explaining its significance to themselves and to their society. They went door-to-door asking parents to endorse the letter; about 95 percent of the parents endorsed it. The letter with the parents' signatures was sent to the school by community leaders to demonstrate the community's support on this issue. The community leaders were told that this issue would be discussed at the scheduled board meeting the next month.

Parents and community members also talked to a faculty member in the Chinese department at the university and asked the faculty member to write a letter explaining the importance of children's home language to their academic success, their future career success, to family communication (Cummins, 1979; Krashen, 1988; Wong Fillmore, 1991), and to the transmission of family values (Soto, 1997). The letter was sent to the school board in the hope that it would positively influence their decision on this issue. Chinese students talked to their parents about staging a sit-in outside of the school board meeting room to send a message to the board about the Chinese students' strong desire to learn Chinese. Before the scheduled board meeting, the Chinese students gathered outside of the school board meeting room requesting that the school offer Chinese as a foreign language in the high school.

The school board responded that the request would be considered if funding were available the next semester. The students and parents felt disappointed about the response, but they were willing to wait and see. They were ready to fight for their rights to the end. But was the board's decision to wait merely a stalling tactic? Why was the Chinese students' request, which was supported by parents and community members, ultimately refused by the school administrators and the school board? Does the refusal imply that parents and community members knew nothing about their children's needs in education? Why were these Chinese students deprived of their right to learn Chinese as a foreign language?

In order to understand the reasons behind the parental and community support of these students, a survey was conducted among Chinese parents to assess what they know about language loss, power, knowledge, and democracy. The results demonstrate that Chinese parents know what is valuable to their children's education; that Chinese parents know the importance of having their culture represented among school teachers, administrators, and board members and the importance of fighting for power; and that those Chinese students made the right decision to fight for their right to study Chinese as a foreign language. To examine this issue, it is necessary to position it within the existing research literature. We review literature on knowledge, power, language, and democracy to help in understanding why these students fought for their right to learn Chinese and why that action failed. The findings from the survey are discussed in light of the current knowledge base.

Literature Review

The Power to Determine What Students Learn

Knowledge is never neutral (Code, 1991). The power, therefore, to make decisions about what types of knowledge should be taught in school is critical. It determines what ideas, values, and information should be included in education and what kind of citizens schools intend to cultivate. Spring (2002), an educational researcher who focuses on understanding inequalities in schooling and education policies, states, "What students learn in school could affect their future decisions

regarding politics, economics, consumption, and social moral issues" (p. 32). Because what students learn in school is constructed by dominant groups who control institutions (Apple, 1993), those who graduate from schools tend to meet the needs of dominant groups. Spring (2002) finds, "Since the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the pattern of elite control has changed and has resulted in major political conflicts over control of school boards. This type of political conflict will increase in the years ahead" (p. 16).

Bryant, the former head of the National School Boards' Association, commented on the disproportional representation of minority populations in 1996 (as cited in Spring, 2002). Hess (2002), in his survey of 2000 school districts nationwide, found that 85.5 percent of school board members are white, 7.8 percent African-American, and 3.8 percent Hispanic. This disproportionate underrepresentation of minority populations hinders their political and educational interests. Minority students' needs and minority parents' concerns are unlikely to be discussed at school board meetings. Little attention may be given to the applications of minority teachers and administrators. Meier and Stewart (1991), in their research focusing on Latinas/os, find that the more Hispanics there are on a school board, the more Latinas/os there are in school administration, resulting in more Latina/o teachers in the school and, most importantly, more Latina/o students graduating from high school. Therefore, a minority group's political power helps to determine whether the group's educational needs can be met (Meier & Stewart, 1991; Spring, 2002).

Spring (2002), examining how various interest groups influence the politics of school education, argues that dominant groups want to control others through the distribution of knowledge and that students with knowledge will learn to free themselves from the control of others. Education, therefore, is not for transmission of knowledge (Freire, 1970); education should help students become critical thinkers so that they know what knowledge and skills they need and how to take action to fight for what they need. Banks (1996) believes:

> Students also should be taught how to create their own interpretations of the past and present, as well as how to identify their own positions, interests, ideologies, and assumptions. Teachers should help students to become critical thinkers who have the knowledge, attitudes, skills, and commitments needed to participate in democratic action to help the nation close the gap between its ideals and its realities. (p. 5)

Therefore, it is important to help students become critical thinkers in schools controlled by dominant groups because their participation in democratic actions may not only help them liberate themselves from the control of dominant groups but also help the nation become democratic and just.

The Power to Determine Language

Researchers find that bilingual students possess certain advantages that help them succeed academically in school and that bilingual students enhance family

communication (Cummins, 1979; Krashen, 1988; Wong Fillmore, 1991). Many students, however, are losing their home language. Each year, many families immigrate to the U.S.A. with their children, and these families initially continue to use their native language at home (Waggoner, 1993); two to three years later, parents find that their children no longer want to speak their home language. The loss of a home language means the loss of opportunities to communicate between generations (Wong Fillmore, 1991), which prevents children from learning home and community values, beliefs, and cultural wisdom (Soto, 1997), particularly if the parents cannot speak English or the parents do not want to learn English.

English-only policies change public attitudes toward minority languages. Under such policies, minority children in school have no environment where they may speak their home language. Punishment of children of color who speak their home language at school was reported in California, Louisiana, and Pennsylvania (Soto, 1997). Sleeter (1997), who studies multicultural teaching in standards-based classrooms, states, "Even though good bilingual education promotes educational achievement and English acquisition, it also supports bilingualism, which many monolingual Americans regard as anti-English and anti-American (a view which itself reflects historic amnesia)" (p. xii). The dominant groups do not like and even fear bilingual education because bilingual education "challenges the assimilationist nature of education in our society" (Nieto, 2002, p. 90).

Within the past 10 years, federal funding for bilingual programs has been drastically cut. Bilingual programs in some states were terminated in public schools. The passage of Proposition 227 in 1998 in California, for example, made bilingual education in California illegal (Nieto, 2002; Gort, 2005); Arizona in 2000 and Massachusetts in 2002 passed laws to make bilingual education illegal in these two states (Gort, 2005). Dominant groups feared that their power was being lost to minority groups and that their control over these groups would decline if the dominant groups continued to give them power (Crawford, 1989; Spring, 2002, 2007).

Soto (1997), an educational researcher who advocates for bilingual education and for immigrant students' and parents' rights, has stated that linguistic and cultural repression in the U.S. will last unless dominant groups that control educational institutions are willing to give power to, or share power with, minority groups. Spring (2002) finds that the more the minority groups ask for power from the dominant groups, the more the dominant groups will protect their power. Those who control the school boards and educational institutions determine which languages are taught in schools. Therefore, language is not just a cultural issue but a political one. As Osborn and Osborn (2005) state, "Language is a basic human right, and the opportunity to learn from other 'cultures' is fundamental to an education in a democratic society" (p. 4).

The same issue of repression surrounds foreign language learning in schools. The schools and the nation devalue children's home languages. Soto (1997) discusses the lack of competent translators and employees knowledgeable in other languages and cultures. On the one hand, students of color are losing their home languages

because students' home languages are devalued in school (Gandara, 1994; Nieto, 2002; Sleeter, 2005; Soto, 1997); on the other hand, other groups of students are struggling to learn foreign languages in class (Nieto, 2002). If the schools and teachers create home language-friendly environments to nurture the students' language skills, it is more likely that the home languages of students of color may be developed into language skills and abilities that the nation needs (Soto, 1997). The nation cannot afford to wait for the loss of children's home language before realizing that students need foreign language abilities.

Because of English-only policies in public schools and the unfriendly attitudes towards students' home language, minority students may gradually look down upon their home language. Valenzuela (1999), who studies the schooling experience of U. S. Mexican youth, argues that schools rob students of their home language and culture for the purpose of assimilation and eventually students will lose their identity, their family, and friends within their cultural community. This misleading policy and insensitive national attitude toward children's home languages make students feel that English is the only language worth learning. Students may have no motivation to learn foreign languages and their home languages as well (Wong Fillmore, 1991). In effect, non-English speaking students pay a much higher price to obtain knowledge in school because they are losing their home language and culture in the process (Ovando & Gourd, 1996).

Democracy and the Choice to Share Power

Power and democracy are contradictory. Those who have power want to control others and do not want to give freedom to those they control. In his study of democracy, diversity, and teaching strategy, Parker (2003) claims, "Members of the dominant group within any society have the power to oppress members of other groups in numerous ways, formally and informally" (p. 156). He continues, "One could argue that those who most need democratic enlightenment, especially a highly developed sense of justice, are those who occupy the board rooms, legislatures, court chambers and faculty positions at prestigious universities" (p. 156). Because dominant group members lack a sense of democracy (Spring, 2002), minority groups should continuously fight for their democratic rights.

After defining tolerance and analyzing its roles in democratic enlightenment and political engagement, Parker (2003) concludes that a citizen who actively participates in political activities will have a better chance to influence public policy than the citizen who is merely a viewer of political activities. In a case study about parents' and community members' request for bilingual education in a Puerto Rican community in Steel Town, Soto (1997) found that school administrators ignored their requests; these findings are consistent with those of other researchers (Sleeter, 1997).

Moreover, this denied request closely mirrors that of the Riverside School Board. Spring (2002) explains the power dynamics at work in these kinds of situations when he argues, "Freedom of expression in the classroom is limited by the power of school administrators, curricula mandated by state governments and school

boards, pressures from special-interest groups, the activities of politicians, standardized testing, and mandated textbooks" (p.201). In the teaching of social science and history in schools, public school administrators choose to avoid controversial political issues to make sure that they are safe from attack by other groups (Spring, 2002).

The same may be said of students' interest in learning a foreign language such as Chinese. In these kinds of classrooms, students lose chances to learn different views about controversial issues that they will face in reality because those who have power care more about the interests of various political and business groups than they do about what knowledge is useful and necessary to students (such as reclaiming their home language). Parker (2003) discusses what students need in school and how to help students become critical thinkers:

> Schools are places where people from numerous private worlds and social positions come together in face-to-face contact around matters that are central to the problems of actually living together on common ground. When aimed at democratic ends and supported by the proper democratic circumstances, this interaction in schools can help children develop the habits of thinking and caring necessary for public life—the courtesies, tolerance, respect, sense of justice, knack for forging public policy with others whether one likes them or not. (p. 160)

Students must be granted their democratic rights to talk about real problems and issues in their community and in society and to become critical thinkers. Likewise, they should not be oppressed by authoritarian ideas and information. Students should take actions to fight for their rights because those who have power do not honor students' rights willingly. This notion, in relation to the Chinese American students and their parents at Riverside High is discussed further in the Findings and Discussion section.

Methodological Approach

Because the Chinese American students' request to study Chinese as a foreign language was denied by the school administration, students' parents and the Chinese community decided to become involved in the students' action. With the approval of their parents, students gathered outside of the school board meeting room requesting the school to offer Chinese as a foreign language. The response from the school administration was that they would consider their request next semester if funding and a Chinese teacher were available. This, however, is not an issue of the funding and a teacher. Why are French, German, and Spanish taught as foreign languages in the high school? We contend that the school administrators and school board did not trust that the parents and their community knew the Chinese American students' educational needs, which is consistent with what Soto (1997) found in her study that Spanish speaking or Spanish and English bilingual parents knew nothing about their children's needs because school administrators are the educational experts.

What parents know about their children's educational needs and why the parents

and their community were involved with students' action were what we explored. In 2006, we conducted a survey to explore the parental and community support in the students' fight for their right to study Chinese as a foreign language. Most parents in this community are faculty members at a university in the same town. Some work for the local high-tech companies. The sampled parents in the Chinese community were identified through telephone listings and email adresses. We sent out email messages to the parents who had child(ren) at Riverside High School, explaining what the research was about, what the survey was for, and inviting them to take the survey. The parents were also informed that the survey was anonymous and no sensitive personal information would be collected. Subsequent telephone contact was also made to invite the parents to take the survey.

Twenty parents responded, expressing their willingness to take the survey. We received 18 of 20 surveys that were distributed to parents. Data collected included parents' and children's home language use; parents' home language proficiency and English proficiency; parents' knowledge of representation of Asian or Chinese minority teachers, board members, and administrators; parents' knowledge about the nature of knowledge that their children learned in school; and children's complaints about discrimination at schools.

Findings and Discussion

Survey results (see Table 1) show that 70 percent of the participants have earned a Ph.D. and that 30 percent of the participants hold a master's degree. There were about 80 Chinese parents who were either faculty members in the local university or engineers in the local high-tech companies in 2006. According to the statistics from the Chinese Students Government in the local university in 2006, there were about 800 students from mainland China, 90 percent of whomh are graduate students. Traditionally, Chinese parents and the Chinese community value the education of children and are actively involved and supportive. For instance, they talk to their children about school work, help organize Chinese cultural events in school, work as volunteers in class, and so on. Chinese families in the community gather together every year to celebrate the traditional Spring Festival and other festivals. During these celebrations, children are always the center of the activities, opportunities are provided for children to experience Chinese culture, and children are encouraged to demonstrate their talents and to share their success stories. The Chinese language is used in these events so that children have opportunities to speak Chinese.

Parents and the Chinese community in general realize that their children are losing a sense of Chinese culture. Parents express concern about maintaining their children's Chinese skills. From their own educational experiences, parents know what knowledge and skills are important in their children's education. Soto (1997) reached similar findings in her 9-year case study of the Puerto Rican community in the Steel Town School District: parents knew what education was effective for their children—namely, a bilingual education—yet this kind of education was denied

Table 1.
Survey Results.

		Parents	Children
Parents'education	High school diploma	0	
	Bachelor's	0	
	Master's	30%	
	Ph.D.	70%	
Parents' English proficiency	Fluent	70%	
	Good	30%	
	Poor	0	
Children's Chinese fluency	Fluent		
	Good		80%
	Poor		20%
Language Use	Both English & Chinese at home	60%	
	Chinese only at home	40%	
	English only at home	0	
	Frequent use of Chinese at home		40%
	Seldom use of Chinese at home		30%
	Sometimes use of Chinese at home		30%
	Frequent use of Chinese in school		0
	Seldom use of Chinese in school		0
	Sometimes use of Chinese in school		0
Why support the fight	Home language integrity	50%	
	Communication at home	30%	
	Future career needs	20%	
Chinese or Asian administrators or board members in the school district	No	80%	
	Do not know	20%	
	Yes	0	
Chinese or Asian teachers in the school district	No	60%	
	Do not know	30%	
	Yes	10%	
Why are Spanish, French, and German taught as foreign languages?	Do not know	50%	
	Because they are American or European language	20%	
	Because funding is available	30%	
The nature of knowledge	Neutral	40%	
	Do not know	40%	
	Objective	10%	
	Both objective and subjective	10%	
Students' democratic rights in school are granted	Yes		100%
	No		0
Complaints about discrimination at school	Yes		20%
	No		80%

them. Why were students' and their parents' requests for quality education frequently declined? As Nieto (2002) contends, language is a political issue, and education can free those who are controlled by the dominant group (Freire, 1970; Spring, 2007).

When asked why only Spanish, French, and German are available for foreign language study at the high school, 50 percent of the participants did not know the answer; 20 percent think that it is because they are American and European languages; and 30 percent believe that funding is available. Regarding the nature of knowledge that their children learned in school, 40 percent of the participants believe that knowledge should be neutral; 10 percent think that it should be objective; 10 percent choose both subjective and objective as their answer; and 40 percent have no idea about it. The purpose of the question was to find out how many parents knew that knowledge is constructed by dominant groups, which exercise a great deal of bias and discrimination.

Parents and students should challenge public school practices because these practices aim to maintain the authority of dominant groups and to silence and marginalize students of color (Giroux, 2000). In order to maintain western middle-class values and culture in public schools, the European canon has dominated school curriculum; knowledge and languages from other cultures must be assimilated to the mainstream culture (Nieto, 2002; Sleeter, 2005; Spring, 2007). Knowledge in schools reflects the different interests of different groups and parties. However, our survey results indicate that most participants do not know the nature of the knowledge that their schools provide. Since dominant groups tend to control institutions, they not only determine what is taught and what is not taught, but they also construct the knowledge in schools (Apple, 1993). Because dominant groups do not want parents or the general public to know what should be learned and what should not (Cooper & White, 2004; Spring, 2002) parents should be critical about the knowledge the school provides to their children. Considering this imperative, the parents' support for the Chinese students' fight against discrimination and challenge to those who dominate the school power is necessary.

The language use of both parents and students at home proves that parents are concerned about their children losing their home language. Seventy percent of the participants state that they are fluent English speakers, and 30 percent claim that they are good English speakers. A total of 60 percent of the participants use both Chinese and English at home, and 40 percent use Chinese only. None of the participants use only English at home. Of all participants, 80 percent think that their children's Chinese proficiency is good, and 20 percent believe that their child(ren)'s Chinese proficiency is poor. Although 80 percent of the participants think that their child(ren)'s Chinese proficiency is good, subsequent conversations with the participants clarify that their children, who have good oral Chinese skills, can read and write little Chinese, which means that they are losing the language (Wong Fillmore, 1991). Overall, 40 percent of the children frequently use Chinese at home; 30 percent rarely use Chinese at home; and 30 percent sometimes use Chinese at home. When asked why the parents support their children's taking Chi-

nese as a foreign language, 50 percent indicate they value home culture integrity; 30 percent think that it is for communication at home; and 20 percent believe that it is for future career needs.

Almost all of the participants try to provide an environment for their children to use Chinese at home: 60 percent use both Chinese and English at home, and 40 percent use Chinese only, while none use only English. Repressive language policies toward home languages, however, facilitate students' loss of their home language (Ovando & Gourd, 1996; Soto, 1997). Home languages that students bring to class and school are valuable because effective teaching and learning are based on students' prior knowledge and experience (Nieto, 2002). Administrators and teachers, however, forgot that students of color had the experience of learning in their home languages. According to Nieto (2002), "Educators by and large accepted as one of their primary responsibilities the language assimilation of their students" (p. 83).

Because Riverside High School refused to provide a course in Chinese as a foreign language, Chinese American students have little chance to develop Chinese proficiency. If school administrators valued these students' home languages and cultures and knew how to nurture these language skills (Gandara, 1994), these students might not suffer the loss of their home language. (Teachers did appear to support the students' position; they were willing to bring the idea to the principal. We have no further knowledge at this time about teachers' responses.)

Students' home language serves as a communication tool between children and parents and between children and grandparents (Wong Fillmore, 1991); this communication plays an important role in their education about family values and culture and community traditions (Soto, 1997). The survey data show that 50 percent of the participants value home culture integrity, 30 percent think that it is for communication at home, and 20 percent believe that it is for future career needs. Seventy percent of the participants are university faculty members, the rest hold a master's degree, and all report that their English proficiency is either fluent or good, the need for Chinese for home communication is not urgent.

However, 60 percent of the participants use both Chinese and English at home, and 40 percent use Chinese only. A total of 80 percent of the participants realize the importance of Chinese in maintaining the integrity of their home culture. These results support the idea that parents know what is valuable to their children and what abilities their children should have. The research literature supports these findings (Soto, 1997). Ultimately, the Chinese students' decision to seek help from their parents as they fight for their right to study Chinese is entirely consistent with what we know about parents' knowledge of their chidlren's educational needs.

When asked about the number of Chinese or Asian Americans in the high school administration and on the school board, 80 percent believe that there are no Chinese or Asian Americans in the high school administration or on the school board, and 20 percent report that they have no idea. As to whether there is a Chinese or Asian American teacher in the high school, 60 percent of the participants believe that there are no Chinese or Asian teachers at the high school; 30 percent

report that they do not know; and 10 percent report that there is one Chinese American teacher in the day care center in the school district. It is hard to believe that Chinese American students' voices can be heard at school board meetings in such a district. That is why the Chinese students staged a sit-in outside of the school board meeting room to protest against discrimination and against those who dominate the school. The empowerment of minority groups, therefore, is necessary to guarantee the rights of equal access to quality education for minority students. Because dominant groups with power are unwilling to sacrifice that power (Cooper & White, 2004; Spring, 2002), minority groups must fight for it. Parents in the Chinese community realize the importance of fighting for power to protect their children's and community rights. In personal conversations, two of the parents expressed their intention of running for a school board position, perhaps as a result of this ongoing matter.

Significantly, there are no Chinese American teachers at Riverside High School. The lack of representation in the faculty, in the school administration, and on the school board makes Chinese American students feel that there is no one like them in a position of educational power and that no one appreciates their home language and culture. This, in turn, made them look outside of the school for support and for their goal of having Chinese taught as a foreign language. With the support of parents and others in the Chinese community, these students developed a petition to argue for the right to include Chinese as a language option for them.

When asked about their children's democratic rights at school, no participants heard any complaints that their children's democratic rights at school were deprived. As to discrimination at school, 80 percent of participants report that they have not heard any child complain about discrimination at school, but 20 percent say yes, which means that they have heard children's complaints about discrimination at school. It seems that Chinese parents did not realize that the denial of the request to study Chinese as a foreign language in the high school robs Chinese students of democratic rights. It is also a form of discrimination against Chinese students. The Chinese students' right to study Chinese as a foreign language is protected by the law of equal education and state regulations regarding foreign language education (IND. ADMIN. CODE tit. 511, r. 6.1-5.1-4). The Whites who dominate power in schools ignore young people's rights or presume that everyone should act as they deem fit. After discussing teaching democracy to students who are not afforded the opportunity to live it, Spring (2002) suggests "[n]ot only should tools of power be shared with those who don't have them; those who do have them must be educated to use them fairly and compassionately" (p. xviii). Students' of color, therefore, must fight arrogance among those with power. Seeking help from parents, community members, and other groups, as the Chinese students at Riverside High did, is an effective way to direct the attention of school administrators and board members to young people's democratic rights and their right to an equal education. Young people are the future of the nation. What they learn and how they experience democracy in school can help them form the habit of critical thinking which, in

turn, will help develop their sense of justice, which may contribute to an improved future for the nation (Parker, 2003).

Chinese parents and community members' involvement with their children's education and democratic needs demonstrates that they understand the importance of Chinese as a home language now and Chinese as a foreign language in the future and that they understand the importance of helping fight for their children's democratic rights. Hidalgo, Bright, Siu, Swap, and Epstein (1995) believe that the partnership among families, schools, and community demonstrate that no one unit itself can guarantee the success of children in education and socialization. Moreover, parents and community members realize that the knowledge and skills of foreign languages are indispensable for our nation to exert its influence on international affairs, to compete in world business, and to communicate among other peoples (Soto, 1997). Sleeter (2005) maintains that:

> As U. S. citizens, we severely shortchange our ability to communicate with the rest of the world when we insist that communication be done in English because most of us are not bilingual, that school-children learn English only. And that languages other than English be "overcome" rather than nurtured. If we began to expect that everyone master at least two languages (including English), our collective ability to communicate with the rest of the world would be greatly strengthened. (p. 7)

Furthermore, foreign language skills may help students find an ideal career in the competitive job market. Therefore, repressive language policies and assimilationist policies toward students' home languages hurt the students, the parents, the community, and the nation.

Chinese students found that there is something wrong in the high school administration and school board. They realized that language is a political issue and that they must continue to challenge the dominant power and school practice so that their equal education can be possible. In a conversation with a faculty member at the university who has a child in Riverside High School, she told us that her son once questioned her: why is there no teacher in the high school from the Chinese community? Why are there Chinese faculty at the university? She told us that she told her son because the university hired Chinese faculty like her, but the high school did not hire Chinese American teachers. She went on and said that it seemed that her son was puzzled by the answer. She also told us one more question that her son asked: Do you think that I can be a teacher in my high school after I graduate from a university? She answered her son's question with encouragement: Why not? It is a good idea. She was glad to hear her son's plan and told us that it seemed that her son had figured out something and planned to challenge the power and school practices.

Conclusion

The fight for the rights of Chinese American students in Riverside High School to study Chinese is not over. While the request to have Chinese as a foreign

language was denied, students plan to continue to advocate to have their language taught. It is not just an issue of foreign language. It is about who controls power in the school, who has the right to determine what language and knowledge are to be learned, and whose interests the school serves. Because of a lack of representation of Chinese Americans, it is unlikely that their voices can be heard in the school. Action should be taken to fight for power and the representation of Chinese Americans in the school administration. Teachers with Chinese backgrounds need to be recruited. If the school power is more evenly distributed, the voices of more students of color may be heard and young people's democratic rights may be given sufficient attention.

Parental and community involvement play a key role in the Chinese American students' fight for their rights. Their collaboration not only strengthens the bond among students, parents, and the community, but it also makes the students feel as if they are not alone in fighting for their rights. Parents, community members, and students will continue to fight for the right to study Chinese as a foreign language. As Parker (2003) states, "Oppression and discrimination are alive and well in many forms, both subtle and gross, … But this is no reason to abandon the struggle. It is all the more reason to pursue it wholeheartedly" (p. xxi). Students are the future of the nation, and schools should provide equal education to all students so that all students may develop with the capacity for critical thought through democratic experience.

Note

[1] "Riverside High School" is a pseudonym.

References

Apple, M. W. (1993). *Official knowledge: Democratic education in a conservative age*. New York: Routledge.

Banks, J. A. (1996). The historical reconstruction of knowledge about race: Implications for transformative teaching. In J. A. Banks (Ed.), *Multicultural education, transformative knowledge, and action: Historical and contemporary perspectives* (pp. 64-87). New York: Teachers College Press.

Code, L. (1991). *What can she know?: Feminist theory and the construction of knowledge*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Crawford, J. (1989). *Bilingual education: History, politics, theory, and practice*. Trenton, NJ: Crane.

Cooper, K., & White, R. E. (2004). *Burning issues: Foundations of education*. Lanham, MD: ScarecrowEducation.

Cummins, J. (1979). Linguistic interdependence and the educational development of bilingual children. *Review of Educational Research*, *49*(2), 222-251.

Gandara, P. (1994). The impact of the education reform movement on limited English proficient students. In B. McLeod (Ed.), *Language and learning: Educating linguistically diverse students*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Giroux, H. A. (2000). Insurgent multiculturalism and the promise of pedagogy. In E. M. Duarte & S. Smith (Eds.), *Foundational perspectives in multicultural education* (pp.

195-212). New York: Longman.

Gort, M. (2005). Bilingual education: Good for U.S? In T. A. Osborn (Ed.), *Language and cultural diversity in U.S. schools: Democratic principles in action* (pp. 25-37). Westport, CT: Praeger.

Hess, P. M. (2002). *School boards at the dawn of the 21st century: Conditions and challenges of school governance*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia, School of Education and Department of Government.

Hidalgo, N. M., Bright, J.A., Siu, S. F., Swap, S. W., & Epstein, J. L. (1995). Research on families, schools, and communities: A multicultural perspective. In J. A. Banks & C. A. M. Banks (Eds.), *Handbook of research on multicultural education* (pp. 498-524). New York: Macmillan.

Krashen, S. (1988). *On course*. Sacramento, CA: California Association for Bilingual Education.

Meier, K., & Stewart Jr., J. (1991). *The politics of Hispanic education*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Nieto, S. (2002). *Language, culture, and teaching: Critical perspectives for a new century.* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Osborn, T. A., & Osborn, D. C. (2005). Introduction: Participating in democracy means participating in schools. In T. A. Osborn (Ed.), *Language and cultural diversity in U.S. schools: Democratic principles in action* (pp. 1-4). Westport, CT: Praeger.

Ovando, C. J. & Gourd, K. (1996). Knowledge construction, language maintenance, revitalization, and empowerment. In J. A. Banks (Ed.), *Multicultural education, transformative knowledge, and action: Historical and contemporary perspectives* (pp. 297-322). New York: Teachers College Press.

Parker, W. C. (2003). *Teaching democracy: Unity and diversity in public life*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Sleeter, C. E. (1997). Forward. In L. D. Soto, *Language, culture, and power: Bilingual families and the struggle for quality education.* New York: State University of New York Press.

Sleeter, C. E. (2005). *Un-standardizing curriculum: Multicultural teaching in the standards-based classroom.* New York: Teachers College Press.

Soto, L. D. (1997). *Language, culture, and power: Bilingual families and the struggle for quality education*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Spring, J. (2002). *Conflict of interests: The politics of American education* (4th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Spring, J. (2007). *Deculturalization and the struggle for equality: A brief history of the education of dominated cultures in the United States* (5th ed.). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Valenzuela. L. (1999). *Subtractive schooling: U. S. Mexican youth and the politics of caring.* New York: State University of New York Press.

Waggoner, D. (1993). The growth of multilingualism and the need for bilingual education: What do we know so far? *Bilingual Research Journal, 17*(1, 2), 1-12.

Wong Fillmore, L. (1991). When learning a second language means losing the first. *Early Children Research Quarterly, 6*, 323-346.