



Gathering strengths and building capitals: engaging Chinese immigrant grandparents in a collaborative project

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Abstract

The significance of family involvement in early childhood services has been recognised as crucial for enhancing the educational outcomes of young children, particularly among those from minority and immigration backgrounds. Extensive research has been conducted on collaborative practices between immigrant parents and early childhood communities, but it may be useful to pursue further efforts targeting immigrant grandparents, given their substantial influence on children's learning and development. This study reports one initiative that involves a team comprising council officers, early childhood educators and Chinese grandparents within a local government area in Australia to design and implement a collaborative project that gathers capitals and strengths in order to support grandparents' active engagement in Chinese immigrant children's learning while enhancing their confidence in working with early childhood educators and local communities. Unlike other parenting programmes that aims to enhance parents' knowledge and practices, this project elicits and celebrates working strategies of everyone involved. Employing the concepts of symbolic capital and strengths-based approach as theoretical frameworks, the flow of resources, strengths and values is embedded in this collaborative effort as an overarching theme. This paper explores how the theme is realised in the project process through workshops, reflective meetings and online and face to face discussions.

Keywords Chinese immigrant grandparents · Early childhood education · Collaborative community · Symbolic capital · Strength-based approach

Introduction

Early childhood researchers have made valuable contributions to understanding the practices of parents from culturally diverse backgrounds and their collaboration with teachers. However, there is a dearth of explicit investigations into the experiences of

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grandparents and their involvement in the early childhood education of young children. Australia is a country where foreign population has grown significantly, with 1.2 million people born in China and 20.7% of them living in Melbourne (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Of this population, over 17% are aged over 55 (Victorian State Government, 2016). According to Liu et al. (2019), Metropolitan areas in Western countries have witnessed a rapidly expanding population of elderly Chinese immigrants. Evidence also suggests that Chinese immigrant grandparents play an active role in their grandchildren's lives, especially during the early years following the child's birth, and they exert important influences on grandchildren's early learning experiences (Nagata et al., 2010). While families of Chinese cultural backgrounds have received much attention in the literature, there is a noticeable research gap regarding Chinese immigrant grandparenting, particularly in exploring grandparents' experiences in raising their grandchildren.

Previous research, both in Australia and globally, consistently highlights the barriers that hinder collaborative relationships between early childhood professionals and immigrant families. These barriers often stem from tokenistic cultural approaches, Eurocentric perspectives, or superficial engagement (Chan, 2011; Miled, 2019). Sadownik and Najjuye (2023) have identified the challenge early childhood practitioners face in balancing cultural responsiveness and their own practices when acknowledging the diversity of families. This raises the need to reassess the partnership concept and examine how the Early Years Learning Framework's expectation to 'respect and collaborate with culturally and linguistically diverse children and families' is put into practice by various stakeholders in immigrant children's lives (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022, p. 23).

Moreover, it has been reported that the values, experiences and resources essential for childrearing within immigrant families and early childhood communities have gone unnoticed and been misunderstood, primarily because of the absence of genuine collaboration between these two parties (McWayne et al., 2022). This oversight has led to an underestimation of the educational strengths and capitals present in the learning environments of immigrant children (Norheim & Moser, 2020).

The current study focuses on addressing these needs within a local area in Melbourne. It involves the participation of Chinese immigrant grandparents, early childhood educators and council officers in a programme. This programme, referred to as the 'Strength-Based and Capital-Building Learning Project', is designed to identify and leverage shared strengths and capitals of all these people involved.

The study intends to answer the following questions:

1. What strengths do Chinese grandparents, early childhood educators and council employ in their practices to support Chinese immigrant children and what capitals do they value?
2. How do these strengths and capitals work in a collaborative community?

Theoretical framework

Symbolic capital

The concept of symbolic capital, coined by Bourdieu (1987), is extensively employed by educational scholars to explain what knowledge, abilities and skills are assigned value in learning and teaching. Symbolic capital, as outlined by Bourdieu, plays a vital role in sociological thought as it manifests and legitimises the three primary forms of capital (economic, cultural and social). According to Bourdieu (1987), 'symbolic capital is nothing but economic or cultural capital as soon as they are known and recognised' (p.15). It exists symbolically, encompassing elements like honour, fame, and value, expressed through words, labels, names, images, places, or actions. Bourdieu (1987) contends that 'the honour and prestige inherent in symbolic capital result from the conversion of other forms of capital' (p. 15).

Symbolic capital is not a toolbox but a mode of interpretation of other forms of capital. The value of a particular capital is not defined by its physical or material proprieties, but rather by how it is recognised and generated 'in the very act of recognition'. In this context, recognition embodies the practical manifestation of symbolic capital, an action that 'produces what it recognizes' (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 141). At the heart of Bourdieu's arguments lies the significance of emphasising the situated value of symbolic capital and acknowledging one's access to other capital forms (Vershina & Rodgers, 2020). This has specific resonance with the current project, which aims at addressing capitals by examining what the participants recognised as valuable in Chinese immigrant children's learning and what they did to manifest these recognitions. Utilising the concept of symbolic capital, the programme will uncover concrete, everyday factors that can be situated within the broader framework of capitals and recognised in practical contexts.

Anticipating that some Chinese grandparents might have difficulty articulating certain forms of capital, such as economic capital, it is expected that they may be more inclined to express their situated values, resorting to words, actions and images as reference points. By focusing on symbolic capital, the collected data are expected to primarily reflect the participants' input, minimising reliance on the researcher's interpretation.

Strength-based approach

The strength-based approach, rooted in positive psychology in the early twenty-first century (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), emphasises individual and community strengths, focusing on what individuals excel at and enjoy (McLeod, 2019). Forgarty et al. (2018) identified various strengths, including assets, resilience, aspirations, wellness, self-image, family and non-familial connections, positive opportunities, interests, resources, and cultural ties. This approach serves as a conceptual framework that prioritises these strengths within individuals, elevating them in discussions about opportunities for further growth.

Challenging deficit-oriented narratives and the presumption of Western ethnocentrism as superior, Brown et al. (2021) acknowledged the limitations of exclusively focusing on specific strengths in research. They advocated for a collaborative, constructive, and respectful approach that embraces collective opportunities, capabilities, and assets when identifying and nurturing strengths. In a similar vein, Govindji and Linley (2007) delineated two fundamental dimensions of strengths: strengths knowledge and strengths application, recognising the importance of both acknowledging one's strengths and applying them in relevant contexts. Conceptually, the current research adopts a strengths-based approach, seeking to gather individual strengths from each participant and subsequently integrate them into the collaborative programme.

Grandparenting in Chinese immigrant families

Over the past decades, Chinese immigrant families have gradually increased in immigration countries and early childhood services have been at the forefront of this phenomenon due to the growing enrolment of Chinese immigrant children. There is a robust study pertaining to how Chinese immigrant parents raise children (Cheah et al., 2013; Guo, 2006), and their work with early childhood services (Chan, 2011; Ma, 2017), but early childhood research into grandparenting in Chinese immigrant families is scant.

Grandparenting in immigrant contexts is a complex issue intricately connected to the multidimensional dynamics of life transitions, encompassing the negotiation and evaluation of grandparents' past and present experiences (Zhou, 2012). As a result, grandparenting patterns exhibit variations driven by factors such as unique immigration histories, acculturation levels, educational backgrounds, professional experiences, and overall family circumstances (Lie, 2010; Ma, 2017).

Even so, some common features were identified in terms of grandparents' immigration categories and living choices. In general, there are three categories of immigrant grandparents (Horn, 2019; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2020): transnational travellers, who frequently visit their migrant children's country of residence; zero generation grandparents, who join the family later in life; and ones ageing abroad, referring to first-generation immigrants who have spent most of their lives in the host country.

Many elderly Chinese immigrants prefer to live with their children and grandchildren, a choice often linked to Confucian values that emphasise family unity (Xu et al., 2018; Yoon, 2005). This living arrangement brings them a sense of purpose and joy, as it nurtures family bonds, maintains the family line, and provides love and companionship from their grandchildren (Xu et al., 2018; Yoon, 2005).

A prominent role of Chinese immigrant grandparents that is featured in the literature is the bicultural advocate who 'saw their home primarily as a site where Chinese cultural traditions were observed and passed on from one generation to another, [as well as] a place in which cultural shifting was manifested in younger generations' (Liu et al., 2019, p. 43). Chinese immigrant grandparents exhibit a dedicated commitment to nurturing bicultural identities in their grandchildren.

According to O'Callaghan et al. (2023), the rich tapestry of cultural traditions and local wisdom that these grandparents draw upon in their child-rearing practices requires fresh significance within the context of immigration. While Confucian traditions continue to hold sway in Chinese immigrant grandparenting, the application of certain aspects, such as patriarchal power dynamics, may clash with the pursuit of children's choice in some host countries. This highlights the nuanced nature of Chinese immigrant grandparenting, which has evolved into a personalised fusion of tradition and host culture. Notably, influenced by the host context, Chinese immigrant grandparents strategically employ Chinese traditions and local knowledge as tools to guide their grandchildren towards bilingual and bicultural achievements. Specifically, these grandparents are known to vigorously maintain their home language while also actively seeking ways to support their grandchildren in acquiring the English language (Liu et al., 2019).

While grandparenting has positive aspects, it can also negatively impact the wellbeing of grandparents. Chinese older immigrants, especially grandmothers, face ongoing stress and social isolation due to intensified domestic responsibilities (Yoon, 2005). Described as making personal sacrifice, Chinese older immigrants were found to have left 'an easy, happy, retired life in China to live in absolute dependence on their children' (Da & Garcia, 2015, p. 232). Exploring these issues in their study, Nagata et al. (2010) reported that being appreciated and loved by their grandchildren was a vital solution for the challenges faced by Chinese immigrant grandparents. This adds another reason why being closely involved in young children's lives is important for them.

Within the diverse coverage of grandparent-grandchild relationships in the literature, there is a notable gap in the exploration of the role played by Chinese immigrant grandparents in their grandchildren's education beyond the confines of the family. Paradoxically, while these elders are often depicted as central figures in collecting and transporting grandchildren to preschools, and as the most prominent points of contact for educators (Xie & Xia, 2011), their involvement in early childhood services for children is relatively overlooked. Arguing such a situation in other countries, Pantea (2016) stated that 'the surrogate-parenting role of grandmothers/grandparents remains overlooked both in policies and in research' (p. 63).

This study builds upon existing research while addressing important gaps to explore the ways in which Chinese immigrant elders contribute to the learning and development of young children. The literature review highlights an intriguing paradox: Chinese grandparents are often 'physically present' yet 'socially invisible' within early childhood services, offering a unique avenue for investigation. Moreover, it remains uncertain whether and how these grandparents integrate traditional strengths with local resources to shape their grandchildren's bicultural identities.

By expanding our participant pool to include professionals from a local council and early childhood settings, this research endeavours to shed light on the intricate interplay of strengths and capitals inherent in childrearing and early education, which may not be fully discernible from a single perspective. Furthermore, this study seeks to unravel the collaborative dynamics within the project community, elucidating how this collective effort contributes to the educational support provided for Chinese immigrant children.

Methods

Central to this research was the development of an experiential programme. Concerned with building effective practices to support grandparents, educators and council officers in their work with Chinese preschool children, and promoting mutual understanding and appreciation, the research emphasised the importance of recognising and gathering the strengths and capitals within the participants. In alignment with the concepts of symbolic capital and a strengths-based approach, developing a collaborative community was considered the most effective means to achieve the research outcome. The focus was directed towards fostering interactive and social engagements to harness and leverage a diverse range of strengths and capitals. We take the view from Peterson (1992) that ‘community is a method that is more important to learning than any other methods or techniques. When community exists, learning is strengthened. Well-formed ideas and intentions amount to little without a community to bring them to life’ (p. 2). An experiential project was designed and enacted with the participants to identify, gather and synthesise capitals and strengths in a collaborative community.

Context and participants

The project was funded by a local council of 270,000 people situated in the south-west of Melbourne, Australia. There is a wide socioeconomic and ethnic diversity in the area. The 2016 census shows the number of Chinese residents as 13,630 (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2016). Out of this group, 12.9% were aged over 60, and a majority of them were involved in raising grandchildren. The council staff and early childhood educators recognised that Chinese grandparents in Australia encountered difficulties fulfilling their roles as grandparents, and their approaches and contributions were not fully appreciated. The prolonged lockdown in Melbourne during the Covid-19 pandemic likely had an impact on the relationships between Chinese older immigrants and their families. The resulting isolation experienced by these individuals, being cut off from the outside world, gave rise to significant issues. As Australia recovered from the pandemic, this project was proposed to provide Chinese grandparents with an opportunity to recognise and utilise their strengths, with the aim of rebuilding their roles in the families and communities. Recognising the vital importance of grandchildren in their lives, the project focused on their grandparenting experiences.

The project involved two Australian-born council officers, 50 Chinese grandparents, and three early childhood educators of Chinese heritage with diplomas in early childhood education. These council officers led reforms and research initiatives in local early childhood services. The project was promoted within Chinese social groups with the assistance of community leaders and was open to interested educators and Chinese grandparents of children aged 3–6. Most participating grandparents were grandmothers with permanent residency status in Australia, categorised as zero generation grandparents (Horn, 2019; Nedelcu & Wyss, 2020). They arrived in

Australia before or shortly after the birth of their first grandchild, making childcare their primary responsibility, aligning with past research on the significant role of Chinese immigrant grandparents in providing childcare (Xu et al., 2018). All participating educators were of Chinese cultural backgrounds, recruited from two early childhood services. They were female and had teaching experience ranging from one to 10 years. While it is possible that the inclusion of educators of different cultural backgrounds would have provided the research with different evidence, it is expected that the participating educators were more likely to connect with the Chinese grandparents.

Study phases and data sources

The study was carried out in three phases over a period of 6 months. Table 1 shows these phases along with the associated procedures and data sources for each phase.

Project design

In the design phase, a 3-h meeting involving researchers, early childhood educators, council officers, and the local ethnic group coordinator was held to conduct a context analysis. The analysis utilised the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework (Department of Education and Training Victoria, 2016) to identify curriculum expectations and practice principles for children's learning and development, which then guided the establishment of project goals and principles.

During this meeting, educators and council officers shared insights on learning programmes for culturally diverse families. Ethnic group coordinators provided examples of Chinese family values and practices, particularly the role of Chinese grandparents in childcare and family operations. These inputs formed the basis for developing draft workshop topics and learning activities.

After receiving feedback from experts in ethnic communities and Chinese groups, the project's main content was designed, which included key components such as an introduction to early childhood education, Australian early childhood curriculum with an emphasis on fostering teacher-parent partnerships, Chinese childrearing values and practices, personal stories from educators and council officers, family stories, early childhood routines and practices, school preparation, and community network and support for immigrant children and families. The meeting was audio-recorded, and minutes were documented.

Project implementation

During the implementation phase, the designed content was delivered over 8 weeks through online workshops involving Chinese grandparents, educators, and council officers. These workshops, facilitated by the researcher, featured open discussions, questions, comments, activities, and artefacts.

To maintain ongoing communication, a dedicated WeChat social media group was created, with Chinese posts translated into English for English-speaking

Table 1 Study phases and procedures

| Phases | Procedures | Data sources | People involved |
|------------------------|---|---|---|
| Project Design | One face to face meeting for context analysis and project design | Personal opinions, curriculum guideline, examples, and stories | Researcher, early childhood educators, council officers and local ethnic group coordinator |
| Project Implementation | Eight weeks of online workshops Ongoing WeChat interactions Eight reflective discussions after each work-shop | Open discussions, questions, comments, activities and artefacts | Researcher, early childhood educators, council officers and Chinese grandparents Researcher, early childhood educators, council officers |
| Project Evaluation | One online workshop One face to face meeting | Open discussions, questions, comments and activities | Council officers, early childhood educators and Chinese grandparents Council officers, researcher, early childhood educators |

participants. WeChat interactions served as a platform for additional knowledge exchange using case scenarios, stories and videos to stimulate discussions.

These interactive opportunities aligned with the principles of collaboration and openness within the community concept, promoting active participation. After each workshop, the researcher, educators, and council officers held reflective discussions to identify strengths, explore emerging ideas, and plan for the next week.

Project evaluation

The evaluation phase aimed to consolidate all the capitals and strengths accumulated during the implementation phase and develop a repertoire of resources. Council officers, early childhood educators and grandparents met online, and they were provided with questions to guide the reflection. As an illustration, a case discussed during a workshop pertaining to a child's learning behaviour was revisited and cross-checked with the information presented in the project. This enabled them to evaluate the situation from multiple angles and assess whether the collaboration facilitated a more well-rounded perspective. Participants were also encouraged to offer comments beyond the scope of the questions. They were prompted to discuss the strengths and capitals observed during the workshops within each group, and collectively across all groups. Additionally, they were asked to identify any challenges encountered and elucidate the facilitating factors that contributed to the effective implementation of the capitals and strengths. After reflecting on the project, the researcher, council officers and educators convened for an in-person meeting to assess its implementation and discuss potential areas for further improvements, including a review of the original purpose of the project.

Ethical approval for the research was obtained from Deakin university and ethics penetrated each stage of the process, which was underpinned by the principles of respect and protecting the privacy of personal information. Informed consent was sought from the participants before the research.

Data analysis

The research analysed data to uncover knowledge about family, teaching, and social support practices for Chinese immigrant young children, emphasising the strengths and symbolic capitals of all participants. The data were translated into English and comprehensively classified and interpreted to extract meaningful insights and reveal underlying structures of significance within the information collected (Flick, 2014).

Recognising the nature of this experiential research, Braun and Clark's reflexive thematic analysis (2021) was undertaken through a concurrent process of subjective and reflexive engagement with the data using the following five steps. First, the researcher and research assistant transcribed the data corpus. The second step involved familiarisation, reduction and organisation of the data. Some data were deleted because they were not relevant. At the end of this step, a file that contained the field notes and transcripts was compiled. Third, a line-by-line colour-coding of data was performed using the 'new comments' function in the Microsoft

word document to allow the identification of initial codes (Byrne, 2021). Fourth, excerpts of similar codes were analysed together. Guided by the thematic analysis framework, this step analysed semantic and latent themes, Semantic themes were clearly provided by the participants (e.g. ‘children’s happiness is the key’) whereas latent themes were the underlying ideas inferred by the researchers (e.g. the importance of wellbeing). Informed by Byrne, we also engaged our thinking with theory. Identification of the themes was supported by our interests in the elements of symbolic capital and participants’ strengths. Finally, broader themes were extracted. In this step, some themes were combined and modified to provide better distinction. Throughout the data analysis, the researcher and research assistant practised reflexivity by using analytic memo writing. This facilitated our understanding of the data and enabled the transition to the formal write-up of the research.

Findings

Identifying strengths and recognising symbolic capitals

Using the lens of strengths, a range of resources and strategies were identified, shedding light on the factors participants leveraged in facilitating Chinese children’s learning. Grounded in the concept of symbolic capital, encompassing the knowledge, abilities and assets recognised by the participants as potent contributors to children’s learning, the following findings were identified. Due to the richness of the data, they are presented first as a table showing a summary of the strengths and symbolic capitals evident in the data (Table 2).

When asking Chinese grandparents about their interactions with preschool children, they described their specific responsibilities and practices. These included daily care, spending quality time, and providing transportation between home and the early childhood centre. These findings align with previous studies on grandparenting, emphasising care, attention, and companionship (Nedelcu & Wyss, 2020). Grandma Z’s statement, ‘I cook for him, stay with him, trying to make sure that he’s healthy and well’, exemplifies this. Grandparents also mentioned their active involvement in various learning activities to better connect with the children, as expressed by Grandpa D: ‘My life focuses on my granddaughter’s activities. I accompany her to learning activities. I also learn to understand her’.

The educators stated that their work with Chinese immigrant children focused on facilitating their settlement in the service, learning about the children’s needs and ensuring the availability of bilingual support. To effectively engage Chinese children, regular communication with the children and their families played a crucial role. Two key aspects of communication stood out: educators actively initiated conversations and educators encouraged children and families to talk:

The most important thing is to communicate. Anything we want or they want, we need to communicate. Educators usually start the talks but we encourage children and families to talk to us. We always tell a child, ‘Tell us what you want’ (educator B).

Table 2 Strengths and symbolic capitals

| Participants | Strengths of the community | Symbolic capitals in children's learning |
|------------------|--|--|
| Grandparents | care, attention, companionship, understanding, open to learning | school readiness, bilingualism, social skills, independence, personal health |
| Educators | open communication, bilingual support, special attention | children's choice, parents' wisdom, family's culture, children's home language, self-help skills |
| Council officers | social support to the families, professional support to the educators, being ready for children and families | friends, social skills, playfulness, school readiness |

Educators unanimously agreed that a key strategy for understanding the needs and wishes of the children and the families was to convey their availability to assist the children and families in achieving their goals. Educator A exemplified this approach, stating, ‘we always tell children and their families that they could try to do what they want and we are here to help’.

Council officers adopted a needs-oriented, strengths-based approach in their work with Chinese immigrant families. This approach values family experiences and offers support when necessary. They acknowledged the remarkable population growth in the council area, driven by evolving socio-economic patterns that encouraged contributions from local Chinese families: ‘We are all learning from these families, but we are also interested to know what we can do for them’ (officer A). Being ready for Chinese families and children is a clear emphasis in their practice: ‘Schools need to be ready for these children and we all need to be ready for them’ (officer B).

In the eyes of grandparents, the process of getting children ready for school represents a valuable form of capital. This preparation not only equips children with essential skills and knowledge but also invests them with a strong foundation for future educational achievement. Grandma H, for example, stressed that ‘being well-prepared for school enables children to do well in life’.

The unanimous consensus among grandparents highlighted the paramount importance of English as a crucial capital for their grandchildren’s learning. Grandma Z explained this: ‘I want my grandchild to fit in Australia and to be able to use English properly’. This idea was extensively deliberated among other grandparents. They collectively believed that a strong command of English not only ensured their integration into the Australian community but also facilitated social connections and bolstered children’s readiness for school.

Simultaneously, within the family context, the Chinese language held profound significance. It was associated with ‘all family-related conversations’ (Grandma W), whether involving immediate family members or Chinese friends and relatives. For the grandparents, one of the primary ways they were supporting grandchildren’s learning was through the use of the Chinese language.

For the grandparents, children’s success in learning was linked to their social skills. Many expressed appreciation for early childhood centres, recognising their role in fostering these skills. Additionally, they emphasised the importance of families in creating opportunities for children to make friends. Grandpa D highlighted this by saying, ‘We take our granddaughter to many places, so she can play with others. Learning how to interact with peers is important’.

The comments from the grandparents also revealed the value they placed on children’s health and hygiene. For instance, grandma W shared an experience regarding her grandson’s handwashing routine and stated: ‘maintaining cleanliness and hygiene is crucial. I teach him to prioritise hygiene to ensure good health because without good health, nothing else is possible’.

Unlike other studies which reported Chinese grandparents’ detailed care for children (Ma, 2017), most grandparents in this study emphasised the importance of children’s independent skills, citing examples of encouraging children to do what they could for themselves, ‘such as dressing up, making their own bed, or packing lunch’.

In a similar way, the educators also pointed out ‘self-help skills’ as a highly valued area in children’s learning: ‘At our kindergarten we focus on children’s self-help skills, such as if children can look after their own lunchbox, or if they can solve the problems by themselves. This is the same to Chinese children’ (educator A).

In addition, educators stressed the importance of a children’s home language, family wisdom, and Chinese traditional culture, which they considered to be fundamental factors in Chinese children’s learning. They believed that Chinese families offered a wealth of resources, including communication strategies, holiday traditions, family customs, and daily activities. Educator A referred to these resources as the ‘family curriculum’ that children were exposed to. She highlighted that children often participated in activities with their grandparents or parents that educators were not familiar with.

There were also the points about the focus on children’s choices as expressed by educator C:

At kindergarten we always offer the opportunity to the children to make choice, such as asking ‘Would you like me to help you or you’d like to do it on your own?’. By doing this you are also offering them the opportunity of expressing their own ideas.

From the perspective of council officers, Chinese children’s learning in early childhood years could be understood as a period of enjoying play, learning to make friends and developing social skills, which for them formed a constitutive part of school preparation. The following passage shows this:

I think that the valuable thing for Chinese young children is that they learn through play and develop social skills. By doing this, they are getting ready for school (officer A).

Learning through strengths and symbolic capitals in a collaborative community

As per the project goals, participants’ collaborative experiences had cultivated a supportive community. This was achieved through the exchange of a range of questions, comments, and examples. These collective efforts led to a mutual understanding and cooperation among them, resulting in the development of a comprehensive set of practices tailored to their roles in educating and supporting Chinese immigrant children.

To a large extent, educators and council officers expanded their understanding of Chinese grandparenting and support strategies for Chinese immigrant children during the project. Initially, council officers perceived Chinese grandparenting as a caregiving role, as described by officer B, who mentioned ‘the role as the physical help of the little...like making sure they are growing and eating enough’. Educators, on the other hand, believed that grandparents supported children’s parents. Both council officers and educators had their biases challenged as they discovered that grandparents were enthusiastic learners about their grandchildren’s growth and development. This newfound awareness exceeded their initial expectations. Educator B shared her perspective: ‘Having been raised by my grandmother, I used to

perceive Chinese grandparents solely as caregivers. It was eye-opening to learn that they are dedicated learners, constantly seeking knowledge on how to raise and educate their grandchildren’.

Council officers contended that all the strengths and resources shared in the programme were key elements in Chinese children’s learning and development. They emphasised the importance of everyone having a seat at the table, stating that ‘we, as the council staff, cannot be in the position of power and privilege’ (officer B). They have also realised the high status that grandparents gave to the educators and decided to provide opportunities for educators to lead the activities and engagement with Chinese grandparents and families in any future endeavours related to children’s learning and early childhood education.

The educators highlighted the significance of reinforcing traditional experiences to effectively implement capitals and strengths. According to educator A, ‘Chinese traditional culture, for instance, the idea of extended family, plays an important role in Chinese immigrant families. We appreciate this opportunity to work with these Chinese elderly people and know how these values and practices work with young children’.

Another recurrent theme, ‘play’, was evident in the educators’ reflective statements, with observations such as ‘grandparents used play to pass time with grandchildren’, ‘grandparents shared a similar understanding of play with us, emphasising adults’ participation without excessive intervention’, and ‘grandparents described play as interactive engagement rather than physical activities’. Reflecting on these insights, educators considered embracing a ‘play-based’ approach to further strengthen working relationships with Chinese grandparents, building upon grandparents’ preferences and extending their existing practices with their grandchildren. Ideas such as storytelling, singing, construction and playdough were going to be explored as potential avenues for their continued development.

During the initial project phase, grandparents expressed desires for increased attention from educators to their grandchildren and a stronger focus on English language teaching in early childhood services. They also voiced concerns about seeking help when needed. Some grandparents shared incidents of family conflicts with their own children regarding child-rearing, covering various aspects like ‘children’s behaviours,’ what children can do and cannot do,’ ‘bedtime routines,’ ‘food choices,’ and ‘clothing decisions’. Grandpa D noted ‘Generational differences lead to different child-rearing approaches’. In reflection, they recognised the project’s value in helping them understand ‘seemingly minor but important things’. Grandma H expressed her satisfaction, saying, ‘Teachers provide detailed information. This helps the communication in the family too’.

Through collaboration with early childhood educators and council officers, grandparents gained clarity on their questions. They remarked, ‘We’ve learned a lot’ and ‘We now understand the work of teachers and the resources available at the council’ (grandparent L). Furthermore, they realised that their grandchildren’s early childhood learning extended beyond language instruction, encompassing aspects like ‘fostering socialisation’, ‘understanding children’s learning processes’, and ‘finding appropriate resources for child development’. Grandma H emphasised, ‘I now know the teachers’ work and understand what my granddaughter’s is doing everyday’.

Central to being connected as a collaborative community, and having ongoing communications, was the usefulness of 'WeChat' as a virtual platform. An educator commented on the power of WeChat to connect with the grandparents and said that they would like to use it at work too. Grandpa D explained that 'I'm glad that our discussions were not only limited to the workshops. It is hard to organise more than 50 people to participate at the same time, so using WeChat is great'.

Despite the positive gains through workshops and WeChat and 'the development of a middle place' (officer A), participants also noted issues in their collaborative community. Council staff identified a discrepancy in the behaviour of grandparents on WeChat compared to during workshops and they wondered why. It was observed that many grandparents kept the videos off in the workshops. Educators, drawing from their own experiences and backgrounds interpreted this as 'a form of silent response, indicating humility and respect towards professionals'.

In addition, while some practices aligned with their existing understandings, participants viewed their ideas about certain aspects as different, particularly regarding attitudes towards children's learning difficulties and the issues that could arise in early childhood environments. For example, some grandparents talked about children's behavioural problems at the early childhood centre to be potentially triggered by racism or poor environment, while educators linked them to family influence or family and teachers' communications: 'there was a child in my class who was very violent. So when we asked him why he was hurting others, he said this is what my dad told me, if someone hit you, you must hit them back. If parents are giving their children some concepts like this, there is no way for us to solve this kind of problem' (educator B).

In a further example of discussion about children's health and eating, one grandparent spoke about what food her grandchild ate. This perspective differed from educators' and council officers' understanding about children's choices:

I think that cooked food is better for children, such as noodles and porridge these kinds of warm food. I don't like my grandchild to eat just oat and milk. I give him what I like to eat (grandma Z).

Throughout the project, different perspectives surfaced, prompting educators and council officers to engage in reflective processes and shaping the topics discussed in workshops. For instance, a grandparent talked about how her grandson's behaviour was perceived as challenging by educators, whereas she considered it normal. This led to the workshop topic on children's learning behaviours following the reflective meeting. As participants continued to learn about each other's practices, mutual understandings gradually evolved, enabling the recognition and appreciation of the capitals and strengths of the community. Educator A expressed that 'we need to adjust our practices according to other differences'.

Discussion

This study focuses on exploring the strengths and symbolic capitals possessed by Chinese grandparents, early childhood educators and city council officers as they collaborate to provide support for Chinese immigrant young children. The findings

have touched on many areas and topics that have been previously reported in the literature on Chinese grandparenting (Da & Garcia, 2015; Xu et al., 2018; Yoon, 2005), social support, and the guiding principles of the Australian early childhood curriculum, in particular respect for diversity and partnerships with families (Australian Government Department of Education, 2022).

Previous studies have highlighted the benefits of collaboration between immigrant families and early childhood services, including improved relationships, children's learning outcomes and parenting and teaching practices (Norheim & Moser, 2020). However, collaborative strategies have not always been optimally implemented, and the involvement of local councils in school-parent collaboration has been limited (McWayne et al., 2022). In addition, there was a lack of research on the partnership practice between immigrant grandparents and early childhood educators. The current project aimed to fill these gaps by developing a collaborative community for Chinese immigrant children's learning that actively included grandparents as key partners.

The findings highlight the positive potential of collaborative efforts that harness collective strengths and capitals. Participants showed a genuine interest in valuing and reflecting on each other's ideas, leading to improved communication within the groups. Their strong motivation to learn and collaborate was evident on the WeChat platform, where they regularly posted messages, asked questions, and responded. Council officers actively participated in group chats with the help of an English Chinese translator. The concept of symbolic capital and a strengths-based approach both stress the importance of recognising and supporting knowledge, abilities, and skills that contribute to children's learning. The project facilitated the gradual identification and collaborative implementation of these assets.

While a general consensus existed regarding the importance of certain practices, like home language maintenance, the analyses revealed discrepancies, for instance, in the choice of food for children. This divergence can be attributed to the fact that grandparents, educators and council officers hold distinct values influenced by their own experiences, thus drawing on a variety of factors stemming from their diverse backgrounds.

Misunderstandings also emerged within the community. Specifically, educators and council officers held a perspective that certain experiences they deemed important, such as fostering children's independence, were regarded as less significant by the grandparents. What the educators and Australian professionals typically valued was a play-based and child-centred experience, where adults played a guiding role in children's decisions (Fleer, 2013). It came as a surprise to them when grandparents also emphasised the importance of children's independence, as, in their view, 'Chinese traditions focus on adult control'.

Many professional fields, including early childhood education in Australia, are burdened with an excess of assumptions, particularly concerning parenting (Fleer, 2013). In the present study, the framework of strengths and symbolic capitals was employed to uncover the strengths and capitals of participating Chinese immigrant families. The approach aimed to challenge certain preconceived notions held by Australian professionals and highlight the significance of expanding their practices when working Chinese immigrant young children. Every approach to child rearing

and early childhood education is inherently interesting and worthy of exploring. It is not solely the Australian professionals who harboured assumptions about Chinese immigrant parenting. The study shows that the grandparents themselves also gained a greater awareness of the educational practices and social services, and they expressed appreciation for the efforts made by the professionals to work with them and their grandchildren.

The findings enabled us to identify four repertoires of community collaboration for the support of Chinese young children's learning through engaging with their grandparents. In the first repertoire, a collaborative mindset prevails, emphasising the inclusion of all stakeholders and ensuring that 'everyone has a voice and seat at the table' (officer A). The second repertoire focuses on recognising and sharing collective strengths and capitals, appreciating and reflecting upon differences. The third repertoire involves the combined use of face to face and online tools, with professionals demonstrating flexibility in engaging effectively with Chinese grandparents. This allows for open discussions tailored to the specific needs and preferences of the grandparents. The fourth repertoire centres around active communication facilitated by a Chinese-English interpreter, utilising culturally -friendly channels, like the WeChat platform and Chinese grandparents' groups.

Conclusion

The study enhances our understanding of an unexplored topic in Australia: the involvement of Chinese immigrant grandparents in the education of young children. The findings confirm that Chinese immigrant grandparents are active participants in their grandchildren's education and display a strong willingness to learn (Da & Garcia, 2015; Yoon, 2005). Additionally, the study highlights the importance of involving early childhood educators and local council officers in harnessing the strengths and resources both within and beyond Chinese immigrant families.

It is worth noting that there has been a limited repertoire of practices available to guide teaching, grandparenting and social support for immigrant children. This limitation stems from the scarcity of opportunities for families and educators to work together. To achieve long-term improvements in their relationships, collaboration needs to extend beyond formal or informal meetings. Experiential projects, like the one conducted in this study, can play a valuable role in creating opportunities for all stakeholders involved in immigrant children's lives to share their knowledge about each other's strengths and resources and foster mutual learning. Despite the potential benefits, the obstacle of limited funding poses a challenge to overcome (Logan et al., 2016). Fortunately, the current study received support from a local council. However, for governments to genuinely promote multicultural education in early childhood education, it is crucial that they allocate resources to facilitate these collaborative activities.

Building upon the compelling evidence that supports the effectiveness of a collaborative project in fostering active participation in children's education, it is crucial to acknowledge the instances of conflicts between Chinese immigrant grandparents and their own children regarding childrearing and early education. Moreover,

the project highlights the crucial role of council officers in the collaborative community. These findings emphasise the proposition to include a diverse spectrum of individuals in the endeavour of cultivating relationships. Central to this effort is the involvement of immigrant parents and professionals from various sectors, encompassing community services and government organisations.

Importantly, the study identifies the substantial trust that grandparents place in the professional expertise of educators. Educators are therefore uniquely positioned to foster collaboration by affirming and incorporating the strengths and resources of immigrant families into their teaching practices. In line with the strength-based and symbolic capitals approach, the key to progress lies in solidifying the sense of strengths and capitals brought by all individuals in children's lives.

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Data availability Author confirms that the datasets used in this study are available upon request from the Deakin repository by the researcher.

Declarations

Conflict of interest Author has not financial or personal conflict of interest that could influence the research and its publication.

Ethical approval Author has followed all ethical standards and procedures outlined by Deakin University and an ethics approval was obtained (HAE-21-146).

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