THE MICRO-POLITICS OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT: ETHNOCENTRISM, UTITARIANISM OR RHETORIC

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ABSTRACT

Developing partnership relationships between home and school is one of the prime focuses in the current education reform movement in Hong Kong. Particularly, specific instructions for involving parents at various levels of children’s education have been spelled out in many governmental policy documents. This article reports on an interpretive study that explores the micro-politics of parental involvement in school education in two primary schools in Hong Kong. By analyzing the interviews with 12 parents and 10 teachers and field-notes of participant and non-participant observations in the case study schools, three propositions of power relations between parents and schools emerge. The findings indicate that in the process of encouraging parents’ participation in school education, teaching professionals demonstrated ethnocentric attitudes towards parents; parents were being utilized as instruments of the school initiatives; and the notion of “parents-as-school governors” was of empty rhetoric in home-school cooperation.

Keywords: Micro-politics, Parental involvement, Ethnocentrism, Utilitarianism, Hong Kong

INTRODUCTION

For the last two decades, the education sector has been changing quickly in Hong Kong. In the West, neo-liberalism has directed reforms to measure performance of schools and teachers given market demands for accountability (Duke, 2004; Skerrett and Hargreaves, 2008). In the East, Cheng (2007) conceptualizes the period of 1990s focusing on the second wave of education reforms in response to the concerns about school accountability to various stakeholders. This accountability orientation conveys the notion that parents play a significant role in school-based management (Caldwell, 2004; Ng, in press). Particularly in Hong Kong, specific instructions for involving parents at various levels of school education have been spelled out in many governmental policy documents. Home-school partnerships have been developed because parent representatives have eventually been allowed to participate in managing schools through legislation. The bill that parents, teachers and alumni were included as school governors was passed as an Education Ordinance by the Legislative Council in July 2004. Thus, empowering parents to play a role in the self-management of schools is one of the most important innovations in helping achieve school effectiveness (Caldwell, 2004; Ng, 2007). However, educational change entails many challenges (Duke, 2004). In Hong Kong, with the implementation of school-based management (SBM), important aspects of governance are delegated to parents, principals and teachers. They face new challenges as a result of their changing roles and responsibilities. For example, parental involvement in school-based management carries the notion oft parent
empowerment which signifies that “power given to a subordinate group is consequently lost by the former power-holder” (Vincent, 1996, p.7). The purposes of this article are (1) to report on an interpretive and exploratory study designed to illuminate the micro-politics arising from increased parental involvement in school education and (2) to theorize home-school relationships emerging in two case study schools of this qualitative research. It concludes that at the initial stage of parental involvement at various levels of school operation, the attitude of ethnocentrism towards parents prevails among teachers. The notion of utilitarianism dominates the second stage of parental involvement where parents are being treated as instruments of school initiatives. Lastly, while parents are encouraged to be involved in managing school, their managerial roles are sometimes marginalized by the school body and the notion of ‘parents-as-school-governors’ is of empty rhetoric in the era emphasizing accountability. The finding of this study does not attempt to come to any generalization but is expected to contribute to illuminative and interpretive analysis of the phenomenon of parental involvement investigated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Micro-politics in school education

Many studies have employed micro-political approach towards investigating human relationships in school organizations. For example, Stephen Ball's (2012) micro-political theory of school organization is a radical departure from traditional theories. He rejects a prescriptive ‘top down’ approach and directly addresses the interest and concerns of teachers and current problems facing schools. Examining the formal and informal processes and structures that constitute everyday political life in the schools, the studies of Blase (1991) explore how individuals and groups use power to achieve goals and the consequences of its use for others.

The study of Crow and Weindling (2010) found that new head-teachers confronted internal political issues, such as weak teachers, staff conflicts, resistance to change, and conflicts with parents as well as external issues, such as those involving governmental entities, the press, and the union. In responding to these political issues, the head-teachers used tactics such as trial and error, mentors/role models, and information gathering for learning how to think act politically. In their study, Blasé and Blasé (2002) examine the applicability of the micro-political perspective to understanding various dimensions of instructional supervision followed by a discussion on the centrality of micro-politics to supervisory structures, processes, and practices. Smylie and Denny (1990) indicate that the development and performance of the teacher leadership roles are mediated by the organizational contexts in which they are established. They suggest that teacher leadership should be approached as an issue of organizational development rather than solely as an issue of individual empowerment. Drawing on specific cases, the study of Thomas and Davies (2005) illustrates the process of the micro-politics of resistance in the UK public service sector and offers a more detailed and varied understanding of resistance that can account for different motivations and ways in which individuals struggle to transform meanings. Blasé (1989) studied teachers’ perceptions of everyday politics in schools and suggested that exchange processes are central to understanding the range of individual political strategies used with open school principals. Björk and Blasé (2009) have found that middle managers were faced with a dilemma when the school district implemented a state sponsored decentralization policy that included adoption of distributed leadership and Total Quality Management (TQM). On the one hand, middle managers risked termination if they failed to implement legislated reform
policies and the superintendent’s directives. On the other hand, if they successfully implemented such policies their positions would become redundant. Initially responses of middle managers ranged along a continuum from acquiescence to resistance however as implementation of the decentralization initiative accelerated, middle managers’ political resistance increased in scope and intensity.

**Micro-politics of parental involvement in school management**

Blase and Anderson (1995) indicates that micro-politics exists everywhere in school especially when new initiatives are introduced to school from outside. The notion of home-school cooperation connotes that parents and teachers value each other in the schooling process of their children where mutual respect exists. In Chrispeel’s (1996) term, ‘co’ means ‘two-way’ and ‘multidimensional’. She argues that parents and teachers can be co-learners and co-teachers. To conceptualize how parental involvement occurs in different dimensions at school, many researchers have developed different frameworks of home-school cooperation on the basis of empirical evidence (e.g. Bastiani, 1989; Epstein, 1995). For examples, Bastiani (1989) conceptualizes eight levels of how school can work with families whereas Epstein (1995) has identified six kinds of school activities for parent-school cooperation: In Hong Kong, Ng (1999) has also developed a six-level ‘Model of Home-School Cooperation’ in accordance with the educational context of Hong Kong. In fact, research in the West demonstrates that parental involvement in school can help enhance positive development of children’s self-concepts and can make contribution to the long term development of school effectiveness (Amatea, 2007; Berns, 2007; Epstein, 2001). Encouraged by the positive evidence of getting parents involved, the Hong Kong government has initiated measures to gradually involve parents at different levels of school education (Ng, 2007).

However, when parents are allowed to be involved in school management, Pang (2008) argues that there has been no decentralization of power with the establishment of the school council; rather, the level of government control over school education has increased. Ng (2007) finds that parent representatives are always marginalized by other members in the school council in Hong Kong. In her studies, Lareau (2000) found that teachers did not want partnership but rather a “professional-client” relationship of which teachers see education as a round-the-clock experience that parents have to play a role in supplementing the school by supervising their children, reinforcing the curriculum and showing support by attending school events. Moreover, two studies in Israel revealed that there are various conflicts and tensions between and within groups of actors involved in school management (Huber, 2011) and that implementation of school-based management provokes parents’ militant behaviours against schools (Nir and Ami, 2005). In South Africa, though parents have a majority on the school governing bodies, lack of trust between principals and parent governors sometimes creates tension in school (Heystek, 2006). In their case study, Brown and Duku (2008) also found that micro-politics emerged among parents in South Africa when participating in school governance. Similarly, the study of Chikoko (2008) in Zimbabwe indicates that despite the presence of a legal decentralized school governance structure in which parents form the majority, they did not have the capacity to function effectively therein, and were still marginalized in the decision-making process. In Britain, according to Blackledge (1995), school governing bodies are still dominated by professionals, politicians and unelected members of the business community. Moreover, the report of a study conducted by Warwick University criticizes that school governors are being sidelined and turned...
into ‘passive pawns’ as their power is eroded by Government reforms (The Telegraph 2009). In short, the findings of these research studies inform us that there is little evidence that schools are accountable to parents and have any intention to hand over policymaking power to parents and communities.

Antonio Gramsci, an Italian neo-Marxist, argued that power is exercised by consent rather than coercion through the institutions of civil society such as churches, schools and families (Simon, 1993). Gramsci did not imply that subordinate groups were powerless but argued that hegemony of dominant groups is exercised to maintain control over other groups by obtaining their active consent to the status quo (Vincent, 1996). Therefore, teaching professionals possess more social and cultural power than parents and the power exercised is probably consented and respected. As reiterated by Davies (1996), by virtue of teachers’ positions in the school and the professional knowledge acquired, the teachers have often demonstrated a certain control over relationships with parent participants so it is understandable that some teachers are hesitant to give up part of their traditionally established power to parents. Cowburn (1986) argues that the concept of home-school partnership is devised for the school personnel to legitimately retain professional control by means of co-opting parents’ support and it seems teaching professionals have built-in control over their relationship with parents. Siu (2000) echoes that power relations penetrate parent-school interactions when she explains the meaning of “home-school cooperation” and “parental involvement”. Parents are still required to work in accordance with school regulations. Teaching professionals will not easily release influence and control to parents. Gascoigne (1995) agrees that there are a lot of obstacles to parental involvement until the teaching professionals have taken initiatives to work closely with parents and each partner feels valued.

**RESEARCH METHODOLGY**

The interpretive methodological approach for collecting and analyzing data was employed in this qualitative study. The essence of interpretive approach is to capture the participants’ points of view (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998; Radnor, 2001). This interpretive paradigm emphasizes naturalistic methods of inquiry within which the study was conducted. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), naturalistic inquiry is appropriate for handling data “where there are multiple constructed realities that can only be studied holistically” (p.37). The perceptions of a group of parents and teachers on issues concerning parental involvement constitute “multiple constructed realities”. In order to achieve maximum variation to the analysis, the method of “theoretical sampling” (Strauss, 1987, p.38) is adopted by including two primary schools for the case studies.

In this qualitative research, the investigator employed the ethnographic method because it facilitates interviews, conversations and participant observations to occur at anytime, anywhere over a fairly long period and the researcher can study the meanings of behavior, language and interactions of the culture sharing group (Creswell, 1998). The author had engaged in extensive work of data collection for half a year in each case study school where in-depth interviews with parents and teachers, and intense participant observation took place. With consent from the principals, teachers and chairpersons of the PTAs, the author had taken part in many activities such as PTA meetings, parent days, parent-teacher conferences, talent night, parent consultation days and recess periods in which field-notes were recorded during participant observations. In this study, being a human instrument, the author had to respond effectively to the phenomenon, and be capable of recognizing, sorting,
distinguishing and interpreting the subtleties of meaning which emerge (Radnor, 2001). Two sampled primary schools, Tai Po and Tai Woo, pseudonyms, were chosen in accordance with two principles. First, the schools provide greater potential for parental involvement at various levels and have already established their parent-teacher associations and school councils. Second, they include families of various socio-economic status so as to ensure parents from different social positions are interviewed. In each school, five parents and four teachers were selected for in-depth interviews (see Figures 1 and 2). After analyzing the transcript of the first interview, the author chose another parent and teacher for interviews. Subsequently their views were, in terms of their social backgrounds or professions, different from the previous one.

**Figure 1  Demographic information of parent interviewees**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Parent interviewee</th>
<th>Social background</th>
<th>Occupation (M=Mother; F=Father)</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tai Po</td>
<td>Mrs. A</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>M: Teacher</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>F: University lecturer</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mrs. B</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>M: Housewife</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>F: Construction worker</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mrs. C</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>M: Housewife</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>F: Teacher</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mrs. D</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>M: Housewife</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>F: Chef</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mr. and Mrs. E</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>M: Civil servant</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>F: Account officer</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tai Woo</td>
<td>Mr. and Mrs. F</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>M: Bank clerk</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>F: Shop owner</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mr. and Mrs. G</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>M: Clean lady</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>F: Truck driver</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mrs. H</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>M: Housewife</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>F: Construction worker</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mr. and Mrs. I</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>M: Clerk</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>F: Senior Executive officer</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mrs. J</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>M: House wife</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>F: Financial officer</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2  Demographic information of the teacher interviewees**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>School head</th>
<th>Teacher interviewee</th>
<th>Years of teaching experience</th>
<th>School position</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tai Po</td>
<td>Principal A</td>
<td>Teacher A</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Class teacher</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher B</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Discipline master</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher C</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Vice principal</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher D</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Class teacher</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tai Woo</td>
<td>Principal B</td>
<td>Teacher E</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Class teacher</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher F</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Vice principal</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher G</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Guidance master</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Teacher H</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Class teacher</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The data were collected by semi-structured in-depth interviews (Creswell, 1998).
An interview schedule was used as a guide for interviewing to help focus the interviews on the major research issue regarding the development of parental involvement in times of education reforms. Probes were used to encourage the interviewees to describe their perceptions and experiences in details and to seek clarification constantly of their words. All the interviews were conducted in Chinese. The interviews were tape-recorded and the transcribed data were analyzed using both open and axial coding (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The analytical case studies of these two schools provided the author with a foundation for an understanding of what was going on about parental involvement in school education. Out of these descriptive analyses, the theories of micro-politics of parental involvement emerged in the interpretive process (Radnor, 2001). To design questions for collecting data through observations and in-depth interviews, the author took into account both Ng’s (1999) and Epstein’s (1995) models as basic references. However, the investigator did not adopt any fixed types of models as framework of the study because the contexts of interpretive research are natural and must be taken as they are discovered. They are not contrived, constructed, predetermined, predefined, or taken for granted (Sherman and Webb, 1988).

THE CASE STUDY SCHOOLS

The following paragraphs, based on the data collected through observations and interviews, briefly described the relationships between parent and school at these two case study schools while parents were invited to be involved in school. This descriptive analysis serves as a basis for the interpretive analysis in the next section.

Tai Po Primary School

Kowloon East has a forty-year history. It is a Christian school situation at the suburban area of Hong Kong. The ratio of students from middle-class and working class families is about 4 to 6. Principal A had had her principalship in this school for just two years. Previously, there had not been any concrete parent policy in Tai Po Primary School. Understanding that parental involvement was a trend in times of school reform, she had already formulated a plan of involving parents in her mind. She seemed to have good relationship with parents. Every morning, Principal A would be standing at the school gate, greeting and chatting with parents. When the bell rang, all parents left the playground and willingly stood aside to watch the morning assembly.

The parent-teachers association (PTA) at Tai Po was set up two years ago. According to Teacher C, the vice-principal, there had been a change in the school culture since then. Apparently, there emerged a culture of parent participation. The PTA was not only an organization for fund-raising but also a bridge between parents and school because Principal A encouraged parents to voice their expectations to school through the association. Parents were also invited as volunteers to help organize social events during Easter, Christmas and Lunar New Year holidays. For most parents, contact with the school was through two channels. First, they were invited by the school for attending some meetings such as “Know Your Teacher” and “Primary One Students’ Academic Life” prior to the commencement of the term, “Secondary School Allocation” for Primary 6 Parents, “Annual Singing Contest s”, “Parents’ Day” and “Annual School Picnicking Day”. Another initiative, inviting some parents to be teachers of some students with learning difficulties, was well received. Each year, the school and the PTA jointly organized a parent-school consultative meeting to encourage two-way communication. A PTA newsletter was issued three times a year informing parent members of the PTA activities and the
Collaborative effort and collegial consensus were the impetus for developing better home-school relationships. Teacher C, the vice principal at Tai Po, perceived teachers working together on a team basis. There was a tradition of sharing views and consultations among colleagues. Teachers were working in a harmonious environment and collegiality prevailed in the school. On the other hand, he admitted that some of his colleagues were not skillful and confident enough to develop rapport with parents. There existed a different picture from Teacher C who perceived that it was the principal’s managerial strategy to keep the teachers in check by encouraging parents to watch the teachers. Teacher B also echoed Teacher C’s worry by saying that the parents demanded too much from teachers and was afraid that parents’ participation would develop a culture of complaints.

Tai Po had already invited one parent representative to the School Board as school manager. Parents seemed to be contented with this invitation. It seemed that parents could now have a say in monitoring and governing the school. To summarize, in addition to playing the role of governor, parents in Tao Po School were in many ways involved at different levels of school operation. They were invited to offer assistance in extra-curricular activities and be presenters at the prize-giving ceremony, audience in the seminars, candidates of the PTA office and participants on the sports day, etcetera.

Tai Woo Primary School

Tai Woo is a primary school without any association with religion. It is situated between a big private residential area in which most of the families are of middle-class backgrounds and three public housing estates composed of many working-class families. Principal B established the PTA a year ago. However, he did not accept those educational innovations introduced by the Education Department he did not believe that the Education Department had had a thorough plan for education development. He claimed that many innovations had subsequently been unsuccessful. He indicated that parents should not be involved in school management because they could not help but interfere with school operation.

Contrary to Tai Po School, Tai Woo had a different picture of the PTA meeting. Activities offered by the PTA were the only opportunity parents could be involved at school. Other than these activities, Principal B did not have any intentions to involve parents as volunteers at school. Judging from his conservative views on school reform, he was fearful of parents’ intrusion at school. There was no sign of involving parents in school operation, not to mention school governance. What parents were encouraged to participate was the annual general meeting of the PTA. On the day parent members electing the executives, only a few parents were willing to be candidates in the election, unlike those at Tai Po. Negative comments were given by parents on the school policies and the principal’s relation with them. In fact, the investigator could not find any statements of the school vision mentioning the role of parents at Tai Woo. Parent H said:

The former principal who has migrated was friendlier with us and Principal A is new and we are not impressed by what he has done so far. (Parent H, Tai Woo)

Another parent opined that Principal B emphasized adopting corporal punishment and was more conservative. Though Principal B was considered conservative, for
political reason, he established the PTA which was intended to be a bridge for enhancing parent-teacher communication. As the parent policy was so ambiguous, some teachers did not turn up in parent events organized by the PTA. Teacher G, the guidance master, who established the PTA for the school, attributed teachers’ apathy to the ineffective leadership of Principal B who also demonstrated hesitation to include parent representatives in the school board. In fact, Teacher G had done much work in preparation but it was so bad that no teachers participated. Parent J found that teaching professionals did not respect them. In fact, the school personnel did not attempt to incorporate any parent policy into the vision of the school in order to prevent parents from overstepping the bounds. Thus there was a lack of consensus-driven policy to let parent play a role. In conclusion, the principal of Tai Woo did not have any intention to involve parents in any school operation, not to say governing the school. He did not encourage teachers to increase contact with parents through PTA activities. He was alerted that parents might interfere with the school operation so only a few activities were organized in the PTA.

**FINDINGS: MICRO-POLITICS OF PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT**

Illuminated from the descriptive analysis of the case study schools, there are different practices of parental involvement which concerns different types of micro-politics in which different levels of powers are dispersed to parents by these two schools. The interpretative analysis below is to deliberately emphasize the rhetoric of parental involvement specifically exemplified by these two case study schools in accordance with their interactions with parents. They imply that the notion of home-school cooperation is devaluated and distorted. It is a matter of power and manipulation. It is discernible in their perceptions of the roles of parents being marginalized in the era of education reform.

**Ethnocentrism demonstrated by teaching professionals at Tai Woo School**

It is more prominent at Tai Woo that parents were not expected to participate in school education beyond the limit of communication and parents’ responsibilities of supervising their children at home as implicitly expressed by the teachers, whereas at Tai Po, parents were invited to assist in organizing some school activities. In the eyes of all interviewed parents, the teachers or even the school policies did not respect parents. Perhaps it was due to the conservative and paternalistic attitude of the newly arrived principal. Parent F had the following remark:

*The new principal emphasizes corporal punishment; that is to use the traditional method. He is more conservative. He convinced us that the methods we now adopt can’t improve the behavior of our children. Moreover, he has not taken any innovations introduced by Education Department into account in school policy. I’ve heard from parents of other schools that their children’s schools are implementing curriculum reform and school-based management. However, it is silent and operated as usual here in this school.*

*(Mrs. F, parent of Tai Woo)*

Though the principal was considered conservative, for political reasons, he established the PTA a year ago. It seemed that it was a sign to empower parents to some extent as requested by the government. However, what parents perceived was a malfunctioning PTA. Parents found that they were not respected as teachers did not value PTA’s activities. The establishment of the PTA at Tai Woo was a formality in response to public request for empowering parents. There was no sign of home-school
cooperation. Teacher E with only five teaching experience was not satisfied with what was going on at Tai Woo:

> However, in reality, I don’t find any parent elements in the vision statement of our school. We don’t have such consensus, neither the principal nor ourselves. I dare say we have none. (Teacher E, Tai Woo)

Another parent found that teaching professionals did not respect them:

> I don’t think we are respected. It’s too bad that no teachers participate in our activities. Or else it’s meaningful to organize the PTA. The parents are active in participating but the teachers act like that. If they were more devoted, we could feel care and respected. It should not only be the part of parents. (Mrs. J, parent of Tai Woo)

The guidance master who put much effort in establishing the PTA felt very furious about teachers’ apathy and the principal’s incompetent leadership.

> It all depends on the senior management. I feel that no one from the school administration finds attending the meeting important. For the last three committee meetings, many teacher representatives and the ex-officio members of the school side were absent. The principal does not require them to attend the meetings. The participation rate of parent representatives was high. Eight parents came but there was only one from the school side. (Teacher G, Tai Woo)

The threat of parents’ intrusion may make those conservative teachers or even the principal adopt strategies to implicitly and explicitly marginalize parents’ power to participate in school education. The teaching professionals did not attempt to incorporate any parent policy into the vision of the school in order to prevent parents Miss Yong from overstepping the bounds. This is manifested by the words of Teacher H when talking about inviting parents to be teaching assistants:

> They know nothing about teaching. They just interfere with my work. What they are interested is complaining. It’s better for them to stay out of classroom or even out of the school. (Teacher H, Tai Woo)

The vice principal, demonstrated an unwelcome attitude towards inviting parents to help organize and determine school activities when being asked his opinion on parental involvement:

> I don’t think they can help. Though many of them are educated, what they possess is the “college theory”. However it doesn’t work in reality. They learn a lot of theories in rearing children and suggest giving them less pressures, more freedom and less homework. They really request more. It will require more effort from our colleagues. I don’t think my colleagues are willing to do so. (Teacher F, Tai Woo)

Manipulating parents’ role can also be illustrated in the school policy that parents are not allowed to enter school without prior approval. Parents F and H demonstrated their anger and unhappiness in the interviews over the issue of entering the school. Parent H remarked:

> We have to ask the maid at the front desk for approval before going into school. Sometimes, without appointment made in advance, the teacher will not see us. What a shame! (Mrs. H, parent of Tai Woo)
In the era of school reform emphasizing power decentralization and democratic governance, Tai Woo is run like a closed institution in which the teachers’ power is guaranteed. It looks as if it were a self-contained community (MacBeth, 1988) where parents have no opportunities to exert any influence on teachers’ professional autonomy. Parents as laymen are virtually excluded from the notion of home-school cooperation as promoted by the government for years across schools. Moreover, the teachers at Tai Woo possessed apathetic attitudes towards working with parents. It shows that both the principal and the teachers did not perceive it as a place of strengthening parental involvement but rather, to some teachers, as a burden due to increase in workload. As reiterated by Davis (1996), by virtue of their positions in the school and the professional knowledge acquired, the teachers have often demonstrated a certain control over the relationships. The built-in control is sometimes, on the one hand, out of the thought of protectionism, and on the other hand, out of the sociological perspective of ethnocentrism. To summarize, it is likely to conclude that there are only a few opportunities for parental participation at any level of the school system at Tai Woo. The relationship between parents and teachers is far from a congenial company. The notion of parents as policy-followers politically connotes disapproval, exclusion and manipulation due to teacher professionals’ ethnocentric and protectionist attitude towards parental involvement in school education.

Literature on current home-school practices (e.g. Dehli and Januario, 1994; Jowett, Baginsky and MacNeil, 1991) acknowledges that the relationships between parents, especially parents of working class, and teaching professionals are characterized by the imbalance in power. Vincent (1996, p.3) highlights that “this inequality is seen as stemming from the discrepancy between the professional knowledge of teachers and local government officers and anyone who does not work in, and has limited access to those sphere”. Thus the solution to the problem of imbalance in power between parent and teacher is to make the process of parent empowerment as fast as possible.

**Utilitarian orientation towards parental involvement at Tai Po School**

It is observed that Tai Po School went beyond the bounds of ethnocentrism by inviting parents to enter schools to assist in their daily operation with the pragmatic belief that parents’ contribution to school education could help improve the academic and social development of the children. It seemed that parents and teachers were playing supplementary roles in school activities. At Tai Po, Teacher C, the vice-principal, reiterated the significant role of parents:

*As for organizing a huge scale of school events, we need volunteers from parents. We have a framework, design the games and parents will help organize them. In fact, parents are helpful. (Teacher C, Tai Po)*

Teacher B illustrated how Tai Po got parents involved:

*In addition to the new year gathering and the consultation meeting, our school always invite parents to be presenters at the prize giving ceremony, audience in the seminars, candidates of the PTA office, participants in the sports day, et cetera. (Teacher B, Tai Po)*

Inviting parental participation has several political purposes. First, parents, on the one hand, seem to be empowered; at least what they are doing now was considered impossible many years ago. On the other hand, the intention of the schools’ determination is strictly and politically “utilitarian”. The schools treated parents as
resources. They are utilising parents to carry out school initiatives. To beutilitarian is based on the belief that actions are good if they are useful or benefit the greatest number of people. For example, as confirmed by the research findings (e.g. Jowett, Baginsky, and MacNeil, 1991; Lyons, Mundschenk and Foley, 1994), the process of implementing parental involvement does carry the function of educating parents. Besides, students may develop confidence when seeing their parents frequently in school. Teachers may develop close and trusting relationship with parents. To be “politically utilitarian” means that the action of welcoming parental participation carries the message of parent empowerment and that the school is going decentralized and democratized. For propaganda purpose, it seems that parental involvement is implemented. With the view of marketing orientation, it is beneficial to the reputation of the school by which parents are attracted to choose the school for their children. Nevertheless, what do parents get in return when being involved in school education?

Here, there are two things requiring consideration. First, parents’ intention to offer assistance is being manipulated. Illustrated from the teacher’s words above, parents came to school when they were requested. They became instruments of the schools for school activities. Second, that parental involvement at this stage cannot be interpreted as home-school cooperation. The question is who is in command of the situation. From the outsider’s point of view, parents and teachers are cooperating harmoniously through a process of integration and collaboration. However, at the back stage, imbalance of power is implicitly demonstrated. In her study, Lareau (2000) finds that what teachers wanted was a professional-client relationship with parents rather than equal partners:

What teachers wanted to control is the amount of interconnectedness between and school. They welcomed only particular types of parental involvement in schooling – involvement they defined as supportive and fruitful. (p. 35)

What roles parents play are in the hands of the school side. The grasp of control is to minimise teachers’ tensions since greater parental involvement embodies a threat to their professionalism (Crozier, 1997). Beyond playing the role of schools’ instruments, parents were not found, actually were not allowed, to play any tangible roles of managers at Tai Po.

**Parent governors as policy rhetoric**

Though parents are invited to be managers in the movement of power decentralisation in education, it is not surprising that most of them remain marginal to the running of the school (Vincent, 2000). At Tai Po, in addition to treating parents as instruments of school initiatives, the governing body had gone a step further faster than other schools by inviting one parent representative to the School Board while the government was at the stage of promoting parents as school governors or managers. Politically speaking, the management in the school is viewed as participatory rather than authoritarian. The notion of parental involvement in the process of decision-making connotes collaboration and partnership. The establishment was well received by Parent B, a working class mother:

*It's an improvement. At least it is a symbol of letting us participate. We are now playing a role. Parent representatives will help deliver our concerned issues to the school management.* (Mrs. B, parent of Tai Po)
However, in terms of the ratio between the number of the representatives from the school sponsoring body and the number of parent representative, ten to one, the establishment of parent-as-governor in the School Board is a symbolically rhetoric. The role of parent-as-governor is considerably limited in effect. Even the working-class parent could realise it as a symbol though she welcomed the idea. As to another male parent of middle-class background, Parent E, he critically expressed his doubt and disbelief to its establishment:

‘It’s just one representative invited to the management committee. It’s really meaningless when there is a vote. If the representative is standing on the side of the school, I think it will be a disaster.’ (Mr. E, parent of Tai Po)

In the eyes of Mr. E, the chairperson had seemingly done nothing so far in the PTA. He was sure that she was eventually acting in the interest of the school side. He put forth his opinion in such a way:

“The theory of inviting parents as governors is good, but the outcome is not as effective as what we think ... As I’ve just mentioned, the parent representative could have done better to the change of school uniform. What she did might not be for the principal. She could have done something against the principal if it was good for parents. What I can see is that she doesn’t speak for the parents but for the school side usually.’ (Mr. E, parent of Tai Po)

On the other hand, Teacher D ventured her opinion from a teacher’s point of view:

“I don’t think parents are mature enough to manage the school. They can’t even manage looking after their children well. Why should they be involved in school management?’ (Teacher D, Tai Po)

Indeed, the issue of inviting parent as school governors revealed the tension of the triadic relationship among parents, teachers and the principal. Parent E was discontented with the performance of the parent representative who, he felt, did not work for the interest of parents. The words of the middle-class parent explicitly carry the message that there is a danger that parents are disintegrated into different cliques upon the establishment because he assumed the representative would play the role of marionette, being manipulated by the school representatives. It seemed that the parent representative being invited to the management was always in a dilemma between two courses of unfavourable actions in the meeting: to voice parents’ general views or to enact the wishes of the school principal. In reality, the outcome was exactly what Fitz, Halpin and Power (1993) and Vincent and Tomlinson (2000) argue that parents’ voice was muted in the School Board and eventually, the parent governor was promoting the general interest of the principal or the governing body. It was simply because the parent representative was placed in an undesirable situation in terms of the number in voting.

On the contrary, the other parents may accuse of the representative being assimilated as a part of the Board. This argument is also echoed by Deem, Brehony and Heath (1995) who argues that individual governors are invited to envisage themselves as an integral part of the governing body rather than representing a specific interest group. In this case study, it is apparent that parents’ managerial role is intentionally marginalized by the school side. Parental involvement is of policy rhetoric, a term to disguise the school’s inclination to grasp the control of parents’ behaviors. The representative was willingly or unwillingly being pushed to and fro in the School Board. The policy rhetoric is a political strategy expressed in an old
Chinese saying: “Using one stone to kill two birds”. Through politically incorporating limited number of parents into the governing body, the parent governor was still an instrument of school initiatives on the one hand and allowing the management to legitimise the policies to be implemented on the other.

CONCLUSION

This qualitative study concludes that micro-politics emerged among parents, teachers and principals in the process of inviting parents to be involved in school education as also evidenced by Addi-Raccah and Ainhoren (2009), Ball (2012), Huber (2011), Ng (2007) and Nir and Ami (2005). It emerges as a far more complicated process as was expected. Parent empowerment is a dynamic process. It involves the principle of give-and-take between parents and teachers. It requires mutual trust and respect. The notion of empowerment suggests that power given to a subordinate group is eventually lost by the former power holders. Parental involvement should not be equated with little more than parents’ passively participating in school activities, attending school seminars or receiving information from school. As Vincent and Tomlinson (2000, p. 2046) remarked, some parents will “undoubtedly untouched by the promises of partnership and remain distanced and alienated”.

Highlighted in this study is the micro-politics of parental involvement where policy rhetoric occurs due to imbalance of power between parent and school. Rooted in the qualitative data of observations and interviews with parents and teachers in the case study schools, three models of parent-school relationships in terms of parents’ roles perceived emerge. It concludes that rhetoric of involvement is due to the fact that teaching professionals tend to “define appropriate parental contributions in accordance with their own interests” (Vincent, 1993, p.44). The notion of ethnocentrism as exemplified by Tai Woo School reiterates that teachers regard themselves as experts and professionals and maintain control over parents. The teachers’ inclination is relatively similar to the protective model suggested by Swap (1993) and the expert model of Cunningham and Davis (1985).

The orientation of utilitarianism conveys the message that parents are treated as instruments of school initiatives during the process of involvement, in which parents are welcome to enter school as assistants. They are actually excluded from the mechanism of decision-making. Even though parents are included, they are within the control of the teaching professionals so their participation in the school management is considered pseudo. When there is mutual respect and shared decision-making enjoyed by parents, parents-as-governors may be actualised. Gore (1993) expects that teachers can give some of their power to parents, and thereby developing conditions in which equal partnership between teacher and parent could be flourished. In his study with ten schools, Edward (1995) concludes that meaningful parental involvement in education is the involvement of parents in the governance structures of the school. Although the innovation of increased parental involvement has marked intention to include parents in school governance in the children’s education (Ng, in press), the practice of partnership is of empty rhetoric as indicated in the interviews with parent samples. The policy rhetoric informs us that “parents-as-governors” is an ideal for excellence in education but it emerges complicated micro-politics among stakeholders in Hong Kong. It is suggested that the Education Bureau should provide more training opportunities for school managers concerned and stakeholders on the real purposes and operational guideline of parental involvement in school education at various levels.
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