

The Chronological Development of Parent Empowerment in Children's Education in Hong Kong

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The decentralization of the power of school governance is one of the recent trends of educational development in a global society in which the notion of parents as stakeholders and partners of state education is being gradually recognized, albeit at different paces, in several Asian countries. This paper attempts to analyze the chronological development of parent empowerment in Hong Kong. By examining the education policy documents of Hong Kong in the last three decades and looking into related debates in education reforms, the author conceptualizes five phases of development of parent empowerment which include (1) the period of absolute quiescence and acquiescence; (2) the period of wakefulness of parents' rights and responsibilities, (3) the period of enhancing communication; (4) the period of accountability; and (5) the period of parents as partners.

Key words: parent empowerment, parent involvement, education reform, home-school cooperation

Introduction

For the last two decades, there have been rapid social, economic and political changes and developments in Hong Kong. Accordingly, the education environment has been changed quickly; thus, education goals and tasks have become more complex and demanding (Cheng, 1996). In the fiscal year of 2006, education spending accounted for about 23% of the total expenditure of Hong Kong. It also occupies 4.7% of the Gross Domestic Product as at 2006.

In the context of education reforms in Hong Kong, it is widely agreed that many of the recommendations have prompted a move from meeting quantitative targets to striving for qualitative improvement (e.g. Cheng, 2007;

Education Commission, 1996; Ng, 2001). After 1985, the emphasis of educational restructuring has been placed mainly on the assurance of education quality, to which the government has allocated a great deal of funding aimed at improving the teaching environment. Cheng (2007) conceptualized the period of the 1990s as emphasizing the interface of the effectiveness of educational institutions as the second wave of education reforms in response to the concerns regarding educational accountability to stakeholders. Thus, empowering parents to play a role in the self-managing school is of paramount significance in helping achieve greater school effectiveness (Caldwell, 2004; Beare, Caldwell, & Millikan, 1989). In such circumstances, the decentralization of power of school governance is one of the recent trends of educational development in Hong Kong in which the notion that parents as being stakeholders in their own children's education and parents as school partners is gradually becoming recognized (Ng, 2006).

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Parent Involvement

It is widely agreed that parental involvement in children's education will bring about positive leaning outcomes of children and help achieve school improvement and effectiveness (Pang, 2005). In their review of the historical development of parent involvement in schooling in Australia, New Zealand, Britain and the U.S.A., Dimmock, O'Donoghue and Robb (1996) found that these countries have been involved in reform movements aiming at highlighting the importance of parent empowerment and their increased involvement in evaluating and reviewing whole-school performance. In fact, the importance of a strong parent-school relationship has been repeatedly identified as a critical factor in the academic success and social development of the children concerned (Epstein, 1987; Mundschenk & Foley, 1994). Epstein (1985) noted that students report more positive attitudes towards school and develop habits in doing homework if their parents are involved in school events. Hodges (1997) observed that parents when involved end up feeling more confident in their roles as tutors and this tends to foster better relationships with teachers. Moreover, sustained interest by parents can also boost teacher morale and overall school achievement. Encouraged by the positive evidence of getting parents involved which has been seen in the West, the government of Hong Kong has initiated measures to gradually involve parents at different levels of school education since 1991 through the reform movement which seeks the implementation of school-based management (Ng, 2004).

To help develop and realize parent involvement practices, many researchers conceptualized a number of different models and frameworks on the basis of empirical evidence in the 1990s. For examples, Bastiani (1989) depicted eight levels of how school can work with families whereas Epstein (1995) identified six types of school activities for parent-school cooperation, namely 'communication', 'parenting', 'learning at home', 'volunteering', 'decision-making' and 'collaboration with the community'. In accordance with the educational context of Hong Kong, Ng (1999, 2001) developed a six-level 'Model of Home-School Cooperation' (MHSC) in which parents could be involved in children's education through three levels of involvement outside school: 'communicating with school', 'helping actual learning of individual children',

'taking part in parent programs and organizations' and another three levels of involvement inside school: 'assisting in school operation', 'helping decision making' and 'participating in decision making'.

Parent Empowerment

The phrase, 'parent empowerment', is always used in the context of school reform (e.g. Hess, 1992; Ng, 2006). In the past, it was not unusual to find the notice, 'no parents beyond this point', in front of the school gate. Vincent (1996a) argued that such a notice reflected attempts by educators to preserve schools as islands of professional expertise and to maintain control and power over parents. In this regard, in the process of current school restructuring, the prerequisite of getting parents involved is to first empower parents to participate in the schooling process of children's education (Vincent, 2000).

Vincent (1996b) defined the 'empowerment of parents' in three ways. First, it is defined as a strengthening of the role of parent-as-citizen, through mechanisms designed to encourage the involvement of parents in planning and delivering education services. Second, it emphasizes the promotion of the role of the parent-as-consumer, through policies aiming at enhancing parental choice of school. The third approach emphasizes the responsibility of the individual to empower him/herself through grabbing opportunities to participate. Whatever approaches are adopted to empower parents, power relations penetrate parent-school interactions. Parents are still required to work in accordance with school regulations (Siu, 2000). In fact, parent empowerment is a political process. The notion of empowerment suggests that power given to parents is eventually lost by the former power holders – teachers. Teaching professionals will not easily release influence and control to parents. The literature on current parent-school practices (e.g. Akin & Bastiani, 1988; Dehli & Januario, 1994) acknowledges that the relationships between parents and teaching professionals are characterized by an imbalance in power. Thus, the solution to the problem of imbalances in power between parents and teachers is to realize the process of parent empowerment as quickly as possible (Vincent, 1996a).

Framework of Analysis

As many research studies have confirmed that parental involvement in school is beneficial to the children and parent empowerment is one way to facilitate effective home-school relationships, the purpose of this review paper is to examine how parents have been empowered for the last three decades and in what ways their roles are evolving in their children's education in Hong Kong.

Ng's (1999) six-levels of MHSC are adopted as the analytical framework to examine when and how parents are empowered to be involved outside and especially inside school. The three approaches of parent empowerment defined by Vincent (1996b) are taken into consideration in the process of conceptualization. Analyses are interwoven with reviews of education policy documents published by the Education & Manpower Bureau (EMB) of Hong Kong and the literature concerned from the perspectives of social, political and economic development at different periods of time. As a result of examining the evolving roles of parents through analyzing these policy documents, five phases of development of parent empowerment in times of education reforms in Hong Kong are conceptualized in chronological order, namely (1) the period of absolute quiescence and acquiescence (before 1985); (2) the period of wakefulness of parents' rights and responsibilities (1985-1991); (3) the period of enhancing communication (1992-1997); (4) the period of accountability (1998-2003); and (5) the period of parents as partners (2004 and onwards).

Phase One: The Period for Meeting Quantitative Targets: Absolute Quiescence and Acquiescence (Before 1985)

Parents' rights to take part in school education had not been recognized in Hong Kong until the 1990s. The belief among the Hong Kong teaching professionals that parents are unwelcome intruders was pervasive among all schools in the last three decades (Ng, 1999). At that time, demand for school places in primary and secondary schools was basically more than that of supply due to the fact that Hong Kong's population grew from 1961 to 1971 by some 800,000 to almost four million (Llewellyn, 1982). In Britain, the 1944 Education Act has ensured that the children receive

efficient full-time compulsory education. However, in Hong Kong, to obtain an aided place in school, children had to reach certain standards by sitting in the public examinations held by the Education Department (ED) in the 1960s. Parents had no rights to choose schools for their children or even obtain sufficient information from schools, let alone participate in school activities. The boom in the manufacturing industry of the Hong Kong economy provided the education sector with more financial resources for expansion at that period of time. The chief and sole mission of ED was to expand educational opportunities to children of suitable age in the aided sector (Wong, 1994). In 1970, six years of free and compulsory primary education for the six to eleven age groups was provided. From 1974, the attention of the Hong Kong government focused on the review of the provision of compulsory education and the 1974 White Paper proposed an extension of three more years of compulsory secondary education for all children. In 1978, the policy of nine years' compulsory and free education for primary and junior secondary students had been achieved and given wide support. During this period, both the economy and the education field were in their developing stage. Parents were quiescent about being involved in their children's education. To acquire a place for either aided or free education for their children, they had to be absolutely acquiescent with the colonial government's educational policies.

It is generally agreed that educational development before the 1980s in Hong Kong was basically a 'response-to-crisis' or 'piece-meal' affair (Choi & Wu, 1996). When the economy demanded more, when people wanted more, then the education sector provided more. The colonial government had never had a complete and comprehensive idea of how education should look and had put little effort into taking care of other aspects of education such as school management, quality language teaching, curriculum development and home-school cooperation (Ng, 2001). Parents who could successfully obtain a place for schooling for their children felt very fortunate and satisfied.

In this regard, parent-school relationships were basically focused on one-way communication; that is to transmit information from school to home. It was not until 1981 when four international panels were commissioned by the government to embark on a thorough study of the Hong Kong education system that the people of Hong Kong had a

fuller picture of the system. In 1982, the panels published a report on the findings which led to a series of investigations and studies of different areas in education.

Concerning the development of parent-school relations, the report (Llewellyn, 1982) noted that many subsidized schools operated by private and voluntary organizations without tight government supervision tended to be run in an authoritarian and centralized fashion, leaving little room for parental participation in school. In the report, it stated:

Teachers in both subsidized schools and private schools operated by and large without close government supervision of their professional activities. Despite the existence of management boards, schools tend to be run autocratically. Parent and pupil participation is almost non-existent by most western standards and the general teaching staff is rarely involved in important school decision (Llewellyn, 1982, p. 50).

In fact, the autocratic style of management of the school principals in Hong Kong had been pervasive for two decades. Not only did the teachers and parents experience difficulties participating in decision making, but the schools themselves rarely considered parents' needs when formulating home-school policy.

In Hong Kong, it was hard to find any sense of parent empowerment among schools in the 1980s. Largely due to political reasons, the colonial government did not find it an appropriate time to allow democratization in the school system. The panel led by Llewellyn wrote the following in the report:

Any move towards greater participation in educational decision-making and policy formulation would add to existing pressures for the democratization of the territory's government generally (Llewellyn, 1982, pp. 17-18).

Llewellyn also stated that teacher-parent contact was limited to problem-orientation. The sharing of responsibilities in education between parents and teachers, and between home and school, was not widely accepted. In the report, it argued:

Parent involvement with schooling is usually limited to formal parent-teacher associations' meetings (where they exist) and to rare school visits when a

child's problems prompt the teacher to call for the parent. Teachers tend not to see it as necessary or relevant to keep in contact with parents, or vice versa (Llewellyn, 1982, p. 18).

During this period, parents were passive. The autocratic image of school authority was historical in origins and had rendered parents no choice but to comply with what the school required. In the relationship between parent and school, the implementation of education policies in this period aimed at providing schooling opportunities for children of a suitable age, compensating most of them with what they had lost and what they should receive. However, due to greater demand and low levels of supply, it was difficult for parents to ask for more. There was no sign of parental empowerment. Parents were excluded from school but they were asked to be involved in supervising their children at home. It is no wonder parents have had to be quiescent and acquiescent during this period of time.

Phase Two: The Era for Qualitative Improvement: Wakefulness of Parental Contribution (1985-1991)

Since 1980, not only have all children received a nine-year compulsory education, but the government has also tried its best to provide 90% of school children with the opportunity of further senior education in aided secondary schools. The reform movement in education, in terms of quantity at least, has apparently become a success and the Hong Kong government has now focused attention on the promotion of quality education. Following the suggestions from the Llewellyn Report, a coordinating body – the Education Commission (EC), was established for the organization of educational planning and policy in 1984. Since this time, recommendations in the Education Commission Reports (ECRs) on educational policies for future development have been presented to the Governor every two years during the colonial period and to the Chief Executive after the return of sovereignty to China in 1997. However, the promotion of parental involvement has been given a low priority among recommendations on educational improvement in the reports. In the first three reports, ECR 1, ECR 2 and ECR 3 (EC, 1984, 1986, & 1988), nothing

regarding home-school relationships and parents' roles in education was mentioned and much of the emphasis was made for the expansion of aided places in secondary years four and five, the medium of teaching and the development of tertiary education.

After 1985, the era of restructuring in terms of quality assurance in school education commenced. As time went by, the parents who are supplied with sufficient information to choose schools for their children gradually began to understand their rights. The schools are unavoidably forced to increase transparency to the parents. In 1984, a more influential political change in Hong Kong aroused parents' awareness of their roles in education. It was the introduction of the representative government system to the Legislative Council, some members of which from education constituencies were elected as Legislative Councilors in 1984 and 1988. They placed pressure on schools in regard to parents' rights in being involved in their children's education (Cheng, 1994a). However, the promotion of parent-school relationships had still not become a major concern in the education sector until 1991, the year the education document of the 'School Management Initiatives' (SMI) was published aimed at the reform of management in schools.

In 1988, a booklet on 'Better Parenting' was distributed to parents (ED, 1988) and a note on 'School-Parent Liaison' was enclosed in a circular on 'Strengthening Home-School Communication' and was issued to teaching professionals to stress the importance of communicating with parents and to introduce various methods of improving home-school links. In 1989, a seminar, entitled 'Towards Better Cooperation between Parents and Schools', was held by the ED. It focused on the significance of parental influence on the social and personal development of the students. It advocated that tighter relationships between home and school were of vital importance. The meaningfulness of home-school links seemed to be recognized by the government but the actions mentioned above were seemingly responses to the sudden change of the social environment that demanded a solution to an alarming increase in the rate of juvenile delinquency.

From 1990 onwards, the EC has begun to put a major emphasis on the issue concerning quality improvement in education. In the ECR 4, there were no chapters on parent-school relationships and its main themes were about

curriculum development and behavioral problems in schools. However, in stressing the need to mobilize parents to cooperate with schools to combat crimes and triad activities, the Report had the following comment:

We note too that many schools cooperate with parents not only in counteracting the influence of triads among school children but also more generally in discussing personal or family problems faced by the children (EC, 1990, p. 140).

In addition to the collaborative efforts in handling juvenile problems in schools, the ECR 4 has also stated the intention of enhancing home-school co-operation further to other aspects relevant to the children's educational process. The discussion on home-school liaisons in one corner of a page in ECR 4 was treated as the starting point that the government of Hong Kong would like to get parents involved. Parental contributions to school improvement were first and formally noted in a policy document. Since then, there had been more discussions and debates on parents' rights to involvement in education. It was a clear message that parents were empowered by the government to be stakeholders in the school process of their children. The role of parent-as-citizen was strengthened during that period of time as they were invited to cooperate with school in combating crimes.

In 1991, to develop in line with the political democratization process in society, the Hong Kong government, after having sent a team of officials overseas to study the characteristics and components of effective schools, introduced the 'SMI' to school, a major policy paper recommending a reform of decentralizing power from the central government to schools, and from the school organizations to both teachers and parents. One of the purposes of the SMI is to clearly define the actual roles of the school principals so that they will not become as autocratic as indicated in the Llwellyn Report. As the SMI specified:

... some Principals are insufficiently accountable for their actions and see their post as an opportunity to become little emperors with dictatorial powers in the school (EMB & ED, 1991, p. 14).

Most importantly, it was a breakthrough in the area of home-school liaisons. The document suggested that schools

were advised to inform parents of their objectives and policies regularly and parental rights for participating in school operation were recognized. When the government reviewed the Education Ordinance and Regulations and the Code of Aid, the greater participation of teachers, parents and alumni in the school decision-making process was recommended. This gave parents a larger formal stake in the management of schools themselves:

Recommendation 10 School management frameworks should allow for participation in decision making, according to formal procedures, by all concerned parties including: all teaching staff; the Principal; the SMC; and (to an appropriate degree) parents and students (EMB & ED, 1991, p. 37).

Notably, very specific instructions for empowering parents in school education were spelled out. To keep pace with the educational development in the West, there is no doubt that decentralization of the school decision-making process should commence. Representatives of parents exercising their rights as citizens could then be members of the School Management Committee (SMC). They were invited to participate in the process of decision making inside the school. However, many teaching professionals objected to the recommendation of getting parents involved in managing schools. They argued as to whether the time was ripe to invite parents to get involved in school management (Shen, 1995).

Phase Three: Communication: Prerequisites for Parent-School Cooperation (1992- 1997)

After the SMI recommended that parents have the right to participate in school management, Chan, Ho, Tsang, and Wong (1993) conducted a survey on primary school teachers' attitudes towards parental participation in school. The four level model of parental involvement as conceptualized by Cheng (1991) was adopted as a framework for measurement, with a sample of over 400 teachers and principals in 20 primary schools. They reported that parents were most welcome by teachers when they stayed outside school to help students in all kinds of learning activities and to give support to the school at special events such as fund-raising and school picnics. However, teachers

would become very conservative and defensive if parents participated in school management. In fact, in the 1990s, it was not the right time to introduce parents to SMCs. Chan (1989) found that there was a lack of systematic channels for parental participation in many aided secondary schools. Teachers' liaison with parents was always limited to one-way information transfer. Although they valued parents' participation and recognized parents as partners, they did not welcome parents participating in the central matters in school.

In 1992, the issue of home-school cooperation was subsequently elaborated upon at great length in the ECR 5 (EC, 1992). Members of the EC found that activities of home-school cooperation in schools were far from adequate and were by no means universal in every school. There were, for example, only about 70 schools that had established a parent-teacher association (PTA) to foster home-school communication in a sustained way. Parent-school communication was always problem-oriented and a telephone call from school might even cause reasonable parents to feel anxious. Furthermore, the atmosphere was not conducive to closer cooperation owing to the fact that teachers and principals, on one hand, treated parents as unwelcome guests (Ng, in press) and parents, on the other hand, often maintained unhelpful attitudes towards sharing responsibility with schools. In the ECR 5, it stated:

But closer cooperation is also hampered by unhelpful attitudes. Teachers sometimes feel they can do their job best without parental interference. Parents sometimes expect schools to take an excessive share of responsibility for raising their children (EC, 1992, p. 15).

Therefore, to try to resolve the problems identified above, the EC (1992) reiterated the vital importance and spirit of parent-school collaboration in the learning process of children. They believed that most parents and teachers were capable people who would like to learn and who could learn to talk to each other about promoting the child's personal, social and academic development, based on the assumptions that parents had a right to be informed about, and a responsibility to be involved in the education of their children. Parental knowledge and understanding of their children complemented the knowledge and skills of the professionals.

Obviously, unhelpful attitudes of both parents and

teachers were the major obstacles to effective home-school links. To improve the current situation, the Commission advised schools to take initiatives to communicate with parents and identify measures and develop innovative approaches to enhancing parent-school partnerships which were not too onerous for either parents or teachers. The Report also recommended the establishment of a new standing committee to conduct a survey on parent-school relationships, produce multi-media training materials on communication skills for teachers and parents and advise schools on methods to encourage and coordinate sustained development in home-school collaboration. Informed by the research findings in the West that better parent-school relationships could help enhance better the development of children and effective operation of schools, the ED continuously reiterated the significance of implementing effective home-school communication on different occasions since 1992. To respond to the recommendations in the ECR 5, the ED set up the 'Committee on Home-School Cooperation' in 1993 to carry out the tasks cited in the Report.

The Committee conducted a quantitative survey and published the Home-School Cooperation Research Report in 1994 (ED, 1994a). The focus of the studies were (1) PTA; (2) practices of home-school cooperation; and (3) parent education in schools (ED, 1994b, p. 2). The Report confirmed that both parents and schools recognized the need to enhance liaison but parents had very little desire to get involved in school operations, especially in the decision-making process. On the other hand, the Report also reflected the fact that most schools did not have the desire to include parents as school managers. To raise teachers' awareness and to encourage their participation in promoting parent involvement, three areas were identified that required urgent attention; (1) to reduce the workload of teachers; (2) to provide training to parents; and (3) to provide training to teachers.

As indicated in the Report, parents believed that the aim of collaborating with schools was to help their children achieve more academically and better nurture their personal development (ED, 1994a). When parents were asked whether they would like to take part in monitoring and managing the school, only a few of them (7%) wished to have a say but nearly half of them wanted to be informed. Parents expressed interest in being informed about school

policies, being invited to school events, participating in parent-teacher conferences, and so on. Shen (1995) found that these responses, on the one hand, might be due to the assumption that schools did not have a genuine intention to invite parents to take part in school operations and the lack of transparency of school policies discouraged parental participation. On the other hand, parents did not understand the meaning of their involvement in school; they confined the meaning of education only to the scope of getting hold of the knowledge in the book. The ideology of a separated sense of responsibility between family and school was the prevailing thought among parents at that time. Parents had put excessive reliance on teachers to educate their children (Szeto, 1991). Tam (1994) argued that one of the side effects of implementing compulsory education since 1978 was that parents had had little sense of responsibility in looking after their children.

Realizing that there were barriers to the promotion of parent empowerment in sharing decision-making, the Committee on Home-School Cooperation found that the prerequisite of making partnerships between parents and schools was to improve their relationship in the schooling process. They then had put more emphasis on encouraging schools to set up PTAs as bridges for providing parents and teachers with more and better opportunities to communicate and to work together at school. According to the secretary of the Committee, out of about 2000 kindergartens, primary schools and secondary schools, there were about 1600 PTAs set up as of 2006 whereas the number was 497 in 1997 and 287 in 1994. While assisting schools to establish PTAs, the Committee published newsletters introducing the work of PTAs in some schools and carried out a campaign a 'Parents also Appreciate Teachers' Drive' (ED, 1997a) campaign to enhance parent-teacher relationships. They also conducted surveys such as the 'Survey on Parents' Views of Schoolbags' (ED, 1994c) and 'Study on the Attitude of Parents and Students towards Extra-curricular Activities' (ED, 1996). They also published a handbook to specify the functions of PTAs and introduce the process of establishing PTAs (ED, 1997b). Since then, through working together in the PTAs, the relationship between parents and teachers has been improved. Effective communication between parents and teachers helped set a strong foundation for further levels of parent-school cooperation and helped to facilitate parent empowerment in their children's education.

Phase Four: Parents as Clients: Accountability (1998 – 2003)

Parents are gradually perceived as vital actors contributing to the schooling of their children. The word – parents, almost always appears in every education document. In 1993, the EMB published a statement of government policy, ‘School Education in Hong Kong: A Statement of Aims’. To further ensure that the domain of parent involvement is one of the main targets for educational improvement in schools, the booklet also aims at helping schools and parents share a common understanding of what schools are trying to achieve, and designing and evaluating projects to encourage home-school collaboration with reference to the statement of aims. Indeed, parents’ rights to get involved in school affairs have been respected and parents as partners with schools in nurturing their children’s personal growth have also been recognized as one of the primary aims in school education. The Statement continues to specify the following aims

Aim (5): As far as possible, parents should be able to choose the type of education best suited to their children, and should have adequate information on which to make informed choices (EMB, 1993, p. 13).

‘Aim (13): School in partnership with parents and others, should contribute to the personal growth of their students, by helping them develop a sense of morality and prepare for the physical, emotional and mental transition to adulthood (EMB, 1993, p. 21).

Parents’ rights and responsibilities in education are also recognized gradually by the government and educators. For example, Cheng (1991) and Cheng, Tam and Cheung (1996) conceptualized the meaning and function of total home-school cooperation by way of three perspectives; namely ‘statutory’, ‘management’ and ‘education’. From the statutory point of view, parental participation is seen as part of parents’ ascribed rights and responsibilities. From the management perspective, the significance of two-way communication and sharing responsibilities between home and school are emphasized. From the educational standpoint, parental involvement in school is seen as a way of inculcating both parent education as well as civic education. Here the assumption that parents are empowered in terms of ascribed rights and being clients of the school is in line with

Vincent’s (1996b) definitions of parental empowerment.

As the issue of parents’ rights has been raised and widely discussed since 1994, parents as clients and schools being accountable to parents’ rights have come to be the main concern in the present era of educational reform. Since the issuing of the SMI, the ECR 5 and the Statement of Aims, a campaign aiming at working on how home and school can merge together for the benefits of both school management and children’s development through parent empowerment seems to be the prevailing trend in the education sector. Cheng (1994a) and Chiu (1994) have attempted to analyze the rights of parents from the standpoint of their being clients or consumers of the teaching professionals. The more open the society, the more parents want to know (Cheng, 1994a). Parents, of course, want to exercise their rights to ask the school to disclose more information about its operation. Schools being pressured by, on the one hand, the legislative councilors elected through education constituencies, and, on the other hand, by the ever increasing expectations of parents in relation to educational standards, have been forced to increase their transparency to satisfy the needs of the general public. In such a case, Cheng (1994b) thought that teachers and principals should take notice of Kogan’s (1986) three systems of accountability. First, there is bureaucratic accountability where schools are answerable to the bureaucracy of the government since the money schools have spent comes from tax-payers. Second, from the perspective of consumerist accountability, parents in the case of kindergartens and primary schools and students in the case of secondary and tertiary education, clearly play a role. Third, teachers with the responsibility for educating the next generation have committed to professional accountability in which the makeup of teachers’ professional self awareness, experience and judgment are of paramount importance.

The ideology of accountability is also demonstrated in policy documents. For example, the policy paper entitled ‘Quality Assurance in School Education in Hong Kong’ has reiterated the fact that parents participate in evaluation of school and provide comments and feedback on school matters (ED, 1999). Schools being accountable to parents became a policy reality in 2002 through the disclosure of the annual school development plan and annual school reports on the web, through which the public, especially the parents, can acquire a complete picture of what is going on at the school (EC, 2000). In a word, parents have been

legitimately empowered in the stage of accountability, in which parents being viewed as clients became a prevailing ideology within the education sector. From understanding the operation of the school by examining the school plans and reports, parents have become involved in giving advice on school matters.

Phase 5: Parental Participation: Partnership (2004 and Onwards)

Parental participation at different levels of school operation seems attractive since parents can contribute actively to quality assurance in school education (ED, 1999). The primary task of education in the 1990s was to pursue quality assurance.. In 1996, the EC published the consultation document ECR 7 entitled 'Quality School Education' (EC, 1996). In the area of parent empowerment, however, the document pointed out that many schools still demonstrated attitudes contrary to the recommendations in the SMI and proposed that all school should be required to practice school-based management by the year 2000.

Obviously, there were still many teaching professionals who objected to parental involvement as an educational innovation in the process of school reforms. The SMI was published in 1991 but no more than 50% of the schools in Hong Kong had joined the scheme as of 1996. However, the administrators in the ED and EC were convinced that the ideas in the SMI could be implemented and would carry benefits for both concerned parties in education. In the area of parental participation in management, the document stressed:

To involve teachers, parents and students in school management is conducive to the development of quality school education. This will not only help the balanced development of students and gain the support of parents, but also enable the school to collate effectively views of teachers, parents and students (EC, 1996, p. 17).

A year after the consultation, the ECR 7 (EC, 1997) was published. Parental participation in school education is formally ensured. Empowerment of parents is one of the objectives in education reform. In the Report, it reiterated:

Education is not the sole responsibility of the Government or schools. Cooperation between schools

and parents is vital. Participation of teachers, parents and students in school management and school activities is conducive to the development of quality school education (EC, 1997, p. 18).

Parents' roles were first marginalized during the period when education reforms strived for quantitative targets and the role of parents was found to be quiescent and acquiescent before the 1990s (Ng, 2002). Fortunately, subsequent policy documents at the end of the twentieth century had provided us with marked evidence that parents' vital roles in children's schooling process were recognized and respected. In addition to the recommendations on parent involvement in school education in the ECR 7 and the paper, 'Quality Assurance in School Education' (ED, 1999), the EC also published 'The Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong' (EC, 2000) in which parents were praised for their recognition of the importance of education for young people. The document provided the following description:

Parents are the closest and the most reliable mentors to students. Parents' viewpoints and guidance have a great impact on students' learning attitudes and effectiveness (EC, 2000, p. 151).

In the same year, parents' significant roles in facilitating learning and teaching in the curriculum reform (Curriculum Development Council, 2000) had again been mentioned (Curriculum Development Council, 2000), in which parents' participation in their child's learning was encouraged. The Advisory Committee on School-based Management (2000) consulted the public for suggestions as to how many parent representatives should be included in the School Board. Parental involvement in school management was then introduced into schools as an educational innovation. Eventually, the government of Hong Kong proposed in the 'Education Bill 2002 (Amendment)' that two parent representatives be included as the 'parent governor' and the 'alternate parent governor' on the School Board. However, the proposal became highly politicized because it was opposed by many school sponsoring bodies but was agreed with by parent organizations. After a serious debate between the school sponsoring bodies and the government over a two-year consultation period, the bill was then amended and eventually became the Education Ordinance at the Legislative Council, in operation since July,

2004. The Ordinance stipulates that all schools in Hong Kong should establish an Incorporated Management Committee (IMC) by 2009 in which one parent representative and one teacher representative should be included as members of the IMC. Though the Ordinance is well established, there has still been a long and heated debate between school sponsoring bodies and the government and their relationships have so far been problematic (Pang, 2005). In order to persuade schools to participate in this governance scheme, the government promises that the school will be funded under a block grant.

Since the passing of the Education Bill, parents are empowered to be involved at different levels of school operation as outlined in Ng's (1999) framework of MHSC. Not only are they encouraged to get involved in their children's education outside school as supervisors at home but they are also invited to be school managers and advisers inside school. According to Ng (2006) and Edward (1995), when parents are empowered to be involved in the decision making process, they can be treated as school partners in which mutual respect and recognition are of paramount significance.

Conclusion

The discourse of parental empowerment in school education has now moved forward from the darkest period of quiescence and acquiescence during which parents were essentially shut out of the education system. The current education reforms around the world, emphasizing democratization and decentralization of power, have enlightened parents as clients as well as partners in their children's education and facilitated the process of parent empowerment (Vincent, 1996a, 1996b, 2000). In Hong Kong, parents' roles are evolving from being quiescent and acquiescent to the roles of parent-as-citizen and parent-as-consumer. They have also strived to empower themselves by taking opportunities to participate in school management. From the phases of awareness, communication and accountability to the phase of participation, these perspectives coincide with Vincent's (1996b) assertion of parent empowerment endowing parents with certain rights and responsibilities in their involvement in school education in Hong Kong.

With reference to the research undertaken in the West, there is no doubt that parent empowerment can have a great effect on children's academic achievement. A total and positive relationship, where two-way communication is emphasized, could help enhance efficient and effective management of education (Davis, 1991; Redding, 1991). To mobilize parents' participation in schools, teachers and principals working at the front line of education should take an active role to liaise with and invite parents to be partners in school education. However, for years, the lack of policy statements for schools at the management level has left the scope of parent empowerment undefined. Some teachers will find the work of communicating with parents as an extra burden while some will develop a sense of professional protectionism that may hamper the development of parent-school relationships.

Comparatively speaking, parents are indeed empowered in the education reform movement in Hong Kong. Since 1997, parents' rights of participating in their children's education have been recognized. They have been consulted and invited to participate in Parent-teacher Associations (PTAs), manage schools, organize school activities and assist in school functions (Ng, 2001; Pang, 2005). Nevertheless, there are still quite a lot of resistances from school professionals to this kind of involvement (Ng, 2003, 2006; Pang, 2005). For example, the passing of the Education Bill concerning setting up of the IMC in which a parent representative is included as one of the members of the school management has become a critical and politicized issue. A great deal of micro-politics has emerged among stakeholders during the process of parent involvement in school (Ng, 2006). Whether parent empowerment in children's education is smoothly implemented is still subject of educational discourse and the politics of parent empowerment in Hong Kong is worthy of further investigation.

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