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# Family-centered practice with non-attending students in Hong Kong

Yuk King LAU, PhD  
Assistant Professor in Department of Social Work,  
Chinese University of Hong Kong,  
Shatin, NT, Hong Kong SAR, China  
yklau@cuhk.edu.hk

## Introduction

In the 2005/06 school year, 'habitual truancy/non-attendance' ranked second among all discipline problems (after 'disruptive behaviors in school' in terms of total number of cases reported.) It accounted for 13.6% of the total case load for secondary schools in Hong Kong (The Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006, p.16 and 58). For the 2006/07 and 2007/08 school years, the reported cases of school non-attendance 1.0% and 1.1% of the total student population in primary and secondary schools (Director of Education Bureau, 2008).

Just as education is strongly prioritised in the Chinese culture, the society emphasises parents' responsibility in training and governing children's appropriate behaviors, including regular school attendance and good academic performance. Given these cultural attitudes, persistent school non-attendance usually creates family crises in Hong Kong and frequent and protracted truancy patterns may lead to a heavy social cost if it remains unresolved. Both foreign and local studies have evidence that students who do not attend school regularly are much more likely to leave school with few or no qualifications, and are more likely to be out of work after leaving school (Caritas Hong Kong Aberdeen Outreaching Team, 1994; National Audit Office, 2005; McCluskey, Bynum and Patchin, 2004).

## Helping students with non-attendance problems in Hong Kong

School systems play the most immediate role in this regard. Schools must report all students who are continuously absent for seven days or more for whatever reason to the Non-attendance Cases Team of the Education Bureau (EMB Circular No. 11/2006 reference). Difficult cases which remain unresolved after six months are referred to the Education Bureau's Internal Review Board so that they may take actions such as issuing warning letters and statutory attendance orders. The education ordinance empowers the Education Bureau to order a parent to send a child between the ages of 6 and 15 to school. Any parent who, without reasonable cause, fails to comply with an attendance order will be charged with an offence that carries a fine of \$10,000 and a prison sentence of three months (Education Ordinance,

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section 74). The order has rarely been enforced because it has been found that parents do their best to encourage their children to attend school but their efforts often end in vain.

As a school-based service, school social work has the most immediate contact with students with nonattendance problems and their families. School social workers play a special role in parent education and in strengthening the links between students, families, schools, and communities (Working group on review of school social work service, 1999). Qualitative data from my study in 2006 indicated that there is a dominant individual approach in their interventions (Lau, Tsang and Kwok, 2007a). All intervention efforts are focused on the students with the purpose of pushing them to resume regular attendance. There is limited attention on the need for parents to offer support. The usual practice of those involved in the service delivery process is to refer those families in need of intensive family counseling to family services. Unfortunately, without adequate collaboration services remain fragmented, and overlapping interventions among multiple helpers occur. One student commented that all the helping professionals and her parents simply repeated what each other had already said by explaining the consequences and urging her to resume her schooling. In another case, perceiving that the student's parents were incompetent and ineffective in supervising the student, a school social worker called the student every morning to wake her up. Repeating the same resistance she demonstrated under her parents' supervision, this student refused to answer the calls and subsequently declined any contact with this social worker.

These cases reflect the widespread negative attitude toward parents, which contributes to feelings of disempowerment that parents experience during the 'helping process.' A participating single mother in my study observed that 'the helping professional expected me to make [my son and daughter] (both had dropped out of school) perform. I am the one who has to make frequent contact with social workers (both of them rejected contacts from helping professionals) ... It seemed like I was the problem ... I had to learn effective communication. I had to learn how to cope with stress ... This confused me. I really didn't know how to cope with the situation and how to explain this to the helping professionals.' A participating mother whose son had learning difficulties echoed those feelings: 'Without being able to understand the

student's problem, the teachers always suspect that the parent is the problem.' In other words, 'the focus (of family interventions) has been placed primarily on promoting responsible parenting and positive family values, whereas parents, and working parents in particular, seem to have been left unsupported' (Chiu and Wong, 2002, p. 151). Furthermore, with a focus on individual deficits or family deficits, there is usually little attention paid to the changes needed in the school system and other social systems.

In response to these limitations in the social service systems, a pilot project using a family-centered practice model to work with students with school refusal behaviors has been launched. It is a practice and research project in a university setting with two members: a full-time teaching staff member within the Department of Social Work in the Chinese University of Hong Kong and a volunteer counselor who is an experienced social worker specializing in child and family services. In total, 25 students with drop-out or non-attendance problems and their families have participated in the pilot project since September 2006. Among the 25 students, 17 students resumed schooling and regular school attendance (13 of them left the project after successfully maintaining regular school attendance for at least one school year). The conceptual framework and the process of the practice model are discussed in the following sections.

### **A family-centered practice model for working with students with non-attendance problems**

Family-centered practice positions the family at the center of attention or field of action (Germain, 1968). Its focus is on those transactions occurring between a person, family, and environment, which affect individuals, families and the larger social forces and systems in which families are embedded. Based on eco-systemic and strength perspectives (Hartman and Laird, 1983; Pecora, Whittaker and Maluccio, 2000), family-centered practices address students' school refusal behaviors in their contexts. These behaviors are usually the result of difficulties including not fitting in with students and their important social systems, which may include the school system, the family system, the peer system or even the cultural system. With reference to the unique interaction of each student with his/her social systems, an individualized systemic assessment is necessary. It is believed that, whether there are pre-existing family problems or not, students' school refusal behaviors exert great pressure on the family system. Furthermore, long-term non-

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attendance problems are an indicator of the family's failure to negotiate among family members and/or other social systems.

Similarly the eco-systemic perspective of family-centered practice enables us to understand all the other helping professionals in their contexts as well. In addition to the lack of training in systemic perspectives, their dominant individual approach is maintained mostly because of the heavy workload. Taking the school social workers as an example, according to the funding and service agreement, every school social worker must handle 70 active cases, close 23 cases, conduct 40 group/program sessions, and provide a total of 380 consultations to school personnel or parents within one year. To cope with the workload, a social worker observed in my 2006 study, 'I will make home visits only when I deem it very necessary. It takes my time from the other cases.' Another social worker stated that usually students with non-attendance problems are not the first priority: 'We tend to be occupied with more urgent or high risk cases, such as suicidal cases, child abuse, or unwed pregnancies. This leaves us with little capacity for school refusal cases.'

Following the schema suggested by Powell (1996), the process of family-centered practices with students who have school non-attendance problems is highlighted in the following:

#### **Joining and discovery:**

The first step is joining both the family and other significant social orgs, including the school, in order to build an effective working system. Listen to the various stories of different family members, as well as other stakeholders, including school personnel and helping professionals. Identify the agreements and disagreements among their stories, as well as their needs for support and resources they can offer in addressing the problem.

The fits and mis-matches among the student, his/her family and the other social networks and the resulting interaction patterns among these systems are the focus of the discovery process. For example, a common identified mis-fit among the students, their families and the education system is the incompatibility of the modern ideal of parenting in relation to the persistent traditional values of the educational system. Good parenting in the modern ideal emphasizes empathy and understanding on the

part of parents and equality between the parent and children, rather than a hierarchical parent-child relationship with total submission on the part of the child. On the other hand in mainstream schools, cultural values of conformity and submission to authority remain the norm. When the student fails to conform to the school authority, it is the parents who are blamed for their weak parenting. The widespread symptoms of social withdrawal among school refusers in Hong Kong and the limited capacity of the helping professionals to pay home visits and offer outreach services is another mis-fit between the needs of the students and the social service system.

#### **Change and celebration:**

As a holistic model, family-centered practice involves interventions at the micro-level, meso-level and macro-level. At the micro-level, interventions aim to enhance the functioning of the family system as a whole. Home visits and intensive outreach services are provided for those students with social withdrawal symptoms. Students' school refusal behaviors are addressed in relation to the developmental or contextual challenges that hinder the families from effective functioning. For example, we are working with a family with unresolved grief issues due to the suicide of the father. There were several years of chaotic marital problems, including the parents' separation, before the traumatic death of the father. The dance of anger on the part of the children and strong guilt felt on the part of the mother keep the family from effective negotiation and a proper response to the children's school adjustment problems after they changed to new schools. Intensive family counselling and grief work have been provided to support the family.

At the meso-level, interventions address the mis-matched and dysfunctional interactions between the families and other social systems. Mediation between the major stakeholders is offered to facilitate effective collaboration between them during the helping process. A strategic alliance with other social systems is also important in family-centered practice. For example, during collaboration between parents and the student guidance officer of the Non-attendance Cases Team, warnings are sent to the student rather than the parent. In a way, this supports the parents' authority rather than defeating it. Case conferences are a built-in element in the practice used to facilitate coordinated interventions of the stakeholders and provide space for the involvement of the families in

the decision-making process. Effective case management is always necessary to ensure that there are compatible and mutually-enriching interventions among the various stakeholders. Shifting from a reactive and problem-focused collaboration system, family-centered practice emphasizes a shared success among the multiple helpers in the helping system. We encourage any changes with the family and major stakeholders that will empower and maintain a working system.

At the macro-level, interventions include advocacy for policy changes and the formation of a collective effort among the major stakeholders in seeking structural changes. Renegotiation of cultural values is necessary. If our cultural emphasis on conformity could be expanded with an enhanced appreciation for assertiveness, it would surely facilitate a less submissive school environment and a higher level of reflexive conformity on the part of the students (Lau, Tsang and Kwok, 2007b). A community development approach has been taken to strive for these changes in the long run. As a form of asset building, ex-service recipients are engaged as volunteers in the helping process to lend support to the families in need. Some parents, teachers, and social workers I encountered in the project have envisaged a greater involvement in the advocacy for an inclusive education system and a better social service system. They are helped in consolidating their collective effort by the formation of self-help groups.

### **Separation and reflection:**

At the micro-level and meso-level, the last stage of family-centered practice is consolidation of the changes and reinforcement of the families and their supporting systems' competence through practice, thus paving the way for termination and separation. At the macro-level, refining the practice model using the knowledge gained from the experiences and the accumulation of practical wisdom is an effort to strive for towards a better social service system. We view it as an effective model and have followed it in the past few years. However, it is very demanding, as interdisciplinary collaboration and liaison is never easy. The outreach service is time-consuming, and intensive family interventions are energy-draining and challenging. The model also demands that the practitioners be equipped with micro and macro perspectives at the same time. Its success requires adequate training and manpower, good supervisory and peer support, and effective power and boundary

negotiations with other social systems. On the road ahead, we are committed to continuing efforts advocating the improvement of the system through research, mass media, and professional training. Additional systematic formative and summative research will be conducted in the coming years.

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