
School dropouts in Hong Kong: Parents' experiences

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The strong emphasis of parents' responsibility in children's study in the Chinese culture

Parents have the prime responsibility to ensure that their children attend school regularly in most developed societies, both in the East and West (National Audit Office, 2005; Manpower and Education Bureau, 2003). In Hong Kong, parents of student dropouts can be issued an attendance order that requires them to send the child back to school. Any parent who fails to comply with an attendance order without reasonable cause commits an offence carrying a fine of \$10,000 and imprisonment for three months (Manpower and Education Bureau, 2003). Unlike in the Western context, such as the situation in the United States and the United Kingdom, in Hong Kong, there is limited community or police involvement with the dropout children over the issues of their nonattendance. Parents are expected to solve the problem with their children.

Chinese parenting emphasises parents' responsibility in training and governing children's appropriate and expected behaviors, including good academic performance. There are many famous stories in China about how parents inspire their children's commitment and persistence in studying and how these children finally become great figures in China's history. As reflected by the Attendance Ordinance and the strong involvement of parents in children's study, there is continuous emphasis on parental responsibility in children's education in contemporary Hong Kong. With the above stated ideology, children dropping out of school could predict stressful parental experiences. However, no exploration on parents' experiences has ever been made in the Chinese context.

A qualitative exploration of parents' experience

In response to the identified knowledge gap, a qualitative study was conducted. The study included a focus group interview with five parents and two individual interviews with another two parents. There were six mothers and one father. Four mothers were full-time housewives with two of them relying on welfare, while the other three participating parents had full-time employment. The age of the participating parents ranged from 42 to 48. Their education level ranged from illiterate to bachelor degree. The age of their children ranged from 12 to 15.

The participating parents were recruited from a specialised practice project for school dropouts and their families. It is a pilot practice and research project using a family-centered practice model in working with students with school refusal behaviors in a university setting. For the service model and conceptual framework of the project please refer to another article in this journal (Lau, 2009). As an ethical practice, follow up counseling and support services were rendered to all the participating parents and their children after the study. The qualitative interviews were audio-taped, and the transcribed verbatim was used for data analysis. The identified experiences and perspectives of the parents are discussed as follows.

An internal attribution of the school dropping-out problem

Consistent with the internal attribution of failure identified among Hong Kong teachers and students (Ho, 2004; Ho, Salili, Biggs, and Hau, 1999), the parents attributed the problem to their children's lack of tolerance for difficulties in school. 'My daughter just doesn't have the tolerance to endure frustration and failure,' expressed the mother who had a bachelor degree (her daughter was 13 years old). 'My daughter is too passive; she doesn't dare to talk with others,' said the mother who was illiterate (Her daughter was 13 years old). 'It is the same with my daughter; she easily feels defeated and overwhelmed by difficulties. She always gives up without making sufficient effort,' another mother echoed (her daughter was 12 years old). Although they were empathetic to the children's difficulties in schooling, they perceived that it was the children who should change to adapt to the school system.

Completion of high school is perceived to be a minimum education level in Hong Kong

Due to their children's school-refusal behaviors, all parents expressed that they refrained from having unrealistic expectations about their education. They only hoped that their children could get a minimum level of education that was required for their survival in Hong Kong. In the participating parents' perspective, it meant the completion of a high school education. All of them agreed that their expectation was for 'the children's own good.' High school education 'is a basic for a good future.' The participating father whose daughter was 13 years old clearly articulated the parents' perspective: 'If it is a basic requirement for all the people, and you can't

meet it, you will be at a great disadvantage. You will be an outcast in the society. Though I realise that receiving school education is not equivalent to being knowledgeable, I perceive school as the foremost important place to learn knowledge. People without education tend to be bullied and humiliated by others.'

We tried everything to solve the problem

With strong worries about the children's future, all the participating parents were committed to motivate their children to resume schooling. However, the process left them with a strong sense of helplessness. The father whose daughter was 13 years old went to her daughter's school every day to save her from loneliness and isolation at lunch hour. 'I did everything, both harsh and soft. I have once torn her textbooks to force her to go to school again. Nothing helps,' he said in the focus group interview. Many of the participating mothers shared the difficulties. A participating mother with a 13 years old son shared that 'I have tried many methods. I tried to communicate with him; I tried to read his heart and mind, but he refused to give me an entry. I am so confused. I really don't know what's wrong with him, and what happened.' 'I warned her. I even begged her. I just did everything I could, but all of them did not work,' said the participating mother who was illiterate and her daughter was 13 years.

Perceiving her daughter's indulgence in web surfing as a cause to her 12 years old daughter's failure to get up for school in the morning, a mother tried to set a limit to her computer use. Her daughter responded with temper tantrums, and the mother had to make concessions, because 'it triggered my daughter's asthma every time.' The mother just worried that her daughter would die of suffocation. She was so confused whether her daughter was really sick or pretended to be sick. She felt so defeated in the process.

The negative spillover effect of the problem on family relationships

Many of the participants voiced the problem of tension in the family relationships. A participating mother described how their effort to help deteriorated the parent-child relationship. 'I woke him up every morning and pushed him to go to school. Our relationship deteriorated, and we even got involved in fighting with each other,' said the mother with a 13

years old son. A mother whose 15 years old son suffered from learning disability revealed that her disagreement with her husband regarding the ways to help their son caused much tension in the already-fragile marital and parental relationship. Her experiences were shared by two other participating mothers. The problem is observed to have adverse effects on family relationships, whether or not there was a pre-existing family problem.

Parents' strong sense of shame and guilt for children's dropping-out behaviors

In addition to intense worry and a strong sense of helplessness and tension in family relationships, results of the study indicated that dropping-out behaviors of children brought shame and guilt to the parents. Echoing the dominant social discourse in Hong Kong that parents are to blame for children's problems, (Ma, Lai and Pun, 2002), the participating parents blamed themselves for their incompetence in child discipline. This self-blaming is especially strong among the mothers.

In the focus group interview, the mother whose 15 years old son suffered from a learning disability expressed a strong sense of guilt for her harsh discipline of him before acknowledging his learning difficulties. 'It is my fault. I feel like...his problem is the result of my previous mistakes,' said a participating mother with a 13 years old daughter. The mother whose daughter was 12 years old and suffered from chronic asthma echoed immediately after her, 'I share the same feeling. I feel so guilty for my daughter's poor health. It is all because of my improper care of her. I have also spoiled her, which caused her low tolerance to frustration.' Similarly, the mother who had a bachelor degree blamed her own indulgence for her 13 years old daughter's personality defect. 'Since I have...full-time employment, I just don't have adequate psychological capacity to make the necessary negotiation with her. I always pacified her with money and materials. Now, I really regret that my daughter doesn't know how to take others' disapproval and refusal. It is all because of my indulgence. I have satisfied all her wants without her asking.' The mother who was illiterate blamed herself for her ignorance and her failure to render proper supervision to her children. 'I have received no education. I am illiterate. (I can't discipline them because) I know nothing about computers, so I don't know what my children are doing all day with the computer.' The expression of a participating mother whose son was 15 years may

precisely summarise their experience: 'I feel like I am a failure.'

Reinforcement of the sense of failure when interacting with the school system and the social service system

Without being able to solve the problem with their children, all the parents sought help from school social workers. Some of them sought help from educational psychologists, psychiatrists, relatives or even church members. However, their assistance was not effective in preventing the children's subsequent dropping out or motivating them to go to school again. Though they dearly hoped for more effective support from teachers and the government, what they experienced was just the contrary. 'The teacher gives me great pressure. She contacts me because she cannot understand my son's problem. She queries about my effort in helping my son. It is hard and stressful to me. Sometimes I just displace my emotions onto my son,' said the mother whose 15 years old son had learning disabilities. 'They make me feel like I am the problem. (My son refused to see them.) It is me who has to learn...communication, ...see the social worker and...learn relaxation. I get more and more confused, and now I just think it is my problem. I am so ambivalent and so distressed these days,' said the mother with a 13 years old son. The mother who was illiterate shared, 'I found myself in the middle of the warfare between the teacher and my daughter. Her father refused to offer me help (the parent were divorced). They requested me to supervise my daughter (who was 13 years old) to complete all her unfinished homework at school. She doesn't want to do her homework, and I can't help her as I am illiterate. This proved me a failure after a few days. I sense that the teachers, the school social workers and even the minor staff in the school perceived me as an incompetent parent.'

Feeling so helpless, these participating mothers earnestly sought for a more effective legal order for their children. They found the 'Attendance Order' useless, as it was targeting them rather than the dropping-out children.

The schools' subtle exclusion of the school dropouts

Some of them also felt trapped by the school's subtle exclusion strategies, which were presented as an effort to help. The mother whose 15 years old son suffered

from learning disability reported, 'They asked me if I would like a warning letter to force my son to attend school. I took this suggestion as an action to help. However, they dismissed my son for his nonattendance, as the warning letter clearly stated dismissal as a consequence.' Unable to resolve the students' nonattendance problem, exclusion of these students seemed to be the last way out for some of the schools.

Despite these negative interactions with the school and the helping professionals, most of the participating parents showed their understanding of the limitations of the school and the social service system. 'There are just too many students to have to take care of in a school. Family should take up most of the responsibilities in motivating the children to go to school,' said the mother with a bachelor degree and had a 13 years old daughter.

Discussion and recommendations

The above analyses indicated that the dropping-out behavior of children brought shame, guilt and a strong sense of incompetence to the parents. Furthermore, children's dropping-out behaviors have added much pressure and tension to the family relationship, which may lead to negative family dynamics. These findings call for strong support for parents when working with school dropouts. More systemic interventions are also necessary to address the family dynamics and the needs of the family as a whole.

Previous studies provided consistent evidence that school dropout is a multivariate, accumulative process in which family is only one of the major stakeholders (Battin-Pearson, Newcomb, Abbot, Hill, Catalano, and Hawkins, 2000; Lee and Ip, 2005; LeCompte and Dworkin, 1991). However, with the strong emphasis of parents' responsibility in making sure of children's proper behavior in Chinese culture, parents are the most common target of blame among the helping professionals and school personnel in Hong Kong. With strong conformity to this cultural belief, most of the participating parents suffered from intense self-blaming. Attributing the problem to the individual deficit of the students and the incompetence of their parents, schools totally overlook problems in the education system and the school system that hinder the fit of some students, especially those with special needs such as chronic illness and learning disabilities. These cultural beliefs hinder the participating parents in being assertive and making effective negotiations with the schools and the social service system.

Renegotiation of these cultural beliefs is necessary to facilitate a more contextual understanding of the problem. It would much relieve parental blame and facilitate more collective actions for these parents seeking structural changes and the improvement of the education system in Hong Kong.

Limitations of the study

The study is exploratory in nature and with small number of participants. Its results reflect only part of the possible experiences of parents encountering school dropping out problems of their children. Furthermore the participating parents of the study are predominately female, thus the results represent mothers' experiences more than those of fathers. Both situations limit the generalisability of the results. A more rigorous study that with large sample size and a more balance gender distribution of the participants is necessary to get a more complete picture of the parents' experiences in their encounters with the school dropping out problem of their children.

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