

Chapter 2

Elucidating the Complexity of Parental Involvement in Primary Schools: Three Ethnographic Case Studies

This chapter aims to describe the nature of parental involvement as revealed in what parents did in school-related activities and what experience they had; as well as how school principals and teachers framed the goals and values of these activities and parents' part in them. The research site covered three primary schools. We adopted a grounded-theory approach to investigate differing facets and manifestations of parental involvement in these three schools. We aimed to understand the underlying values and the implicit meanings that different stakeholders ascribed to it (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). Parental involvement in a specific school setting is a complex phenomenon and the forms of parental involvement evolved in these three schools may differ given variations in school leadership style, parent–teacher relationship being established and dispositions of different stakeholders. Indeed, forms of parental involvement tend to result from actions and interactions between and among various groups of stakeholders in children's education in contemporary society, notably principals, teachers, parents and students. These actions and interactions take place in specific organizational, policy and community contexts. Table 1 profiles the contextual information of each of the three primary schools.

To acquire an “insider view” of what parental involvement is about, what it is for, and what it means to the actors in the three primary schools, we obtained the school principals' agreement to take part in the case study, which took place between December 2001 and December 2002. We conducted a total of 68 interviews, including interviews with the three school principals, 18 teachers (labeled ‘T’ in the verbatim quotes) who were members of the parent–teacher associations (PTAs) or home–school cooperation (HSC) teams, 18 “involved parents” who were either members of the PTAs or active parent volunteers in the schools (referred to as ‘PH’), and 29 “non-involved parents” (referred to as ‘Non-PH’) whom we talked to at random either at the school premises or in school activities they joined. We also conducted participant observation in nine activities organized by the PTAs or HSC teams. The term “home–school cooperation” is conceptually different from “home–school collaboration”. “Home–school cooperation” implies

Table 1 Background characteristics of the three participating schools

Characteristics	School A	School B	School C
School establishment year	1996	1988	1999
School size	30 classes	27 classes	30 classes
School instruction time	Whole-day	Whole-day	Whole-day
School location	A new town	A new town	A new town
Students' socio-economic background ^a	Middle-class	Working-class	Lower-middle class
PTA/HSC team establishment year	1999	1996	2000
Level of parental participation as of 1999–2000	High	Low	Medium

^a A crude measure based on the occupation of students' parents and the type of housing they live in

a division of labor between the family and the school in the education of children. “Home–school collaboration” implies status equality between parents and school personnel in a collective endeavor, as each party equally shares decision-making power and contributes knowledge and skills.

In the first phase of the research process, we conducted ethnographic field work in the three schools, coding of field notes and interview texts to generate conceptual categories, and thematic analysis of field data. For the purpose of case comparison, presentation of the three case studies follows an a priori common structure to allow cross-case comparison. First, we furnish contextual information of each school. Next, we give a descriptive account of the practice of parental involvement as told by groups of actors, and elucidate the meanings that they conferred to parent involvement. We then examine the actions and beliefs of different groups of actors and study the interplay of individual, organizational, policy and community factors in shaping the form and meanings of parental involvement in the school. Based on the descriptive analysis of field data, we proceed to offer a critical discussion of what we learn. After presenting the three case studies, we offer a comparative analysis that examines and accounts for both convergences and divergences in the forms and meanings of parental involvement found in these three schools.

1 School A: Alienated Relationship Under a Bureaucratic Leadership

Established in 1996, School A is located in a new town. It is a whole-day school, with a total of 30 classes. The school-sponsoring body is a large charity organization and has been providing highly reputable educational services in Hong Kong for many years. The school has been quite innovative in pursuing curriculum reform and professional development of teachers. The school's 2005 annual strategic development plan called for enhanced student learning, improved quality of teaching, and school accountability. In this plan, parents are expected to help develop good

reading habits in students (not only their own children), support students' participation in sports and craft-learning activities, be responsible parents, and actively participate in activities promoting parent-child relationship and a healthy family environment for children (School A's webpage on 9 November 2005).

Heeding the policy guideline of the school-sponsoring body and the recommendation of the Report No. 7 of the Education Commission of Hong Kong, the school set up a Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) in 1999. In the research project "Home-School Cooperation: In Search of Success Indicators and Practices" between 1998 and 2000, School A was found to have high parental involvement judged on the basis of parent participation rates in a variety of home-school activities, such as parent education seminars and carnivals organized by the school and/or its PTA. Parents' response to those school activities aiming to enhance parent-child relationships was very positive.

Membership of the executive committee of the PTA was made up of parent representatives and teachers. The functional positions of chairperson, vice-chairperson, secretary, treasurer, recreational officer, promotional officer and liaison officer were filled by parent-members. The teacher-members of the executive committee, including the principal, the vice-principal and four teachers, performed a consultative role in the committee. Membership of the executive committee changes every year. All parent- and teacher-members took training courses on HSC offered by a local university. Given a huge load of teaching and administrative duties, teacher-members considered that the training courses exacerbated the time squeeze already plaguing them. A working committee, staffed mainly by parent-members, was set up to plan and manage the activities sponsored by the PTA. Parent-members of the executive committee enjoyed the privilege of having physical access to teachers, as the school relied on these parent-members to bridge school-home communication (Second order analysis on PTA Activities, p. 5, p. 7).

1.1 The Practice and Meaning of Parental Involvement

Parental involvement in School A was restricted to certain non-teaching, non-administrative activities and tasks initiated and organized mostly by the PTA. Minutes of the first meeting of the PTA during the 2002-2003 school year showed that parental involvement activities and tasks included coordinating recreational training courses for students, establishing a communication network among parents, and organizing social and leisure activities for parents and students. In the meeting, concerns and complaints raised by parents were heard. Parents' concerns were about matters of student welfare, such as hygiene of lunchboxes and eating utensils provided by an outside catering service, and the arrangement when parents were not on time to pick up their children at the end of school. In the light of the kind of parental concerns and complaints being given voice to, and the areas where parental involvement was active, the PTA-mediated parental involvement in School A was limited in scope and depth.

In interviews with parents, we were given the impression that the school welcomed parents to help out in school and PTA activities (School A_PTA_Committee_Members, researcher's notes on p. 8 & p. 10). In the year 2000, during a "chat-with-the-principal" session, the principal announced that the school was in need of parents having good capability to serve as volunteers (School A_PTA_PH_Mrs_C, lines 54–58, p. 2). When we interviewed the principal in the beginning of the research project in 2001, she brought up this point again. The school looked for parent volunteers who are of better quality than full-time housewives. In her view, women in the work world were better educated and more capable. They would make ideal parent volunteers. Such a bias somehow became widely known among the parents. Consequently, some parent-volunteers quit and were replaced by "hand-picked" parent-volunteers who met the "qualifications" that the school looked for.

1.1.1 The Principal's Approach to Parental Involvement: Keeping Parents Within Bounds

The principal of School A, Ms. A, considered parental involvement very important to children's education. She believed that home and school both shared the responsibility of supporting children's academic progress as well as personal growth. However, she thought there should be a limit to parental involvement:

... parents should only be involved in children's learning and be supportive to school policies, but should not be directly involved in school policies or administration (School A_Principal, lines 14–33, p. 1).

In her view, teachers and parents took up different and separate roles in children's education. She did not see the need for parents and teachers to come together to work or meet as partners:

Home-school cooperation should be kept at the ideological plane. Some schools organize activities and programs for parents. I don't think it is the responsibility of the school [to organize such parent activities] (School A_Principal, lines 114–118, p. 4).

Adopting such an ideological standpoint necessarily implied a somewhat restricted boundary set for parental involvement. The principal laid down a set of parameters to govern the function of the PTA. First, the PTA served as a mechanism to convey school policies to parents in a manner to ensure their acceptance and cooperation. To that extent, home-school communication would not be a two-way channel that also channeled parents' feedback on school policies or suggestions on school practice and educational matters. Second, the PTA should not serve as an agent to promote social relationships among parents or between parents and teachers, or to promote parent-child relationships. Third, the PTA was expected to handle its own administration and resource management, with minimum investment of teachers' time and school resources. The principal made this explicit in the first meeting of the PTA committee on 1 November 2002:

The main responsibility of teachers is teaching, not organizing the parent–teacher association. The school does not support teachers to put in too much time on liaison with parents. Parents are welcome to serve as volunteers and give time and energy into the work of the PTA. ... After all, the school is a place for education, not a venue for developing parent–child relationship. ... Organizing parent–child activities would take away teachers’ time unnecessarily; this will not help children’s education. The first and foremost mission of the school is to educate. What the school cares most about is the result on the report card. The development of the PTA is secondary.

Apart from these three parameters, there was one operational principle that governed the way parents were to be involved in the school—the school preferred working parents with good educational background to serve as PTA members and helpers. In the principal’s past experience of mobilizing parent volunteering in PTA and school activities, she (and also her colleagues) found that many parents, particularly housewives lower in educational levels, were likely to be “irresponsible” and “immature”. She explained how this principle came into being:

We had more than forty parent volunteers to supervise students during lunch hour. We discovered that they only looked after their own children and did not perform their duties. Moreover, they were immature in dealing with things. For instance, they complained that the quality of school lunch for students was not good enough compared with their home-made meal. Understandably, lunch-box food is much more inferior. Because of their complaint, our teachers had to organize food-testing for them to select a food supplier before we ordered lunch boxes (School A_Principal, lines 187–202, p. 6).

The parameters that the principal laid down to delimit the function of the PTA reflected her ideological standpoint regarding the respective roles that the school, teachers and parents should play in children’s education. The operational principle underpinned administrative measures to smoothen school operation by marginalizing the voice of parents who made unreasonable complaints—housewives who were less educated would have little idea about the reality of the work world. However, it is reasonable for parents, irrespective of their socio-economic background, to look after their own children and to be concerned about the quality of school lunch for their children. Shouldn’t schools be held accountable to parents, even if it would mean causing administrative inconvenience over matters that school personnel might regard trivial?

1.1.2 Parental Involvement Infringing on Teacher Professionalism?

Teachers to whom we had talked in both formal and informal interviews supported the viewpoint of the principal regarding the role of parents in school. Teachers such as Ms. W and Ms. L, who volunteered to join the PTA as committee members, agreed with the principal that parents should serve as volunteers involving only in non-teaching and non-administrative tasks. Parents should not be involved in teaching or school governance (School A_PTA_T_Ms_W, line 74, p. 2), as these areas fell within the “professional” territory of educators and teachers (School A_PTA_T_Ms_W, line 75, p. 2).

A senior teacher, Mr. Y, who was the core teacher-supervisor of the PTA, thought that parents should “mainly be involved in assisting teachers” (School A_PTA_T_Mr_Y, line 41, p. 1). Drawing on his past experience with the PTA committees, he found that the majority of the parent-members were “passive” and “lacking in enthusiasm”. As most of them were full-time housewives who had stopped working a long time ago, they became “out-of-touch” with the society, hence did not adapt well to the school culture (School A_PTA_T_Mr_Y, lines 100–101, p. 1).

Another senior teacher, Ms. M, who was also a teacher member of the PTA, shared the same views about parents and parental involvement. When asked for her opinion about letting parents have a voice on matters related to teaching or school administration, she rejected this notion outright: “Teachers are professionally trained. It’ll be difficult for parents, in lieu of the expertise and insider view of the job of teachers, to give sound advice” (School A_PTA_T_Ms_M, lines 259–262, p. 6).

Given their strong view of the rigid boundary of teacher professionalism, coupled with a negative assessment of the capacity and capability of parents, particularly those who were full-time housewives, most of the teachers converged on the view that parental involvement should be confined to non-teaching and non-administrative tasks in the school. In their experience, some parents were so ignorant that it was difficult to have a meaningful conversation with them. They all concurred with the principal’s policy of selectively recruiting those parents with higher educational attainment and holding professional jobs to serve the PTA or to volunteer their help to support teachers and the work of the school.

1.1.3 Active Parent-Members of the PTA: Toeing the School Line

With the principal’s operational principle at work, all the parent-members of the PTA in the year 2002–2003 had higher educational attainments than their counterparts in previous years. Over half of them were either full-time employed or in flexi-work. These parent-members were self-selected and/or hand-picked. They identified with the mission and function of the PTA as prescribed by the school.

The chairperson of the PTA, Mrs. X, thought that parental involvement was a means to get to know the teachers and their work. It was important to promote understanding between parents and teachers (School A_PTA_Committee_Member_Mrs_X, lines 53–56, p. 2). She thought PTA activities to promote parental involvement should serve the purpose of supporting teaching and school operation (School A_PTA_Committee_Member_Mrs_X, lines 81–82, p. 2). She acknowledged that teachers were professionally trained and therefore owned specialized knowledge and skills. Parental involvement should therefore be confined to assisting teachers rather than taking part in teaching or school administration (School A_PTA_Committee_Member_Mrs_X, line 165, p. 4). What the chairperson said about the practice and meaning of parental involvement was quite representative of the views of other parent-members we interviewed. Given their

commitment to and identification with the roles that the school had assigned to them, they were very self-reliant and seldom sought help from the principal or teachers. The chairperson explained why it was important and essential for parents to be cooperative with the school:

... the teachers could spend more time on lesson design and preparation of teaching materials ... to enhance student learning in an innovative and lively way. Ultimately, this will benefit students' growth and learning (School A_PTA_Committee_Member_Mrs_X, lines 152–156, p. 4).

On the whole, all parent-members enjoyed their work and found it rewarding. As the chairperson, Mrs. X, noted, “We find personal growth in our involvement in the school. It has enriched our life, enhanced our social and communication skills and, more importantly, increased our self-confidence as a person who could make a contribution other than being a housewife ”(School A_PTA_Committee_Member_Mrs_X, lines 407–411, p. 9).

1.1.4 Diverse Orientations Towards Parental Involvement Among Involved Parents

We interviewed three parents who were not PTA members and yet took time to help out in school. Mrs. W regarded parental involvement as a way to get an insider view of the school, so that she was able to cooperate with the school in giving home instruction to her child. She shared similar views with the PTA chairperson that parental involvement should be confined to non-teaching activities. Any teaching-related responsibilities should be taken up by teachers, as they were professionally trained.

Another active parent volunteer, Mrs. K, cherished the work of the PTA in networking between parents and teachers. In a PTA-sponsored seminar “Preparation for Promotion to Secondary School”, she learned not only from the teacher-presenters but also from the parent-presenters, as the latter had experiences in choosing secondary schools for their children and helping them to prepare for admission interviews (School A_PTA_PH_Mrs_K, lines 158–188, p. 4).

When asked if parents should be involved in school management, Ms. N, another parent, offered her view:

... it would be a difficult task to parents. I know my limits. Parents need to possess “high qualities” for them to participate in school management. Those parents with “high qualities” would likely be working parents. They may not have time to involve in school activities. For those non-working parents, since most of them are housewives, the demand on them would not be that high. Paradoxically, it is those parents working at administrative and professional levels, and who are committed, should be invited to participate in school management. (School A_PTA_PH_Ms_N, lines 344–354, p. 8)

All involved parents held positive views about the function of the PTA. This was expected as they were informants nominated by a former teacher member of the PTA. Nonetheless, some of them did see gaps between the stated goals and the

actual practice of the PTA while others found that parental involvement brought benefits beyond the benefit accrued to the academic performance of their children. One commonly identified benefit is “learning about the school life of their child and, thus, having more common topics when talking with their child.” Another benefit reflects an altruistic orientation—“feeling good about being able to help (e.g., Mrs. K).” Also, “being a volunteer gives children an example so that they will then learn the worth of being helpful to other people ...” (School A_PTA_PH_Mrs_C, lines 118–122, p. 3) was found to be a benefit by quite a number of parents.

1.1.5 Inertia and Indifference of the Non-involved Parents

We interviewed 12 parents to probe the views and experiences of non-involved parents. All of them were mothers, three of them being referred to us by the PTA members and the rest being randomly selected during a field visit to the annual Christmas carnival held by the PTA. Some of the parents who were interviewed had been involved in voluntary work for the school in the past. As noted by some current parent- and teacher-members of the PTA, the operational principle adopted by the principal had alienated many working class parents who had volunteered their help to the school in the past.

To Mrs. Y, a housewife whose child was studying in Grade 3, parental involvement was restricted to helping her child’s education at home. For instance, she assisted her child in reviewing homework assignments and studying for examinations. She thought that “when it came to educating children, there was a division of labor among home and school” (School A_Non-PH_Mrs_Y, lines 62–64, p. 2). Home and school taught children separately. In her opinion, there was nothing that required home and school to collaborate. Another parent, Mrs. L, did not find much meaning to parental involvement. She thought that home–school cooperation did not affect children’s performance or personal growth (School A_PTA_Non-PH_Mrs_L, lines 31–33, p. 1). Besides perceived irrelevancy regarding division of labor, non-involved parents also expressed the following orientations: (1) separate roles for teachers/school and parents/family; (2) unfriendliness and non-helpful attitude of homeroom teachers, particularly towards those parents with children who did not perform well in school; (3) little or no spare time for those parents who had to look after younger children at home; (4) full-time working parents had little or no time for volunteering; (5) parental involvement in school had no bearing on children’s school performance; (6) being shy or uncomfortable in dealing with other parents and/or teachers (e.g., Mrs. N who felt uncomfortable in meeting strangers; Mrs. H who did not like working with teachers and dealing with administrative matters); (7) children did not like to see parents’ presence in the school (e.g., Mrs. N); (8) parental involvement in school did not benefit senior-grade students; and (9) interpersonal bickering was common among parents who were active in the school. Table 2 profiles the orientations of non-involved parents.

Table 2 School leadership and home-school relationship emerged

Leadership	Utilitarian		Communitarian
	Bureaucratic		
Habitus of the principal	Principal A saw school governance and administration as being the responsibility of professional educators and believed that it was inappropriate for parents to have any say on matters of school governance	Principal B agreed with the concept of parental involvement for its value in providing additional “human resource” to the school. The school established its PTA to comply with the government policy on school-based management	Principal C believed that parents are “co-owners” of the school. Teachers, the family and the school join hands to pursue shared goals. Parental involvement can provide children with holistic education of high quality
	Teachers’ views on parents Parents with little education are potentially troublesome, as they spread rumors that may hurt the school	Parents only perform supportive tasks because they are considered to be incapable of dealing with educational or administrative matters. Parental involvement should lessen teachers’ workload, not add to it	Parents’ commitment is most important, not their education level or expertise. Working parents are usually more committed. They can be nurtured to provide support to the school
Home-school relationship	Alienated Schools as “formal organizations” characterized by a rigid division of labor for teachers in school and parents at home	Instrumental Schools as “policy tool”; parents are utilized to support school education and promote the reputation of the school within the community	Mutual Trust Schools as a “small society”, an organization that emphasizes informal and enduring trusting relationships between home and school

1.2 Beliefs and Actions

At first glance, the notion of division of labor between parents and teachers in the education of children was held by the principal, teachers, parent-members of the PTA as well as some non-involved parents. Bounded by past experience and an orthodox view of teacher professionalism, the principal and the teachers had fashioned a PTA that would toe the school line. Yet, some human learning emerged in the course of action and interaction. It bred ambivalence among some parent-members of the PTA and alienation among some parent-volunteers.

1.2.1 Hard-and-Fast Principles Swerved by Emerging Human Learning

The scope of the PTA's work had been broadened by an infusion of parent-members who were better educated and could bring in a variety of professional/occupation experience and skills they had acquired in the work world. In fact, the PTA did enter into "professional territory", though it still stayed clear of the teachers' territory in the classroom. The "Aunties as Reading Pals" reading program is an example. Parents had to possess certain knowledge and skills for them to prepare and conduct the program. While some parents took care of logistics and coordination of human resources, other parents serving as "reading pals" had to acquire knowledge on children's psychological and cognitive needs in order to help students develop a reading habit. Another professional territory the PTA entered was teaching students Putonghua. In view of student feedback, the instructor, Mrs. X, the PTA's chairperson, proposed to modify the teaching strategy so as to enhance students' interest and learning. Both the principal and the teachers endorsed her ideas. The change in teaching strategy reflects the chairperson's capability in integrating knowledge about children's learning and how adults teach. She demonstrated confidence in herself as a "professional" instructor in the way she put forward her proposal to the principal, teachers and other parent-members in the PTA meeting.

The involvement of parents in these two professional territories received enthusiastic support from the principal and the teachers. However, other initiatives proposed by the PTA, such as issuing a PTA newsletter and holding an annual Christmas carnival, received only lukewarm and even indifferent response from school personnel. The proposed PTA newsletter was meant to inform parents not only of PTA activities but also of school policies and plans. The school principal did not see the necessity of such. She was adamant about drawing a clear line between parents and the school. She explained:

The problem is that we don't want any parental involvement in school governance ... the parents are not mature enough to qualify them to take part in school administration (School A_Principal, lines 429-434, p. 12).

In short, school staff refused to let parents have any part in school administration and governance. Regarding the proposal of holding a Christmas carnival, the school found absolutely no role in it, as its prior responsibility was to teach, not to promote social activities for parents. Ms. A put it thus:

In fact, since the day the school was established, I strongly opposed organizing lots of leisure activities and parent-child activities (for example, picnics for parents and kids). Why does the school need to organize these kinds of social activities? I think it is unnecessary (School A_Principal, lines 91-96, p. 3).

The inconsistent reactions of the principal and some of the teachers towards PTA initiatives may have arisen from the paradox generated by the school's guiding principle restricting the function and operation of the PTA. If the school looks for high-caliber parents to support teachers and 'staff' the PTA, it makes good sense to target working parents who are more educated. However, this does not mean that the school will find parental involvement trouble-free. Once these parents come to work together, unavoidably there will be diverse views about how things should be and what could be done. Looking at it positively, it will mean creating generative forces that may energize the school as a whole and re-align the home-school relationship. However, it will also mean that the school needs to drop this guiding principle that effectively puts parental involvement in a box in order to accommodate new ideas and new modes of partnership between teachers and parents. Failing that, frustration on the part of the parents and even the teachers will be bound to happen.

1.2.2 Lack of Enthusiasm Among Teachers Under a Principalship that 'Boxes' Parental Involvement

The core teacher-members of the PTA included the principal, the vice-principal, the panel chairs and other teacher-members who were either appointed by the principal or took turns to join according to a rotation system. Most of them were apathetic towards the work of the PTA and did not hold any long-term vision of its development. To them, their place in the PTA was mostly symbolic, not functional.

A strong sense of teacher professionalism may partially explain the lack of interest and energy. If what teachers do will account for how and what children learn, it is understandable that the school staff did not perceive any linkage between parental involvement and children's learning. Indeed, they perceived parents to be outsiders. When making the journey to the camp site, teachers travelled in a separate coach. This arrangement may well be seen as a clear articulation of the setting of a clear boundary between teachers and parents, even if the school staff did accept the notion of home-school cooperation.

The principal's view that teachers' involvement in PTA activities should be minimal did make good logical sense if indeed parental involvement made little contribution to children's learning. However, this would also mean teachers' presence in the PTA was symbolic and passive, and this might bring about certain

latent negative effects on teachers' professional identity. No teachers, particularly those with a strong sense of professionalism, would like to serve a decorative purpose in any activity. Furthermore, parents would likely perceive teachers' passivity as being indifferent and distant, thus widening the divide between parents and teachers even as the teachers' part in the PTA was meant to foster home-school cooperation. Consequently, no cooperative, let alone collaborative, working relationship could be created for parental involvement to work towards supporting children's learning.

1.2.3 Alienation, Ambivalence and Awakening of Parents

It is understandable that parents participate in school activities because they want to know more about children's school life and, if given a way, to contribute to children's learning. When the parents discovered that they were actually unwelcome by the school people despite their good will, they felt bad about it. Parents voiced their frustrations towards the school:

(The school) treats parents as if they were cheap labor. The school hasn't even thanked [us] for all the efforts that [we] have put in (School A_PH_PTA_Committee_Mrs_Z, lines 466–469, p. 10).

... it is difficult to communicate with teachers: in school activities and some other occasions, many teachers were absent (School A_Non-PH_Mrs_L, lines 54–56 and 67–69, p. 2).

... there was no opportunity for parents to communicate with the teachers (School A_Non-PH_Mrs_E, line 67, p. 2).

It is true that many parents acted like “Sze-Lai”, a category label that confers on full-time housewives the following set of traits: they look for other people's praise; they always turn to teachers for guidance and advice; they like to chit-chat a lot and spread gossip among themselves. In fact, parents might not be civil in dealing with teachers when they had some grievances in mind. For instance, a parent thought that her child was treated unfairly by a teacher. She directly confronted the teacher and at some point pushed the teacher. Instances like this might have bred among teachers a biased view toward parents, and this might come across to parents as open rejection—not only of what they did for the school but also of who they were as people. This would only further alienate them.

Initially, those parents who actively involved in the work of the PTA did accept the “bureaucratic” view of the principal about the function of the PTA. Many concurred that the workload of teachers was too heavy for them to take up additional duties in helping the PTA to organize activities. This explains why Mrs. X accepted a limited role for the PTA even though she (and probably other parent-members) was willing and also capable of doing more for the school. As parental involvement experiences increasingly broadened her horizon, she came to recognize the importance of the role of parents in children's academic performance as well as cognitive and psychological development. She felt that parents could take one step further in parental involvement and find more ways to know about their

children. Despite such awareness, she was ambivalent about positioning herself, as the chairperson of the PTA, to move beyond what the boundary that the school principal had set and made known not only to all the parent-members but also to the teachers. Mrs. X's sentiment was also echoed by some parents. Mrs. J, who used to be a dancer and a dance tutor, volunteered to provide help to the PTA to organize dance classes for parents. She found satisfaction in being a dance tutor to other parents in activities organized by the PTA. In sharing her expertise, she saw the worth of being an involved parent beyond the interest of her own child.

Despite their understanding of the boundary that the school had set for parental involvement, many involved parents started to contemplate the potential of the PTA in organizing its members to make a more direct contribution to the education of children. They also considered it unfair that the present school leadership discriminated against parents of lower socio-economic background in their involvement in the PTA. For those parents whose children were doing well in school, joining the PTA or being a parent-volunteer in the school was not something important. However, for those parents whose children did not perform well, having an active part in parental involvement may make a lot of difference.

1.3 A Critical Analysis: Parental Involvement as Social Interactions that Generate Human Learning

Other than the PTA, in which a limited number of parents could be involved, few opportunities for parental involvement were offered in School A. The school principal was the major actor who defined the meaning of parental involvement. Her philosophy about the respective roles of the school, teachers and parents in the education of children set a narrow boundary that limited the scope of parental involvement. Her preconception of full-time housewives as home-makers had led to a large group of parents being excluded from getting involved in the school. Moreover, parental involvement was confined to non-teaching and non-administrative tasks and only those parents with working experience and good educational level were welcome to get involved in the school.

Given the perception of the school staff that housewives and parents of lower socio-economic background were relatively more difficult to work with, many parents were excluded from participating in the school. Such a perception was grounded on their experience that these housewives exhibited such behaviors as caring only for their own child and paying attention to trivial things like the inferior quality of lunch-box food as compared with home-cooked food for their children. In fact, parents' selective reading and interpretation of school practices could be the source for rumors.

Better educated parents of higher socio-economic background were no different. They too were concerned more about their own children than other children. They too were concerned about the quality of school lunch for their children. These parents also gossiped and sought praise from teachers. The school principal

could have taken action to dampen the spread of rumor rather than to avoid it. She did not see the potential of parental involvement and did not take up the challenge of creating an open school for all parents to effectively participate in children's education, not simply their own children but also the students as a young generation for whom they share a collective responsibility.

The school principal had been discouraging teachers from taking the initiative to promote better communication with parents. As a result, even though some teachers had found parents to be promising partners in a collective effort to support students' learning and development, they felt ambivalent about whether or not to take the initiative to develop a strong partnership. The haphazard manner of the teachers put off many parents who were prepared to take a more active role in parental involvement. As such, a vicious cycle set in that hampered the communication between parents and the school. In the absence of candid and two-way communication between teachers and parents, it would be difficult to develop a culture of home-school cooperation, let alone home-school collaboration.

Through training and collaborative work, many parents could be guided to help create a better teaching and learning environment for the teachers and all students, not just their own children. For example, parents like Mrs. X, the PTA's chairperson, and those parents involved in the development and implementation of the Reading Pals program could have been coached to get involved in some teaching tasks. Since the length of office for PTA committee members is only one year (though some members do stay for a second term), it is unlikely that the PTA, as a collective, could learn from its members' experience through reflecting on their strengths and weaknesses so as to improve its work over time.

If the principal and the teacher-members do not learn from their own experiences and re-conceptualize parental involvement in school as a form of human learning for all the stakeholders, it would not be possible to establish home-school linkage for supporting children's learning and school improvement.

To summarize, School A is viewed as a "formal organization" by the principal. Both the principal and the majority of teachers believe in a rigid division of labor between teachers in school and parents at home. The principal and most of the teachers had never thought about understanding the diversity of needs, concerns and expectations of parents and transforming their motivation and resource into collective energy for enhancing the education of children. As a result, particularly those parents who took an active stance toward parental involvement in school tended to feel alienated in their relationship with the school.

2 School B: Instrumental Relationship Under a Utilitarian Leadership

Established in 1988 by a large charitable organization, this primary school is located in a new town. It was a half-day school before 2000. It then became a whole-day school and moved to the current location, neighboring several large

public and private housing estates. The students came from working and middle-class families. There are altogether 27 classes. In response to the policy guidelines of the Report No. 7 of the Education Commission of Hong Kong, the school established a Parent–Teacher Association (PTA) in 1996. Between 1998 and 2000, the school participated in the “Home–School Collaboration: In Search of Success Indicators and Practices” research project. In that project, the school was rated to be low in parental involvement. Furthermore, the performance of its PTA and the provision of school activities for enhancing parent–child relationships and/or parenting knowledge and skills were rated quite negatively by the parents.

A working committee was set up to steer the work of the PTA. It consisted of seven official posts. Except for the post of chairperson to be filled by election among parent-members, all the other positions (vice-chairperson, treasurer, secretary, coordinator, recreational officer and promotional officer) were co-staffed by one parent and one teacher. All parent committee members were mothers. Among them, four were employed full-time and three were full-time homemakers. No training course was provided to the committee members and parent volunteers until recently. Parent volunteers serving in PTA activities were coached and/or supervised by committee members. To ensure that all teachers would have the opportunity to work with parents, the principal adopted a rotation system to assign teacher-members of the PTA. Non-PTA teachers were also required to attend PTA activities at least twice a year. Towards the end of our field study, a parent academy was established to provide training to parents for enhancing their capability.

2.1 Practice and Meaning of Parental Involvement

Like most PTAs in other schools, the PTA of School B was responsible for organizing and running activities that aimed to promote the parent–child relationship and enhance parent–school communication so as to improve student learning and performance. One major operational task was to recruit parent volunteers to help out in PTA or school activities. The basic or regular tasks/duties performed by parent volunteers included monitoring student discipline during lunch hour, and organizing and implementing charity/environmental protection activities and parent–child recreational activities. These tasks had nothing to do with teaching and school administration. Some parents who possessed craft skills (such as making bead-jewelry) were invited to tutor students in extra-curricular activities. PTA activities were open to all parents.

Due to limited capacity or scope of planning, many PTA activities had a quota set on the number of parent-participants and volunteers. For administrative purposes, parent-participants and volunteers were chosen by drawing lots in order to ensure equal chance for every parent. There was a system to record parents’ participation in PTA activities. A parent’s record of participation would appear in her/his child’s report card at the end of the school year.

2.1.1 Pragmatics of the Principal in Meeting Policy and Market Demands

The principal of School B, Ms. B, had a policy-oriented approach towards promoting parental involvement in the school. Following the guidelines of the Education Commission, she set up a PTA in 1996, the earliest among the three schools in this study. Even though the decision was made to follow the “trend” among local schools to set up a PTA as recommended by the Education Commission, the school principal was opinionated regarding the mission of PTAs in the local educational scene:

To enhance the communication between parents and the school is critical to the cognitive, emotional and physical growth of students. Due to social changes, children are subjected to various sources of influence. So, home-school communication has become more important (School B_Principal, p. 2).

Regarding the relative importance of parental involvement as an element of the school policy for accomplishing the objectives of the school, Ms. B expressed the following view:

... parental involvement is secondary to the school. The academic result of the students is most important. [But] according to the Education Commission, PTA or home-school cooperation is part of the required “package” under the concept of school-based management for each and every school, therefore we had to organize it, and even more so because we belong to ABC (the charity organization). ABC is always the first to respond to new policies, new reforms, new research, etc. and to follow any new trend in education reform (School B_Principal, lines 40–47, p. 5, p. 3).

What then is the specific role of parental involvement in meeting the objectives of the school? The school principal candidly revealed what she intended to accomplish through parental involvement:

To have more parents coming to participate in school activities can (also) build a positive reputation for the school. We require all parents to attend parent meetings. There is a theme for every parent meeting. We keep an attendance record for every parent. When parents visit the school, they will see what we have done. They will spread the word around to help build our reputation. Also, with the expansion of the school and increasing demands of the Education Commission, there will be growing diversification in student activities. Parents can provide us with more human resources (School B_Principal, lines 35, p. 2).

According to the school principal, “parents would only be engaged in ‘low-level’ activities, such as helping in lunch hours and reading stories.” Parents were seen as not being able to take up “high-level” work because they were not well educated. Other than that, the school principal had other reservations:

Parents often look at things only from the perspective of the students and for the interest of their own children. They tend to see things from their own point of view and not from other perspectives. Allowing them to engage in administrative-level tasks (such as serving as a member of the Director’s Board) may not be a good thing. As parents are generally low in educational level and lack a good understanding of the school, their involvement in school administration can be detrimental (School B_Principal, lines 45–50, p. 5).

Under the leadership of the school principal, parental involvement focused mostly on its pragmatic function, such as promoting the school's reputation. Given the principal's reservations (parents' concerns are egoistic, and they are not well-educated), parental involvement in School B was confined mostly to non-teaching and non-administrative tasks.

2.1.2 Teachers' Dilemma in Parental Involvement

Most teachers found the PTA activities functional in enhancing home-school communication. They believed that improved home-school cooperation could enhance the growth of students. Some teachers considered parental involvement particularly important to low-achievement students. Ms. F offered this analysis:

Parent involvement has become increasingly important, particularly for those low-achievement students. Some of them are labeled by teachers as being "incurable". However, if their parents keep in touch with the school, contact the teachers, and join home-school activities, their kids may get a chance for "incarnation" (School B_T_Ms_F, lines 55–60, p. 4).

Another teacher, Mr. C, thought that parental involvement could contribute to the school:

The concept of home-school cooperation is good because parents are aware of the constraint on teachers in having sufficient time to attend to the needs of every student. On the contrary, parents are more attentive to the everyday life of their children. For instance, they are more knowledgeable in getting the lunch arrangement to go smoothly than teachers. The school therefore tends to accept their opinion in this regard (School B_T_Mr_C, lines 65–70, p. 2).

Ms. H, a senior teacher in School B, was a permanent member of the PTA at the time of the study. She agreed with the principal that it was not a good idea to invite parents to take part in school governance or teaching-related tasks. She explained:

... [parent-] members of the PTA are low in education. This will cause inconvenience to the school. Most of them are not capable of running a meeting. We simply cannot leave them to plan activities. Many parents are also afraid of meeting such challenges. They lack confidence and are not willing to be involved in administrative or teaching-related tasks. Unlike how things are in the West, parents [in School B] are not capable of leading or organizing PTA activities (School B_T_Ms_H, lines 23–35, p. 1).

On the other hand, some teachers did recognize the importance of getting to know parents through home-school collaboration activities. "Teachers could know more about students through contacts with their parents" (School B_T_Ms_U & Mr_K, lines 18–24, p. 1). This implies that teacher-student interaction would ultimately enhance student learning. Mr. M adopted a reactive approach in seeking parental involvement:

When students display behavioral problems or lag behind in school work, I'll call up their parents and inform them of what and how their kids are doing in school. Hopefully, the parents would pay more attention to their children (School B_T_Mr_M, lines 74–77, p. 1).

Ms. U was the vice-chairperson of the PTA. She was not particularly enthusiastic about her role in the PTA. She held a broader view toward parental involvement. She said:

In order to understand why children behave or perform in a particular way, we need to understand their family background first, since family background is a factor affecting child development (School B_T_Ms_U & Mr_K, lines 18–24, p. 1).

Some teachers found themselves facing a dilemma. While they reckoned that parental involvement did help in lessening their burden, they refrained from being proactive in seeking collaboration with parents. Ms. F's caution about the extent to which she wanted to maintain acquaintance with parents might be shared by her colleagues. She said:

When talking with parents, we need to be cautious about what we say as it may become the source of rumor (School B_T_Ms_F, p. 1).

2.1.3 Parents' Responsibility in Taking Initiatives

Involved parents, particularly those who were PTA members, identified with the function and contribution of the PTA stated in the operation manual. For example, the PTA chairperson, Mrs. M, described home–school cooperation as “parents assisting teachers in non-teaching and non-administrative tasks, such as maintaining order during lunch time, helping in extra-curricular activities, and reading stories to the students” (School B_PH_Mrs_M, lines 371–375, p. 8).

Another involved parent-volunteer admitted that parental involvement provided her with opportunities to know the child's learning environment in school (School B_PH_Mrs_W, lines 25–33, p. 1). Other involved parents thought that by helping to maintain classroom discipline, they could get first-hand knowledge about teachers' work and how hard they work (School B_PH_Mrs_L & Mrs_J, lines 60–65, p. 2). A PTA parent-member got “fringe benefits” through parental involvement:

It enables me to be acquainted with many parents, know more about the school, and get to know each teacher's personality and temper. All these facilitate me to maintain communication with the teachers (School B_PH_Committee_Members, lines 61–64, p. 1).

Some parents did find a gap between the purpose and the practice of the PTA. Mrs. C, a full-time homemaker, initially thought that the PTA would serve as a channel for parents to communicate with teachers on how their children were doing at home and in school. She realized later that the school did not provide such a channel (School B_PH_Mrs_C, lines 60–63, p. 2). Noting also the pressure and dilemma that the PTA chairperson, Mrs. M, experienced, it is apparent that there was a lack of ownership of the PTA among parents. As the chairperson, Mrs. M said:

As the chairperson, I need to devote a lot of time and bear a lot of pressure (School B_PH_Mrs_M, lines 46–47, p. 1). Sometimes I found myself in a dilemma, as I am not sure about how to handle parents' complaints about teachers and school practices (School B_PTA_Activities_Day Camp, lines 106–119, pp. 2–3).

Parents complained about essay assignments not being properly marked, and students not being allowed to make copies of test papers for revision when teachers kept possession of them. In some cases teachers rushed through the last few lessons because they were behind schedule (School B_PTA_Activities_Day Camp, lines 171–174, p. 4). Mrs. M explained why these complaints posed her a dilemma:

Parents who found faults in the teacher of their kids do not want to confront the teacher directly. They were afraid that the teacher would be prejudiced against their kids ... Therefore they expected that the PTA would act on their behalf to straighten the matter out for them. In theory, the PTA should and could act as a buffer between parents and teachers if there is a conflict between them. However, in practice we (the PTA) do not have legitimate authority to do so (School B_PH_Mrs_M, lines 205–218, p. 5).

Some parents had positive experience in their contact with teachers. Mrs. S had a positive experience with her child's teacher:

Teachers are relatively friendly. When my child got in trouble in school, the teacher called and informed me of what had happened. They are willing to contact parents and communicate with them (School B_Non-PH_Mrs_S, lines 158–161, p. 4).

Conversely, many non-involved parents found teachers being passive in communicating with parents (School B_Non-PH_Ms_W, lines 89–92, p. 2; School B_Non-PH_Mrs_A, lines 181–184, p. 4). They thought the teachers should be more proactive in contacting parents. If teachers were keeping in touch with parents, they would have better understanding about parents' views and expectations. Teachers' input in PTA meetings would then be more constructive (School B_Non-PH_Mrs_A, lines 81–85, p. 3).

From teachers' point of view, the burden should be on parents to initiate contact with teachers. A teacher, Ms. L, reckoned that there was inadequate communication between parents and teachers. However, it was parents who should take the initiative:

Parents should be more active in contacting teachers. A close relationship between teachers and parents would help "rehabilitate" students (School B_T_Ms_L, lines 72–74, p. 2).

Given the contrasting views and diverse expectations among and between teachers and parents, there was confusion over the role of the PTA and the responsibility of PTA members.

2.2 Beliefs and Actions

In School B, the principal's pragmatic view of parental involvement was that, under the school-based management scheme, the school would gain additional human resources for running PTA activities and a raised performance indicator. Both the teachers and many parents were aware that the value of the PTA to the school was more about meeting policy and market demands.

2.2.1 Instrumental Leadership in Parental Involvement

To justify an instrumental view of parental involvement—in terms of additional human resource to the school—the school principal explained that most of the parents were low in education, hence would not be able to shoulder tasks related to teaching or school governance. Indeed, it was not only that it was difficult for her to find tasks for parents, she was also careful about parents spreading rumors around:

Parents have many chances to gather together. If they have any misunderstanding about the school, they would spread the rumor around ... it is very hard to stop them from passing it around ... they see things in rather simplistic ways (School B_Principal, lines 46–50, p. 2).

Given this concern, the ideal parent the principal looked for to take active part in parental involvement was one who “has the heart and the mind, with good education, efficient and willing to give away her/his time” to serve the PTA. The principal’s insistence on getting “qualified” parents to serve the PTA might have dampened the enthusiasm of many parents who, though low in educational level, would like to take an active part in parental involvement.

As the PTA was constituted by both parent- and teacher-members, with each group performing specific yet complementary duties, it was strange to find that the effort of teacher-members was to be spared when the PTA needed to do something beyond the parents’ capability. In contemplating a PTA journal to be published regularly, the principal claimed:

In general, I think parents [with low education] are not too helpful to the school ... for instance, I really want to publish a regular journal as a communication channel between parents and the school. ... I already mentioned that the parents who are not so educated could not handle the work involved. If I insisted in having that publication, it would have increased the workload of the teachers (School B_Principal, lines 45–51, p. 3).

A rotation system for assigning teacher-members of the PTA could hardly cultivate in teachers a sense of commitment or identification with the work of the PTA. It is understandable that the principal was unable to get the teacher-members of the PTA to support the initiative of publishing the PTA journal. Adopting a consultative approach in finding teachers who identified with the mission of the PTA in serving also the interest of teachers would be a far better alternative to the rotation system.

The PTA, or more accurately, the chairperson and its parent-members, constituted the main communication bridge between parents and the school. However, in practice, they were constrained by their limited official capacity to inform and coordinate parents, and to mobilize general support toward parental involvement as a means for enhancing student learning and school improvement. Mr. M, a teacher, made a candid remark:

The power of the PTA in enhancing communication with parents was not that great. Its work is mostly about organizing parent–child activities. The PTA has not demonstrated any real effectiveness in establishing a good relationship between parents and teachers (School B_T_Mr_M, lines 135–137, p. 3).

2.2.2 Limiting Teachers' Effort Under the Instrumental Principalsip

Most teachers considered their PTA duties as a minor part of their job duties. They did not show much enthusiasm in it, let alone take initiatives or make efforts in the PTA's work. Most teachers were not enthusiastic about attending PTA activities. Ms. O, an experienced teacher who had been working at School B for more than ten years, joined the PTA for the first time:

As a teacher, if I had a choice, I would not be willing to be a teacher-member of the PTA. A two-year term for this job is demanding (School B_T_Ms_O, lines 13–15, 28–30, p. 1).

In the PTA meetings, it was the panel chairperson who took charge of what would be discussed, resolutions to be made, what action to be taken. Most teacher-members assumed a passive role in PTA meetings (School B_T_Ms_O, lines 61–63, p. 3).

Ms. K, another teacher-member of the PTA, also found the duties exhausting (School B_T_Ms_K, lines 50–52, p. 1).

Teachers also failed to promote home-school collaboration. In some school activities, parents and teachers rode on separate buses, and teachers only socialized among themselves. As a result, parents could hardly find opportunities to get to know the teachers (School B_Non-PH_Mrs_S, lines 41–43, p. 1). A teacher also admitted that many teachers are not too enthusiastic about communicating with parents. In her view, many teachers were unwilling to join the PTA because the each term lasted for two years and the commitment was “too time-consuming” (School B_T_Ms_O, lines 27–29, p. 1).

On the part of parents, some of them were indifferent toward parental involvement. A teacher, Ms. U, thought that there was a single factor affecting parental involvement—the person's orientation. She argued that:

It is nothing to do with parents' SES background. Without such an orientation, full-time homemakers would not invest their time and working parents would not invest their knowledge in voluntary work supporting the school. Parental involvement depends on parents' “heart and mind” (School B_T_Ms_U & Mr_K, lines 65–74, p. 2).

However, Ms. U qualified that those parents who volunteered their help tended to have a good relationship with the school. Both she and her colleague, Mr. K (they were interviewed together), felt that under the current arrangement, parents were not allowed, nor were they guided, to fully explore their potential. Commenting on a PTA activity involving teachers and parents working together to set up the venue for the activity, they said:

If there was genuine collaboration between teachers and parents, the venue could have been decorated much better and more efficiently (School B_T_Ms_U & Mr_K, lines 56–57, p. 1).

Mr. K did not find parents involved in school activities particularly passive or active. Generally speaking, this group of parents was willing to cooperate and/or communicate with the school (School B_T_Ms_U & Mr_K, lines 147–149, p. 3). He did find some parents very dedicated in working for the school. The dynamics of social interaction between these parents and teachers helped in correcting bias

and misconceptions toward each other. This is why some teachers felt that doing the minimum is not enough or right.

2.2.3 To Be Involved or Not Involved: Personal Decision vs. Institutional Constraint

The decision of most parents to get involved in the school resulted from a set of expectations: expanding their social network, learning new things such as how to communicate and cooperate with teachers, and finding out more about how to educate children. Most of them, particularly parent-members of the PTA, clearly understood the limit set by the school that kept parents from having voices in policy-related matters or joining the school's Board of Directors (School B_PH_Mrs_M, lines 380–386, p. 8). Nonetheless, they were dedicated volunteers giving help to the school, as found in a parent's reflection on her experience of being an active volunteer:

As a parent-volunteer to assist teachers in organizing activities, it is not like attending school activities with your own kid. I came to know how PTA activities were planned and implemented, such as booking coaches and coordinating parent-volunteers. Such insider view led me to appreciate the PTA's effort rendered and understand school practices (School B_PH_Mrs_W, lines 48–56, p. 1).

To parents who were not volunteers, the value of parental involvement lies in whether or not it gives their children practical benefits. Many did not join the rank of parent-volunteers because they thought that volunteering in the school would not benefit their children's academic performance. Other parents provided different reasons for their non-involvement. A few parents whom we interviewed could not find time to join school activities. They would like to join if their schedule allowed (School B_Non-PH_Ms_W, Non-PH_Mrs_H). Other parents could not join because they had to take care of elderly dependents (School B_Non-PH_Ms_N) or young children at home (School B_Non-PH_Ms_W). There were also idiosyncratic reasons. For example, Mrs. G explained why she chose not to be a parent-volunteer:

I'm scared of being surrounded by too many people and voicing my views in front of others. Working in school requires cooperation with other parents. It is not that easy to reach consensus as people tend to differ in ideas and ways of doing things (School B_Non-PH_Mrs_G, lines 27–32, p. 1).

In general, parental involvement was limited by one's economic and social capital. Yet, some institutional factors may also block or hinder parental involvement. Ms. E had never joined volunteering in the school because she did not get selected by the school's drawing system, as there were too many parents competing for the "job" (School B_Non-PH_Ms_E, lines 25–27, p. 1). Some non-involved parents whom we interviewed were positive toward parental involvement. They thought joining parent-child activities was meaningful and useful. For example, Mrs. G found:

Parent seminars enable parents to know how to get along with children, stimulate parents to find effective ways of educating their children by examples, and help parents to know more about the school (School B_Non-PH_Mrs_G, lines 67–71, p. 2).

Some parents discovered that the school would inform only a selected group of parents of up-coming PTA activities, such as seminars on parenting skills, and invited them to join (School B_PH_Mrs_C, lines 155–168, pp. 3–4). To them, such a school practice was unfair. Some parents got the impression that it was always the same group of parents who got selected by the school to become parent-volunteers. Also, they did not comprehend why the school set a quota system to limit the number of parent-/student-participants in PTA activities which were not free of charge. It would be reasonable to allow as many parents to join insofar as they were ready to pay the fee. To them, with adequate planning and administrative support, it was not difficult for these events to entertain a larger audience.

Some non-involved parents whom we interviewed did not harbor any specific or high expectation toward the PTA (Mrs. S & Ms. N). They thought that the function of the PTA was confined to organizing parent–child activities, but such activities would not foster home–school connection. In our field observation at the day camp, we did pick up the impression that the connection between PTA parent- and teacher-members and the ‘ordinary’ parents was weak. Most ‘ordinary’ parents did not know the PTA members. In the journey to the campsite, a parent-member of the PTA escorted one coach. It was only when the PTA member introduced herself that other parents came to know her.

2.3 A Critical Analysis: Rhetoric Versus Substance

The school principal had offered an eloquent account of the importance of parental involvement in the education of children. To put ideas into practice, there was an operation manual that specified the function and composition of the PTA, as well as the accountability and responsibility of PTA members. Nonetheless, the principal was not able to cultivate a strong parental involvement in the school despite what on paper seemed to be a well thought out plan. The diversity of views, concerns and expectations found among and between teachers and parents indicated the absence of a common purpose and shared goals.

The principal did not expect the PTA to be able to contribute in a significant way to enhancing teaching and learning in the school. Instead, she held the view that if parents came to the school and observed what happened, they would know and understand why teachers do what they do and what they want to accomplish, and would then help to spread the name of the school in the community. It sounded rather simplistic, and failed to grasp the complexity of parental involvement as interplay between institutional ideology and practice on the one hand, and diverse motivational factors that parents and teachers bring to the scene on the other. Albeit the school had pursued parental involvement for several years, it was still unable to create room for functional participation by teachers, particularly those teachers who had come to realize the positive and valuable contribution of parents to the education of children.

Nor did the school provide sufficient space for parents to collaborate with teachers in meaningful tasks bearing on student learning and school improvement.

Under the school's policy of keeping parents from crossing the professional boundary and its market-oriented approach toward parental involvement, the PTA had never been regarded as an independent entity with the autonomy for the parent- and teacher-members to work collaboratively to set its direction and find ways to pursue its goals. For example, in the PTA's second meeting to formulate its annual activity plan, there was exchange of ideas only between the vice-principal (who served as the vice-chairperson of the PTA) and the chairperson of the PTA. In another PTA meeting on recycling saleable used items, the vice-chairperson and the chairperson came up with a new strategic plan for the coming year after listening to the experiences of parent-members in collecting, checking and price-marking of used items collected from parents and students in this year's exercise. That their voices dominated the meeting reflects the silence of other PTA members. There would be a price to pay for the absence of a broad-based participation. At the personal level, it might breed a sense of frustration among non-participating members, particularly teacher-members who had little time to spare for what they would consider to be "side-tasks". A number of teachers whom we interviewed did express such frustrations.

At the organizational level, the PTA (or the school as a whole) failed to capitalize on the wisdom that other members had gained through their participation in the PTA's work. Moreover, by focusing on parents' weaknesses, the principal had ignored their strengths and had failed to draw their attention to what benefits parental involvement would bring to them and their children. These benefits are in fact what all PTAs should aim to achieve. Having teachers to participate in the PTA and its activities for the sake of sheer physical attendance not only alienated them as professionals but also stifled their motivation to contribute. As a whole, School B failed to develop a community of teachers and parents who mutually trusted each other and collaborated on tasks that aligned with the common objective of enhancing children's learning and working toward school improvement.

To summarize, in School B, a utilitarian-minded principal regards parents as "just-on-time" human resources to be used for strengthening the school's "market position" in an era when school education becomes commoditized. In this school, parental involvement is a managed response to the educational reform authored by the government. Also, creating a semblance of home-school cooperation is also instrumental for establishing the school's reputation in the community.

3 School C: Mutual Trust Relationship Under a Communitarian Leadership

School C is operated by a well-established religious organization. The school was established in 1999 in a residential new town. It is a whole-day school with 30 classes, around five classes for each grade/level. Under the government's

educational reform initiative, the religious organization took the option of providing a “through-train” educational provision from primary to secondary education for students. To parents in general, this is an attractive arrangement. It spares them from finding a good secondary school for their children in future. In addition, the school enjoyed a good reputation of being innovative in developing a school-based curriculum and was strong in teacher professional development.

In 1999, the first year of the school’s establishment, the school took part in the year-long research project “Home–School Collaboration: In Search of Success Indicators and Practices”. In a school survey of the project, the level of parental involvement in this school was rated medium in quantitative terms. However, parents’ response to school-sponsored parent–child activities was quite positive. In 2000, the school established a Home–School Cooperation Team (HSCT) instead of a PTA. This HSC team had similar functions to those of a PTA. It was responsible for recruiting parent-volunteers as well as planning and coordinating activities to promote parental involvement in the school. The HSC team took up the leadership in steering home–school activities. All parents were supposed to be involved in the HSC. The team comprised a group of teachers who were either self-selected or appointed by the principal in accordance to their aptitude and willingness to ensure that all the teacher-members identified with the mission and function of the HSC.

To solicit the support and involvement of parents, a “parent support network” (PSN) was created. Ms. R, the teacher in charge of the school library, was also in charge of the PSN. She had rich experience in working with parents. The PSN aimed to enhance mutual help and information exchange among parents, to recruit parent-volunteers, and to collect parents’ opinions and ideas. The network was made up of four layers. The top layer was made up of HSC members who were responsible to planning and coordinating parental involvement activities. The second layer was made up of teachers and parents chosen from each grade as the core contact person for both teachers and parents of that grade. They received information from the HSC and passed it on to homeroom teachers and parents. The third layer was made up of four liaison parents who were elected from each class of the same grade. These liaison parents were responsible for disseminating information of the HSC to all parents of students in that class (the fourth layer).

3.1 The Meaning and Practice of Parental Involvement

The main tasks of the HSC team and parent-volunteers in school included mending books, serving at the circulation desk in the library, attending to students during lunch hour, helping in special or extra-curricular activities such as the school’s Open Day, assisting in the preparation of teaching materials, and hosting the “Reading Stories by Auntie” program. While most tasks are non-teaching and non-administrative tasks, some do require certain specialized skills and knowledge, such as reading stories to students, and assisting teachers in the classroom.

The HSC also organized off-school activities to promote parent–child relationships and community involvement of students. Under the Family Volunteering Scheme organized jointly by the Agency for Volunteer Service and the Committee on Home–School Cooperation of the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB), some parents and students made moon-cakes together and sent them to elderly people living on their own. HSC teachers assumed a coordinating and supervising role in training students to make moon-cakes and delivering them to needy old people.

3.1.1 The Principal's Orientation

Mr. C, the principal, believed that children's growth and development took place at the intersection of the family, the school and the community (as stated in the proposal on setting up a parent academy). The three sectors should therefore collaborate to create an environment conducive to children's learning and growth. Upon this premise, the principal conceived the function and mission of the HSC. He explained why parental involvement in home–school cooperation is valuable to the school:

... the concept of home-school cooperation ... is that the school is owned by both parents and teachers. Parents and the school could and should become partners in working towards enhancing children's development (School C_Principal, lines 16–19, p. 1).

The principal believed that parental involvement is particularly critical for young children. However, with changes in family structure, many students do not have the care of both parents even at a very young age. Seeing the three sectors are interrelated in complementary roles, he held the view that:

... schools have the responsibility of attending to the needs of this group of students (School C_Principal, lines 22–25, p. 1).

He thought that the school should take the initiative of mobilizing parents' support and establishing a partnership with them:

There are several channels for parental involvement. The first and most significant way is volunteering. The school arranged training courses provided by community agencies for all parents who were interested in becoming volunteers in the school. Parents may also join the "Parents' Academy" established by the school to attend seminars on parental skills. Parents may choose to participate in formal or informal activities to stay involved in the school. (School C_Principal, lines 232–234, p. 6).

The principal envisioned that parental involvement would enable parents and teachers to learn from each other. Parents could be better informed of the mission of the school and teaching methods of the teachers. Teachers could know more about their students. He wished that such collaboration could provide students with better education, both at home and in the school:

... [our] school frequently organizes activities with the goal of enhancing parent–children relationships, as [we] hope that ... parents will collaborate with the school to educate their children together. Through participating in these activities, both parents and teachers will be exposed to experiences that affect each other. This is a process that can bring personal

growth to both parents and teachers, and [I] hope that it gives parents and teachers more opportunities to communicate with one another. ... I do not want to see any hostility among parents and teachers (School C_Principal, lines 56–61, p. 1).

The principal's commitment to creating a partnership between the school and the family was widely shared by his colleagues. To Ms. R, the librarian, parental involvement meant "cooperation between parents and teachers in a school with the goal of acquainting parents with the operation of the school and getting them to be more involved in children's education." Such cooperation can occur and should be expected to occur only when parents have a full understanding about how the school operates toward meeting their objectives. With this understanding, Ms. R's colleagues, Ms. G, Ms. K and Ms. T, expected that:

... all parents will be attracted to participate in school activities (School C_T_Ms_G, Ms_K, & Ms_T, lines 70–72, p. 2).

They anticipated that:

Through various kinds of social activities and casual contacts, the teachers and the parents will come to know and understand each other more. Gradually, a sense of mutual trust will be established among them (School C_T_Ms_G, Ms_K, & Ms_T, lines 180–184, p. 5).

Ms. V, another teacher-member of the HSC team, defined home-school collaboration as the key channel of parental involvement in which both parents and teachers shared responsibilities. Ms. V showed an unswerving commitment to the mission of the HSC team as she had volunteered and joined the committee on its establishment in 1999. She also indicated that parental involvement allowed parents to communicate with teachers, which was extremely important to the personal growth and development of children (School C_T_Ms_V, lines 45–46, 51–53, p. 1).

The principal and all the teachers we interviewed converged on the view that securing the trust and commitment of parents is a prerequisite for parental involvement in the education of children. They believed that through taking part in activities and frequent contacts, the school/teachers and the family/parents would develop mutual trust and understanding.

3.1.2 Parents' Choice: Educated or Otherwise

During the academic year covered by this study, the school had recruited more than 80 parent-volunteers. Most of them had received training at the Parents' Academy (this will be elaborated under the "Beliefs and Actions" section to follow) which was established through collaboration between the school and a nearby social service agency affiliated to the same parent organization.

Many involved parents shared the view that parental involvement should be restricted to non-administrative tasks:

Home-school cooperation requires that parents should understand the teaching model of the school through taking part in activities organized by the school. Parents will then be able to work alongside the school in accordance with its teaching model. Even at home, parents should help their children according to the requests of the teachers and the teaching models of the school (School C_PH_Mrs_M, PY, EY & Mrs_C, lines 40–43, p. 1).

Mrs. M, a parent volunteer who worked part-time in a professional job on every Wednesday, came to the school to help in the library. Being a parent-volunteer in her daughter's school allowed her to observe the child's school life; she valued the chance of getting to understand more the education that her child received. Thus, she could in turn make relevant adjustments to collaborate with the school. Additionally, being a parent-volunteer had also expanded her social network and had resulted in a positive influence on the child. The network consisted of 80 parent-volunteers at the time of the interview. "I have come to know many parents and my social network got expanded greatly," she said. "I have learned much knowledge and many skills." The child was also very proud of her mother being a parent-volunteer. Whenever the mother worked in the school, "her child would behave especially well."

There are other benefits that many parents claimed to have arisen from their involvement in the school. Many of these benefits and the parents' motivation are similar to those identified by the parents of School A. Many of the involved parents were motivated to join in response to their children's wish. Mrs. S, a working parent attending the "making moon-cake" activity, expressed very well the heart and mind of these parents:

I treasure the time spent with my daughter. When she learned that I'll join her in parent-child activities, she became very excited. That is why I am most delighted to come to the school to attend activities even though I need to take leave from my work (School C_HSC Activities_Moon-cake Making, lines 94-98, p. 2).

The non-involved parents whom we interviewed did not share the views expressed by these involved parents. Mrs. L, a non-involved parent, thought that parental involvement would not make any difference in her child's academic performance or personal development (School C_Non-PH_Mrs_L, lines 24-25, p. 1). The school would send notices to inform parents of important events anyway. To her, parental involvement did not strictly refer to parents' physical presence in school. Rather, parental involvement was more about knowing what the school was doing or intended to do that affected children's education.

On the other hand, some of these non-involved parents did harbor ambivalence regarding the effect of parental involvement on children's learning and performance. Mrs. A noticed that some kids might feel neglected when they saw their classmates having parents around during lunch hours. She speculated that they would then ask why their parents were not with them (School C_Non-PH_Mrs_A, lines 99-103, p. 2). For this reason, Mrs. A (who worked full-time) would like the school to arrange parent-child activities on Sundays and/or week-day evenings to allow working parents to join. Likewise, Mrs. L, who at first did not see any connection between parental involvement and children's school performance, admitted later in the interview that parental involvement might be good for children's development. Parents serving as school volunteers set a good example to their children of the virtue of helping others (School C_Non-PH_Mrs_L, lines 68-72, p. 2; lines 130-133, p. 3).

Despite differing orientations toward parental involvement, most parents, be they involved or non-involved in school activities, did find a positive connection between parental involvement and children's school performance. For those parents who were non-involved in school activities, they gave reasons rather similar to their counterparts in the other two schools. Lacking time (because of family commitment or full-time employment) was the one reason most often cited by non-involved parents. However, there was one reason given that was specific to this school. Due to some unpleasant prior experiences, some parents were deterred from getting involved in HSC activities. Mrs. T used to be a parent-volunteer in the kindergarten that her child attended. She was worried about offending people when she found that the parents there "had too many opinions about the school" (School C_Non-PH_Mrs_T, lines 24–25, p. 1). Such past unpleasant experience deterred her from volunteering in this school.

3.2 Beliefs and Actions

The dedication of the teachers and the amount of work they put into their job had been widely acknowledged by both involved and non-involved parents. Some parents were impressed by their patience with students (School C_PH_L, C, M & A, lines 138–143, p. 3); some admired their communication skills (PH_Mrs_H, lines 82–84, p. 1); and some found their sincerity and strong sense of duty admirable (e.g., School C_PH_Mrs_E & Mrs_U; School C_Non-PH_Mrs_N, Mrs_X, Miss_I & Mrs_J). All involved parents got a sense of belonging whenever they were with the teachers.

The school's incremental approach to networking teachers with parents as well as among parents through frequent contacts and cooperative tasks over the years may be a key factor in its success at nurturing the trust of parents in the school and its teachers. In 1999, after the school had participated in the Project "Parental Involvement—In Search of Successful Indicators", it vigorously sought collaboration with a community service center in setting up a Parent Academy with the aim of enhancing the capacity and capability of parents to help improve children's school performance in partnership with the school and its teachers. Having rich experience in providing parent education courses, the community service center tailor-made a set of courses to systematically help parents build up better family and social relationships, develop personal potential, cultivate self-confidence and sense of responsibility, increase self-management capacity, and broaden their worldviews so as to enhance their critical thinking and personal growth.

Involving a third party who shared the school's mission but harbored no vested interest in the school process may have helped the parents and the teachers to see things from each other's perspective. The parents could apply what they had learned from the courses in HSC activities. They would also acquire empowering experiences in the process. Furthermore, the training courses would help in leveling off the differences in social and cultural capital of parents coming from different socio-economic backgrounds.

3.2.1 Breaking Away from the Past and Taking up the Challenge: Strategic Plan of the Principal

The low rating of the school on parental involvement in 1999 had alerted the principal of deficiencies in fostering the support of parents to the school. The establishment of the Parent Academy was a strategic move in view of the diverse backgrounds and educational levels among the parents. The principal did not restrict the degree of parental involvement for those parents who were less educated:

... we [the principal and the teachers] think parents' educational level is not important at all in determining whether they are suitable to be parent-volunteers in the school. What is important is whether or not they care about volunteering work. If they care, [I think] any problems could be resolved. (School C_Principal, lines 71–74, p. 2)

The principal believed that the school “is owned by parents as well” (School C_Principal, lines 98–99, p. 2). He told every new teacher his ideology and his expectation prior to the day they started working in the school:

We started proactively to invite parents to become volunteers in the school [when the school first established]. I explained to every new teacher clearly and in great detail the school's ideology—that home–school cooperation is the goal and the direction of the school. Every teacher would have accepted, approved and familiarized themselves with this vision of home–school cooperation. Through official and unofficial activities and gatherings, teachers establish rapport with parents. In the first two years after the school was established, the teachers spent a lot of time communicating and building relationships with the parents. The Home–School Cooperation Association has been running for four years. (School C_Principal, lines 177–183, p. 7)

In his view, parental involvement in children's schooling could counterbalance adverse negative consequences arising from fast-changing family structures in Hong Kong:

Over the past 20 to 30 years, the family structure in Hong Kong has undergone great changes. Every child carries some family burden with him/her. Many children of our school came from single-parent households and broken families. Hence, there is a need to organize formal as well as informal activities for parents. I hope the school can help these families so that children can develop well. (School C_Principal, lines 19–25, p. 1)

The principal strongly believed that the school should take up the leadership role in helping families to face the challenges of a fast-changing society. This conviction might have sustained his effort in finding strategies to make parental involvement an effective way of enhancing the students' learning and performance. With the help of the Parent Academy the school was successful in empowering parents by enhancing their capability in giving active support to the school.

3.2.2 Crossing the Boundary Through Collaborative Effort Between Teachers and Parents

Ms. R, the core teacher of the HSC Team, was a very diligent teacher. She had close contact with all the parent-volunteers. In every visit to the school, we would

find four or five parent-volunteers working around her, either helping in the library or answering the phone. In every recess break, two parent-helpers would act on her behalf to maintain order in the library. She thought that parental involvement was about "... any task that was related to the governance of the school and teaching" (School C_T_Ms_R, line 142, p. 3). She explained that the school had not found suitable parents to join the school board. Regarding the future development of HSC, Ms. R offered the following analysis:

... as parents rendered their specialties to help the school, along the way they will pick up some pedagogical principles underpinning the work of teachers. This demonstrates how teachers and parents learn from each other and validates the collaborative partnership between them. (School C_T_Ms_R, p. 5 in the second-order analysis on PTA Teachers)

This indicates a possibility for parents to start off from the non-administrative and non-teaching territory and later move into the "professional" territory. In fact, some parents have already acquired some professional knowledge on the job.

On the part of those involved parents, having access to the classroom and observe, preparing teaching aids, helping teachers in classroom as teaching assistants, standing on duty along with teachers, assisting teachers to prepare questions for social studies quiz contests, and helping to modify teaching tasks, they became "the-left-and-right-hands" of the teachers (School C_T_HSC committee member, lines 269–272, p. 6). With training and practice, some involved parents were able to synthesize their experience and come up with new ideas about how to implement and improve the tasks assigned to them. For example, parents acting as the "aunties" in the reading program got a sense of satisfaction from seeing improvement in the reading proficiency of some students. They were also able to identify the learning gaps in other students, such as lacking vocabulary and concentration span. They were not able to respond to every question raised by the students; there were too many (Second-ordered analysis on School C_PTA_Activities, p. 10). They also noticed that some students were stereotyped as "low-achievers" by fellow students. At the end of every round of the program, Ms. R, the teacher in charge of the program, held an evaluation meeting with all parent-aunties to come up with ways of improvement and/or methods of solving the problems identified. Parents taking part in the program worked in small groups to find new ways and methods. Such collaborative effort would often yield workable alternatives and solutions. Final decisions on what modifications to make for improving the program would be made by the teacher and two core parent-members.

Sharing ideas and finding new ways to do things through discussion furnished the experiential basis for mutual trust and respect between teachers and parents to evolve. Mutual trust and respect allow the two parties to work cooperatively:

... once in a while, some school activities turned out to be not that well-planned or arranged. We know it's due to the teachers' pressing schedule. We understand their constraint and would offer help to ease their workload. (School C_PH_Mrs_H, lines 107–110, p. 3)

With mutual trust, one teacher found it easier to call up parents to tell them something negative about their children:

Through involvement in the school, parents come to understand and even empathize with teachers regarding how hard and dedicated they work. So when students are not doing well in school work, parents will not just lay blame on the teachers and the school. Rather, they will take the perspective of teachers into account (School C_T_HSC committee members, lines 310–312, p. 8).

A partnership building on mutual trust does not mean there will be no conflict or disagreement between parents and teachers. It is in the way they interpret or define the source and nature of the conflict that demonstrates the power of such mutual trust. With mutual understanding and support, the two parties are able and willing to understand each other's perspective in understanding why the other party has (not) done something. With such understanding, they are able to resolve conflicts, resulting in the partnership being further strengthened. Some teachers began to give up earlier misconceptions and doubts about the capability of parents in taking part on matters of school governance:

Parents could enter the school board. We do have some capable parent-volunteers (School C_T_Ms_U, lines 128–131, p. 3).

Some teachers were far less optimistic. They thought there would be a long way to go before parents were ready to join the school board (School C_T_Ms_G, Ms_K & Ms_T, lines 79–83, p. 2). Nonetheless, all teachers expressed an open attitude towards parent participation in the school board.

3.2.3 Bridging the Divide: Contrasting Views of Involved and Uninvolved Parents

School C had been undergoing curriculum reforms for a number of years. Given teachers' knowledge about the grade-specific learning and developmental needs of students, they identified and developed teaching methods and materials to enable students to learn and meet certain academic standards. An activity-based teaching approach had been adopted by the school. However, some parents held different and even contrasting views on this approach that might be attributed to their being less involved parents.

Some non-involved parents felt that the curriculum reform and changes took place too frequently and too fast. They found it very difficult to help their children and coordinate with teachers' new teaching activities. They did not have faith in the activity-based teaching and learning approach adopted by the school. They explained:

Firstly, our students are not comparable to the students of international schools in terms of both quality and qualification. Secondly, the school does not have the same amount of resources found in international schools. We were worried that such activity-based curriculum may not be fully implemented. As a result, our kids will suffer when they compete with their counterparts in open public examinations (School C_Non-PH_Mrs_N, Mrs_X & Mrs_J, lines 76–85, pp. 2–3).

By contrast, no involved parent expressed similar worry. In fact, many applauded that the mission of the school was not just expressed in words but also in action. Mrs. E found that the activity-based curriculum helped to develop in her child a liking for school learning (School C_PH_Mrs_E, lines 99–102). Indeed, many involved parents regarded the activity-based teaching and learning approach innovative and effective in sustaining students' attention and developing their creativity. They also appreciated the effort of teachers to plan, organize and implement these teaching activities. Many involved parents agreed that:

... the school has relatively few homework assignments, children could learn independently without being hurried along. They do not feel pressurized to study (School C_PH_Mrs_M, PY, EY & Mrs_C, lines 283–285, p. 7).

It should be noted the school was aware of parents' worries regarding the effectiveness of the school-based curriculum in preparing students for secondary education. The school had a comprehensive scheme to ensure a smooth transition of Grade 6 students to secondary education (secondary order analysis on School C_T_core involved teachers, p. 22).

3.3 A Critical Analysis: Visionary Leader, Dedicated Teachers and Well-Trained Parents

Premised on his view that the family/parents, the school/teachers and the community perform complementary roles in children's education, the principal considered parental involvement one of the founding principles of the school (School C_T_HSC committee). Drawing on his past experience, he recognized that the diversity in the socio-economic background of parents would be something that he needed to consider. It is important for an organization to accommodate differences and to resolve rather than to avoid conflicts between and among its stakeholders. In order to identify and understand parents' needs, concerns and expectations, the school had established several two-way communication channels with parents—letters from the principal, school newsletter, students' homework diary and periodic reports. The school vowed to support parents who were short in time and resource. The Parent Academy helped equalize the amount of social and cultural capital that parents could deploy to support children's education. The school adopted an open attitude in finding how the HSC team, as a new endeavor, should and could be developed. The principal emphasized that he and his colleagues were prepared to learn along the way in searching for an appropriate HSC model for the school.

In School C, having committed teachers as members on the HSC team is vital for its success in creating a collaborative partnership, rather than a cooperative relationship, between parents and teachers. The teachers, given their professional training and the authority that parents would confer on them, were better placed to take up a leading role in initiating strategic actions. For example, Ms. G was aware of the importance for the school to identify and understand the needs and concerns

of parents in order to attract and retain parent-volunteers. She created the Parent Support Network to ensure effective communication between and among teachers and parents. The dedication of teachers that parents witnessed was also vital to the sustainability of the home-school partnership.

It is also critical to provide training to parents for enhancing their competence as members of a team/organization in working with other people coming from diverse backgrounds and bringing in different concerns. They learned the dynamics of give-and-take in collective decision-making, and to be self-disciplined in regulating one's behavior to allow equal participation and contribution. Core parent-members came to the school regularly to help with not only things they were requested to do but also with anything else they could assist in. They were reliable and diligent members of the school community. They gained the trust of teachers; they moved around freely in the school (including classrooms—the private space of teachers) because they knew “their place” in relation to the teachers. This trust reinforced the social status that these parents had acquired through their application of what they learned from the Parent Academy in performing their duties in the school.

The principal had a long-term view of what the school could accomplish through the involvement of some active parents in the HSC team and its work. He had in mind the establishment of the parent-teacher association at some point, with broad-based representation of all the parents in the school. The present parental involvement policy would have to be modified in order to attract and include parents of diverse backgrounds to collaborate with the school/teachers. It is essential for the school to continuously evolve a strategic framework for parental involvement to develop PTA programs and activities to meet the needs, concerns and expectations of future cohorts of parents coming from even more diverse social backgrounds.

4 A Synthesis: Convergence and Divergence in the Phenomenon of Parental Involvement Found in Primary Schools in Hong Kong

At first glance, a common observation emerges in the three ethnographic case studies, that parental involvement is mainly confined to non-teaching and non-administrative tasks in a school. However, when we compare and contrast the beliefs of various stakeholders and their actions, we find the practice of parental involvement in school to be a complex phenomenon. While some convergences in the enactment of parental involvement are found, there are divergences in ways such enactments were interpreted and, to some extent, evolved among the three schools. The convergences and divergences will make sense in the light of some individual, organizational, community and policy factors that we have come to identify in examining the three case studies.

4.1 *Convergences*

We have identified three convergent phenomena. They are: (1) the dominant role of the principal in the defining what parental involvement is and is for, and how it is to be actualized in the school; (2) the hierarchical school culture that moderates or regulates the behavior of teachers in response to parental involvement; and (3) the diversity in the needs, concerns and expectations of parents in accounting for their orientation and (lack of) participation in parental involvement in the school.

4.1.1 Dominant Role of the Principal

One prominent convergent phenomenon is that the principal is the dominant actor who defines the meaning of parental involvement in each school and, thus, sets the boundary for how far and in what way parental involvement finds expression in the school—which aspects of school life parents participate in the school, and how they cooperate with teachers and the school. For instance, the principal of School A strictly limited how and which parents participate in the school. She also set rules for teachers to work in the PTA. For the principal of School B, parents were treated as a tool instrumental to the achievement of the goals of the school. Both principals acknowledged the importance of parental involvement. Yet, they asked parents to support teachers only in non-administrative and non-teaching tasks and to help boost the academic results of poorly performing students. In School C, the principal also assumed a determining role in establishing the form and level of parental involvement found in the school.

The introduction of parental involvement in the education of school children is a policy initiative. So, it is the job of the principal of every school in Hong Kong to set up some mechanism, be it a PTA or variants of it, to enlist parents as active participants in the schooling of their children. The fact that parents in all three schools had not been invited to be involved in school governance or teaching-related issues reflects that principals do not feel comfortable letting parents cross the boundary into their professional territory.

4.1.2 Hierarchical School Culture

Among the teachers and the parent-volunteers we interviewed in each school, most supported the principal's views and shared similar beliefs about parental involvement, at least in their first reaction to our questions. This kind of support and identification reflects the working of an organizational hierarchy widely found in schools in Hong Kong.

Schools are hierarchically structured. This means that there is a division of labor with clear lines of responsibility for each member. The incorporation of parents as members of the school organization is relatively new to many schools in

Hong Kong. In other words, in many schools the role of parents is not clear. This may cause confusion or even conflicts between and among both old and new members of the school community. Traditionally, as the official head administrator of the school, the principal has the power and authority to set policy guidelines to clear confusions and resolve conflicts. For example, the principals of School A and School B had stipulated some guidelines on how teachers should respond to parents in the way they conduct themselves in PTA/HSC activities.

4.1.3 Similarities and Differences Among Parents

Despite differences in socio-economic backgrounds, parents of the three schools tend to share similar orientation toward the meaning and value of parental involvement. Parents who got involved in school were positive about the value of parental involvement in the learning and performance of their children. Some even found benefits to their own personal development. For those who did not get involved, they offered a set of reasons, such as lack of time due to work and family commitment, and perceiving no connection between parental involvement and child learning. On the whole, family support and personal commitment were found to be most critical to parental involvement in school.

Some idiosyncratic reasons and contrasting situations were noteworthy. For example, some non-involved parents claimed that their past negative experience with teachers and other parents had dissuaded them from getting involved in school activities. Some parents did not take part because their children dissuaded them from volunteering in schools. By contrast, some involved parents felt encouraged to do so by their children. In other words, a configuration of circumstantial factors may have bearing on how a parent approaches parental involvement.

4.2 Divergences

We find divergences in school leadership, parent–teacher partnership and parent community as the cause or the result of different manifestations of parental involvement in the three schools.

4.2.1 School Leadership

The type of school leadership—the “bureaucratic” one in School A, the “utilitarian” one in School B and the “communitarian” one in School C—largely accounts for variations in the form and level of parental involvement in the three schools. The bureaucratic type of school leadership translates into rigid interpretations of rules and regulations set for parental involvement without attending to

the processes that various stakeholders go through and which provides opportunities for people to interact and learn from each other. The utilitarian type of school leadership prizes the instrumental value of parental involvement as a tool for enhancing the “market position” of the school in a “social market” where schools in the same school-net compete against each other for students at a time of continuous decline of school-age population. The communitarian type of school leadership is an expression of a strong commitment to the potential contribution of a close and equalitarian-based school–family partnership to improve the life chances of children from disadvantaged social and family backgrounds.

The leadership style tends to arise from a constellation of factors, such as formal training as well as ongoing (re)construction and reflection of experience in working with different stakeholders in a school. The wider socio-cultural and policy contexts may also contribute to how a school principal interprets and reflects on her/his experience in providing school leadership.

4.2.2 Home–School Relationship

The type of home–school relationship found in each of the three schools is different. In School A, an “alienated” relationship was found as parents and teachers did not feel comfortable with each other. In School B, due to the utilitarian purpose of parental involvement envisioned by the school principal, the cooperation between teachers and parents was limited to those tasks where parents worked only as assistants even if some teachers thought that parents were in a better position than they themselves were to perform certain tasks that would contribute to a better learning and teaching environment in the school. Thus, there emerged an ambivalent relationship between teachers and parents in School B. In School C, through mutual sharing and collaborative work, there emerged a “trusting” relationship between parents and teachers. This led to an open attitude among teachers toward parental involvement in matters of school governance and students’ academic work.

4.2.3 Community of Parents

The diversity of needs, concerns and expectations of parents is a common phenomenon found in all three schools. Yet, the way this diversity was interpreted and worked on in order to transform it into a collective energy varied across the three schools.

To an organization, whenever there is a new recruit, there must be some investment on training in order that the person will be assimilated into the organization and contribute to the organizational purposes.

School C was able to tap into and transfer the strengths of individual parents into organizational resources by first providing them with systematic training (in collaboration with a community agency in the neighborhood). The training provided to

parents enhanced their capability to help the school and its teachers. It also prepared them to become a community of learners. In contrast, School A and School B did not have any policies on enhancing the capability of parent-volunteers. Nor did the schools attempt to improve the relationship between parents and teachers or to build a higher level of trust among them. Adhering to the principal's bureaucratic principle, School A extended the divide between and among teachers and parents instead of narrowing it. School B adopted a utilitarian view of parental involvement. It failed to recognize the importance of nurturing the potential of parents even though the school recognized parent-volunteers as organizational resources.

5 Summary

This chapter presents and synthesizes the results of the ethnographic case studies in the three primary schools. Schools recognize and reward the attitudes and practices of the privileged. Primary evidence emerging from the case studies supports the existence of school practices that select, implicitly or explicitly, the kind of parents whose involvement the school wants to enlist. Working-class housewives who have neither the confidence nor a middle-class educational background are often excluded from taking part as core parent-members even if they are motivated. Family resource does make a significant difference in determining not only whether and in what ways a parent can take part in parental involvement in a school, but also whether or not the school will enlist their involvement. Moreover, the present study also suggests that school principals' ideology toward parental involvement and their "habitus" of leadership are powerful parameters in shaping the home-school relationship.

We have identified three convergent phenomena: (1) role of the principal; (2) hierarchy in the home-school relationship within the school organization; and (3) convergence in parents' views on their involvement and non-involvement in schools. First, the principal is the dominant actor who defines what parental involvement is about and the form it takes in each school. The principal's ideological predisposition sets the stage for the level and extent of parental involvement, avenue for parental involvement, and the power relation in home-school cooperation. Second, a hierarchical school culture, which is mainly shaped by the principal, regulates how teachers approach parents and parental involvement. Setting a tight boundary of teacher professionalism means confining parental involvement to non-teaching and non-administrative tasks in a school. Third, parents of the three schools tend to have similar sets of orientations and justifications for their response (and passivity) to parental involvement in school.

We also find divergences in school leadership, parent-teacher partnership and parent community as the cause or the result of different forms of parental involvement found in each of the three primary schools. First, the three types of school leadership—the "bureaucratic" one in School A, the "utilitarian" one in School B, and the "communitarian" one in School C—led to variations in the form

and level of parental involvement between and among the three schools. Second, we find three types of parent–teacher relationship in the three schools, namely, alienated, instrumental and trusting. Under the principal’s “bureaucratic” leadership in School A, an “alienated” relationship emerged, which was marked by mutual discomfort between parents and teachers. In School B, due to the “utilitarian” leadership of the principal towards parental involvement, collaboration between teachers and parents remained “instrumental”, that is, only those parents who could contribute needed skills and knowledge were accepted by the school. Under the communitarian leadership of the principal in School C, there emerged strong sentiment of mutuality and collaborative partnership between parents and teachers, leading to a “trusting” relationship between them. Third, the diversity of needs, concerns and expectations of parents is a common phenomenon found in all three schools. However, the way such diversity is interpreted and used for the advantage of the school varied across the three schools. The training provided to parents by School C helped to enhance parents’ capability in helping the school. It also helped to transform the parents to become members of a learning community. In contrast, in both School A and School B, there was no school policy to cultivate parents for taking a more important part in school governance and classroom pedagogy. Rather, School A sought to keep and extend the divide between parents and teachers, not narrowing it. In School B, its utilitarian view of parental involvement as added human resource for the school’s disposal did not go beyond “using” parents to “cultivating” them as true partners to teachers.

Table 2 summarizes the three types of leadership of the principals in these three schools, which largely shaped the view of teachers regarding the role of parents in the school, which in turn shaped the nature of the home–school relationship. The principals’ habitus affects teachers’ view on the value of parental involvement. Their views also defined the zone of parental involvement in the schools. “Communitarian” principals recruit enthusiastic teachers to coordinate parent activities and make parents feel welcome and empowered in the school, and create space for parent volunteering in school activities. Teachers perceive parents as their partners; they enlist parents’ assistance in educating students. Teachers are willing to connect to parents and provide opportunities for parents to learn from their involvement in the school. Mutual trust emerges in communitarian schools. “Utilitarian” and “bureaucratic” principals are more concerned about responding to government policies and the directives of the sponsoring body. They tend to set a boundary on parental involvement to keep parents from the professional domain of teachers, and to ensure that teachers will not invest in any substantial way in parental involvement. Teachers in this kind of school perceived parents as distant supporters, not close partners. They attempt to minimize their effort and time in parent activities. As such, home–school relationship is weak, and reinforces the hierarchy between teachers and parents.

References

- Glaser, B., & Strauss, A. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. London: Sage.

Parental Involvement on Children's Education

What Works in Hong Kong

Ho, E.S.-C.; Kwong, W.-M.

2013, XVII, 162 p. 7 illus., Softcover

ISBN: 978-981-4021-98-2