Exploring Teaching Professionals' Constraints In Implementation Of Parental Involvement In School Education

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Abstract

This article presents a qualitative study aiming at exploring how teachers’ attitudes are affected due to increased parental involvement in times of reform. By capturing the thoughts and perceptions of parents and teachers and conducting participant observations in two primary schools, it is found that there were implicit and explicit ideological demarcations among teachers. ‘Altruism’ and ‘isolationism’ are two types of overt value-orientations encompassed in teachers’ perspectives towards parental involvement. Four positive value-forces, namely ‘welcome’, ‘devotion’, ‘joint effort’, and ‘renewal’ are identified from altruistic teachers’ responses to change whereas four negative value-forces, namely ‘fear’, ‘reticence’, ‘avoidance’ and ‘withdrawal’ emerge from those isolationistic teachers with orientations which often sustain educational conservatism.

Keywords: Parental involvement; home-school cooperation; educational innovation; teachers’ values

1. Introduction

Empowering parents to play a role in the self-management of schools is one of the most important recent innovations in helping achieve school effectiveness (Caldwell, 2004). Marked evidences from a lot of research in the West demonstrate that partnership between teachers and parents can help enhance positive development of children’s self-concepts (Berns, 2007). The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government has initiated a series of proposals regarding parental involvement in school since 1994. Since then, the recommendation has drawn the attention of school personnel and the general public to the discussion of the issue of parental involvement in schools. However, educational change entails many challenges (Duke, 2004). Indeed, many school principals have had a lot of doubts such as whether it is ripe time to get parents involved in school, whether teachers and whether parental involvement will facilitate or impede school operation. Implementation of parental involvement signifies
the notion of parent empowerment (Ng, 2007) which implies that power granted to a subordinate group is ultimately lost by the former power-holder (Ng, 2013).

While it is believed that parental involvement is beneficial to social and academic development of school children, there is a paucity of or even a lack of empirical data in Hong Kong to throw illumination on the impact of its implementation on teacher’s attitudes and beliefs. It is of paramount importance to capture teachers’ thought as to whether they do voluntarily give up the power to parents in the process of implementing parental involvement in Hong Kong. The purposes of this article are (1) to report an exploratory study designed to illuminate the constraints of teachers arising from increased parental involvement, and (2) to indicate the dynamic relations between teachers’ attitudes and educational change grounded in the empirical data.

2. Theoretical underpinnings of parent involvement

To help realize parent involvement practices, many researchers have conceptualized different models and frameworks on the basis of empirical evidence in the 1990s. For examples, Bastiani (1989) depicted eight levels of how school can work with families whereas Epstein (1995) identified six types of school activities for parent-school cooperation, namely ‘communication’, ‘parenting’, ‘learning at home’, ‘volunteering’, ‘decision-making’ and ‘collaboration with the community’. In accordance with the educational context of Hong Kong, Ng (1999; Ng & Yuen, 2013) developed a six-level ‘Model of Home-School Cooperation’ (MHSC) in which parents could be involved in children’s education through three levels of involvement outside school: ‘communicating with school’, ‘helping actual learning of individual children’, ‘taking part in parent programme and organization’ and another three levels of involvement inside school: ‘assisting in school operation’, ‘helping decision making’ and ‘participating in decision making.

3. Teachers as change agents and teachers’ resistance to change

The studies of many scholars (e.g. Hargreaves 2007) have found that perspectives of leadership, teachers’ commitment and school culture are the key factors affecting a change or a reform. Fallan (2003) has identified four types of core capacities of change agents. They are ‘vision building’, ‘inquiry’, ‘mastery’ and ‘collaboration’. He perceives them as supporting forces ‘required as a generative foundation for building greater change capacity’ (p.12). In other words, to carry out a planned change, it is of vital importance to see how many teaching professionals are equipped with these change qualities that facilitate them to be receptive rather than resistant to change and how flexible they are. In understanding how education reform is implemented, one set of literature examines how stakeholders’, especially teachers’ values, practices and beliefs shape the outcomes of implementation (Hargreaves & Goodson, 2006; Sannino, 2010). When it is contested or called for change, teacher resistance occurs. The study of Katyal & Evers (2007), however, indicates that Hong Kong teachers prefer a ‘professional-client’ relationship to a ‘partnership’ with parents. Resistance to change is both a psychological and a cognitive state which seems to be a necessary part of professional learning process (Msuanti & Pence, 2010). In facing reform demands, teachers were found to react differently due to differences in dispositions, interpretations of the challenges and abilities to respond to them (Day & Smethem, 2009, Ng, 2009). Fink & Stoll (2005) argue that some schools behave remarkably untouched because the quest for stability has become an excuse for immobility.

4. Framework of analysis

The qualitative research that informs this paper is conceptualized within the interpretive paradigm since it aims at understanding the thoughts of parents and teachers from their perspectives in times of implementing the notion of home-school cooperation in Hong Kong. Through this paradigm framework, both of them make sense of the world (Radnor, 2001). Eleven parents (P1 to P11) and twelve teachers (T1 to T12) in two primary schools (Schools A and B) were selected for in-depth interview according to the procedures of purposeful sampling suggested by Lincoln & Guba (1985). The schools were chosen according to two principles. First, the schools provided greater potential for parental involvement and had already had the experience of involving parents through establishing parent-teacher associations (PTAs). Second, students from different socio-economic status were studying in these two schools. The data were collected by semi-structured in-depth interviews (Creswell, 1998). An aide-memoire was used as a guide
for interviewing. The interviews were tape-recorded and the transcribed data were analyzed using both open and axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Going hand in hand with the interviews is the ethnographic method the author employed.

5. Interpretive analysis of the findings

In each school, there were different types of parental involvement activities introduced. In both schools the PTA acted as a bridge between parents and teachers. Some parents were invited into the classroom as teaching assistants and school volunteers. Some assisted in looking after children’s discipline during recess. Some organized extracurricular activities for the children in collaboration with teachers. One parent representative was even invited to be the member of the governing board at School A. At School B, parents were not invited to participate in school operation. The PTA was only responsible for organizing seminars for parents. However, teachers simultaneously responded to parents’ involvement differently in these two schools. It is apparent that there were ideological demarcations among teachers. In this study, in response to increased parental involvement, some teachers worked ‘altruistically’ whereas some behaved ‘individualistically’ for the innovation. ‘Altruism’ and ‘isolationism’ are two types of overt ideologies encompassed in teachers’ perspectives towards the imposed change.

5.1 Altruism: Working collaboratively with parents

The beliefs and value orientations of the altruistic teachers have always been the significant factors striving for school improvement. In the study, some teachers always bore in mind the need of home-school cooperation as one of the school missions in current educational reforms. For example, they were committed to actively communicating with parents. Their welcoming attitudes towards parental involvement were out of a thought of service for the school and the community as a whole. A teacher had such a remark:

It is my duty to serve the students and their parents. The more we communicate, the better students get benefited. (T2, School A)

In this study, four ‘positive value-forces’ of these altruistic teachers’ attitudes and actions are identified:

(1) Welcome

A strong belief of incorporating parents’ efforts into the school system will help develop a vision of parent-school partnership. With this striving attitude, some teachers welcomed parents’ participation.

I believe that home and school are partners. If this relationship develops, a sense of belongings among parents will also develop. Hence, many activities such as ‘fund-raising night’, ‘parent seminars’ and ‘talent show’ will be easily implemented. The more we contact each other, the more parents will know more about school. Thus partnership is what I believe. (T4, School A)

(2) Devotion

Those teachers with altruistic attitudes were enthusiasts and committed to organizing activities for parent-child interaction. In addition, criticism made by parents was considered useful and effective for self-reflection. When asked about how they were involved with parents, a teacher in School B responded in such a way:

Sometimes I have to counsel parents patiently when they don’t know what to do about their children’s behaviours. As I apply attentive listening skills to answering parents’ queries, they are willing to tell what is in their minds. I always take criticism as a way to collect information about the student and his family and as a means for self-evaluation. (T11, School B)

(3) Joint effort

In the interviews, to come up with consensus, some teachers shared their experiences of involving parents in school events. They believed that collegiality could be conducive to successful implementation of increasing parent-teacher contacts. One teacher commented:

We work on team basis. On many occasions, we have stayed after school for a long time to discuss the correct methods of involving parents. Sometimes, we have to sacrifice a Sunday for parent activities but it is worth to do so. Our vision could be realized through collaboration. (T9, School A)

(4) Renewal

In the study, it was identified that some teachers were not only receptive to newly imposed ideas but also taking initiatives to keep pace with the innovation for ‘personal renewal’. By actively participating in implementing
policies concerning change and taking courses to learn more about the trend, some of the teachers admitted that they could upgrade themselves with knowledge and skills. A teacher said:

*We have to face reality and teachers have to adapt to change. Teachers have to change too. So I will go to take the refresher-training course on home-school collaboration.* (T3, School A)

Personal renewal has a ‘dissemination effect’ among teachers. The actions of personal renewal will eventually lead to ‘collective renewal’.

5.2 Isolationism: Keeping away from innovation

In response to the innovation of parental involvement, some teachers were apparently isolation-oriented. To play ‘safe’, they would rather adopt non-risk-taking (traditional) methods and yet, it does not contribute to school improvement. As a result, these isolationistic and conservative attitudes reinforced their inclination to separate themselves from the school ethos. Derived from the data, four types of ‘negative value-forces’ emerged what those individualistic teachers behaved are identified:

1) Fear

In this study, some teachers could not develop a vision to work collaboratively with parents and colleagues. Worst of all, they felt frightened that parents’ participation would interfere with their teaching matters. They were threatened by parents’ intrusion into their territory. Furthermore, lacking necessary skills prevented them from contacting parents. One teacher of School B responded frankly:

*I’m not afraid of parents’ complaints but I am afraid that it’ll affect my prospect.* (T8, School B)

Another teacher in School A had the following comments:

*I find that parents really want to be involved but there is one barrier. It’s some of the teachers who think that they are intruding their turf.* (T3, School A)

2) Reticence

Some teachers filled with fear and were reticent about parental involvement. It was easy for them to display scepticism about implementing change as experiences told them that they have seen it all before. They were fenced in by the pre-conception that parents were trouble-makers. As one of the teachers displayed her scepticism by responding in the following way:

*Do you know that how much time we have spent on parents? I am not trying to object to parental involvement but what turns out is that our effort is at the expense of our time, our family days and our privacy.* (T5, School B)

3) Avoidance

Some teachers were diffident about meeting parents. They would avoid participating in any parent events. For example, lack of communicative skills would reinforce teachers not to arrange conferences with parents. Some parents were smart enough to discover teachers’ attributes of avoidance. A parent described:

*Some teachers lacked necessary skills in meeting parents. When my husband and I met my child’s class teacher, she did not look at me. I guess she was not confident enough to see us.* (P3, School A)

4) Withdrawal

Fear, shyness, diffidence, reticence and avoidance trigger off the behaviour of ‘withdrawal’ that reinforces teachers’ isolationism. In this study, the guidance teacher in School B expressed a special concern with this type of teachers:

*Those who have been teaching for many years do not care about parental involvement. They withdraw from any involvement from those positively welcoming parents’ participation.* (T7, School B)

Therefore, when parental involvement is introduced, two balkanized factions of teachers with demarcated ideological orientations are wrestling at school. When more teachers feel fearful and reticent, and seclude themselves from interacting with parents, the crisis of unsuccessful promotion of parental involvement will occur.

6. Conclusion

To conclude, the externally imposed innovation of parental involvement indeed exerts influence on teachers’ value orientations, creating tremendous impacts on school cultures. In fact, Ng & Yuen (2013) argues that a great deal of micro-politics has emerged among stakeholders during the process of parental involvement in school. The finding of the study argues that there are different types of attitudes towards involvement in school education among parents and
teachers. This will easily cause conflicts between parents and teachers and exert negative impacts on school cultures. Therefore, to ensure better home-school relations to be developed, it is recommended that schools provide parent education for parents and opportunities for teachers to receive refresher-training course with regard to parental involvement in school. This can ensure both parents and teachers are psychologically prepared for collaboration in times of reform.

References


