

Home-school Cooperation in the Changing Context – An Ecological Approach

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This paper aims at examining the development and conditions of home-school cooperation in Hong Kong during the past 15 years. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory is adapted in the analysis whereby interactions between home-school cooperation and various contextual factors in the microsystem, exosystem and macrosystem are examined. The change of social capital in the process is also examined. It is argued that the development of home-school cooperation has been subjected to great influences from the interrelated contextual factors and the forces experienced by different types of cooperation. The Government is found to play a critical role in shaping the development of home-school cooperation and the reform has focused on meeting the requirement of school accountability rather than on developing partnership for student learning. Suggestions for further development are made and new research directions are proposed.

Keywords: home-school cooperation, ecological systems theory, accountability

There has been a keen interest in studying home-school cooperation as an aspect of school reform in the past two decades. There are apparently two types of studies. The first type examines the parental roles and family learning environment (e.g., Christenson, 2004; Jeynes, 2007; Ketsetzis, Ryan, & Adams, 1998; Lareau, 2003; Reschly, Coolong-Chaffin, Christenson & Gutkin, 2007; Spera, 2005); and the second type investigates school roles and programs (e.g., Comer & Haynes, 1991, Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005). Many recent studies of home-school cooperation look at how it can bring about children's learning and development (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003; Fantuzzo, McWayne, Perry, & Childs, 2004; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Perrino, Gonzalez-Soldevilla, Pantin, & Szapocznik, 2000; Sheldon & Epstein, 2005; Van Voorhis, 2003; Xu & Filler, 2008). There are, however, relatively few researches examining the development and conditions of home-school cooperation (Chrispeels, 1996; Christenson, 2004; Eccles & Harold, 1996; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005; Lareau, 2003).

It is argued that in order to understand the development of home-school cooperation in a region, one has to consider the whole ecological system in which cooperation occurs. In this study, ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), which was originally used to study the processes and conditions of human development, is adapted as the analytical framework. Home-school cooperation is referred here as the mesosystem, usually defined as constituting the interconnections between the microsystems of home and school. The study examines the interactions between home-school cooperation and its "immediate environment", which may include the political, social and economic contexts and the conditions of school and family. The bi-directional influences between home-school cooperation at the mesosystem and the various contextual factors (settings/environments) in the microsystem as well as exosystem, (Government policies), and macrosystem, (economic environment), is discussed. The multi-levels of influences on home-school cooperation are also analysed. Unlike examining

human development, for which the characteristics of individuals are taken into account, this study only looks at the environmental contexts of home-school cooperation at the system level. The target of this study is Hong Kong. The period of study is the past 15 years during which Hong Kong has experienced a rapid development of home-school cooperation. It is anticipated that this study will help identify the driving forces of the development of home-school cooperation in a region and understand the ongoing interactions among home-school cooperation, various education policies and reforms, and the political, economical, and social contexts. The achievement and challenges of various types of home-school partnership are examined, and relevant issues of the development of home-school cooperation are discussed.

This is perhaps the first attempt in the literature to use the ecological systems theory to examine the development of home-school cooperation in a region. This study may help find out to what extent the ecological system approach can be used to explain and predict the development of home-school cooperation. The results of this study may be able to inform education policy makers about the conditions conducive to home-school cooperation. These findings should also contribute to the construction of a theory of the development of home-school cooperation.

To describe and differentiate different types of home-school cooperation, Epstein's framework of six types of school-family-community partnerships is adopted, which includes parenting, learning at home, communicating, volunteering, decision-making,

and collaborating with community. The local term of "home-school cooperation" is synonymous to school-family-community partnership as used in North America. The data about Hong Kong home-school cooperation and related areas used for the analysis are drawn mainly from the academic journal papers, technical reports, books, websites and newspapers in the past two decades. These include education reform, teacher stress, family studies, social trends and the political, economic and social context. The sources of data include the Government, non-government organisations, academics, teacher organisations, parent bodies, political parties, and school sponsoring bodies. In particular, the empirical as well as theoretical studies of home-school cooperation in Hong Kong have been thoroughly reviewed.

This study attempts to identify the contextual factors located at different levels of the ecological systems which may account for the development of home-school cooperation in Hong Kong. The possible effects of these factors are discussed.

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS IN THE MACROSYSTEM

In the macrosystem, three contextual factors were proposed to contribute to the changes in home-school cooperation in the past 15 years. These included the economic environment, the marriage institution and the increased accountability of public institutions (see Figure 1 & Table 1).

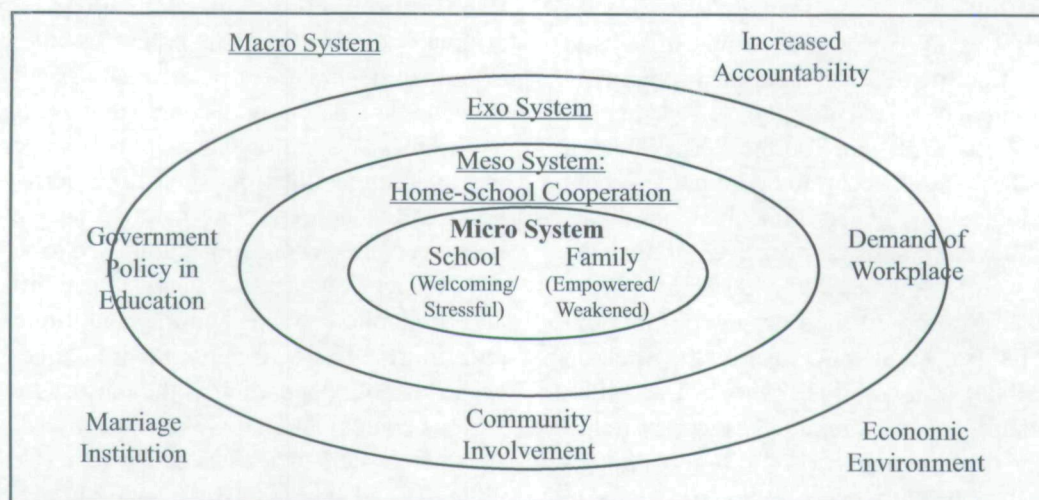


Figure 1. The contextual factors and home-school cooperation in Hong Kong

Table 1
The contextual factors and the development of home-school cooperation in Hong Kong in the past 15 years

Contextual Factors	Home-school Cooperation (Meso Layer)	Consensus & Achievement	Sample Practices	Controversies & Challenges
Macro System	Parenting	Both schools and parents recognise the importance of parent education. Increased school-NGO collaboration in parent programs	Parent education seminars/class Parent support groups/interest groups Parent-child game day	Parents are reluctant to attend parent education programs
	Economic environment	Both schools and parents have shown increased concern about children's all-round education.	Project learning Parent-child reading Interactive homework	While parents want to know how to help their children at home, most teachers do not involve parents in children's learning. Few practices were identified.
	Marriage institution	Both schools and parents agree that the parents should be informed of school matters. More communication channels have been established.	Parent day/orientation Sunshine call Parent room School website/electronic circular/newsletters	Parents want to know children's progress, yet schools are more interested in impression making. Parents and teachers are too busy to discuss about children and their learning. Increased parent complaints
	Increased accountability			
Exo System	Government policy in education			
Work place demands Community involvement	Decision making	All stakeholders agree that the school should increase its transparency and accountability.	Legislation of the School-based Bill to widen the representation in school governance Set up PTA/Federation of PTA	Some school sponsoring bodies oppose the School-based Bill. Various stakeholders are not keen to serve as school managers.
			School lunch Library assistant/story telling Helpers in school functions/extra-curricular activities Fund-raising/Flag day Community service Study trip Health program	While some parents are willing to assist the school in many aspects, most teachers are reluctant to allow parent assistance in the classroom. Minimal involvement of business community in school education Lack of commitment in creating a healthy community environment conducive to children's learning
Micro System				
School (Welcoming/Stressful)	Volunteering	Teachers and parents welcome volunteering and believe that parents can support the school.		
Family (Empowered/Weakened)	Collaborating with community	Increased school-NGO collaboration in educating children and supporting parents		

Economic environment

In the last two decades, owing to the opening up of China and the high labour cost and property price in Hong Kong, most of the local manufacturing industries have moved to China, followed by related service industries like computing, accounting and personnel. The mode of economy in Hong Kong has shifted from labour-intensive and manufacturing-focused in the 1970s to service-based in the 2000s. Hong Kong has undergone substantial development in finance, trade, logistics and tourism and has become a coordination and management centre of the cross-border production in China (Chiu & Lui, 2006; Ho, 2005; Tse, 2002). There has been increased competition as well as collaboration between Hong Kong and other parts of China (Ho, 2005). The labour market has experienced a significant restructuring with a high demand of re-training. To reinforce Hong Kong's bid to develop into a knowledge-based economy and to meet the challenges of the globalised economy, there was a strong quest for the school system to launch a comprehensive education reform (Education Commission, 2000) and a major curriculum reform (Curriculum Development Council, 2001). These rigorous reforms have changed significantly the work lives of the teachers in schools.

The restructuring of Hong Kong companies in the last two decades did not only involve repositioning, but also downsizing as well as de-layering. To remain competitive, these companies increased their organisation flexibility, resulting in an increase in job insecurity among middle class as well as non-skilled workers. The "bureaucratic career path" has encountered a fundamental change. More workers were hired on contract basis. The unemployment rate of the less educated, unskilled and older workers have been comparatively high (Chiu & Lui, 2006; Lui & Wong, 2003). These trends had significant impacts on the working life of the adult members in families and brought significant economic stress to these families. The transformation of the mode of economy in Hong Kong has probably enlarged the disparity of income among Hong Kong families. It was noted that the Gini coefficient of Hong Kong, upon which the household income is based, has increased from 0.451 in 1981 to 0.533 in 2006, suggesting that the income inequality was serious and deteriorating and there has been a significant increase of the low-income family (Census & Statistics Department, 2007; Chiu & Lui, 2006; Ho, 2005; Shek, 2005).

Marriage institution

In the last two decades, the marriage institution in Hong Kong has been in decline, typically represented by the increase in divorce rate and the greater tolerance towards divorce, cohabitating and extra-marital activities (Lee, 2000). There was also evidence of postponement of marriage and lack of faith in marriage. The relative population of those divorced/separated in 2006 was 3.16 times greater than in 1991. The percentage of children living in single parent families has increased from 4.4% in 1996 to 8.4% in 2006 (Census & Statistics Department, 2007; Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 2009). Family solidarity also has been found to be declining (Shek, 2005). These family trends were consistent with those identified in many developed countries, which included increased family instability, falling fertility, rising rates of separation, births outside marriage, and lone mother families (Lewis, 2003, 2006). Another change was the falling fertility rate. In recent years, many families had fewer children or no children at all (Lee, 2000). The average annual birth rate was 0.83% between 1996 and 2006. The fertility rate (number of birth per 1,000 women) in Hong Kong in 2005 was 966, which was significantly lower than that in 1983, i.e. 1722, and in 1993, 1342. This fertility rate was much lower than the corresponding figures reported in some developed countries, i.e., 1,340 in Japan; 2,140, USA; and 1370, UK (The future of Hong Kong's population, 2007). This decline in the birth rate has resulted in a significant surplus of school places.

Increased accountability

There has been a quest for increased accountability of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government (hereafter the Government) to the Hong Kong community in the last two decades. In 1989, the Finance Branch issued a discussion document titled *Public Sector Reform* which reflected a broad concern over the efficiency of the Government. The report recognised the need for a more defined relationship between resources and objectives and recommended that the Government should improve value for money by introducing more private sector practices (Scott, 2000). The early initiatives of the Government included introducing the performance pledges, budget devolution, contracting-out services, performance management, establishing a culture of service, setting up the Office of Ombudsman, and introducing a code of access to the Government information (Sankey,

2001). The quest for such reforms in the Government and public bodies has become even stronger after the change of sovereignty and the financial crises of Hong Kong (Lee, 2001a, 2001b; Standard Chartered Bank, 2002). The emphasis on public sector reform has shifted fairly rapidly from "departmental responsiveness to the public" to the question of "how private sector practices might best be introduced to the Government" (Scott, 2000). In addition, the Principal Officials Accountability System was introduced in 2002. Secretaries were nominated by the Chief Executive and appointed directly by the Central Government to take the lead in various government bureaux staffed by civil servants. In the arena of education, the Government issued a consultative document of School Management Initiatives (SMI) calling for a broader participation in school management (Education and Manpower Branch & Education Department, 1991). This move has paved the way for the implementation of school-based management.

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS IN THE EXOSYSTEM

In the exosystem, three contextual factors were identified to account for shaping the development of home-school cooperation in the past 15 years. These included work place demands, Government policy in education, and community involvement (see Figure 1 & Table 1). These contextual factors were also closely linked to the factors proposed for the macrosystem as discussed in the previous section.

Work place demands

Owing to rapid change in the economic environment, many Hong Kong workers were unclear and anxious about their work careers. They now worked harder and also tried to upgrade themselves through retraining and further study in an attempt to maintain their market value and standard of living. In the last decade, the working hours of people have shifted from 30 to 49 hours per week to over 50 to 60 hours (The future of Hong Kong's population, 2007). While working hours at various levels were set between 42 and 45 hours per week, workers have been found to actually work 11 to 13 hours extra per week (Hong Kong Institute of Human Resource Management, 2004). Long working hours tended to have a negative impact on families and children.

Working overtime is a common phenomenon across industries, exerting significant psychological pressure on the population. Naturally, this means time spent at home and time appropriated for family matters are sacrificed. Subsequently, this also translates into neglect of children and the elderly (p.14).

In education, owing to the decline in birth rate, the number of students in primary schools has decreased by approximately 30% from 432,500 in September 2002, to 332,800 as of September 2007 (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2002, 2007). The Government has closed down a substantial number of primary schools. Many teachers have been subjected to the threat of losing their jobs. Competition between schools has increased with teachers, who used to enjoy stable professional careers, having to vie among themselves to maintain their jobs. The Professional Teacher Union indicated that many teachers have undertaken "excessive further study", so as to increase their advantage in retaining their jobs (Fung, 2008).

Government policy in education

In Hong Kong, the roles of teachers and parents in educating children were seen as separate in the past (Llewellyn, 1982). Parents mainly served as the "homework supervisors" of students' school work (Shen, Pang, Tsoi, Yip, & Yung, 1994). On school premises, they usually played the role of *audience*, i.e. passive partners in attending school assemblies and parent conferences (Greenwood & Hickman, 1991). Since the 1990s, the Government has placed increasing emphasis on home-school co-operation. In 1993, based on a recommendation of the Education Commission, the Government set up the Committee on Home-school Co-operation so as to co-ordinate and promote the sustained efforts of home-school co-operation in the region (Education Commission, 1992). The Government also requested all publicly-funded schools to establish a parent teacher association (PTA). The number of PTAs has increased from 959 in 2000 to 1,340 in 2008 (Committee on Home-School Cooperation, n.d.). Currently, over 90% of the primary, secondary and special schools have already established a PTA. In 1997, the Government included "school links with home and community" as a performance indicator for the school review exercise (Education Department, 1997). In 2000, the Government allocated HK\$50 million and set up a

steering committee to promote parent education. In response to various Government initiatives, there has been an increase in parent *volunteers* in schools and the number of schools which offered parent education. The Government has also consulted parents and the public widely in formulating its education reform blueprint (Education Commission, 2000). With the introduction of education reforms, home-school cooperation has been fueled by the ideas of "life-wide learning" and society-wide mobilisation. In late 1990s, the Government suggested parents serve on school executive committees as *advisers* (Education Commission, 1997). In 2004, the School-based Bill was passed and all subsidized schools were required to include parents and community members as *school managers/governors* (Pang, 2008).

It was argued that the education reforms introduced by the Government in the last decade had significant impacts on the school system. On the one hand, various kinds of performance management were introduced together with many standards and criteria for schools to comply with, such as Territory-wide System Assessments, External School Reviews and language competency requirements for teachers. On the other hand, the education reforms, which aimed to create a knowledge society, involved a comprehensive and fundamental change in primary and secondary school curricula and a major shift of the modes of teaching and learning. The reforms have challenged teachers' basic competence in teaching. Cheng (2006) argued that in the last decade, Hong Kong has been "infected" with the so-called "Education Reform Syndrome", characterized by never-ending reforms with no priorities and little effectiveness. One outcome was teacher exhaustion and burnout. The curricular reforms have also affected parent roles at home. Parents, especially those from middle class, endeavoured to provide various learning opportunities to enhance the all-round development of their children. As a result, many neighbourhood student learning/development centres of various kinds have emerged.

Community involvement

The community has been involved in a very unique way in the running of the school system in the past. More than 80% of Hong Kong schools were categorised as "subsidised", meaning, they were governed by school sponsoring bodies (SSBs) which are non-government organisations, such as religious bodies, fraternal associations, alumni associations and

professional bodies. Yet, such school governance was not constituted on a regional basis, i.e. represented by the local community. With the introduction of the School-based Bill in 2004, the power of the SSBs in school governance was significantly reduced and redistributed, and the influences of other stakeholders like parents, teachers, alumni and the community members had increased. It was possible that the resource support offered by SSBs in the past, like financial support, administrative support, staff development, and parent education would be correspondingly reduced (Pang, 2008).

The implementation of education reform has triggered further community involvement in children's education (Curriculum Development Council, 2001; Education Commission, 2000). Schools were funded by the Government to buy services from non-governmental organisations (NGOs) to support innovations like life-wide learning, student guidance, home-school cooperation, and inclusive education. Schools have also made increasing use of the community, regional and international contexts for service learning, citizenship education and extending the life experience of students. Unlike the NGOs in the past, which were set up to provide direct service to the family and the community, many collaborated with schools to provide education to children as well as parents in school sites as shown by the increasing the number of applications from NGOs applying for Quality Education Fund (QEF) in recent years.

Another trend was the development of parent organisations. Besides the PTA set up in individual schools, federations of parent teacher associations (FPTA) have been formed in each of the 18 Hong Kong Districts. These federations were established to develop a district-based network for the PTAs, promote parent education programs, organise education seminars, and give advice to the Government on educational issues (Committee on Home-School Cooperation, 2009). There has also been substantial development in some parent associations of programs tailored to assist children with special needs. For example, the Hong Kong Association for Specific Learning Disabilities (<http://www.asld.org.hk/>) and The Parents' Association for Pre-school Handicapped Children (<http://www.parentsasn.org.hk/>) started to provide public education, direct education service, and training to children and their parents, and even to take up research activities, in addition to their traditional roles of advocacy, liaison, and fund raising.

Besides NGOs and parent bodies, a major support towards home-school cooperation has come from tertiary institutions. Since 1995, the Hong Kong Institute of Education (www.ied.edu.hk), the major teacher education provider, has developed and offered courses on school-family-community partnership in its pre-service and in-service teacher education programs. In addition, substantial research has been taken up by various tertiary institutions to inform and facilitate the practices of home-school cooperation. An overview of home-school cooperation has been reported (Shen et al., 1994). Various models of parent involvement have been proposed (Cheng, 1991; Pang, 1997, Pang, 2000a; Tam, Cheng, & Cheung 1997). Theories of social psychology, motivation, and social capital have been used to examine school-family relations (Ho, 1995, 1999; Pang, 2000b, 2000c; Pang & Watkins & 2000). The effects of family background and school policies on parent involvement have also been examined (Ho, 2000; Ho & Tsoi, 2000; Ng, 1999, 2000), and the results of comparative study of home-school cooperation in the Asia-Pacific region have been reported (Pang et al., 2003).

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS IN THE MICROSISTEM

While home-school cooperation was subjected to the influences of various contextual factors in the macrosystem and exosystem as discussed in previous sections, it was argued here that effective cooperation has also been closely related to the conditions of individual schools and families as they enter into various relationships (see Figure 1 & Table 1).

The school

In the past 15 years, the importance of home-school cooperation has been duly recognised by schools. In the 1990s, home-school contacts in local schools were rare, typically one-way and often "crisis triggered", i.e., when students had academic, behavioral and emotional problems (Shen et al., 1994). Through education programs offered by tertiary institutions, many school principals and teachers have been equipped in their attitudes and skills to work more effectively with parents. Driven by the idea of school-based management and the incentive to build up a good image in their neighbourhood, schools have become increasingly responsive to parents' concerns.

In turn schools have treated parents as "customers" or "clients" of educational services. Increasingly more information has been released to parents like school plans, school inspection reports, teacher qualifications, and how schools meet various benchmarks set by the Government. With the setting up of PTAs, teachers and parents had more chances to meet each other in school functions. More channels of school-family communication have been provided. More positive messages have been conveyed by schools to parents. With the support of information technology, electronic means of home-school communication have been used, such as school websites, electronic circulars, and e-mail linkages. In some schools, specific resource rooms were set up for parent gatherings and meetings. Parents could thus communicate with teachers more readily and have become more visible in schools. Furthermore, teachers seemed to be increasingly more receptive to parent involvement with their schools and especially supportive of their volunteering in school activities. Parents were no longer kept outside the school door as audience and observers. They could visit to find out about the school, assist in school operations, learn how to help their children, and to develop their own supportive networks of friends (Pang, 2004). To parents, schools have become more *welcoming*.

Yet, the education reforms have posed serious challenges to teachers in terms of the demands on their time, knowledge, and skills. To meet various accountability requirements, like external school reviews, the paperwork of staff has increased significantly. Moreover, schools have to be able to attract enough students in order to avoid reduction of class or school closure. Banners were often posted outside school buildings to publicise school achievements. In some schools, teachers were required to promote their schools. Concurrently, because of the adoption of school-based management and the enhanced status of parents, schools have received increasingly more complaints from parents. These complaints were often not only directed to the school authority, but also to the Government and the media. Many teachers found meeting difficult parents stressful. In some cases, the complaints from difficult parents paralyzed normal school operations because a tremendous amount of time and effort were spent by the school authority in handling them.

There were a number of studies which revealed that Hong Kong teachers have been under severe

stress in recent years. A study reported that nearly 90% of 800 teachers said that they were under stress (Democratic Alliance for Betterment of Hong Kong & the Hong Kong Federation of Education Workers, 2006). One out of four teachers said that they had to work up to 71 hours a week and 56 % said that they worked more than 61 hours a week. In another study, 91.5% of primary school teachers and 87.3% of secondary school teachers said that they experienced more stress now compared to five years ago (Pang, 2006). Further, the rates of depression and anxiety of teachers were found to be double those for ordinary citizens (Hong Kong Mood Disorders Center, 2004). In response, the Education and Manpower Bureau set aside a total of HK\$34 billion (US\$ 4.36 billion) to implement measures to reduce teacher stress. It also formed the Teacher Work Committee in 2006 to look into the issue. Owing to the increased workload of teachers, less time was available for teachers to make contacts with parents. A study (Pang, 2000c) showed that the time spent by primary school teachers in communicating with parents was comparable to the finding of 0.69 hours per week reported six years ago (Shen et al., 1994). While teachers agreed that home-school cooperation is important, they were reluctant to take part in the home-school activities held in the evening and in the weekend. On the whole, the school has become more stressful than it was in the last decade.

The family

Owing to the decline of marriage institution and the economic restructuring, there has been an increase in atypical families in the region, including single parent families, reconstituted families, poor families, immigrant families and separated families (Shek, 2004; Tse, 2002). Many of the difficult families have less time and resources for their children and/or are less supported by their extended families. Because an increasing number of people have to work on the Mainland, there are more absent fathers and extra-marital affairs, causing increased family stress (Shek, 2005). Basic caring of children may be lacking in these families. Families often had to rely on the support of external organisations like schools and NGOs. Even for intact families, many parents with long working hours, found it difficult to have opportunities to talk to their children and organise family activities, not to mention participate in school activities, and supervise or assist their children's learning at home (The Church

of the United Brethren in Christ, 2008). According to Shek (2000), one-third to four-tenths of adolescent had communication problems with their parents. For these reasons, some schools organised parent-child activities to provide opportunities for parents to interact with their children. A review study also showed that few parents attend parent education programs organised by their schools, especially the non-elite schools (Tam, Lam, Ho, Cheng & Ma, 2002). Parents tended to participate in school recreational rather than educational activities. Tam et al. (2002) explained that Hong Kong parents emphasised materialistic values, which led them to work long hours, leaving them with little energy and time to participate in parent education. On the whole, Hong Kong families have become less stable and have *weakened* in their caring and educational functions (Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 2009; Lee, 2000).

Yet, owing to the promotion of school-based management, Hong Kong parents have become increasingly influential in school education. In the 1980s, Hong Kong parents were seldom involved in their children's education at school sites (Shen et al., 1994). In the 1990s, as the public-funded schools set up PTAs, parents' efforts have become more organised and visible in school. The role of the PTA has gradually changed from enhancing home-school communication and promoting student welfare to assisting in school operations. Parent concerns have shifted gradually from peripheral to core school activities. In addition, almost every school had a group of parent volunteers serving as library assistants, story aunts, lunch mums, and assistants in school functions. These parents have increased their understanding of the internal workings of their children's schools, the teachers and their children's education, while building friendship networks. Through participating in parenting programs and interest groups, parents were given the opportunities to develop their interest and be equipped for caring and managing their children (Pang, 2004).

Parents who in the past shouldered the responsibility in *parenting* and *learning at home* on their own could now get some support from the school. Furthermore, through media and direct contacts with schools, parents have become more aware of the importance of providing holistic education to their children. In some schools, parents were equipped with skills on how to assist their children's learning at home, like parent-child reading, interactive homework,

project work, and IT application (Pang, 2004). In 2004, the Government introduced the School-based Bill and parent representatives were able to sit in the Incorporated Management Committee (IMC) as school managers. Unlike the parents in the past who had to listen to teachers and comply with the school, current parents, especially those who are professionals, worked with the school on an equal footing. They have been *empowered* to become more influential in their children's schools (Pang, 2008).

In summary, the last decade the school has become more welcoming to parents yet teachers, who worked under more demanding and stressful condition, tended to have less time to interact with them. While the family has become weakened in its caring and educational functions, certain parents have been empowered to play a more significant role in school matters. There seemed to be a continuous adaptation of schools and families to the changing environmental contexts within an overall ecological system (see Figure 1).

EFFECTS OF HOME-SCHOOL COOPERATION ON THE ECOLOGICAL SYSTEMS

Though a comprehensive study of the multiple effects of home-school cooperation on the macrosystem, ecosystem or microsystem was not undertaken, it was speculated that there have been significant effects of the practices of home-school cooperation, on the beliefs of the actors in the microsystem. By applying the analytical tool of symbolic interactionism, it was argued that the increased cooperation experienced between teachers and parents should be able to convey new meanings to them and shape their beliefs about children's education, home-school cooperation and their working partners (Blumer, 1969). For example, through observing the volunteering of parents in school lunch and sports days activities, teachers may increase their beliefs that parents can help their schools in many significant ways. Parent volunteers, who found out that teachers are always occupied in school, may strengthen their beliefs about the fact that teachers were willing to make extra efforts in the education and caring of children. Further, mutual support between teachers and parents in activities like parenting and volunteering should be able to increase the collective efficacy beliefs of teachers and parents (Bandura, 1995; Goddard, Hoy & Hoy, 2004). In addition, because of the increase

of teachers and parents in their mastery and vicarious experience in working with their counterparts, their efficacy beliefs in cooperation would be enhanced (Bandura, 1995; Pang, 2000c). Cognitive dissonance theory suggests that increased cooperation experience between teachers and parents will reinforce their belief in the importance of home-school cooperation, since people will feel the pressure to change when there is inconsistency between thoughts and behavior (Myers, 2008). As suggested by the idea of proximal process in Bronfenbrenner's theory, it is expected that change of beliefs was most likely to occur among those teachers and parents who have continuous contacts, such as parent volunteers, teachers in-charge of parent matters and those teachers and parents who frequently communicate with each other (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). However, it could not be ruled out that the experience of some teachers in home-school cooperation may be undesirable, either because they were not skillful in handling parents' concerns and/or some parents were too difficult to deal with (Seligman, 2000).

DISCUSSION

The conditions of home-school cooperation

This analysis supports the claim that there are reciprocal interactions between home-school cooperation in the mesosystem and the contextual factors in the macrosystem, exosystem, and microsystem. It suggests that the ecological systems theory helps to organise the contextual factors of home-school cooperation, and clarify their interactions. For example, the rising status of parents in school education can be explained by the quest for increased accountability at the macrosystem level and the implementation of school-based management at the exosystem level. The application of the theory has also made possible a systematic examination of the conditions for home-school cooperation. There are helping as well as hindering forces identified at different levels of the ecological systems (Lewin, 1997) (see Figure 1). Examples of helping forces include community involvement and curriculum reform at the exosystem level. Examples of hindering forces include the changing economic environment and the decline of marriage institution at the macrosystem level. One apparent strategy to reinforce home-school cooperation is to increase the helping forces and decrease the hindering forces in the systems. It is

found that the Government policy of increasing school accountability was a "double-edged sword". While it has enforced schools to open up and to become more responsive to parents' concerns, it has also brought in various types of performance management practices resulting in an overloaded and stressful set of tasks for teachers.

It seems that various types of home-school cooperation are subjected to different degrees of influences within changing contexts (see Table 1). With regard to *parenting*, while schools are prepared to collaborate with NGOs with the funding support from the Government, many parents are reluctant or unable to attend support programs possibly because of the increased demands placed on them in the workplace. *Communicating* patterns between school and home also manifest tensions. In response to the Government's requirements for increased accountability and transparency, schools tend to impress parents with their achievements and to introduce measures to reduce complaints, rather than to require teachers to enhance communication with parents.

With regard to facilitating *learning at home*, very few partnership practices are identified in schools, suggesting perhaps there was an absence of Government and community intervention, like in the setting up of the PTA and promoting parent education in schools. It seems that teachers failed to see the benefit of such partnerships and did not possess the relevant skills for involving parents. It suggests that teachers still believe in a separation of responsibilities between teachers and parents in children's learning at school and at home (Epstein, 1987). With regard to *decision making*, the Government has been very keen on involving parents as school governors, as shown in the legislation of School-based Bill. Yet, a majority of parents is found only to want to be informed of or consulted about school policies. Principals also did not think that it was important to consult parents on major school decisions (Ho & Tsoi, 2000). With regard to *collaborating with community*, as a result of the education reforms, the schools have made increasing use of community resources for children's and parents' education, yet the involvement of the business community in school education is still very limited. *Volunteering* seems to be the most well received form of home-school partnership. It has been facilitated by the setting up of PTAs in schools. Through parent volunteering, teacher's workload can

be reduced and school operations can be supported. Parents and their children also can benefit from such support from parents. The rewards gained from parent volunteering seem to be more significant than those by other efforts (Blau, 1964; Pang, 2000b). However, teachers are still reluctant towards accepting parent assistance in the classroom (Pang, 2004).

Research suggests that the conditions for home-school cooperation may vary among families. It is shown that parent education programs were less successful with families of low socio-economic status, single parent families, and families with marriage discord (Goodyear & Rubovits, 1982). Working-class parents are also found to be in a less favourable situation with regard to participating in school activities (Lareau, 1989; Ng, 2000). It seems that to encourage cooperation, more support should be rendered to the families in need. To suit the diverse interests and needs of families, schools should be more inclusive in program design that may encompass "recreation for family", "school and children information" as well as "education for parents." For example, parent education program may be integrated in school functions, together with activities like barbecuing on school ground, student talent performance, and giving out student report cards. Besides taking into account the working schedules of parents, schools probably need to provide parents with psychological support, like positive feelings, recognition and respect, as well as physical support like child care and transportation convenience.

Home-school cooperation and student learning

While there has been a general increase in home-school activities over the past 15 years, it is found that most of them were not directly linked to children's learning. For example, the setting up of school-level PTAs which tend to organise activities at the school level cannot meet the concerns of individual parents on their children's progress (Shen et al., 1994). The setting up of Incorporated Management Committees is said to be irrelevant to children's learning in schools (Pang, 2008). The fact that teachers and parents have been over-occupied with demanding work schedules suggests that communication among teachers, parents and students, which is critical to children's development, has suffered (The Church of the United Brethren in Christ, 2008). While the majority of parents want to know how to reinforce their children's learning at home, teachers seldom provide

parents advice and adequate support. For example, there is little guidance from teachers on how parents can assist in their children's homework assignments. The current working relationship between teachers and parents in children's learning cannot be regarded as "cooperation", but is still "a division of labour" (Pang, 1999). It is unfortunate that *learning at home* is perhaps the least explored areas of home-school cooperation in Hong Kong, though it was found to be most significant in enhancing children's learning (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Ames (1993) suggests that the content of school-to-home communication is critically important. To enhance parent involvement in their children's learning, schools need to provide parents with a sense of efficacy and make parents feel comfortable with the school, while providing parents with adequate guidance as how to be constructively engaged with their children's activities at school and at home (Ames, deStefano, Watkins, & Sheldon, 1995).

The ecological theory reminds us that home and school are not the only sources of education for children, and that the neighbourhood does matter. It is noted that the neighbourhoods that children live in have become more problematic in Hong Kong. For example, there has been an increase in the number of betting branches of Jockey Club to 108, an increase in the horse racing days to 82 days a year, and soccer gambling has been legalised. The popularity of gambling suggests that less time is available for parents in communicating with their children and organising family activities. There has also been a significant increase in drug abuse cases among students (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2009). Enhancing the quality of community life for students increasingly is the responsibility of the "whole village". The Government should set this as a high priority in its endeavours. There should be inter-departmental cooperation to ensure the community environment is friendly to children and conducive to their learning and development.

The issue of social capital

The social capital of schools and families has been found to be strongly associated with improved educational outcomes (Coleman, 1988; Putnam, 2000). Social capital refers to social networks and the ways in which they are sustained to the benefit of those participating in them (Morrow, 1999). Portes (1998) notes that social capital is acquired through an individual's relationships with other individuals.

In the last decade, while there has been an increase in community involvement to support the Government's initiatives in home-school cooperation as a whole, the Government's partnership with school sponsoring bodies (SSBs) is problematic (Pang, 2008). Three main Hong Kong SSBs (i.e., Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, Hong Kong Anglican Church, and the Methodist Church Hong Kong), have reiterated that they will not comply with the Education Ordinance legislated in 2004 to set up the independent Incorporated Management Committees (IMCs) to manage schools. These IMCs are composed of representatives of parents, teachers, alumni and the community as well as members appointed by the SSBs. The SSBs worry that upon replacement of the existing school management committees under their control, they can no longer have complete control over their schools and the mission of their schools will be affected. In addition, the Government's partnership with school professionals has also been jeopardised because education reforms and the closure of schools have caused hardship to teachers. While schools and families have expanded their collaborative efforts, it seems that cohesion among school staffs and among family members themselves has been weakened – in large part, because they have little time to communicate among themselves as a "community" (The Church of the United Brethren in Christ, 2008).

Nahapiet & Ghoshal (1998) suggest that social capital should be considered in terms of three clusters: structural, relational, and cognitive. In the last decade, while the structural dimension (the ability to make weak and strong ties with others within a system) of individuals may be enhanced, the relational dimension (the character of the connections between individuals) and the cognitive dimension (meaningful communication) of individuals may have suffered because of the insufficient time to communicate among themselves and the stressful conditions experienced by teachers and parents. Trusting relationships and shared meanings within schools and the families leave much to be desired. To increase social capital, it is recommended to strengthen the partnerships between various stakeholders in the school system, while reducing the stressful conditions faced by teachers and parents. Further exploration of the role of the extended family in caring and education is also proposed, given the relatively strong links within extended families still prevalent in Hong Kong. In addition, given the strong sense of importance of

education in the community as a whole, it seems that the school-community links can be further explored, for example, in the area of school-business partnerships (Sanders, 2006). The Government should devise measures to encourage contributions from the extended families and business community. While the former is associated with housing policies, such as allowing married couples to stay with their parents in public housing units, the latter can be encouraged by a matching grant from the Government and tax deduction for donation to school, and involving businesses in the new senior secondary curriculum in areas like career education, applied learning, and other learning experience.

Changing home-school cooperation and the role of the government

This study suggests that the Government policy in home-school cooperation has been changing rapidly in the past 15 years. The Hong Kong Government's focus has shifted from enhancing home-school communication in the early 1990s, to setting up PTAs in mid-1990s, promoting parent education in late-1990s, and involving parents in decision making in the 2000s (Pang, 2004). Government priorities have shifted from improving children's education to enhancing school accountability and parent participation in schools. The locus of accountability for children's learning has shifted from "parents accountable to schools" to "schools accountable to parents". The school increasingly refers to parents in formulating their policies and practices (Hyman, 1968; Pang, 2000b). On the whole, parent involvement has become more school-based as compared to predominately home-based in the past. It has become more formal and organised. At home, the role of parents, as influenced by the education reform, has shifted gradually from a homework supervisor to a coordinator of children's learning activity. In schools, the role of parents has gone from passive recipient of information to active volunteer, customer of education services, and school governor. The working relationship of teachers and parents has become more complicated than it was, especially in schools with parents of high socio-economic status.

This analysis has shown that home-school cooperation has been hampered by the stressful school conditions and weakened families. Cheng (2006) proposes that a kind of "bottleneck" effect has occurred, which explains why teachers are reluctant

to embark on further innovations given the limited time resource they have. There seems to be a need for the Government to enhance the coordination of different education reform initiatives so as to create opportunities for teachers to engage in genuine communication with parents in children's learning and development. To strengthen the family, more family-life education and family-support services may be needed. On the cultural front, there is a need to address the problematic aspects of an increasingly materialistic lifestyle of parents and to strengthen family relationships with various support services. Family-friendly employment/labour policies should be developed to ease social stress and to achieve a more favourable work-family balance (Siu & Philips, 2006).

This study also finds evidence of the fact that Hong Kong Government has assumed greater control over not only the outcomes of education but the internal workings of schools. Like other education reforms, the Government has taken the lead in setting the aims, determining the criteria and the means of home-school cooperation. The roles of Government have shifted from facilitating to leading, supervising, and evaluating. The Government has included "school links with family and community" in the school review exercise. It also requires the parents to play the role of school managers as well as school customers/clients and to monitor school performance. In late 1990s, the Government has stressed the flexibility of the stakeholders' role in school-based management (SBM). Yet, in 2004, it has replaced this outdated version of SBM by a rigid and standard governance structure, by which participation of parents and the community was made compulsory. Since the incorporated management committee (IMC) established for each school is an independent body, it is no longer directly controlled by its school sponsoring bodies (SSBs). The Government has taken back the power of school governance that it delegated previously to the SSBs by dividing it among other stakeholders. The vision and mission of the school will thus be "diluted" or "at risk" because the representatives from parents, staff and community in the IMC may not agree with the mission set by the SSB. Through the division of power and the removal of the "intermediate structure" of the SSBs, Government control over school education has increased (Pang, 2008).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This analysis looks at the interactions between various contextual factors and home-school cooperation at the systemic level. It will be useful as a strategic consideration to further explore how schools and families with different characteristics differ in their responses to the changing Hong Kong context (Eccles & Harold, 1993). It will be illuminating to find out, for example, how individual schools form their beliefs about home-school cooperation, respond effectively to an increasingly stressful environment, enhance their social capital, and develop their collective efficacy in educating children.

A comprehensive study of the impact of home-school cooperation policies on the workings and outcomes of the Hong Kong school system is lacking. There have been bits and pieces of information about the increase in the numbers of PTAs, Incorporated Management Committees, and parent support groups in schools. Yet, there are few empirical studies about changes in the beliefs and behaviours of various stakeholders after becoming involved in home-school cooperation, as well as about the effect of various types of cooperation on the learning outcomes of students. Longitudinal studies in these areas will contribute to greater understanding of the outcomes of these initiatives in home-school cooperation. Reviews and case studies on cooperation in the area of learning at home, a largely unexplored yet rewarding area, are necessary. Successful stories need to be heard and success indicators identified. Though such studies are not uncommon in the USA and UK, it will be worthwhile to find out, in this particular Asian context, how families with a tradition of supervising children's homework, respond to the assistance from their schools in children's learning at home.

Further study should also be undertaken in areas on how the Government, schools, families, NGOs and the business community may work together to create safer and more supportive neighbourhood learning environments for children. The current study has shown that Government's intervention through policy formulation is critical to the development of home-school cooperation. It is believed more studies on policy impact on schools, families and children should be undertaken. Such studies will contribute to more informed and, hopefully, effective public policies that foster the development of all children in Hong Kong.

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