

# Educational Leadership for Parental Involvement in an Asian Context: Insights from Bourdieu's Theory of Practice

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## Abstract

This article examines how educational leadership defines parental involvement and shapes the nature of home-school collaboration in schools in an Asian context. Results show three major types of principal leadership, or *habitus* of parental involvement: bureaucratic, utilitarian, and communitarian, which provide a more powerful explanation for the extent and nature of home-school collaboration than parents' *capital* in this context. The present article adds to the existing literature by application of Bourdieu's concepts of *field*, *habitus*, and *capital* to understand the relationship between principals' leadership and different types of home-school relationships.

Key Words: educational leadership, home-school relationships, parental involvement, Bourdieu, theory of practice, capital, trust, utilitarian, bureaucratic, parents, teachers, principals, families, schools, collaboration

## Background of the Study

Under the current global decentralization reform movement, parental participation in children's education at home and in school has been taking hold in England, Wales, Australia, New Zealand, Israel, Singapore, Brazil, Germany, France, Italy, the United States, and Canada (Beattie, 1985; Brown, 1990, 1994; Ho, 1997, 2003). Growing evidence of the beneficial effects of parents'

involvement on children's learning and school success has caused policymakers, educators, and educational researchers to seek ways to bolster parent involvement, in particular, that of disadvantaged parents (Comer, Haynes, Joyner, & Ben-Avie, 1996, Coleman, 1987; Henderson, 1988; Henderson & Mapp, 2002, Ho & Willms, 1996). In Hong Kong, the involvement of parents in their children's education was not formally recognized in educational policies until the pronouncement of the School Management Initiative (Education and Manpower Branch & Education Department, 1991), School Based Management (Education Department, 2000), and the Education Commission Report 7 (Education Commission, 1997). Since their introduction, these policies have fueled a growing interest in promoting parental involvement as one of the prime strategies for enhancing children's education and for improving the accountability of schools in the community. However, a number of studies to date have suggested that Asian parents are only prepared to support their children's learning *at home* (Ho, 2000; Shen et al., 1994). Additionally, these studies purport that school administrators and teachers are not generally receptive towards parental participation (Pang, 1997; Shen, 1995; Shen et al., 1994). It appears that people place different interpretations on the term "parental involvement" and have different perceptions of the limits to which parents can become involved in their child's school and the level of involvement that parents are prepared to undertake. Indeed, very little is known about how schools, teachers, and parents interpret the meaning of the term "parental involvement" and what value they place on it, nor have researchers profiled or accounted for the diverse forms of home-school relationships present in Asian schools.

Recent studies on home-school cooperation in Hong Kong, however, have confirmed that parents, regardless of their social background, are willing to participate in their children's education both at home and in the school setting (Ho, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003; Pang, 2004). Although family background appears to be a powerful determinant of parental involvement, most parents, if duly encouraged, are able to devote extra time and effort to assisting with their children's education, both in the home and school settings (Ho, 1999, 2002, 2006). As shown in the literature cited, school practices largely determine how far parents are willing to invest their resources in actively engaging in their child's education (Brown, 1998; Comer et al., 1996; Epstein, 1990; Wolfendale, 1992). These findings are provocative because they suggest that school personnel can make a difference in the extent of parental involvement in schools. It has been determined, for example, that certain school leadership practices can mobilize a substantial number of parents to work with their child's school regardless of their social background (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997). Yet, little has been done in Asian societies to examine how

schools, teachers, and parents understand the meaning of parental involvement (Ho, 2002; Pang, 1997; Shen, 1995). Nor have we profiled and accounted for the diverse forms of home-school relationships under different forms of school leadership. The present article aims to fill this knowledge gap. Through a series of ethnographic case studies conducted in Hong Kong, this study investigates how three different principal leadership approaches relate to three different parental home-school relationships.

The purpose of this article is to examine the practice and the meaning of the concept of parental involvement as enacted in three heterogeneous Hong Kong primary schools. In this regard, I utilize Bourdieu's theory of social practice to identify the objective conditions of the field, both existing and emerging, where the practice of parental involvement is induced and experienced. Then, through an examination of the principals' respective habitus of leadership and deployment of capital, I will delineate how different forms of home-school relationships emerge. As Bourdieu's work has been used mainly to examine social reproduction and production of inequality through education rather than educational change, the present use of his theory of practice – to understand how and why parental involvement as a reform effort may initiate changes in the leadership approaches of principals – is groundbreaking.

## Understanding the Logic of Parental Involvement from Bourdieu's Theory

Parental involvement in the schooling of their children is a practice that takes place within the social world. Bourdieu (1991) describes the social world as a multi-dimensional space that is comprised of intersecting fields. Such fields include social institutions (e.g., the family, the media, the medical system, the legal system, the education system) and also their trans-institutional forms or sub-fields (e.g., a particular family, hospital, law firm, or school). It is within all of these overlapping fields that humans assert themselves as individuals and/or as members of a group. Their action or practice is determined by their habitus, the capital they possess, and their ability to maneuver within a particular field. According to Bourdieu (1984, p. 11), any social practice can be accounted for by the following formula:

$$[(\textit{Habitus}) (\textit{Capital})] + \textit{Field} = \textit{Practice}$$

Habitus is a system of dispositions acquired through one's experiences in different life dimensions – the family, schools, and the wider social, economic, and political environment (Bourdieu, 1977). The relationship of habitus to practice is interactive. Habitus is a “practice unifying” and “practice generating”

principle that shapes practices according to the objective situation in the field. Capital can be seen as resources (Bourdieu, 1986) which exist in three fundamental types: economic capital, cultural capital, and social capital. Economic capital exists only in objectified form such as income and property. Cultural capital can be embodied in the form of dispositions and aptitudes, such as familiarity with highbrow culture and use of formal language; in cultural goods, such as the possession of books and works of art; and in institutionalized form, such as credentials, degrees, or public awards. Social capital consists of networks and connections with people with social prestige, and it may be institutionalized through the acquaintance in systems of noble title or recognition as a member of some social groups in higher social strata (Jenkins, 1992).

For a child's education, the field begins at home, as this is the setting where children are first guided to learn (albeit informally) and additionally encompasses the formal schooling system (i.e., from preschool through to university; Bourdieu, 1986). What the agents of the school field (i.e., principals, teachers, students, and parents) strive for is cultural capital (e.g., knowledge and credentials), as cultural capital can be cashed in other fields for social and economic capital (e.g., position and rewards; Lareau 1987, 1989). As the school field, like most other fields, is hierarchically stratified, those in higher positions (i.e., those who dominate) are sometimes resistant to change. In order to maintain and reproduce the structure of the field (i.e., the relative positions of agents within the field) certain logics of practice and/or rules of the game are instituted to regulate resources and capital. For example, upper-middle-class parents are more advantaged in helping their children strive for credentials than are parents in the lower socioeconomic strata, as upper-middle-class parents are typically more familiar with the language and etiquette practiced within the school field, because their own cultural capital is generally consistent with that of the child's school. This suggests that without changing the rules of the game in the educational field, decentralization and parental involvement will not bring about any marked improvement in school quality or social equality. Yet in order to redefine the rules of the game, the habitus of agents, especially the principals, must be understood since students, teachers, and parents are disposed to participate in the game based on their "acquired schemes of action" (Bourdieu, 1991, p. 25).

Bourdieu's concept of capital has been used widely to examine the disadvantages of working-class parents in their involvement (Ho, 1999, 2000, 2006; Lareau, 1989, 2001). In this study, Bourdieu's theory of practice will be used to explain how the ideology and beliefs (habitus) of principals define their zone of acceptance (field) for parental involvement (practice) and how different types of family and/or school resources (capital) are being created and deployed.

## Method and Design of the Study

This paper is part of the empirical work of a large scale project using mixed methods for investigating the nature and impact of diversified forms of parental involvement on children and schools in Hong Kong. The whole project started with case studies followed by a series of surveys of different stakeholders. This paper reports the major findings of the case studies in three primary schools. By way of the grounded theory methodology, this paper aims to explain the divergences and convergences in the practice and meaning of parental involvement amongst the three schools. The theoretical map derived at this stage of the project is adopted as the conceptual framework for generating and testing the hypothesis in the next stage of the project.

### Profiles of Participating Schools

Three schools, Schools A, B, and C, from different social backgrounds and with different levels of parental involvement, were selected in accordance to with Ho's (1998) Hong Kong primary home-school collaboration study dataset. In that study, 40 schools that provided detailed parent information on their involvement were possible sites. The 40 schools were then sorted from high to low extent of involvement and categorized into three groups: high participation (top 30%), medium participation (middle 40%), and low participation (bottom 30%), according to an index of parents' reports of their involvement. The involvement index was assessed by 49 items modified and localized from Joyce Epstein's model measuring parents' participation in parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, and community collaboration (Epstein, 1990; Epstein et al., 2009). The profiles of the participating schools are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Background of the Three Participating Schools in the Study

Characteristics	School A	School B	School C
Year school established	1996	1988	1999
School size	30 classes	27 classes	30 classes
School instructional time	Whole-day	Whole-day	Whole-day
School location	A new town	A new town	A new town
Socioeconomic background of the student population*	Middle-class	Lower-middle-class	Working-class
Year PTA/HSC team established	1999	1996	2000
Level of parental participation as of 1999-2000	High	Low	Medium

\*A crude measure based on the occupation of students' parents and their type of housing.

School A was established in 1996. Most of the parents of the children attending School A were middle class. According to a survey in 1998, the level of parental participation was considered high. School B was established in 1988 and was a half-day school with 30 classes. The average socioeconomic status (SES) of its parents was lower-middle class, and the level of parent participation was the lowest of all three of the schools. In 1999, School B switched from a half-day to a full-day school, but retained 27 of its classes. School C was founded in 1999. The School C parents were of mainly working-class origins, and their participation was perceived to be of a medium level. School C was a full-day school with 30 classes.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Fieldwork was conducted from December 2001 to December 2002. During this period, we conducted a total of 68 interviews with the principals of the three schools, 18 teachers who were members of parent-teacher associations (PTAs) or home-school cooperation (HSC) teams, 18 “involved parents” who were either members of PTAs or active parent volunteers in the schools, and 29 non-involved parents whom we talked to at random either on the school premises or at school activities that parents attended. We also conducted participant observations of nine different activities organized by the PTAs or HSC teams of the three selected schools. This first phase of the research process took six months to complete transcription, data coding, and primary and secondary analysis in the manner of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Grounded-theory approach is used in the present study to explore the different facets and manifestations of parental involvement so as to understand the underlying values and the implicit meanings different stakeholders ascribe to it. Data were then subjected to primary coding analysis. These codes were subsequently conceptualised and abstracted during a second phase of analysis to reveal pertinent themes and constructs (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

## **Major Findings**

### **1. Extracted the Meaning of Parental Involvement**

A preliminary analysis of the case study field notes revealed parental involvement in all three schools was a multi-faceted, multi-layered, and complicated phenomenon, in so far as there were substantial divergences evident both across groups (e.g., among school principals, teachers, parents, and students) and within groups. In general, parental involvement in the three schools was shaped by both group beliefs and the individual and collective actions of group

members. Overall, there was no fixed meaning for the practice of parental involvement. Moreover, the meaning of parental involvement not only varied substantially among the three schools but also changed over time within the same school. Evidence from the case studies indicated that parental application and practice varied according to the personal and professional beliefs of each of the participating school principals. Moreover, their incorporation of parental involvement in their respective school's development plan was driven mainly by the principal's leadership approach to home-school collaboration.

For instance, the level of parental involvement in School A has dropped substantially, and their home-school collaboration has become more separated. This was shaped by the principal's view toward the purpose of parental involvement and her "selective" habitus of the "high" quality parents and her exclusion of some active working-class parents who previously volunteered at the school. In contrast, under the "inclusive" leadership of the principal in School C, housewives are welcome in the school. Many involved parents have changed their conception about themselves as a housewife and/or as a mother and derived some new understanding about the way teachers teach and students (including their own children) learn. This shift in their habitus took place through working together, running into conflict, resolving differences, and building trust between and among their fellow parents, the teachers, and principals. Similarly, in School B, quite a number of teachers from the schools under study – including those who cherished a negative perception about some parents and/or had a haphazard view on the practice of parental involvement – have come to acknowledge parents as potential "resources" for them as individual teachers or "instrumental" for the school to deploy in enhancing teaching and learning. This change in the *practices* of parental involvement demonstrates a shift in the *habitus* of different stakeholders towards parents with different *capital*, for some of them have started to understand and embrace the needs, concerns, and expectations of parents.

## 2. Complexity of Parental Involvement in Different Contexts

Although the importance of parental participation in children's learning was generally recognized by school principals and teachers, both expressed some ambivalence as to the relative merits of diverting school resources to mobilize and strengthen parental involvement. Opinions also differed as to the relative importance of parental involvement in decisions that pertained to school development. For instance, in School C, the principal considered parental involvement to be the foundation of his school's development. On the other hand, the principal of School A considered parental involvement peripheral to the main functions of the school (i.e., teaching and learning). The principals

of both School A and School B perceived parent volunteering to be a good resource for school development. However, they both expressed some concern that parental involvement could cause trouble within the school and could become an additional burden for teachers dealing with an increasing workload.

Overall, findings from the case studies have revealed that the form of leadership adopted by the three participating principals was a key factor shaping the area and level of parental involvement present in the schools, which in turn influenced the level and effectiveness of home-school relationships. Each of the three principal's individual leadership approaches will now be considered in turn.

### **3. Principal Leadership and Influence on Home-School Relationships**

The logic of practice in parental involvement in each school is initially stipulated by the principal's habitus of leadership. Yet in reality, certain variations occur due to the different objective conditions of the field and the variation in the amount of capital perceived by the principals to be available to parents.

#### *School A: Alienated Home-School Relationship Under Bureaucratic Leadership*

In response to the policy guidelines of its sponsoring body and the recommendations of the Report No. 7 of the Education Commission of Hong Kong, School A set up a Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) in 1999. Under its provisions, an executive committee with two sets of members, parent members and teacher members, is formed every year. All seven functional positions (i.e., chairperson, vice-chairperson, secretary, treasurer, recreational officer, promotional officer, and liaison officer) on the PTA's Executive Committee are staffed by parent members. The teacher members are comprised of the principal, the vice principal, and four teachers, and assume a largely consultative role. There is also a working committee set up by the PTA, which is mainly staffed by parent members. However, it is only the parent members of the executive committee who meet with the teachers, and it is these members who form the bridge between the main body of school parents and the school's teaching and administration staff.

The principal of School A, Ms. A., agreed that the involvement of parents in the students' education was very important, since both home and school share responsibility for facilitating academic progress and personal growth. However, as the following comment reveals, Ms. A. had some reservations:

...Parents should be **involved in the learning of the students and be "supportive"** to the school policies, but not directly involved in the school policies or administration. (Principal A, lines 14-33, p. 1)



She believed that teachers and parents have separate roles in the education of children and that the major role of school is not so much for nurturing and social gathering of parents. She stated:

Home-school cooperation should remain at the theoretical level. Some other schools organize some social functions or parenting classes for parents. I think it is not the responsibility of the school [to organize such parent activities]. (Principal A, lines 114-118, p. 4)

Having defined parental involvement in such a way, Ms. A. devised a set of principles to delineate the functions of the school's PTA. Even though Ms. A. claimed to believe that the PTA provided parents with a channel to communicate with teachers, in her estimation, the first and foremost function of the PTA is to provide a mechanism for conveying school policies and, in doing so, ensure parental "acceptance" and "cooperation." In other words, when it came to policy-related issues, parental involvement was not perceived by Ms. A. to be a two-way channel of communication allowing parents to give feedback or their views on school policies and practices. The second principle (according to Ms. A.) is that the PTA is not an agent for promoting social relationships among parents and/or between parents and children. The third principle related to the school's administration and resource management. In her estimation, the school PTA needs to work primarily on its own, that is with minimum involvement from the school's teachers and with little recourse to school resources. She elaborated thus:

We think that the main responsibility of teachers is teaching, not organizing the parent-teacher association. The school does not encourage teachers to put in too much time in **corresponding with parents**. We welcome parents to serve as volunteers at our school, and parents could put in extra time and energy for the parent-teacher association....After all, the school is a place for education, not a venue to promote the parent-child relationship....To organize parent-child activities would only occupy teachers' time unnecessarily, and they do not help the education of the students. The first and foremost mission of the school is to educate. What the school cares most about are the results on the report cards. The development of the parent-teacher association is secondary.... (Views elaborated by the principal at the first meeting of the PTA working committee on 1 November 2002)

Based on this set of principles, parental involvement in School A was restricted to certain non-teaching, non-administrative activities and tasks which were mostly initiated, organized, and manned by the PTA. They included coordinating recreational training courses for students, organizing the commencement day for primary-one students, organizing the school's opening day,

organizing school visits to and from other schools, sending thank-you cards to teachers, establishing a communication network among parents, and organizing other social and leisure activities for parents and students. In addition, the concerns and complaints of some parents were reported during one of the PTA meetings. These included the hygiene of lunchboxes and eating utensils provided by the school's external food vendor, the release of students after school without ascertaining whether parents were available to pick them up, the deteriorating hygienic condition of the lower-form toilets, and the non-marking of student reading reports.

The teachers of School A that we interviewed also supported the viewpoint of the principal on the role of parents in school. Teachers such as Ms. W. and Ms. L., both of whom volunteered to join the PTA and became its committee members, agreed with the principal that parents should serve as volunteers to the teachers on non-teaching and non-administrative tasks only. Ms. W. thought that parents should not be involved in teaching or school governance (Ms. W, line 74, p. 2), as these areas were "professional" territory of the school and of the teachers (Ms. W, line 75, p. 2).

With the operational principle at work by the principal and teachers in School A, all the parent members of the PTA of 2002-03 were of a certain educational level and over half of them worked full-time or on a flexible schedule. This group of parent members, being self-selected as well as hand-picked, was identified with the mission and function of PTA endorsed by the school. Mrs. X., the chairperson of the PTA of School A, viewed parental involvement as a means to get to know the teachers and their scope of work. To her, this was important to promote better and greater understanding between parents and teachers (Mrs. X., line 53-56, p. 2). She considered parental involvement via PTA activities as serving a supportive role to the teaching and operation of the school (Mrs. X., lines 81-82, p. 2). She agreed with the principal that teachers who were professionally trained had specialized knowledge and skills. So, parents who were involved in the school should only be assisting the teaching staff, but not participating in teaching or administration (Mrs. X., line 165, p. 4). However, other parents voiced their frustration towards the school. As one of the PTA parent members, Mrs. Y. complained, "(The school) treats the parents as if they were cheap labor. The school hasn't even thanked [us] for all the efforts that [we] have put in (before)" (Mrs. Y., line 466-469, p. 10). Others found it difficult to communicate with the teachers, saying that "in some school activities and in other occasions, many of the teachers were absent in parent activities" (Mrs. L., line 54-56 & 67-69, p. 2).

Overall, School A maintained a clear division of work between home and school, and between the separate roles of the principal, teachers, and parents.

For example, the main role of the teachers was to teach, not to organize leisure activities, which might enhance parent-student relationships (Principal A., line 91-96, p. 3). To Principal A, teachers are “professionals” and therefore parents should comply with their requests and support their decrees (Principal A., line 16-19, p. 1). Although School A hosted a number of parent involvement initiatives and were assessed as having relatively high levels of parental involvement in 1997-1998, under Ms. A.’s bureaucratic leadership habitus, the extent of parental involvement became limited to certain parents with more family capital, and the overall home-school relationship had become alienated when we conducted our in-depth case study in 2001-2002.

*School B: Instrumental Home-School Relationship Under Utilitarian Leadership*

School B’s PTA had been established under the 1996 Education Commission’s guidelines for the formation of PTA. Of all of the schools participating in the study, School B’s PTA was the longest standing. The principal of School B outlined her school’s commitment to the Education Commission’s guidelines as follows:

...according to the Education Commission, PTA or home-school cooperation is in the required “package” for the concept of school-based management for each and every school, and therefore we needed to organize it. Especially we belong to the charity organization, which is always the first to respond to new policies, new reforms, new research, and to follow the new trends in education reform. (Principal B, lines 167-172, p. 4)

In School B, a working committee had been established to steer the work of the PTA. It consisted of seven positions; the chairperson position was elected by parent members only. Each of the other six positions (i.e., vice-chairperson, treasurer, secretary, coordinator, recreational officer, and promotional officer) was co-staffed by one parent and one teacher. At the time of the interviews, all parent committee members were mothers. Four were employed in full-time work, and three were full-time homemakers. No training had been provided to either the current committee members or to the founding committee members. As a consequence, training was conducted on an ad hoc basis, with inexperienced parent volunteers completing tasks under the tutelage of more experienced committee members. In terms of the participation of the school staff, the principal employed a rotational practice for assigning teachers to join the PTA. In addition, she required all staff members to attend PTA activities at least twice per year. This rotation system was put in place to counteract the teachers’ reluctance to assume responsibility for PTA duties.

The PTA of School B, like most PTAs in other schools, was responsible for organizing and running activities that promoted better parent-child relationships and enhanced parent-school communications, the rationale being that these activities would help to improve student learning and performance. One major operational task of the PTA was to recruit parents as volunteers to help out in PTA-organized school activities. The basic tasks performed by parent volunteers in School B included the monitoring of student discipline during the lunch hour, organizing and implementing both charity and environmental protection activities, as well as recreational activities to promote improved parent-child relationships. However, all of these tasks involved non-teaching or non-administrative work, except in the case of a small number of parents with specific craft skills (e.g., making beaded jewelry) who were invited to tutor students in specialized extracurricular courses.

Due to limited capacity (or scope of planning) many of School B's PTA activities had a numerical quota attached to them. The quota delineated how many parents were allowed to participate in each PTA activity. Thus, a raffle system was established to ensure that the selection of participants and volunteers was equitable. One of the administrative consequences of the quota system was that teachers were obliged to record the parent's volunteer hours on the students' report cards.

In assessing the relative importance of parental involvement as a school policy against the objectives of the school, Ms. B. provided the following summation:

The roles of school and parents are equally important. Lacking either side would have a bad impact on the growth of kids. (Principal B, line 17-19, p. 1)

When subsequently asked, what is the specific role of parental involvement in meeting the objectives of the school?, Ms. B. revealed the following goals:

To have more parents to come to participate in the school activities can (also) *build a positive reputation* for the school. We actually have required all parents to attend the organized parents' meetings, where there is always a theme for every meeting, and have recorded the attendance rate of every parent. As parents come to the school and see the work that the school has done, they *spread the word around and help the school to build a better reputation*. Also, with the expansion of the school and increasing demands from the Education Commission, such as a diversification of student activities, parents provide us with more human resources. (Principal B, line 165-162, p. 4, italics added)

According to Ms. B., parents should only be engaged in “low-level” activities, such as helping during lunch hour and reading stories. In line with this assertion, Ms. B. provided the following explanation:

Parents would look at things sometimes only from the perspective of the students and only look out for the interest of their own children. They tend to see things from their own rather than different perspectives. If they engage in administrative level tasks (like we would have parents be on our Director’s Board), it is probably not a good thing. Due to parents’ relatively low educational level and lack of understanding towards the school, their involvement in school administration could be detrimental. (Principal B, lines 91-98, p. 4)

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

...[parent] members of the PTA have low educational level, and this will bring inconvenience to the school. Most of these members are not capable of running a meeting. The school simply cannot let them plan activities. Many parents are also afraid of challenges. They lack the confidence and are not willing to be involved in the administrative or teaching tasks. Unlike in the West, parents [in School B] cannot lead or organize activities for the PTA (Ms. H., lines 23-35, p. 1).

As for the involved parents of School B, particularly those who were PTA members, they identified with the functions and contributions of the PTA as stated in the operation manual of School B. For example, the PTA Chairperson, Mrs. M., defined home-school cooperation as parents assisting teachers in non-teaching and non-administrative work, such as making sure that students were in order during lunch time, helping out in extracurricular activities, and in reading stories to the students (Mrs. M., lines 371-375, p. 8).

Yet, some parents did find a gap between the purpose and practice of the PTA. Mrs. C., a full-time homemaker, with an assumption that the PTA would serve as a channel for parents to exchange opinions with teachers about how their children were doing at home and in school, found no such channel provided by the school (Mrs. C., lines 60-63, p. 2). As the chairperson, Mrs. M. said she sometimes found herself in a dilemma, as she was not sure about how to handle some complaints posed to her by other parents about the behavior of some teachers and the practices of the school (Mrs. M., lines 106-119, p. 2).

In sum, parental involvement for Principal B is little more than a pragmatic means of promoting the reputation of the school. Given Ms. B.’s narrow views on the suitability of having parents with low levels of education involved in the

operation of the school, it is reasonable to characterize her instrumental leadership approach as being “utilitarian.” Most teachers share the principal’s view, and some just accept the role in PTA as one of their routine duties assigned by the principal. Parents participate in school according to the boundaries set by the principal and find it difficult to fulfill their multiple roles of supporting the schools and representing other parents in advising the school.

*School C: Mutual Trust Home-School Relationship Under Communitarian Leadership*

In 2000, School C established a Home-School Cooperation (HSC) team instead of a PTA. School C’s HSC is responsible for recruiting parent volunteers and planning and coordinating activities that promote parental involvement in the school. All of School C’s parents are encouraged to get involved in the HSC. The HSC team was begun by a group of teachers who were themselves either self-selecting or appointed by the principal based on their aptitude and willingness. Hence, consensus to the HSC mission ensured that the functions of the HSC were maintained. Moreover, with the support of a community (non-government) agency, a parent academy was established to provide training to enhance the capacity of parents who wanted to be involved in School C’s home-school operations.

At the inception of the HSC, the principal, Mr. C., affirmed that the growth and the development of a child is enriched and embraced within ecologies where family, school, and community all interact and collaborate. He explained the reason why he perceived parental involvement via home-school cooperation is valuable to the school as follows:

...the concept of home-school cooperation...is that the school is *co-owned by both parents and teachers*. Parents and school could and should become partners so as to enhance the development of the children. (Principal C, lines 16-19, p. 1, italics added)

Mr. C. asserted that parental involvement is particularly critical in the lives of younger students, but also acknowledged that due to changes in family structure in contemporary society, many students in their formative years do not receive care from both parents. Furthermore, Mr. C. maintained that in the present social circumstances it was important that the school take the initiative and seek out the support of parents in order to establish a workable partnership (Principal C, lines 232-234, p. 6). He commented thus:

There were several channels for parental involvement. First, and the most significant way, was to volunteer to help out in the school. The school required all parents who were interested in becoming volunteers in the school to undertake a volunteer training course, organized by the

Church or the community center. Parents could also join the parent academy, established by the school, to attend seminars on parental skills. Some parents chose to participate in formal and informal activities to stay involved in the school. (Principal C, lines 21-28, p. 1)

Mr. C. envisioned that in his school parental involvement would allow both parents and teachers to learn from each other, as parents would learn more about the mission of the school and the teaching methods of its teachers, while teachers would learn more about their students' backgrounds. In the following comment, Mr. C. expressed an opinion that collaboration generally was productive, as it provided students with better educational outcomes both in the home and school setting:

...[Our] school will frequently organize activities with the goal of enhancing parent-children relationships, as [we] hope that...parents will collaborate with the school to educate the children together. Through participating in these activities, both parents and teachers will have an experience in which they affect each other. This is progress that could *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. (Principal C, lines 56-61, p. 1, italics added)

Mr. C's commitment to creating a partnership between the school and the family is widely shared by his colleagues. With this understanding, most of his colleagues, expected that: "...all parents will be attracted to come to participate in school activities" (Ms. C., 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 us. (Ms. C., Ms. K., & Ms. T, lines 180-184, p. 5)

During the academic year of 2001-02, at the time of this study, the school had recruited more than 80 parents to be parent volunteers, which was a substantial increase when compared to the previous study in 1998 (Ho, 2002). Most of them had undergone training at the parent academy. One of the parent volunteers said that she "has come to know many parents, and my social network got expanded greatly." She also thought that she had learned new knowledge and skills and that her child was very proud of her and behaved especially well when she volunteered in school (Mrs. T., p. 2). In sum, the training provided to parents in School C helped them overcome deficits in cultural capital. Principal C.'s commitment to nurture parents helped not just to

enhance parents' capability in helping out the school, but also groomed parents into a community of learners. Through mutual sharing and collaboration, a trust relationship had been built between parents and teachers.

In sum, working from a communitarian mindset, the principal of School C was able to see all parents as important partners in helping students learn. Moreover, with the collaboration of a small core of parents and the one community agency actively involved with the school, the principal was able to solicit support from the rest of the school's parents in establishing a long-term, enriching, two-site learning environment. It may well be, therefore, that Mr. C.'s leadership approach to parental involvement in schools may become the model for other HSC's.

To summarize, the practice of parental involvement in a school setting is a complex phenomenon. Given different styles of school leadership and dispositions of different stakeholders, the form of parental involvement enacted or induced in different schools will vary, which in turn develops different forms of home-school relationships.

The school principal manifesting a *bureaucratic leadership* approach considered school as a formal organization with a rigid division of labor for teachers in school and for parents at home. Parents of children attending such schools tend to have an *alienated* relationship with the school. The school principal manifesting a *utilitarian leadership* approach typically viewed parents as tools for promoting the school's reputation and for fulfilling the home-school policy mandates of the central government. Parents of children attending such schools tend to establish an *instrumental* relationship with the school. Finally, the *communitarian* principals viewed the school as a small community and emphasized informal, enduring, and *trusting* relationships formed between home and school.

## Conclusions

In this paper, I have argued that parents predominately from the working class are no more passive in their involvement in their child's school than are parents of students attending schools in more affluent communities. The study found that working-class parents are as involved and sometimes even more passionate about education than are their middle-class counterparts. Deficits in different kinds of capital can be mitigated by school leadership practices. The study has observed that school principals are the major definers of the practice of parental involvement. The principal's ideology actually shapes how parental involvement is defined by the school stakeholders and what forms of home-school relationships are constructed in schools.



During the interviews with principals, it was found that the construction of principals' leadership/habitus approaches towards parental involvement needs to be contextualized within the societal context (i.e., changing of family structure and family life) and the educational context (i.e., current education reform and educational policies) of the specific sponsoring bodies which establish the school. Principals' beliefs in education to include or exclude certain parents with different amounts of capital and principals' past interactions and experiences with parents are major factors affecting each leaders' habitus, which in turn influences their strategies and practices for home-school collaboration.

This study revealed that three major types of leadership approaches (or in Bourdieu's term, habitus) towards parental involvement are present in schools: bureaucratic, utilitarian, and communitarian. Yet, principals' habitus also affects teachers' views on the value of parental involvement. School principals with bureaucratic leadership approaches tend to consider parental involvement as being peripheral to the main concerns of the school (i.e., teaching and learning). In such situations there is a rigid division of work between home or parents' work and school or teachers' work. As a result, an *alienated* relationship emerges and parents and teachers are disconnected from each other. School principals with a utilitarian leadership approach consider parents to be a tool or resource which can be utilized to support the school's educational practices and to promote the reputation of the school to the wider community. Therefore, only those parents who fulfill this concept of resource and have an appropriate knowledge base are accepted in the school's PTA. As a result, an instrumental relationship forms between the home and the school. School principals with a communitarian leadership approach believe parents to be the co-owners of the school and, in conjunction with the school, pursue a holistic, quality education for all of the school's students. Communitarian principals recruit enthusiastic teachers to coordinate parent activities and parents are made to feel welcome in the school. They have space to volunteer in school activities. In such circumstances, teachers perceive parents as partners. Teachers connect with parents and provide opportunities for parents to learn through their involvement with the school. Parents feel empowered and a bond of mutual trust is established. These three leadership approaches are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Principals' Leadership Habitus and Home-School Relationships

Leadership	Bureaucratic	Utilitarian	Communitarian
Ideologies	Principal A saw school governance and administration as the responsibility of professional educators and believed that it was inappropriate for parents to have any say in school governance issues.	Principal B agreed with the concept of greater parental involvement in the school as it provided extra human resources to run various programs. The school set up its PTA to comply with governmental policy.	Principal C believed that parents are co-owners of the school. Teachers, the family, and the school all join together united in the same goal. Parental involvement provides children with a quality, holistic education.
Views on Parents	Parents of low education level are quite troublesome, as rumor tends to spread easily among them. These easily spread false messages can have an undesirable impact on the school.	Parents can only perform supportive tasks because they are inexperienced with educational or administrative matters. Parental involvement alleviates teacher workloads.	What is crucial is that parents are sincere in their desire to volunteer in school. Working parents are capable individuals well able to provide effective assistance to schools.
Home-School Relationship	<b>Alienated</b> Schools as formal organizations characterized by a rigid division of labor for teachers in school and parents at home.	<b>Instrumental</b> School as policy tool: Parents can be utilized for supporting school education and promoting the reputation of the school to the community.	<b>Trusted</b> Schools viewed as a small society, an organization that emphasizes informal and enduring trusted relationships between home and school.

### Theoretical and Practical Implications

From a theoretical perspective, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital has been used in previous home-school collaboration studies for understanding the inequality of *practice*, which relates to parental involvement in schools (Bourdieu, 1973, 1974, 1977; Harker, 1990; Lareau, 1987, 1989, 2001). Application of Bourdieu's theory of practice (1990), however, remains rare (Lingard & Christie, 2003). Findings from this paper suggest that the concept of *habitus*

appears to be a more powerful factor than *capital* in understanding the practice of parental involvement in the different fields of home and school. In particular, the principal's habitus appears to be a major determinant of parental involvement, especially since Chinese parents generally trust schools and respect school professionals. Moreover, recent international research into school autonomy suggests that the principals' relative autonomy in making school decisions is even higher in Hong Kong than in OECD countries (Ho, 2005). As a result, leadership habitus of principals appears to be one of the most important factors affecting the extent of parental involvement in schools. This observation is consistent with the deep structure and culture of Hong Kong schools (Walker, 2004).

In sum, evidence emerging from the present study challenges the deterministic view of the home advantage of middle-class parents and the deficits of working-class parents because of their differing amounts of capital. It can be tentatively argued that principal habitus rather than parental capital provides a more powerful explanation for the extent and nature of home-school collaboration. Application of Bourdieu's concept of habitus in the research of educational leadership, which allows for contextual constraints and individual possibilities, is a promising avenue for further theoretical understanding of the work of principals in home-school collaborations.

From a practical perspective, all principals in the case studies agreed that parents are additional resources for schools which are still largely untapped, especially in Asian societies. Yet differences in the principal's leadership habitus result in the formation of different strategies for tapping into this parental resource. The communitarian leadership approach appears to have the most inclusive habitus, as it recognizes that parents, regardless of their social background, can be nurtured and mobilized for the benefit of the students' education. These findings are consistent with some current case study and large scale survey studies in the United States (Griffith, 2001; Sanders & Harvey, 2002), which argued that principals' actions and behaviors as school leaders are major determinants that linked to facilitating factors in promoting school-community collaboration and higher levels of parental involvement.

Yet it is unrealistic to expect educators to assume a communitarian leadership role in working with parents without providing them with the necessary time and resources. They need the extra time and resources in order to work on the construction, implementation, and ongoing engagement of the HSC/PTA and to access information and community resources for parents. This requires recognition that being a professional teacher (or principal) no longer simply relates to teaching duties. It also includes working with families and communities. As such, this broadening of roles should be an integral element

or credentialing requirement in the professional competencies framework (ACTEQ, 2006).

The challenge for current principal leadership training programs is that communitarian leadership is more of a shared construct than a hierarchical or bureaucratic one. As Walker (2004) suggested, shared leadership is difficult, given the established hierarchical leadership structure within traditional Hong Kong schools. However, such a change is not impossible, based on the evidence collected in the present study. Certainly, it is unfair to place the responsibility for home-school collaboration on principals and teachers without giving them training to develop skills in working with families. Preservice education is one way to help aspiring principals to reflect on their own leadership habitus and to understand their new role of developing home-school collaboration. As Lingard and Christie (2003) noted, principals need to reflect on their own practices and on how to harness their untapped resources of parental capital regardless of parental social background. Also, time is required for parents and teachers to gain experience, reflect on, and make contributions to the new emergent communitarian approach to leadership habitus and practice.

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