

Parental engagement in schools to support gifted learners: the current development in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Home-school cooperation has been advocated in Hong Kong for decades. The engagement of parents in schools to support the gifted learners, however, is still in its infancy in Hong Kong even though the influences of parenting and family environment on supporting the gifted students have been studied. A tertiary-wide survey about how schools engage parents in school so as to support the gifted learners has been conducted by the Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education in 2011-2012. The paper examines the extent of parental engagement in schools to support the gifted across 6 domains in Hong Kong. They include various forms of parent education, channels and substances of home-school communication, opportunities of volunteering, involvement of parents in students' learning, engagement of parents in school-wide decision making related to gifted education as well as collaboration with the community and parents. Moreover, the influential factors of the parental engagement such as types of schools and levels of schooling and school's experience in gifted education are illustrated in accordance with the statistical analysis. Implications including insights and practical measures of engaging parents in schools to support the gifted are further discussed.

Keywords: parental engagement, home-school cooperation, support the gifted,
Hong Kong

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INTRODUCTION

Home-school cooperation has been advocated in Hong Kong for decades. The current development of engaging parents in schools to support the gifted learners, however, is still in its infancy in Hong Kong even though the influences of parenting and family environment on supporting the gifted students have been studied. In order to explore the current situation of this topic, a tertiary-wide survey about how schools engage parents in school so as to support the gifted learners was conducted by the Hong Kong Academy for Gifted Education in March 2012. In addition to obtaining an account of the current development, the influential factors of the parental engagement such as types of schools, levels of schooling and school's experience in gifted education are studied in accordance with a statistical analysis. Implications including insights and practical measures of engaging parents in schools to support the gifted are further discussed.

PROBLEM

Extensive researches over the past decades show a strong relationship between parental influence on learning motivation and academic performance of gifted students (O'Neill, 1978; Garn, Matthews and Jolly, 2010; Phillipson, 2010; Chan, 2005). It is also found that the extent of parental engagement in schools play an important role in their children's academic performance (Clemons, 2005; Morrison, 2009; Harris and Goodall, 2007; Sinay, Zheng and Presley, 2009). Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) pinpoint that this positive correlation is obvious in the primary age range in particular across all ethnic groups and social classes. In view of the cultural context of Hong Kong, Phillipson and Phillipson (2007) find that the parental engagement in school has a positive impact on their children's academic standard, particularly in language.

Gifted education (GE) has been developed in Hong Kong for more than two decades. A guideline that consists of an implementation model was published by the Education Bureau for all schools in Hong Kong (EDB, 2000). It mainly focuses on identification of gifted learners and student programme in the Three-tier Model. The

notion of parental engagement in schools to support the gifted is not mentioned at all. Viewing the positive impact of parent engagement in schools on their gifted children's performance, it is necessary to conduct a baseline study for understanding how well parents are engaged in schools to support their gifted children. It is important to help school administrators to understand how well parents are engaged in schools in general. It also facilitates the policy makers to have an overview of the development and hence further develop a comprehensive GE policy.

RESEARCH QUESTION

To what extent are parents engaged in schools to support their gifted child(ren)?

METHOD

A quantitative research was designed. The Parental Engagement in School to Support the Gifted Questionnaire (PESSGQ) was developed with reference to a number of leading literatures in the field, including NAGC's Quality Standards for Parental Engagement (NAGC, 2007) and the works of Harris and Goodall (2007). Comment from a local research expert in this field was obtained before it was tried out with a focus group. The questionnaire was then revised according to their feedback. The finalised PESSGQ was sent to all primary and secondary schools in Hong Kong. A total of 127 school responded (successful response rate at 10.1%) in March 2012. The reliability of the items across the 34 items is 0.98 (Cronbach's alpha to 2 d.p.)

The questionnaire contains 34 items across 6 strands, including 6 items in parenting (various forms of parent education), 5 items in communicating (channels and substances of home-school communication), 6 items in volunteering (opportunities of volunteering in schools), 5 items in students' learning (involvement of parents in students' learning), 6 items in decision-making (engagement of parents in school-wide GE-related decision making) and 6 items in collaborating with the community and parents. For each item, the school representatives reflected their school's development in accordance with 5 levels of practice: 1 (no: not possible now); 2 (no: could do it); 3 (yes: could improve); 4(yes: okay); or 5 (yes: excellent). Moreover, school representatives also needed to provide information of the school type, level of schooling and school's number of year of GE experience.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. Responses of the 127 school representatives about engaging parents in their schools to support their gifted child(ren)

Levels of practice:

1: No (Not possible now); 2 No (Could do it); 3: Yes (Could improve); 4: Yes (okay); 5: Yes (Excellent)

N= 127; Figure shown in %

Strand 1: Parenting

Level of practice	No	Yes	1	2	3	4	5
1. Provide parents with GE's parenting information	59.1	40.9	12.6	46.5	26.8	13.4	0.8
2. Organise parent education programmes about GE	71.7 ^a	27.6 ^a	27.6	44.1	17.3	8.7	1.6
3. Set up a parent support group for parents of gifted children	83.5	16.5	30.7	52.8	11.8	4.7	0
4. A contact person within the school for gifted parenting	63.8	36.2	17.3	46.5	15.7	15.7	4.7
5. Connect with and survey parents of gifted children for their needs	78.0	22.0	18.9	59.1	13.4	7.1	1.6
6. Provide ample support (e.g. venue, resource room) for parents	82.7	17.3	29.9	52.8	6.3	10.2	0.8

Remarks: a. 0.8% no response

Strand 2: Communicating

Level of practice	No	Yes	1	2	3	4	5
7. School-home two-way communication with many channels	41.7	58.3	10.2	31.5	18.1	32.3	7.9
8. Survey parents of gifted children on a regular basis for planning	80.3	19.7	33.9	46.5	11.0	7.9	0.8
9. A school-wide system for parents of gifted children to talk to staff	78.0	22.0	26.8	51.2	12.6	7.9	1.6
10. Enquire parents of gifted children about needs and expectations.	68.5	31.5	7.1	61.4	16.5	13.4	1.6
11. Acknowledge and overcome any barriers that arise in comm.	59.8 ^b	39.3 ^b	12.6	47.2	18.9	17.3	3.1

Remarks: b. 0.8% no response

Strand 3: Volunteering

Level of practice	No	Yes	1	2	3	4	5
12. Opportunities for parents to support GE at school	65.3 ^c	33.8 ^c	17.3	48.0	16.5	15.7	1.6
13. Suggestions for staff on how to utilise parental expertise in GE	77.2	22.8	18.9	58.3	8.7	13.4	0.8
14. Support staff to use parent volunteers on a regular basis	53.5 ^d	45.7 ^d	15.7	37.8	13.4	20.5	11.8
15. Survey parents at the beginning of each school year for their expertise, skills & availability	56.7 ^e	42.5 ^e	8.7	48.0	18.1	16.5	7.9
16. A safe and efficient system for training and managing p. volunteers	67.7 ^f	31.4 ^f	26.8	40.9	17.3	10.2	3.9
17. Acknowledge parent volunteers' efforts on GE to the school	76.4 ^g	22.8 ^g	20.5	55.9	7.9	10.2	4.7

Remarks: c, d, e, f, g. 0.8% no response

Strand 4: Students' learning

Level of practice	No	Yes	1	2	3	4	5
18. Contact parents promptly for children's concerns in school, work out solutions together	38.6	61.4	7.9	30.7	24.4	26.0	11.0
19. Work with parents to build a bank of resources geared to gifted children's autonomous learning	78.7	21.3	26.8	52.0	14.2	6.3	0.8
20. Involve parents of gifted children in the learning progress/ strategies of their children	72.4	27.6	27.6	44.9	17.3	8.7	1.6
21. Contact parents of gifted children regularly for children's learning progress & both expectations	69.3	30.7	18.9	50.4	22.0	7.1	1.6
22. Provide staff members training, resources & support on home learning	62.2	37.8	13.4	48.8	25.2	9.4	3.1

Strand 5: Decision making

Level of practice	No	Yes	1	2	3	4	5
23. Inform parents with school's GE-related decisions	62.2	37.8	12.6	49.6	22.8	11.0	3.9
24. Include parent rep. in comm. to share parents' ideas on GE	85.8 ^h	13.4 ^h	36.2	49.6	5.5	5.5	2.4
25. Engage parents in GE-related decision-making	85.0 ⁱ	14.2 ⁱ	35.4	49.6	7.1	6.3	0.8
26. Welcome and consider parents' GE suggestions	74.8	25.2	16.5	58.3	12.6	10.2	2.4
27. Establish GE policies at school and inform all parents	73.2	26.8	13.4	59.8	16.5	5.5	4.7
28. Set up a group/agenda item in PTA for parental engagement in school's GE	84.3 ^j	14.9 ^j	26.8	57.5	11.0	3.1	0.8

Remarks: h, i, j. 0.8% no response

Strand 6: Collaborating with the community

Level of practice	No	Yes	1	2	3	4	5
29. Inform parents of GE-related opportunities in the community	59.8	40.2	11.8	48.0	20.5	14.2	5.5
30. Provide parents with information & access to self-help resources	56.7	43.2	10.2	46.5	22.8	17.3	3.1
31. Allow school facilities to be used for GE-related community act.	75.6	24.4	22.0	53.5	9.4	14.2	0.8
32. Provide community service for the gifted	58.3	41.7	10.2	48.0	21.3	15.7	4.7
33. Co-organise programmes for gifted students and their parents with community organisations	71.7	28.3	18.9	52.8	15.7	8.7	3.9
34. Nominate students for gifted programmes in the community	37.8	62.2	4.7	33.1	17.3	26.0	18.9

Table 1 above shows the summarised responses of the 127 school representatives.

The 127 schools have negative responses to 31 out of 34 items in the questionnaire. 17 of the 31 items even carry more than 70% negatives. These provide a clear picture that the parental engagement in schools to support their gifted children is very limited in Hong Kong in general. All strands contain negative responses in different ways. The responses at Strand 5 (decision making) are particularly negative. Apart from the item 23 (inform parents of school's GE-related policy) that carries 62.2% negative, all other 5 items (items 24-28) carries 73.2% to 85.8% negatives. Parents are rarely involved and engaged in consultation and formulation of GE-related policy at different levels.

Only items 7, 18 and 34 records positive responses. Item 7 is a two-way communication between school and home in a range of communication ways. It is believed that the communication channels are well-built in the school systems for a long history, including phone or/ and email contact, reporting system and the learning diary. Both informal and formal contact and reporting systems are well-established in the Hong Kong schools. Item 18 is contacting parents promptly for children's concerns in schools and working out solution together. The nature of the concerns is yet to explore. Item 34 is nominating students to participate in gifted programmes offered in the community. The first two items indicate the engagement of parents for addressing immediate issues aroused by the gifted students while the third one refers to a peripheral measure in response to the needs of the gifted students.

Schools also indicated their level of schooling (primary or secondary or combined), school type (government, aided, direct subsidy scheme, independent) and number of year of experience in school-based GE development. By using Pearson Chi-squared Test, correlation between each of the 34 items and the three school background information is studied. By spotting out the item with $p < 0.05$ in the test, the following patterns are identified.

To begin with, level of schools has a significant impact on 10 items. The secondary schools show more negatively on the following items:

Item 2. Organise parent education programme (Strand 1: parenting)

Item 5. Connect with and survey parents about their needs (Strand 1: parenting)

Item 9. Gifted children and parents talk to staff (Strand 2: communicating)

Item 10. Enquire parents' expectations and gifted students' needs

- (Strand 2: communicating)*
- Item 12 Opportunities for parents to support GE at schools*
(Strand 3: volunteering)
- Item 13 Suggestions for staff to use parents' expertise in GE*
(Strand 3: volunteering)
- Item 20 Involve parents in learning process/ strategies*
(Strand 4: students' learning)
- Item 24 Parent representative in committees to share GE*
(Strand 5: decision making)
- Item 30 Provide parents of gifted children with information and access to self-help resources (Strand 6: collaborating with community)*
- Item 33 Co-organise programmes for gifted students and their parents with community organisations (Strand 6: collaborating with community)*

Concerning the school type, it is less correlated to the extent of parental engagement in the school to support their gifted children. The most obvious one identified in Pearson Chi-squared Test is item 12. Parents are seldom provided opportunities to support GE at school (Strand 3: volunteering) in the government and aided schools.

The Pearson Chi-squared Test also shows a strong correlation between the school's GE experience and 19 survey items. A tipping point is identified when the data shows a sharp increase in the frequency or a pointed turning from negative to positive. Table 2 shows the extent of parental engagement with reference to the number of years of the schools' GE experience. It is obviously noted that the degree of complexity of the task increases with the school's GE experience. In the first 2 years of GE development, parents are engaged in a simple way where easily accessible resources are available and schools only need to designate a contact person, provide parents of gifted children with information and access to self-help resources, and nominate gifted students to off-site gifted programmes. These measures do not involve a lot of planning and administrative support. A lot more options of parental engagement are found in schools with 6-10 years of GE experience. Not only the number of elements of parental engagement boosts up, but also the degree of complexity increases and expands. Schools not just survey parents' expertise, skills and availability in the first 3-5 years, at the same time, they make suggestion for staff to use parents' expertise in GE and provide adequate opportunities for parents to support GE in school after the 6th year. More parental engagement in supporting students' learning is found. Schools are more likely to work with parents to build up the resource bank for gifted children's autonomous learning and to provide staff with

training and resources on supporting home learning. It is also the period of time that schools start to engage parents in GE-related decision making by providing them with more information on school's GE-related decisions.

Table 2. The extent of parental engagement in schools to support their gifted children in accordance with the number of years of the schools' GE experience.

Tippling point for more positive response: 1-2 years	
Strand 1: Parenting	4. establish a contact person
Strand 6: Collaborating with community	30. provide parents of gifted children with information and access to self-help resources
	34. nominate students to participate in gifted programmes offered in the community
Tippling point for more positive response: 3-5 years	
Strand 3: Volunteering	15. survey parents at the beginning of each school year for their expertise, skills & availability
Strand 4: Students' learning	20. involve parents in learning process/ strategies
	21. contact parents of gifted children regularly for children's learning progress & both expectations
Tippling point for more positive response: 6-10 years	
Strand 1: Parenting	1. provide parenting information for parents
	2. organise parent education programme
Strand 2: Communicating	10. enquire parents' expectations and gifted students' needs
Strand 3: Volunteering	12. opportunities for parents to support GE at school
	13. suggestions for staff to use parents' expertise in GE
Strand 4: Students' learning	19. work with parents to build a bank of resources geared to gifted children's autonomous learning
	22. provide staff members training, resources & support on supporting home learning
Strand 5: Decision making	23. provide clear information for parents of gifted children on school's GE-related decisions
Strand 6: Collaborating with community	29. inform parents of gifted children of GE-related opportunities in the community
	33. co-organise programmes for gifted students and their parents with community organisations
Tippling point for more positive response: more than 10 years	
Strand 1: Parenting	6. provide ample assistance/ support for parenting, e.g. venue, resource room

Strand 5: Decision making	28. set up a group/agenda item in PTA to monitor levels of parental engagement in GE in school
Strand 6: Collaborating with community	31. allow school facilities and venues to be used for community activities that link to GE

Amongst the schools with more than 10 years of GE experience, higher level of parental engagement is found. In Strand 1 (parenting), schools not only establish a contact person and organise parent education programme, meanwhile, they provide ample support for parenting such as providing a resource room for parents for GE. They also start to scaffold GE-related decision making by setting up a group or agenda item in PTA to monitor levels of parental engagement in GE in their schools. Concerning Strand 6 (collaborating with the community), the schools not only refer gifted students to off-site support, but also they allow school facilities and venues to be used for GE-related community activities.

CONCLUSION

The development of parental engagement in schools to support their gifted children is still at the embryonic stage in Hong Kong. Schools reflect most elements of parental engagement across the six aspects negatively. Particularly, school's GE decision making plays a more dominant role in affecting the extent of parental engagement. Moreover, interestingly, it is found that the development of parental engagement in secondary schools is slower than that in primary ones in general. It is thus worthwhile to further investigate the underlying reasons in this aspect. As a whole, nevertheless, the extent and complexity of engaging parents in schools to support their gifted children grow with the GE experience of the schools.

IMPLICATIONS

With increasing importance of developing territory-wide parental engagement, research on parental engagement has been an important topic for exploration and is widely carried out in the world. To begin with, extension of this study may enrich the understanding of the current development of parental engagement in school to support their gifted children in Hong Kong. Three further studies could be conducted. First, focus group interview with school representatives can be arranged and the reasons for the low parental engagement can be explored. This may help explore teachers' and schools' concerns of engaging parents in schools to support the gifted learners. Second, this study uses school's self-reflection as a baseline of data source. A certain

degree of subjectivity is inevitable. However, the same questionnaire could have been distributed to parent representatives for triangulation and comparison in order to obtain a clearer picture.

Nevertheless, this tertiary-wide study is a pioneer study in Hong Kong to understand how well parents are engaged in schools to support the gifted children. It provides a general picture of Hong Kong schools in the development of parental engagement for GE. Even if primary schools and GE-experienced schools tend to engage parents more in schools to support the gifted, other influential factors should be explored in order to provide more effective ways to support the gifted. A set of standards and guidelines can then be developed for schools' reference.

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