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Author(s)	Lee Kong Wee and Toh Kok Aun
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PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN NEIGHBOURHOOD SECONDARY SCHOOL

Lee Kong Wee and Assoc. Prof Toh Kok Aun

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Aims of Study

In 1998, Mr Goh Chok Tong, the then Singapore Prime Minister said, “*With the partnership of parents, there is hope that we will be able to give our young the education they deserve*” (MOE, 1998: 2). This statement underscores the importance of partnership between the school and parents.

Hence it is very appropriate that the aims of this study were to:

1. study the details and nature of parental involvement in a neighbourhood secondary school in Singapore.
2. recommend ways to promote greater parental involvement in the school.

1.2 COMPASS

The role of parents in the Singapore education system has been increasingly recognised by the Ministry of Education. In December 1998, COMPASS (Community and Parents in Support of Schools), an Advisory Council, was set up by the Ministry of Education. COMPASS will advise the Ministry on ways in which the collaboration among school, home and the community could be strengthened.

COMPASS is a forum where the best practices on the collaborative efforts can be shared and promoted. It will encourage parents and the community to work together in schools to help children learn better.

Before COMPASS was formed, there were only 60 Parent-Teacher Associations (PTAs) or Parent Support Groups (PSGs) in some 300 schools in Singapore. In 2001, the number shot up to 156. By 2002, there were 220 parents’ groups formed. However, in 2003 there were 272 groups – about three out of four schools had such a set-up (The Straits Times, 10 Mar 2003 and 12 July 2003).

1.3 School Excellence Model (SEM)

The Ministry of Education (MOE) has developed the School Excellence Model (SEM) as a tool to guide schools to review their overall performance and challenge some of their well-established norms” (MOE, 2000b).

Sub-Criterion 8.1 of the SEM is on *Benefits of Partnership* – it focuses on what the school is achieving in relation to its partners. One of the areas to address is on the benefits parents derived from their partnership with the school. In other words, schools are being appraised by their partnership with parents.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 United Kingdom

In the United Kingdom, the most important turning point in the thinking about the role of parents in education was the publication of the Plowden Report in 1967 (Hewison in Cullingford, 1985). Bridget Plowden was the chair of the Central Advisory Council which produced the two-volume Plowden Report (HMSO, 1967).

Lady Plowden described parents as '*an untapped source of strength to the school*' (Wolfendale, 1989: Forward). This was a welcome shift in attitude towards parental involvement in schools.

2.2 Singapore

2.2.1 *Exclusion Model*

Since independence in 1965, the most dominant model practised in Singapore is that of *exclusion* (Sharpe, 1993). The convention is that most parents expect teachers to teach and most teachers expect to contact parents only when there are discipline problems or poor performance in examinations.

2.2.2 COMPASS

The formation of COMPASS in 1998 (as previously mentioned) marked a major turning point in the thinking of parental involvement in Singapore. It has encouraged the increase in the numbers of parent support groups (PSGs) in Singapore.

2.2.3 PSGs

PSGs comprise parents who meet in school to discuss with the school's key personnel on educational concerns and improvement on school programmes. The PSG provides a network of support amongst the school, families and the community. The PSG and the school can also collaborate in a symbiotic relationship towards a common vision to improve the school (MOE, 1998).

2.2.4 Benefits of Parental Involvement

Singapore's MOE identifies the following benefits of parental involvement:

- In working closely with the school, parents are able to identify with the school system.
- Teachers are encouraged when they are able to build good rapport with parents.
- With their parents working actively with teachers, students are better motivated to achieve.
- Parental involvement in co-curricular activities can help to enhance the common spaces in schools. Parents of different ethnic backgrounds can help to promote greater understanding of differences in different ethnic groups (MOE, 1998).

2.3 Epstein's Model

Joyce Epstein, the co-director of the Centre on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning at Johns Hopkins University, USA, has developed the model: Epstein's Six Types of Involvement. The model can be summarised in the following table:

Type	Description
1. PARENTING	Assist families with parenting and child-rearing skills, understanding child and adolescent development, and setting home conditions that support children as students at each stage and grade level. Assist school in understanding families.
2. COMMUNICATING	Communicate with families about school programmes and student progress through effective school-to-home and home-to-school communications.
3. VOLUNTEERING	Improving recruitment, training, work, and schedules to involve families as volunteers and audiences at schools or in other locations to support students and school programmes.
4. LEARNING AT HOME	Involve families with their children in learning activities at home, including homework and other curriculum-related activities and decisions.
5. DECISION MAKING	Include families as participants in school decisions, governance, and advocacy through PTA/PTO, school councils, committees, action teams and other parent organisations.
6. COLLABORATING WITH THE COMMUNITY	Co-ordinate community resources and services for students, families, and the school with businesses, agencies, and other groups, and provide services to the community.

Table 1: Epstein's Six Types of Involvement (Epstein, et al., 2002: 165)

Epstein's Model was also described by Khong as a

“comprehensive and co-ordinated framework for developing school, family and community partnerships sharing the responsibility for children's learning” (Khong, in Tan, J. et al., 2001: 171).

Moreover the Singapore's Ministry of Education (MOE) also endorses the use of the Epstein's Model (MOE, 1998: 5, 26).

3 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

The school involved in the study is a neighbourhood secondary school. The school conducts parent-teacher meetings four times a year – at the end of each term. The main purpose of these meetings is to let the parents have the opportunity to discuss with teachers about their children's performance after the two Common Tests and two Semestral Examinations. However, the main activity of parental involvement in the school occurs within the Parent Support Group (PSG).

3.2 Research Method

The case study method was used. It was effective for a study which had a limited time scale like this research study which was only allowed about nine months to complete. It allowed the researcher to study the research question in some depth. It also enabled a study of the various interactive processes in parental involvement in schools to be carried effectively.

3.3 Piloting

Three sets of interview questionnaires were being designed. They were:

- (i) Interview with the Principal, teacher in-charge of PSG and the Chairman of Park View Parent's Association (PVPA)
- (ii) Interview with parents in the PSG
- (iii) Interview with parents not involved in the PSG

Pilot questionnaires were sent to a colleague of mine and two personal friends – all of them have vast experiences in carrying out research work. They gave very good suggestions on how to improve the quality of the questionnaires. The final versions of the questionnaires are attached as Appendix.

3.4 Interviewees

The list of 8 interviewees were:

- Mr Robin Koh, Chairman of Park View Primary School Parents' Association (PVPA)
- the school principal
- teacher in-charge of PSG
- two parents in PSG
- three parents not in PSG

3.5 Quality of Data

A lot of rich data could be gleaned out of the interviews. The interviewees spoke after in-depth reflection of their experiences in parental involvement in schools.

There was a good presentation of data from the three groups of interviewees: the administrators (Principal and teacher in-charge of PSG), two members of PSG and three non-members. The different groups offered their perspectives from three different angles providing the researcher with a means to cross-check and verify the veracity of the statements made. These different perspectives injected tremendous amount richness in the qualitative data gathered.

The efforts of PVPA serves as a benchmark for all PSGs. Park View Primary School was one of the three outstanding recipients of the PARTNERS Award in 2003 (Contact, January 2003).

4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The data from the interviews could be categorised mainly within the framework of Epstein's Six Types of Involvement. Epstein's model was used as it was the most comprehensive model (see Section 2.6.7) The six types of involvement are as follows:

- (i) Parenting
- (ii) Communicating
- (iii) Volunteering
- (iv) Learning at home
- (v) Decision making
- (vi) Collaborating with the community (Epstein et al., 2002: 165).

The other categories are:

- (vii) Obstacles Preventing Involvement with PSG
- (viii) Benefits of Parental Involvement

- (ix) Continuity of PSG

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

Upon thorough observation of the research findings, in terms of Epstein's model, the strengths of parental involvement in the school were in the areas of *communication* and *learning at home*. The weaknesses were in the areas of *parenting*, *decision making*, *volunteering* and *collaboration with the community*.

5.2 Other Categories

5.2.1 *Obstacles preventing involvement with PSG*

The obstacles are:

- Time constraint faced by parents
- Parents feel that they lack certain expertise in order to contribute effectively.

5.2.2 *Benefits of parental involvement*

The benefits are:

- Children of parents who are involved tend to do better in school.
- One parent aptly pointed out that the school has helped her two children to develop into well-rounded and confident individuals

5.2.3 *Continuity of PSG*

Once the members of PSG have their children graduated from the school, they are unlikely to continue to serve in the PSG. There is a need to recruit new parents each year

5.3 Ways to Promote Greater Parental Involvement

5.3.1 *Parent Support Group (PSG)*

To increase the membership of the PSG, the following ways could be adopted:

- Current PSG members should work towards attaining the critical mass of about thirty committed members. At the various school functions like the Speech Day, Open House and Sports Day, PSG members could approach other parents and encourage them to become members of PSG.
- There should be a flexible time schedule for the PSG members to meet. This should be done outside office hours and during the weekends if possible.

5.3.2 Parent-Teacher Meetings

The parent-teacher meeting is a good opportunity to reach out to a great number of parents. During the meetings, the following measures could be adopted:

- There should be a presentation on the school's vision, mission and policy.
- The school should suggest ways on how parents could collaborate with the school to ensure that the students have the best education they deserve.
- The school could suggest ways of how parents could contribute to the improvement of various school programmes.
- A survey could be conducted during the meetings. The survey could study what areas parents could help, the expertise of parents and barriers to parental involvement.

5.3.3 Micro Level

The one-to-one meeting of parent and teachers should be made more meaningful. Teachers should be equipped with counselling and communication skills to enable them to interact effectively with parents.

Technology should be further utilised to get parents to communicate with teachers and school administrators. As most households in Singapore have Internet access, the Internet could be better used in terms of creating an interactive school website, discussion forums and communication by emails

5.4 Conclusion

The case study school, with its relatively short history of five years, has a good head start in getting parents to be involved with the school's programmes. However, much more could be done to enable the school to tap into the potential vast resource of parents for the benefits of the students, the school and the community. The key in the continuing success of parental involvement lies in the hands of the teacher in-charge of the PSG and the principal as they are the people directly involved in determining the policies and implementing the various programmes involving parents. With this collaboration between school and home, the school would be able to scale greater heights.

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APPENDIX

Interview with Principal /Teacher i/c of Parent Support Group

1. What are the purposes of the parent support groups?
2. What are the problems facing parent support groups in schools? How could these problems be addressed?
3. What are the future directions that can be taken by MOE or schools to increase parental involvement?
4. How do you get parents to be involved with the school's programmes?
5. What are the areas of involvement?
6. What are the means of communication between the school and parents?
7. What are the benefits of the partnership of parents with the school?

INTERVIEW WITH PARENTS IN PARENT SUPPORT GROUP (PSG)

1. What are the purposes of the parent support group (PSG)?
2. How did you get involved with PSG?
3. Why are you involved in PSG?
4. How do you benefit from your involvement in PSG?
5. How does the school benefit from your involvement in PSG?
6. What is/are your area(s) of involvement in PSG?
7. How to promote greater parental involvement in the school?
8. How to promote better communication between the school and parents?

INTERVIEW WITH PARENTS NOT INVOLVED WITH PARENT SUPPORT GROUP (PSG)

1. From the few meetings you have with teachers after your child's examination, what benefits you could derive from the meetings?
2. What are the benefits of a strong partnership between parents and the school?
3. How to promote greater collaboration between parents and the school?
4. How can communication between parents and the school be improved?
5. What are the areas you think parents can be involved with the school's parent support group (PSG)?
6. What keep you from being involved with the PSG?
7. If you are able to join the PSG, in which you think area(s) you can be involved with?