EVALUATING EDUCATIONAL PROBLEMS, BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS AND INTERVENTION STRATEGIES IN SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN HONG KONG: VIEWS FROM STUDENTS, PARENTS AND TEACHERS

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This paper examines the prevalence of common educational and behavioural problems among secondary school students in Hong Kong and the effectiveness of common intervention strategies for dealing with them. Approximately 3000 students, 2300 parents and 600 teachers were sampled to complete a specifically-designed questionnaire. The results showed that all three parties acknowledged that student lack of motivation and problems with curriculum were the most serious educational problems and that making noise/disturbance in class was the most serious behavioural problem in schools. They also agreed that establishing a fair discipline system and asking non-motivated students to transfer to vocational schools were effective solutions for dealing with student destructive behaviours. Students’ perspectives overlapped much with those of their parents, but seldom with those of their teachers. Creation of greater and more flexible vocational and remedial classes is recommended and more communication between teachers, students and parents is needed.

Key words: behavioural problems, dropout, intervention strategies

Preventing school failure and school dropout have been a major challenge for educators in 20th century. Dislike of school, poor grades, poor study skills, emotional or behavioural difficulties are among the most common causes for school failure and school dropout (Barro & Kolstad, 1987; Combs & Cooley, 1968). Keeping these students at school could intensify their frustrations and intimidate other students and teachers, but letting these students drop out of school may bring about serious financial costs to them in the future. According to the US Bureau of the Census for 1990 (Report No. 174), for instance, 25-to-34-old men who had dropped out of high school earned 35% less than those who had earned high school diplomas. 25-to-34-old women who had dropped out of high school earned 40% less than those who had earned high school diplomas. To prevent school failures, educators around the world came up with various recommendations. Among them, Gruskin, Cambell and Paulu (1987) proposed six intervention strategies for helping academically at-risk students to achieve school success, which include: intervening early to enable students to develop competence and confidence in learning, creating a positive school climate to let...
students feel valued, trusted and encouraged, setting up high but realistic expectations for students' attendance, academics, and behaviour at school, selecting and developing strong teachers who are sensitive to needs of at-risk students and are able to work with them dynamically, providing a broad range of instructional programs to accommodate students with diverse needs, and initiating collaborative efforts to develop and administer dropout prevention programs involving schools, communities, churches, and families. Others called for creation of more innovative and relevant vocational education programs for non-motivated students as well as use of alternative curricula at school (Boyer-Stephen, 1991; Edison-Swift & Novak, 1981). All such efforts attempt to improve the at-risk students' academic skills, problem-solving and decision-making skills, employability skills so that they could achieve successes in life and enhance their self-esteem.

In Hong Kong, nine years compulsory education was first introduced in late 1970s and since then, it has also transferred into classrooms many unruly and delinquent behaviours of young people as well. According to the Hong Kong Education Commission Report No. 4 (1990), the incidents of unruly behaviours in primary and secondary schools increased steadily from 1980 to 1989. In primary schools, the total number of unruly incidents in 1988-89 was 12.1% more than that in 1986-87; the total number of criminal cases recorded in primary schools in 1989 also doubled that in 1980. In secondary schools, the total number of unruly incidents in 1988-89 increased 16% over those reported in 1986-87. The total number of incidents of habitual lateness, habitual truancy, and failure to hand in assignments/bring text books to class increased 20% over those reported in 1986-87, the total number of delinquent incidents in 1988-89 increased 14% over those reported in 1986-87.

Educators in Hong Kong began to attend to the undesirable consequences of compulsory education after the mid-eighties (Cheng & Wong, 1987; Law 1990; Wong & Chung, 1988). Local educators have sought to increase both vocational education in school curricula and counselling in student services. In recent years, a whole school approach to guidance was recommended for all schools in Hong Kong, seeking to make schools a more caring and encouraging environment for students to let them feel more valued, respected (Hong Kong Education Commission, 1990). It was also recommended that in secondary school one to three forms1, pre-vocational schools follow a curriculum which drew about 40% of its content from commercial, practical and technical sectors and that subject integration and school-based curriculum project scheme be formed in secondary schools to facilitate vocational education. Some scholars, having studied dropouts at secondary schools, also called for the enhancement of vocational education programs for students under age 15 (Lo, 1990).

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1 In Hong Kong education system, a secondary school usually has seven forms (grade levels). Students will be able to graduate from a secondary school if they can complete form five (fifth grade) of education. For those students who wish to enter forms six and seven, they will need to take a special examination and if they pass it, they will be able to take two years of matriculation courses in preparation of the university entrance examination.
Though school failure and students' behavioural problems have been studied and tackled from a variety of perspectives, relatively little has been done to examine the gaps in understanding and resolving school failure among students, parents and teachers. Only a sprinkling of studies have looked at how the three perspectives shared or differed from each other. Thus conceived, the present authors conducted a survey to examine the major educational and behavioural problems in Hong Kong secondary schools and the effectiveness of appropriate intervention strategies, with three major goals in mind: (a) to examine the prevalence of educational and behavioural problems as perceived by teachers, parents and students themselves; (b) to assess the effectiveness of the appropriate intervention strategies for dealing with students’ behavioural and dropout problems; (c) to contribute to cross-cultural studies on prevention of school failures.

**Method**

**Participants:**

A total of 3056 students, along with 2039 parents and 632 teachers, from 19 secondary schools in Hong Kong participated in the present study. One school was sampled from each school district in Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territory respectively. For the sampled students, 926 (30.3%) came from form one classes, 709 (23.2%) came from form two classes, 646 came (21.1%) from form three classes, 764 (25%) came from form four classes.

For the sampled teachers, 27 (4.3%) were school principals or deputy school principals, 75 (11.9%) were senior graduate teachers, 302 (47.8%) were graduate teachers, 59 (9.3%) were senior non-graduate teachers, 144 (22.8%) were certificate teachers. For the sampled parents, the majority of them came from working families.

**Material:**

A questionnaire was specifically designed for this study, which has four general questions regarding the prevalence and management of behavioural problems among junior high school students in Hong Kong. Within each question, six to eight phrases are given covering different spectrums of responses to the question. To answer each question, respondents were required to rank from the given list of phrases the order of seriousness and effectiveness suggested by the phrases. The ranking format is in descending order (e.g., 1=most serious/effective, 6=least serious/effective). Specifically, the first question asks respondents to rank in level of seriousness the current problems facing junior secondary schools in Hong Kong, the second question asks respondents to rank in level of seriousness the common behavioural problems among students, the third question asks respondents to rank in level of effectiveness some commonly recommended policies for improving school successes, and the fourth question asks respondents to rank in level of appropriateness some commonly recommended policies to deal with non-motivated students at school.

To safeguard success of the main study, a pilot study involving 90 students was run first to test the suitability of the questions and phrases stated in the questionnaire. Based on its results, some revisions were made to the questionnaire.

**Procedure:**

For each sampled school, four classes of students, one from secondary forms one, two, three, four respectively, were selected to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire took approximately 15 minutes to complete. The sampling sites were carefully chosen to represent different school districts in Hong Kong, and half of the sampled students were required to bring home a copy of the questionnaire for their parents to complete. For each sampled school, 40 copies of the questionnaire were allocated to teachers for completion as well.

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2 There are normally 40 students in a class in secondary schools in Hong Kong.
RESULTS

Ranking of Common Educational Problems in Secondary Schools

Table 1 displays in descending order the position ranks and the mean ranks of the participants’ answers on common educational problems for secondary schools in Hong Kong.

Student lack of motivation and problems with curriculum were ranked as the most serious problems for secondary school education. Teachers’ mean rank scores for the student lack of motivation was significantly higher than those for students and parents using the Kruskal-Wallis one-way ANOVA test ($\chi^2 = 52.3$, $p < .001$), suggesting that teachers took the problems much more seriously than did students and parents. It is intriguing to note that students and parents ranked teacher low quality and lack of training as the third serious problem in secondary education, whereas teachers themselves ranked it as the sixth serious problem. In contrast, teachers considered the teacher work overload as the second serious problem for secondary education while students and parents ranked it as the fifth and fourth serious problem respectively. Evidently, there is a lack of empathy for concerns of teachers on one side and for those of students and parents on the other side. Equally intriguing to note is that school lack of discipline was lowly ranked by students, teachers and parents alike, implying that all three parties were more concerned with student motivation or teacher qualifications than with disciplinary control at classrooms.

Ranking of Common Student Behavioral Problems in Secondary Schools

Table 2 presents the ranking of common student behavioral problems facing secondary education in Hong Kong.

There are a number of striking findings, one is that making noise/disturbance in class was ranked as the most serious behavioral problem by students, teachers and parents alike, another one is that students and parents shared their views more frequently than those with teachers. For instance, students and parents shared their ranking for lack of respect for teachers, failure to hand in assignments/bring textbooks to school, habitual lateness. Even their mean rank scores are quite close. The high agreement between students and parents and the low agreement with teachers once again demonstrate the lack of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Student Rank</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
<th>Teacher Rank</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
<th>Parent Rank</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Problems with curriculum</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.39</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.37</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Student lack of motivation for learning</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.17</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.72</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Lack of discipline at school</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4.03</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.68</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Teacher low quality and lack of training</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.74</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.69</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Teacher work overload</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.06</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.57</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
empathy and communication between teachers on one side and students and parents on the other side. Students and parents also showed little respect for teachers' well-being and teaching requirements (e.g., attention in class, hand in homework in time, etc.) as they ranked quite low on such items as lack of respect for teachers, failure to hand in assignments/bring textbooks to school, habitual lateness.

Probably the most striking finding of the table is that involvement with triad activities (e.g., involvement of gang activities, smuggling of drugs, drug abuse) was ranked as the most serious problem by parents and the third serious problem by students, but it was ranked as the least serious problem by teachers. This finding is significant in that while parents and students seemed to be quite concerned with potential involvement of triad activities at schools, teachers did not seem to be concerned at all. No matter what may be offered to account for this, the finding serves to alarm teachers in Hong Kong to the grave concerns manifested in students and parents.

**Ranking of Common Intervention Strategies for Improving School Management**

Table 3 shows the participants' ranking of effectiveness of common intervention strategies for improving school management. Similar to the above, students' ranking
of items overlapped a great deal with those of parents. For instance, expanding manpower was ranked as the most effective strategy for improving school management by teachers, but it was only ranked as the sixth effective strategy by students and the fourth by parents. Besides, asking a student to leave school should he remain unchanged was considered as the third effective strategy by teachers, but was considered as the fifth effective strategy by students and the sixth effective strategy by parents. Providing more training to teachers regarding classroom management was ranked as the fifth effective strategy by teachers but was ranked as the third effective strategy by students and the second effective strategy by parents. The only response that all three parties shared was to establish a fair discipline system for controlling students.

**Ranking of Effectiveness of Common Intervention Strategies for Dealing with Non-motivated Students**

Table 4 displays the participants’ ranking of effectiveness of common intervention strategies for dealing with non-motivated students. Asking non-motivated students to transfer to vocational schools to take some more practical courses was the most favored strategy for dealing with such students by all three parties. Nonetheless, Kruskal-Wallis one-way ANOVA of the mean rank scores showed significant difference between them ($\chi^2=163.69$, $p<.001$), suggesting that the wish was stronger for teachers than for students and parents. In addition, all three parties agreed that letting non-motivated students to work in society and supervise those under age 15 was the least favored solution. Kruskal-Wallis one-way ANOVA of the mean rank scores also showed significant difference between them ($\chi^2=73.22$, $p<.001$), indicating that the wish was stronger for students than for parents and teachers. Taken together, these results appear to indicate that attending vocational schools to learn practical skills is a highly

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Student Rank</th>
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<th>Teacher Rank</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
<th>Parent Rank</th>
<th>Mean Rank</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. School continues to help students until they finish form 3 or even form 5 schooling</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.08</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.71</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ask these students to transfer to other schools of similar background to have a new chance</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ask these students to transfer to vocational schools to take some more practical courses</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.07</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Let these students work in society for some time and return to school should they truly wish to learn</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3.89</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.59</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. The Vocational Training Counsel should offer more practical courses/training to students under age 15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.90</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Let these students work in society and supervise those who are under age 15</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.28</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.76</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.42</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
favored solution for dealing with non-motivated students, but simply letting students join the labor force would not help them resolve their problems.

Besides, students and parents also expressed a strong wish for helping non-motivated students to finish form three or even form five level of education as they both ranked the item as the second preferred solution to tackle the problem. In contrast, teachers only ranked the item as the fifth preferred solution. Ironically, while teachers chose to let non-motivated students to work in society for some time and return to school only if they truly wish to study as the second favored solution for dealing with the problem, students and parents chose it as the fifth favored solution. In other words, students, along with their parents, wished to stay in school no matter what happened to them, but teachers would like them to leave schools to work and return to schools to study only when they truly value learning.

Discussion

The present study examined the prevalence of common educational and behavioral problems among junior secondary school students in Hong Kong as well as the effectiveness of common intervention strategies for improving school management and for dealing with non-motivated students. Students, teachers and parents generally acknowledged that student lack of motivation for learning and problems with curriculum were the most serious problems facing secondary schooling in Hong Kong and that making noise/disturbance in class was the most salient behavioral problem at school. They also agreed that establishing a fair discipline system and asking non-motivated students to transfer to vocational school to take some more practical courses were effective strategies for coping with student delinquent behaviors. But students’ perspectives overlapped a great deal with those of their parents, but seldom with those of their teachers. Some of our findings are quite striking. For instance, involvement of triad activities at school was greatly concerned by parents and students but was least concerned by teachers. Besides, while teachers considered expanding manpower as the most effective solution for improving school management, students and parents were not at all concerned with it. Nonetheless, both students and parents hoped that school would continue to help non-motivated students to finish form three or even form five level of schooling, but teachers hoped that students may leave school to work in society and return to school unless they are committed to education again. This affirms the concerns of non-motivated students and their teachers to remain at school no matter how frustrated they could be with learning.

All these findings bear important implications for teacher education and school management in Hong Kong and elsewhere. To begin with, the conflicting concerns between students, parents and teachers need to be more attended. More efforts should be made to bridge the concerns and frustrations of either parties and active parent involvement at school decision-making process ought to be more vigorously pursued. In fact, active parent participation in education has been pervasive in modern school management (Robinson & Fine, 1994; Hardin & Littlejohn, 1994).
INTERVENTION STRATEGIES

Existence of a high degree of agreement among educators and parents are vitally important for schools, children and families (Epstein, 1992). Successful learning comes from neither home nor school alone, but from the dynamic relationship between the two (Seeley, 1985). Research studies also indicate that active teacher involvement would result in an increased understanding of the function of schools as well as an improved communication of concerns of educators and school children in general (Mundschtenk & Foley, 1994). Use of accurate listening, appreciating the other person's frame of reference and introducing one's ideas non-competitively would greatly facilitate the communication process (Robinson & Fine, 1994).

Next, more vocational schools or programs are advisable for students who are not interested in a general education package. Students will benefit a great deal from taking courses of practical use and skills that will enable them find technical jobs in society. If this is difficult to achieve in a short while, the school curriculum should be revised to include a greater component for vocational education and training, particularly for students at junior secondary levels. In fact, the Hong Kong Education Commission (1990) had already recommended that pre-vocational schools follow a curriculum which at secondary one to three drew about 40% of its content from commercial, practical and technical sectors and that participant integration and the school-based curriculum project scheme be developed in secondary schools to facilitate vocational education. However, the present findings showed that the existing kind of pre-vocational programs were not so well regarded by students and parents alike, they ought to redefine its goals and financial planning to enable more students benefit from the scheme. Use of alternative classes, alternative programs, and alternative schools may be experimented to meet the diverse needs of students (Gruskin et al., 1987; Tindall, 1988). These programs should let students feel valued and cared for as capable members of the society and encourage them to participate in tasks of learning by presenting curriculum and instruction in ways that are extrinsically rewarding and intrinsically valuable (Smith, 1991).

Thirdly, more remedial or tutorial services ought to be organized for students with learning difficulties as many students, along with their parents, do wish to complete secondary schooling until form three or even form five. Remedial teaching and tutorial assistance are instrumental to enable these students fulfill their expectations. The three additional teachers to be provided to each secondary school for remedial teaching (Education Commission Report No. 4) are far from being adequate to fulfill its goals. To answer the Education Department's call for selection of experienced, mature and dedicated teachers to undertake the school-based remedial programs, the remedial teachers ought to be charged with greater administrative and financial power. Increases in manpower for teaching and career/psychological guidance would help relieve work pressure at work and reduce the tension between conflicting concerns of teachers and students/parents.

Finally, the present findings have several implications for further studies on prevention of school failure and dropouts in Hong Kong as well. More studies are needed to validate the present findings, particularly on the conflicting concerns
between students, parents and teachers. An interesting task for further research would be to compare how such conflicting concerns may decrease as a function of improved communication between the three parties. It would also be interesting to study how prevention of school failure may vary as a function of enhanced vocational programs as well. Finally, more research is necessary to examine the adjustment of school dropouts to labor market through follow-up studies.

REFERENCES


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