

Hong Kong parents' perceptions and experiences of involvement in homework

Tam, Vicky C.; Chan, Raymond M.

Published in:
Journal of Family and Economic Issues

DOI:
[10.1007/s10834-010-9202-7](https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-010-9202-7)

Published: 01/09/2010

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Tam, V. C., & Chan, R. M. (2010). Hong Kong parents' perceptions and experiences of involvement in homework: A family capital and resource management perspective. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 31(3), 361-370. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10834-010-9202-7>

General rights

Copyright and intellectual property rights for the publications made accessible in HKBU Scholars are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners. In addition to the restrictions prescribed by the Copyright Ordinance of Hong Kong, all users and readers must also observe the following terms of use:

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from HKBU Scholars for the purpose of private study or research
- Users cannot further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- To share publications in HKBU Scholars with others, users are welcome to freely distribute the permanent publication URLs

Hong Kong Parents' Perceptions and Experiences of Involvement in Homework:

A Family Capital and Resource Management Perspective

Vicky C. Tam, Ph.D.

and

Raymond M. Chan, Ph.D.

V. C. Tam (corresponding author) · R. M. Chan

Department of Education Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University, Kowloon Tong, Hong
Kong.

e-mail: vtam@hkbu.edu.hk

R. M. Chan

e-mail: rmcchan@hkbu.edu.hk

Abstract

This qualitative study examines Hong Kong Chinese parents' perceptions and experiences of involving in their primary school children's homework process. It draws upon the theoretical frameworks of family capital theory and family resource management perspective to explicate the role of parents in enhancing children's homework outcomes. Information was collected through individual and focus-group interviews with 52 parents who had at least one child attending primary school. Findings of this study provide a glimpse into the range of homework-involvement strategies used by Chinese parents, and reveal parental goals and cultural values embedded in the generation of family capital. Such understanding on parental involvement is helpful for schools and policy-makers in cultivating parents' participation in home-based learning processes for children.

Keywords: Family capital theory, Family resource management, Homework, Hong Kong,

Parental involvement

Chinese culture regards education as the most effective avenue to social and economic advancement and for the improvement of the person (Salili et al. 2003). Chinese parents in general hold high aspirations toward children's educational achievement as a promise for a bright future for the family. With a strong cultural value on effort, Chinese people believe that intensive drilling and practice provided through homework assignments enhances children's academic performance. Hence, homework is often seen as a crucial part of learning. Previous studies have shown that Chinese children in general spend large amount of time on homework (Stevenson and Lee 1996; Tam 2009). To support the importance of homework, Chinese parents often offer help to their children by providing support and assistance as well as by monitoring the homework process. They consider such involvement a preferred form of home-school collaboration that serves to promote children's learning (Ho 2003). Yet, few research studies to date have focused specifically on Chinese parents' homework involvement. Hong Kong poses an interesting case for such investigation as its examination-oriented system exerts heavy pressure on students with respect to academic performance (Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups 1998). Studying in a prestigious secondary school is considered by students and parents as crucial for future academic and life successes. Intensive drilling and practice are emphasized in the primary school curriculum so to ensure good academic results that increase the chance of placement into prestigious schools through the central Secondary Schools Place Allocation System (Pong and Chow 2002). Such competitive and

selective nature of the Hong Kong school system reinforces the importance of homework, thus making it a remarkable ecological setting for research on parental involvement.

Theoretical Framework

Studies on parental involvement in education often draw upon Coleman's family capital theory (1988). The theory focuses on three main types of family resources available to children, including (a) financial or physical capital, in terms of family income or physical resources; (b) human capital, pertaining to parents' education that provides the potential for a cognitive environment for the child that aids learning; and (c) social capital, referring to interactions and relations between children and parents. Previous studies show that financial or human capital alone does not guarantee desirable child outcomes (Parks-Yancy et al. 2007; Simmons et al. 2007). If human capital possessed by parents is not complemented by social capital embodied in family relations, it is irrelevant to the child's educational growth. Social capital serves as the medium through which children access their parent's financial and human capital (Schlee et al. 2009). Parents' human capital and physical capital available to the child may be multiplied if the social capital of involvement and networking between child and parent is sufficiently strong (Ho 2006). Coleman (1988) points out that social capital within the family that gives the child access to the adult's human capital depends both on the physical presence of adults and on the attention given by the adults to the child. Parental involvement in homework can thus be perceived as a form of social capital. Through

intensive purposive interactions with the child, parents assist children in the homework process thereby developing human capital in children. Furthermore, social capital is often found outside the family when the community provides important family resources of value to children (Sandefur et al. 2006). In summary, family capital theory conceptualizes parental involvement as a process that mobilizes social capital, physical capital, and human capital for children's learning. The concept of family capital has been used in studies of Chinese families on aspects such as second language acquisition (Li 2007) and social disparity of family involvement (Ho 2006). Research focus thus far has been put on the link between social class and social capital. Little attention is directed to examining Chinese cultural values that potentially forms the core of family capital.

Family resource management frameworks offer another perspective on understanding parental involvement in children's homework by focusing on specific family practices, activities, and behaviors. This perspective sees families as providing a variety of resources to children that can be instrumental in enhancing educational attainment (Sandefur et al. 2006) and meeting developmental needs (Sharpe and Baker 2007). Deacon and Firebaugh's (1988) model considers the family a decision-making unit that endeavors to meet its goals. These goals are achieved through planning the use of human and material resources and implementing the plans. The planning process involves the two components of (a) standard setting, the establishment of criteria by which to judge future outputs; and (b) action

sequencing, an ordering of activities to be completed. Parental involvement in homework is thus conceptualized as a sequence of resource-mobilization and management behaviors or strategies that are ordered with respect to supporting children in their achievement of desirable academic performance standards. Studies on family resource management show that perceptions are important aspects of managerial behaviors (e.g. Rettig et al. 1999). It is thus essential to examine parents' perceptions so as to understand their involvement in children's educational processes. In this regard, qualitative research approaches should be employed.

This study examines Hong Kong Chinese parents' perceptions and experiences of involvement in their primary school children's homework process using qualitative research methods. It draws upon the theoretical frameworks of family capital and family resource management in explicating the engagement of parents. Findings of this study provide a glimpse into the range of strategies used by Chinese parents, and examine cultural values embedded in the generation of family capital. Such understanding on parental involvement is helpful for schools and policy-makers in cultivating parents' participation in the home-based learning processes for children.

Method

This study is part of a research project on primary school students' homework process in Hong Kong (Tam and Chan 2005). Findings reported here drew from eight individual and eight focus-group interviews involving fifty mothers and two fathers whose children enrolled

in four primary schools. Schools A and C are located in two regions in the New Territories remote from the city center with a mix of subsidized housing and village dwellings, whereas Schools B and D are in two separate urban areas with mainly private housing. Recent census data (Census and Statistics Department 2007) show that the four regions vary tremendously in median household income, thus representing a diverse range of socio-economic background. Mean age of the parents, as found in data on these four schools from the research project, is 40.3 years. Over 95% of them were married. Informants' children enrolled in the entire span of primary school levels from Primary 1 to Primary 6, which typically admit children at age six to age twelve. Furthermore, 82.1% of the informants who reported on their occupation status identified themselves as full-time homemakers.

Informants were invited through school personnel to attend focus group or individual interviews on school premise. Eight focus group interviews were arranged, each involving four to seven parents with children attending the same class. Focus group method was used because it renders a relatively informal atmosphere for informants to discuss specific topics so that underlying norms, beliefs, and values common to their experiences might be uncovered (Parker and Tritter 2006). In addition, eight individual interviews were carried out so as to explore in depth specific experiences of parental involvement. All interviews were conducted by a member of a three-person research team using Cantonese, the local Chinese dialect. The interviews, each lasting from 30 to 60 minutes, were semi-structured in nature

and used a protocol covering questions on topics including involvement of students and parents in homework, attitudes toward homework, and perceived functions of homework.

Verbatim transcripts of the interviews were analyzed by the first author using approaches suggested by Taylor and Bogdan (1998). First, the transcripts were read several times so as to gain an in-depth understanding of the content. A scheme of 19 codes was developed, which include “expectation on homework”, “practices of homework involvement”, and “perception of children’s homework attitudes”, and it was applied to code the transcripts. The coded data were then sorted into respective coding categories so that comparisons could be made.

Questions such as “what does this tell us about how parents view their involvement?” and “what do these quotes in common?” were raised so as to allow an in-depth interpretation of the interview content and the development of themes that captured the parents’ experiences and that gradually moved the analysis to a higher level of conceptualization. These themes developed were phrased using informants’ first-person perspective so as to highlight their perceptions and experiences, e.g., “homework is important for learning” and “we use direct parental involvement strategies”. Finally, the themes were compared, refined, and selected to give an integrative theoretical narrative on parents’ homework involvement (Auerbach and Silverstein 2003). These procedures adhere to the idea that data analysis is a transformative process that generally involves moving beyond descriptive characteristics to propose elaborate conceptual framings of the observed phenomena (Lofland et al. 2006). Quality of

the analysis was checked using the strategy of peer review. Specifically, discussion was made with the team members so as to ensure the congruency between the emerging findings and the raw data.

Results

Findings of this study are presented in the form of a theoretical narrative comprising major themes that depict Hong Kong Chinese parents' involvement in their children's homework process. These themes, presented as headings in the following sections, are grouped into the four categories of (a) perceptions on homework; (b) strategies of parental involvement; (c) goals of involvement; and (d) benefits and problems of involvement. Verbatim quotes extracted from the interviews and translated into English are provided to illustrate the perceptions and experiences of the informants.

Parents' Perceptions on Homework

Informants shared in the interviews how they perceived the importance of homework, its functions, as well as children's attitudes towards assignments. Their views explained why they believed parental involvement was necessary and important.

Homework is important for learning. Chinese parents interviewed in this study considered homework an essential part of schooling. B1¹, mother of a Primary 2 student, asserted such view with a rhetorical question: "What is the point of going to school if there is

¹ Each informant is identified by a school code (A, B, C, or D) and an identifier digit.

no homework?” Parents in general supported the assignment of homework to children. D1 found it necessary to have homework so that she could monitor her Primary 5 son’s learning. She remarked: “[If there is no homework] I won’t be able to tell what my kid has learned in school. Kids often don’t have good communication skills so I am not able to know what he has learned. I think there should be some homework.”

Informants drew upon the language context in Hong Kong to explain the importance of homework. D2, mother of a Primary 5 boy, gave her views: “Chinese Language is different from English Language in that the latter does not require reciting or hard work.... We have to practice writing and to memorize the strokes of Chinese characters. If there is no homework, we cannot remember the strokes.” To these parents, the drilling and practice required for learning Chinese language rendered it necessary to assign homework to children.

The importance of homework was further exemplified in cases in which homework assignments were accorded priority over other individual or family activities that competed for the child’s time. D3 described how she resolved time conflict for her Primary 2 son who was taking piano lessons: “When there is much homework to do, [my son] has to give up piano practice. It takes daily practices to learn to play the piano.... [But] when there is not much time left, I have to let him give up piano practice.” From a family resource management perspective, this arrangement reflects parents’ active planning on the use of their children’s time around the important goal of education.

Homework serves learning and non-learning functions. Homework was deemed important as it served crucial functions. Informants cited a host of learning and non-learning purposes that could be fulfilled through homework. First, parents believed that homework helped children consolidating learning, especially in promoting comprehension and enhancing recall. When asked why children had to do homework, these parents with children attending Primary 2 replied: “To consolidate learning” (B1); “To reinforce learning.... To review things learned in class.... They may forget everything” (B2); “I feel that if there is no homework, children may not remember what they have been taught” (B3). Second, from an instrumental perspective, homework assignments benefited students by helping them to prepare for tests and examinations. This view was expressed by A1, mother with a son in Primary 5: “ I feel that [homework] can help him consolidate learning so that he can have an easy time when revising for examination. If he completes his homework all by himself, then it takes shorter time for revision before examinations, tests, dictations, etc.” Third, homework was deemed helpful in acquiring and practising learning skills. C1, mother of a Primary 6 student, remarked, “I find doing assignments very helpful in promoting the application of skills.” Similarly, A4 believed that homework provided practice opportunities for her Primary 3 child, “otherwise students will not be able to retain their learning.”

Other than learning gains, parents mentioned non-learning functions of homework. They found that doing homework contributed to the development of responsibility. A2, mother of a

Primary 3 student, said, “From my son’s point of view, doing homework is like eating; it is a natural demand on him. I tell him all the time that this is the responsibility of a child.”

Furthermore, homework kept children busy and away from what parents considered meaningless activities. This point is vividly reflected in a remark by A3, mother of a Primary 3 girl: “It will be a disaster if there is no homework. Children will become lazy and idle around all day.... They will just sit around and play games.” In such regard, parents found self-discipline in doing homework a positive trait that should be cultivated early in life. D4 was happy with her Primary 5 daughter’s self-disciplined behaviors: “Basically [my daughter] can finish assignments for Chinese Language and Mathematics in school.... But for English Language, she takes the assignments home when she runs into difficulty.... She is on the whole self-disciplined and I feel quite satisfied with her.”

In the eyes of these Chinese parents, children acquired learning and developed positive attributes through doing homework. Homework was thus a tool for the development of human capital in their children. From a family resource management perspective, these learning and non-learning functions of homework relate to parental goals for child development, towards which family resources are mobilized and managed.

Children have to be pushed to do homework. Yet, given the importance of homework, children did not necessarily appreciate its value. According to the observation of the informants, children by nature did not enjoy doing homework: “I think no kids want their

parents to ask them to do homework... Really, they are not willing to do it; they just do it out of their duty” (B1); “They are just kids. How many of them really take the initiative to do revision?” (B4); “They are so happy when they come home from school [after exam] without any homework” (A4). Consequently, parents had to push their children to complete homework, as in the experience of D1: “Kids have to be pushed, really. If you don’t push them, they just forget everything you tell them.”

Taken together, these perceptions on the importance and functions of homework as well as beliefs of children’s attitude towards homework explained why parents were willing to spend time on engaging in their children’s homework process.

Strategies of Parental Involvement

Informants reported two major types of strategies that they used in engaging in their children’s homework process, namely direct and indirect. From a resource management perspective, these strategies illustrate parents’ active managerial behaviors that mobilized resources towards enhancing children’s homework completion. They also provide good examples demonstrating how children were rendered access to their parents’ human capital and physical capital through parental involvement as a medium of social capital.

Direct parental involvement strategies. Direct parental involvement strategies entail face-to-face parent-child contact that leads to the completion of homework. These include homework supervision measures such as checking or correcting homework and explaining

learning materials. Checking homework was a major form of involvement reported by the informants. B6 with two school-age children checked the completed assignments to make sure that they are done correctly. She said, “When I notice that there are mistakes, such as misspelling a word, I mark down the word and teach them how to spell it correctly.” Another commonly used direct involvement strategy was explaining learning materials. C2 described how she explained mathematical concepts to her son studying in Primary 3,

For example, [my son] does not understand an application problem and he doesn’t know whether to use addition or multiplication. I use a simple method to teach him, such as “If your brother owes you a certain amount of money, and I owe you a certain amount of money. How much money do we owe you altogether?”

Some parents admitted that they occasionally finished homework for their children by providing answers to problems, though they understood that the practice was inappropriate.

A1 shared her reservation:

At times [my son] doesn’t know the answer and cannot figure it out even after thinking hard for quite a while. Then I tell him the answer. I don’t really want to do this, and I try hard to help him coming up with the right answer. This should be the better way.

This example shows parents’ awareness of the improper use of direct parental involvement strategies and the potential problems generated.

In summary, the above experiences in employing direct homework supervision strategies

give a vivid portrayal of parents' emphases on the importance of homework completion and their value over good academic performance with error-free homework.

Indirect parental involvement strategies. Parents mentioned in the interviews how they took part in their children's homework process without face-to-face parent-child contacts. These indirect involvement strategies provided homework support through establishing daily routine, setting up rules, and seeking other sources of homework help. These strategies entail the provision of an optimal homework environment as well as the utilization of financial capital to acquire services for homework support.

Most parents reported that they set up daily routine schedule for children, showing how homework was structured into family life. B7 described the daily schedule of her three school-age children attending a half-day p.m. school:

They finish school at around 6 p.m. and when they get home they have dinner right away. I usually allow them to watch TV for a while. At around 7:30 to 8 p.m. they start doing homework. This is how I arrange their schedule. I want them to complete all assignments in the evening. In the morning [before going to school], they do revisions.

Some parents went a step further to set up and enforce rules that ensured compliance with the daily routine. D5, a working mother with a boy attending Primary 2, believed that it was essential to intervene so as to get her son to finish homework while she was away at work:

If I don't intervene, [my son] will not do homework. I tell him that I have set up a

timetable. If he is not able to finish homework by a certain time, I will not let him do certain things. I ask my domestic helper to record his schedule. If he is able to meet the timeline..., I will encourage him and give him rewards so that he will do better next time. So the first and foremost thing is to finish homework after school.

These strategies of setting up daily routine and rules are ways to ensure homework completion. They also illustrate the primary importance accorded to school assignments.

Some parents arranged additional sources of homework help. These strategies illustrate how parents' human capital was substituted by services acquired through financial capital. Private tutoring services were popular alternatives when parents were unavailable or felt incompetent to supervise homework. A5 had a private tutor for her Primary 3 daughter. She explained, "I am not competent enough to supervise my daughter, so I arrange a private tutor for her.... The curricula for Primary 3 and Primary 4 are quite difficult." B8 sent her Primary 1 daughter to a tutorial school as she found it time consuming to help the young girl with homework:

It is better to help your child yourself if you have the time. But my daughter just spends her time at home watching television, so it is better to send her to a tutorial school. The tutors are of course not as good or as supportive as the parents, but I have no choice.

However, parents showed concern that tutoring services might not be helpful as it might have masked children's learning problems. D6 whose daughter was in Primary 2 complained about

the tutorial school as it failed to guarantee error-free homework completion. She said: “I browsed through my daughter’s homework after she came back from the tutorial school and found that there were still mistakes.... I might as well supervise her myself. So I stop sending her to the tutorial school.” These examples on the use of tutoring services demonstrates that parents made active consideration on the use of other forms of homework support by assessing effectiveness as well as comparing with parental supervision.

Parental involvement is tailored to the characteristics of children. Given the wide variety of involvement strategies, parents were aware of the need to tailor involvement to children’s characteristics including age and personality. D7 believed that different children required different parental involvement strategies. She shared her experiences with her two children:

My elder kid [who is in Primary 4] comes home after school and finishes his homework by himself. I just check his Mathematics homework and mark those with incorrect answers with crosses for him to make correction.... But I can’t do the same for the younger daughter [attending Primary 2] because her personality is different. I have to sit with her to ensure that she finishes her homework.

In another case, a Primary 6 boy resisted parental monitoring of homework. His mother, C1, had to adjust her strategy accordingly: “I started supervising [my son] in Primary 1, but he wanted to be independent and told me not to look at him while he was working. He now

shows me his work only after homework is done.” These considerations for children’s developmental needs and characteristics reflect parents’ active thinking in managing resources for achieving parental goals.

Goals of Parental Involvement in Homework

Underlying informants’ engagement in homework process are parental goals, that is, desirable ends that parents strive to attain for their children. The range of goals identified in the interviews illustrates different expectations held by parents, which form the bases for the selection of homework-involvement strategies.

Parental involvement is linked to task-oriented goals. In many instances, parental goals were task-oriented, aiming at error-free, efficient homework completion. To achieve these goals, parents monitored homework performance and progress closely. C3 pointed out that she checked her Primary 3 child’s homework so as to make sure that homework was done properly “because basically parents do not want to see crosses marked all over the homework [by the teacher].” Other instances show that parental involvement was also motivated by the objective to get the child to finish homework sooner: “[My son who is in Primary 5] sometimes takes two to three hours to finish homework. If I sit next to him and push him, he will finish it sooner” (A1); “My younger girl [studying at Primary 2] is easily distracted. If I don’t sit next to her, she will walk away.... If she doesn’t know how to do her homework and I don’t teach her, she will just give up. So I have to supervise her” (D7).

To summarize, these task-oriented goals were mainly achieved through direct parental homework involvement of homework supervision and monitoring. They vividly demonstrated Chinese cultural values on effort and practice. Parents' participation in the homework process was a way to help children achieving better academic performance.

Parental involvement is linked to child-centered goals. At the same time, some parents focused on a broader perspective by emphasizing the intrinsic value of homework in learning enhancement. C1, mother of a Primary 6 boy, remarked, "We parents do not intend to control anything; we just want to see what children have learned, what they don't know, and whether they grasp the materials."

Other parents mentioned involvement goals that focused on children's psycho-emotional needs beyond academic learning. Some wanted to show concern and give support to their children through supervising homework. B6 had a daughter in Primary 1. She said, "It is a kind of emotional support. I don't mean to teach her or to help her. In fact, she feels that her parents care about her and do not leave her to face this painful process of studying all on her own." Other parents aimed at developing children's independence. A1 described her son's behaviors and how she changed her involvement strategy in order to promote the boy's self-discipline in doing homework:

When he was in Primary 2, I sat next to him while he did homework. I found that he became dependent on me. If I walked away, he started shouting, "I don't know how to

do this or that.” Now [in Primary 5] I tell him that I am busy and that he should figure out the problems on his own. Gradually he finishes his homework by himself, though it takes longer.

With a child-centered focus, homework was taken not just as assignments to be completed and submitted; it was a means through which broader goals of child development could be attained and the human capital of the child was developed. Homework thus offered an avenue through which parents could assist in their children’s multifaceted growth.

Benefits and Problems of Parental Involvement

Finally, informants expressed in the interviews their perceptions on the impact of parental homework involvement. Their focus was often on direct parental involvement strategies such as homework supervision and monitoring. While the views were in general positive, queries and reservations were also expressed.

Parental involvement may or may not be effective. Generally speaking, parents considered their own participation in children’s homework as beneficial to their children. They believed that parental involvement rendered children more attentive to homework as parents were able to explain materials and concepts better than others. B7 shared her experience with her three school-age children: “As I stay home all day, I am very clear about what my children need or what they don’t understand... I can explain to them when they don’t understanding their schoolwork.” The human capital provided by the parents and the

social capital generated through parent-child interaction were often deemed superior than other form of homework support. A6, mother of a Primary 5 girl, compared direct parental involvement to the indirect involvement strategy of using tutoring services: “Of course, the kid’s mood is going to be different. In front of the tutor, she sometimes feels that she is too competent to admit that she does not understand. But she is willing to admit it to the parents.”

Yet there were parents who had doubt in their academic or emotional competence in supervising children’s homework, thus feeling stressed over the task. A3 was concerned that she might teach her Primary 3 daughter something wrong: “It has been a long time since I went to school. I worry that my methods are wrong....I teach my daughter how to solve a Mathematics problem. She says, ‘My teacher does not do it this way.’ The methods may be different now.” Another mother, C3, found it too emotion-draining to supervise her Primary 3 daughter’s homework. She said, “I really don’t know of any other way to teach my child. I simply give her the answers so that she can complete homework.” She understood that this approach was inappropriate and eventually sent her child to a tutorial school for homework support. In these instances, parent’s human capital was insufficient to meet the learning demands of the child. Parental homework involvement was deemed inadequate or ineffective.

Parental involvement changes the parents and their relationship with children.

Homework provided gains to not just children, but also their parents. In a positive light, some parents were able to find personal gain through homework supervision. A7, mother of a

Primary 3 boy, remarked, “I am able to have self development as there are many things that I can learn through him. Things taught in school in the older days are different... I can learn a great deal, such as General Studies.”

The close contact involved in using the direct involvement strategy of homework supervision sometimes led to changes in parent-child relationships. C4 with a child attending Primary 6 believed that parental engagement in children’s homework process strengthened parent-child relationship. A8 was happy to find the relationship between her husband and their Primary 5 daughter improved as a result of the father’s homework supervision: “The daughter ends up learning more and the [father-daughter] relationship improves. There is better communication between them.”

At the same time, negative perceptions of parental involvement were noted in the interviews. Supervising homework might take a toll on parent-child relationship when one of the parties found it a nuisance. A5 shared her feelings: “I once spanked [my Primary 3 daughter] because I was mad that she still did not get it after much explanation. She cried... I was very agitated.” Other parents were aware of the negative consequences of homework supervision that children relied too much on parents for assistance and support. C2 with a son attending Primary 3 complained about her boy’s overdependence: “He keeps saying that he does not know how to do homework and asks me to help him out, though I query whether this is the case.” A1 related concern over her Primary 5 son’s academic development:

It is not good if you keep reminding the child what to do and if you provide answers when he does not know how to do homework. As a result, he will have weak thinking skills.... He just relies on you for answers every time he runs into difficulty.

In such instances, direct parental involvement strategies were deemed ineffective when parents intervened too much into the homework process, thus jeopardizing children's academic development.

The above views on the impact of parental involvement reflect parents' appraisal on the utility of family capital mobilized in the process. Taken together, these parents' perceptions show that direct parental involvement as social capital can augment or deflate human capital of children and their parents. These instances thus are good examples demonstrating the dynamic flux and flow of resources available in the family.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study examines the perceptions and experiences of Hong Kong Chinese parents' homework involvement from the frameworks of family capital theory and family resource management. A diverse range of experiences and views were reported in the themes developed. In summary, homework was considered an essential part of learning, especially in the unique educational context of Hong Kong. Homework was perceived by parents to fulfill learning functions mainly, including consolidation of learning, preparation for tests and examinations, and learning skills development. Parents also identified non-learning functions

of homework, namely the development of responsibility and self-discipline. Findings of this study reveal two major categories of practices in which Hong Kong Chinese parents involved in their children's homework. Direct involvement strategies included checking homework and explaining learning materials while indirect involvement strategies comprised establishing daily routine, setting up rules, and seeing additional help. Underpinning the involvement strategies were parental goals that are in general task-oriented while goals that pertained to children's psycho-emotional development were also identified.

On the whole, findings reported in this study concur with research conducted in Western countries. Hoover-Dempsey et al.'s (1995) study on parents of elementary school students in USA revealed similar parental assumptions that homework a normal part of their children's lives and that parents should be involved in children's homework efforts. Yet parental involvement practices reflect goals that are embedded in and specific to the socio-cultural context. Results of this study demonstrate that homework involvement strategies among parents of primary school students are linked to Chinese cultural values on effort, self-discipline, and responsibility that pertain to educational achievement. These task-oriented values are the core virtues in traditional Chinese culture which continue to prevail in contemporary Chinese societies (Yang 2005). In the competitive education system of Hong Kong with a strong examination orientation, these virtues are considered to be crucial for success. Similarly, task orientation is identified as a typical parenting style in

Chinese families with primary school children in Hong Kong (Tam and Lam 2003). Findings of this study thus demonstrate how cultural values relate to the goals and behaviors of parents in their homework involvement. At the same time, this study also identifies changing sentiments among Chinese parents that deviate from traditional patterns. At least some of the participating parents show a shift to child-centered orientation, with concerns for emotional and psychological well-being of children. These reflect psychological transformation as a result of modernization among Chinese people (Yang 2005). Future research should track changes in cultural values and beliefs among parents in Chinese communities outside of Hong Kong and observe the impact of such transformation on parenting practices and behaviors in Chinese families.

The narratives provided through this study illustrate Hong Kong parents' planful behaviors that mobilize resources and sequence activities towards the goals of enhancing children's academic performance. It is important to note that the parents' homework involvement level varies tremendously across families. Quantitative data from the large research project encompassing this study report that at least one third of parents with children in primary school do not spend time on homework supervision (Tam and Chan 2005). It thus shows that parents differ in terms of the extent and the type of resource management behavior they adopt. While the qualitative analysis reported here shows a repertoire of strategies employed by various parents in engaging in their children's homework process, further

research is needed to explore demographic and psychological factors affecting parents' decision making in the type and use of homework involvement strategies.

From the perspective of Coleman's family capital theory (1988), the cultural virtues embedded in Hong Kong parents' homework involvement strategies relate to human capital to be developed in children through social capital derived from parents' homework involvement. Through providing direct parent-child contact that allows adults' intervention into the homework process, the various direct involvement strategies of homework supervision are good examples of social capital that serves as the medium through which children access their parents' human capital. Daily routine and family rules constitute the structure of a stable family learning environment that potentially generates social capital conducive to academic success. Moreover, the use of indirect strategies that involve arranging paid tutorial assistance exemplifies the mobilization of physical capital that makes up for unavailable human capital of the parents. Similarly, parents in this study pointed out their reservation and dissatisfaction about tutorial help for their children. It shows that even in the eyes of parents, physical capital does not determine the quality of family environment in supporting learning, which concurs with findings of previous studies (e.g., Li 2007).

Hong Kong Chinese parents interviewed in this study share concerns on problems emerged from their homework involvement, including children's over-reliance on parents as well as parent-child conflicts. It thus shows that parents' homework involvement can be

potentially damaging when it fails to pay due regard to the child's autonomy development and developmental needs. These types of parental involvement should also be tailored according to children's characteristics and grade level. In such regard, these findings support the conclusion of Li (2007) that not all investment of family capital was beneficial to children's education; only investment that addresses children's specific developmental needs can be translated into success in learning.

It is important to note that informants participating in this study are predominantly female. Hence the findings by and large reflect mothers' experiences and strategies in involving in children's homework. Given the central role of mothers in child-rearing in Hong Kong (Law 1994; Tam 1999), the findings describes parental involvement in authentic real-life settings. Yet gender difference has often been raised as a major issue in understanding parental engagement and investment in children (Monna and Gauthier 2008). Future studies should expand the focus to include fathers' perceptions and experiences in homework involvement. Such investigation will provide insight on promoting paternal engagement in children's education. Furthermore, the scope of this study is delimited by the socio-cultural background of the families and the age range of children as specified in the research objectives. Within the sociocultural setting of Hong Kong, further investigation may include a broader range of schools with various funding sources and student ability background so as to reach a comprehensive understanding on parental involvement in

homework across settings. Future studies should also look at Chinese families with preschool children and adolescents as parental goals and involvement strategies are likely to vary with children's developmental stage.

The notion of social capital identifies connection between family and the outside community as between-family social capital that can augment within-family capital (Hao and Bonstead-Bruns 1998). It points to the potential role of schools in supporting and facilitating parents' homework involvement. School-based parent education programs should be devised to focus on developmentally appropriate homework involvement strategies. These programs benefit families by helping parents intervene more effectively in children's homework process. On an informal basis, parent-teacher discussion on homework supervision can also strengthen parents' commitment and enhance their involvement strategies and skills (Hoover-Dempsey et al. 2001). These school practices serve to strengthen between-family social capital thus creating potential impact on children's academic achievement. Findings of this study will be helpful for school personnel and policy-makers such that relevant school practices supporting parents' homework involvement can be designed and implemented.

Acknowledgements

This work was funded by the Committee on Home-School Co-operation, Education Bureau, Hong Kong Government.

References

- Auerbach, C. F., & Silverstein, L. B. (2003). *Qualitative data: An introduction to coding and analysis*. New York: New York University Press.
- Census and Statistics Department (2007). *2006 population by-census summary results*. Hong Kong: Author.
- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *American Journal of Sociology*, *94*, S95-S120.
- Deacon, R. E., & Firebaugh, F. M. (1988). *Family resource management* (2nd ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Hao, L., & Bonstead-Bruns, M. (1998). Parent-child differences in educational expectations and the academic achievement of immigrant and native students. *Sociology of Education*, *71*, 175-198.
- Ho, E. S. (2003). Students' self-esteem in an Asian educational system: Contribution of parental involvement. *School Community Journal*, *13*(1), 65-84.
- Ho, E. S. (2006). Social disparity of family involvement in Hong Kong: Effect of family resources and family network. *School Community Journal*, *16*(2), 7-26.
- Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups (1998). *How important are academic results to students?* (Youth Opinion Polls No. 60). Hong Kong: Author.
- Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., Bassler, O. C., & Burow, R. B. (1995). Parents' reported

- involvement in students' homework: Strategies and practices. *Elementary School Journal*, 95(5), 435-450.
- Hoover-Dempsey, K. V., Battiato, A. C., Walker, J. M., Reed, R. P., DeJong, J. M., & Jones, K. P. (2001). Parental involvement in homework. *Educational Psychologist*, 36(3), 195-209.
- Law, C. K. (1994). *Contemporary Hong Kong families in transition*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Women Foundation.
- Li, G. F. (2007). Home environment and second language acquisition: The importance of family capital. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 28(3), 285–299.
- Lofland, J., Snow, D. A., Anderson, L., & Lofland, L. H. (2006). *Analyzing social settings: A guide to qualitative observation and analysis* (4th ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Monna, B., & Gauthier, A. H. (2008). A review of the literature on the social and economic determinants of parental time. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 29, 634-653.
- Parker, A., & Tritter, J. (2006). Focus group method and methodology: Current practice and recent debate. *International Journal of Research & Method in Education*, 29(1), 23–37.
- Parks-Yancy, R., Di Tomaso, N., & Post, C. (2007). The mitigating effects of social and financial capital resources on hardships. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 28, 429–448.
- Pong, W. Y., & Chow, J. C. (2002). On the pedagogy of examinations in Hong Kong. *Teacher*

& *Teacher Education*, 18, 139-149.

Rettig, K. R., Leichtentritt, R. D., & Danes, S. M. (1999) The effects of resources, decision making, and decision implementing on perceived family well-being in adjusting to an economic stressor. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 20, 5-34.

Salili, F., Zhou, H., & Hoosain, R. (2003). Adolescent education in Hong Kong and Mainland China. In F. Pajares & T. Urdan (Eds.), *Adolescence and education, Volume III: International perspectives on adolescence* (pp. 277-302). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.

Sandefur, G. D., Meier, A. M., & Campbell, M. E. (2006). Family resources, social capital, and college attendance. *Social Science Research*, 35, 525-553.

Schlee, B. M., Mullis, A. K., & Shriner, M. (2009). Parents' social and resource capital: Predictors of academic achievement during early childhood. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 31, 227-234.

Sharpe, D. L., & Baker, D. L. (2007). Financial issues associated with having a child with autism. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 28, 247-264.

Simmons, L. A., Braun, B., Wright, D. W., & Miller, S. R. (2007). Human capital, social support, and economic wellbeing among rural, low-income mothers: A latent growth curve analysis. *Journal of Family and Economic Issues*, 28, 635-652.

Stevenson, H. W., & Lee, S. Y. (1996). The academic achievement of Chinese students. In M.

- H. Bond (Ed.), *The handbook of Chinese psychology* (pp. 124-142). Hong Kong: Oxford University Press.
- Tam, V. C. (1999). Foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong and their role in child care provision. In J. Momsen (Ed.), *Gender, migration and domestic service* (pp. 263-276). London: Routledge.
- Tam, V. C. (2009). Homework involvement among Hong Kong primary school students. *Asian Pacific Journal of Education*, 29(2), 213-227.
- Tam, V. C., & Chan, R. M. (2005). *Research on the involvement of parents in using homework to enhance primary school students' educational development*. Retrieved on December 10, 2009 from http://chsc.edb.hkedcity.net/chi/publications_reports.php
- Tam, V. C., & Lam, R. S. (2003). A cultural exploration based on structured observational methods in Hong Kong. *Marriage and Family Review*, 35(3/4), 45-61.
- Taylor, S. J., & Bogdan, R. (1998). *Introduction to qualitative research methods: A guidebook and resource*. New York: Wiley.
- Yang, K. S. (2005). Psychological traditionality and modernity. In K. S. Yang, K. K. Hwang, & C. F. Yang (Eds.), *Indigenous Chinese psychology* (Vol. 2, pp. 713-745). Taipei: Yuan-Liou. (In Chinese)

Vicky C. Tam obtained her Ph.D. degree in family social science from University of Minnesota – Twin Cities Campus, USA. She is Professor at Department of Education Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University. Her research projects cover the areas of adolescent stress and identity, parental involvement in children's education, and parental decision making on child care.

Raymond M.C. Chan obtained his Ph.D. degree from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He is Associate Professor at Department of Education Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University. His research interests include acculturation, counselling supervision, teachers' professional development, and life skills development. Currently he is a co-investigator of a research project on life skills development.