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Help from the parent–teacher association to parenting efficacy: Beyond social status and informal social capital

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Abstract

Objective: Empirical research is required to shed light on the issue concerning the support the parent–teacher association (PTA) for parents of schoolchildren. It is to examine if the benefit stems from informal social capital arising from the PTA.

Method: A telephone survey collected data from parents whose children studied in a grade between Grades 4 and 9 in Hong Kong.

Results: The benefits of PTA membership and help were significant. However, the contribution of informal social capital to change in parenting efficacy was insignificant.

Discussion: Consequently, The benefit of the PTA is not attributable to informal social capital.

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1. Introduction

Promoting mutual support among schoolchildren's parents, notably through parent–teacher associations (PTAs) or parental organizations receives pervasive support from the governments of many modern societies (Hood, 1999; Norwood and Atkinson, 1997). Government officials and educators in many countries often regard the promotion as a cost-effective way to enhance parents' parenting efficacy, which in turn champions schoolchildren's academic achievement (CERI, 1997;

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Desimone, 1999; Edwards and Jo, 1999). Therefore, PTAs are prevalent in various countries, ranging from the United States (e.g., National PTA, with 5.7 million members), Britain (e.g., National Confederation of parent–teacher associations, representing 7 million parents), Japan (Knipprath, 2005), Pakistan (Educational International, 2003), and Hong Kong (Pang, 2005).

Conceivably, parents' mutual support constitutes social capital, which engender further benefits in sustaining social solidarity, social control, and societal stability (McNeal, 1999). Proponents of the development of social capital anticipate that social capital can create many externalities, beneficial not only to those gaining access to social capital but also to other people (Sampson et al., 1999). The advocacy of building social capital through parents' social capital, mutual support, and enrollment in PTAs, however, is not viable, effective, and justifiable according to critics. Notably, critics maintain that the viability and effectiveness of parents' social capital development hinge on the parents' socioeconomic status. Accordingly, only parents with higher status contribute to and benefit from the social capital in the PTA (de Carvalho, 2001; Desimone, 1999; Vincent, 1997). Similarly, critics assert that parents who are not congenial to the middle or upper class culture of the PTA would experience the PTA as a burden rather than a benefit. These critical views hold that the promotion of the PTA and parents' social capital development is not justifiable because many parents are incapable of offering support to the PTA and other parents. The controversy arising from diverse views about the contribution of parents' social capital is in need of empirical clarification, which the present study pursues.

The study aim is to gauge the influences of socioeconomic status and cultural backgrounds on creating and benefiting from social capital through the PTA. In this connection, social capital refers to resources inherent in a person's social networks that potentially help the person (Feuerstein, 2000; Coleman, 1988). It is distinguishable from a person's cultural capital, which is an essential part of the cultural background that comprises beliefs and lifestyles that are consonant with the surrounding culture (de Carvalho, 2001; Feuerstein, 2000). A common feature of capital is that it represents a resource that can convert into various resources and forms of capital to proliferate its benefit (Collier, 2002; Krishna and Uphoff, 2002).

1.1. Anticipated benefits from the PTA

Proponents of the PTA or partnership involving teachers and parents of schoolchildren maintain that the PTA is beneficial to all people, not just middle class members (Epstein, 2001). Moreover, proponents assert that the PTA helps lower class people more than helps those of higher classes, because disadvantaged parents have the greatest need for support from the PTA (Parker, 1999). As such, universal enrollment in the PTA is desirable to maximize social inclusion and help available from the PTA (Ho, 1999). The help, accordingly, would flow from parents' participation to the elevation of parents' concern for and assistance to their children and eventually children's academic outcomes (Rosier, 2001). The benefits would include gains in parents' attitudes and skills (Hornby, 2000). As such, the favorable view regards the PTA as indispensable to child achievement (Wanat, 1997), and is allegedly more important than money (Radd, 1993). The PTA thus represents an extended family network conducive to communal parenting (Diamond, 2003). The favorable view also regards parents as capable of contributing to the PTA, as their role is more enduring than that of teachers (Hood, 1999). More than accruing benefits to parents and children, the PTA would contribute to a vibrant and well-organized civil society, which takes care of citizens' interest independent of state intervention (Vincent, 1997).

There is no shortage of empirical findings in support of the favorable view of the PTA (Bradley et al., 1988; Cameron and Birnie-Lefcovitch, 2000; Epstein, 2001; Marcon, 1999; Melby and

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