

Student Developmental Needs Based Parent Partnership: A Case Study of Qilun Elementary School in Minhang District, Shanghai.

Jiacheng Li

East China Normal University
Shanghai, China

Peiyong Wang

Qilun Elementary School
Minhang District, Shanghai, China

Zhongxian Chen

East China Normal University
Shanghai, China

This case study reconsiders the value of parent partnerships from the perspectives of educational equity and quality in China, and develops a framework to discuss the relationship between student development and parent partnerships. The paper seeks to find out whether it is possible for disadvantaged parents to help a struggling school to reform itself through parent partnership. The research applies qualitative and quantitative research methods to explore the value of promoting student development with diversified parent/school activities. Research findings suggest that parent partnership in the case school have successfully provided a safe and healthy environment, abundant and diverse courses, student-based teaching and learning, and rich school lives for students. They also involve in school decision-making and create a better parent-child relationship.

Keywords: Students, parents, developmental needs, parent partnership.

China is experiencing a transformational period of soaring urbanization. Part of this phenomenon means that an increasing number of rural students are swarming into urban schools. In this context, parent partnerships play an important role in promoting educational equity and improving educational quality. It is our belief that, among all the values parent partnership has brought to school reform, promoting student development is the most important one while it is also the easiest one to be overlooked.

Especially in regard to academic problems and the required support for the children, parents of children with learning disabilities provide support throughout the school years, with the demands growing as the child grows and the parents feeling more stressed and less capable in assisting their children (Petterson & Mattson, 2007).

For this reason, we put forward such research questions: 1. What is the value of parent partnership in Chinese schools? 2. How can the parents with low SES involve into the schooling? 3. With equity and quality perspectives, how can one school fulfill the potential of parent partnership holistically?

To answer the questions, we take three steps. The first step is to develop a new framework of parent partnership with theoretical thinking, especially from the perspective of students' learning in school. Most of thinking is based on Chinese school reform, especially the *New Basic Education Project*.

The second step is to focus on one case study to find out the possibility of developing the parent partnership in such a diversified society, even for a struggling school and disadvantage parents. We cannot answer this question only by surveys, but the case study may be a better way for us in China today: if such schools can renew themselves, or such parents can involve into it, other schools and parents may be able to do it too.

The third step is to evaluate the achievements of students, conduct research in more schools, and keep reforming in the case school.

Current Research and Existing Problems

Parents and teachers are the most important people to a child or student's growth, and families and schools are the most crucial places. Therefore, parents and schools should work cooperatively on the development of the whole child (Smrekar & Cohen-Vogel, 2009; Epstein, 2009; Glasgow & Whitney, 2009; Grant & Ray, 2010; Li, 2013; Coleman, 2013). It has been pointed out that "our conceptions of what

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jiacheng LI, e-mail: jcli@dem.ecnu.edu.cn

families, schools, and communities are like or should be like are experiencing revolutionary paradigm shifts" (Swick, 2008: x).

Nowhere is this truer than in Shanghai, where contemporary school reform is causing a great need for parent partnerships. The diversity and complexity accompanying this need bring possibility and complexity. These partnerships happen in many ways. On an individual level, some teachers take parents as cooperators with whom they share the responsibility of rearing China's next generation. Classroom teachers and *banzhuren* (Chinese homeroom teachers) will do home visits, organize parent meetings, or invite parents to the school to act as visiting teachers. Communicating with parents about student development has become very important to Chinese teachers. On a school level, some schools provide parents with more opportunities to conduct equality dialogues and guarantee parents' rights in school decision-making (Li, 2010). Many schools are hosting open houses or back to school nights, providing tutoring services for parents, and forming parent-teacher committees and parent-volunteer groups. On a regional level, Shanghai in particular has made a commitment to promoting parent partnerships, primarily by forming "a system of school-family interaction which allows schools to actively take the challenges of the information age" by encouraging "schools to play an exemplary role in those new fields" home-school collaboration (Yin, 2011: 10). Schools in Foshan City, Guangdong Province have had particular success with partnership reform (Xie & Zhang, 2010; Zhang, 2012).

However, there is little research about what Chinese parents want from schools. Some researchers insist that parents do not have enough knowledge and information, which causes them to make irrational decisions about their children's lives in schools (Chen, 2013). Therefore, some educators have doubts about partnerships. Exacerbating the doubt is what Wu's (2012) research describes as a trend of parents being more concerned with their children's future occupations and social classes than they are with their children's values, interests and needs (Wu, 2012). It can become challenging when teachers' concerns differ from those of the parents in this regard.

At the school level, parents do not have many ways to participate in school leadership, classroom management, and assessment. Hu (2012: 17) remarks that

"The parents have no right to participate in deciding the education reform outside the school. At the same time, inside the school, parent involvement has been reduced to parent training because of unequal

status, asymmetric information and the great disparity in cultural capital. The relationship between parents and the school is only a top-down implementation of the will of power, and parents have been totally deprived of their participation right. "

As for policy making, Ye (2012) finds that the policy-makers have little awareness of parents' right to involvement during the process of rural schools' reform efforts (Ye, 2012). In 2012, MOE asked all the kindergartens and schools to set up parent committees, and recognized the committee's right to be involved in school leadership and management, classroom instruction, moral education, and relationship development activities between schools and families (MOE, 2012). So far, research shows that these parent committees do not work very well (Lewis, Bjork, Zhao & Chi, 2011; Zhao, 2012).

Generally speaking, research on parent partnership in China is in its early stages. But scholarship from other countries suggests that parent partnership is beneficial to student development (Hedlund, 2010). Epstein has pointed out that collaboration among schools, families, and communities must focus its attention on promoting students' development (Epstein, 2009). Chinese researchers also conclude that school reform should center on student development (Li, 2005; Li, 2006; Yuan & Li, 2012) because doing so will help improve educational quality and promote social equity. The problems of how to help, and if we hope to improve educational quality and promote social equity through parent partnership in China, there is an urgent need to continue studying how parents with different SES work together, and how parent partnerships benefit students .

Theory and Framework

We build on our theoretical foundations with evidence from the New Basic Education Project (NBEP), which has been conducted by professors, principals, and teachers in China since 1994. Through research (Ye, 2006, 2010) we have begun to develop what we are calling NBE theory about principles of teaching and learning, school leadership, school reform, the relationship between theory and practice, and philosophical foundation of education (Ye, 2006, 2010). We seek to develop our NBE theory in the areas of school reform and student development in this case study.

The first area of focus is student-centered school reform outside of the school. In the past, Chinese teachers always taught for test scores, principals managed the school with a top-down style, and students learned mainly by repeating

and memorizing. However, we are realizing that school reform must lead to student development, and seek that this new value of education for learning's sake should be fostered through schools (Li, 1996). By this reasoning, everything happening in school, including parent partnerships, should address issues of student development.

The second area of focus deals with reforms inside the school. At the classroom level, instructional reforms are being made by teachers, and classroom community development, or class-rooming, is being conducted by Banzhuren (Li, 2012; Li & Chen, 2013). Chinese school reform is not only focused on curriculum and instruction, but also on culture of the school, particularly as it is exemplified by classroom relationships, extracurricular clubs, ceremonies, school traditions, student government (Ye, 2006; Li, Wang & Li, 2009) and parent partnerships. We are recognizing that development of the whole student can be achieved through these activities.

The third focus is on the theory of student development. Just like the discussion on 21st century skills, NBE is developing its own theory, contextualized in China's educational reform (Ye, 2006). From this perspective, school reform should focus on the capability of doing and thinking, social and emotional development, and the awareness of learning in the lives of students. In this case study, we relate the thinking of student development to school reform areas, and begin to develop a framework. The components of the framework include a safe and healthy environment, diversified and colorful curriculum, student-based approaches to teaching and learning, planning activities that support the life of the school, school decision-making, and improvement of the parent-child relationship.

The fourth focus is trained on the theory of research-based school development. We consider research as a powerful tool for school reform. Meanwhile, we regard principals and teachers as researchers and school reform as a process based on inquiry, mainly conducted by educators (Ye, 2006). Educators should design the reform, solve the problems, assess the achievements, and engage in reflection.

Methods

We have been collaborating with each other for over 5 years, and have access to the school development documents, student observations, and parent feedback.

The reasons why we choose the case study are rooted in the following thinking. Firstly, we see this case as the beginning of our research project. In such an undeveloped area of Chinese research, many issues can be investigated. We choose the case study as the first methodology

we will use, and eventually build on with large scale survey research.

Secondly, we can achieve the main goals of our research through case study. From the perspective of student development and school reform, we need to know the potential that exists as well as the problems. So a good model is greatly needed. Case study will allow us to surface these issues.

Thirdly, the research can be applied to actual school reform efforts. We carried out this case study with the teachers and principal, with the view that the research will be beneficial to teachers' development, parent involvement and school improvement. We have confidence that engaging in research will make a difference in their professional learning.

The case school, Qilun Elementary School, was firstly established by a factory (Shanghai Steam Turbine Factory), and most of its students are children of factory workers. In 1997, the school was managed by local government and since 2007, student demographics have changed dramatically. Because development of the local district lagged behind greatly, the majority of local citizens gradually moved to downtown Shanghai. Local students were attracted by other schools in an area with a lot of new residential real estate development. With the advent of urbanization, it has become more common for Chinese migrant workers coming to cities with their whole family, and for their children to be accepted by the public schools. In September, 2008, the rate of students from rural migrant worker families in Qilun rose to more than 55%.

In September, 2012, we surveyed parents to find out parents expectations for their children's education. 470 copies of questionnaires were distributed and 462 copies of valid questionnaires were retrieved. In January, 2013, we conducted another survey to collect the data of parents' diversity, and satisfaction of parent partnership activities. 470 copies of questionnaires were distributed and 465 copies of valid questionnaires were retrieved. From 12th to 21st December 2012, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 6 male and 14 female parents. They were asked about their feelings and subsequent understanding after participation in school activities, as well as their sense of the value school activities had for students and the school.

Results

Parents with low SES

We have found through our research that Qilun is a typical school with great diversity. It is comprised of 18 classes with 470 students. The survey in January 2013 shows that over 73% students are migrant children from 18 provinces. Most of the parents are waiting for resources in some way. For example, their housing and

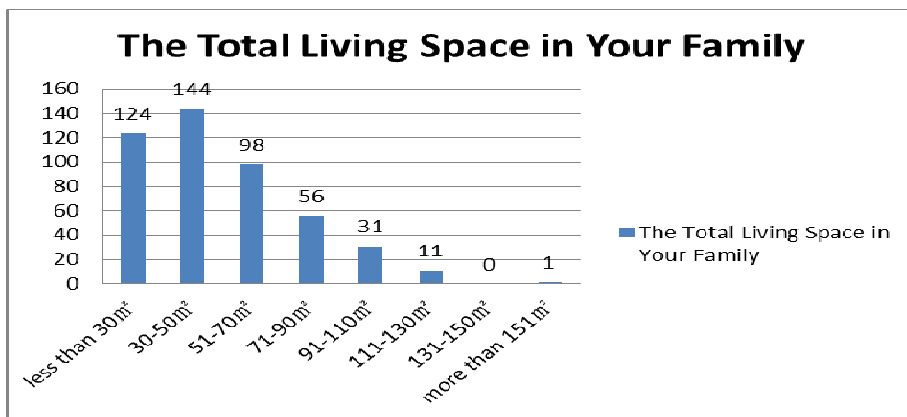


Figure 1 - The Total Living Space in Students' Families (N=465)

Table 1. The Resources in Students' Families (N=465)

Items	Number	Percent
An independent room	211	45.37%
An independent desk	465	100%
A quiet learning environment	308	66.32%
Classic literature	172	36.98%
Internet connection	212	45.59%
A computer	323	69.46%
Children's books	332	71.39%
Tape/video players	349	75.05%
A TV set	383	82.36%
A private car	120	25.80%
USB flash drive or mobile hard disk drive	199	42.79%
A subscription to a newspaper, journal or magazine	240	51.61%

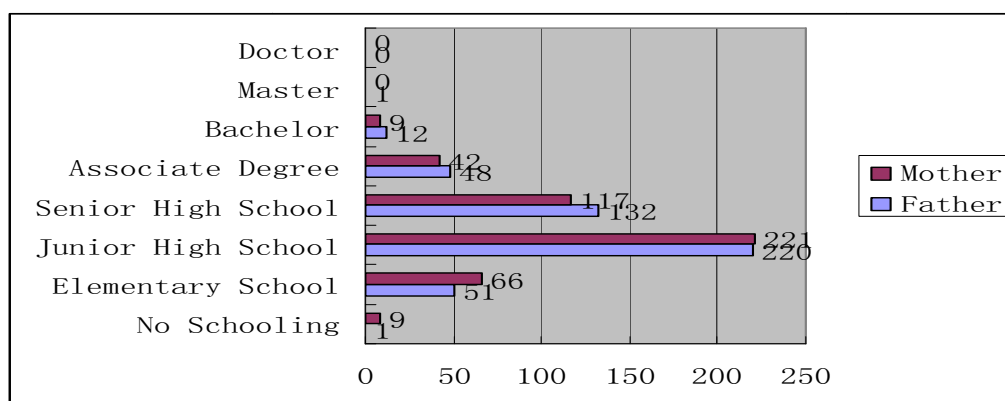


Figure 2 - Educational Background of Students' Fathers and Mothers, (Father=465), (Mother=464)

The survey shows that the majority of the parents have a junior high school level of

education, and that most of them are either petty dealers or working in factories.

Parents' Satisfaction

The January 2013 survey shows that parents value many types of partnership activities, and only a few parents have no access to the parent involvement.

Safe and Healthy Environment

Weidong Liu, one of the parent participants, said: "Our children are too young to protect themselves. I didn't think that the environment around schools were good enough—too many vehicles on the road. The tragedies happened in the United States and Henan province has rung the alarm bell for us" (December, 2012). At Qilun Elementary School, parents support the students in different ways.

The first way is by volunteering to be safe guards. The activity came from "Leave the Road for Children", a call put forward by Jie Guo, Deputy Director of the Parent Partnership Committee of Qilun, in September 2011. In this group, parent volunteers are recruited to form a team. Every weekday, between 7:30-8:00am and 4:30-5:30pm, 3 parents come to school to direct traffic. According to statistics from September, 2012, there have been more than 270 parent volunteers, almost 55.7% percent students' families, involved in it during the past semester. As a result of the activity, traffic jams in front of the school gates, once common, have virtually disappeared.

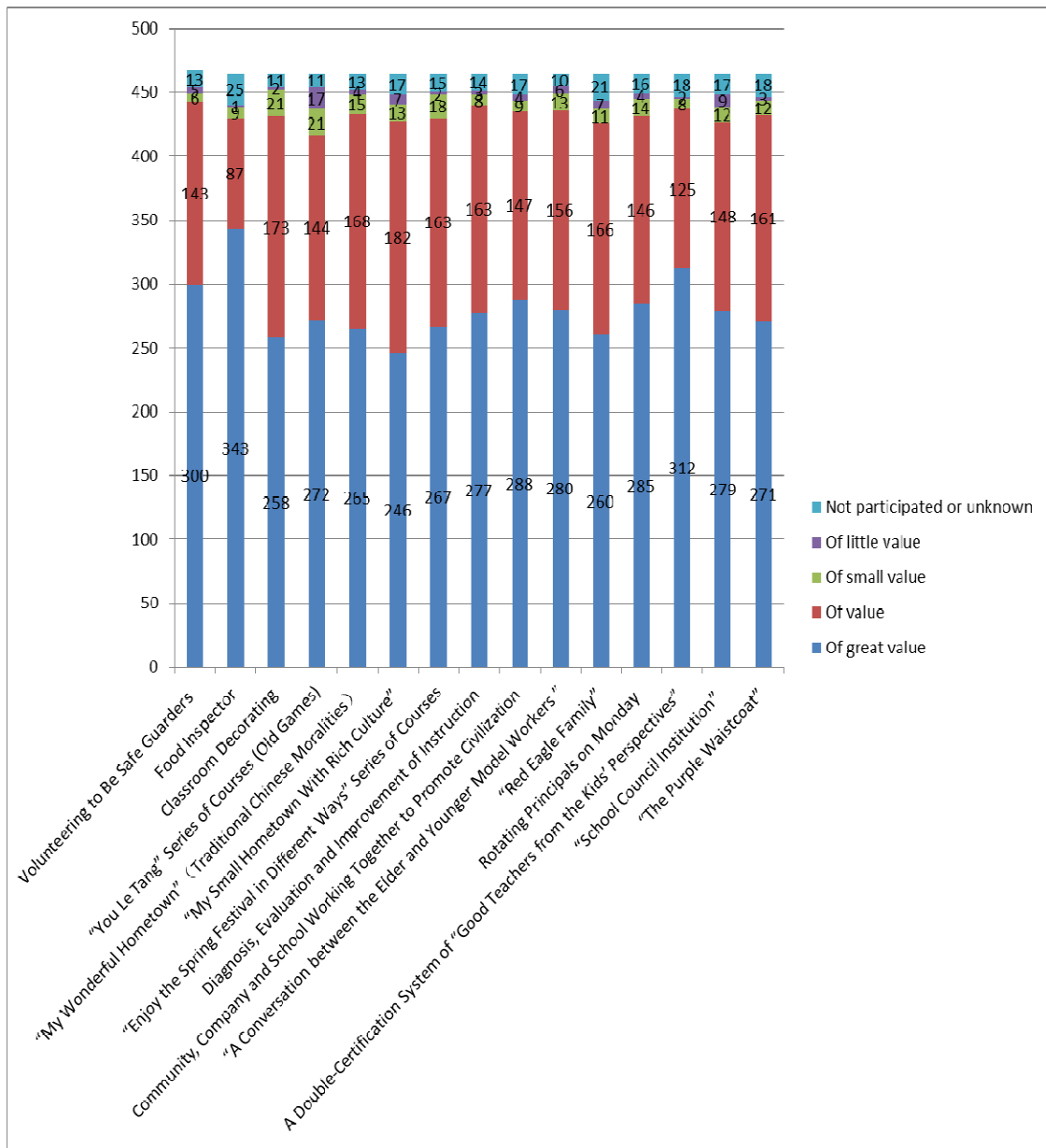


Figure 3 - The Evaluation of Parents Partnership by Parents (N=465)

Parents have also volunteered to be food inspectors. Since 2011, every Monday, "Rotating Principals", parents acting as temporal principles, come to the school to investigate the sanitation of the school canteen and the warehouse. In March 2012, one Rotating Principal found that there were sanitation problems in the warehouse and reported it to the principal, allowing the school to solve the problem right away.

The third way that parents participate is to be classroom decorators. Based on our September 2012 data, all parents of first grade students have access to the classroom for decorating purposes. Before school reform in China, it was the teachers' responsibility to decorate the classroom. But now, teachers and parents meet first and talk about what one participant explained as, "how to create a warm and welcoming classroom for the children." Parents know more about their children's interests and emotional development, and needs, and have provided many suggestions that have enhanced the learning environment throughout the school building for children.

A Diversified and Colorful Curriculum

School-based curriculum is greatly encouraged by the government and conducted by many schools. At Qilun, parents bring much to the curriculum.

The "You Le Tang" (Old Games) series of courses is one example of how parents have contributed to curriculum development. Parents in the Parent Partnership Committee all believe that kids can learn to work with each other through games. Parents also believe that games can also help children to have a better understanding of each other. Therefore, since 2009, parents have gradually put forward a series of activities known as the "You Le Tang" Curriculum. First, they asked every parent to write down their favorite games from childhood. Then, they held events or contests to encourage parents and their children to play the game together. In the playground, you would find fathers and sons work with each other to roll a hoop, mothers and daughters playing a traditional Chinese game called "drop the handkerchief", and whole families coming together to give performances.

The second way that parents have contributed is through the "Xiang Yun Tang" (Chinese Festivals) series of courses. In 2011, two parents suggested that the school should make full use of our Chinese traditional festivals to cultivate students' national consciousness. The suggestion was taken and put into practice soon thereafter. During the Qing Ming Festival, the school and parents hold a meeting, and tell children about the tales, customs and the meanings of the festivals. For example, during the Dragon Boat Festival, schools and parents hold a garden party, where they introduce traditional customs like eating Tzung Tzu, drinking Realgar wine,

hanging up Ay Tsao and tell children stories of the great patriotic poet—Qu Yuan.

The third way that parents participate in curriculum making is through "Enjoy the Spring Festival in Different Ways" Series of Courses. February 6th, 2012 was the Chinese Festival of Lanterns, and many parents were involved in the "Enjoy the Spring Festival in Different Ways" courses. Most of the children and parents had just celebrated the different traditions of the Chinese Spring Festival, and gathered at the campus to share different feelings and resources with all the children and parents. Six pavilions were built in the campus, turning the school grounds into a mini EXPO. Our interview with participant Mr. JieGuo is representative of many parents' reactions to this course. He shared that he valued the course greatly, and appreciated its value of developing children's awareness of the cultural diversity in our country (December, 2012). He was also very proud of his own child, who had no bias to other migrant students and learned from them.

Student-Based Teaching and Learning

In Chinese schools, parents have historically had little access to the instruction, but were always asked and even criticized by teachers to do more work with students' on their homework. The dialogue between teachers and parents on teaching and learning is an area that we still need to address.

At Qilun, the first thing parents can do is to help develop school activities. By the development of school-based curriculum, many teachers get ideas about how to weave the diverse cultural resources into teaching. For example, P.E. teachers conduct culturally relevant experiential learning with local games; art teachers' conduct many kinds of project based learning focusing on Chinese culture, including the arts of calligraphy and Chinese painting.

The second thing parents can contribute to is in the area of assessing, evaluating and improving instruction. Parents can help teachers to address questions like, how can we help students from different cultural backgrounds and social statuses intermingle with each other? How can we conduct teaching reform, which currently benefits native students, so that it meets the needs of migrant students as well? How can we help migrant students to be confident? All of these issues challenge the schools, teachers and parents in China. However, parents in Qilun now have many ways to collect information about teaching and learning in schools. Now : a) they can talk to the students; b) rotating principals can go to classrooms at any time; c) the parent partnership management committee has even designed a special assessment form for parents. Parents can express their opinions on the teaching process; teachers can also explain their teaching methods

to parents. This democratic process helps both teachers and parents to better understand teaching and learning, engage in shared reflection, and creates closer relationships between teachers and parents.

Jiemei Chen, one of the interviewed parents, spoke highly of parent evaluation efforts. She explained, "It (parent evaluation) could help us parents to know our children's school performance and teachers' teaching methods." Lilan Cai, another student's parent, said: "It is a good try to bring family education and school education together, to bring parents and teachers together. We are a unified one now, not two separate parts who are hostile to each other" (December, 2012).

School Lives' Planning and Conducting

School lives have a close relationship to students' social, emotional and academic development. At Qilun, quite a few projects have been conducted by parents and teachers. The first project was called "Collaboration between Companies and Schools for Student Development". Qilun worked with different businesses to provide chances for students to engage in social activities with their parents. In May, 2012, the school established an agricultural science education project, encouraging students to experience the fun of modern agriculture. In November, 2012, the "Parent Partnership Management Committee" cooperated with Min Zhong Company and volunteers from Intel's Research & Development center in the Asian-Pacific Region and SHANGHAI MITSUBISHI ELEVATOR CO. LTD to open a small garden in the campus which used organic compost to grow cucumbers, tomatoes and other vegetables. All of these activities not only provided chances for students to socialize with families and local business members, but also developed understanding of how to lead a healthy lifestyle for the students.

The second project was called the "Model Family" Project. On the first day of every June, the school will hold "Model Family" Project, where good parents and families will be celebrated by all the students and teachers. By now, the definition of "model family" has become increasingly rich: the model families can be good at reading, community service, environmental protection, self-help and so on.

School Decision-Making

Based on our research, we believe that parents should have more access to school decision-making for the wellbeing of children. At Qilun, the most important way for parents to get involved in school activities is to be Rotating Principals on Mondays. Every Monday, there will be one parent who acts as the "Rotating Principal" who will patrol the campus, go to classrooms to observe classes, investigate the

school canteen, and have conversations with students and teachers. To improve the quality of classroom assessment, they themselves design a series of texts like "the guidebook for class assessment", "the memorandum book for the interview", and "the best teacher in my eyes".

Sizhong Zhang, who was once a rotating principal, points out the value of this work (December, 2012):

First, it can help school leaders to find the blind spot in their daily work and eliminate the danger as soon as possible, thus creating a safe environment for the kids indirectly. Second, through this kind of activity, our children can see the work that we have done for them directly and feel how much we love them. It would help them to cherish what they have gotten. Third, this kind of activity also motivates teacher to work better, to find better teaching methods and to communicate more with parents. Finally, it is also a good chance and challenge for us (parents). Parents can get exercise from such kind of experience. More devoted parents can join the "Parent Partnership Management Committee" which will greatly improve the quality of our work.

Parents can conduct student questionnaires and run the Double-Certification System of "Good Teachers from the Kids' Perspectives" project. The questionnaire was drafted by Mr. Zhang, discussed and passed in the regular meeting of the "Parent Partnership Management Committee", and soon taken into practice.

The Improvement of the Parent-Child Relationship

Parents who actively take part in all kinds of school activities would subtly influence their children by setting up a role model for the kids. Studies from PISA show role models of parents have a lasting impact on children's development (OECD, 2012). Zhechen Guo from Class 2 Grade 4 wrote: "From my father, I understood that one should fulfill his promise and be a responsible person. My father is my role model and when I grow up in the future, I would like to be a person like my father who is responsible and always ready to help others" (September 2012).

New Understanding and Expectations of the Parents

The survey in January 2013 shows that parents in Qilun have their own understanding of education, and focus more on students'

During the semester reported here, 25% parents went to bookstores with kids over five times, 26% parents 3-4 times, and 42% parents 1-2 times. Over 59% parents discussed the important issues happened in the school or classroom with the kids over 3 times in this semester. Nearly 59% parent spent some money on kid's after-school tutoring for 1, 2 or even 3 subjects, and

Table 2 - The Parents' Understandings of Education (N=465)

<i>Items</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly disagree</i>
I am strongly dissatisfied with my child's state of development.	45	75	211	134
Children nowadays have heavy academic burden.	176	176	72	41
I don't have the chance or time to educate my child in the way I prefer.	44	117	191	113
I would think about sending my child to study abroad if condition permits.	136	115	106	108
I spare my time to accompany my child when he/she is doing his/her homework every day.	233	185	36	11

Table 3 - The Parents' Expectations on School

<i>Items</i>	<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly disagree</i>
School education should not only focus on marks, but on students' comprehensive quality.	346	113	5	1
The school education my child receives should have more changes.	145	233	73	14
I hope teachers will pay more attention to children's initiative in learning.	320	130	10	5
I hope the school to provide more chances to cultivate children's creativity	249	182	28	6
Schools should adopt multiple evaluation methods to evaluate students.	190	249	20	6
Teachers should spare more time for the students to speak in the classroom.	307	136	19	3
Schools or teachers should not organize extracurricular activities or class activities.	28	56	202	179
Teachers should think more about the needs that the future society requires students.	303	134	23	5
School teachers can learn something from our experience in educating the next generation.	117	233	102	13
In order to prepare for the examinations, subjects like music and painting can be sacrificed.	30	72	219	144

over 39% parents spent money on the development of kid's interests besides subjects learning (December, 2012).

At the same time, the parents are eager to involve into the schooling with high expectations on school reform.

Result and Discussion

From the research, we may answer the research questions in the following ways:

Firstly, parent partnerships should have a very close relationship with students' development. It

is a very important component of school reform. By relating the parent partnership to the learning environment, learning resources, learning process, and the relationship between parents and children, we have taken an important first step into future reform and research. Secondly, even

disadvantaged parents have the right, interest and ability to be involved in schooling, because they do have educational understandings and expectations. An educator should never deny parents' rights and the possibilities.

Thirdly, the parent partnership can be woven into the school holistically, and the principal and

teachers benefit from having a systematic thinking way about parent participation. In the context of school reform, parent partnership is closely related to the value, mission and direction of schools. New schooling is needed now, and parent partnership is an important, powerful, and indispensable part in the process of school transformation..

There is no doubt that the case of Qilun is established on the basis of its unique foundation of the students and parents and our study is limited by the time and methods, but it does draw some inspiration and reference to the reform of other schools. Under the context of contemporary Chinese social transformation with high requirement of equity and quality of education, parent partnership is very complicated, and more research and actions are needed in these areas.

It is necessary to have statistical evidence to establish empirical statistical correlations relevant to school reform; however, the most important considerations for Chinese schools at this moment are the reform of perspectives and orientations to teaching, learning, and partnership. This is evidenced with the case that we present here about diversified forms of parent partnerships, carrying out collaboration based on students' developmental needs, building up a unique parent-school collaboration that meets specific student and school needs, and promoting students' growth.

The parent-school collaborative activities can be smoothly carried out on the basis of related

organizations and the construction of collaborative mechanisms. Such organizations include not only the formal organizations which are built by the school and parents together, but informal organizations or groups which are established by the parents themselves. Therefore, parents' power can be integrated into the development of the school. Meantime, how to build up an operational mechanism for partnership, and make the organizations operate more efficiently are areas that need further study.

It is true that if there are no specific activities and rich relationships, there would be no benefits for students' healthy growth. During the whole process of the collaboration between schools and parents, the need to help students have their own perspective has become more important, and understanding of how to establish rich relationships among students is in urgent need of research.

We also need more awareness of ecology. When parents get involved into schooling, the two most important ecologies to students--family and school, are simultaneously informing the child's development. Furthermore, through this method, the school can consciously affect and promote parents' development. As a result, schools are positioned to create a good external environment for their own development.

Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful for funding support from MOE of PRC and ECNU (funding grant 11JJD880013 and 11JJD880034), the help from the parents and teachers of Qilun, the comments and advice from the two reviewers, and the proofread by Dr. Kami Patrizio from Virginia Tech.

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