A multiple-family group with youngsters who refuse to attend school: Learning and implications for School-Based Family Counseling

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This article reports the experience, knowledge, and skills of youngsters who refuse to go to school and their parents as documented through the use of a Narrative oriented multiple-family group in Hong Kong. The integration of a Narrative framework into the multiple-family group expanded the focus from inter-familial and intra-familial interactions to the interaction of the youth and their family members with the ideology of the school system. This expanded scope facilitates our understanding of the school system's participation in the problem. It adds a focus of social justice and enhances a reflective and reflexive practice of school-based family counseling. In addition to changes at the individual and family levels, modifications at the school level are also necessary to help students achieve success in school.

Keywords: Multiple-family group, Narrative approach, consulting the consultant, students who refuse to go to school, Hong Kong

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Introduction
School-based family counseling is defined by its focus on helping children succeed at school and overcome personal and interpersonal problems (Gerrard, 2008). Given these concerns, students who refuse to attend school deserve our attention with regard to the evidence that they are much more likely to drop out of school, resulting in negative long-term consequences (Kearney, 2008). However, there is scant discussion of the issue or its effective intervention in the school-based family counseling literature. This article reports the experience, knowledge, and skills of youngsters who refuse to go to school and their parents as documented through the use of a Narrative oriented multiple-family group in Hong Kong.

Education and the helping system for students who refuse to attend school in Hong Kong
As a Chinese society, education is strongly prioritized in Hong Kong (Cheng, 1998; Lee, 1996;

Salili & Lai, 2003). Students are under great pressure to perform well in school at the expense of their social development and emotional well-being (Salili, Lai & Leung, 2004). With these cultural attitudes, parents' responsibility for ensuring that their children attend school regularly is emphasized. The Education Ordinance (Cap 279, sections 74 and 78) empowers the Education Bureau to order a parent to send a child between the ages of 6 and 15 to school. Any parent who without reasonable cause fails to comply with an attendance order will be charged with an offence that carries a fine of HK$10,000 (US$1,250) and a prison sentence of three months (Education Ordinance, section 74). Schools must report all students who are continuously absent for seven days or more for whatever reason to the Nonattendance Cases Team of the Education Bureau (Education Bureau, 2009). Difficult cases which remain unresolved after six months will be referred to the Education Bureau's Internal Review Board so that they may take such actions as issuing warning letters and statutory attendance orders. Though the order has rarely been enforced as it is a fact that parents do their best to encourage their children to attend school, students' persistent school refusing behavior implies parental inadequacy or incompetence. As a result, a child's refusal to attend school could predict a stressful parental experience.

As a school-based service, school social work has the most immediate contact with students who refuse to attend school and their families. School social workers have a special role in parent education and in strengthening the linkage among students, families, schools, and communities (Working Group on Review of School Social Work Service, 1999). Qualitative data indicated that there is a dominant individual approach in their interventions. All intervention efforts are focused on the students with the purpose of pushing them to resume regular attendance (Lau, Tsang & Kwok, 2007). There is limited attention to the necessary support for the parents. The usual practice of those involved in the service delivery process is to refer those families in need of support to family services. Again, there is a dominant individual approach that aims at the amelioration of the parents' inadequate parenting. Furthermore, without adequate collaboration, services remain fragmented and overlapping interventions among multiple helpers occur (Lau, 2009).

In brief, students who refuse to attend school and their parents are perceived to be social deviants or failures as they fall short in meeting cultural and social expectations (Lau, 2011a). Similar to the situation of students who are excluded from school in New Zealand and their parents, their voices are rarely heard (Smith, 2011). To give voice to the parents of students who refuse to attend school, and to work with these families using a more empowering approach, a Narrative oriented multiple-family group with students and their parents was held.

Multiple-family group
A multiple-family group is defined as "A deliberate psychosocial intervention with two or more families present in the same room with a trained therapist for all or most of the sessions. Each participating family should have two or more family members that represent at least two generations in the family and are present for all or most of the sessions. Sessions should have an explicit focus on problems or concerns shared by all families in attendance. These focal problems should pertain directly and indirectly to cross-generational interaction. Sessions should implicitly or explicitly emphasize patterns of interfamilial interaction, as well as utilize actual or potential alliances among different families based on similarities of age, sex, focal problem or family roles." (O'Shea & Phelps, 1985, p. 573).

This method has inspired many practitioners in Europe, North America, and Asia (Asen & Scholz, 2010). It has also been found to have cross-cultural applicability (Bradley et al., 2006; Chien & Chan, 2004; Kratochwill et al., 2004; Xiong et al., 1994). Theoretically, it is based on systemic concepts and practices, and its defining feature is the presence of many families at the same time (Asen & Scholz, 2010). It facilitates families to learn from each other, building a support network to end their isolation and assist them in breaking away from chronically debilitating patterns of interaction (Rhodes, Gosbee & Madden, 2005). A decentralized position of the therapist minimizes the power difference between the families and the therapist. Furthermore, it helps to balance the intergenerational power as each family member has support from peers in the same generation and with common concerns (Mckay et al., 2002).

Applying multiple-family groups in school-based family counseling can be traced back to the 1960s (Durell, 1969). Its benefits for school counseling include utilizing the family system to aid students, providing opportunities for reaching a greater number of clients, and working collaboratively with other school personnel (Dombalis & Erchul, 1989). It has been applied to the facilitation of students' recovery from parental separation and divorce (Ziffer, Crawford & Penney-Wietor, 2007), the management of behavioral problems (Durell, 1969), and the prevention of drug abuse (McDonald et al., 1991; McDonald et al., 1997; Kratochwill et al., 2004; Kratochwill, et al., 2009).

In all of these projects, the school assumed a significant role in helping the students and their families. With Durell's (1969) project as the only exception, little attention was given to school-related issues in which the school may have been part of the problem. Even when negative interactions between the school and the students and their families were addressed, the emphasis was on changing the parents' perception and enhancing the acceptance of the school perspective (Durell, 1969). This risks the danger of subjugating the students' and their families' voices to the perspective of the school. To facilitate a more reflexive practice, the systemic framework has been expanded using a Narrative approach (White & Epston, 1990).

Integration of the Narrative approach into the systemic framework
The Narrative approach adopts a perspective of health and strengths that questions anthologizing and subjugating practices (Semmler & Williams, 2000). It addresses the power of cultural and social ideologies in shaping people's lives and self-identities. Narrative interventions focus on the construction of alternative stories that are more empowering, meaningful, and representative of the persons' lived experiences (White & Epston, 1990). The reauthorized stories and the empowered self-identity are sustained through the support of a network of "outsider witnesses" (White, 2007, p.186).

Asen (2002) explained how the concept of "outsider witnesses" expands the practice of multiple-family groups. "The individuals' and families' stories, relationships and identity become enriched by listening to the groups' retelling of these stories. The outsider witnesses—the other families—add to the person and families' Narrative resources by sharing experiences from their lives, triggered by the stories of the family in focus" (pp. 13-14). Rhodes, Gosbee & Madden (2005) adopted the Narrative technique of recruiting veteran families back into the process of therapy with new families. They also integrated Madigan and Epston's (1995) concept of

"community of concern" in the practice of multiple-family groups. The "community of concern" is derived from other families in similar circumstances, veteran families, and members of the families' social network who have reclaimed their own lives and successfully learned to deal with the problem (Rhodes, Gosbee & Madden, 2005).

With a systemic perspective, the practice of multiple-family groups facilitates alternative interaction patterns within families through mutual support among families (Lau, 2011b). Through integrating the Narrative approach, it also focuses on challenging oppressive social and cultural ideologies, enriching the participants' life stories through the exchange of life stories, and sustaining empowering identities through a "community of concern."

The Narrative oriented multiple-family group
It was an open group in which participating families could enter and exit at any stage of the group. A total of eight mothers, two fathers, and eight youngsters participated in the group. One couple came with their two daughters, both of whom had once refused to go to school, and a mother who participated in the group alone without her child. Participants came from eight families, with four veteran families and four families who were still struggling with the youngsters' school refusing behaviors. Five families maintained a regular attendance in the group while the other three families participated only in one or two of the sessions. Except for two of the students who refused to go to school during their senior year (Grade 12), the participating youngsters refused to go to school during their junior forms (Grades 7 to 10). Their school nonattendance lasted from half a year to several years.

The group met for a total of eleven sessions, including eight interview sessions, two social activities sessions, and one designation ceremony. Guided by the concept of "consulting your consultants" (Epston & White, 1992, p.17), the participating families were interviewed in the group to document the knowledge that had been generated by their past experiences. The other participating families served as the "outsider witnesses" (White, 2007) to the family being interviewed. The main theme of each session emerged from the sharing of the family being interviewed and the resonance among members to the sharing. In the designation ceremony, certificates were conferred on the participating members of the five families with regular attendance. They were designated to be consultants in the author's practice project with other families of children who refused to attend school.

With the participating families' written consent, all the interviews were taped and used as a resource for others in similar circumstances. Additionally, the interviews served as a source of training for school-based family practitioners, including school social workers, educational psychologists, guidance teachers, and family service workers. For a demonstration of the consultant interviews and the telling and retelling process after the interviews, please refer to Lau's article (2011b). The following sections document the experience and wisdom of the youngsters and their parents. To protect their privacy, pseudonyms were used. Implications of their experience for school-based family counseling will be addressed in the discussion section.

The path to school disaffection
Most of the youngsters shared that their disengagement from school had been a gradual process; it grew with an accumulated disappointment and estrangement. The following alienating factors

were most frequently echoed by the youngsters. The first factor was that school education in Hong Kong was too focused on the syllabus and examinations and ignored other needs of the students.

> *"The teachers just focused on the syllabus. The teachers treated my curiosity and questions on topics that did not strictly fall into the syllabus as irrelevant"* (Jason, age 19).

> *"The teachers just taught what was in the textbooks and the school pushed students to work hard by frequent tests"* (Kitty, age 14)

The second factor involves inhuman school regulations and the meritocracy of the school system.

> *"The rigid school regulations and my failure to gain a sense of recognition in the school served as a force pushing me out of the school…I perceived them to be extremely inhuman. They did not take into consideration the student's feeling and need for respect. I questioned a lot about the regulations that most students accepted without question. For instance: Why is there categorization of students according to their academic performance, and why do students with good academic performance usually get delegated with more power by being selected as school prefects?"* (Susan, age 18)

> *"For every minor mistake, we had to write the whole sentence repeatedly for correction"* (Kitty, age 14).

> *"Though there was unbearable pain for every step I took, the school refused to give me the necessary assistance such as allowing me to go to my classroom by using the lift. Some teachers even thought that I pretended to have the pain to get out of going to school"* (Tom, age 18. After a long process of diagnosis, he was found to have a broken spine.)

Parents shared similar observation on the inhuman culture and the meritocracy of the school system.

> *"Changing from a Chinese school to an English school, Betty had difficulties in understanding the teachers' lectures. She was labeled as an under-achiever. She was advised to seek for private tuition or changing school. It is her responsibility to accommodate herself to the school system."* (Lauren, mother of Quence and Betty) *"My daughter told me that a teacher called them rubbish because of their poor academic performance"* (Alice, who participated in the group alone)

Subtle competition and class difference among schoolmates also hindered development of satisfactory peer relationships and school engagement.

> *"It was hard to find a genuine relationship among classmates. They claimed they did not give any effort to revision, but in fact they worked extremely hard to outperform you"* (Kitty, age 14).

> *"The school required all students to learn to play a musical instrument. However, not every student had the resources to do so"* (Doris, age 16).

> *"Schoolmates in my previous school were detached from each other. I had to fight my*

own battle. ” (Betty, age 16)

Effects of the problem on the youngsters and their families

> *“Refusing to go to school is an unacceptable behavior in the society. All people including my parents perceived me as a deviant. They were blinded by their own socialization of the normative ideology that going to school is an obligation of a good child. They just couldn't understand that refusing to attend school may be a way of coping with underlying difficulties”* (Susan, age 18).

> *“All students are supposed to attend school regularly. I just couldn't understand why my two daughters refused to go to school. I tried my best to push them to go to school but all effort ended in vain. I just couldn't accept their behavior at the very beginning”* (Lauren, mother of Quence and Betty)

These statements vividly describe the social discourse of students who refuse to attend school and the barriers it creates in parent-child communication. It hit on the students' self-worth and many of them, including those who held a critical perspective on the school system, experienced a sense of personal failure.

> *“I knew people saw me as a failure, and I perceived myself as a failure as well”* (Jason, age 19).

> *“I always think I am totally useless and people around me kept on telling me that people who do not go to school are useless”* (Doris, age 16)

Together with self-blaming, it also caused depression.

> *“I was overwhelmed by the sense of uselessness. I felt that I was so ugly and I totally lost confidence in making contact with others”* (Barbara, 18-year-old).

At the other extreme, Susan's difficulties pushed her to adopt a totalizing perspective on the mainstream education system.

> *“I perceived that the mainstream education system was all negative and all other students were brainless slaves within the system”*.

The sense of failure and self-blaming was equally strong among the parents. Chinese parenting emphasizes parents' responsibility in training and governing the children's appropriate behaviors, including regular school attendance and good academic performance:

> *“There is an expectation that a successful mother should have an obedient child and should be able to help her son solve his problems”* (May, Jason's mother).

These cultural emphases caused the parents to perceive themselves as total failures. In addition to self-blaming, the problem also invited scorn from relatives.

> *“My extended family members always blamed me for my failure to motivate my daughter to resume schooling. Their blaming annoyed me very much”* (Jane, mother of Doris).

> *“They criticized me to be a submissive and spoiling mother”* (Debby, mother of Kitty).

The problem was also found to be powerful in triggering disagreement among family members and intensified family tensions. For example, it intensified the tension between Susan's mother and her mother-in-law due to their disagreement on how to cope with the problem. At the opposite end, Lauren experienced tension with her mother-in-law due to the latter's criticism of Betty for her refusal to go to school. The in-law relationship handicapped the husband, and put him in a difficult and ineffective role in the helping process. Through these divisive tactics, the problem prevented the family from becoming a united front (Lau, 2011b).

Skills and knowledge in overcoming the problem step by step
Some youngsters took a critical perspective on the dominant discourse that supported them to resist the subjugating power of a sense of failure.

> *"I would rather be perceived as a failure than go to school. I don't care how others label me. I got this label just because I act differently. I am the minority." "How do you get this perspective?" "I read a lot of books…I am a person with strong curiosity and motivation in learning. Furthermore, I believe that making a mistake or encountering failure is an inevitable or even valuable experience. Mistakes provide us opportunities to grow and learn. We have to accept them or even love them rather than escape from them"* (Jason, age 19).

Susan (age 18) overcame her totalizing perspective by accepting diversity.

> *"My new school encouraged students to have multiple perspectives. I have realized that meritocracy has motivated many students to work really hard in Hong Kong...The mainstream education system may fit for some students. I have to accept these as part of the reality. However, it should not be the only way…Instead of blindly forbidding students to do a lot of things, negotiation with the students in setting up reasonable school regulations will provide opportunities to educate them to take into multiple perspectives. It will create an entirely new school culture."*

Many of them emphasized the importance of family support.

> *"My parents could have given me up, but they didn't. A lot of parents gave up their children when they ran away from home and became defiant. My parents kept on looking for me and drew me back"* (Susan, age 18).

Susan also revealed that family counseling was useful.

> *"With the help of family counseling, we discussed the issues as a family. My parents began to understand my difficulties and rethink whether pushing me to go to school was the best solution or not."*

Jason, Quence, and Betty supported Susan's comment. Family counseling helped to calm down their parents. It enabled them to have more emotional space to sort out their problems.

There is also a special wisdom that comes from relating with depression or psychosomatic symptoms.

> *"Small successes such as being able to get up in the morning for a jog were extremely spirit-boosting and accumulated into the energy to make a real breakthrough…".*

> *"What if you failed to get up in the morning no matter how determined you were the night before?".* *"It always happened. I kept on trying and trying and finally I got up one day. It boosted my spirits, and then came another day of success within a shorter period, and then another day. Don't give up on your children because they cannot keep their promise. Disappointment will drag you down to hell. Keep your hope"* (Barbara, age 18).

Doris (age 16) shared that she gradually realized that her epileptic outbursts were a response to an evaluative and humiliating environment, both for her and her mother. The epileptic symptoms subsided when both she and her mother became more assertive in rebuking the humiliation.

Though they stopped going to school, most of the youngsters continued to study and learn. For instance, Susan passed the school examination by self-studying at home. She changed to another school at the start of the new school year. Doris also maintained self-study at home and later restarted schooling at an evening school. Kitty kept on attending Japanese class every week. Jason took many computer courses and developed computer engineering knowledge from books and web forums. An acquaintance in the forum offered him a job in the field of computer engineering.

For the parents, trust and faith in their children and a strength perspective carried them through the process. With strong faith in Tom and her observation of his pain and suffering, Cindy supported Tom by fighting forcefully with the school system as well as the education department. May resisted the sense of failure by focusing on Jason's strengths rather than his problems; she kept a self-voice that accepted her son's special choice, and this did not make her a failure. Selective disclosure to those who were really understanding and supportive helped to strengthen her self-voice. Meeting people with similar experiences was also empowering and hopeful. Rather than dragging her two daughters in the direction she desired, she learned to trust them, honor their pace and follow one step behind them in the process. These wisdoms were widely shared among the parents.

They also shared a common focus on the sustaining of a workable relationship with the youngsters.
> *"Though I scolded her verbally (for her night drifting and school refusal), I made soup for her and there was a bowl of soup waiting for her every night (Making nutritious soup is a love-showing and care giving gesture in Cantonese Chinese families)."* (Tina, mother of Susan)*" "Did it work?" "Yes, it worked"* (Susan, age 18).

> *"Gradually, I refrained from struggling with him over the schooling problem. If I allowed the problem to destroy our relationship, I would not be of any help to him at time when necessary"* (May, Mother of Jason)

Echoing the youngsters' experience, effective family counseling facilitated them in finding alternative ways out.
> *"It is important to have some place where you can ventilate your pain and anxiety, and have someone who can facilitate your mutual understanding, as well as to show us alternative ways and allow us to figure out our own way"*(Felix, Susan's father). *"The*

counselor gave me great support. The support helped me to have the capacity to accept my daughters and understand their difficulties" (Lauren, mother of Quence and Betty).

In addition to coping at the individual and family levels, the participants voiced the need for collective action to strive for a more humane education and school system. Felix and Susan actively participated in media interviews, with the hope of arousing public attention to problems in the education system through their stories. Cindy, mother of Tom who suffered from a broken spine, formed a concern or support group with other patients and parents who had encountered similar difficulties, to advocate for the improvement of the educational and medical systems.

Discussion and reflections

The need for a reorientation of practices in School-Based Family Counseling
In this group, families join in the role of "consultants" to the other families as well as the practitioners. It is a complete reorientation of the practice in traditional multiple-family groups in which members take on the role of patients or families with problems. The "consulting the consultant" (Epston & White, 1992, p.17) interviews documented their "insider" knowledge, wisdom, and coping skills developed through their special experiences. Sharing by participants informs school-based family counseling about the need for a more collaborative practice, and for being alert to the subtle parent-blaming attitude which is so prevalent among professionals. It advocates relating parents as persons and accepting them as partners with unique wisdom in our practice (Smith, 2011). In addition, it reminds us of the importance of a contextual understanding of the youngsters' difficulties, rather than simply perceiving them as deviants due to their refusal to attend school. This contextual understanding is a built-in perspective in school-based family counseling. With a broad systemic framework, it conceptualizes the student's problems in the context of all his or her interpersonal networks: family, peer group, classroom, school (teacher, principal, other students), and community (Evans & Carter, 1997; Gerrard, 2008).

The Narrative perspective expands the systemic perspective by addressing the influence of social ideologies and dominant social discourse. The Narrative approach also acknowledges that counseling or therapy is indeed a political endeavor that cannot be separated from the power relationships between students, parents, and the school system. Within this power structure, school-based family counselors can easily lose sight of the involvement of school systems or the meritocracy of the mainstream education system. Learning from the group calls for a reflective and reflexive practice in school-based family counseling.

Qualitative studies of students who refused to go to school found that these youth are usually "exiles" who are critical of the meritocratic ideology promoted by their schools. Nevertheless, their views are frequently disparaged as deviant and in some cases are conspicuously silenced (Fine & Rosenberg, 1983; Smyth & Hattam, 2001). The stories of youngsters in the group repeatedly echoed this finding. In working with these young people, "The focus should be on the social practices of adolescents challenging authorities over a perceived injustice or their unwillingness to accommodate to the social relations and definitions of knowledge that school legitimate" (Smyth & Hattam, 2001, p.406).

Instead of unilaterally helping students and parents understand the perspective of the school, a mediating approach is necessary to facilitate mutual understanding and effective negotiation

among students, parents, and school. In addition to individual and family changes, change at the school level is also necessary for facilitating students' success.

A model of sustainable developments
The concept of "consulting the consultant" (Epston & White, 1992, p.17) emphasizes the incorporation of the person with others in a familiar social world, recruitment of others in the celebration and acknowledgement of the person's arrival at a preferred destination or status in life, and circulation of their experiential knowledge. With the designation ceremony, the families were chosen to be consultants in the author's practice project with other families of children who refused to attend school. Some of them have already participated and contributed to the training of school-based family counselors, and to the author's work with families who are struggling with these difficulties. They also helped to rename the project to convey a more empowering image of families encountering difficulties. A website to post their stories was established with the help of the youngsters in the group, to maximize the accessibility of the stories to those with similar struggles and related helping professionals, as well as to expand the circle of outsider witnesses.

Through the group process, the participating families came to understand certain problems in the education system in Hong Kong, especially its overemphasis on syllabus and examination. A system that is more able to address the diversified learning needs of students was envisaged. They considered it necessary to have their voices heard on educational reform and ideological change. In addition to helping in training programs and therapy with individual families, they showed their readiness in taking collective action such as co-signing opinion letters and responding to consultation papers to advocate for necessary policy changes. All these movements expand clinical practice into a collective practice and demonstrate a model of sustainable development of practice and resources.

With this model, the practice of multiple-family groups serves the purpose of capacity building for the participating families in addition to a reduction of social isolation, a pooling of family resources, and an enhancement of family functioning. It also calls for a focus on social justice that is consistent with the mission of school-based family counseling in helping children succeed at school. The model expands the scope of school-based family counseling and facilitates its development into integrated practice, which includes multi-level interventions.

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