

Leading with Limited Resources: The Agency and Support Systems of Grassroots Parent Leaders

Parent leaders play an important role in supporting school improvement and student learning through their collaboration with principals and teachers, their memberships in formal organizations such as parent-teacher associations and advisory committees, and volunteerism for strengthening community partnerships. However, parent leadership has often been sidelined in educational research. Although existing parent engagement literature addresses this topic, much research remains focused on leadership roles taken by middle-class parents, which often overlooks the agency of disadvantaged parents and the enabling contexts that shape their engagement in schools and communities. The absence of research addressing school-linked parent leadership within disadvantaged communities leaves a gap in understanding how these parents engage in and demonstrate leadership in schools. To address this gap, the proposed study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the parent leadership dynamics from the perspectives of disadvantaged parents and educators. The study explores the motivation, challenges, and strategies of parent leaders from economically disadvantaged backgrounds while analyzing the support mechanisms that shape their leadership practices in Hong Kong primary schools. This research, focusing on the Hong Kong context, holds the promise of offering insights into these dynamics within East Asian cultures while expanding upon existing home-school partnership frameworks mostly established by Western literature. The study adopts a qualitatively oriented mixed-method (QOMM) case study design. To maximize diversity, 16 school cases will be selected based on three criteria: school socioeconomic levels, home-school collaboration levels, and geographical locations. Across the selected schools, interviews will be conducted with 50-80 economically disadvantaged parents active in school roles, along with 50-80 school leaders and teachers. As a comparison group, 10-15 parents from higher socioeconomic backgrounds will also be interviewed. Focus group interviews with 5-10 parents per school will explore shared experiences and group strategies for home-school collaboration. Observations will also be arranged at school events, meetings, and parent activities to gain insights into stakeholder interactions and contexts. To complement the qualitative data, surveys will be administered to parents, school principals, and teachers to capture the overall perspectives and practices in schools on issues such as parent engagement, support received, challenges faced, and satisfaction levels. Via a systematic analysis of the leadership experiences of economically disadvantaged parents, who are not typically recognized as leaders within the school community, the findings of this study are expected to offer insightful perspectives on how grassroots parents can influence educational leadership and foster proactive models for inclusive parent engagement in schools.