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**YOUNG SCHOOL DROPOUTS:
LEVELS OF INFLUENCE OF DIFFERENT SYSTEMS**

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‘(S)tudents who drop out are likely to be those who are unmotivated by their classwork; who have problems with either the school authorities, the police, or both; who skip classes or are often absent; who are pregnant or married; who are poor and must work; who have family problems; who have drug or alcohol problems; (McWhirter et al., 1998:97).

The above quotation illustrates the problems often associated with young school dropouts. In England, official statistics show that of the 2,917,639 day pupils of compulsory school age in maintained secondary schools in 1999/2000 school year, 1% of the students were classified as students with unauthorized absence. Although that percentage is not high, the actual number, 29,177, is alarming (Department of Education and Employment, 2001). This figure, to a certain extent, reveals the situation of young school dropouts in England. In the United States, the available data show that in 1996, ‘nearly half-a-million young people enrolled in 1995 left school by October 1996 without successfully completing a high school program’ (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997:1). This also reveals the severity of the problem of school dropouts among young people in the country. The then U. S. Secretary of Education, Richard W. Riley, commented that ‘(y)oung people at risk (school dropouts) shouldn’t just be left on their own to hang out on the streets. New attention needs to be paid to finding ways to encourage many more dropouts to drop back in to school so that they have a real chance at living a decent life. When young people drop out they do more than just giving up their education, they are too often giving up themselves’ (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997:2).

In Hong Kong, a Special Administrative Region of China with a total population approaching 7,000,000, the problem of school dropouts among young people has attracted much public attention. The official data provided by the Education Department of Hong Kong show that in the 1998/1999 school year, among 238,877 junior secondary students (S.1 – S.3), there was a dropout rate of 0.57%, that is, 1,362 students in number (Education Department, 1999). As in England, although the percentage is not high, the actual number of 1,362 deserves attention.

Studies have indicated that dropout rates are higher for students from families of low socioeconomic status, low family income, and from homes where there is an absence of learning materials and opportunities (Rumberger, 1983, Russell, 1986). Lamb (1994) reported the association of certain family backgrounds with school dropouts, e.g. father having a manual occupation, parents having little schooling, and low family income. All these relate to the functioning of the family. Medway and Cafferty (1992) indicated that the functioning of a family could be assessed from three dimensions: interdependence, homeostasis and adaptability. Interdependence of the family is its degree of supportiveness and differentiation, homeostasis indicates the equilibrium or balance of different aspects in the family (e.g. parental control, guidance and supervision, etc.), adaptability refers to the ability of the family to cope with changes. It is believed that the chance of presence of young school dropouts from families with high degree of interdependence, good homeostasis and high adaptability is relatively low.

School-related factors have also been associated with school dropouts. Henry and Roseth (1985) discovered that dropouts were generally less satisfied with school than those who remained in school. Lamb (1994) stated that inflexible school structures and poor teaching practices might contribute to students' dropping out of schools. Studies have found that lack of encouragement from teachers and

counsellors, disagreement with teachers and school administrators also contribute to young people dropping out of schools (Martin 1995; Jordan et al., 1996; Kasen and Cohen 1998). According to Tucson (1998), Janosz et al. (2000) and Galloway and Edwards (1992), three aspects of school have affected students' motivation of studying, and hence, dropping-out of school. They include school climate, students' commitment to schooling and school rules and regulations. School climate refers to different kinds of relationship in school (Tucson, 1998). Commitment to schooling refers to students' perceptions of school curriculum and schooling experience (Janosz et al., 2000). School rules and regulations basically imply the disciplinary practices in school (Galloway and Edwards, 1992).

On the other hand, peer acceptance has been noted as a significant factor in influencing young people's decisions to drop out from school. Caldwell and Wentzel (1997) stated that students who feel accepted by their peers at school are more capable of meeting academic challenges. In other words, rejection and negative peer group experiences at school are likely to erode the self-confidence level of adolescents and cause them to exhibit disruptive behaviours that are associated with dropping-out of school. Peer characteristics and behaviours are believed to be influential factors that cause students to drop out. Rumberger (1983) stated that friends of dropouts have more deviant behaviours, such as substance abuse and stealing. Most of them are also school dropouts or they have been expelled or suspended from school. A local study also indicated that relationships with peers influence students' decisions to drop out of school (HKFYG, 1994). The Hong Kong Playground Association study (1989) found that deviant activities (such as gambling and visiting billiard centres) among dropouts are more frequent than those of non-dropouts; and it was found that most of the friends of dropouts were themselves dropouts too. From the literature, three aspects of peers are significant to understand their influence on young people. They

are peer types (Youniss et al., 1994), peer culture (Adler, 1998) and peer functioning (Berndt, 1999). These aspects would be explored in the present study.

The literature has pointed out that the problem of young people dropping out of school is a multi-causal phenomenon (Elliott and Voss, 1974; Russell, 1986; Lecompt and Dworkin, 1991; Callison, 1994; Deudre and Gaskell, 1996; Edmondson and White, 1998; Kronick and Hargis, 1998). Employing a system perspective, the influential factors can be categorized as pertaining to different external systems including the family, school and peers of the dropouts. Each system also has its own internal dimensions, perceived as subsystems, that affect its functioning to fulfill an individual's (young person's in this context) needs and expectations. The following diagram (Diagram 1) illustrates the theoretical perspective employed in this study:

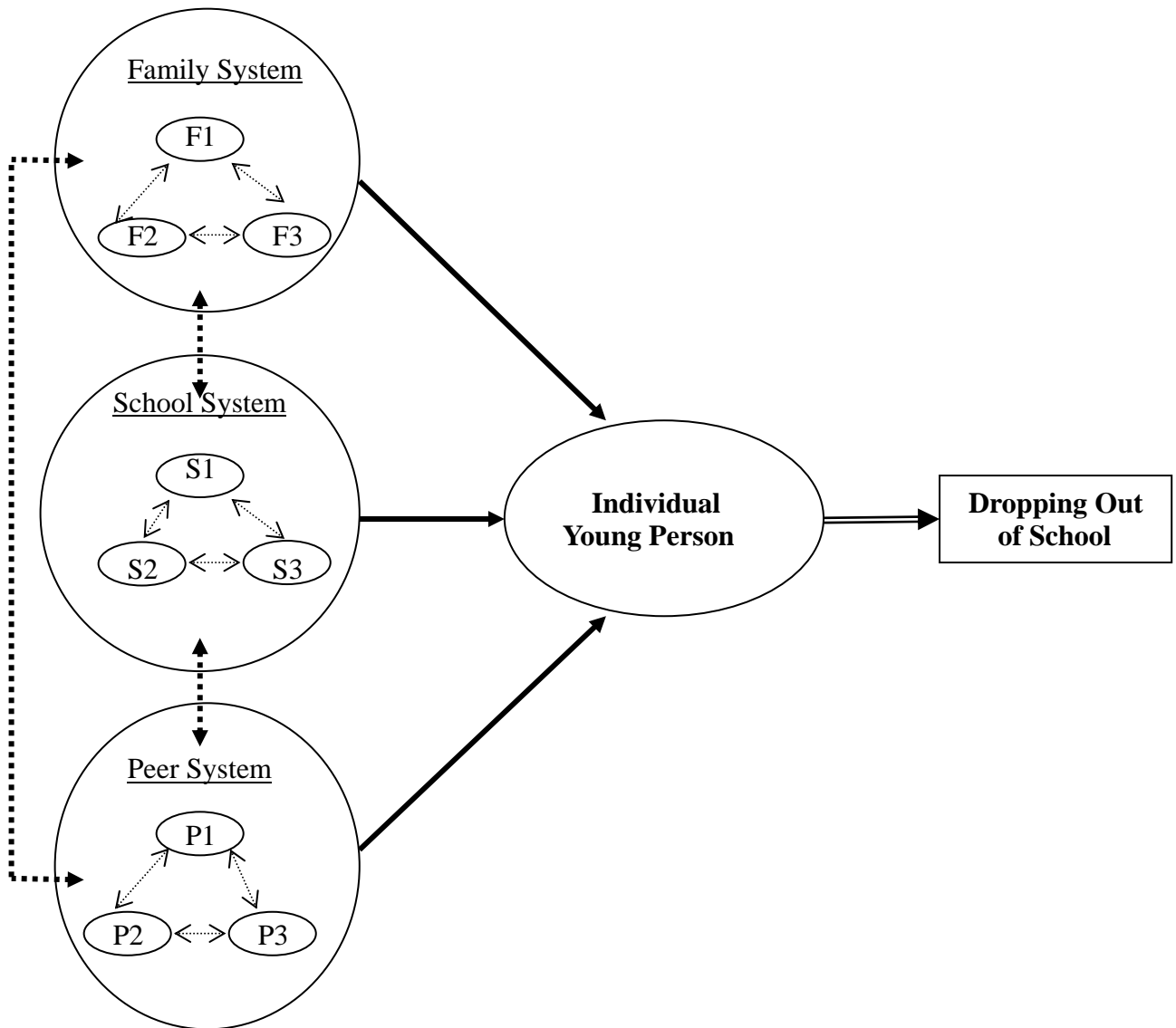


Diagram 1: System Perspective of School Dropout Behaviour

Legends

Family System

Subsystems: F1: Interdependence
 F2: Homeostasis
 F3: Adaptability

School System

Subsystems: S1: School Climate
 S2: Commitment to Schooling
 S3: Rules and Regulations

Peer System

Subsystems: P1: Peer Types
 P2: Peer Culture
 P3: Peer Functioning

—————> Relationships explored in this study
 <-----> Relationships not explored but believed to exist

The above model point to these social systems (i.e. family, school and peer,) that influence the school dropping out behaviour of an individual young person. Each system has subsystems of its own that interact with each other and those interactions

result in influences of the mother system on the individual. This study only explored the influence of the family, school and peer systems on an individual young person that might have resulted in his/her dropping out of school. Though the interactive effects among subsystems of different mother systems and the interactive effect of different mother systems are believed to exist, they were not investigated. As the levels of influence of different systems on school dropping-out behaviour of young people have never been investigated, this study aimed to explore the phenomena.

Methods

Fifteen schools were randomly selected from the sampling list of all Band 3¹ schools in the territory². A comparative research design was used in the study. Two targets – a school dropout (DO) (study subject) and a non-school dropout (NDO) (of same gender and form as the school dropout cohort) (control subject) – from each sampled school were interviewed with different pre-set interviewing schedules for collecting qualitative data. In total, 30 in-depth individual interviews (15 DOs and 15 NDOs) were conducted.

Each group consisted of 8 males and 7 females. The majority of the subjects were 14 years old (14). The level of their studies were S.1 (secondary one) (16) and S.2 (secondary two) (14). Eight DOs came from intact families, 6 from single-parent families and 1 lived with his grandmother. Nine NDOs came from intact families and 6 from single-parent families. Most DOs (12) reported that their academic results were bad and that they had failed in most or all subjects. Only one of them reported average academic results. These responses are quite different from those of the NDOs. Ten NDOs reported that they had average academic results. DOs reported more negative school behaviours than NDOs. Some behaviours of DOs put them in danger of running up against the law, for example, collecting

protection fees, stealing classmates' belongings and recruiting Triad members. However, some DOs participated in some healthy school activities, such as selling charity flags, joining ballgames and participating in extra-curricular activities. As expected, most DOs and NDOs (13 DOs and 14 NDOs) reported that they had peers of their same age. One point has to be noted. Most of the peers of DOs (13) share a similar behavioural pattern, that is, they are all dropouts that have truancy experiences. Only 2 DOs mentioned that their close peers were still at school, which is very different from NDOs. All of the close peers of NDOs were students attending school. Most DOs reported that taking drugs, selling pirated CDs, and being involved in gang fights were common in their peer groups. While NDOs reported more positive social activities, such as, 'singing Karaoke', 'playing ballgames', 'sharing and chatting with friends', and 'participating in social services'.

Results: Influence of Different Systems on School Dropping Out Behaviour

Family System

Interdependence (F1) refers to the relationship among family members and how they maintain intimacy and dependence among themselves. The degree of supportiveness, informational and emotional, and differentiation of family are the focal points.

Informational support: Nine DOs reported that their parents could not provide information or help solve their academic and daily life problems. Most of them said that their parents were unable to provide informational support when they sought advice or help from them. As most of the parents of DOs had themselves attained a low educational level or were uneducated, they faced difficulties in advising their children. DOs were 'lost' when they needed this kind of support from parents. Four DOs also shared that their

parents were too busy and one DO said that his father had to work almost 12 hours a day. Tiredness and inadequate knowledge hindered the quality of the knowledge support they were able to give their children.

DO2: ‘...when I face difficulties that neither my friends nor classmates can help solve, I have tried to seek advice from my parents. However, they can’t help me ‘cos they don’t know how to help ... I feel that they are indifferent to my affairs....’

DO11: ‘...they (parents) are not resourceful or helpful people, especially academically, because my parents are uneducated...they are too busy...they don’t want me to disturb them....’

However, 8 NDOs reported that their parents could provide informational support or help in solving their academic problems and difficulties in daily life situations. NDOs who had informational support from parents shared that their parents were able to help them academically and socially.

NDO6: ‘The homework is very difficult, when I have problems, I ask my father to help me... he is the manager of a business firm..., he is knowledgeable and helpful when I have problems...’

NDO10: ‘When I have problems, I seek help from my mother ‘cos she teaches at DGS (a reputable secondary school)... she can help me and teach me all the things... most of my friends like to seek help from her as well...’

Emotional support: Almost all DOs (13) reported that they were not satisfied with the emotional support they received from parents. They stated that their parents were not encouraging and were not at all supportive. Five DOs reported that their parents were unwilling to listen to their feelings when they were sad and lost. The parents only focused on their studying

and were not understanding. They gave no emotional support. The followings are some examples:

DO1: 'My father always compares my academic results with my older brother. It is so discouraging that I've made up my mind to quit school because I simply don't want this kind of comparison to happen anymore.'

DO4: '...every time I feel sad or face difficulties, I'm very scared and feel lonely. I don't think my parents care about me. They give no comfort, no support, and don't even chat with me. They don't love me. All they care about is my academic results...loneliness and sadness are my home life.'

This kind of discouragement not only caused the DOs to loose interest in their studies, but also intensified their feelings of not being supported by family members.

On the other hand, the kind of emotional support given by the families of NDOs is quite different from those of DOs. Encouragement and supportiveness can be found among NDOs' families. This is revealed by a description given by one NDO:

NDO5: 'When I'm unhappy or angry, my father always takes me for a walk. He talks to me, and plays games with me, such as having a basketball game...I feel my father understands me and knows how I feel...He gives me support and advice to solve my problems. I enjoy accompanying my father when I'm not feeling good....'

A majority of the DOs' families (12) are identified as having a low level of differentiation. We can explain this phenomenon of differentiation by examining the following two aspects.

Expectation of freedom, privacy and independence: All DOs expected their parents to give them freedom and independence. They wanted their parents to give them the freedom to choose their friends and the right to make decisions. However, DOs reported that their parents did not satisfy their needs for autonomy and independence.

DO6: 'My parents don't allow me to make any decisions on daily matters, such as hair and clothing style. They have a high level of control over me...'

Some DOs thought that their parents did not care about them but controlled their behaviour and exploited their freedom.

DO9: 'My parents have me report to them several times a day. They keep a close eye on my schooling and behaviour. I have no freedom... They don't care about me or show me any respect...'

DO2: '...my parents always secretly read my diary and listen to my phone calls...they don't respect me at all...'

In contrast, NDOs generally have more autonomy and privacy in the families.

NDO2: '...my parents allow me to decide on my choosing of studying subject in school. They said that my personal interests are most important...'

NDO4: 'I have my own room in the family. When I am talking over the phone with my friends, my parents won't disturb me and they will usually turn off the TV and go into their room.'

NDO7: '...my mother told me that I need to learn to make my own decisions on different aspects in life. She said that its time for me to learn to be responsible to my life and bear the consequences...'

Expectation of mutual communication: Most DOs did not want their parents to simply be material providers, but to be caregivers. However, most DOs' families, not only had rigid boundaries, but they also lacked mutual communication. Some DOs (6) pointed out that they felt there was a distance between themselves and their parents whom they feel neglect them. Their parents seldom shared their feelings and never asked about their daily life.

DO3: '...whenever I feel troubled, I always want to talk with my mother. But she is too occupied with her business and never has the ear to listen, so I just keep the problems myself.'

DO7: 'When I want to tell my father about how good I have played in the match, he always has a tired look. He told me not to trouble him because he has a hard day of work. So, no matter how exciting it has been, I never told him my daily life.'

But a majority of NDOs (10) said that they have good communication with their parents.

NDO1: 'I always tell my father if I have faced problems in school. He will discuss and analyze the situations with me patiently. He will also help me come up to different possible solutions. So I like to talk with him.'

NDO4: 'My parents are willing to listen to my experiences in school. No matter good or bad, they will listen attentively and give their opinions afterwards. When I want to tell my father about how good I have played in the I treasure their opinions.'

Most DOs' families have difficulties in maintaining interdependence relationships with one another, and the low level of supportiveness and differentiation has made

most DOs feel as if they are not cared for by their families and that they do not receive adequate support from them. A vicious cycle is formed in the families that further weakens its proper functioning in caring for children.

Homeostasis (F2) is significant in maintaining family functioning. Styles of parental control, and guidance and supervision are important components in maintaining the homeostasis of a family.

Parental control: Styles of parental control in the families of DOs were either rigid or laissez-faire. Some DOs face rigid parental control. They describe their parents as adopting an autocratic attitude to control their behaviour.

DO9: 'My parents set-up many rules, like they don't allow me come home late even when it is festival holiday. If I break the rules, my parents punish me in order to enforce the rules.'

DO12: 'My father said: "I have the right to make you do anything without giving reasons, I'm your father and you're my son, all you have to do is simply follow my decisions and that's all."'

DO15: '.....father decides the family matters on his own and no one has the power to object to him...'

While other DOs encounter a laissez-faire parental control style. Their parents seldom impose any rules over them. They exert considerably less parental control. Even if these parents impose rules or regulations, they make little impact on the DOs.

DO4: 'My parents set many regulations for me to follow, such as no smoking, being back home before midnight, and not letting me go out during exams...I never follow these regulations because they won't punish me even if I don't follow their rules.'

DO13: 'My father never cares about my behaviour. I can do whatever I like, I'm a free man in the family.'

Some parents of DOs exert inconsistent patterns of parental control. They mix rigidity with laissez-faire parenting patterns.

DO7: 'Sometimes over the holidays my parents don't make me get permission when I stay overnight with my friends, but sometimes they do so. If I forget to get permission, they punish me... their inconsistency confuse me.'

The data showed that almost half of the NDO families adopted an authoritative pattern of parental control. However, they allowed explanations for wrongdoings was reported in the interviews.

NDO7: 'My parents tell me the reasons before punishing me when I make mistakes...'

NDO10: 'If I violate the rules or I'm impolite in front of my elders, my parents ask me to apologize... and when we get home, they suggest the right ways and listen to my explanation.'

NDOs pointed out that this kind of parental control style gave them a clear picture of what they had done wrong.

Guidance and supervision: How parents provide guidance and supervision to children affects children's perceptions of the family and their performance in the social environment. However, we note that DOs have experienced unsatisfactory parental guidance and insufficient supervision.

Five DOs complained that their parents were too busy at work, and that they always have to stay at home alone after school. Even when their parents were at home, DOs felt that they were only concerned about their academic performance but not about their personal life. No suggestions or

recommendations were given to them except on academic-related matters.

DO7: 'My parents are very busy, they never try to talk to me or understand me...even I'm very unhappy or facing difficulties, they never try to assist me or provide me with guidance...all they care about is their business or how to earn money...'

DO11: 'My parents never provide concrete or proper guidance when I do something wrong... 'OK' is the only answer when I seek advice from them...however, this surely isn't an answer for me...'

While in the NDO group, we can notice a significant difference in parental guidance and supervision. Most NDOs pointed out that their parents are able to provide them with adequate guidance and supervision. They agreed that proper parental guidance and supervision help them judge what is right and what is wrong.

NDO14: 'My parents discussed the daily news and exchanged opinions with me.... this kind of discussion and guidance have extended my insights, and I enjoy it very much.'

We can conclude that most families of DOs have problems in maintaining homeostasis. Problems in styles of parental control and inadequate parental guidance and supervision have produced confusion as to how DOs should behave and perform. As such, conflicts, misunderstanding, disharmony and disequilibrium of the family result.

Adaptability (F3) refers to the family's ability to manage changes. This can be illustrated by a family's adaptability to new situations and their skill in addressing problems. However, it was found that the adaptability skills of DOs' families are rather weak.

Adaptability to new situations: DOs are in the stage of adolescence when

they have to fulfill different developmental tasks. These new situations require family members' support and understanding. Children face great changes when they enter secondary school. These changes bring pressure and feelings of stress. Almost all DOs reported they encountered problems at school.

DO5: 'I find the learning of the subjects taught difficult, I couldn't keep pace with the academic requirements and I find the homework heavy. I always scolded by the teachers...'

DO10: 'My relationship with most teachers is bad. I think they consider me as a bad student who cannot achieve what they expect.'

DO15: 'I have difficulty in making friends with my classmates. They think that I am a bully and don't want to make friend with me.'

Families can use the difficulties and changes faced by young people as chances to improve their relationships, thus increasing their understanding, mutual support and cohesion. However data from the DOs reveal that their families have less adaptability to respond to these changes. The following is a typical example:

DO8: 'When I try to tell my parents about how I find the school environment stressful, they just say "it's like that for everyone, and your situation's not special."'

However, the situation of the NDOs is somewhat different.

NDO8: 'When I have problems with my classmates in school, I will tell my mother and she will help me analyze the situation and find a solution so that I can be friend with my classmates again.'

NDO12: 'The homework from school is really heavy. Luckily, I have the encouragement and comfort from my mother who teaches me how to

do my work systematically with priority. She also teaches me how to manage my time more efficiently.'

Problem-solving skills: The methods parents use to handle the problems and changes they face reflect their ability to adapt to changes. In facing various changes, DOs reported that their parents did not offer proper solutions to help them overcome their problems. Most of the time, parents gave no suggestion to DOs, they simply used avoidance. Nearly all DOs (14) reported that they seldom seek help from parents when they face problems because they don't think their parents can help them solve the problems. Two typical responses from DOs are as follows:

DO5: 'When I told my parents my relationship problems with my friends, they offered no suggestion as to how I could handle them. They just told me to think out my own solutions.'

DO8: 'I had told my parents my frustrating experience in school. But they just said that it's my own problem and I have to face it myself.'

The families of NDOs are found to be more capable in dealing with familial difficulties and with the NDOs' problems. They apply more flexible and appropriate skills to handle crises. The following is an example:

NDO3: 'When I tell my mother about my problems with classmates, she listens to me and discusses possible solutions with me.'

None of the DOs reported that they would seek help from parents when they had problems while most NDOs (12, 80%) would consider their parents as problem-solving agents.

For the family system as a whole, the findings of this study show that, in terms of interdependence, homeostasis and adaptability, DOs' families are relatively weaker than NDOs' families. Although DOs and NDOs have similar expectations of the

family, such as providing care, guidance and supervision, support and understanding, etc., DOs' families are less functional in fulfilling their needs. These further contribute to the deterioration of DOs' relationships with parents and result in lower degree of satisfaction with the family system. The unfavourable family atmosphere, consciously or unconsciously, influence DOs' desires to quit school.

School System

School climate (S1) is the first subsystem to be discussed under the school system. In this aspect, DOs' relationships with teachers and classmates are examined.

Relationships with teachers: The relationship between teachers and students largely relies on two factors. The first factor is the degree of authoritativeness of teachers, and the second is the degree of fairness that teachers exhibit when they handle students' affairs. Nearly all DOs (13) reported having bad relationships with teachers who asserted high authority. They reported that teachers always punished them without understanding what had happened or without listening to their explanations.

DO9: 'I have a bad relationship with my class-mistress who always punished me without listening to my explanation. She used to find fault on me.'

To express their discontent, they sometimes openly provoked and insulted the teachers in front of the class. These acts caused the relationship between teachers and DOs to deteriorate, and inevitably resulted in further conflict.

For NDOs, the scenarios were somewhat different.

NDO10: 'My relationship with most teachers is good. I was appointed as the class-monitor by the class-master. Whenever there are some new extra-curricular activities, the responsible teachers would ask

me to announce them to the class and help recruitment.'

NDO5: 'I have a very good relationship with the English teacher. I like the subject very much and I have got good grades in the subject.'

Concerning the degree of fairness, DOs reported that they had poor relationships with the teachers who failed to treat students fairly. Some DOs complained that teachers favour students who attain better academic results and falsely accuse them simply because their school performance was not good. However, they maintained better relationships with teachers who treated students fairly.

DO8: 'The disciplinary teacher was unfair. He always found fault on me and punished me. He would think that it was me who bullied other schoolmates even though I was only a by-stander in the event.'

DO14: 'Since we played truancy in a group, it was unfair to only punish a few of us but not all the group.'

Relationships with classmates: Most DOs (12) reported having better relationships with their classmates, especially classmates who had the same academic results as theirs, or who had the habit of skipping class, or who felt they were being discriminated against by teachers. Emotional support, sharing and help offering can be found among these classmates.

DO1: 'I have a very good relationship with quite a number of classmates. We share similar interests, for examples, football, billiard, roller-blades, etc. We sometimes played truancy together.'

DO4: 'Man and Ho are my best friends in class. They supported me when I have conflicts with the teachers and comforted me when my examination results were not good.'

DOs enjoyed their relationships with these classmates. They always went

out together to have fun after school. However, most DOs (12) reported that they had problems in getting along with classmates who had good academic results or who ‘behaved properly’ at school. They reported facing discrimination from these classmates. This unfavourable climate made them dissatisfied with school life.

But NDOs have different experience and they usually have good relationship with their classmates.

NDO8: ‘In general, my relationship with most classmates is good, especially those who are diligent. We use to discuss things we don’t understand in the lessons after class.’

NDO11: ‘I have a good relationship with my classmates. We share similar study interest, and we study the subjects we like together after school.’

Commitment to schooling (S2) can be assessed by the young people’s perceptions of school curriculum and their schooling experience.

Perceptions of school curriculum: Most DOs (13) considered the school curricula too complicated. They thought that they were required to study too many subjects which were too academically orientated, boring and impractical.

DO6: ‘I found the subjects we studied in school were not interesting and too difficult to understand. I don’t know how they can be used in the real life.’

DO4: ‘The purpose of education is to prepare our future career. But I don’t know how we can be prepared with the education we received in school which I think quite impractical.’

For DOs, the heavy workload brought burdens and pressures that reduced

their interest in studying. They suggested that their motivation to study would have increased if the curriculum was improved. They wanted to study subjects that were more interesting and practical, and that were more activities-oriented, to keep pace with society and benefit their future career.

The perceptions of school curriculum of the NDOs are somehow different.

NDO6: 'I like the subjects we study in school, such as Mathematics. It can train up our logical thinking which I think would be very useful in our further career.'

DO4: 'I believe that "education prepares us for tomorrow". I think every subject we take in school has its value and can contribute in training our thinking ability.'

Schooling experience: Nine DOs reported that teachers used the group instruction style of teaching rather than giving individual direction. They reported that their teachers seldom gave them individual attention, even if they had problems or questions in learning. They also complained that their teachers only focused on their academic results but never appreciated the efforts they made. Some DOs further complained that their teachers hurt their self-esteem by openly insulting them in front of the class when they did not perform well on an examination.

DO5: 'I understand why the teachers are also frustrated in teaching the class because we are a huge class with 45 students. It is understandable, but not acceptable, why the teachers could not give us individual attention.'

DO15: 'I hate the teacher who taught us Chinese because once he insulted me in front of the class as I got bad grade in the test.'

Seven DOs reported that the classroom atmosphere was regimented, but

sometimes uncontrolled and disorganized. Although teachers or principals had the power to 'control' students, some DOs pointed out that the situation of classroom was always disorganized and teachers had problems in restoring order.

DO2: 'The class-master and the disciplinary teacher tried to control the class but failed. I think most of us could not catch up with the teaching of the teachers that why we were so unruly in class.'

Three DOs shared that their school focused much on academic results. They believed that the academic results of students directly affected teachers' promotions and the reputation of the schools. Teachers spent most of the time drilling students' examination skills. So as a whole, the schooling experience of DOs was negative.

DO8: 'The school favours students who perform well in examination. It can help the school build up its reputation. We are bad students, since we perform bad academically.'

DO10: 'Teachers are willing to spend time with good students to drill their examination skills after class. They would never spend time with us to discuss things taught but we don't understand.'

However, most NDOs had positive comments on the teaching style of their teachers. They shared that their teachers were quite encouraging to their studies. Their classes consisted not only of group discussions but also individual attention. Their teachers would teach them patiently after class if they had any problems. This teaching style had a positive influence on NDOs' motivation to study and increased their interest in learning.

NDO6: 'Teachers are willing to spend time with us after class to discuss about ways to improve our performance in examination. They are

also helpful in answering our questions concerning subject matters we don't understand in class. This surely encourages our putting of more effort on studying.'

So, in terms of their unfavourable perceptions of school curricula and schooling experience, DOs were not highly committed to their schooling.

Young people's views on the implementation of school rules and regulations (S3) is another important aspect to assess whether the school system has a positive or a negative impact on students.

Implementation of school rules and regulations: The most common rules and regulations in schools memorized by DOs include 'no food or drink in class' (15), 'no smoking in school' (13), 'no talking during lessons' (12), 'no dyed and gelled hair' (10), 'handing in homework on time' (9), 'good discipline' and 'following the regulations and instructions of teachers' (7). There were two different sets of opinions among DOs on classroom rules and regulations. Nine DOs shared that the rules were relatively strict and harsh to follow.

DO5: 'We are not allowed to gell our hair and go to school. I think it is not fair since it is the fashion of young people today.'

DO12: 'Sometimes the punishment from teachers was not reasonable, but we could not argue back as the school rules require us to obey teachers' decisions.'

On the other hand, some DOs considered school regulations quite loose. Those schools allowed them to do what they wanted unless they violated the law, and teachers were incapable of monitoring students' behaviours or they seldom controlled their behaviours.

DO2: 'Most teachers were unable to implement the school-rules and control the class. They used to requested students' cooperation to follow the

class order when there were visitors.'

DO8: 'Some teachers could not stop us from talking, so they just requested us to talk in lower voice.'

The inconsistency of school rules made students feel as if they did not know what to do or follow, and this further contributed to conflicts between teachers and students. This made DOs dissatisfied and they gradually lost their interest in school.

From the above, we can see that DOs' experiences of school climate, their commitment to schooling and their experiences of the school rule and regulation implementation were all unfavourable. All these negative school system experiences exert an unhelpful impact on their interest in schooling.

Peer System

One of the subsystems of the peer system to be examined is peer types (P1). Data show that the peer types of a majority of DOs (10) are mainly 'controversial'. The 'Controversial' type is clearly accepted by a sizeable number of peers, but at the same time, actively disliked by many others (Medway & Cafferty, 1992).

DO3, DO6 and DO13: 'Many people don't like us. Everything we say and do is never accepted by them, but there is also a group of people who buy our ideas and accept our behaviour.'

Some DOs (3) described their peer type as 'isolated'/'negligence'. They are neither actively liked nor disliked but are ignored by their peers (Medway & Cafferty, 1992). DOs with this type of peers described themselves as 'invisible'. They said that they had no influential power in decision-making when they joined in school activities.

DO5: 'We did not have any influence over the decisions of our class. Our opinions were usually ignored. We felt like invisible.'

But, two DOs reported that they belong to peer groups that could be categorized as the

'popular' group. They described their peers in the 'popular' groups as being well liked by others. They had the power to make decisions. Many peers respected them and followed their instructions. This sense of achievement and respect increased their satisfaction in these peer groups. They shared that they enjoyed their peer life and admitted that they had to pay a lot of attention and try their best to perform well in order to maintain their in-group status. However, most NDOs (12) would regard their peer groups as 'popular' type which are well liked.

Peer culture (P2) is another subsystem examined. Most DOs (13) had peers of similar educational attainment level as theirs, and they normally have similar behavioural patterns, that is they too are dropouts or have experienced truancy. Only 2 DOs mentioned that their close peers were still in school. Eight DOs reported that some of their friends were Triad members. The activities of DOs with their peers can be categorized as pro-social and anti-social. On one hand, 'having ballgames' and 'sharing and talking among friends' are common activities of DOs. However, they also reported a number of anti-social activities, which have them running up against the law, such as 'shoplifting', 'selling pirated CDs', 'being involved in gang fights' and 'taking drug', etc. DOs also shared similar attitudes on schooling of their peers which are mainly indifferent and 'don't care less'.

DO8: 'We did not like to go to school. It was useless and boring. We just went to school because our parents wanted us to do so and we don't know the meaning.'

DO10: 'We wouldn't feel upset when we failed in the examinations. It was expected. The subjects we learned were not interesting and impractical. We all have the same feelings.'

On the other hand, the peer culture of the NDOs is somewhat different. It has a positive view on schooling and many of their activities are pro-social.

NDO9: 'We find the subjects taught in school interesting and thought provoking. We enjoy the lessons and have put much effort in studying.'

NDO13: 'The usual activities we have are playing footballs, talking through ICQ, joining the programmes of the community centers, etc.'

In this study, peer functioning (P3) is assessed by peer support and the quality of relationship.

Peer support: All DOs reported that they had frequent interaction with their close peers. A majority of DOs (9) reported that they met with their close peers everyday and some even stayed together overnight 3 to 4 times per week. Feeling unhappy and lonely, seeking fun or avoiding conflicts at home led them to their peers for companionship and support. Some common topics of DOs and their peers were dating, playing, singing and bullying others. Sometimes, they shared with each other and had in-depth conversations, but this was a relatively rare situation for male DOs. DOs reported that the kinds of support provided by their peers included material and emotional. Money, clothes, meals, and drugs were materials supplied by peers. When they felt sad or faced difficulties, most of their peers would try their best to help them and accompany them the whole night. These indicate that the peer system can satisfy their material and emotional needs which other systems might not be able to. A typical example of DOs' view on the peer support is as follow:

DOI: 'I quarreled with my father that night and ran away from home. I told Ming (a close my friend) about that and he immediate came to accompany me. He even asked me to go to his place to stay for the night. He has the kind of brotherhood spirit we treasure'

There are also some examples of peer support given by NDOs. But the contents are different.

NDO7: 'When I have problems with the subjects taught in school, I use to call Hoi (a close classmate) and ask for help. He usually would discuss with me about the subjects and we usually will find the answers. I think Hoi has given me a great support.'

NDO9: 'When I have a quarrel with my boyfriend, I will call May (a close friend) and tell her the problem. She will patiently listen to me and suggest ways that I can use to compromise with him.'

Quality of peer relationships: There is gender difference in the communication patterns of DOs with their friends. Female DOs were found to be more willing to share their feelings with their peers. Conversations between female DOs and their friends were mainly concerned with emotions, sadness and worries. Their relationships were close and personal. However, male DOs felt ashamed to express their feelings and considered it useless to share their worries and sadness with their peers. Thus more superficial conversations were found in male groups.

DO7 (Male): 'When I'm unhappy, I play ballgames or TV games... Sharing? No, I'm a boy, crying and sharing with friends will make me loose face! I don't share and talk to my friends.... I solve things by myself...'

DO8 (Female): 'When I'm unhappy, I call my friends to go out. I cry and talk and talk, tell them why I'm sad. They support me and never refuse to help me when I have problems...'

Although the conversations of male DOs and their friends was rather superficial, they reported that they still felt mutual support and understanding

among themselves. A cigarette or a bottle of beer showed support. They all agreed that these feelings consolidated their friendship and 'brotherhood'. This kind of support and cohesion can also be found in female DOs and their peers. Most female DOs reported that they always acted or cried together if one of their members was unhappy. Some female DOs said that they couldn't find this kind of support from their families.

NDOs have the same quality of peer relationships. Both DOs and NDOs enjoy good peer functioning that includes emotional and material support. This positively felt peer relationship contributes to the high degree of cohesion in their peer groups. They enjoy a high degree of satisfaction in their peer life. Compared to the family and school systems, the peer system is the only positively felt social system. All DOs were satisfied with their peer relationships. They described their peers as friendly and trustworthy, supportive, understanding and always gave a helping hand.

Peers influence on dropping out behaviour: The data from DOs indicate that peers play an immediate role in influencing their dropping out behaviour. DOs enjoy peer relationships based on companionship, respect, fun and understanding, and suggestions and recommendations from peers do play an important role in the decision-making processes of DOs. Peers' direct suggestions to terminate school immediately contribute to decisions of DOs to leave school. Nearly all DOs (14) shared that peer persuasion or suggestion caused them to drop out of school.

DO5: 'Most of my friends are dropouts. They always tried to persuade me to runaway from school and play with them. At the very beginning, I refused their 'suggestion', however, after several times, I began to be impressed by their enthusiasm, then, I dropped out of school...'

DO8: '...my friends told me to quit school, so I quit.... In fact, my friends

always expressed their enjoyment and freedom when they didn't need to go to school. I admired that situation so much.'

DO11: '...the reason I quit school was because my friends told me to quit and I followed them to earn money by selling 'lo-fan' (pirated CDs) and 'see-yin' (smuggled cigarettes). They always claimed that school was boring and a waste of time. Also they faced discrimination from school so they don't enjoy it. They shared that they can have a luxurious life when they quit school and help their 'big brother' (from the Triad) to run the 'business'. When I heard this, I decided to follow my friends and, so, I dropped out of school...'

The data also reveal that the experience of truancy with peers also has direct effects that lead DOs to decide to drop out of school. Eight DOs shared that they were truants before they dropped out of school. They enjoyed the experience of freedom, fun-seeking, and accompanying friends for a whole day when they 'escaped' from school.

DO4: 'The experience of truancy is great, I can go out with my friends all day, sing karaoke, wander around and do anything. I can't enjoy this kind of freedom and fun when I go to school...'

DO7: 'I quit school because I enjoy freedom and fun-seeking with my friends.... I can see my friends for the whole day, talking, smoking, and playing in the playground... even if we don't do anything, I enjoy freedom and companionship I get being with them...'

We can see that peers do play an immediate role that influences on dropping out behaviour of DOs. Since the peer system provides 'positive' feelings to DOs compared with other systems, suggestions and persuasion made by

peers have a direct/instant influence on DOs in the course of their dropping out of school.

Discussion: Causes of School Dropping out Behaviour: Levels of Influence of Different Systems

From birth, family plays the role of prime socialization agent, responsible for nurturing personalities, teaching rules and norms, problem-solving skills and fulfilling the need of intimacy. Prior to entering school, family bears the responsibility for different primitive functions, such as providing material and emotional support, disciplining and giving guidance, etc. to young members. The families of DOs may not successfully play these roles. Data in the previous section show that DOs have negative perceptions of their families. Their expectations of their families are not met. They have experienced a lower degree of interdependence, homeostasis and adaptability in their families. Their negative family perceptions further deteriorate when they enter school. As a whole, the family system has a distal effect on the school dropping out behaviour of DOs.

Schooling is an important channel where individuals acquire confidence and build up self-esteem through positive experiences. These are paramount in the growth of teenagers. During the transitional period, that is, when youngsters enter into secondary school, they face all kinds of stress brought about by the new environment, such as coping with new inter-personal relationships with classmates and teachers, and a new school curriculum, etc. Thus, it is important for school to be a supportive agent in order the positive feelings of students to prosper. If students constantly face setbacks that contribute to academic and interpersonal failures, negative perceptions of school will be generated. This greatly reduces their motivation to study while also gradually eroding their confidence. Ultimately, their

commitment to their schooling fades and they use truancy or dropping out as an option to express their dissatisfaction. This is exactly the case of the DOs. Their self-esteem and self-confidence were ruined when they failed to meet the academic requirements. Thus, school became a negative social system where they were most familiar with failure and frustration. So when another more approachable system emerges, they are easily attracted to it and they consider leaving school to disengage from all the negative aspects they have experienced. The school system, therefore, exerts a predisposing effect on the school dropping out behaviour of young people.

Peers are the most significant influential force for adolescents. The present study has shown that it is also the only positively felt social system for DOs. Peers fulfill expectations that are not satisfied by the other two social systems. In their experiences with peers, DOs have a sense of belongings, freedom and power that make them feel respected, happy, understood and supported while having fun and sharing. The peer system enhances DOs' self-esteem and self-confidence. Positive peer feelings gradually take on an important place in the DOs' world. When DOs have problems or difficulties or decisions to make, they listen and value their peers' opinions most. As revealed in this study, most DOs drop out of school because their peers suggested or persuaded them to do so. Obviously, the peer system exerts an immediate effect on the dropping out behaviour of young people.

As a conclusion to this study, different levels of influence from different external social systems, namely the family, school and peer systems, are identified. The family system has a distal effect, the school system has a predisposing effect, and the peer system has an immediate effect on the school dropping out behaviour of young people. The distal effect connotes a more remote and underlying influence. The predisposing effect means a closer scene and background that set up more immediate actions. The immediate effect signifies an instant influence. The following model

(Diagram 2), which is an improved version of Diagram 1, illustrates the relationships and influences among the different systems that cause the school dropping out behaviour of young people.

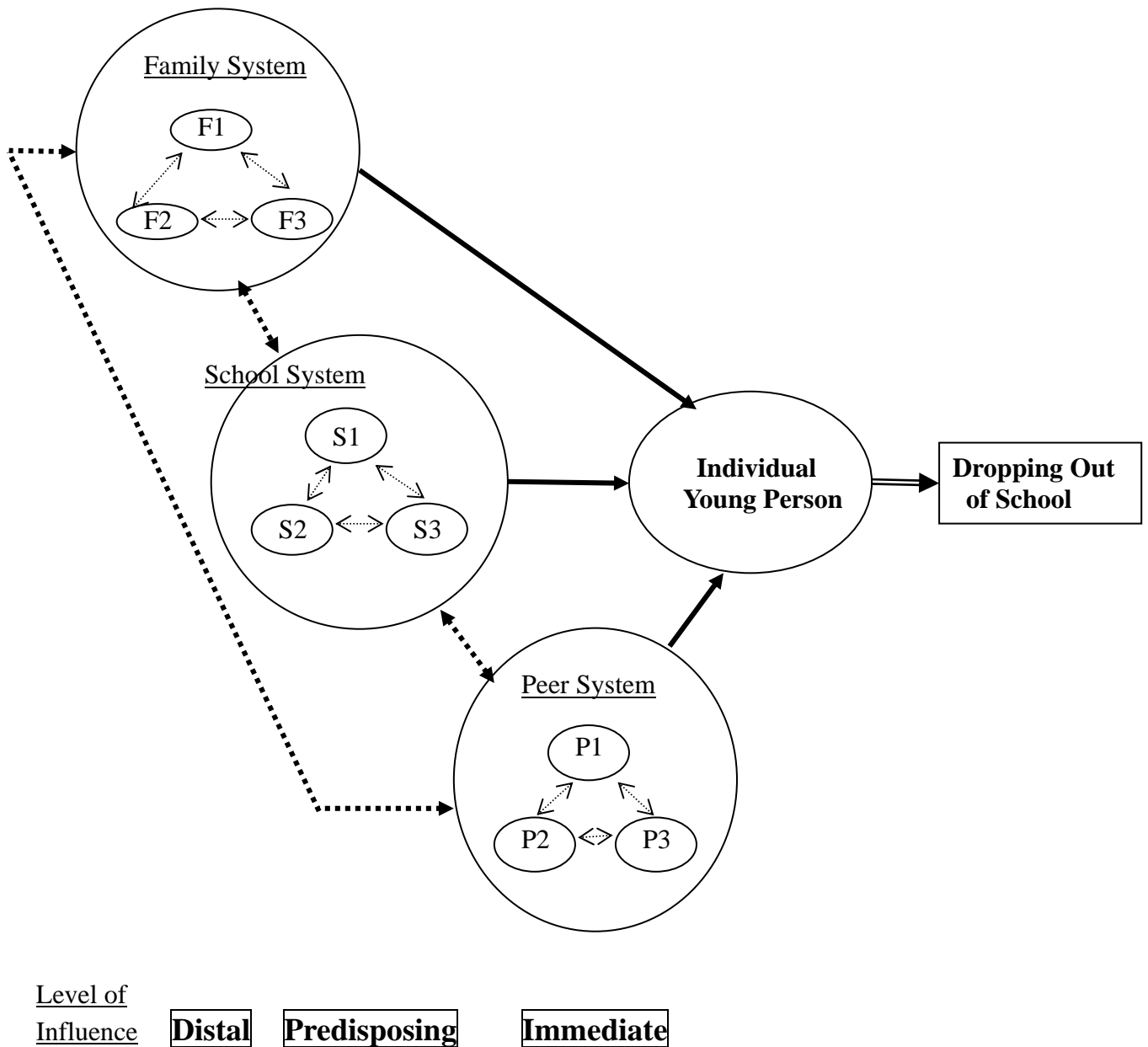


Diagram 2: System Perspective of School Dropping out Behaviour of Young People

Recommendations: Policy Implications for Prevention of School Dropouts

This study has identified different levels of influence from different social

systems on the school dropping out behaviour of young people. In order to prevent the problem from worsening, the following recommendations of policy implications are offered.

On Family

- (1) Strengthening the interdependence of the family system: To improve the relationships among family members, strengthening the interdependence of a family is a priority. Programmes should be provided by social services to teach parents how to appropriately show support and concern for their children's lives, but not only emphasizing their academic expectations. Focus should also be put on how to achieve mutual communication where parents and children can exchange ideas and opinions.
- (2) Training for effective parenting and disciplining skills: To improve homeostasis in the family, proper parenting styles and disciplining skills should be adopted. If parents ultimately decide to exert punishment, justifiable reasons should be given. Social services can offer different skills training, talks and workshops to help parents attain the right knowledge and proper skills.
- (3) Increase adaptability: Both parents and children need to prepare for and acquire skills to cope with changes, especially when the children reach adolescence. Educating parents on the physical, psychological and social changes experienced by their children in adolescence is necessary. Parents should allow and show respect for their children's privacy. Families should always be ready to offer assistance when their children encounter difficulties/problems. Again, social services have a key role to play in educating and training parents about these attitudes and skills.

On School

- (1) Creating a positive school climate: In this study, DOs commented that teachers

were not friendly and often enforced discipline and punishment unfairly. In order to ensure a supportive school atmosphere, teachers have to be friendly, fair and approachable. They need to spend more outside class time with students in order to understand their wants and needs, and feeling. Building positive and trusting relationships with students is a way to create a positive school atmosphere. The school administration has an important role to play in creating this climate.

(2) Enhancing commitment to schooling: Some DOs mentioned that the school curriculum was boring and impractical, greatly reducing their interest in study. In order to increase students' interest in study and commitment to schooling, some measures should be taken. For example, reducing class size, designing a creative and practical curriculum, and updating teaching methods/instrument, etc. Besides, communication skills, problem-solving skills and self-management skills should be taught to students so that their self-competence can be enhanced. By implementation of these measures, it is believed that students' commitment to schooling can be increased. The Education Department and schools concerned should spend more effort to achieve these.

(3) Enforcing fair school rules and regulations: Most DOs reported that they were treated unfairly when they violated school rules or regulations. Inconsistency in the application of school rules and standards creates dissatisfaction and sharpens conflicts between teachers and students. School rules and regulations need to be applied fairly. School administration should investigate into the situation in their school and make sure that school-rules are enforced fairly.

On Peer

Enhancing the positive strengths of the peer system: This study has shown that the peer system is the only positively felt social system that can satisfy most of the needs of DOs. It serves as an immediate help agent and also exerts an immediate influence

on students' school dropping out behaviour. Thus, it is necessary to enhance the positive functioning of peers and manipulate this system effectively as a means to prevent the school dropping out behaviour of young people. Adolescents tend to seek help from their peers first as their immediate system for seeking help when they encounter difficulties/problems. As they share similar experiences, their mutual understanding, cohesion and 'in-group' feeling are reinforced. It is appropriate to provide service programmes to young people and their peers to teach them proper skills for mutual support and to introduce them pro-social behaviours and proper values. Training young people about appropriate problem-solving and conflict resolution skills is necessary. By strengthening the positive elements of the peer system, it is believed that its immediate effect on the dropping out behaviour of young people can be greatly improved. Both schools and social services have significant roles to perform in these aspects.

Notes

1. In the Hong Kong Education system, secondary schools are unofficially classified into five different bands. These bands are grouped according to the ranking of the weighted scores of the students in the schools. The weighted score of a student is a product of his/her school's internal assessment result and his/her school's overall external assessment result based upon the Academic Aptitude Test taken for the School Placement Allocation during Primary 6. Band 1 is the top band constituting the best 20% of students while Band 5 is the bottom band constituting the worst 20% of students. Therefore, Band 3 is the middle band constituting the middle 20% of students.
2. As there is no official banding classification of secondary schools, Band 3 secondary schools were selected with the assistance of three senior teachers, one secondary school principal and one senior officer from the Education Department. Based on their knowledge, they helped to identify the banding of all secondary schools in Hong Kong. Those schools that at least 3 of the people identified as Band 3 schools were selected to form the sampling list.

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