

# *A narrative oriented multiple-family group with students who refuse to attend school and their parents*

**By Yuk King Lau**

Dr Lau is a professional consultant in the Department of Social Work, The Chinese University of Hong Kong. She is an experienced trainer and clinical supervisor in family social work. Her research areas include family practice with students who refuse to attend school, post-divorce families and post-divorce co-parenting, cross-border living families, work and family interface, family policy, and family impact analysis. Yuk King can be contacted at the Department of Social Work, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, N.T., Hong Kong SAR, China, or by email: [yklau@cuhk.edu.hk](mailto:yklau@cuhk.edu.hk)

Education and a parent's responsibility to govern children's appropriate behaviours are greatly emphasised in Chinese culture. In this culture, school refusing behaviours are not only a reflection of personal problems or a deficit of the students, but also a failure of their parents' parenting skills. Qualitative studies on students who refuse to attend school found that they are usually 'exiles' who are critical of the meritocratic ideology promoted in their schools. Students who refuse to attend school and their parents need space for their voices and critical perspectives. This article illustrates the implementation of a narrative oriented multiple-family group with students who refuse to attend school and their parents, which is guided by the tradition of 'consulting your consultants' developed by Michael White and David Epston. The telling and re-telling in the group was found to be an empowering process for the participating families. The cultural difference between the emphasis on modesty and humility in the Chinese culture and the emphasis on self-affirmation was identified in the re-telling process. Further observations in the group process revealed that it is direct compliments or praise – especially those in big and abstract terms – that are being resisted in Chinese culture. Indirect appreciation through the resonance of life stories is accepted in both the west and the east.

**Keywords:** multiple-family group, narrative therapy, consulting the consultant, students who refuse to attend school, Chinese families in Hong Kong

## THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF EDUCATION IN HONG KONG

With the emphasis on education and effort in Chinese culture (Salili & Lai, 2003), education is viewed as the best means of socialisation through which children learn to adapt to the expectations of the larger community (Cheng, 1998). Education is not only seen as important for building character, but also as the most important vehicle for upward mobility and societal achievement (Lee, 1996; Salili & Lai, 2003). Both parents and teachers in Hong Kong place high expectations and high standards of achievement on students. A comparative study found that Hong Kong students spent significantly more time studying, but they were more anxious, felt less competent and received lower grades than their Canadian counterparts (Salili, Lai & Leung, 2004). A more recent study found that students in Hong Kong were under high academic stress and that stress heightened student anxiety levels (Leung, Yeung & Wong, 2010).

Previous studies consistently found that Chinese students' drive to achieve was correlated positively with filial piety and a wish to please their family (Yu, 1974; Salili, 1994, Tao & Hong, 2000). Chinese parenting emphasises parents' responsibility in training and governing the children's appropriate behaviours, including regular school attendance and good academic performance. With these cultural emphases, school refusing behaviours on the part of the children usually create family crises in Hong Kong (Lau, 2009).

## THE DOMINANT DISCOURSE ON STUDENTS WHO REFUSE TO ATTEND SCHOOL AND INTERVENTION MODELS IN HONG KONG

In Hong Kong, the most widely adopted terminologies for students who refuse to attend school are 'school refusals,' 'school dropouts' and 'school phobic' (Chu, 1989; Education Commission, 2001; Hong Kong Council of Social Service, 1970; Law, 1990; Tam, 2005). These terminologies convey a pathological assumption that these students are either psychological dysfunctional or socially deviant. With the cultural emphasis on parents' responsibility to train and govern a child's appropriate behaviours, it is the parents who are blamed for their submission in parenting when the

student fails to conform to the school authority. There is a widespread 'parenting-blaming' attitude among teachers, social workers and other related helping professions (Lau, Tsang and Kwok, 2007; Lau, 2011). In other words, school refusing behaviour is not only a personal failure of a student, but it is also a failure of the parents.

A critical review of the existing approaches to students who refuse to go to school found a dominant individual approach in working with these students (Lau, Tsang & Kwok, 2007; Lau, 2009). All intervention efforts are focused on pushing the student to resume regular attendance or pushing the parents to draw the students back to school. In addition to warnings and the use of threats, intervention modalities include cognitive behavioural therapy and parent effectiveness training; both aim to ameliorate the cognitive and skills deficit of the students and parents. A mother said of the interventions, 'They make me feel like I am the problem. (My son refused to see the helping professions) It is me who has to learn communication ... see the social worker and ... learn relaxation. I get more and more confused, and now I just think it is my problem. I am so ambivalent and so distressed these days' (Lau, 2011, p. 40). Perceiving that the person is the problem, these interventions risk the danger of privatising and individualising the problem without realising the class, ideological and structural issues in the social construction of school refusal.

## A NARRATIVE APPROACH IN UNDERSTANDING AND WORKING WITH FAMILIES WITH STUDENTS WHO REFUSE TO ATTEND SCHOOL

The concept of 'personal failure' in the narrative approach alerts us to attend to the multi-storyline, gaps or resistance that exist along with personal failure (White, 2004). 'Personal failure is a failure to "be" a particular kind of person – a "normal" person according to the cultural guidelines of our time and culture' (Hutton, 2008). Qualitative studies on students who refuse to attend school found that they are usually 'exiles' who are critical of the meritocratic ideology promoted in their schools. Nevertheless, their views are frequently disparaged as deviant and are conspicuously silenced in some cases (Fine & Rosenberg, 1983; Smyth & Hattam, 2001). To provide space for their

voices and critical perspectives, students who refuse to attend school 'need to be recognized not as aberrant and not as giving up' (Fine & Rosenberg, 1983, p. 270). In working with these young people, 'the focus should be 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).

Comparatively, much less attention is paid to the struggle and resistance on the part of the parents. Since parents are the ones that seek help and continue to help their children despite their strong sense of learned helplessness or even oppression when seeking help, they should have a voice, too. To address the students' and parents' marginalised social position due to the pathological perspective on school refusing behaviours and the 'parent-blaming' discourse in Hong Kong, a collective and empowering approach is necessary. A pioneer project on a narrative therapy-informed multiple-family group was launched in August 2010.

## THE NARRATIVE ORIENTED 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 represents 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)*

A multiple-family group encourages families to be 'therapeutic' to each other, while the therapist attempts to decentralise him/herself (Asen & Scholz, 2011). It minimises the power difference between the families and the therapist. Furthermore, with many families in the same group, each family member has support from peers in the same generation and with common concerns (Cassano, 1989). It helps to balance the intergenerational power difference and provides opportunities for parents and children to listen to each other (Mckay et al., 1995). The facilitation of peer or non-peer interactions within families and between families is the major focus of a multiple-family group.

Asen (2002) explained how the narrative approach expands the focus of a multiple family group:

*... with the concept of "outsider witnesses", the individuals' and families' stories, relationships and identity become enriched by listening to the groups' re-telling 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)*

Madigan and Epston's concept (1995) of 'community of concern' is also applied to the multiple-family group. This community is derived from other families in similar circumstances, veteran families who have reclaimed their own lives from the influence of the problem and members of the families' own social networks (Rhodes, Gosbee, Madden & Brown, 2005). In other words, a narrative-oriented multiple-family group focuses on enriching the participants' life stories, constructing a more empowering self-identity through the exchange of life stories and sustaining these empowered identities through the support of a 'community of concern' in addition to facilitating growth enhancing interaction patterns within families through mutual support among families.

Guided by the concepts of 'consulting your consultants' (Epston & White, 1992; White & Epston, 1986) and 'co-research' (Epston, 1999), I invited families who have reclaimed their lives from

the family crisis induced by their children's school refusing behaviours to be my 'consultants'. With their written consent, their wisdom and alternative knowledge was documented in videotaped interviews. They also provided their consent that their taped interview and their insider knowledge would be used as a resource for others in similar circumstances. With their permission, other families who have overcome or who are going through the crisis were invited to be the outsider witnesses. With the concept of the participating families as the consultants, the participating families were invited to plan the group development together through continuous feedback on the group format and process.

To make rigorous reflection on my work and maximise my awareness of the influence of my own values on the group, a student of mine who is a school social worker served as a co-facilitator and an outsider witness of my practice. She provided valuable feedback on the group process and areas of practice for modification, based on her personal experience in the group. The evolving practice and the lessons I learned in the process are illustrated here within the second, third and fourth sessions.

## **ILLUSTRATION OF THE GROUP PROCESS IN THE SECOND SESSION**

The first two sessions started with a consulting the consultant interview facilitated by the therapist, followed by a re-telling of the outsider witnesses and the consultant family. There were three families in the second session. The consultants interviewed in the session were Jason, 19 years old, and May, his mother. The other family included Doris, a 16-year-old girl, and Jane, her mother. The fathers of both families were deceased. The last family was Susan, age 18, and Felix and Tina, her parents. Susan, Felix and Tina were the consultants interviewed in the first session. Doris and Jane were still receiving therapy from me at the time. To make a concise presentation, the process is summarised by integrating the most illuminating conversations. Pseudonyms are used in this article to protect the family's privacy.

### **Consulting the consultants interview**

After the greeting and a brief introduction of the other families, the interview started with an

orientation question (Epston & White, 1992), 'If someone was experiencing a problem like you used to have, from what you know, how would you help them?' Jason suggested that his mother express her opinion first. May stated that it was extremely important to understand the reason/meaning of the school refusing behaviour. We should not label the child as a problem or a bad boy/girl because of the behaviour. Parents should not give up on their children for their school refusing behaviours; instead, they should try to understand their experience and perspective. Then Jason said that it is important to help the person distinguish if there are concrete hindrances that block him/her from going to school, or if the stated hindrances are just excuses for his/her determination to stop going to school.

Never having thought about this distinction, I asked him why, according to his experience, people have to use these excuses and which group he fell into. He said, 'Refusal to go to school is an unacceptable behaviour in our society. You have to give legitimate excuses for the behaviour. I determined to leave school as I found it was meaningless to go to school. It just could not satisfy my desire to learn and know more. The teachers treated my curiosity and questions on topics that did not strictly fall into the syllabus as irrelevant. They just ignored my invitation for discussion. I couldn't have my voice in school. I knew people would see me as a failure if I clearly announced my determination to quit schooling. I did not dare tell my mother.'

'You knew that you would be perceived as a failure, so what led you to make up your mind to leave school?' I asked, curious about his resistance to the normative definition of success, as well as the intention, purpose or value behind this decision. 'It was not an isolated decision. It was a gradual process. My disengagement from school grew with my accumulated disappointment. I started to be absent from school more and more frequently. I gave myself and the school a try in the new school year to see if I could find some meaning to go to school. I finally dropped out as my sense of meaningless was so strong. 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? It is not easy for a young person to have this perspective', I asked, trying to trace the history of his wisdom. 'I read a lot of books', he replied.

Follow the practice of re-authoring, I asked, 'So you stopped schooling but kept learning in your own way? Does your persistence in learning reflect what kind of person you are?' '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.' 'In what way has your curiosity and positive perspective on failure helped you?' 'It gives me direction and courage to explore different possibilities. After leaving my previous school, I took a course in French because I enjoy learning new things. Then I took many computer courses; I developed my computer engineering knowledge from books and Web forums. I made a lot of friends on the Web. I was exposed to different experiences and perspectives in my web exchanges with them. Later I got a job in the field of computer engineering.'

I followed up with a unique possibility question (Epston & White, 1992), 'Do you have any idea where your desire to learn and explore more will lead you?' 'I learned from my previous job that society requires people to have recognised qualifications. I quit my job because I was not ready to fulfil their requirements. I am only 19. I think I am still young and have time to do more exploration. I just want to take my time to see where I want to go from here. With my life principles, I will keep on self-learning. It is possible that I may settle down one day and get a recognised qualification if I find it to be a necessity for my survival. However, I will explore if there are other alternatives.'

After hearing Jason's stories, I turned to May. 'How do you survive the experience of having a son who refused to go to school?' I tried to explore her coping and strength, despite her suffering. May said that she learned to understand and accept him step by step. Now she just accepts him for who he is. I traced her step-by-step description of this breakthrough with unique account questions (White & Epston, 1986) such as, 'So what led up to this

breakthrough?' May said that she could not accept Jason's school refusing behaviours in the beginning. She woke him up every morning and tried to push him to go to school. She hoped Jason would tell her why he was not going to school. All her efforts to help him go to school and communicate with him ended in ruin; he just ignored her. She remembered that for one year she would go to work with disappointment and tears. She perceived herself as a total failure. When I asked her what social expectation told her she was a failure, she said that there is an expectation that a successful mother should have an obedient child and should be able to help her son solve his problems. When asked about how she could keep a distance from the negative impact of the social discourse, she shared her wisdom on selective disclosure to those who would impose the normative expectation and choice of people who are really understanding and supportive.

I turned back to Jason and asked if he realised his mother had struggled this way. Jason said yes and then vividly described his observation of his mother's step-by-step shifting of her expectations for him. It moved from a normative high expectation of academic success to a minimum requirement of regular attendance irrespective of academic performance, and finally to the acceptance of his determination to have an alternative life goal and style. May confirmed that it was a very accurate observation. I asked Jason, 'You were very sensitive to the suffering and struggle of your mother, so how come you responded by turning a deaf ear to her?' Jason said that he chose not to respond to the issue of going to school. As a non-acceptable choice, he was sure they would get into a quarrel if he spoke up. It hurt the relationship without solving the problem. 'You kept silent because you treasure the relationship?' I asked. 'Yes', Jason replied.

Integrating the narrative practice of re-telling and the systemic intervention in facilitating parent-child interaction, I asked May to tell Jason about her feedback on his telling. She was glad to know Jason's perspective. She misread silence and avoidance as disobedience, and this reinforced her sense of failure. Focusing on the unique outcome, I asked how she survived the effect of misunderstanding and acquired an acceptance of her son's non-normative choice. She revealed that a



focus on her son's strengths rather than his problem, and a self-voice to remind her that accepting her son's special choice did not make her a failure, were effective skills. 'What is the foundation of these coping skills?' 'It is because I value our relationship very much', May said.

Evaluating the influence of this unique outcome on Jason and the parent-child relationship, I asked Jason, 'How has your mother's final acceptance made a difference in your life?' Jason said, 'I feel more relaxed. I have no need to worry about my mother's emotions and sorrow. I can focus on what I think is important. I get the peace to think about my preferred life direction.' Guided with the re-authoring practice, I asked, 'What do all these experiences reflect about what sort of mother your mother is?' 'She accepts me though it is so hard for her.' 'In your opinion, what sort of mother your mother is as reflects from her acceptance?' 'A good mother', Jason replied. 'What do all these principles reflect about what sort of mother you are?' I asked May. She responded with a normative response in a humble Chinese manner: 'I think I am just an ordinary mother doing ordinary things; I have nothing special. In fact, I could do better.'

### **Re-telling of the outsider witnesses**

The other two participating families gave their feedback to Jason and May. Jane said she was impressed by May and Jason's good communication and mutual acceptance. She found it valuable because of her difficulties dealing with Doris's emotions. Doris's emotions always triggered her emotions. They usually got into a visceral cycle of emotional upsurge when she tried to use words and reasons to calm Doris. She learned tolerance and patience from May and Jason. Their experience reminded her of a unique experience when she refrained from excessive words and reasoning, and Doris calmed down by herself.

Echoing her mother's sharing, Doris showed her appreciation for the communication pattern between May and Jason. Noticing that she was a very timid girl, step-by-step facilitation helped her express her ideas. When asked about the specific aspect of the communication that she found most appreciative, she used the phrase 'silence is much better than noise'. Focusing on personal resonance, I asked how this comment related to her experience and she

said that people around her tended to educate her with words and admonitions. They added pressure on her and she was afraid that she would disappoint them by failing to meet their expectations. The anxiety suffocated her and made it more difficult for her to face the challenges with ease. After hearing Doris, Jane said, 'I should trust her more and speak less'. Doris also found Jason's perspective on accepting the inevitable failure and learning from it very impressive. It helped her be less anxious about failure. She decided to take more risks in spite of the possibility of failure.

Tina showed a great understanding of May's sorrow about Jason's school refusal because she went through this difficult path too. May impressed Tina as being a tolerant and accepting mother. In Tina's perspective, Jason was a special young adult who freed himself from the normalising gaze of social values on education and the social discourse on personal failure. Citing her observation of Susan's experience in making a choice that was alternative to the mainstream system, people making special choices have to prepare for difficulties and challenges that go along with the choices.

Susan said that May was a special and great mother, and she seemed to feel unease for May's humility. She wished May would have more self-appreciation. She admired Jason because he could live outside the restrictions of normative ideologies. From Jason's experience, she realised that the normative cultural emphasis on education is still holding her. Jason's sharing strengthened her inner voice that her recent failure in the Advanced Level Examination was not a personal failure. There was a structural problem – the assessment criteria and the aspects of capability on which the assessment focused.

Felix was the last one to do the re-telling. Jason impressed him as a critical and mature young adult. However, he thought Jason needed a mentor to guide him so he could save time finding a suitable direction. In his observation, May had not yet achieved a genuine acceptance of Jason's special choice. She tolerated it because she failed to change him. In a traditional masculine manner, he advised May to accept Jason. Sensing a feeling of unease on May and Jason's parts, I shared my understanding of Felix's advice with double

listening. His advice was an expression of his confidence in Jason and he wanted to share his confidence with May. Felix agreed to the suggested alternative.

### **Re-telling of May and Jason**

Jason admitted that he was the type of person that the outsider witnesses mentioned. He enjoyed being a person who lived outside the normalising gaze of social values. He understood that special life choices usually come with special challenges and difficulties. He was determined to face them. May expressed her surprise to the re-tellings of the outsider witnesses. These re-tellings gave her a new perspective on her relationship with Jason. Though still perceiving herself as an ordinary mother, she was glad that her experience was useful to others. She thanked Felix for his concern, although she disagreed with his comment that she did not genuinely accept Jason's special choice.

### **REFLECTION AND LEARNING OF THE SESSION**

Significant practice and culture issues arose in this session. In Chinese culture, giving advice and making admonitions is the most common way to show concern, especially among traditional Chinese men who used to serve as the head of the family. Another cultural restriction is the construction of masculinity in Chinese culture. Men have to be strong and tough instead of emotional. Emotional struggles and suffering are feminine traits and are seen as signs of weakness. These cultural values were a great hindrance for Felix as an effective outsider witness. He did the re-telling with flat advice without linking it to his own suffering and worries. It turned into judgement rather than support for May. In the traditional multiple-family group, participating families are encouraged to make constructive criticisms and suggestions as a form of mutual help among families (Asen, 2002). In the group process, I realised the danger of advice-giving, even advice with good-intentions because it puts advice receivers into an inferior position.

On the other extreme, Chinese culture emphasises modesty and humility. Explicit self-appreciation may be taken as being 'boastful'. Sometimes, Chinese people even show their humility by declining others' appreciation and

recognition. Hong Kong was a British colony for more than 100 years, and it has been a cosmopolitan city since the 1970s, and therefore western culture has a tremendous influence. The east and west coexist in Hong Kong without a good assimilation of them. The crash of the two cultures was expressed in the group process. Susan, with her strong western beliefs of assertiveness and self-affirmation, took May's humility as a sign of self-depreciation and expressed her wish for her to have more self-appreciation.

Another critical issue is the expectation of 'heroic' accounts of identities of the consultants. May's struggle to accept Jason's decision to lead an alternative life path and her modesty in perceiving herself as a mother who could still do better, failed this expectation. Felix and Susan's responses told me that they told a terrific but heroic account of their story in the first session. Before joining this group, they had been repeatedly interviewed by the media about their story. In the group process, I realised that their 'success' turned them into imposing outsider witnesses who set their own level of 'achievement' or experience as a standard for others. In the group process, I found that a heroic identity account is oppressive rather than liberating. Externalisation of strength, competence and personal attributes in addition to the externalisation of a problem may help minimise the risk of a totalising heroic identity.

The group members and the co-facilitator said the group process was too structured and that the interview was too long, since there was more than one consultant every time. The listening process was extremely draining. They suggested the group process be more interactive to make it more engaging for all participants. They wanted to join the facilitation of the interview so they could raise their concerns directly and learn from the consultants. A modified format of practice was implemented in the subsequent sessions based on this feedback.

### **THE THIRD SESSION**

In the third session, a new consultant family (Bobby, Lauren and their two daughters) was invited to come for the 'consulting the consultant' interview. Meanwhile, Debby, a single mother who was absent in the last session, came alone to the

group session. Debby had a strong need for support and guidance on the school's request for a concrete deadline for her daughter's resuming school. The consultant family and all other families responded enthusiastically to her request for support. With the 'family-driven' principle of multiple-family group, the group process shifted from interviewing the consultant family to facilitating all participating families being consultants for Debby. With what they learned from the second session, they were prepared to express their support through sharing their experiences and methods of coping in similar crises or situations, instead of providing direct advice. Debby was relieved when she heard consistent sharing from the youngsters in the group that they perceived their struggle with school as a valuable life experience; they did not regret that they once refused to attend school nor did they perceive it as a waste of time.

However, the pattern of advice-giving persisted in the session, especially among the male participants. Feeling annoyed by these direct pieces of advice, May boldly spoke out that advice expressed in a manner of *'It should work for you because it worked for me'* might sound like lip service to someone who is suffering. I supported May's opinion and lent further support on this alternative perspective from Debby. Debby took all the advice as an expression of support and concern. She expressed her gratitude for their support and discussed her need to work out the applicability of their copings in her situation. Her gentle and genuine response subtly challenged the certainty and absolute thinking behind the advice-giving. Participants such as Felix spoke in a much less certain and imposing way in the subsequent part of the session, although he still found it hard to disclose his own suffering and struggles.

### **THE MODIFIED 'CONSULTING THE CONSULTANT' INTERVIEW IN THE FOURTH SESSION**

The consultants interviewed in the session were Barbara, age 18, and her mother, Winnie. There were five families in the session. Realising the need for more guidance and preparation of the outsider witnesses, a Chinese print-out of Michael White's (2007) five basic understandings for the outsider witnesses was given to the participating families at the beginning of the session. I explained the

understanding with the observed negative effect of advice-giving in the previous group process, and the empowering effect of life-encountering sharing. I also demonstrated how to link our re-telling with our own life experiences and life stories with concrete examples.

The interview started after a detailed explanation of the basic understanding that outsider witnesses should have. It was open to the participating families with my active involvement when a rephrasing of questions and further exploration of step-by-step formulation of the coping and wisdom were necessary. I did not depart from my facilitating role to ensure an ethical practice and that the interview was constructive instead of harmful to the consultant family. Debby, May, Jason and Felix were the most active interviewers. At the beginning of the interview, they showed great curiosity about the difficulties that Barbara encountered in school. I facilitated an externalisation of the problem through questioning. The problem's influence on Barbara, Winnie and the family as a whole was mapped. It hit on the self-worth of Barbara especially hard and it caused a deep depression. It intensified the tension between Winnie and her mother-in-law due to their disagreement on how to cope with the problem. The in-law relationship handicapped Barbara's father 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.

With an empathetic understanding of Winnie's difficulties and Barbara's suffering, Debby was keen to note that Winnie shielded Barbara from the in-law conflicts and gave her freedom to love her grandmother. She said genuinely, 'It is not a simple capability for me; though I know it cognitively, I found it hard to actualise it. My extended family members always blamed me for my failure to motivate my daughter to resume schooling. Their blaming annoyed me very much. I sometimes pour my anger onto my daughter. I am so curious about how did you develop this capability?' 'I think I am a forgiving person. I just don't take people's judgement on me seriously', Winnie answered. I traced the history of the capability by asking, 'Is it related to any of your life experiences? Who taught you about this attitude?' 'It may have been my



parents. They are easy-going people as well. They also told me that it is useless to compare and compete with others. We should have our own principles, and we have to be true and responsible according to our own principles', she answered. I followed with, 'How does the principle of being true and responsible according to your own principles help in your life?' She said, 'It makes my life easier and happier despite the various difficulties'.

A similar step-by-step tracing of solution knowledge and competence was repeated in the interview with the co-facilitation of the participating families and the therapist. After learning from my previous demonstrations, Debby and May did beautiful work as interviewers. They spontaneously asked unique account questions with follow-up history-tracing questions. For example, witnessing Winnie's great persistence and commitment while going through the difficulties with Barbara, they asked, 'There seems to be a foundation of this persistence; what is it?' For Barbara, they took a step-by-step exploration of her reclaiming of life from depression. When Barbara said that 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, they threw out a 'smaller' step question: 'What if you fail to get up in the morning no matter how determined you were the night before?' Barbara said, '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.' We all found this solution wise and hopeful.

For Jason and Felix, guidance was rendered mainly to help them clarify their concerns or the experiences behind their questions. Jason showed persistent curiosity in knowing about Barbara's beliefs related to her decision to go to work, in between her repeated attempts to resume schooling. Barbara said that it was because she wanted to keep learning and growing, but she was still hesitant to go back to school, so she went to work. She perceived that working and studying enhanced her growth. When I redirected the focus to his own experience, Jason revealed that he got no support

for his decision to go to work. Everyone told him that he should continue his studies. He decided to go to work despite enormous pressure from others. Now, after years of working, he found that a school certificate is not the only way to show his competence. He felt no regret for his decision. Barbara said, 'Yes, I think your choice is okay'. The clarification helped Jason reaffirm his decision to quit school and enter the employment system early. For Felix, his questions tended to be hypothesis-testing questions due to his strong desire to seek certainty. For example, he kept asking whether Barbara's school refusal originated from her depression or her adjustment difficulties in school and, if Barbara stopped her medication right now, if she would predict a relapse of her problem. Although they seemed like inappropriate questions, they helped Barbara evaluate her reliance on medication and her faith in her self-reliance. She said, 'I am not worried about relapse, though I will not stop medication without my psychiatrist's instructions. I experienced substantial growth in my maturity. Now I am a more independent person. It is not only because of medication, but it is because of my personal growth in the process.' The process helped Felix realise his anxiety and feelings of confusion because the positive effect of Barbara's medication challenged his belief that psychiatric treatment would only bring about labelling instead of help for youngsters. However, his belief that medication was the right thing for Barbara contrasted with his decision to reject psychiatric treatment for Susan. The other participating families, including Barbara and Winnie, were so responsive in doing the re-telling that, as Felix's family had already reclaimed their life from the problem, it was evident that the family did something right. The different solutions and life-reclaiming paths of Susan and Barbara showed that there were many possible solutions to a problem. The oppressive power of dualistic thinking was explicated in the discussion process.

### **Re-telling**

As an engaged listener in the whole process, Tina took the initiative for the re-telling in the latter part of the session. She found Winnie's capability to shield Barbara from tension between her and her mother-in-law very impressive. She encountered a

similar situation when Susan encountered the school refusal problem. Winnie's principle of being true and responsible to her own principles would lend her extra strength when encountering a similar situation in the future. May thanked Barbara for sharing her feelings of not regretting being involved in the school refusal problem. Jason made a similar expression but May found it hard to fully believe it. Barbara's sharing enhanced her trust of Jason. Debby shared May's re-telling. Barbara's sharing echoed the sharing of the youngsters in the previous session. It relieved Debby's guilt for being ineffective and not working hard enough to solve the problem for her daughter. Following their sharing, guided by the practice of externalisation, I explicated the pressure of unrealistic expectations imposed by the normative ideology on motherhood. Its influences shown in the mothers' perseverance in helping their children and their undue guilt were discussed.

The last part was the re-telling of Winnie and Barbara. Both found the process encouraging and rewarding, especially Winnie. Winnie gained an enhanced self-appreciation and self-confidence through realising that her experience is something significant for others. She was receptive to the life-stories-linking re-tellings and did not show an urge to decline the appreciation expressed through these re-tellings.

The cultural difference between the emphasis on modesty and humility in Chinese culture and the emphasis on self-affirmation in western culture did not create any problems in this session. Like May, Winnie is a humble and modest Chinese mother. She did not express any explicit self-appreciation and took her perseverance as a common and ordinary human attribute. The difference seemed to be the better facilitation of life-stories-linking re-telling. Every re-telling was linked with significant life experiences that were triggered by the telling of the consultants. Direct compliments or praises, were replaced with life resonance responses in the re-telling in this session. There was no use of big or abstract words such as 'good' or 'great'. Therefore, it is the direct compliments or praises – especially those in big and abstract terms – that are resisted in Chinese culture. Indirect appreciation through the resonance of life stories is accepted in the West and East.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

As an experienced systemic family therapist and a fresh narrative practitioner, the integration of a narrative approach with a multiple-family group drew me into an intensive unlearning and relearning process. I made many mistakes and learned a lot in the evolving process of the group. Though it is painstaking, it reflects my strong commitment to the well-being of students who refuse to attend school and their families. In the process, I have been moved to critically reflect and forsake the terminology of 'school refusal' that I adopted originally (Lau, Tsang & Kuck, 2007; Lau, 2011). I have intentionally shifted from describing young people as 'school refusers' in an effort to distance myself from descriptions that can oppress a young person's identity, favouring the term 'young people who refuse to attend school'. Resonant with the concept that these students are 'exiles', the participating youngsters are critical of the meritocratic ideology promoted in their schools. The narrative-oriented multiple-family group documents their experience and gives them voices. The group also documents the wisdom and coping methods of their families. The group is a collective approach that enables 'people to speak through us, not just to us' (Denborough, 2008, p. 16). It helps the participating families create an audience to the changes that each participating family member is making in their life (Russell & Carey, 2003).

The narrative perspective expands the focus on inter-families and intra-families interaction of the multiple-family group to the challenge of subjugating social ideologies. Through the group process, the participating families realised the problems in the education system in Hong Kong and the normalising gaze of dominant social values. They believed it was necessary to express their voice on the necessary education reform and ideological change. As a small group, they knew that they had to develop a collective mass. The group has developed into a mutual help group. New families are invited to join the group through the on-going 'consulting the consultant' interviews. In response to the strong sense of failure of the family members, they join the group in the role of 'consultants'. It is a complete reorientation of the practice in a traditional multiple-family group in

which members act as patients or families with problems.

To prevent the group sessions from being overloaded with tasks, a working group of all the youngsters was formed to post their stories to the Web site of my practice project with students who refuse to attend school. They helped to rename my project to convey a more empowering image of families encountering school refusal problems with their children. I see the group as a mutual witnessing, empowering and co-construction process. You are welcome to contact me for any feedback, comments or ideas on the group.

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