

CASE REPORT

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The evolution of early childhood education policy in Hong Kong

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Abstract

Almost all 3- to 6-year-olds attend preschool programmes in Hong Kong; however, early childhood education (ECE) had been relatively neglected by the Hong Kong government until 2000 when the reform of school education system was initiated. Since then, notions of 'child-centredness' and holistic development have been promulgated as the core values of ECE. Against this backdrop, this paper critically examines the Hong Kong ECE context, its historical development, the major obstacles to reform from both parents' and providers' perspectives, and the recent key policy developments in ECE. It provides a useful reference for international audiences, particularly those in Confucian-heritage cultures, in designing and implementing educational reform and change in ECE.

Keywords: Hong Kong; Pre-primary education; Early childhood education policy; Educational reform

The evolution of early childhood education in Hong Kong

In November 2012, Hong Kong's Secretary for Education, Eddie Ng, announced that the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government was working to implement the 3-year free kindergarten education and 'develop one of the best, most competitive kindergarten education policies' in the world (as cited in Chong 2012). A committee was subsequently set up in April 2013 to examine the feasibility of free kindergarten education and recommend specific proposals to enable all children to have access to high-quality kindergarten education. The formation of this committee was a watershed moment for early childhood education (ECE) in Hong Kong considering that ECE was excluded from the boundaries of formal government policy until the turn of the century. The critical role of ECE was, for the very first time, acknowledged by the government in its proposal for a full-scale reform of the entire education system in 2000 (Education Commission 2000). Since then, the education system of Hong Kong has been subject to dramatic policy initiatives.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this paper is to examine the evolution and the continuous development of ECE in the policy context of Hong Kong. It begins by providing an overview of ECE in Hong Kong. A historical approach is used to critically analyse the key policy developments and determine the major obstacles to reform from both parents' and providers' perspectives as well as understand the rationale for the development of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS). The Hong Kong early childhood sector, which was once called 'the Cinderella of the education system'

(Opper 1993, p. 88), has finally gained the attention of both the government and the general public. However, a number of problems that have either arisen from or remain unresolved by the PEVS still need to be addressed.

Background

The Hong Kong context

In the 2013 to 2014 academic year, there were a total of 969 kindergartens and kindergartens-cum-childcare centres (KG-cum-CCCs)^a in Hong Kong (Education Bureau 2014b). Most kindergartens offer half-day classes of around 3 h each, while most KG-cum-CCCs offer whole-day programmes. Children are enrolled in classes denoted as K1 (nursery class for 3- to 4-year-olds), K2 (lower kindergarten class for 4- to 5-year-olds), and K3 (upper kindergarten class for 5- to 6-year-olds) by age. About 27.5% of students were enrolled in whole-day sessions and 72.5% in half-day sessions (Education Bureau 2012a, Education Bureau 2012b).

Emphasis on education

Hong Kong has one of the most competitive education systems in the world wherein examinations are heavily emphasised (Biggs 1992; Education Commission 2000; Watkins 2009). The examinations serve to identify talented individuals to join the administrative and managerial class. Hence, elitism is socially and culturally encouraged, and education is perceived as a means for upward social mobility. The emphasis on education and competition is further intensified by the Confucian belief that success can be achieved through the exertion of effort regardless of innate ability (Biggs 1992; Watkins 2009). Cram schools in Hong Kong, also known as tutorial schools, have become a popular standard in addition to regular education. Ng (2009) reports that 34% of the primary and secondary school students in Hong Kong, or about 300,000, went to cram schools, and 70% of secondary school students and about 50% of primary school students have hired tutors. Tutorial classes and playgroups for learning reading and mathematics are also common for pre-primary children, even for infants as young as 6 months old.

Universal attendance in preschool programmes

With such intense emphasis on education, it is not surprising that almost all Hong Kong children between the ages of 3 and 6 attend preschool programmes, even though ECE is not compulsory in Hong Kong (Audit Commission 2013). Hong Kong parents generally perceive ECE as preparatory programmes for primary schools (Rao et al. 2009). Other reasons for the high coverage rates include the Kindergarten and Child Care Centre Fee Remission Scheme (KCFRS) (which ensures that no child is deprived of preschool education because of financial reasons), the large number of dual-earning families, Hong Kong's small size, and the extensive and efficient public transport system (Rao 2010).

Regulation and forms of preschool services

Until 2005, Hong Kong adopted a system of pre-primary services in which kindergartens (3- to 6-year-olds) were supervised by the erstwhile Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB)^b, and day nurseries and childcare centres (2- to 6-year-olds) were overseen by the Social Welfare Department (SWD) (Rao and Koong 1999). Though kindergartens were

generally more academically oriented than day nurseries or childcare centres, both provided highly performance-oriented and structured learning programmes to children aged 5 or above, who would soon experience a similar environment at primary school (Oppen 1992a). In September 2005, the monitoring of pre-primary services was 'harmonised' so that a joint office of the Education Bureau (EDB) and the SWD regulated early childhood services for children aged between 3 and 6 years (Rao and Li 2009).

All kindergartens or KG-cum-CCCs in Hong Kong are stand-alone institutions owned either by charitable organisations or private enterprises. They can be categorised as either non-profit-making kindergartens (NPMKs) or private independent kindergartens (PIKs). NPMKs differ from PIKs essentially in the amount of financial resources they receive from the government. They are granted tax exemption under the Inland Revenue Ordinance and are eligible to apply for government subsidies which include reimbursement of rent, rates, and government rent (Census and Statistics Department 2003). Before the implementation of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS) in 2007, financial assistance under the Kindergarten and Child Care Centre Subsidy Scheme (KCSS) was granted to these kindergartens based on enrolment rate (Education and Manpower Bureau and Health, Welfare and Food Bureau 2005). In return, NPMKs could only budget for 5% profit margin which should all be re-invested in education. They should also pay their teachers according to the salary scale recommended by the government. PIKs, on the other hand, may have a profit margin of 10% as they were not supported financially by the government. Other than the monetary matters, as long as they fulfilled the requirements specified by the Education Ordinance and Regulations, both NPMKs and PIKs could practically determine their curriculum (although kindergartens are strongly advised to formulate their own curricula based on the 2006 *Guide to Pre-primary Curriculum* published by the Curriculum Development Council (2006)), pedagogical and operational arrangements based on their own philosophies, objectives, and religious backgrounds. In the 2013 to 2014 academic year, there were 794 NPMKs and 175 PIKs (Education Bureau 2014b).

Case presentation

The road to change: from political neglect to ECE reform

The long history of the overlapping and private system reflects three unique characteristics of pre-primary services in Hong Kong: (a) the government considered education and care as separate domains - a perspective that is contradictory to the common view by many scholars and educators that children's education, health, and socio-emotional needs are intertwined (Pearson and Rao 2006); (b) the government was ambivalent about where primary responsibility for early education should lie; and therefore (c) there was an absence of official policy or plan supporting early education.

The time of political neglect

The colonial government of Hong Kong had a *laissez-faire* approach to pre-primary services, as the care and education of young children was viewed to be the responsibility of the family (Rao and Li 2009). Early education and care in Hong Kong became widely available only after World War II, as a market response to the rapid expansion of the population and the growing demand of labour market participation resulting from the influx of refugees from Mainland China (Oppen 1992a, 1992b, 1992c). The sudden rise of

population put pressure on the limited number of places in primary schools, and the keen competition therefore led parents to turn to early institutions for preparation for admission to primary schools. The number of children enrolled in Hong Kong kindergartens rose from 13,415 in 1951 to 198,351 in 1979, whereas the number of places in childcare centres and day nurseries increased from 920 in 1958 to around 17,400 in 1980 (Census and Statistics Department 2008; Opper 1999; Rao and Koong 2000). As a result of the high demand for pre-primary education, many kindergartens introduced entrance examinations (Rao et al. 2009). Nonetheless, the proportion of qualified teachers decreased noticeably as class sizes increased, and the lack of official regulation often resulted in unsatisfactory conditions for children (Opper 1999). As a result, the quality of programmes suffered in terms of available space, group size, adult-child ratio, and teacher training (Opper 1992a, 1992b, 1999; Pearson and Rao 2006; Rao and Li 2009).

In 1981, the government released the first official policy on pre-primary services - the White Paper on Primary Education and Pre-primary Services - only as a response to the increasing concern of the public about the alarmingly low percentage (13%) of professionally trained teachers in local kindergartens (Hong Kong Government 1981, Opper 1992b). The document outlined the need to accelerate training and required 45% of kindergarten teachers to receive 120-h part-time basic training to attain Qualified Assistant Kindergarten Teacher (QAKT) status by 1986, expanding to 90% by 1992; while all principals should attain qualified kindergarten teacher status (QKT, equivalent to 2-year part-time training) by 1986. It also recommended the minimum standards for adult-child ratios, space, materials, and equipment. Notwithstanding these targets, the government's financial commitment to promoting teacher training remained limited (Pearson and Rao 2006). As a result, only 23% of kindergarten teachers had been trained as QAKTs by 1986 (Rao and Li 2009). The Education Commission^c (1986) even concluded in its Report No. 2 that kindergarten education was not essential and therefore did not deserve aided sector status. Though the report did advocate various measures to enhance kindergarten education, such as a more stringent teacher-child ratio, higher professional levels of teacher training, and a modified fee assistance scheme for children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds, as late as 1992 the Education Commission Report No. 5 made only brief mention of statutory staffing requirements and a fee remission scheme which covered only 5% of children (Opper 1999; Pearson and Rao 2006).

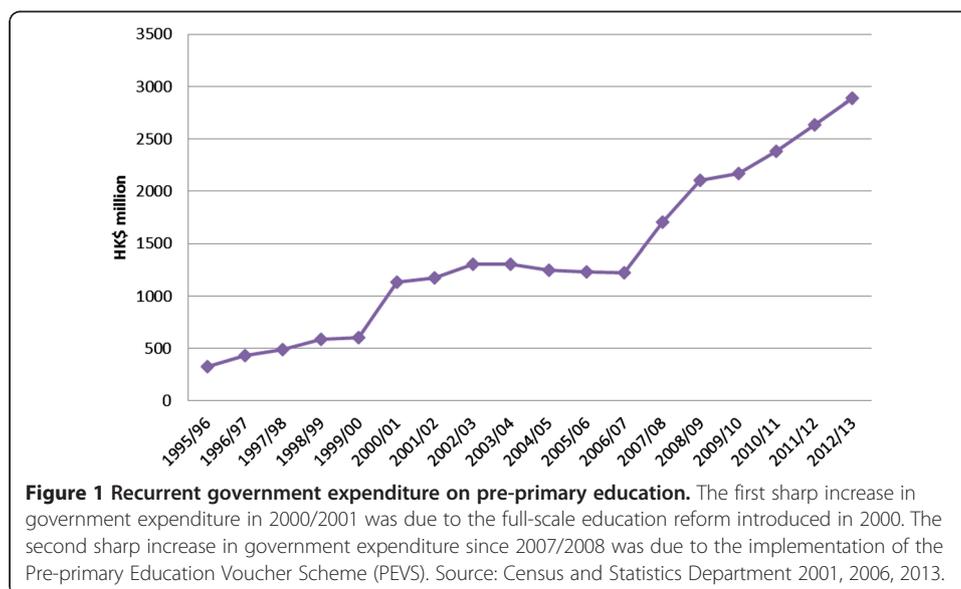
These kinds of government input - or actually lack of government input - allowed market forces (i.e. parental choice) to have pervasive influences on the ECE market. Parental concern over entry into primary schools advanced an emphasis on teacher-centred academic curricula. In fact, Hong Kong preschool children were consistently found to be ahead of their overseas counterparts in academic learning, especially in areas of pre-writing and early number skills in the Pre-primary Project of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA), though at the expense of other areas of development such as social skills (Opper 1996).

The early childhood education reform

The government finally started to change its *laissez-faire* attitude towards ECE in the mid-1990s, following the release of commentaries and reports on the significance of pre-primary education by professional organisations and education experts such as the Hong Kong Council of Early Childhood Education and Services (1993) and Opper (1992a, b, c,

1993). In 1994, Governor Patten announced in his policy address the allocation of HK \$163 million^d over a period of 4 years to provide professional training to kindergarten teachers. Other pledges included offering a new 2-year part-time Certificate of Education in Early Childhood Education (CE(ECE)) programme to in-service teachers in 1995 and a new full-time CE(ECE) programme to pre-service teachers in 1997; raising the minimum academic entry qualification of kindergarten teachers from Secondary 3 to Secondary 5 level with at least two passes in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (HKCEE), and requiring at least 40% of teachers in each kindergarten to be QKT-qualified by 1997 (Hong Kong Government 1994). The Kindergarten Subsidy Scheme (KSS) for NPMKs was implemented in 1995 and later reviewed in 1996 to encourage professional development and make it possible for these kindergartens to pay their trained teachers according to a government-recommended salary scale without increasing their fees substantially (Education Bureau 2008; Rao and Li 2009). There was a concern that some kindergartens went too far in presenting formal academic curricula. In 1996, the Curriculum Development Institute published the *Guide to Pre-primary Curriculum* stressing all-around development (Education Department 1996). In 1997, the government raised the qualification requirement once again by making it mandatory for kindergartens to have at least 50% QKT-qualified teachers by 1999 and 60% by 2000. Moreover, all pre-service kindergarten principals had to complete the CE(ECE) by 2004 (Chan et al. 2009). Six hundred and sixty additional training places were provided between 1998 and 2002 in order to achieve these goals (Rao and Li 2009). All these measures demanded a substantial increase in government expenditure on kindergarten education, from merely HK \$81.5 million in 1990/1991 to HK \$608 million in 1999/2000 (Census and Statistics Department 2001, 2004; see Figure 1).

Yet rather than the colonial government, it was the new post-1997 HKSAR government, which took a more interventionist approach to policy (Mok and Currie 2002), which has brought the most radical and stirring changes to ECE in Hong Kong. A full-scale reform of the entire education system was introduced in 2000. The importance of ECE in the reform was finally recognised by the HKSAR government as it ‘lays the foundation for life-



long learning and all-round development' (Education Commission 2000, p.49). The core value of ECE lies in 'child-centredness', a popular view in child psychology today which acknowledges individual differences in rates of early development and requires teachers to help children actively construct their own learning experience rather than transmit knowledge to passively participating students (Rao et al. 2009). In order to achieve the very aim of ECE in Hong Kong - 'to provide children with a relaxing and pleasurable learning environment to promote a balanced development of different aspects necessary to a child's development such as the physical, intellectual, language, social, emotional and aesthetic aspects' (Education Bureau 2009), a number of initiatives were put forward. The most notable initiatives were as follows.

Enhancing professional competence

Starting from the 2001/2002 school year, the entry qualification requirement for new kindergarten teachers was raised again to five passes in HKCEE (including Chinese and English subjects). All serving kindergarten teachers would also be required to complete the QKT programme (Education Commission 2000). Indeed, by 2005/2006, 94.4% of kindergarten teachers had acquired the qualification (Rao and Li 2009).

Improving the quality assurance mechanism

In 2000, the erstwhile Education Department and the SWD introduced Performance Indicators (PIs), which incorporated the curriculum aims of the 1996 *Guide to Pre-primary Curriculum*. It set the standards for the ECE sector and served as an important reference for kindergartens to formulate policies and strategies for self-evaluation and school improvement (Education Department and Social Welfare Department 2001). The government later in 2004 implemented a trial quality assurance mechanism that emphasised both external and internal evaluation based on the PIs. Yet between 2003/2004 and 2006/2007, less than one-tenths of all kindergartens in Hong Kong participated in the evaluations (Education Bureau 2010).

'Harmonising' pre-primary services

The definitions of pre-primary services were redefined upon the implementation of the 'harmonisation' of pre-primary services in 2005. Childcare centres were amended as services for children under 3 years and remained under the remit of the SWD. On the other hand, all day nurseries (serving children aged between 2 and 6) and day nursery-cum-day crèches (serving children aged between 6 weeks and 6 years) have been converted into KG-cum-CCCs under the monitoring of the EDB (Census and Statistics Department 2008; Chan et al. 2009; Rao and Li 2009). The KSS was also renamed as KCSS to cover all eligible providers of pre-primary services for children aged below 6 (Education Bureau 2008). In addition, a new normative salary scale for kindergarten teaching staff was recommended by the government (Hong Kong Professional Teacher Union (HKPTU) 2006b).

Reform obstacles

A major reason why the government increased its intervention in the sector starting from the mid-1990s was due to the growing importance of ECE at the global level. In fact, research in recent years has consistently shown the long-term benefits of ECE, which contributes to the future well-being of society by developing children's later academic ability, making them more independent, more socially adept, and more self-confident; reducing grade retentions

and incidences of juvenile delinquency; and enhancing later adult productivity (e.g. Barnett 2002; Bowman et al. 2001; Shonkoff and Phillips 2000). Transforming from a British-dependent territory to a local administrative region of the People's Republic of China, which enjoys a high degree of autonomy, the HKSAR government inevitably needs to pay more attention to its own long-term social development. The persistent urging of educators, parents, and advocacy groups for the provision of early childhood services to be viewed as a government obligation has also forced the government to change its *laissez-faire* attitude. Education reforms in the West greatly emphasise testing and standards to enhance academic achievement of students. With the establishment of official curriculum guidelines, more stringent teacher qualification requirements, and enhanced monitoring mechanism, the objective of the Hong Kong ECE reform, however, is to dissuade schools from putting too much emphasis on academic achievement and formal training.

These efforts, nonetheless, did not bring great changes to the long neglected sector. Before the implementation of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS), which is discussed in greater details in the following section, the qualification of the early childhood workforce continued to lag behind other developed countries and regions (HKPTU 2006a). Classrooms were still highly structured, curricula were academically focused, and formal and didactic approaches continued to be used as the major method of instruction (Rao et al. 2009). Rao (2002) commented that 'Cinderella [was] ready for the Ball but she [had] not yet met the Prince' (p. 78). There were, indeed, a number of major obstacles to ECE reform in relation to both parents' and providers' perspectives.

Parents' perspective

The fact that Hong Kong parents are highly influenced by Confucian values which emphasise academic achievement and diligence in academic pursuits has made the ECE pedagogical reform difficult to effect (Biggs 1992; Watkins 2009). Hong Kong parents often see education as a 'highly didactic business of inculcating as much knowledge and as many skills as possible in the time allowed' (Llewellyn 1982, p. 43). To 'win at the starting line', a phrase frequently heard in recent years, they often demanded a curriculum that focused on as many academic components and as early as possible (Cheung 2009; Pearson and Rao 2006). Yuen and Grieshaber (2009) surveyed Hong Kong parents to gauge their ideas and attitudes about ECE. They found that parents, regardless of their income and educational levels, stated that they wanted their children to be happy learners but that they struggled to settle for a less difficult or less academically oriented curriculum. As quoted by Yuen and Grieshaber, some parents believed 'spoon-feeding is only a matter of time' and 'sooner is better than later' (p. 270). Moreover, even the vast majority (90.8%) of Hong Kong's population speaks Cantonese as a first language (Census and Statistics Department 2006), parents want their children to start learning English, a language of 'superiority, power, and success' (Tse et al. 2007, p. 135), and Putonghua, a language that is increasingly important since the return of sovereignty^e, in kindergartens (Yuen and Grieshaber 2009). Though such extreme focus on academic performances clearly violated the aim of ECE as specified by the government and the definition of high-quality ECE as identified by local early childhood specialists and preschool educators (see World Organisation for Early Childhood Education [OMEP] -Hong Kong 1999), parents' preferences are so deep-rooted that it is unlikely to be changed merely by administrative or political measures.

Providers' perspective

A major barrier to the ECE reform from the providers' perspective is the inadequate financial input from the government, even though increased financial resources have been allocated to the sector (Figure 1). In 2005/2006, for example, only 2.9% of the education budget was allocated to pre-primary education, compared to 66.1% and 27.9% for school education (including primary, secondary, and special education) and higher education, respectively (Census and Statistics Department 2006). The ECE reform itself put additional financial pressure on kindergartens, since they had to invest more in staff training and quality enhancement in order to attain the more stringent standards. As a result, the increasing operational costs of kindergartens had to be largely met by school fees. The Census and Statistics Department (2003) analysed the school fees of kindergartens from 1998/1999 to 2002/2003, and found that over the 5-year period the average annual school fees per kindergarten student in half-day sessions increased from HK \$12,772 to HK \$16,284 (27.5% increase), whereas in whole-day sessions, the amount increased from HK \$23,469 to HK \$29,051 (23.8% increase). Even NPMKs, owing to KSS and other government subsidies, generally charged lower school fees than PIKs, their average annual school fees per student in 2002/2003 were still HK \$13,969 and HK \$27,300 for half-day and whole-day sessions, respectively. The corresponding amounts in PIKs were HK \$22,086 and HK \$34,017, representing 58.1% and 24.6% higher than those of their counterparts.

Since their operational costs relied heavily on the schools fees paid by parents, Hong Kong kindergartens were highly susceptible to the wishes of parents (Chan and Chan 2002). Meanwhile, in the face of the declining birth rate and the general student population, kindergartens needed to compete with each other for students and hence financial resources, or else they would be forced to close. To attract parents, kindergartens had no choice but to adopt the teacher-centred, academically oriented pedagogy that was associated with primary education and that parents tended to welcome (Chan and Chan 2003). In order to cater to parents' wishes to have their children begin learning English early, teachers also often taught using a mixed-code that combines Cantonese and English, despite research at school level showing this results in poor standards in both languages (Rao et al. 2009). The Education Department, in fact, did acknowledge and attempt to alter this situation by publishing a list of 'Do's and Don'ts' for kindergartens in 1999. However, not all kindergartens implemented the recommendations. Since the income of PIKs depended solely on school fees, the problems of curriculum overloading and inappropriate teaching appeared to be more serious among these schools, although these, ironically, made PIKs more popular among parents.

Furthermore, even though the government had repeatedly and rapidly raised the minimum qualification requirement for early childhood educators since the mid-1990s, because of limited financial resources, many kindergartens simply could not afford the expenses for staff development and the salaries necessary to bring appropriately qualified staff into the field (Chan and Chan 2002). Until 2005, only 23.8% of kindergarten teachers had certificate-level qualification, and only 12.8% of kindergarten principals received a degree (Education and Manpower Bureau 2006). The qualifications of teachers in Hong Kong, therefore, are still significantly behind those of nearby regions such as Taiwan, Shanghai, and Tianjing, where preschool teachers have to receive at least college level of education and formal teacher's training (HKPTU 2006a). With inadequate training, many Hong Kong kindergarten teachers were unable to incorporate the ideas of child-centredness and holistic development advocated by the reform movement into their practice (Li and Rao 2005).

On the other hand, teachers' own cultural values about early development and learning might also hinder reform in schools, even if they have relatively high academic and professional qualifications. The ECE reform and teacher-training programmes in Hong Kong reflect Western concepts of child individuality, child-centredness, and learning-through-play, but these may not reflect the priorities of parents and teachers in non-Western contexts (Pearson and Rao 2006; Prochner 2002). Indeed, various scholars (e.g. Ng and Rao 2008; Pearson and Rao 2004; Rao et al. 2003) have observed that while teachers acknowledged the significance of child-centred learning and attempted to implement recommendations made in official guidelines, their actual practices often reflected traditional Confucian values and beliefs that children needed to be properly trained in early years. Correct answers to questions, 'proper' behaviour, self-control, and classroom discipline were commonly emphasised in Hong Kong kindergarten classrooms (Rao et al. 2009).

The pre-primary education voucher scheme

Pressure from parents' expectations, insufficient financial input from the government, inadequate qualifications of teachers, their difficulties in reconciling Western theories with inherent cultural values about early learning and development, and most importantly, the strong market forces that resulted from the long-time *laissez-faire* attitude of the government, impeded the speed and strength of the ECE reform. Following the Macao Special Administrative Region government's announcement of the plan to provide fee-free ECE (Macao Government Information Bureau 2005), many people urged the HKSAR government to substantially increase investment in ECE in Hong Kong and promote high-quality services. It was this distinctive backdrop that eventually led to the introduction of an 'education voucher' programme, namely the PEVS, in 2007.

The main purpose of the PEVS, as stated by the Chief Executive, was to provide 'quality education for our next generation' and '[ease] the financial burden of parents' as 'an integral part of government support for the family' (Education and Manpower Bureau 2006, pp. 15-16). Under the PEVS, the government provides an annual non-means-tested and flat-rate subsidy in the form of a voucher, not to kindergartens, but to parents of kindergarten-aged children to meet part of the school fees. The value of voucher is HK \$17,510 in the 2013/2014 school year and will be increased to HK \$20,010 per student per annum in the 2014/2015 school year (Education Bureau 2014a). Needy families can still apply for the means-tested KCFRS for additional support if their school fees exceeding the fee subsidy level.

Kindergartens, on the other hand, need to fulfil a number of requirements to redeem the vouchers. First, subject to a transitional period of 3 years from 2007/2008 to 2009/2010, only NPMKs could join the PEVS. Second, they would no longer be subsidised by the KCSS, which used to cover all eligible providers of pre-primary services to children aged below 6. The KCSS, instead, would continue only for operators of pre-primary settings for children under the age of 3. Third, they must offer local curriculum and charge a tuition fee not exceeding the tuition ceiling (for the 2014/2015 school year, the ceiling is HK \$30,020 (half-day)/HK \$60,040 (whole-day) per student per annum (Education Bureau 2014a)). Fourth, for the first 4 years of implementation (i.e. 2007/2008 to 2010/2011), voucher kindergartens were expected to spend a portion of the balance on upgrading the professional qualifications of teachers and principals (Table 1), for whom the compulsory qualification requirements were raised from QKT level to

Table 1 Schedule of voucher value from 2007/2008 to 2011/2012

School year	Voucher value (HK\$)	Amount of the voucher dedicated towards fee subsidy (HK\$)	Amount of the voucher dedicated towards teacher development (HK\$)
2007/2008	13,000	10,000	3,000
2008/2009	14,000	11,000	3,000
2009/2010	15,000	12,000	2,000
2010/2011	16,000	14,000	2,000
2011/2012	16,000	16,000	– ^a

^aNote: by the 2011/2012 school year, all teachers and principals were expected to meet the enhanced qualification requirements. Source: Education and Manpower Bureau. 2006.

CE(ECE) level and CE(ECE) level to Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood Education (B.Ed.(ECE)) level, respectively, by the 2011/2012 school year. They also needed to submit an annual staff development plan to the government indicating the scheduled time for staff development. Fifth, all kindergartens joining the PEVS practice self-evaluation according to the PIs complemented by the EDB's mandatory quality assurance mechanism (now termed the Quality Review). Starting from the 2012/2013 school year, only accredited NPMKs could continue to redeem the vouchers under the PEVS. Sixth, all voucher kindergartens had full discretion in determining their teachers' salaries (Education and Manpower Bureau 2006).

Though a highly contested arena in education policy-making in the past 30 years, education vouchers, in theory and in practice, have been used by neoliberalists to induce 'free' market competition, remove the monopolistic privileges of public schools, and promote educational choice and student achievement (see Friedman 1962, 1997; Jencks 1970; Lee and Wong 2002). The PEVS works like other education voucher programmes for parents, because it too focuses on empowering them to unleash the vastest amount of market force. But instead of allowing schools to freely respond to the demand of parents, the market force is regulated, and hence helps promote the government's direct involvement in the private sector, by implicitly directing the market force through limiting the vouchers to a restricted sector of the wholly private ECE market while explicitly tying financial assistance with official quality assessments. This defies the usual agenda of decentralising authority through the endorsement of market force in education vouchers.

In the face of parental desire for academically oriented curricula that cannot be easily altered, the 'hybrid' PEVS (between market and social engineering) does seem like a practical move to drive (or force) kindergartens to endorse child-centred pedagogy and curriculum and provide quality ECE in accordance to the official PIs. Limiting the eligibility to only NPMKs on one hand would provide incentives for parents to choose these schools, which were more likely to follow the government's recommended 'Do's and Don'ts' for kindergartens. On the other hand, the redirected market force would quickly drive some unqualified PIKs out of business. The teacher development subsidy embedded in the voucher would also ensure kindergartens to be able and willing to invest in professional training to raise the qualification of teachers.

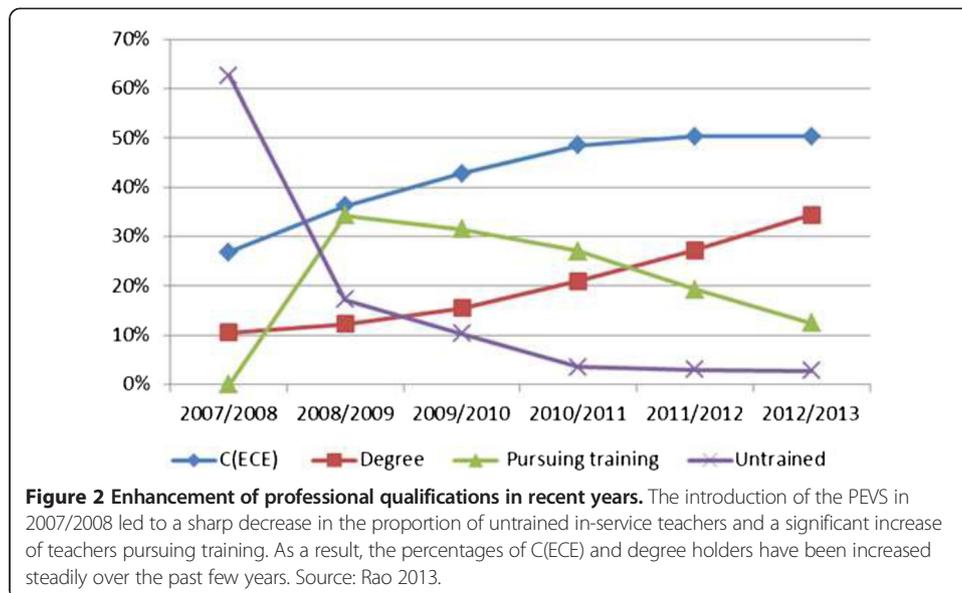
Despite the considerable controversy generated and the resentment of many parents and educators of PIKs, who argued that the new voucher policy might prohibit the formation of market competition and fetter parental choice of schools, statistics have shown that the PEVS is a worthy effort for promoting the affordability and quality of

ECE in Hong Kong. According to the Audit Commission's^f (2013) audit review on the PEVS, as of September 2012, 77% and 79% of kindergartens and students participated in the PEVS. About 85% of kindergarten students received direct financial subsidy through the PEVS, compared with some 50% under the previous KCSS. In 2007/2008, parents on average had to pay HK \$7,200 (for half-day class), compared with HK \$15,169 paid before the implementation of the PEVS. In terms of professional development, 78% of the principals serving in voucher kindergartens had obtained B.Ed. (ECE) and 98% had completed the certification course, while 86% of the in-service teachers had acquired the C(ECE) or equivalent qualification (Figure 2). All voucher kindergartens have passed the Quality Reviews, which have also helped promote school accountability by linking kindergartens' eligibility under the PEVS to the outcomes of the Quality Reviews and publishing the results on EDB's website. In general, the government investment in ECE had risen from 2.7% in 2006/2007 (right before the implementation of the PEVS) to 4.8% of the total recurrent education expenditure in 2011/2012.

Conclusion

The future of early childhood education in Hong Kong

Although the introduction of the PEVS has provided an ample opportunity for the government to carry out its long hoped-for ECE reform, a few problems remain unresolved. As pointed out in the Education Commission's (2010) review on the PEVS, many stakeholders in ECE were still concerned about the eligibility criteria for kindergarten admission to the PEVS. Some worried that the flat-rate design of the PEVS could be unfair to whole-day kindergartens and parents in need of whole-day services. Many early childhood educators also complained about having difficulties in coping with the Quality Review standards, at the same time satisfying parents' preference for the nature of ECE, which often ran counter to pedagogically sound practice. They were also frustrated about the government's decision to stop issuing a recommended salary scale and perceived it gave 'no recognition and due respect to the teaching force' (p. 35).



The voucher policy has also brought new problems. The Audit Commission (2013) pointed out that the average staff turnover rate calculated on the basis of individual kindergarten was 22% for voucher kindergartens. Despite the fact that the EDB has required all voucher kindergartens to comply with a set of principles to control profits and to obtain prior approval from the EDB for charging fees (e.g., school fees and lunch charges), some schools were found to be able to bypass the requirements and make excessive profits by selling optional school items and paid services, which do not require the EDB's approval, and writing them off as miscellaneous fees, which do not need to be disclosed to the public. Meanwhile, more and more voucher kindergartens are approaching the fee ceilings set by the EDB, and some even opted out of the PEVS.

The discontentment of parents and the teaching force, high teacher turnover rates, inadequate financial transparency of some voucher kindergartens, and the declining participation in the PEVS, have worried many about the sustainable development of ECE in Hong Kong. Kindergartens were highly concerned about the government's lack of long-term planning in areas such as continuous professional development of teachers, subsidy mode for ECE, governance on the quality-of-service provision, cross-disciplinary collaboration, local research, and parent education. Others even advocated for universal government-funded ECE in Hong Kong (Education Commission 2010).

To address these issues, as mentioned in the very beginning of this article, the Committee on Free Kindergarten Education has been set up to examine various issues relating to the long-term development and quality of kindergarten education as well as to make concrete recommendations to the EDB on the practicable implementation of free kindergarten education in Hong Kong. At the time of completion of this article, the Committee has just submitted its interim progress report and proposed short-term measures that focuses on five aspects: (a) increasing the voucher subsidy of the on a one-off basis and lifting lift the fee remission ceilings under the KCFRS; (b) providing relevant professional development programme for principals, middle management, and teachers; (c) improving the admission arrangements; (d) enhancing support for catering for student diversity; and (e) enhancing parent education (Committee on Free Kindergarten Education 2013). However, in the paper submitted by the EDB to the Subcommittee to Study the Implementation of Free Kindergarten Education of the Legislative Council Panel on Education⁶, in long-term, 'free kindergarten education' would only cover half-day service as basic provision for all eligible children. In other words, parents enrolling their children in whole-day programmes or half-day programmes that charge more than the government allowance will still need to pay for the difference. Also, only local NPMKs would be covered. The Committee, on the other hand, has not decided if a salary scale for teachers should be established (Education Bureau 2014c). The final report will be submitted in 2015.

Regardless of what the final report will entail, the changes brought about by the recent reforms have already changed the ecology of ECE in Hong Kong. Instead of being a 'one-sided power game between kindergartens and parents' as described by Fung and Lam (2008), ECE in Hong Kong now sees a new player - the HKSAR government. This portends that more official control on the once free ECE market will possibly be seen in the future. The increased official attention and, more importantly, investment, on the long neglected sector could be good news to many as, described by Rao (2013), Cinderella is finally at the Ball and about to meet the prince. The documentation of the experience of Hong Kong ECE makes one rethink the viability of decentralisation of

education as an effective policy tool. Actually, the Hong Kong ECE market itself is a challenge to neoliberals' market theory, as the free market forces imposed by parents do not necessarily encourage schools to improve service provision.

However, will Cinderella go on to live happily ever after? Or will she revert back into her old self? The answers are yet to be determined. The case of ECE in Hong Kong, meanwhile, highlights the difficulty in fusing Western pedagogical appreciations of individuality and Eastern values of Confucianism and suggests ones need to carefully consider the embedded cultures and constraints in their education systems in the development of education policy.

Endnotes

^aKindergartens-cum-childcare centres' is an official term used by the HKSAR government to denote kindergartens operate with an attached childcare centre to provide caring services for children aged below 3.

^bWith effect from July 1, 2007, the Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) was renamed as the Education Bureau (EDB).

^cThe Education Commission is a non-statutory body setup in 1984 to advise the government on the overall development of education in the light of the community's needs. It is the most important advisory body on education in Hong Kong. For more information, please visit its website at <http://www.e-c.edu.hk/tc/index.html>.

^dUS \$1 = HK \$7.78.

^ePutonghua, also known as Mandarin Chinese or Standard Chinese, is the sole official language of the People's Republic of China. Although it shares much vocabulary with Cantonese, the majority and official language of Hong Kong (alongside English), the two languages are not mutually intelligible because of pronunciation, grammatical, and also lexical differences. Since the 1997 handover, however, Putonghua has become increasingly important in Hong Kong as there has been a rise in immigrants and visitors from mainland China and greater integration with the mainland economy. According to Profiles of Primary and Secondary Schools (<http://www.chsc.hk/chsc-school-profiles-pri-lang-1.html>), about 35% (357) of schools in Hong Kong use Putonghua as the language of teaching Chinese.

^fThe Audit Commission is a government department that provides independent, professional, and quality audit services to help the government and public sector organisations enhance public sector performance and accountability. For more information, see <http://www.aud.gov.hk/eng/home/home.htm>.

^gThe Legislative Council is the unicameral legislature of Hong Kong. Its main functions and powers are to enact, amend, or repeal laws; examine and approve budgets; approve taxation and public expenditure; and monitor the work of the government. The Subcommittee to Study the Implementation of Free Kindergarten Education is set up in October 2014 to monitor the progress of the Committee on Free Kindergarten Education. All of its members are Legislative Councillors.

Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' contributions

This article is based on research conducted by the first author, in partial fulfilment of a Ph.D. degree, under the supervision of the second author. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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