

The Development of Pre-Primary Services in Hong Kong: Quality Review as a Lever of Continuous School Improvement

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At present, early childhood education is not part of the universal and compulsory system of education in Hong Kong. All pre-primary services are run by non-profit-making institutions or private independent bodies in Hong Kong. The operation of pre-primary services is largely market driven. According to the organic system model, the development of pre-primary services in Hong Kong had gone through a period of stable development with self-managing institutions which have placed an emphasis on internal effectiveness in the early stages. Since 1997, the services have undergone changes that have been brought forth by the education reforms which hinted upon the interface effectiveness between the pre-primary services operators and the government. Taking effect from 2007, the pre-primary institutions experienced a period of enhanced development under the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme. This period stressed the importance of intraface effectiveness among the key stakeholders—parents, professionals and government. Upon the implementation of the education voucher scheme, a Quality Review system was poised to ensure the deliver of standards-based quality pre-primary services with a clear vision and sense of mission, performance indicators, as well as intended and expected outcomes. The Quality Review aimed to adopt a two-pronged approach based on internal quality assurances undertaken by School Self-evaluations and external school reviews. It can be argued that this represents the best way to improve standards through the collaborative efforts of pre-primary institutions and the government. All pre-primary institutions under the Scheme should be accountable to their stakeholders by optimizing the school data by perfecting their planning cycle through on-going process of self-evaluation, while the government should monitor the state of education at both the national and district levels. The Quality Review is the lever of change that has a direct bearing on the quality performance of pre-primary institutions, children's learning and leadership issues at both the school and system levels.

Key words: pre-primary services, school and organization effectiveness, education voucher, quality review

Pre-primary services in Hong Kong refer to the provision of education and care to young children by kindergartens and child care centers. Early childhood

education is not part of the universal and compulsory education system in Hong Kong.

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Pre-primary Services in Hong Kong

Kindergartens and kindergarten-cum-care centers, registered with the Education Bureau, provide education services for children from three to six years

old. Child care centers, registered with the Social Welfare Department, provide care service to children aged two to three and edu-care centers and crèches, look after infants from birth to two. The aim of pre-primary education in Hong Kong is 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.

At present, all pre-primary services are run by non-profit-making institutions or private independent bodies. In September 2006, 140,800 children were enrolled in 1,015 kindergartens (Information Services Department, 2007). The average size of pre-primary institutions is less than 100 pupils. Pre-primary institutions vary greatly in their scale of operation and the number of classroom(s), and can range from one to over ten. Regarding the provision of facilities, a large proportion of pre-primary institutions can accommodate a reading corner, a nature corner, an art and craft corner, a music corner, a home corner, etc. which are all well equipped with the necessary teaching aids to provide a stimulating environment for self-study.

Attending pre-primary institutions is not compulsory for children below the age of six as the government provides nine years of free and universal basic education from the age of six to 15, i.e. from primary one to secondary three levels. Hence, the operation of pre-primary services is largely market driven. Government assistance to pre-primary institutions includes rent and rates reimbursement to non-profit-making kindergartens, allocating purpose-built kindergarten premises in public housing estates, the Kindergarten and Child Care Centre Subsidy Scheme, and the remission of fees to needy parents through the Kindergarten and Child Care Centre Fee Remission Scheme (Information Service Department, 2007). Under the Kindergarten and Child Care Centre Subsidy Scheme, pre-primary service institutions were required to pay teachers according to the

recommended Normative Salary Scale (Legislative Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, 2008a).

The Different Stages of Development of Pre-Primary Services in Hong Kong.

According to the organic system model, school effectiveness can be defined as the flexibility and adaptability of the school in the sense of an organization's survival (Scheerens, 1992). It emphasizes the importance of the well-being of the individuals in an organization, the importance of consensus and collegial relationships as well as motivation and human resource development (Cheng, 1993, 1996). In this context, the development of pre-primary services in Hong Kong can be described as going through the following stages.

Pre-1997: A Period of Stable Development with Self-managing Pre-Primary Institutions

In the early stage of development, all pre-primary services in Hong Kong were privately run with their own adaptability, diversity and market responsiveness. There were substantial degrees of variation among the pre-primary institutions in terms of school curriculum, operational standards, fee levels, staff qualifications and quality of service. The Government set minimum requirements for the registration of teachers in pre-primary institutions and provided operational manuals and curriculum guides for the purposes of general reference for the operators. The Education and Social Welfare authorities conducted random inspections of these institutions in order to give advice to principals and teachers on curriculum, teaching approaches and school administration and provided advisory services for improvements where needed. Apart from the above mentioned activities, there was little government interference.

As these institutions were mainly customer-

oriented and market-driven, they had to make every effort to appeal to parents to send their children to them. Leadership, communication, participation, adaptability, school climate, teaching methods, and class-room management were important indicators of effectiveness (Cheng, 1996). These factors were also the characteristics of a self-managing school. Quality pre-primary institutions that could attract most pupils displayed the aforesaid indicators of effectiveness as they showed a relatively high degree of internal effectiveness in terms of school management, teaching and support provided to pupils. This period of development could be described as a period of stable development with self-managing institutions.

1997-2007: A Period of Change Brought Forth by Educational Reforms

The Education Bureau recognized the importance of promoting the well-being of the young generation and committed itself to the provision of quality education for all. The blueprint for education in the 21st century *Learning for Life, Learning through Life: Reform Proposals for the Education System in Hong Kong* (Education Department, 2000) emphasized the importance of early childhood education as the foundation for lifelong learning. The Education Bureau has revised the curriculum guide on pre-primary education for use as a reference for early childhood workers. The framework encompasses the physical, cognitive and language, affective and social, and aesthetic aspects of education, covering six learning areas, namely, physical health and fitness, language, mathematics, science and technology, self and society, and art. The revised guide to the pre-primary curriculum was implemented in September 2007 to provide the basic principles and direction for pre-school educators to develop their school-based programmes.

Since 1997, progressive steps had been taken to upgrade the professional qualifications of early childhood educators, and to improve the teacher to pupil ratio. This has been done in the belief that a

professional teaching force could make a difference in the quality of service. The number of qualified kindergarten teachers had increased dramatically from 40% in the 1997 school year to 100% in the 2004-2005 school year. All teachers in the pre-primary services reached the Qualified Kindergarten Teacher Status and all new and the majority of serving principals of pre-primary services institutions had completed a certificate in kindergarten education. The teacher pupil ratio has also improved to 1:15.

The Manual of Kindergarten Practice, issued by the Education Bureau, provided prospective school operators with the necessary information regarding statutory requirements and recommendations for the operation of kindergartens.

Quality assurance of early childhood education was developed in 2000 with common Performance Indicators for self-evaluation by kindergartens and child care centers. All Quality Assurance Inspection reports can be found on the Education Bureau homepage for the general information of members of the public (Education Bureau, 2008). Beginning in September 2005, the Education Bureau has harmonized the governance and supervision of pre-primary services to assure more effective delivery of edu-care services for our young children. The aim was to move swiftly towards a coherent, high quality pre-primary education service, backed by more professional and financial support.

All the aforementioned measures were implemented within the wider context of seeking further improvements and setting higher standards. This period of development related closely to the various measures proposed in the education reforms and the success of pre-primary services institutions in realizing their targets. The basis of the desired environment is discernable from the following: the interface effectiveness between the pre-primary services operators and the government in terms of the policy targets as highlighted in the Education Blueprint, the quality assurance framework and the introduction of school-based management.

Post 2007: A Period of Enhanced Development under the Pre-Primary Education Voucher Scheme

Given the fact that all policy targets set out in 2000 in the Blueprint for Education in the 21st Century had been achieved, the Chief Executive announced in his policy address of 2006-2007 a new education initiative to further improve the quality of pre-primary services with the introduction of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS) in the 2007-2008 school year. The government has decided to invest heavily in pre-primary education, but the authority wishes every dollar to be spent to enhance teaching and learning and achieve real improvements in the pre-primary services. The aim inherent within the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme, to provide affordable and quality pre-primary schooling to all students aged 3 to 6, will benefit parents, students, teachers, and pre-primary services operators. The Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme provides a fee subsidy for parents to enroll their children in pre-primary institutions and financial support to teachers for professional development. For each child older than two years and eight months attending a local non-profit-making kindergarten or relevant classes in a local non-profit-making kindergarten-cum-child care centre, a subsidy of \$10,000 will be given in the 2007-2008 school year. The sum will be increased progressively up to \$16,000 in the 2011-2012 school year.

Under the scheme, pre-primary institutions teachers and principals will receive financial assistance up to the 2011-2012 school year in order to support their professional development. The entry requirement for pre-primary teachers will be raised from Qualified Kindergarten Teacher to the Certificate in Early Childhood Education level or equivalent as from the 2007-2008 school year. The ultimate goal is to upgrade serving kindergarten teachers and principals to the level of a Certificate in Early Childhood Education and a bachelor's degree in early childhood education respectively by 2012. Upon the implementation of the Pre-primary Education

Voucher Scheme, pre-primary institutions will enjoy full discretion in determining salaries for their teachers and principals.

To assure teaching quality, all pre-primary institutions under the Pre-primary Education voucher Scheme will be subject to classroom inspection (Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, 2007). All pre-primary institutions joining the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme are required to produce detailed school profiles such as their status, enrolment, number of classes by level, principal and teacher numbers/experience/qualifications, school facilities and school fees for reference purposes by parents. In parallel, these institutions are required to undergo a Quality Review (QR) process for quality assurance purposes. All Quality Review reports will be uploaded onto the Education Bureau homepage and linked to the electronic version of the school profiles. Starting from the 2012-2013 school year, only local non-profit-making pre-primary institutions having met the prescribed standards established in the Quality Review framework may continue to redeem their education vouchers (Education Bureau, 2007).

In designing the pre-primary voucher for Hong Kong, it can be seen that the overarching principle is that public funds will be allocated to where they are most needed, complemented by professional development and enhanced quality assurance over the next five years. The pre-primary services in this period stress the importance of intraface effectiveness among the key stakeholders—parents, professionals and government. Upon implementation of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme, all pre-primary institutions will become more transparent; parents will have greater autonomy in choosing the right service providers by reference to more detailed school data and profiles while the government will ensure that all pre-primary services reach the required standards and to provide quality education for young children through the appropriate use of government funding. Though with increased government

investment, the existing operation status quo of marketization will undoubtedly continue. The Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme, operating alongside a transparent quality assurance mechanism and various teacher upgrading measures, will bring in affordable and quality pre-primary education in the best interest of all children.

The Evolution of Quality Assurance Inspection to Quality Review

The quality assurance mechanism has been in use in the kindergarten sector since 2000 to give impetus to enhance the quality of kindergarten education. Under this mechanism, Quality Assurance Inspections are conducted by inspectors of the Education Bureau while school self-evaluation is carried out by the kindergartens themselves. The quality assurance mechanism is to assure parents and the community that eligible kindergartens are operating at an acceptable or higher standard. The main purposes of the Quality Assurance Inspection to kindergartens were: (a) to inform the government about the quality and performance of kindergartens on a territory-wide basis, (b) to inform kindergarten operators about how well their institutions are performing and advise on improvements to be made, (c) to inform parents about the quality of the kindergartens their children attend, and (d) to identify good practice for dissemination among kindergartens.

Parents will be assisted in making their choices of kindergarten through the publication of kindergarten profiles which include key operational details and information about their education programmes.

A full set of Performance Indicators for pre-primary institutions (including kindergartens and child care centers for children aged 2 to 6) has been completed since late 2003 and has been used as an effective measuring tool for School Self-evaluation. Pre-primary institutions can make use of the Quality

Assurance Inspection findings and refer to the performance standards specified in the Performance Indicators for conducting School Self-evaluation. As part of the school development process, School self-evaluations are conducted by individual kindergartens on their own initiative. In general, kindergartens receiving government funds were more willing to conduct School Self-evaluations.

With the implementation of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme, a Quality Review will be introduced in the 2007-2008 school year. Under the Quality Review, the Education Bureau will conduct external school reviews to validate the School Self-evaluation of all pre-primary institutions. It can be described as a standards-based approach to these services. The Education Bureau has started the first batch of a planned number of 130 Quality Review visits in the 2007-2008 school year (Legislative Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government, 2008b). The validation of performance standards focuses on the four domains of management and organization, learning and teaching, support to children and the school culture, and children's development. Pre-primary institutions under the Education Voucher Scheme are required to conduct ongoing self-evaluation and submit a school report and an annual school plan before the 1st of September each year. Depending on the school size, an Education Bureau inspection team, consisting of two to three inspectors will conduct a two to three day on-site visit to assess school performance in validating their School Self-evaluation reports. Validation of school performance is evidence-based and derived from class observations, interviews, questionnaires and document review. Those pre-primary institutions not meeting the prescribed standards will receive an advisory letter to take necessary improvement measures by the Education Bureau (Education Bureau, 2007).

It is obvious that development and improvement in school is central to the government inspection and review policies. A clear framework of quality

assurance and improvement ensures the achievement of set standards and that public investments provide good value for money. Back in 1991, when the then Education Department introduced the School Management Initiative Scheme, schools were required to conduct self-evaluations and report their performance in a school profile annually. Since 2000, under the School-based Management, all local schools have been devolved with greater autonomy and flexibility in handling their operation and resources. Some kindergartens have also practiced the school self-evaluation for school development in the context of the School Management Initiative and School-based Management. In this regard, the Education Bureau has promoted since 2003, promoted the School Development and Accountability framework to enhance School Self-evaluation in all schools. The School Development and Accountability framework rests upon interacting and transparent quality assurance processes, vis-à-vis School Self-evaluations and external review, including Quality Reviews which strikes a balance between providing support to schools through partnerships and giving impetus for self-improvement through inspection. Under this review framework, front-line educators play an active and participative role in decision-making; schools are devolved with greater autonomy and flexibility in handling their operation and resources, set school goals and evaluate the progress towards achieving these goals. The Quality Review framework works on the understanding that the presence of both pressure and support is the most effective means of achieving school improvement.

The Quality Review as a Lever of Continuous School Improvement

At the heart of every national policy of education is the delivery of quality education which can generally be defined in terms of whole-person development and the attainment of high standards. Pre-primary

institutions capable of delivery of such high standards—the Quality School—have a high degree of accountability to their stakeholders and the community at large. While every institution has its unique circumstances that may impinge upon its pupils' performance and indeed upon school performance as a whole, the creation of the Quality School is not unattainable. Apart from its accountability, the Quality School is marked by continuous development in its pursuit of excellence. It follows that school development is a task for the school, and education policy makers are entrusted with the task of creating a framework that increases the chances of success in schools. This is the belief that underpins the school review systems in many parts of the world, including that of Hong Kong.

Fullan (1993) has long professed that teaching, at its core, is a moral profession. Implicit in teacher professionalism is the moral purpose and the belief that the teacher is an agent for change—to deliver output of the best quality in the best interest of the clients. To do so, teachers should keep themselves abreast of the latest knowledge and developments in the field. The successful change agent secures the commitment of his team even to ideas he may not like, by taking a leadership role in helping his team members seek collective meaning, addressing the concerns of doubters, transforming culture and appreciating the inevitable early difficulties. Sylva (2007), from her studies, also confirmed the notion that qualified teachers made a difference in children's academic and social outcomes. An organization having undergone transformation of its culture in this way is sustainable and ever-improving.

The willingness to inject a sizeable portion of the national budget into education should be matched by proven results in pupils learning. Caldwell and Spinks (1992), in describing the world-wide move toward self-managing schools as a mega trend in education, highlight the fact that school leaders who are responsive, accept that there are many stakeholders who have a right to know what is going

on in the school—pupils and their parents, the local community, the school system, government and the community at large. These leaders will respond to the expectations for schools and will be comfortable to collect and act on the data indicating how well the school is performing. The essence of such a multi-faceted framework lies in a school culture of using data to drive improvement and in capacity building. In the past few decades, developed countries like the United States and United Kingdom have become concerned with the “return in investment” of education. This is perfectly understandable as education uses up a tremendous amount of financial and human resources. This concern has given rise to the proliferation of school reviews as a mechanism of quality assurance which tacitly demands that schools do their jobs well and deliver. The Quality Review framework, which is evidence-based, keeps a balance of both pressure and support in achieving improvements to schools. Fullan (2004) points out that there is a strong emphasis on accountability as well as upon capacity building in terms of principals and teachers in achieving new levels of excellence in pupils’ attainment.

Intended Outcomes of Quality Review

The reason for the Hong Kong Quality Review in adopting the two-pronged approach of internal quality assurance through the School Self-evaluation and the external school review becomes obvious. It has been done to improve standards through the collaborative efforts of pre-primary institutions and the government. The Quality Review framework for improvement has the following key components: (a) strengthening the organization culture in pre-primary institutions, (b) building capacity through scaling up school-based management and schools, (c) self-evaluation/school self-assessment, (d) institutionalizing data-driven school practices, (e) nurturing professional dialogue in “learning organizations”, (f) giving “space” to teachers through re-prioritization of tasks, and (g) providing a feedback loop for

continuous school improvement.

The Vision of Quality Review

If pre-primary institutions undertake robust School Self-evaluation and can assess with accuracy where they are and how well they are doing, they can plan and prioritize their work, set targets and standards, formulate policies and allocate resources strategically, as well as evaluate progress and target achievements effectively and efficiently. It therefore carries the hallmarks of a participative and hence transparent decision-making, rigorous School Self-evaluation system, informed by the Quality Review, as well as reaching new heights in standards. Like the development of school reviews in the United States and the United Kingdom, pre-primary institutions can gear to children’s learning and delivery of quality education with the conviction of there being “no losers.” It is an improvement-oriented professional community.

The essence of this Quality Assurance pyramid is that the very end vision of “school improvement and accountability” is driven by School Self-evaluations complemented by external Quality Assurance Inspection/quality reviews. “Real school improvement comes from within and is about the on-going and sustainable learning of pupils and all those inside and

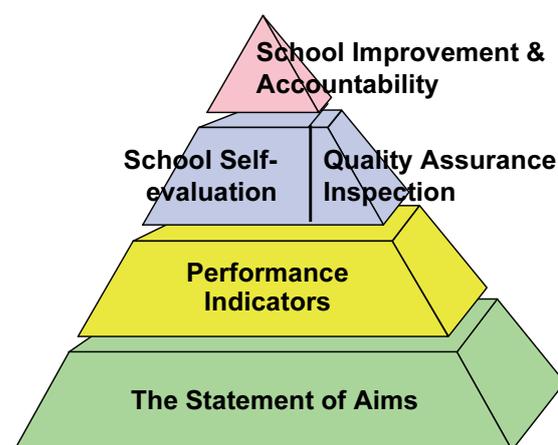


Figure 1. Quality assurance pyramid (Education Bureau, 2008).

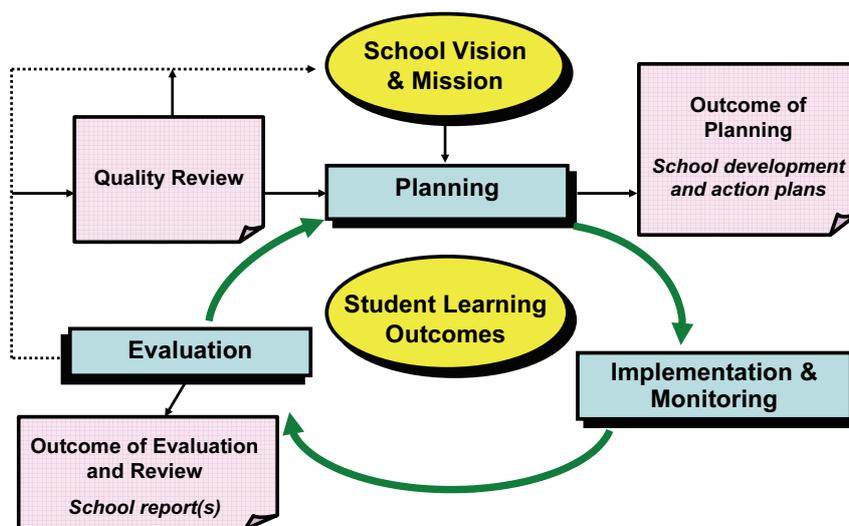


Figure 2. Quality Review framework

outside schools who care about pupil learning” (Stoll, 2004, p. 6).

The Mission of Quality Review

The Quality Review framework, with its balance between the internal quality assurance mechanism and external reviews has the mission of: (a) facilitating the successful implementation of education, (b) initiating development in schools, (c) providing an external view on school performance, (d) enhancing the feedback loop for school improvement, (e) providing the public with information on the current situation regarding the quality of school education, and (f) making informed policy decisions.

Performance Indicators for Pre-primary Institutions

In the Quality Review framework, a set of Performance Indicators for child development, in consultation with the pre-primary education sector, is designed to promote school valuation and continuing improvement. These indicators provide the basis for the School Self-evaluation, quality assurance inspections and quality reviews. They are measuring tools for inspection and self-evaluation purposes, undertaken with a view to enhancing school

accountability and self-improvement. The Performance Indicators cover the following four domains; school work (which are composed of management and organization), learning and teaching, support to children and school culture and children's development. The four domains consist of 32 performance indicators, which are used as a reference tool for school performance evaluation. The Performance Indicators of each domain are categorized into different areas with one or more aspects each (Education and Manpower Bureau and Social Welfare Department, 2003). Performance Indicators can be used at both the subject and domain levels to review the work done and the progress of development. In working out action plans and development targets, pre-primary institutions can make use of Performance Indicators as a reference point to set criteria for School Self-evaluation, set development priorities and conduct training and development. Teachers can use these Performance Indicators to review and reflect on their teaching practices, evaluate pupils’ learning from a ‘pupil-oriented’ perspective, and make reference to the good practices outlined in the evidence of performance.

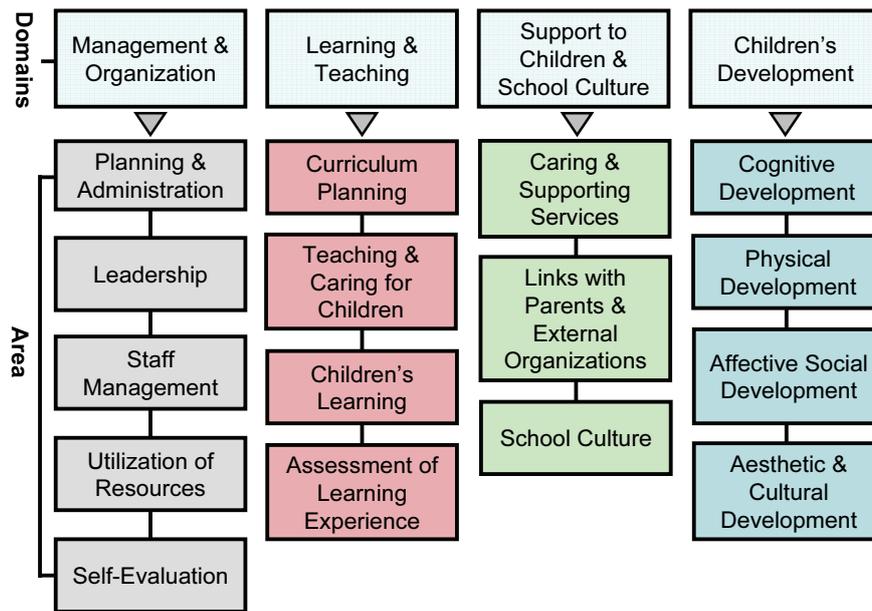


Figure 3. Performance indicators for pre-primary institutions (Education and Manpower Bureau & Social Welfare Department, 2003).

The Working Principles of Quality Review

Both the Quality Assurance framework and the Quality Review framework are grounded on the PIE cycle—planning, implementation and monitoring, and evaluation process. This cyclical process, being developmental and improvement-oriented in nature as well as data-driven and evidence-based, is incorporated as an integral part of school work. Four pieces of the jigsaw puzzle interweave within the Quality Review framework, i.e. capacity building, school development and improvement, accountability, and data-driven processes. This feedback loop is targeted at continuously improving learning and teaching within the pre-primary institution as a learning community and its ever-growing partnership with the external community. “Both Blackmore (2001), based on research in the Australia context, and Ranson (2003), based on research in the English context, argue that new educational accountability has been about regulation and performance rather than educational improvement, local capacity building and the encouragement of democracy in

schools” (Moller, 2007, p. 1). In this regard, accountability and transparency are subsequently enhanced.

Within the Quality Review mechanism of Hong Kong, pre-primary institutions are entrusted with the task of sustainable development with standards and pupils learning outcomes at the core of all their school work, thus fully realizing the spirit of school-based management. On the other hand, the public have a right to know how well the pre-primary institutions are performing through participation through different avenues. Pre-primary institutions, having received Quality Reviews, have recognized the benefits of School self-evaluation and external review in promoting school improvement. These include enhancements in school-based management, enhanced teaching and development in both process and professional capacity building. What this means to the public is that quality school education can be seen in the form of enhanced participation, accountability, transparency and organizational effectiveness.

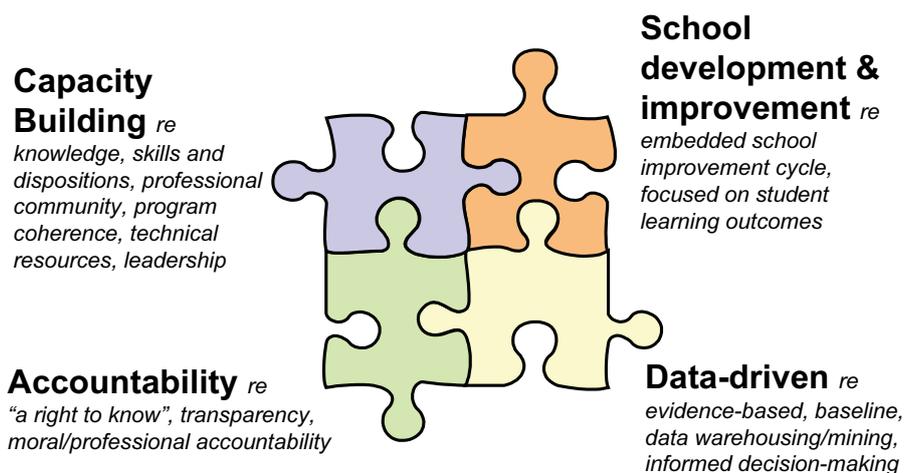


Figure 4. Quality Review: The jigsaw

Expected Outcomes of the Quality Review

The expected outcomes of the Quality Review can be summarized as follow: (a) all pre-primary institutions will eventually benefit from the Quality Review to complement their internal evaluation and performance assessment processes, irrespective of their mode of financing; (b) the Quality Review is conducted throughout a child's educational cycle (Quality Review in kindergarten level; External School Review in primary and secondary); (c) parents will have a clear indicator for choosing a high quality pre-primary institution, based on a rational and objective assessment made by professionally competent personnel who are adequately monitored by the Education Bureau; and (d) the Quality Review provides an incentive for high quality provision by pre-primary institutions, since their performance is linked with the government subsidy.

Conclusion

There is clear evidence from the findings of the annual Quality Assurance Inspection reports and individual Quality Assurance Inspection reports of kindergartens that classroom teaching in many

pre-primary institutions is now more engaging, more child centered and more open to critical appraisal and evaluation. It is now more common for teachers and school leaders to tune in to their pupils' voices and to see pupils as critical evaluators responsible for their own learning (Education Bureau, 2008). Sustainable school improvement and intelligent accountability will require a capacity building approach in which self-evaluation is progressively embedded at the classroom level and permeates all initiatives, so that self-evaluation is not seen as an extra, but is built into every aspect of practice. An optimized knowledge base surrounding school effectiveness is central to enhancing school improvement. Given the increasingly rich database at the school and system levels, pre-primary institutions should be accountable to their stakeholders by optimizing the school data by perfecting their PIE cycle through School Self-evaluation, while the government should monitor the state of education at both the territory and district levels and should take on the role of being critical friends to the school personnel. The School Self-evaluation and Quality Review help pre-primary institutions ensure sustainable development by prioritizing and affirming strategic improvement measures. The Quality Review is a standards-based approach to school improvement. It is the lever of

change that has a direct bearing on the performance of pre-primary institutions, children's learning and leadership issues at both the school and system levels. With full transparency of the operations and greater parental choice, market forces should drive forward continuous improvement in the pre-primary institutions. Our young children will benefit from enjoying quality pre-primary education through well-qualified teaching staff and a greatly improved learning environment. As pre-primary education lays the foundation of lifelong education, quality pre-primary education will have long-term positive implications for continuing and sustainable development of the society as a whole. The combination of an existing vibrant pre-primary market, viable parental choice facilitated by quality information, professional upgrading and quality assurance arrangements, one can expect significant improvements in the pre-primary services in Hong Kong over the coming decade.

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