

# Competing Forces: Government Policy, Teacher Education, and School Administration in Hong Kong Early Childhood Education

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The ecology and development of Hong Kong early childhood education is molded by the continuous and dynamic interactions between major stakeholders: government, school administrators and teacher educators. Hong Kong early childhood education is driven by three forces: policy, advocacy, and quality. These diverse forces compete with each other to become the dominant discourse in the field. Over the years, the voice of a particular force became more prominent than the other after an intricate interactions and negotiations between the different parties. This paper reviews the development of Hong Kong early childhood education policy from 1930s to present and examines its impact from the perspectives of teacher educators and school administrators.

Key words : teacher education, school administration, Hong Kong

This paper focuses on the dynamic interactions of key stakeholders including government, school administrators and teacher educators, and examines the impact of policy change on early childhood education quality and teachers' development in Hong Kong.

Early childhood education in Hong Kong is not publicly funded. All early care and education services are provided by private and nongovernment organizations (NGOs). Before the handover, the

colonial government separated education from care and monitored kindergartens and childcare centres independently by the Education Department and the Social Welfare Department respectively.

At the turn of the millennium, Hong Kong returned to Chinese sovereignty and underwent rapid development in early childhood education with new educational reform. These changes can be regarded as a great leap forward in building the infrastructure of Hong Kong early childhood education, including raising teachers' qualifications and establishing a quality assurance mechanism (Rao & Li, 2009).

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## Three Stakeholders and the Competing Voices

The ecology and development of Hong Kong early childhood education is molded by the continuous and

dynamic interactions between major stakeholders, including government, school administrators, and teacher educators. The interconnectedness of the three stakeholders can be represented in Figure 1.

Early childhood education development can be driven by a variety of forces. It can be policy-driven, advocacy-driven, or quality-driven. These diverse forces compete with each other to become the dominant discourse in the field. At different time period, the voice of a particular force became more prominent than the other forces after an intricate interactions and negotiations between the different parties.

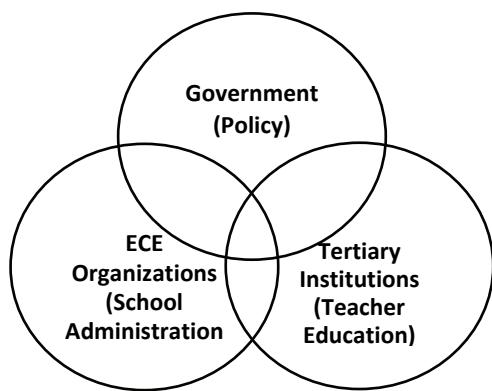


Figure 1. Interactions of the three stakeholders of Hong Kong early childhood education

In the early years of the 1960s to 1970s, Hong Kong government adopted a laissez-faire approach towards early childhood education. At this period, many new developments in kindergarten and childcare centre were advocacy-driven by leading organizations in the field. For instance, the abolition of Primary One Entrance Examination was the result of the joint efforts of pioneering lobby groups. During this period, the whole field is united with one heart in order to fight for recognition and resource allocation.

From the 1980s onwards, the government began to introduce more regulatory policy and some changes are policy-driven by government initiatives. For

example, the minimal qualification requirement for kindergarten teachers was set by the government.

From the 1990s until recently, with the blossom of research on early childhood development and innovative pedagogies in tertiary institutions, informed practice is seriously considered by all three stakeholders in the field. Some of the new policies such as child-centred approach in the curriculum guideline can be regarded as example of quality-driven force.

It illustrates the complexity of forces that interact with one another, which in turn influences early childhood education development in Hong Kong.

## Research Questions

Three research questions were addressed in this paper:

(1) What are the major policies in Hong Kong early childhood education that affect teacher education and school administration?

(2) From the perspective of teacher educators, what is the impact of recent policy changes on Hong Kong early childhood education development?

(3) From the perspective of school administrators, what is the impact of recent policy changes on Hong Kong early childhood education development?

## Method

### Participants

Participants were seven prominent teacher educators and academics from various tertiary institutions and seven experienced school administrators and practitioners from large nongovernment organizations (NGOs) that provide early childhood education services. Of all the participants, 93% were females. Many of them have been working in the Hong Kong early childhood

education field for decades. They represented a variety of viewpoints.

#### **Procedure**

Teacher educators and school administrators participated in three focus-group meetings on "Teacher Education and School Administration". Using thematic coding, major themes were identified and analyzed. Changes in Hong Kong early childhood education were examined through the perspectives of teacher educators and school administrators.

### **Results and Discussion**

Major policies in Hong Kong early childhood education that affect teacher education and school administration are reviewed. It is followed by the examination of the impact of policy changes on the ecology of Hong Kong early childhood education from the perspectives of teacher educators and school administrators.

#### ***Development of Hong Kong Early Childhood Education Policies***

The review of policy changes can be divided into different periods. The first stage was from 1930s to 1970s. The second stage was about the 1980s. The third stage was about 1990s and the final stage was from 2000s to the present.

**1930s to 1970s.** Early forms of kindergarten appeared in Hong Kong in the 1930s. With the influx of mainland Chinese immigrants, the first childcare centre was established in 1956. Education Department and Social Welfare Department monitored kindergartens and childcare centres respectively. While the Education Department focused on "education" of children aged three to six, the Social Welfare Department was responsible for both "education and care" of children from infants to

preschool age (0 to 6).

Part-time In-service trainings were provided to kindergarten teachers and childcare workers separately by their respective departments in the 1950s and 1960s. For instance, the Kindergarten Advisory Inspectorate established a two-year Part-time In-service training for kindergarten teachers in the 1950s. The Social Welfare Department, on the other hand, began Part-time In-service and Full-time Pre-service training for childcare workers in the 1960s. However, their trainings were not mutually recognized. Thus, the movement between kindergarten teachers and childcare workers were prevented.

The first Ordinances for kindergartens and childcare centres were released in the 1970s (Hong Kong Government, 1971, 1975). In particular, the Child Care Centres Ordinance (Hong Kong Government, 1975) required childcare workers to complete the relevant In-service training courses within their first year of employment. Gradually, the responsibility of In-service training has shifted from government departments to the tertiary education sector. The Hong Kong Polytechnics commenced one-year Full-time Pre-service training in 1976.

**1980s.** In the 1980s, the first official policy on pre-primary services was released and recommendations were made to accelerate teacher training and to raise teacher qualification requirement. Of importance were the *Green Paper on Primary Education and Pre-primary Services* (Hong Kong Government, 1980) and the *White Paper on Primary Education and Pre-primary Services* (Hong Kong Government, 1981). The Green Paper was the first consultation in the field. The White Paper was the first official document that outlined the need to accelerate training. It recommended that each kindergarten should have at least one trained teacher (i.e., Qualified Kindergarten Teacher or Qualified Assistant Kindergarten Teacher) by 1984. Nonetheless, it was not followed through.

During this period, the Education Department

Table 1.

*A brief review of early childhood education development in Hong Kong (1930s to 1970s)*

	Kindergarten	Child Care Centre
Monitoring Bodies	Education Department (or Education & Manpower Bureau)	Social Welfare Department
Focus	Education look after children aged 3-6	Care and education look after children aged 0-6
1930s – 1940s	Early form of kindergartens appeared in Hong Kong	
1950s	<u>In-service training</u> Kindergarten Advisory Inspectorate was established and provided 2-year Part-time In-service training for kindergarten teachers.	With the influx of mainland Chinese immigrants, the first childcare centre was established in Hong Kong by YWCA in 1956.
1960s		<u>In-service training</u> Social Welfare Department began Part-time In-service training for childcare workers in 1960, and Full-time Pre-service training in 1968.
1970s	<u>Policy</u> Education Ordinance and Regulations was released in 1971.	<u>Policy</u> Child Care Centres Ordinance was released in 1975 requiring childcare workers to complete the relevant in-service training courses within first year of employment. <u>In-service Training</u> Hong Kong Polytechnics commenced 1 year full-time pre-service training in 1976.

transferred more training provision to various tertiary institutions. For example, the new two-year Part-time In-service program was offered by the Grantham College of Education in 1981 with Qualified Kindergarten Teacher (QKT) registration. The Kindergarten Advisory Inspectorate, instead, provided a new 12-week program of Qualified Assistant Kindergarten Teacher (QAKT) in 1982. In addition to the Hong Kong Polytechnics (the forerunner of Hong Kong Polytechnic University), Lee Wai Lee Technical Institute (the forerunner of Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education – Lee Wai Lee campus) also provided Full-time Pre-service training for childcare workers.

Initial curriculum guides were developed. For example, the *Education Department Manual of Kindergarten Practice* (Hong Kong Government, 1984) and the *Guide to the Kindergarten Curriculum* (Curriculum Development Council, 1984) were produced for kindergartens. Similarly, the *Activity Guidelines for Day Nurseries* (Hong Kong Government, 1986) was developed for childcare centres. At the same year, the *Education Commission* released their *Report No. 2* (Hong Kong Government, 1986) which recommended kindergartens to have 40% of QKT by 1990. Kindergarten principals were also recommended to complete the QKT program.

Table 2.

*A brief review of early childhood education development in Hong Kong (1980s)*

	Kindergarten	Child Care Centre
1980s	<p><u>Policy</u></p> <p>Green Paper on Primary Education and Pre-primary Services (1980) - First official consultation in the field.</p> <p>White Paper on Primary Education and Pre-primary Services (1981) - First official document outlined the need to accelerate training and recommended at least 1 trained teacher (QKT or QAKT) per kindergarten by 1984.</p> <p><u>Training</u></p> <p>Education Department transferred training provision to Grantham College of Education in 1981 to offer a new 2-year Part-time In-service program with Qualified Kindergarten Teacher (QKT) registration.</p> <p><u>Training Workshops</u></p> <p>Kindergarten Advisory Inspectorate provided a new 12-week program of Qualified Assistant Kindergarten Teacher (QAKT) in 1982.</p> <p><u>Curriculum Guide</u></p> <p><i>Manual of Kindergarten Practice and Guide to the Kindergarten Curriculum</i> (1984) were produced.</p> <p><u>Policy Recommendations</u></p> <p>Education Commission Report No. 2 recommended KG to have 40% and 60% teachers trained (QAKT or QKT) by 1990 and 1994 respectively.</p> <p>Government (1986) required kindergarten principals to complete QKT program.</p>	<p><u>Training</u></p> <p>In addition to Hong Kong Polytechnics, Lee Wai Lee Technical Institute (later renamed as Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education - Lee Wai Lee campus) provided 2 year full-time pre-service training in 1980.</p> <p><u>Curriculum Guide</u></p> <p>Developed <i>Activity Guidelines</i> (1982) for Childcare Centres.</p>

1990s. In 1997, the sovereignty of Hong Kong was returned to China. Around the handover was the establishment of a centralized institute for teacher education. The Hong Kong Institute of Education was formed by the amalgamation of various Colleges of Education. It took over the In-service training for kindergarten teachers from various colleges. During the 1990s, a new Certificate of Education in Early Childhood Education (CE) and Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) degree courses were provided and mandatory qualification requirement was raised. Kindergartens were required to have at least 50% QKT-trained teachers by 1999 and 60% by 2000. All Pre-service kindergarten principals had to complete the

Certificate of Education (CE) by 2004. From the 1980s to the 1990s, the Social Welfare Department organized workshops for childcare workers by inviting leading academics such as Professors Lillian Katz and Thelma Harms to Hong Kong to introduce latest research and pedagogies regarding the use of Project Approach and Environmental Rating Scales. This was a time of rapid learning.

2000s. In the new millennium, the Education Commission (2000) recommended a series of educational reforms. The sincerity and good intention behind the reform is recognized by the field. The most notably initiatives were:

Table 3.

*A brief review of early childhood education development in Hong Kong (1990s)*

	Kindergarten	Child Care Centre
1990s	<p><u>Qualification Requirement and Teacher training</u></p> <p>Government (1994) required kindergartens to have at least 40% QKT by 1997.</p> <p>A new 2-year Part-time Certificate of Education in ECE (CE) was offered to In-service teachers in 1995 and a new Full-time CE to Pre-service teachers in 1997.</p> <p>Government (1997) required KG to have at least 50% QKT by 1999 and 60% by 2000.</p> <p>All the Pre-service KG principals were required to complete CE by 2004.</p>	<p><u>Training workshops</u></p> <p>SWD introduced workshops on latest research and pedagogies to ECE teachers from late 1980s to 1990s (e.g., invited Profs. Thelma Harms, Lilian Katz to Hong Kong).</p>
	<p><u>Teacher Training</u></p> <p>Hong Kong Institute of Education amalgamated the various Colleges of Education to form a central institution, took over In-service training for kindergarten teachers from the College of Education. B.Ed. courses were established in 1997.</p>	

(1) Harmonization (Restructure of monitoring systems)

Harmonization was implemented in 2005 by joining Education Department (ED) and Social Welfare Department (SWD) to end the separation of monitoring bodies on early childhood education provision (Hong Kong Government, 2005). Discussion for unification started in the 1980s, and harmonization was implemented in the mid-2000s by restructuring the relevant sections within ED and SWD. This marriage of ED (renamed as Education & Manpower Bureau after 1997) and SWD come late but the two partners in this “new marriage” need time to adapt to each other and learn about what it meant by “educare”. The interdepartmental working group closely examined the harmonization of kindergartens and childcare centres.

(2) Enhancement of practitioners' qualifications and the voucher system (Teacher education policy)

Over the years, Hong Kong government used two measures to enhance teacher qualifications: (i) by increasing funding for the provision of in-service and pre-service training; and (ii) by mandatory upgrade of

teacher qualifications.

Qualified Kindergarten Teacher (QKT) program was established in early 1980s by the Kindergarten Advisory Inspectorate, while the Child Care Workers Training (CCW) was established in 1970s by the Training Section of SWD. The Certificate of Education in ECE (or CE) was established in 1995. The B.Ed. (ECE) program was established in 1997. Initially, training was provided by SWD or ED separately. Later it was transferred to the tertiary education sectors such as Hong Kong Polytechnics in the 1970s, Grantham College of Education and Lee Wai Lee Technical Institute in the 1980s, and Hong Kong Institute of Education in the 1990s.

With the government mandate to upgrade teacher qualifications, all practitioners were required to finish compulsory training in order to stay in the profession. Policy changed from requiring at least one QKT or QAKT trained teacher per kindergarten in 1984, to 50% trained teachers in 1999, and 100% in 2004. Finally, this target was met within 20 years. By 2012, all ECE teachers are required to have Certificate of Education (CE). Early childhood principals were

Table 4.

*A brief review of early childhood education development in Hong Kong (2000s).*

	Kindergarten	Child Care Centre
2000s	<p><u>Educational Reform</u></p> <p>(1) Performance Indicators - provided a standard for assessing early childhood education in Hong Kong and published <i>Guide to Pre-primary Curriculum</i> (2006).</p> <p>(2) Service Quality Standards (SQSs) was introduced by the Social Welfare Department (SWD) in 1999 to specify the criteria or assessment indicators on policies, procedures, mechanisms and plans...etc. External assessment was conducted through document review, interview with staff, service users and observation (SWD, 2001; ED &amp; SWD, 2002).</p> <p>(3) Quality Assurance mechanism – external evaluation by EDB QA inspectors and internal self-evaluation.</p> <p>(4) ED mandated compulsory professional training to upgrade qualifications:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All new EC teachers must complete a 1-year Pre-service QKT/CCW course by 2003,</li> <li>• All EC teachers must be fully trained with QKT/CCW by 2004,</li> <li>• All EC principals must complete CE by 2005.</li> </ul> <p>(5) Harmonization (2005) of SWD &amp; ED The interdepartmental working group closely examined the harmonization of kindergartens and childcare centers.</p> <p>(6) Voucher Scheme (2007) required:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• All new principals to have a B.Ed. degree in 2009,</li> <li>• All serving KG teachers should have completed CE by 2012,</li> <li>• All serving KG principals must complete the principalship certificate course by 2012 and are highly recommended to complete B.Ed. by 2012 (not mandatory).</li> </ul>	

required to complete CE by 2005 and encouraged to complete B.Ed. by 2012. In 2007, the government introduced Voucher Scheme to allocate resources to parents and this system linked with the qualification upgrade of teachers and principals (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2007).

(3) Quality assurance mechanism (School administration policy)

The quality assurance was linked to a set of Performance Indicators developed by the Education Department (2000), which provided standard for assessing kindergartens in management and organization, teaching and learning, support to children and school ethos, and children's development. A new *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* was published by the Curriculum

Development Council (2006) to specify the requirements.

The quality assurance mechanism emphasized on both external monitoring by school inspectors, and self-evaluation by the early childhood organizations (Pearson & Rao, 2006).

Hong Kong has undergone extremely rapid development in early childhood education since the implementation of educational reform. It can be regarded as an achievement of the field of early childhood education.

*Impact of Policy Changes: Teacher Educators Perspective*

Participating teacher educators found the changes in ECE policy affect the development of Hong Kong early childhood education significantly. It can be seen

on three aspects: quality of the provision of early childhood education, teachers' qualification upgrade and development of professional identity among early childhood educators.

*Reflection on quality of ECE provision.* Teacher educators commended the significant improvement of early childhood education provision in the past decades, especially the adoption of innovative approaches and pedagogies. Thanks to Social Welfare Department's and Education Department's training workshops in the 1980s and 1990s, early childhood practitioners were eager to implement Lillian Katz's Project Approach, Thelma Harms' Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS), and create aesthetic environment with the inspiration of Reggio Emilia in the 1990s.

The Quality Education (QE) Fund established in the late 1990s was warmly welcomed as it led to many projects on quality improvement and research cooperation between early childhood education organizations and universities. The Quality Education (QE) Fund provided more resources and allowed more staff training (Rao & Li, 2009). This development can be regarded as a joint result of healthy interactions between policy-, advocacy- and quality-driven forces.

*Reflection of qualification upgrade.* In the early days, teacher educators felt that early childhood education teachers were highly motivated and very eager to learn latest ECE principles and pedagogies. Even though the pathway for professional development was long, teachers were still very devoted and persistent. For instance, it could take eight to nine years to complete the qualifications from a Certificate of Education (CE) to a Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) for in-service early childhood teachers.

With the implementation of educational reform, however, the joy of learning was disappearing because of the pressure to meet a tight deadline of mandatory qualification upgrade. The intrinsic

motivation for learning was weakened by the extrinsic motivation for pragmatic results. Wagner (2006) found a significant positive relationship between early childhood teachers' intrinsic motivation for professional growth and observed changes in teaching practices. In the Hong Kong context, there was doubt in whether teaching quality was enhanced by this coerced training.

Moreover, Hong Kong government lacks a long-term plan for early childhood teacher education. Every time a new qualification upgrade policy was introduced, funding were competed among various tertiary institutions by tender. Course providers are left with little room for long-term planning or improvement for tender-based course provision.

*Reflection on professional identity to form a united front.* The front-liners of early childhood organizations had long been taking up an advocacy role to negotiate with the government (such as the Council of Early Childhood Education and Services). Teacher trainers, on the other hand, were very focused on professional training. Government may consult individual practitioners and teacher trainers without meeting other academics or school administrators in the field. The need to build a united front of school administrators, teacher educators and early childhood teachers was felt, especially in nurturing the growing professional identity (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004; Yuen, 2006, 2008) and developing a collective voice for effective advocacy.

### *Impact of Policy Changes: School Administrators Perspective*

School Administrators found that policies on qualification upgrade, harmonization, voucher scheme, and quality assurance mechanism had significant impact on the ecology of Hong Kong early childhood education.

*Reflection on qualification upgrade.* Some school administrators regarded government subsidy on

teacher education as an indirect form of status recognition. With the qualification upgrade, it reflected a positive status change in the profession. It took thirty years for the government to take this crucial step. Large early childhood organizations do not wait for the government and had established a system of in-service training for their staff.

*Reflection on harmonization and voucher scheme.* As kindergartens and childcare centres had been lobbying for the harmonization of education and care for decades, government's goodwill in uniting the Education Department (ED) and Social Welfare Department (SWD) was welcomed. Nonetheless, they commented that the unification of regulatory bodies of SWD and ED was conducted on an administrative and structural level. It did not show adequate commitment to the integration of "educare". On the other hand, it created heavy workload for the school administrators in documentations. More consideration of the actual school context was necessary.

Voucher Scheme was introduced to encourage quality improvement through increased competition within the sector (Yuen, 2007; Yuen & Grieshaber, 2009). In the past, SWD heavily subsidized many childcare centres in Hong Kong. The government intended to move away from the model of subsidizing childcare providers, funding was allocated to parents under the new scheme. However, the Voucher Scheme aroused strong dissatisfaction in the field. Recently, some 2000 practitioners protested and requested an urgent review of the policy. They argued that (1) the criteria for voucher eligibility should be set at a reasonable level, (2) full-day service is disadvantaged in comparison to half-day service, (3) a salary mechanism linking the qualification upgrade is needed, and (4) guidelines for parents in choosing service providers should be provided.

*Reflection on quality assurance.* As quality assurance mechanism was linked to the Voucher Scheme of financial assistance, early childhood organizations

had to comply with intensive Quality Review. This brought about heavy burden on school administration. Some school administrators felt that many external inspectors did not understand the early childhood context, complicating the working relationship between the government and schools. It was because many external inspectors were trained in Primary or Secondary education, not Early childhood education. Despite this, the School administrators admitted that internal self-evaluation could provide indicators for them to understand their own strengths, and areas for improvement.

### *Vision for the Future*

Fullan (2006, 2008) investigated effective education reform and claimed that standards, assessment, curriculum and professional development are all important in a standards-based reform initiative. However, these measures are incomplete if what happens in the classrooms and school cultures are neglected. It is necessary to investigate "Under what conditions will continuous improvement happen?" and "How do we change cultures?" Using Fullan's (2006) analysis, Hong Kong followed a standards-based reform. The Hong Kong government had

- (1) identified "Performance Indicators" as the standards,
- (2) developed "Quality Assurance mechanism" that mapped on to the standards,
- (3) published "Guide to Pre-primary Curriculum" based on the standards and assessments, and
- (4) seriously invested in ongoing professional development for school leaders and teachers.

What is missing from this standards-based reform strategy is the understanding of "school culture" or "organizational culture" (Fullan, 2006). As early childhood education policy can be interpreted in different ways by practitioners, education policy focusing only on formal structures and people in power may not bring long-term change (Yuen & Grieshaber, 2009).

### ***Interactions between the stakeholders***

In summary, the development of Hong Kong early childhood education is a consequence of the dynamic interactions between the three stakeholders.

*Government policy and teacher education.* Teacher education in Hong Kong seemed to be patchy and without long-term vision. Although resources have been injected to teacher education, Hong Kong government does not seem to have a long-term vision for early childhood teacher education, leaving teacher educators little room for planning and improvement.

*Government policy and school administration.* The harmonization of regulatory systems of Social Welfare and Education departments is still in its infancy. The unification did not integrate education and care. On the other hand, it increased a lot of paperwork for the school administrators. Continuous review and adjustment are necessary, especially with the input from the field.

*Teacher education and school administration.* Teacher education and school practice cannot be separated. The application of new knowledge is highly dependent on the school context. School administrators inform teacher trainers the real needs of the field. In response to government policy, Individual organizations and tertiary institutions could form a united front for a collective voice.

There is no doubt that the early childhood education profession and government continuously engaged in negotiation and compromise to develop a new pathway for the field. The forces of advocacy, policy and quality compete for dominance in the discourse of early childhood education. The negotiation process will be more mature if a collective voice of school administrators and teacher educators was heard and the school context was investigated.

With this vision in mind, inter-organizational bodies may contribute in this process. For instance, as an independent research association in an

international city, Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association Hong Kong Chapter (PECERA Hong Kong) has the advantage of connecting world-renounced early childhood education academics with practitioners in the field. Since its establishment, PECERA Hong Kong has frequently organized workshops and seminars to introduce innovative practice. Through participating in these activities and interactions, the professional identity is consolidated. PECERA Hong Kong had also established a collaborative working relationship with teacher educators and school administrators. It is hope that inter-organizational bodies can facilitate the building of a collective voice.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the development in Hong Kong early childhood education is going toward the direction of a standard-base reform, where indicators of standards are identified, quality assurance mechanism are mapped to the standards, guidance to the curriculum was released based on such standards and assessments, and ongoing professional development of school leaders and teachers were heavily invested. However, such a reform is "incomplete if what happens in the classrooms and school cultures are neglected" (Fullan, 2006, 2008). The early childhood profession and the government continuously engaged in negotiation and compromise to develop a new pathway for the field. The negotiation process will be more mature if a collective voice of school administrators and teacher educators was heard and the school context was taken into consideration.

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