Impact of Government Policy Changes on Hong Kong Early Childhood Education: Perspectives from Teacher Educators and School Administrators*

Introduction

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 ECE 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 will review the development of Hong Kong ECE policy and examine its impact from the perspectives of teacher educators and school administrators.

Developments of Hong Kong ECE Policies

Early childhood education in Hong Kong is not publicly funded. All early care and education services are provided by private independent school and NGOs. The colonial government separated education from care and monitored kindergartens and child care centres by the Education Department (ED) and the Social Welfare Department (SWD) respectively.

Part-time In-service trainings were provided to kindergarten teachers and child care workers by their respective departments in the 50s and 60s. Their trainings were not mutually recognized. Ordinance for kindergartens and child-care centres were released in the 70s.

In the 1980s, the first official policy on pre-primary services, the Green and White Papers on Primary Education and Pre-primary Services, were released. Recommendations were made to accelerate teacher training and to raise qualification requirement to Qualified Kindergarten Teacher (QKT).

Major developments in teacher training emerged in the 1990s. New Certificate of Education (CE) and Bachelor of Education (BEd) degree courses were provided and mandatory qualification requirement was established.

At the turn of the millennium, Hong Kong returned to Chinese sovereignty and underwent rapid development with new educational reform. The reform is instrumental in building the infrastructure of Hong Kong ECE, including raising teachers’ qualification and establishing a quality assurance mechanism.
The series of educational reforms recommended by the government after the turn of the century included:

1. Harmonization was implemented in 2005 by joining Education Department and Social Welfare Department to end the separation of monitoring bodies on ECE provision.

2. Teacher qualification upgrade was implemented with two measures:
   a. Funding for the provision of in-service and pre-service training was substantially increased.
   b. All practitioners were mandated to upgrade qualifications by 2012, where all ECE teachers are required to have a Certificate in Early Childhood Education (CE), and all serving principals must complete the principalship certificate course and are highly recommended to complete B.Ed. All new principals will have a B.Ed by 2009.

3. The quality assurance was linked to a set of Performance Indicators, which provided a standard for assessing kindergartens in management and organization, teaching and learning, support to children and school ethos, and children’s development. The quality assurance mechanism included both external monitoring by school inspectors and self-evaluation by the ECE organizations.

4. The government also introduced a Voucher Scheme in 2007 to allocate resources to parents and it linked with the qualification upgrade of teachers and principals.

**Research Questions**

This report examines two research questions:

1. From the perspective of teacher educators, what is the impact of policy changes on HK ECE development?
2. From the perspective of school administrators, what is the impact of policy changes on HK ECE development?

**Method**

Three focus group meetings were held with 13 prominent teacher educators/academics from various tertiary institutions and experienced school administrators/practitioners from large NGOs in Hong Kong. Major themes were identified.
Results and Discussion

In the three focus group meetings, both ECE teachers and school administrators have commented and reflected on the changes in ECE policies over the years.

Teacher educators’ perspective
The teachers educators reflected on the Quality of ECE Provision, Qualification Upgrade, and Professional Identity.

In terms of quality of provision, significant improvements have been achieved over the years with innovative approaches and pedagogies. The training workshops in the 80s and 90s were helpful for practitioners to implement new approaches such as Katz’s Project approach or Harms’ early childhood environmental assessment. The establishment of Quality Education (QE) Fund also provided more resources for staff training. These improvements can be regarded as a joint result of healthy interactions between policy-, advocacy-, and quality-driven forces.

Teacher educators felt that, in general, ECE teachers were highly motivated and persistent in learning latest ECE principles and pedagogies, although the pathway for professional development was long. However, the educational reform had put much pressure on teachers to meet a tight deadline of mandatory qualification upgrade. The intrinsic motivation for learning was weakened. There was doubt in whether teaching quality was enhanced by this coerced training. Moreover, Hong Kong government lacks a long-term plan for ECE teacher education. Course providers are left with little room for long-term planning or improvement for course provision.

Teacher educators felt a need for building a united front of school administrators, teacher educators and ECE teachers, especially in nurturing the growing professional identity and developing a collective voice for effective advocacy.

School administrators perspective
Reflection shared by the school administrators were related to Qualification Upgrade, Harmonization, Voucher Scheme, and Quality Assurance.

Some school administrators regarded government subsidy on teacher education as an indirect form of status recognition. They regarded qualification upgrade as a positive status change in the profession. Nonetheless, it took 30 years for the government to take this crucial step.

The Government’s move to harmonize the Departments of Education and Social Welfare was welcomed by school administrators, as both kindergartens and child care centres have lobbied it for decades. However, they commented that the unification of the two departments was conducted on
an administrative and structural level, in which the real meaning of “educare” has not been achieved. On the other hand, it created heavy workload for the school administrators in documentations. More consideration of the actual school context was necessary.

The government’s intention to move away from the model of subsidizing child care providers results in the implementation of the Voucher Scheme, where funding was allocated to parents. However, the scheme raised strong dissatisfaction in the field. 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.

As quality assurance mechanism was linked to Voucher Scheme of financial assistance, ECE organizations had to comply with intensive Quality Review. They felt a heavy burden has layed upon them. In addition, some felt that many external inspectors did not understand the ECE context, complicating the working relationship between the government and schools. Despite this, the school administrators admitted that internal self-evaluation could provide indicators for them to understand their own strength, and areas of improvement.

**Conclusion**

The development in HK ECE 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, 2008).

Teacher education in Hong Kong seemed to be patchy and without long-term vision, leaving teacher educators little room for planning and improvement. The harmonization of regulatory systems of Social Welfare and Education departments did not integrate education and care. On the other hand, it increased a lot of paperwork for the school administrators. The application of new knowledge is highly dependent on the school context. School administrators inform teacher trainers the real needs of the field. ECE profession and 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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Yew Chung Education Foundation engaged in research with Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association (Hong Kong) on the impact of HK ECE policies on school administrators and teacher educators. This report is a condensed version of the paper presented at the 10th Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association annual conference at the University of the Philippines on July 25, 2009. The paper is published here with the permission of the authors.