The Impact and Implication of Hong Kong Pre-Primary Education Voucher Scheme
香港學前教育學券制的推行與影響

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Abstract
Hong Kong early childhood education runs in the private sector. In recent years, the government has implemented a number of policies to improve the quality of early childhood education. The Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme is one of important early childhood education policies in Hong Kong. The Scheme aims to improve the quality of early childhood education, by providing financial assistance to parents and upgrading teachers’ qualifications. However, this policy raised widespread awareness and debate amongst the stakeholders. This paper will discuss how the scheme affects different stakeholders and explores its way forward. The essay first provides a brief background of the scheme and Hong Kong’s early childhood setting. The latter part of the essay discusses how the scheme affects the various stakeholders, including: policy makers, early childhood education sectors, early childhood educators and parents. Finally, suggestions to improve the scheme are made.

Introduction
In the past decade, the early childhood education in Hong Kong has been placed as the priority of the education policy agenda. A key factor in the politicization of edu-care was the Hong Kong government’s commitment to improve the quality of early childhood education. A number of new policies have been introduced, including upgrading teacher qualifications, implementing a quality assurance framework, harmonizing pre-primary education services and introducing a new kindergarten curriculum guide in 2006 (Ho, 2010, p.615).

Most recently, the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) has announced a policy, Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme, on subsidizing early childhood education in the 2006/07 Policy Address. This policy states that an education voucher will be provided to the parents of children, between the ages of three to six, who are enrolled in kindergartens (Hong Kong Government, 2006, p.16). According to the Chief Executive, the new scheme is expected to benefit 90% of children between the ages of three to six, who are enrolled in kindergartens (Hong Kong Government, 2006, p.16). According to the Chief Executive, the new scheme is expected to benefit 90% of children between the ages of three to six, who are enrolled in kindergartens (Hong Kong Government, 2006, p.16).
It has received widespread attention and feedback from the early childhood institutions, front-line early childhood educators and parents. On the other view, the PEVS has caused adverse effects in early childhood setting. Different stakeholders and researches brought up diverse issues in the PEVS since 2007. Rigorous debates included how the scheme in Hong Kong would work to produce new norms and practices to enhance the standards of early childhood education, how it could enhance teachers’ professionalism, how it would induce more pressure of the front-line early childhood educators, and also how it would be beneficial or harmful to parents in real situation. Thus, this paper will explore various discussion points between the scheme and different stakeholders.

**Background of the PEVS**

The modern concept of education vouchers dates back to the 1950s. Milton Friedman (1982), Nobel Prize winning economist, argued for the concept of education voucher as this would create competition between public and private school, and therefore improve the quality of schools and cost efficiency. The Scheme for children between the ages of three to six who attend a non-profit kindergarten has been implemented in Hong Kong since 2007. Each child will get HK$13,000 per annum. The $13,000 subsidy will be separated into two parts. $10,000 is used to subsidize the school fee and the remaining $3,000 is used for kindergarten teachers to pursue further education and obtain a Certificate in Education (see table 1). The goal of the Hong Kong government in implementing the Scheme is to enable kindergarten teachers to obtain an Education Certificate by the year 2011-2012, at which point the subsidies would then be adjusted to provide $16,000 per student, all of which would go toward the school fee.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School year</th>
<th>Voucher amount (HKD)</th>
<th>Fee subsidy per student per annum</th>
<th>Teacher Development Subsidy per student per annum (HKD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007-2008</td>
<td>13,000</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-2009</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>11,000</td>
<td>3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009-2010</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>12,000</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010-2011</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>14,000</td>
<td>2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>16,000</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 – Voucher amount combination

Since one of the aims of the Scheme is to improve the quality of early childhood education in Hong Kong, all kindergartens under the Scheme must also accept the Quality Assurance mechanism. Kindergarten facilities are required, under this scheme, to submit the “Teacher Development Plan” for vetting and approval before disbursement of Teacher development subsidy. The “Teacher Development Plan” should be thoroughly discussed and agreed between the principal and the teachers of the facility, and endorsed by the kindergarten supervisor (Hong Kong Government, 2011). After the supervision, kindergarten should gain a “pass” performance. The kindergartens would then need to accept a second inspection and further improve the quality of the facility to reach the Quality Assurance mechanism within five years from the first round of inspection. Otherwise, they are not qualified under the Scheme.

**Discussions and Critical Analyses in Relation to Different Stakeholders**

Do policy-makers make an adequate preparation to implement the PEVS?

Firstly, the Scheme mainly provides a fee subsidy for parents of children attending nursery, lower and upper classes in non-profit kindergartens...
and in parallel, subsidises teachers’ professional development (see table 1). The Scheme has been announced in October, 2006 and quick was implemented from the 2007/08 school year. According to Ozga (2000), there are those who understand policy in quite straightforward terms as the actions of government which aims at securing particular outcomes. Policy research in education would help to inhibit the misuse or simplification of research by policymakers, who denigrate or ignore research that does not support their chosen policy direction, while claiming to be committed to “evidence-based policy making” (p.2). Ozga (2000) also considers how different theoretical approaches connect to different methods of enquiry and analysis (p.1). At the beginning, the Hong Kong government did not seem to have approached any local researches or have based on any finding before implement the Scheme. They thought they had sufficiently enquired different stakeholders and gained solid findings or thorough analyses before implementing the scheme. However, the Scheme has eventually created many problems since its implementation in 2007 and up till now.

One major problem is that the Scheme originally aimed to improve the quality of early childhood education and to ease parents’ burden but has created reverse effects. Patrinos (2002) argues that it is commonly believed that market competition will put pressure on schools to improve the quality they provide (p.62). In Hong Kong, the introduction of the Scheme in the early childhood sectors is built on the basic tenet that the operation of a market in education supply is a positive act. All local preschools and kindergartens are private and mostly rely on the school fees to operate. That means early childhood education is privately run and market-driven. The new policy initiative promotes school choice as a means to increase competition among local preschools and kindergartens. More importantly, it signifies the formal recognition of the consumer power of parents in the education market (Ho, 2008. p.224). Thus, the Scheme has led to rigorous discussions among the early childhood sectors, educators and parents.

**How does the PEVS effect on early childhood education sectors?**

Friedman in his paper “Public schools: Make them private” (1995) mentioned that the most feasible way to bring about such a transfer from the government to private enterprise is to enact in each state a voucher system that enables parents to choose freely the schools their children attend. The voucher must be universal, available to all parents, and large enough to cover the costs of a high-quality education. No conditions should be attached to vouchers that interfere with the freedom of private enterprises to experiment, to explore, and to innovate. Theoretically, all preschools and kindergartens in Hong Kong are operated by the private sectors, with little financial support from the government, and hence are highly susceptible to market forces (Chan, 2002, p.83). According to Yuen and Grieshaber (2009), as compared with other countries, the scheme in Hong Kong is unique in that it is put into operation in an already competitive private sector and in the absence of any public provision (p.264). The use of vouchers in early childhood education has occurred mainly in contexts where both private and public education provisions coexist within the system (Brown et al, 1998, Lindjord, 2001; Granell, 2002; Lee, 2006; Levin & Schwartz, 2006). Nevertheless, there is still limited research being done on vouchers in early childhood education. Whether vouchers can actually improve the quality of education remains debatable (Yuen & Grieshaber, 2009, p.265). However, the scheme has caused differentiation to the early childhood education sectors.

Moreover, according to Friedman said that the whole point of a voucher system is to provide a competitive market place and should not be limited to non-profit making settings. In the first year of the Scheme, after protests by representatives of private independent kindergartens and parents with children enrolled in private independent kindergartens, the program was extended to children in private independent kindergartens, but only for those enrolled in or before September 2007. The Hong Kong government also provided up to HK$30,000 subsidy to for private independent kindergartens which wanted to convert
into a non-profit setting. The Education Bureau encouraged private independent kindergartens to apply to convert into non-profit status but these institutions suddenly face a huge change within a short period of time. Meanwhile, it led a strike to private independent kindergartens.

According to the 2006/07’s Policy Address, kindergartens that have decided to participate in the Scheme would be inspected to assure its education quality. Both preschools and kindergartens had to implement the School Self-Evaluation (SSE) and compile their school reports and annual school plans. After the submission of the two documents, reviewers from the Education Bureau would visit preschools and kindergartens to validate the SSE findings and evaluate if they have met the prescribed standard (Hong Kong Government, 2011). Also, the Quality Review (QR) reports would be made publically available on the Education Bureau homepage.

Furthermore, the number of student admission for regular child care centre (CCC) is, on average, smaller than that of kindergarten (KG). In most cases, most CCC enrolls about one hundred students, and since it provides full-day service, it is impossible to legally increase enrollment. KG has the same teacher-to-student ratio with six to seven teachers per principal but KG mostly provides half-day service. KG can accommodate 180 to 300 students in a half-day session, and as many as 360 to 600 or above students during the morning and afternoon sessions combined. Thus, the KG’s staff has greater manpower than the CCC’s staff and creating more flexibility in terms of utilizing manpower resources. When these two sectors are exposed to the external and internal Quality Assurance mechanism evaluation, teachers at CCC would have to shoulder a larger portion of work, such as extra administrative and paperwork. It is a common reason that a part of CCC’s teachers choose to resign and change to work in KGs instead. The extension of PEVS to KG has exposed CCC to greater competition and increased pressure for CCC or full-day service provider.

How does the PEVS support and enhance educators’ (front-line early childhood teachers) professionalism?

In the early 1990s, there was an increased public interest in and demand for more government interventions to upgrade the quality of kindergarten education. For the first time, the government was committed to upgrade the professional training of kindergarten teachers. The recommendations made by the Ad Hoc sub-Committee on Pre-Primary Education (Board of Education, 1994), organized by the Board of Education, were well received (Chan, 2002, p.90). According to the 2001 Policy Address, the minimum academic entry qualification for kindergarten teachers required five passes, including both Chinese and English on the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination. Since September 2000, kindergartens are required to have at least 60% qualified kindergarten teachers. By the 2004/2005 school year, all kindergartens are required to employ 100% qualified kindergarten teachers. Meanwhile, kindergarten principals are requested by current regulations to complete the training course and acquire the status of ‘Qualified Kindergarten Teacher’ (QKT) or its equivalent. By 2002/03 school year, all newly appointed kindergarten principals are required to have completed the Certificate in Kindergarten Education Course, or its equivalent. Furthermore, when the mandatory pre-service professional training for entry to the early childhood teaching profession is implemented, teacher education in Hong Kong will have reached an important milestone (Chan, 2002, p.92). Under the Scheme, teacher qualifications and statutory requirements are enhanced to obtain an Education certificate by the year 2011/12.

According to Ozga (2000), she mentioned that teachers should be allowed to speak with authority against misguided, mistaken and unjust education
policy (p.1). Teachers are policy makers of sorts. They have a strong influence on the interpretation of policy, and engaging with the policy on a number of levels, from the national level of formal policy making to the informal arena of pupil-teacher relations (p.3). Actually, the government has adopted a top-down mode to implement the Scheme and the government has not consulted nor announced the scheme to the teachers beforehand. During the Scheme implementation period, teachers worked towards reaching the qualification requirement to fulfill the Quality Assurance mechanism. Teachers have pointed out that apart from teaching, they also have to prepare for school activities, handling additional administrative work and working hard to complete the degree course. They worked an average of sixty hours per week (Wenweipo, 2008). All these have made them unaffordable and forgot the role of professional teaching and learning area.

According to the Scheme, in addition to providing a fee subsidy for parents, teachers may be qualified to receive subsidies for teacher professional development. The government understands that enhancing teachers’ professional competency is critical in improving the quality of pre-primary education. Hence, they have reserved a part of the voucher value for teacher professional development, so that eventually the children will benefit (Hong Kong Government, 2011). Each eligible preschool or kindergarten will receive funding according to the Scheme (see Table 1). The teacher development subsidy is to enhance teachers’ professionalism through providing course fee reimbursement, appointing substitute teachers to relieve teachers’ workload and organizing school-based training programmes (Hong Kong Government, 2011). Unfortunately, because of the increased pressure, some teachers have resigned or switched to serve part-time as a substitute teacher. As a result, many schools are facing a shortage of teaching manpower. Meanwhile, the role of substitute teachers can not exactly replace a regular teacher’s duties. In fact, the substitute teachers did not relieve the teachers’ workload by much.

In addition, the recommended salary scale for trained kindergarten teachers and registered childcare workers have lagged far behind that for primary school teachers. Furthermore, the recommended salary scale was not enforced and all kindergartens in the private sector were governed by market forces instead. As a result even trained kindergarten teachers were often paid at levels much lower than the recommended scale (Chan, 2002, p.91). The worst situation was the abolishment of the recommended salary scale following the Scheme implementation, leaving the remuneration level of teachers to be determined by market forces. Senior status teachers and teachers who have upgraded their qualifications may still be unprotected.

**How does the PEVS beneficial or harmful to parents in real situation?**

In the 2007 Policy Address mentioned that “providing quality education for our next generation is an integral part of government support for the family” (Hong Kong Government 2006, 16; Ho, 2008, p.224). According to Ozga (2000) parents are valuable to policy research, such as during in the investigation of the processes and consequences of choice of school for children (p.3). The Scheme assumes that parents are capable of making the best choice in terms of early childhood education for their children and that free choice and competition can help enhance the quality chosen (Yuen, 2007, p.356). However, a closer examination will show that the Scheme seems to repeat the emphasis of past policies, supporting half-day service more heavily and thus hindering the development of full-day programmes and limiting the availability of such choice (Yuen, 2007, p.356). Parents who opt for full-day programmes receive less financial support as compared with parents who choose half-day programmes. The lack of affordable choice has already pushed some parents to select a less favourable option for their children, especially for parents from low income families.

The significant consequence of a family’s decision is furthered highlighted through fee subsidies provided for attending certain schools. By attending eligible non-profit kindergartens rather, all three to six years old children would be
eligible to receive a fee subsidy. However, they would not be able to enjoy fee subsidy under the Scheme when attending a private independent kindergarten. School choice is obviously a policy issue but it seems unfair to parents. The Scheme is limited to non-profit kindergartens only. Parents who choose to send their children to private independent kindergartens do not gain the funding from the Scheme. There were heated debates over this mandatory condition (Yuen, 2007), for it was against the spirit of free choice in using vouchers as originally conceptualised by Friedman (Yuen, 2009, p.264).

Furthermore, one of the aims of the Scheme was to ease the parents’ financial burden. However, some parents have reflected that the school fees they are paying were now more than before (China Daily, 2008). The Scheme also placed additional restrictions on parents in that they can only choose non-profit schools making with yearly fee less than $24,000. In Yuen’s study, it showed that the Scheme has not helped those in need, but rather created unfairness among social classes (Yuen, 2008).

Therefore, the current situation is dangerous because the privileging of markets has increased fragmentation, localism and fluctuation, in which ‘nearly all factors of social economic and political life are contingent, elective and gripped by change’ (Offe 1996; Ozga, 2000, p.7).

**Suggestion for Improvement**

Based on the above discussions and critical analyses, the following are suggestions that have been raised. The policy makers should listen to opinions from the different stakeholders in order to develop a more “complete picture” to capture the increasingly complex global-national-local dynamics of education policy in new times (Vidovich, 2007, p.289). Vidovich (2007) also said that a hybrid framework for policy analysis which is based on the concept of a policy cycle (p.289). Policy makers will then consider any modifications of the policy cycle. The policy cycle approach is to incorporate state-centred constraint to a greater extent. The approach is state-centred to emphasize the key role often taken by governments in policy, but it’s not state-controlled to the extent that other policy participants are completely excluded. The Scheme should be opened to all early childhood sectors, including non-profit kindergartens and private independent kindergartens.

There is a need for the policy makers to study the method of calculating the subsidy on the basis of the number of children. The policy makers should consider the subsidy irrespective of whether the child attends a full day or a half day kindergartens programme. There is more room for a half day kindergarten to admit more children. It is possible for a half-day kindergarten to admit twice as many children as full day preschools. The current scheme is therefore unfair to full day preschool. The workload for full day preschools is no less than that of half day schools, but they are subject to a different resource allocation. Thus, the policy makers should review the relevant policy so that full day preschools will be subsidized appropriately. As a result, it will provide an environment that is market competition. Also, parents should have more choices under the policy.

Moreover, Barrett (2004) stated that with increasing attention paid to policy effectiveness, evaluative studies were starting to highlight the problematic of implementation, and identify key factor deemed to contribute to what was perceived as “implementation failure” (p.252). The stakeholders and the government appeared to have different in expectations. The scheme is doubted on clear policy objectives, problems of communication and co-ordination between the links in the chain. Policy makers should return to evidence-based policy to reflect a centralized or open systems model (Newman, 2001).

According to Vidovich (2007) that next modification of the policy cycle is to explicitly highlight the two-way interrelationships between different levels and contexts of the policy process by examining the dynamics of how these contexts continually relate to each other (p.290). The early childhood sectors and teachers have expressed their situation and requirements through demonstrations
to protest against the Scheme (Sun, 2009). There are possible avenues for feedback from the micro level, which has contributed to the reconstruction of policy agendas at the macro or intermediate levels (Vidovich, 2007, p.290). The government should create a favorable working environment for early childhood education, alleviate the administrative work of teachers and pressure as much as possible, such as extending the period of further studies and reducing the workload for self-evaluation. Teachers would then be able to focus more on the teaching and learning work, and it would be beneficial if schools and teachers were provided with additional room and manpower to cope with the requirements of teaching and studies.

The Hong Kong government should provide sufficient resources to schools. For example, the schools should be able to employ teaching assistants to manage administrative work. Also, the government expects teachers to pursue further studies after school and attain degree and certificate qualifications within five years, from the school year 2007/08 to 2011/12. The new requirements have forced teachers to attain their qualifications within a short period of time. As a result, teachers have experienced an increase in work pressure. Therefore, the Hong Kong government should consider extending the period of further studies for teachers. The mentioned adjustments would improve the quality of schools as well as the teachers’ working conditions. After teachers and principal have completed their qualification studies, the government should draw up a salary scale to encourage teachers and principals to pursue further studies. Also, an appropriate salary scale will identify and acknowledge the teachers and principals’ contribution to the education field.

Governments across the world need to be able to respond quickly to events to provide the support that people need to adapt to change and that businesses need to prosper. Policy makers must adapt to this new, fast moving, challenging environment if public policy is to remain credible and effective (Cabinet office 1999, Newman, 2000, p.64). The Scheme has been implemented for over four years and should be reviewed as soon as possible. The government has delayed the review for 2011/12, which will probably have a great impact on the scheme.

**Conclusion**

Policy affects people in almost every single aspect of life, but often gives an impression that it is something very remote, tedious, or hard to change. The fact is that policy can be very interesting as it takes into account the voices and actions of key stakeholders, including the interest of children.

In summary, early childhood education is an important stage in a child’s articulation to primary education. The intention of the Scheme is good in the sense that the government is paying more attention to early childhood education. If the current policies are continually reviewed through consultation and careful research, it will be of value to policy-makers, early childhood sectors, educators and parents. To this end, children will receive the most benefits. The Hong Kong government is definitely able to and needs to make greater commitment to early childhood education. While the Council has urged the government to expeditiously work towards the implement of fifteen years of free education, include early childhood education in the scope of subsidization, we look forward to witnessing a new milestone in Hong Kong early childhood education.

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