The Impact of Government Policy on Kindergarten Teachers in Hong Kong

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This paper aims to investigate and examine the impact of government policy (Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme) on kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong using SWOT analysis. This paper critically analyzes the strengths and weaknesses such as positive and negative impacts on kindergarten teachers through the introduction of Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS) for professional upgrade and training, opportunities and treats such as intended as well as unintended outcomes that the policy might have brought to the early childhood education field, and their relationship with each other.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education, Voucher Scheme, Kindergarten Teachers

I. Introduction

Education in Hong Kong should keep abreast of the global trends and development in order to cope with the challenges of the 21st century. Thus, improving early childhood sectors’ quality assurance mechanisms and early childhood teachings’ qualifications were the main focus of the government policy. After a review of the education system in Hong Kong, the Ex-Chief Executive of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR), Mr. Donald Tsang Yam-Kuen announced in the “Reports on Government Administration in 2006-2007” that the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS) was introduced in order to envision betterment and up-grade teachers’ qualifications for the field of early childhood education in Hong Kong. The key objective of the PEVS was for all children in Hong Kong at school age (children aged above two years and eight months) to “receive affordable and quality pre-primary education” (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2007, p. 1). It aimed to “Increase Investment, Enhance Quality” (Education Bureau, 2008b) in early education services. For parents with young children attending kindergartens under PEVS, it offered a direct fee subsidy to alleviate the expenses of pre-primary education (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2007). Under the voucher scheme, in-service professional trainings were made mandatory and compulsory to raise and upgrade teachers’ qualifications with some financial assistance from the government. The in-service teachers’ training funded by the government aimed to provide teachers with opportunities to review their curriculum; enhance quality assurance mechanism and increase accountability in early childhood education services.

As mentioned, improving the quality of kindergarten teachers was one of the main focuses of education policy in the new millennium. There was a need for upgrading teachers’ qualifications to facilitate them to meet with demands of the profession in knowledge-based and globalized economy like Hong Kong. However, this policy presented with an interesting paradox. On the one hand, policymakers expected kindergarten teachers to be capable change agents in promoting effective school curriculum in learning and teaching, yet at the same time, they considered the profession to be inadequate and insufficient.

Striving to enhance the quality of the early childhood education services in Hong Kong, the government of the HKSAR committed an extensive sum of HK$2 billion per year to run the PEVS since 2007–2008. But it is questionable whether offering a direct subsidy to parents through the PEVS is an effectual way to improve the professional quality of kindergarten services (Fung & Lam, 2008). In fact, Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme in Hong Kong has created huge controversy and critics in terms of implementation and accountability of the scheme. This literature review is to critically analyze the possible strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and treats the policy may have brought to the kindergarten teachers and the early childhood education field in Hong Kong. Thus, the purpose of this literature review is to find out what factors are influencing the quality of kindergarten teachers and to what extend the introduction of the government policy has increased the standards of early childhood services in Hong Kong.
This paper is divided into three parts. The first part is background information of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS). The second part is to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the PEVS taking into account the current operational conditions and the impact of in-service teacher’s training as a tool to ensure the quality of early childhood education in Hong Kong. The third part is to examine possible opportunities and treats that PEVS may have brought to the early childhood education field emphasizing on global as well as local perspectives.

II. Background information of the PEVS

Early childhood education and kindergarten teachers’ training was not publicly funded by the government before the introduction of the PEVS. All pre-schools in Hong Kong were private and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) which could be categorized as non-profit making kindergartens or private independent kindergartens depending on the background of organizations (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2007). Under the PEVS, it required all pre-service and in-service kindergarten teachers in early childhood education sectors to obtain a sub-degree qualification i.e. Certificate in Early Childhood Education (CE) and kindergarten principals to acquire Bachelor’s Degree in Early Childhood Education (BEd) by 2012/13 (Gail, 2007). Many in-service teachers had to attend three year part-time evening early childhood education training courses in order to fulfill mandatory qualification requirement by the Education Bureau (EDB). Each non-profit making kindergarten joining the scheme was granted a teacher development subsidy from the 2007 to 2012 school years covering course fee reimbursement of permitted training courses for in-service teachers, appointment of supply teachers and stipulation of school-based professional development programmes (Education Bureau, 2008b). It was obvious that some resources and financial support had been granted for professional trainings and qualification upgrading through the PEVS which brought positive images to the early childhood education field.

The Education Commission in 2000 highlighted that “Early childhood education lays the foundation for lifelong learning and all-round development” (Education Commission, 2000, p. 49). More and more emphasis is being stressed that early childhood education as the foundation for lifelong learning. Enhancing the professional standards of kindergarten teachers is essential for high quality and integrated early childhood education and care services. Highly skilled teachers are one of the most important influences on success and development of young children (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005). Nevertheless, the government does not seem to have a long term development plan for kindergarten teachers which leaves uncertainties for continuous planning and improvement (Pearson & Rao, 2006).

III. Strengths and weaknesses of PEVS to kindergarten teachers

According to National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), early childhood education is vital to children’s growth and development, it is a key to forming work habits, attitudes and habits of lifelong learning. Children form beliefs about themselves, their abilities and potential in their early educational experiences. Due to its importance, early childhood education is also one of the most vital areas of educational policy making in nowadays world, especially in the well developed counties and cities like Hong Kong. It is because of the reality of growing needs of research studies, demand from various stakeholders as well as the necessity to provide higher standard professionals and qualified teachers in every classroom for better development of the early childhood education field (Harris & Sass, 2008). Ever since the implementation of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme, more concerns and financial commitments from the government were focused on early childhood education (Gail, 2007). The PEVS was indicative of the government’s increasing commitment to professionalizing early childhood education sector as a new initiative (Fung & Lam, 2008). It was considered as a policy that played an important role in promoting excellence in pre-primary education.

With more concerns about issues of this area, the government invested more resources in pre-primary education compared to before the implementation of the scheme. The government of Hong Kong also paid more attention on establishing early childhood education as the entry and basis for further learning, supporting parents, and reducing poverty as well as supporting underprivileged families (Education Commission, 2010). The education quality in early childhood was believed to be a function of the professional and pedagogical competence of the kindergarten teachers (Fung & Lam, 2008). More effort was put to improve the early childhood education system and the upgrading of professional standards of kindergarten teachers has created better image of the field. Kindergarten teachers and principals benefited from the financial assistance for their professional advancement and development.

In assuring continuous quality improvement in early childhood education services as well as efficient investment of government funding, the Education Bureau formalized a new quality assurance mechanism known as the “Quality Review (QR) Framework” along with the introduction of the PEVS (EDB, 2008c). “All kindergartens joining the PEVS are required to undergo the QR process for quality assurance purpose. Starting from the 2012/13 school year, only local non-profit-making kindergartens having met the prescribed standards established in the QR Framework may continue to redeem the voucher under PEVS” (EDB, 2008c, pp. 1–2). To enhance the accountability of the operations of kindergartens, quality assurance mechanism that combined self-
evaluation with external reviews was developed. Furthermore, self-evaluation mechanism with reference to the Performance Indicators for kindergartens published by Education Bureau aimed to improve the transparency of early childhood education sectors in Hong Kong (Education Commission, 2010). Workshops and seminars on self-evaluation and school development planning were conducted regularly by training institutes to maintain professional status in the field. Quality education, quality assurance, governance and support for professional development were emphasized in the scheme. The emphasis on provision of training kindergarten teachers, increasing transparency and accountability of kindergartens in Hong Kong has kept in pace with the globalized trends of development in the field (Fung, 2010).

Nevertheless, there were some issues in the implementation of the policy due to rapid changes of the system in early childhood education sectors within a short period of time. Yet, the readiness of the professional capacity within the sectors to respond to such changes might have brought concerns and pressure for kindergarten teachers. There was a mismatch between the system’s capacity and facility which created challenges and obstacles (Yuen, 2007). The intention of the scheme was good as it encouraged kindergarten teachers to reach a certain qualifications and to pursue further studies after school and work. However, insufficient support in terms of resources and time allowed for professional training to attain the required qualifications created redundant anxiety and stress from local kindergarten teachers and principals (Gail, 2007). The voucher scheme also brought about a considerable increase of workload for them. Many in-service teachers had to attend three year part-time evening professional training courses in order to fulfill the basic qualification requirement by the Education Bureau in Hong Kong. They raised serious concerns that teachers without the required qualifications would not be allowed to continue their services after 2012/13. This would happen regardless that most of them had teachers training qualification previously and they were both experienced and competent teachers (Yuen, 2006). Some in-service kindergarten teachers were forced to attain the expected qualifications within a period of five years, and given the time constraints, teachers usually pursued intensive studies with the aim of attaining the relevant qualifications according to the time frame set by the government. As a result, some of them were suffered from work and study at the same time as they had to attend evening training courses after long working hours during day time.

Secondly, most teachers were without the qualification protection upon completion of their studies. The salary mechanism linking the qualification upgrade was abolished with the introduction of PEVS (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2007). There was no salary increment awarded upon acquisition of higher qualifications. In fact, the field continued to require even higher expectations, demands and workload from the kindergarten teachers. Besides upgrading qualifications of professionals in early childhood education field through teachers’ training, there were some dilemma between school choice and the promise of education quality.

Underlying the argument for the use of education vouchers was to empower parents with regard to school choice for their children (Sandler & Kapel, 1995). As the major consumers in the market-driven early childhood education services, parents had always been treated as an essential party by kindergarten principals or early childhood education centers. While parents had the right to choose the school for their children, early childhood education became market-oriented. Ever since the field became more market-oriented and parents had more freedom of school choice due to the introduction of PEVS, for some kindergartens, their curricula were designed to meet parents’ expectations instead of using the expertise of the teachers upon completion of in-service professional trainings. In the “power struggle” between parents, teachers and kindergartens, parents always had the power in hand. It was not uncommon for early childhood organizations or centers to compromise their professional preferences (Fung, 2007). For that reason, some kindergarten teachers expressed doubt as to the effectiveness of promoting quality early childhood education through a market-driven system or scheme (Fung, 2010). Many kindergarten teachers indicated concerns regarding the quality of early childhood education as some kindergartens might not continue to practice what they believed to be pedagogically sound as their focus was on parents’ expectations (Rao & Li, 2009).

Even though resources have been added to enhance kindergarten teacher’s training and qualification upgrading, with the current operational conditions under the voucher scheme, there are obstacles and concerns upon maintaining the quality of early childhood education in Hong Kong.

IV. Opportunities and threats created for the early childhood education field

According to Neuman and Bennett (2001), the area of early childhood education has an enormous significant role in the society. It is because early childhood education consists of bases for psychological, emotional, social, physical and cognitive development as well as lifelong learning, it has an enormous potential in fostering values, attitudes, skills and behaviors that have key role in preventing environmental problems (Samuelsson & Kaga, 2008). There is more emphasis and considerations being paid to introduction, monitoring, and operation of early childhood education programs as well as qualifications of kindergarten teachers ever since implementing the government policy. Better teaching services are linked to better early childhood education (Cochran, 2005) and this would positively affect children’s education and social life in the long run. No one denies the need for good and professional teachers. When it comes to quality education in early
childhood, it is the teachers that are referred to on the first place as to be the major foundation of providing high-quality standards (Buysses & Wesley, 2006). If teachers are required to make use of best learning and teaching strategies and pedagogies, it is important that these teachers are taught on the model of such practices. Teachers should be made aware of different learning and teaching strategies by which they can incorporate these approaches required in the early childhood education (Deakins, 2007). Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme created opportunities and chances for kindergarten teachers to review their roles, identify effective teaching strategies and evaluate their activity planning skills through in-service professional trainings. For high-quality early childhood education services, it required that policy makers, training institutions, schools and teachers to work together towards a common vision and mission. The voucher scheme provided a platform for sharing of teaching skills and practices through increasing the transparency and accountability of kindergartens and early childhood centers.

The launch of the PEVS signals the government’s commitment to and investment in the well being of young children and future owners of Hong Kong. Nevertheless, there are some potential threats to the early childhood education field due to the introduction of the policy. As mentioned previously, quality assurance mechanism is linked to the voucher scheme due to financial assistance by the government. On one hand, the mechanism can ensure the quality of education through self evaluation and external evaluation; on the other hand, early childhood sectors have to fulfill intensive and demanding Quality Review (QR) and administrative work for quality assurance. This has produced heavy workload and burdens on both teachers’ job and school administration. Some kindergarten teachers have pointed out that apart from teaching, they have to handle additional administrative work, to the extent that they work ten hours per day, and five and a half days per week. Whilst free periods are forced to be cancelled, time for a rest is not available (Yuen, 2007). Unfavorable work conditions would not only fail to attract and maintain kindergarten teachers but also affect school cultures and operation in the classrooms. There has been exceptional loss and transfer of teachers ever since the implementation of the scheme due to poor circumstances which have demoralized many kindergarten teachers in the field. Some teachers have resigned or switched to serve part-time teaching resulting in schools running short of teaching manpower, and this may affect the quality of education in the long run for school development (Pearson & Rao, 2006). Fullan (2006) stated that a policy reform is incomplete if what happens in the classrooms and school cultures are neglected and ignored by the policy maker. It is because teachers’ morale plays a vital role in attaining high-quality education for early childhood. According to Goodfellow (2001), the teachers who have been reported to have more pressure and job burdens, longer working hours, and other difficulties facing in workplace are not highly motivated and so it is a factor that is regarded as critical when it comes to quality education.

The government should consider and find out ways to create a pleasant working environment for pre-primary education sectors by lessening the administrative work of kindergarten teachers and providing sufficient resources such as hiring teaching assistants to be responsible for administrative work whilst teaching staff can focus on teaching children. It is only through resolving the problem of insufficient manpower in early childhood sectors that the teaching quality can be enhanced and improved to maintain quality education.

V. Discussion and implications of the PEVS

The quality of the early childhood education services and teacher workforce is a subject of perpetual concern in Hong Kong. At first glance, the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme appears to cover a series of forward-looking new initiatives for early childhood education as the aim of the scheme is to professionalize kindergarten teachers and services. It is impartial in its intention of ensuring that children are taught by ‘qualified’ kindergarten teachers through in-service professional training and upgrading their qualification requirements. Nevertheless, the definition of ‘qualified’ teachers is linked only to an individual’s knowledge of the subject area that they teach in which can be overly complicated and confusing (Berliner 2005).

As the quality of kindergarten teachers is an intangible measure, there is plenty of possibility for arguing that holding a Certificate in Early Childhood Education (CE) required by the government under the policy does not necessarily confer quality. It is questionable whether the PEVS can promote and enhance the quality of early childhood services in Hong Kong. Further research study is proposed to gain better understanding of the impact of voucher scheme on quality of early childhood education services as well as to examine the implications of PEVS to the professional development of kindergarten teachers. It aims to find out the perceptions of kindergarten teachers regarding quality early childhood education under the government policy and the possible outcomes (including both desirable and undesirable outcomes) of PEVS from the perspectives of teachers.

VI. Concluding remarks

In summary, Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme could be a deliberate way to improve the quality of early childhood education services by making use of market forces, increasing parental choices and upgrading the qualification requirements of kindergarten teachers. Conversely, the voucher scheme that intentionally enhances parental authority on the pedagogical autonomy of early childhood centers through
subsidies parents could have an adverse and unfavorable impact on the professional quality of early childhood education services. Moreover, the call for a government financial support and subsidy for 15 years free education (i.e. 3 years free education for pre-primary education) would reduce tension in kindergartens to equalize the leading parental influences on the pedagogical operation of the early childhood education centers, and to refurbish the pedagogical autonomy of kindergarten teachers. More importantly, the call with an aim to normalize the balance of power among the stakeholders involved in the well-being of children and their learning (Fung, 2010). With free pre-primary education, no longer will one party dictate pedagogical decisions or govern the choice of pedagogical practice. As an alternative, parents, kindergarten teachers, and early childhood organizations or centers can work in close collaboration and communication in the education of young children. Parents will become not just clients or consumers of kindergartens but partners as well (Bridges, 1994). It is most likely that offering free education to parents and kindergartens could concurrently and considerably enforce the professional quality and standard of early childhood education services.

References