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**Parents' choice of early childhood education service in Hong Kong: A pilot study**

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## **Abstract**

The introduction of a voucher scheme for early childhood education in Hong Kong has resulted in significant changes in the field. This paper reports data from a pilot study that aimed at gaining a deeper understanding of how parents chose early childhood education service following the introduction of a voucher scheme in Hong Kong. Eight-six Chinese parents with children aged three participated in interviews and focus group discussions. This group of parents had just gone through the process of selecting a kindergarten or nursery for their child for the school year of 2007-2008. Parents from a range of socioeconomic circumstances and educational levels who had selected non-profit kindergartens and nurseries in public and private housing estates participated. Results showed that what parents looked in their choice of service matched closely with how they defined quality. As evidenced in the study, parents' changing views on quality shared a great deal of resemblance with the specific notion of quality being heavily promoted by recent reform policy. The findings pointed to the complex interactions of policy, choice and practices of early childhood education. The new voucher scheme is intensifying the governing of the self and the field, the impact of which can be worrying.

Following reunification with the People's Republic of China in 1997, the Hong Kong Education Commission (2000) embarked on a review of education, which recommended reforms in all areas of education with a strong focus on lifelong learning and quality education. Early childhood education was acknowledged as the foundation for lifelong learning and five specific but interconnected reforms were proposed: improving the ways in which quality is assured; harmonizing operations and professional training for kindergartens and child care centres; enhancing continuity between early childhood and primary education; encouraging parent education and involvement; and improving the qualifications of early childhood staff (Education Commission, 2000). The idea of lifelong learning and quality education is seen as essential for knowledge-based economies (Tse, 2002). The Hong Kong government has also associated education with improving market competitiveness, and this was one reason a review of education was undertaken (Mok, 2006). One change intended to improve educational delivery and management is the introduction of a voucher scheme for kindergartens and what were formerly known as child care centres (thereafter nurseries). The voucher scheme is structured so that it includes professional learning for staff.

### **Introduction**

Up until the return of the colonial city from Britain to China in 1997, Hong Kong witnessed prosperous economic growth. As the economy dwindled due the Asian financial crisis, the new Special Administrative Region (SAR) government had to face challenges

associated with a prolonged budget deficit and a concern about its legitimacy (Cheng, 2002; Mok & Welch, 2002). A comprehensive quality framework came about when the government officially adopted the proposal of the Education Commission (1997). For early childhood education, there was no defined framework except a stance that had been historically repeated: “to promote the development of high quality kindergarten education in the private sector” by professional upgrading, curriculum advice, and miscellaneous subsidy schemes for operators and parents (Hong Kong Government, 1997, p. 107). The laissez-faire policy orientation, as reflected by inadequate regulatory measures, has left the field to the fully-fledged influence of market forces (Yuen, 2008). The *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* (Curriculum Development Council, 1996), for example, was developed to promote more “child-centred” practices but early childhood institutions were not obliged to follow either the curriculum guidelines or the officials’ recommendations (Ho, 2007).

Providing this contextual information helps to explain why education policy, including that concerning early childhood education, has exerted influence in the form of an authoritative discourse. This paper uses Bakhtin’s (1986) concept of language as social practices that are embedded in time, space and place relationships. For Bakhtin, language is always ‘in the making’ and social practices are both representative and constitutive of local cultures. Authoritative discourse and internally persuasive discourse (Bakhtin, 1981) are used to examine how these discourses, as embedded in the specific cultural, institutional and

historically contexts Wertsch (1985, 1991) of Hong Kong, have competed against each other at various points of time, leading to changes in power relations and people's ways of reasoning about choice and quality in early childhood education service. In Bakhtin's (1981) words, authoritative discourse is 'single voiced' because utterances and their meanings cannot be changed in the process of communication. It prevents itself from coming in contact with other voices, and it contributes to the production of univocal utterances or texts that typically characterize transmission models of communication. On the contrary, internally persuasive discourse encourages contact. It is "akin to retelling a text in one's own words, with one's own accents, gestures, modifications" (Holquist & Emerson, 1981, p. 424). For human beings to come to ideological consciousness, they have to engage in a constant struggle between these two discourses.

The relatively weak position of policy as an authoritative discourse in the years prior to the launch of the education reform in Hong Kong offered an excellent opportunity for other discourses present in cultural, institutional, historical contexts to prevail. In analyzing the competing contexts for developing personal and social education in Hong Kong, Luk (2001) criticized the stress on western values, that is, individualism and autonomy, in the seemingly Eurocentric curriculum of the local education system, which was very much oriented towards economic advancement. Such an emphasis works in accord with the Confucian tradition where "education is important for personal development" and "social mobility.... whether

education is viewed important from either internal or external perspectives, it is strongly colored by a sense of equalitarianism – you can achieve it if you want to” (Lee, 1996, p. 39). Not surprisingly, these discourses have shaped parents' views about education to the effect that education is seen to be more about making a good living than for learning. The unstable economic conditions that persisted after 1997 have made parents more aware that educational achievement is highly significant in a knowledge-based society. Parents make every attempt to send their children to what they see as ideal schools (Luk, 2001). This is a longstanding problem that was acknowledged as early as the 1980s: “Education in Hong Kong is predominantly a highly utilitarian means to economic and vocational ends” (Llewellyn, 1982, p.12). It seems that this socially constructed meaning of education is extremely resistant to change. Mellor and Chan (2002) doubted that teachers with more professional training could actually change parents' conceptions of early childhood education.

Given the lack of regulatory measures and the official position of improving quality through keeping the field in the private sector as it has historically developed, early childhood institutions, like their customers (parents), found it difficult to withstand dominant forces such as the effective operation of a market system (Chan & Chan, 2003). They have been offering what they think parents want (Chan & Chan, 2003; Ebbeck, 1996; Hong Kong Christian Service, 2002; Weihart, 1999). To be considered a ‘quality service’ in the earlier days, they had to deliver a difficult academic curriculum that was characterized by rote memorization,

dictation, writing and examinations, as well as adopt teacher-directed approaches (Chan & Chan, 2003). There was not much attention given to school philosophy or staff qualifications (Opper, 1992). Although having some training was perceived as essential, parents gave high regard to teacher qualities such as love and patience (Ebbeck, 1995). The market-driven notion of quality resembles the dominant construction of early childhood institutions “as a producer of care and of standardized and predetermined child outcomes” (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999, p. 63). Young children, being viewed as empty vessels, have to become ready to learn. So when speaking about quality in relation to the construction of early childhood education, the child is very much seen “*as a knowledge, identity, and culture reproducer*” (Dahlberg et al., 1999, p. 44, emphasis in original).

The pilot study reported here investigated how parents of children aged three viewed and acted on the voucher scheme, as well as how the voucher scheme might have shaped parents' ways of thinking about and choosing a kindergarten or nursery. Because the voucher scheme is new, little is known about how parents make such decisions. Cultural views exert a powerful influence on how Chinese parents think about education (Gow, Balla, Kember, & Hau, 1996; Lee, 1996) and although Hong Kong is predominantly a Chinese society, there are religious, gender, class, and individual differences that indicate diversity (Leung, 2003). Nevertheless, the paper investigates the interactions among parents' choice, the reform policy since 2000 and practices of early childhood education, in an attempt to identify



understandings parents have about quality that have been produced as a result of the interactions of these factors.

### **Methodology**

As a new policy, the introduction of a voucher scheme has not been explored as yet by local researchers. This pilot study aimed at providing initial insights into the introduction of the voucher scheme in Hong Kong. Three data collection techniques were used: individual interviews (Creswell, 2008), focus group discussions (Madriz, 1998) and document analysis (Prior, 2003). The participants were parents of children aged three years who had just been through the process of selecting a kindergarten or nursery appropriate for their own child for the school year of 2007-2008.

Individual interviews and focus group discussions offer effective ways of learning about the many factors that parents consider when making choices about early childhood education service, the rationale behind the choice, any difficulties involved in the decision making process and the influence of the voucher scheme on their choice. Eighty-six parents were recruited from a range of early childhood settings in different socioeconomic areas, including kindergartens and nurseries that were profit- and non-profit-making, as well as those that served children in public and private housing estates. A full list of kindergartens and nurseries participating in the voucher scheme was obtained from the Education and

Manpower Bureau. Using the list, kindergartens and nurseries, representing profit- and non-profit-making institutions in public and private housing areas, were randomly selected from four districts with the highest number of school enrollment in the voucher scheme.

Altogether there were four categories of early childhood settings, namely, non-profit-making institutions located in private housing areas; non-profit-making institutions located in public housing areas; profit-making institutions located in private housing areas and profit-making institutions located in public housing areas.

The initial plan was to have an equal representation of kindergartens and nurseries from each category and an equal number of parents from each early childhood institution to participate in the study, that is, 2 parents from each institution with a total of 64 parents from 32 institutions (including 16 kindergartens and 16 nurseries). Due to various kinds of issues, for example, difficulty in getting the profit-making institutions' involvement, the lack of provision of service by non-profit-making/public housing nurseries in one of the districts, the busy period of school operation and parents' time constraints or scheduling conflicts, the plan had to be adjusted. In the end, 36 early childhood institutions (20 kindergartens and 16 nurseries), all non-profit-making, and 86 parents (48 from kindergartens and from 38 nurseries) were recruited to ensure equal representation as much as possible. With the exception of one district, all the districts had representation from each of the four categories.

In order to categorize participants by socioeconomic status and educational level, a

simple form was designed to collect relevant demographic information. The participants were then divided into three groups: low income (23), lower-middle (31) and middle income (32). In terms of educational level, 22 participants and one participant in the low income group were secondary school and university graduates, respectively. In the lower-middle income group, there were 2 primary school graduates, 24 secondary school graduates and 5 university graduates. In the middle income group, 16 of the participants had completed secondary school education while the remaining 17 had a university degree. Of the 86 parents, 15 were male and the rest were female.

Chinese parents were recruited as participants due to their dominant presence as users of kindergartens and nurseries. Chinese parents also facilitate an in-depth examination of the cultural influences at work. Permission to contact parents of incoming students was sought from participating kindergartens and nurseries. While 38 parents participated in individual semi-structured interviews, 47 were involved in focus group discussions (a total of 15 groups with about 3 parents per group). Each parent participated in an interview or a focus group discussion once. Interviews and focus group discussions were conducted at the kindergarten or nursery where the parent had enrolled their child. Cantonese was the language used for all interviews and focus group discussions, and all interviews and focus groups were audio and video recorded. The audiotapes were transcribed in full (to Chinese) and videotapes were used to identify who said what in the focus groups, to clarify questions arising during

transcription and to ensure the accuracy of the transcripts.

A semi-structured interview protocol (Creswell, 2008) was used to guide rather than to standardize the interview or focus group discussion. Interviews lasted for about one hour, whereas the focus groups ranged from one to two hours in duration. What focus groups can achieve that individual interviews cannot is the “collective testimony” resulting from the process of discussion (Madriz, 1998, p. 116). The essence of focus group discussion lies in the ability to create an opportunity for participants of similar backgrounds to share and validate their own experiences with each other. Following transcription of interviews and focus group discussions, parents were asked to check the transcripts for accuracy.

Data analysis began in the early stages of data collection and data were coded and analysed in accordance with emerging themes. The constant comparative method (Glasser & Strauss, 1967) was used to sort recurring issues, ideas and actions. Language plays a key role in reflecting individual interpretations of reality. According to Bakhtin (1986), social languages are related to classes of speakers. A social language is “a discourse peculiar to a specific stratum of society (e.g., profession, age group) within a given social system at a given time” (Holquist & Emerson, 1981, p. 430). Thus, social languages are characterized by an apparent social hierarchy of the speakers. Individuals frequently make use of social languages to produce their own utterances or to make sense of others' utterances (Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Holquist & Emerson, 1981). Specific words, phrases, or metaphors (e.g., those

related to neoliberalism) used in dialogues were therefore of great importance to the analysis. Some of these were 'learning the basics', 'happy child', 'academic' and 'pushed'. These terms provide nuances that reflect competing ideas, shaping forces, or significant factors that may account for the choice of service made by parents. The nuances may also reflect struggles faced by parents that are related to differences in socioeconomic status.

## **Results**

In search of an appropriate early childhood education service for their children, parents often made reference to a number of factors when considering the available options. Among the many mentioned, child outcomes, curriculum practices (such as school philosophy, curriculum and pedagogy) and professional suitability (such as teacher qualities and professional abilities) were frequently highlighted as key considerations. What parents looked for in their choice of service and whether they would consider the selected service as the best choice or good quality of service revealed a close connection with what they expected their children to learn and how they wanted their children to develop in the early years. The following section depicts these complex relations through documenting parents' views on learning and practices of early childhood education in regard to choice of service.

### *Child Outcomes: Parents' Expectations*

Regardless of their income and educational level, parents generally went through a very

careful process to select a specific kind of service for their children. It might be assumed that parents could easily answer the question “What do you want your child to gain from the service?” given the intensive effort they invested in selecting the service. This proved to be not quite the case. The responses showed a wide array of ambiguities among parents of all income and education levels in their views on young children’s learning. At one end of the continuum, three parents with low and lower-middle incomes who were all secondary school educated, indicated that they had not given much thought to what children should learn in the kindergarten or nursery. One of the parents said,

[I don’t have] high expectation. I don't know how to make the demand. [I have] never thought about what young children should learn.... I think most parents do not understand what kindergartens should teach [and] what young children should learn.... Therefore, [we all] rely on what other people say when choosing a kindergarten. (Parent 20; FG [Focus Group])

It was not uncommon to hear parents make statements such as: ‘to learn something’, ‘to learn more things’, ‘to learn what children at this stage need to learn’, or ‘to learn the basics’.

There seemed to be much ambivalence about “what to learn” in the early years. Although the term ‘learning the basics’ was often used by parents, its meaning was subject to individual interpretation and could be divided into two main categories, that is, character and life skills, as well as cognitive abilities and literacies.

### *Character and life skills*

In contrast to cognitive development (discussed next), close to half of the parents in

each income level shared consistent views about what they valued for their children in terms of character, self-care, and social skills. They saw these aspects, especially character, as the core of learning for very young children, and far more important than academic achievement. When parents of various income or educational levels discussed character development, they wanted their children to be polite, self-disciplined and morally good people. As for self-care, being able to take care of oneself in daily living and to become independent was the hope of the parents for their children. Socially, parents wished their children to have the ability to communicate, share, cooperate and develop harmonious relationships with others. Knowing that they could not provide similar experiences or support at home, parents genuinely appreciated the presence of a social context in early childhood education where children could learn from group life and receive assistance from professionally trained teachers. A lower-middle income parent, who was a secondary school graduate, stated:

It is very difficult for adults to interact with the child as if they were young children, because [they] would not purposefully seize a toy from the child or make fun of him or her. [They] only want the child to play quietly, at best having a stable emotion. Therefore, young children can only learn to interact and share with others, as well as control their own emotions in a school setting. (Parent 16; FG)

Unlike the low and low-middle income earners, parents in the middle income group tended to think of social development in terms of their children's future adjustment to primary school and society. A university educated parent said:

Peer influence is good for the child. When young children influence each other, they can improve more quickly and learn faster, thus easing their transition to primary school. After all, the ultimate purpose of studying is [to learn] to face [the challenges of] society

[and] face the people. (Parent 7; FG)

Despite the positive tone being conveyed in the above excerpt, two other middle income earners stated that there was not much to learn in early childhood institutions because they were primarily places for children to play and interact.

### *Cognitive abilities and literacies*

In talking about what knowledge children should acquire during the time spent in the kindergarten or nursery, the responses that parents gave were much more divergent and ambiguous than about character and life skills. Ten parents in the study, whose education varied from primary to university level, referred to “learn[ing] the basics” of academic and language learning, that is, English, Chinese (Cantonese and/or Putonghua) and mathematics. A few parents in this category preferred a more difficult curriculum (e.g., testing, examination, dictation) and two others wanted to see writing started at the age of two or three. One low income parent explained, “[I want the curriculum] to be harder. Young children nowadays can quickly learn the daily, simple things. Their ability is amazing.... I hope my child can study well and find a good job” (Parent, 20, II [Individual Interview]). Another low income parent said: “I would push [the child] to learn more things, starting from the early ages to the older years. Otherwise, it would be very daunting when [the child] enters secondary school, realizing that something has not been learned” (Parent, 22, II). Generally speaking, it was the middle income parents, particularly those who were more educated, who displayed more



concern about their children's learning of different languages.

Other than the ten parents who referred to learning the basics, the majority of parents were cautious about pressuring their children too much in the early years. Statements such as the following, made by a middle income university graduate, are indicative of parental concerns: “[I] feel that Hong Kong’s young children do not have any childhood. I also think the childhood stage is very precious. I don’t want to see [my child] being pushed like that” (Parent 10, II). Why were parents so conscious about not pressuring children at very young ages? Forty-three parents, regardless of their educational background or income status, indicated having a happy child or happy learner was most important to them. They were well aware of the tremendous academic pressure shouldered by children as soon as they entered primary school, or even in kindergartens or nurseries where children are asked to do lots of homework. In a way, parents saw early childhood education as a refuge for their children to enjoy a happy childhood. One parent explained, “Happy learning is more important; the curriculum does not matter” (Parent 27; II). Nevertheless, parents’ keen concern about their child’s happiness was also linked to their fear that a difficult curriculum might scare children about going to school. The careful selection of an early childhood institution was associated with parents’ wishes that their children would like going to school, an outcome which was of great importance for future academic study.

There was much prominence given to happy learning, with relatively less emphasis on

acquiring knowledge, and academic learning in particular. However, parents, especially those in the lower-middle and middle income groups, also talked about the importance of developing children's interest in learning and willingness to take initiative to learn. A secondary school graduate pointed out,

It is same as what the government is promoting now. Happy learning.... Don't force [children] to learn.... I hope they would be happy, willing to learn.... Most important is to develop an interest in search for information and to discover personal interests.... It is not like our generation which was being spoon-fed and was asked to memorize things.... I don't want to see young children of this generation go through the same path. (Parent 23; FG)

Such a viewpoint was echoed by another secondary school graduate who was in favor of the idea of "learn[ing] how to learn" (Parent 19; II).

In spite of the overwhelming preference for a more relaxed mode of learning for their children, seven parents, all from the lower-middle and middle income groups, struggled to settle for a less difficult or academically oriented curriculum. The highly educated parents were not immune from the struggle either. Like other parents, they worried about transition to primary school. One university educated parent wished her child to be happy and at the same time wanted to see a small amount of dictation added to the curriculum (Parent 38; II).

Having a child who had just started primary one and who was facing difficulty in spelling, another parent, also a university graduate, reflected on the dilemma: "It will get harder when moving up [to primary school]. Some parents say spoon-feeding is only a matter of time.

Sooner is better than later.... It's very conflicting when I come to think about this" (Parent 01;

II). Apparently, the dilemma was a tension between wanting an academic curriculum and wanting their children to be happy in their learning. For many parents, it was a difficult struggle, and it cut across the different income groups.

*Child outcomes, best choice and quality service*

Whether parents interpreted “learning the basics” in terms of character and life skills, or cognitive abilities and literacies, or both, almost all of them considered their choice of service as satisfactory, suitable, or best for their children. The first reason given for the choice usually centred on their children. Understandably, parents were thrilled to see various aspects of progress or improvement in their children, having sent them to a kindergarten or nursery. Of the 43 responses that were related to child outcomes, 30 focused on the child being happy and being able to enjoy going to school. Likewise, when asked for their views about quality early childhood education, parents, mostly lower-middle and middle income earners, tended to include child outcomes as an indicator. For instance, one male parent commented: “After he has started school, we can see the changes or growth [in the child].... This tells if early childhood education is good or not” (Parent 16; II). Similar to this was a university educated parent who said: “A quality school, I think, is able to make young children feel happy and comfortable” (Parent 03; II). This orientation resonated with the remark of another male parent: “While children are still studying in the kindergarten, it is not necessary to be so serious about learning knowledge” (Parent G01; FG). Sharing her perspective on service

quality, a lower-middle income parent with secondary school education brought up the official effort currently in action:

Not just about academic learning but also about helping young children like learning; learn how to learn. It is not merely about learning something. Understanding the importance of learning is necessary, too. Today, the government keeps promoting lifelong learning.... It is about character and thinking. [One] must have interest in order to learn. (Parent 19; II)

In short, the data showed a tendency for parents to talk about child outcomes, that is, learning the basics and having happy learners, to evaluate their choice of service and define the meaning of quality early childhood education.

#### *Curriculum Practices: Ways of Achieving the Expected Child Outcomes*

In light of the obvious parents' focus on child outcomes, curriculum practices (school philosophy, curriculum and pedagogy) became a high priority for service selection. As with child outcomes, a pattern emerged from the responses of parents in different income groups and those with various educational backgrounds. Twenty-seven parents, including 23 from the lower-middle and middle income groups, articulated their desire for a play-based, activity-oriented, inspiring, lively learning environment that could support children's active exploration. Some parents described the traditional teaching approach as 'not activity-focused', 'boring' and 'not interesting' (Parents 08, II; 32, II; 06, FG). Lower-middle and middle income parents, especially the latter, put more emphasis on whether the curriculum was age appropriate and whether it was able to address individual differences. Besides, the

curriculum should be progressive and balanced in a sense that it was not overly academic. It needed to offer a broad range of learning experiences and exposures, both within the classroom and in the community, to facilitate the development of the whole person and the discovery of potential in various areas, such as music, sports and arts. Two secondary school graduates, one in the low income group (Parent 37; II) and the other in the lower-middle income group (Parent 03; FG), explained that the newly implemented voucher scheme aimed at diversifying the curriculum and assisting early childhood institutions in building young children's foundations of knowledge and experiences in a more systematic manner.

In comparison with those in the low income group, parents in the lower-middle and middle income groups demonstrated a higher tendency to include curriculum practices in their discussion about choice and the concept of quality service. By and large, they were satisfied with the "child-centred" practices and appreciated the fact that lots of different activities were offered to their children. A few parents suggested having more outings, extra-curricular activities, or interest classes. A university graduate said: "Quality [early childhood] education should give young children more space to think and more stimulation" (Parent 07; II). A male parent in the low income group had a similar view:

[Quality kindergarten]...is about acquiring knowledge from all directions, thus enabling them [young children] to follow the pace of the world and the needs of society. Therefore, [I] hope the school can bring young children to various places so as to help them understand the community and come in touch with different sorts of things. (Parent 25; II)

Of course, not all parents thought the same way when defining what they meant by a quality service. Two lower-middle secondary school graduates talked about quality in relation to more academic learning.

*Early Childhood Teachers, Expected Child Outcomes and Quality Service*

As for curriculum practices, the professional suitability of early childhood teachers was seen by parents as playing a crucial role in delivering expected child outcomes, and thus a quality service. The bases that parents used to choose and evaluate their choice of service and to describe quality early childhood education were quite consistent. What parents were most concerned about were teacher qualities. They were looking for teachers who were predominately loving, positive, committed, responsible, enthusiastic, patient, personal and friendly. Other qualities included having a good character and being young, energetic, or cheerful. With regard to professional abilities, parents wanted teachers to have relevant experience and training in early childhood education so that they were capable of understanding, communicating and working with young children. Parents also acknowledged the unique difference in teaching techniques between early childhood and other levels of education, expressing an appreciation that early childhood teachers had better ways of guiding their children.

Eight parents indicated a higher diploma (sub-degree level) as the minimum professional training required (two to three years), although one year was mentioned by a

couple of parents. There was, however, a relatively strong belief among the parents that it was neither important (nine parents) nor necessary, though nice to have (four parents), for early childhood teachers to hold a university degree. One low income university graduate pointed out: "Individuals who have a higher degree normally would not stay long in a low level work environment" (Parent 04; II). Comments related to the high cost of operation and a higher degree providing no guarantee of being a good teacher were also made by five parents in all income groups. Other reasons referred mostly to the fact that the job involved teaching children of very young ages: "It's not demanding because the knowledge being learned in the kindergarten is very easy. Everyone can handle it. [University degree] is more important at the primary level" (Parent 12; II).

Four parents did lend their support to having a given ratio of university degree holders in early childhood institutions, as did another parent who stated that a university qualification could help one face the technical and intellectual challenges involved in teaching young children. Nonetheless, the idea that a degree was not necessary remained significant in all three income groups, regardless of parents' educational background and gender. Even two parents who were primary and secondary school teachers themselves held the same view. Thus, so long as anyone had attained secondary school education (or Form 7 at most) as well as possessed the necessary qualities and professional training, he or she could be an early childhood teacher.

As a whole, 30 parents representing all income levels were pleased with their choice because of the stated teacher qualities and professional abilities provided by the respective services. According to parents, these qualities and abilities made it possible to build good teacher-child relationships, which in turn helped children develop into happy learners while learning the basics. Therefore, if children liked their teacher, it would be a good indicator of a quality service. A middle income university educated parent presented an interesting point:

Talking about quality early childhood education, I think it is of utmost importance to have it built on the close relationships between the teacher and the students.... Hence, the government should do more to help kindergarten teachers get more involved... so that they can be more sensitive to students' development and changes. (Parent 13; II)

Nineteen parents from all three income groups were genuinely worried about the adverse effects of the voucher scheme on the well-being of the teachers and their ability to maintain good relationships with the children, and needless to say, the quality of service. Their concerns were due to the increasing pressure exerted by the voucher scheme for teachers to upgrade their professional qualifications to sub-degree level within a certain period of time; to face the mounting workload resulting from the mandatory quality assurance inspection and to handle problems arising from the policy.

These data shed light on three key factors that shaped parents' perspectives about choice and quality of service, namely, child outcomes, curriculum practices and professional suitability. Though full of ambiguities and ambivalence when thinking about young children's learning, parents of all income levels had consistent expectations in some areas and were



resistant to traditional curriculum practices to varying degrees. While showing an awareness of the government's effort to promote happy learning, some parents were still struggling to cope with the fear of what losing an academic curriculum might mean for their children's future. As reflected by parents' contentment of their choice of service, a specific notion of quality was evident, where loving and specifically trained early childhood teachers were to guide young children to learn the basics and to become happy learners through an exciting curriculum packed with active, diverse activities.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study reveal a particular notion of quality that is embedded in parents' choice of service, thus suggesting interactions among the market function, practices of early childhood institutions and the reform policy. How do these interactions construct or reconstruct the prevailing notion of quality? In what ways do the words and ideas shared by parents reflect the governing forces behind the interactions that shape human reasoning and action? Bakhtin stated that an utterance is "made specifically social, historical, concrete and dialogized" (Holquist & Emerson, 1981, p. 433). It is "always partially determined by the voice it is answering, anticipating, or even striving to ignore" (Wertsch, 1985, p. 65). The concept of dialogicality explains why in any utterance, there exist at least two voices. Thereby, each word becomes "half-ours and half-someone else's" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 345).

This implies the possible existence of conflicts among multiple voices. However, none of the voices can consistently claim primacy over the others, though one particular voice may appear to be more important at times. As Wertsch (1991) explained, the concern should be more about “how and why a particular voice occupies centre stage, as well as why it is privileged in a particular setting” (p. 13). While voices can contradict each other, they also strive towards a mutual goal, that is, to become ideological. Bakhtin (1981) described ideological development as an internal struggle “for hegemony among various verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions, and values” (p. 345). The “various verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions, and values” are manifested in the form of discourse.

The ambivalence expressed by parents in this study about what young children should learn and the dilemma that parents have experienced with regard to their choice of service point to the struggles for primacy between internally persuasive and authoritarian discourses. The child outcomes emphasized by parents in this study, that is, being a polite, self-disciplined, morally good person, as well as being able to take care of oneself and to develop harmonious relationships with others, have been consistently mentioned in earlier studies of early childhood education in Hong Kong (Ebbeck, 1995; Hong Kong Christian Service, 2002; Opper, 1992). As many of these aspects of child outcomes are closely connected to the Chinese tradition of socialization (Luk, 2001; Wu, 1992), they, too, serve as a vital key to successful adjustment of future schooling experiences. Regardless of income and education

levels, parents could not stop themselves from worrying about their children's transition to primary school; hence, academic knowledge has to be part of learning the basics. Whether academic knowledge has to be presented in the form of a difficult curriculum is a matter of opinion. All of the earlier studies conducted about parents' choice and views on early childhood education have clearly shown a strong preference for academic preparation (Ebbeck, 1995, 1996; Lam, 1999, Opper, 1992). What this means is that parents' choice of early childhood education for their children often involves multiple voices. It is always made up of one's own and others' voices (Bakhtin, 1981).

To deal with parental pressure, the Curriculum Development Council (2006) came up with a new version of the *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* that coincided with the lifelong learning spirit of the education reform, that is, "to nurture children to attain all-round development...and to develop good habits" as well as "to simulate children's interest in learning and cultivate in them positive learning attitudes" (p. 18). Similar in some ways to the first version in 1996 (e.g., ideas about child-centredness, age appropriateness), the new guide presents a strong image of children as learners who learn through play, which is described as a "happy learning experiences", as well as through "observation, exploration, thinking and imagination" (p. 12). Added to this guide is the idea of lifewide learning which emphasizes the provision of "broad learning space and precious learning opportunities" outside the classroom (Curriculum Development Council, 2006, p. 98). Most important of all, it advises

explicitly “not to expect children to write at nursery classes [age 3]” (p. 95). The message that young children should not be given excessive pressure has been repeated a number of times in the guide. It becomes clear that the stance taken in the education reform of happy learning experiences is in fact a challenge to the prevailing discourse of an academic kindergarten curriculum, which has been embedded in the cultural context of Hong Kong for many years.

The image of the child in the new curriculum guide bears much resemblance to the humanistic view of education of those parents who participated in the consultative meetings for drafting the reform proposal: ‘happy learning’, ‘giving children a happy childhood’, ‘let students love studying’, and so forth (Tsang, 2006). Whether it is the image of the child in the curriculum guide or humanistic view of the parents, there is a great deal of consistency with the ideal child imagined by parents in this study. It looks as if this ideal (happy) child is assuming the status of a universal truth and existing in opposition to the traditional (academically focused) child, who is now being positioned as not capable of meeting the challenges of the future. Yet, it may also represent a resistance by parents to the hegemony of the authoritative discourse of the academic child that is prevalent in the cultural context. To Bakhtin, voice is “the speaking personality, the speaking consciousness” (Holquist & Emerson, 1981, p. 434), or in other words, it is the internally persuasive discourse which is trying to make its way to centre stage. As revealed by the findings, parents have openly

spoken against the traditional mode of learning and teaching or the sole focus on academic knowledge. Their choice of service has been partly determined by the academic voice they are “striving to ignore” (Wertsch, 1985, p. 65). Nonetheless, judging by the significant change in parents' attitudes towards learning the basics and curriculum practices, it is plausible that many parents in the study have adopted the official quest for quality and lifelong learning as their “own intention” (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293).

In what ways then has the issue of income contributed to the process of appropriation?

It is evident from the data that parents with lower incomes have a slightly higher tendency to look for or define quality in terms of academic learning. They seem to be more ready to sacrifice a happy childhood for what they see as a more secure future. Parents in the lower-middle and middle income groups, especially those who are highly educated, were more inclined to think in terms of the happiness and welfare of their children. Although the conflict about academic learning is just as obvious, they seem to be more comfortable embracing the official stance. As explained by Bakhtin (1986), the languages that people use are characterized by a social hierarchy. Perhaps the ‘happy child’ discourse fits more comfortably with middle income earners at this point in time. It could also be that this privileging of middle income parents dates back to the humanistic view of education expressed at the consultative meetings (Tsang, 2006). There is no information about whose voices were represented at these meetings but there is a consistency between these humanistic views and

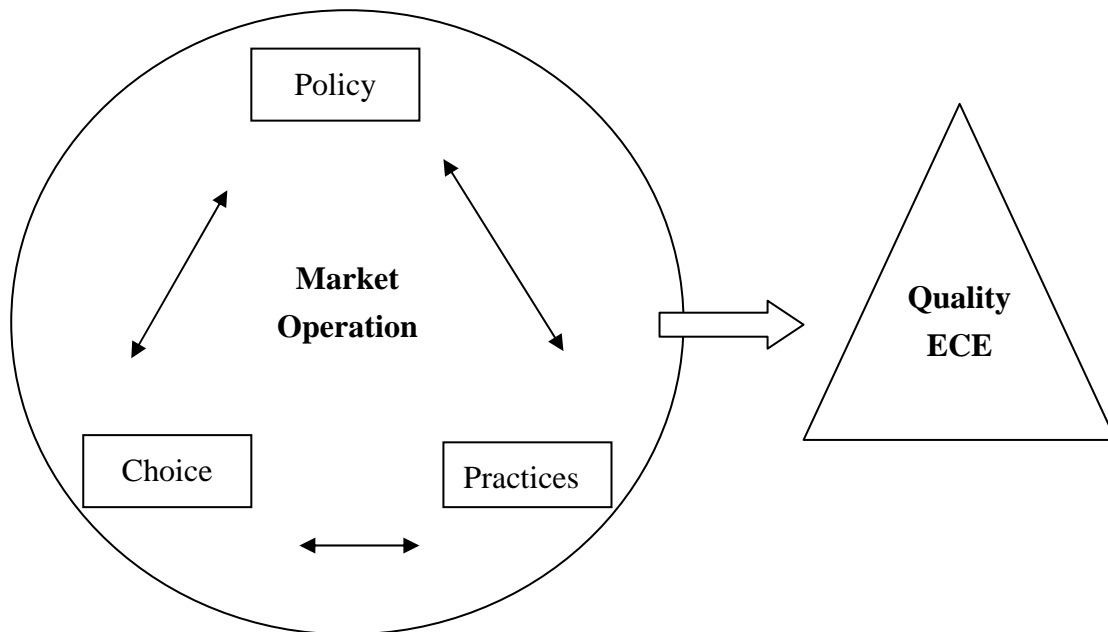
those of the middle income parents in this study. However, because of the government's fervent effort to publicize the official stance through a wide range of media (television, radio, internet, publications, the press), parents across all income levels are able to pick up the main message and make use of it to produce their own words, thus becoming more ideologically conscious as they struggle through the process.

So far we have shown how reform policy has worked as a regime of truth (Foucault, 1972) to manage the authoritative discourse in the form of a cultural preference for an academic kindergarten curriculum. As the voucher scheme gains momentum, it is re-working the reform policy in conjunction with the market and the practices of early childhood institutions. It signifies the tremendous potential of policy to make an enormous impact, good or bad, on a society and its people. However, we contend that with the introduction of the voucher scheme in 2007, the governing of the self and the field is being intensified. Vouchers, as a direct fee subsidy to parents, are a means by which the government hopes "to preserve the market responsiveness of the sector and to enhance quality at the same time" (Legislative Council, 2006, p. 3). Parents are pivotal because their decisions about choice of service have been placed in what amounts to a de facto relationship with the market and quality. This has occurred because the new policy has formalized the relation between resource allocation (vouchers) and its specific notion of quality by bringing together all relevant components under one roof – performance indicators, self-evaluation, and external validation – while

stepping up the effort to enhance transparency (Education & Manpower Bureau, 2007). The *Guide to the Pre-Primary Curriculum* (Curriculum Development Council, 2006) has become the basis of the quality assurance mechanism and accounts for some of the change from parents wanting an academic kindergarten curriculum to a preference for 'happy children' and more child-centred approaches.

As a more powerful authoritarian discourse, the voucher scheme allows the government to control not only parents but also the field, from a distance without making contact with other voices (Bakhtin, 1981). Ho (2007) noted that the quality assurance mechanism had already heightened the struggles experienced by early childhood institutions as they were trying to answer simultaneously contradictory demands from parents and stringent requirements of the government. It is a pure irony that the government is using the voucher scheme to "perfect" the market function to produce the desirable notion of quality (as shown in Figure 1) in a field that has already been intensely governed by market forces.

*Figure 1: Interactions of policy, choice, and practices of early childhood education*



The notion of quality which has been produced by the above interactions presents early childhood education as a place where a happy childhood can be constructed by loving and specifically trained teachers who are capable of guiding young children to develop an interest in learning and to acquire all the necessary basics through a variety of active classroom and lifewide experiences. Such a notion of quality is consistent with the finding of a recent study that “diverse views on quality have begun to shift from childrearing to developmental nurturing with an emphasis on academic learning” (Ho, 2008, p. 231). It is, however, problematic and ambiguous in four ways.

First, it reproduces the image that early childhood education is capable of doing only the basics. From the range of parents' responses in this study, for example: not expecting much from early childhood education; not giving much thought to what to expect from early



childhood education; only a place for children to play; level of knowledge not the same of those of primary and secondary schools, early childhood institutions are not seen by parents as providing opportunities for higher levels of intellectual engagement. So young children are expected to learn just the basics and teachers to teach just the basics. This low expectation of early childhood education is paradoxical in the sense that it helps make possible the production of happy learners who are then not pressured to learn too much knowledge.

Second, to be considered a quality curriculum, it has to include all sorts of experiences, including “lifewide learning” as promoted by the new curriculum guide (Curriculum Development Council, 2006). As shown by this study, there is much emphasis on the provision of different kinds of exposure for children to develop their potential. Previous research (Chan & Chan, 2003; Ebbeck, 1996; Hong Kong Christian Service, 2002; Weihart, 1999) also indicates a high tendency for early childhood institutions to perform in accordance with what they think parents want. While early childhood institutions are stretching themselves to expand the breadth of the curriculum to meet the expected demands of parents, the space for teachers and children to engage in deeper learning or intellectually challenging works may also be narrowed. It would be hard them to become the “co-constructors of knowledge” described by Dahlberg et al. (1999) for an alternative construction of early childhood education in which young children are seen as powerful social actors. Although

the Curriculum Development Council (2006) has tried to reinforce the image of the teacher in the latest guide, can the general public really see teaching young children as an intellectual endeavor just as challenging as teaching older children? Based on the parents' descriptions of professional suitability in this study, it looks doubtful. Early childhood teachers seem to be positioned more as providers or managers of activities than as autonomous curriculum planners and thinkers. In spite of the enthusiastic effort to promote focusing on the learning process (Curriculum Development Council, 2006), teachers continue to attend to learning outcomes, that is, helping children complete set tasks: "When learning is teacher-directed, children do not have opportunities to initiate questions...to develop...their ability to learn how to learn, as valued by the education reform documents" (Li, 2004, p. 344). It is worrying that the voucher scheme, which privileges parents' choice and market competition (Education & Manpower Bureau, 2006), may further reinforce such an image and narrow the possible learning space. In turn, it remains difficult for the society to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of work of early childhood teachers.

Third, parents of this study have stated that teachers having such qualities as being loving, caring, patient and dedicated, and having a specific training in early childhood education are more important than having a university degree qualification. They would like to see teachers develop close relationships with their children. Certainly, these views are not unique to the Hong Kong situation as parents in other countries like Australia (Noble, 2007)

also have similar perspectives. The image of teachers in early childhood education has been enhanced by the past reform policy (Education Commission, 2000). Yet, the voucher scheme (Chief Executive, 2006) has kept early childhood teachers in a position that is inferior to that of their counterparts in primary schools. The latter are required to have a university level qualification (Chief Executive, 1997). The voucher scheme continues to perpetuate the prevailing perceptions of early childhood teachers as nurturers and caregivers whose job is not viewed as intellectually challenging; therefore, a university degree is not needed.

Lastly, the present study reveals a high consistency in the ways parents think about choice and quality. As is supported by other research (Cryer, Tietze, & Wessels, 2002; Long, Wilson, Kutnick, & Telford, 1996; Noble, 2007), parents tend to speak highly of the quality of their choice of service if they think the early childhood institution is able to meet the criteria they most value. This is indeed a very interesting phenomenon. On the one hand, it demonstrates the voices of parents in competition with the other authoritative discourses. On the other hand, it points to the fact that what parents consider as a quality service can differ vastly from what is being advanced by policy. In the case of this study, the internally persuasive discourse, as populated as the voices of parents, has been significantly shaped by dominant cultural forces and reform efforts. Given the almost identical match between parents' views on choice and quality with those of the government, it is risky to feel content with the status quo because it serves to keep the market-driven notion of quality unchallenged.

## Conclusion

Analysing choice and quality through the lens of authoritative and internally persuasive discourses that are embedded in the cultural, institutional, and historical contexts has proved fruitful as it brings to light how various discourses have competed to gain hegemony over time, leading to changes in parents' points of views about early childhood education. It illuminates the multifaceted interactions of policy, choice and practices of early childhood education in the market place. Emerging as a relatively powerful authoritative discourse, reform policy and more importantly, the latest voucher scheme, have exerted tremendous efforts to regulate the field and all those involved, not only parents but all children and teachers. In the name of free choice, parents are expected to become well-informed consumers who bear the risk and responsibility of choosing good service for their children.

As Dahlberg and Moss (2005) wrote,

The ideal citizen and ideal worker...[is]:an autonomous subject, in no way dependent, with rights but also matching responsibilities, self-governing and responsible for managing his or her risks through making market choices – whether it be childcare, schools..., or maintaining employability through lifelong learning. (p. 44)

Although the reform efforts have successfully constructed a romantic image of the child, young children continue to be intensely governed by adults to become the ideal child. Their teachers may feel just as helpless to resist the regulatory forces imposed on them.

Simultaneously, teachers have to respond to the competing voices coming from parents, children and policymakers. The reform policy looks effective and promising in terms of

supporting early childhood education. Nevertheless, the specific notion of quality so produced by the combination of the policy and the market function may have limited rather expanded the possibilities of transforming the field into something even more desirable.

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