

Position Paper of the Special Meeting for the Review of Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme on 20 March 2009

The pre-primary education voucher scheme has been constructed as a promising policy to envision betterment and progress for the field of early childhood education in Hong Kong. However, since its first implementation of the policy in 2007/08, several major issues concerning the long-term development of early childhood education have emerged to require our immediate attention. In this paper, these major issues will be highlighted under the themes of affordability, accessibility, and professionalization to represent a professional and scholarly point of view from the field of early childhood education in Hong Kong.

Affordability

In response to the education reform, tremendous efforts and resources have been channeled into professional upgrading and the development of a quality provision. Unfortunately, as this happens, the constant pressure to increase tuition fees resulting from the rising costs of operation to develop and sustain a quality learning environment as well as a qualified professional workforce has not stopped worrying the field. The concern is that continuous tuition fee increases would eventually prevent young children from having an affordable choice of quality education. In Hong Kong, decades of policy debates on the effectiveness of different modes of subsidy in tackling the undesirable forces of a market-driven model and reducing the financial vulnerability of operation reveal that the relation between cost and quality has not been fully acknowledged and examined. The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development has concluded, after reviewing the early childhood education and care system in twenty countries, that direct subsidy to operation is more effective than parent subsidy models to steer service development, minimize cost, assure quality, facilitate professional development, and ensure equitable access. Some education economists also challenge the market approach to early childhood education, arguing that most parents do not fully understand or appreciate the goals and long-term benefits that it can bring to society. The new voucher scheme, being widely known as a market approach to education, is in its second year of operation. Recent news on tuition fee increases in light of the present economic climate once again highlights the unresolved dilemma between cost and quality.

Accessibility

One local study has been completed recently by the Hong Kong Institute of Education to understand the effects of the voucher scheme from parents' perspectives. In this study, concerns about equal access to diverse and appropriate choice of early childhood education service were raised. Due to how the voucher scheme had been initially set up, there were serious issues about equity and choice with regard to class (i.e., low and middle income families) and mode of operation (i.e., half-day and full-day service). The problems identified by the study do not seem to be in congruence with the original intention of the new policy to reduce the financial burden of all eligible families and to promote parents' choice of service, as well as the direction set for early childhood education in the reform blueprint on maintaining a diversified system of provision. Meanwhile, early childhood education in other developed societies, such as the US and UK, has been playing a key role in giving disadvantaged children a head start in education. As highlighted by the equity issue, such a role deserves more careful examination in Hong Kong.

Professionalization

The voucher scheme requires all existing teachers to have a sub-degree qualification by 2011/2012. In effect, some teachers are already in their pursuit of a professional qualification at the degree level. The first cohort of preservice teachers in Hong Kong with a bachelor degree in early childhood education is about to complete a four-year professional development program. There has been a high expectation of this cohort of new teachers who are seen by many in the field as important stakeholders to shoulder the responsibility for endeavoring in innovative practices and synthesizing educational ideas from the west and the east. Moving towards a degree-graduate profession, as officially noted to be the next possible reform direction, is certainly a long cherished goal shared by all those in the field and is closely in line with the international trend. However, whether these highly qualified professional teachers, inservice and preservice alike, can truly transform professional practices and advance professionalism to another level will hinge on the daily school context in which they work.

The concern about the reform pressure exerted on local school teachers has been taken seriously by the government. It is imperative that the welfare of early childhood teachers, including having comparable remuneration, is equally attended to. Unfavorable conditions would not only fail to attract and retain highly qualified professionals, but also easily affect students in the classroom. Early childhood teachers hold this latter concern to their heart as they see themselves as fully accountable to students of very young ages. Thus, having the space and capacity to realize their professional aspirations is crucial to meeting the immense challenges involved in ensuring quality.

In short, it is high time for the government to revisit its longstanding position on early childhood education as a private provision. In other places like Taiwan and the UK which have implemented voucher before, the trend is to move towards universal provision. As a well-known international city, Hong Kong needs to reposition early childhood education so as to make room for a quality culture that is premised on child-focused, equitable, and ethical practices. Probably, it is too early to tell how the voucher scheme may have improved quality. At the moment, most of the overseas research on voucher has been conducted in a context where both private and public education provisions co-exist within the system. As far as early childhood education is concerned, research is still very limited, not to mention the fact that the voucher scheme in Hong Kong has been put in operation in an already competitive private sector and in the absence of any public provision. The new policy, therefore, requires a close monitoring of its progress and observation of its impact to make sure that the issues of affordability, accessibility, professionalization, and quality are thoroughly addressed.

Recommendations

1. A comprehensive review of the voucher scheme needs to be conducted immediately. Periodic reviews are also necessary on a regular basis.
2. Local research on voucher and its impact on quality as well as the key stakeholders, including parents, teacher, and students, is a high priority.
3. Favorable conditions need to be structurally and meaningfully created to support early childhood professionals in the school context as well as to retain them in the teaching profession. Incentive for continuous professional upgrading is essential.
4. A concrete plan and a timetable to provide universal access in early childhood education, along with the re-examination of the roles of early childhood education in Hong Kong's society, need to be drawn up for future development.

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