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Adult Views on Learning and Development in Hong Kong Preschool Children

Sylvia Opper

Department of Education

The University of Hong Kong

The present study compares the views of 198 parents and 51 teachers of a sample of 4-year-old children on early learning and development and their reciprocal roles in promoting such learning. Generally parents and teachers have similar rankings for eight overall categories of early learning and development. The major difference is for preacademics, that parents rank as the most important category and teachers rank as amongst the least important. Mother's occupation was the only family background variable to affect the rankings. Comparisons between parents and teachers by type of preschool and locality indicate a similar pattern to the overall sample. Moreover, parents and teachers agree that teachers are primarily responsible for preacademics and self-expression, parents for self-sufficiency and social skills with adults, and both groups hold joint responsibility for language and social skills with peers. Neither group takes primary responsibility for promoting motor-physical and self-assessment skills.

本研究比較四歲兒童的家長和老師，在幼兒早期學習及發展上之見解，及探討他們在促進兒童學習時的相互角色。研究對象涉及 198 位四歲兒童的家長和 51 位教師。概括而言，家長和老師在八項早期學習和發展的類別排列次序上大致相同。主要分別是家長認爲學術訓練是最重要，而老師列它爲其中最不重要的一項。在家庭背景方面，母親的職業是唯一影響兒童早期學習和發展的因素。家長與老師在學前教育機構類型和地區方面相比，調查結果大致相同。家長和老師同意後者是主要負責幼兒的學術訓練和教導自我表達，前者主要負責幼兒自立能力和與成人社交的技巧訓練。在幼兒的語言和同輩間社交的技巧訓練方面，家長和老師則有共同的責任；相反，幼兒的體能發展及自我評估，家長及老師認爲都不是他們的首要責任。

The formative years from birth to six are important ones in the life of a person. This is the time when young children acquire many of the basic skills and abilities which will serve as foundations for subsequent development (Bloom, 1965; White & Watts, 1973). Children acquire these skills in a variety of socialisation settings which operate at different levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1976, 1986). At the microlevel, the main learning environment of young children is the home where the family plays a central role in children's socialisation and development (Hess *et al.*, 1980; Osborn, 1990; Schaefer, 1987; Seginer, 1983). Increasingly, however, the home is being supplemented by another microlevel socialisation environment, the early care and educational setting (Ogbu, 1981), which also has an effect on children's learning (Weikart *et al.*, 1978; Rutter, 1985; Schweinhart *et al.*, 1986).

Research at the mesolevel, which seeks to examine the reciprocal influences, connections and interactions between microlevel settings, has found similarities and major differences between the views and ideas that parents and teachers hold about the role of preschools in early learning and development (Carlson & Stenmalm, 1989; Ebbeck, 1980; Spodek, 1985). Parents generally believe that preschools should emphasize direct preparation for primary school, whereas preschool teachers tend to stress the importance for young children to learn social and emotional skills during the time they are in the preschool. Hess (1981) and Katz (1980) explain these differences between the two groups by their differing experiences and training. Adults' attitudes and expectations for early learning affect their socialisation and educational practices towards young children, both for mothers (Hess *et al.*, 1980) and for preschool teachers (Hatch & Freeman, 1988; Shavelson and Stern, 1981; Spodek, 1988). Marked differences between the home and the preschool in attitudes towards early learning and child-rearing practices have also been found to lead to greater

stress on children (Rescorla *et al.*, 1991).

In Hong Kong the two primary socialisation settings for preschool children are the home and the preschool, consisting of kindergartens regulated by the Education Department for 85% of the children (Education Commission, 1986), or of day nurseries regulated by the Social Welfare Department for 15%. In the home the family, particularly the mother, plays the central role (Opper, 1993), whereas in the preschool it is the early childhood educator. Hong Kong parents have high aspirations for their children's education and a high proportion hope that their preschool child will complete university (Opper, 1992). Kindergarten teachers also have high expectations for children upon completion of kindergarten and entry into the primary one level, particularly in the areas of independence and preacademic skills (Chow, 1993). What are the views of parents and teachers in Hong Kong on learning during the preschool years? How does each group view its own role and that of its counterpart in this process?

Preschool staff in Hong Kong are not a unified group but differ along a number of dimensions such as the type of preschool in which they work (kindergarten or day nursery), and its locality (Hong Kong island, Kowloon, New Territories). Kindergarten and day nursery staff have different qualifications and training, and are expected to implement a different curriculum. Preschool staff working in various parts of the territory also vary in their training and experience (HK Govt. Education Department, 1992; Opper, 1992). Are these various differences amongst preschool teachers reflected in different views about young children?

The present study seeks to compare the views that Hong Kong parents and teachers hold about the relative importance of certain general categories of behaviours for the early learning and development of young preschool children. In addition to investigating the beliefs of each group separately, it also examines what each group considers to be the priorities of the other group in this respect. Finally, the study examines how each group views their own role, as well as that of their counterparts, in promoting the various aspects of child development. The variables of type of preschool and locality are used as a framework for comparisons.

Method

The sample consists of the 51 class teachers and parents of 198 4-year-old children attending kindergartens and day nurseries in various localities of the territory. The children were randomly selected from a stratified sample of 51 preschools using type of preschool (day nurseries and kindergartens) and locality (Hong Kong island, Kowloon, New Territories) as the strata for selection (see Table 1).

Table 1
Teachers and Parents by Locality and Type of Preschool

	Hong Kong (HK)	Kowloon (K)	New Territories (NT)	Total
Teachers	12	18	21	51
Kindergarten (KG)	6	9	11	26
Day Nursery (DN)	6	9	10	25
Parents	47	70	81	198
Kindergaten (KG)	23	35	42	100
Day Nursery (DN)	24	35	39	98

An adult expectations task was given to all teachers and parents in individual sessions. During the session each adult was required to rank in order of importance the following eight categories of behaviours and skills that children should learn between the ages of 3 to 5 years: preacademics, motor/physical, self-expression, language, social skills with peers, social skills with adults, self-sufficiency, and self-assessment. Respondents also ranked the categories that they believed their counterparts (teachers for parents, parents for teachers) would indicate as the three most important. Respondents then selected from a list of sub-skills the three most important ones for their top ranking category. Approximately nine sub-skills were listed for each category, ranging from seven for self-assessment to eleven for preacademics. Finally they indicated the categories for which they felt teachers held the primary teaching responsibility, and those for which parents held the primary teaching responsibility.

Means were calculated for all categories and sub-skills and were used to determine the average rankings for teachers, parents, teachers' perceptions of parents, and parents' perceptions of teachers, sub-skills, and primary teaching responsibilities. When comparing the rankings of two groups, differences of one or two ranks were considered minor, of three ranks as moderate, and of more than three ranks as major discrepancies.

Results

Teachers' and Parents' Views on Early Learning

Table 2
Teachers and Parents Rankings of Categories of Early Learning

Category	Teachers (1)	Teachers perceive Parents (2)	Parents (3)	Parents perceive Teachers (4)
Preacademic	7	1	1	1
Motor/Physical	5	7	5	6
Self Expression	4	6	6	5
Language	2	2	2	2
Social Skills with Peers	3	5	4	4
Social skills with Adults	8	4	7	7
Self Sufficiency	1	3	3	3
Self Assessment	6	8	8	8

Overall Sample: Similarities and differences were found in the ways that teachers and parents view the behaviours and skills that young children should acquire during the period from 3 to 5 years (Table 2, cols. 1 and 3). Both teachers and parents believe that the most important categories of behaviours that preschool children should acquire during this period are self-sufficiency, language, and social skills with peers. Both groups also agree that self-assessment, motor/physical, and social skills with adults are the least important categories acquired during this period of life. One major difference between parents and teachers is preacademic skills, which parents rank as the most important category whereas teachers only assign it to seventh rank.

Comparisons between what parents think are priorities for teachers and teachers' actual priorities (Table 2, cols. 4 and 1) show that, with one major exception, parents hold relatively accurate perceptions of teachers. Parents consider correctly that teachers believe that language and self-sufficiency are important areas of learning, and that self-assessment, social skills with adults, and motor/physical skills are relatively unimportant. The one area where parents misperceive teachers' priorities is preacademic skills which parents believe is the most important area for teachers, but which teachers only rank as seventh. This mismatch seems to be due to the fact that parents' ranking of teacher priorities is almost identical to their own (cols. 4 and 3).

Teachers, on the other hand, have a more accurate perception of parents' priorities (cols. 2 and 3), particularly with regard to the three most important areas of preacademic, language and self-sufficiency, and two of the least important, self-expression and self-assessment. They do, however, show a major discrepancy for the category of social skills with adults, that teachers believe parents rank as fourth, but that parents actually rank as seventh.

Table 3
Ranking of categories by mother's occupation

	Professional/ Managerial (1)	Clerical/ Service (2)	Semi-skilled (3)	Unskilled (4)
Preacademic	6	3	1	2
Motor/Physical	5	5	5	7
Self Expression	4	6	6	5
Language	1	1	2	3
Social Skills with Peers	2	2	4	4
Social skills with Adults	7	7	7	6
Self Sufficiency	3	4	3	1
Self Assessment	8	8	8	8

Comparisons using Spearman rho on various family background characteristics such as father's and mother's education, father's occupation, and family income, showed no differences in the rankings of parent expectations. The only difference in ranking was related to mother's occupation and differences were found between professional mothers and those working in semi-skilled and unskilled jobs (Table 3, cols 1, 3, 4).

Comparisons using Spearman rho on various background characteristics of teachers such as age, number of years working in setting, and with 3-5 year-olds, years of full-time education, and training, all showed no significant difference between the overall rankings.

Type of Preschool: Kindergartens in the territory are commonly believed to place more emphasis on the teaching of preacademics, whereas day nurseries have a reputation for stressing children's socialisation and learning through play. If this were the case we would expect to find differences in the way teachers and parents of these two types of preschool view the learning and development of preschool children.

Table 4
Teachers and Parents Expectations of Early Learning by Type of Preschool

Category	Teachers (1)	Teachers perceive Parents (2)	Parents (3)	Parents perceive Teachers (4)
Kindergarten				
Preacademic	7	1	1	1
Motor/Physical	5	7	5	6
Self Expression	4	4	6	5
Language	1	2	3	2
Social Skills with Peers	3	5	4	3
Social Skills with Adults	8	6	7	7
Self Sufficiency	2	3	2	4
Self Assessment	6	8	8	8
Day Nursery				
Preacademic	7	1	1	1
Motor/Physical	4	8	6	7
Self Expression	5	6	5	6
Language	2	2	2	4
Social Skills with Peers	3	5	4	3
Social Skills with Adults	6	4	7	5
Self Sufficiency	1	3	3	2
Self Assessment	8	7	8	8

Comparisons between type of preschool, show more similarities than differences in their priorities. Teachers in both kindergartens and day nurseries feel that the three most important categories are language, self-sufficiency, and social skills with peers, and the three least important are social skills with adults, preacademic and self-assessment (Table 4, col. 1). Similarly parents of children from both types of preschool believe that preacademic skills, language, and self-sufficiency are the three most important skills, and self-assessment, and social skills with adults the two least important (col. 3). One difference between kindergartens and day nurseries, however, is in teachers' perceptions of parents and parents actual expectations (cols. 2 and 3) with regard to social skills with adults. Kindergarten teachers have a more accurate perception of how parents view this category than day nursery teachers. The former assign social skills with adults to sixth rank and parents to seventh rank, whereas the latter believe that parents view this category as relatively important, fourth in rank, but in actual fact day nursery parents believe that it is quite unimportant, only seventh.

Comparisons within each type of preschool between parents and teachers show that, similar to the overall comparison, the major discrepancy between teachers and parents of both kindergartens and day nurseries (cols. 1 and 3) is in the area of preacademic skills, which teachers of both types of preschool rank as seventh but parents rank as first.

Locality: The present findings of differences in adult expectations of learning in young children by locality support findings of previous studies of differences between teachers and parents in the three different localities of the territory.

Hong Kong island shows the greatest similarities between parents and teachers (Table 5, cols. 1 and 3) for the three most important areas, social skills with peers, language, and self-sufficiency, the two least important, self-assessment, and social skills with adults, and only a moderate discrepancy for preacademic skills. Major discrepancies exist, however, in Hong Kong teachers' perceptions of parents (cols. 2 and 3) for social skills with peers, social skills with adults, and preacademics. Hong Kong parents' perceptions of teachers (cols. 4 and 1) appear to be fairly accurate with the exception of preacademic skills. In Kowloon the major difference between teachers and parents (cols. 1 and 3) is for preacademic skills with a moderate difference for self sufficiency. Teachers' perceptions of parents (cols. 2 and 3) show only a major difference for motor/physical skills.

With the exception of preacademics, Kowloon parents' perceptions of teachers, on the other hand, are quite accurate. The greatest difference between parents and teachers is in the New Territories (cols 1 and 3), with major differences for preacademic skills, social skills with peers, and social skills with adults, moderate differences for motor/physical and self-expression, and minor differences for the remaining categories.

Table 5
Teachers and Parents Expectations of Early Learning by Locality

Category	Teachers (1)	Teachers perceive Parents (2)	Parents (3)	Parents perceive Teachers (4)
Hong Kong Island				
Preacademic	6	1	4	1
Motor/Physical	4	7	5	5
Self Expression	5	6	6	7
Language	2	2	3	4
Social skills with/Peers	1	5	1	2
Social Skills with Adults	7	4	7	6
Self Sufficiency	3	3	2	3
Self Assessment	8	8	8	8
Kowloon				
Preacademic	8	1	1	1
Motor/Physical	4	8	5	5
Self Expression	5	5	6	6
Language	2	2	2	4
Social Skills with Peers	3	4	3	2
Social Skills with Adults	7	6	7	7
Self Sufficiency	1	3	4	3
Self Assessment	6	7	8	8
New Territories				
Preacademic	6	1	1	1
Motor/Physical	5	6	7	7
Self Expression	4	5	6	5
Language	2	2	3	2
Social skills with/Peers	1	7	4	4
Social Skills with Adults	8	4	5	6
Self Sufficiency	3	3	2	3
Self Assessment	7	8	8	8

New Territories teachers have a relatively accurate perception of parents priorities (cols 2 and 3) with the exception of social skills with peers. Parents, on the other hand, have a less accurate perception of teachers' priorities (cols. 4 and 1), particularly for preacademics, motor/physical, social skills with peers, and social skills with adults.

Specific sub-skills within the general categories

The above findings on categories of behaviours provide a general overview of parents' and teachers' priorities for preschool children. They do not however indicate the specific sub-skills that each group has in mind when selecting an overall category. These sub-skills could differ considerably between the two groups. For example, while parents and teachers may both believe that language is important, they may be considering different aspects of language. In order to examine the specific sub-skills that each group had in mind when selecting an overall category, respondents were asked to indicate from a list of sub-skills the three most important ones for their most important category. Findings on these sub-skills for the most important categories for teachers and parents are shown in Table 6.

Table 6
Three most important sub-skills for Teachers and Parents in the most important categories

	Teachers	Parents
Self-sufficency	Self-care skills	Self-care skills
	Avoid danger	Avoid danger
	Keep things in order	Persistence at task
Language	Engage in conversation	Correct pronunciation
	Ask questions	Ask questions
	Correct pronunciation	Engage in conversation
Social Skills with Peers	Interact with children	Interact with children
	Share toys	Share toys
	Play with children	Admit when wrong
Preacademic	Manipulation	Count 1-10
	Count 1-10	Copy Numbers, Characters
	Classification, Seriation	Read Numbers, Characters

There appears to be a great deal in common between teachers and parents in their selection of specific skills, particularly in the area of language. Some differences are, however, noted in other categories. In self-sufficiency, teachers feel that children should learn to keep things in order whereas parents feel that persistence at a task is more important; in social skills with peers, teachers feel that children should learn to play with other children, but parents feel that children should learn to admit

when they make a mistake or are wrong; in preacademics teachers prefer manipulation, classification and seriation skills, whereas parents feel that copying and reading numbers and Chinese characters are more important.

Comparisons between type of school (Table 7) show that for social skills with peers, both kindergarten and day nursery teachers consider that sharing toys, interaction with other children, and playing with other children, are the most important skills. Differences are noted between the teachers of the two types of preschool in language, self-sufficiency and preacademics. In language, kindergarten teachers stress correct pronunciation, whereas day nursery teachers feel it is more important for children to learn to ask questions when confused or curious; in self-sufficiency, kindergarten teachers want children to keep their things in order, whereas day nursery teachers want children to ask for help when required; in preacademics, kindergarten teachers stress the learning of classification and seriation, whereas day nursery teachers stress manipulative skills.

Parents of the two types of preschool also have a great deal in common, particularly with regard to the skills for language, preacademics and social skills with peers. In language both groups of parents stress correct pronunciation, conversation, and asking questions when confused or curious; in preacademics it is reading and copying numbers and Chinese characters, and counting; and in social skills with peers, both groups of parents want children to share toys, interact with other children and admit when they are in the wrong. One difference, however, is in self-sufficiency. Kindergarten parents stress the importance for the child to clear up after self, whereas day nursery parents prefer children to learn to keep things in order.

Comparisons by locality indicate that the three groups of teachers and parents have identical skills in mind for language, but that there are minor differences for preacademics, self-sufficiency, social skills with peers.

Primary Teaching Responsibilities

The views of teachers and parents on the topic of primary responsibility for teaching the categories (Table 8) indicate that most categories are considered the responsibility of one or other of the two groups. In general, teachers are felt to be primarily responsible for preacademics, and self-expression, whereas parents are primarily responsible for self-sufficiency and social skills with adults. Both groups are responsible for language and social skills with peers, and neither group seems to be responsible for motor/physical skills and self-assessment.

Table 7
Most important skills for Teachers and Parents in the most important categories by Type of Preschool

	Teachers	Parents
Kindergartens		
Language	Engage in conversation	Ask questions
	Correct pronunciation	Correct pronunciation
	Communicate feelings	Engage in conversation
Self-sufficency	Self-care skills	Self-care skills
	Avoid danger	Avoid danger
	Keep things in order	Clean up
Social Skills with Peers	Share toys	Interact with children
	Interact with children	Admit when wrong
	Play with children	Share toys
Preacademic	Classification, Seriation	Copy Numbers, Characters
	Count 1-10	Read Numbers, Characters
	Shapes, Colours	Count 1-10
Day Nurseries		
Self-sufficency	Self-care skills	Self-care skills
	Avoid danger	Avoid danger
	Ask for help when needed	Keep things in order
Language	Ask questions	Correct pronunciation
	Engage in conversation	Engage in conversation
	Communicate feelings	Ask questions
Social Skills with Peers	Interact with children	Share toys
	Share toys	Interact with children
	Play with children	Admit when wrong
Preacademic	Count 1-10	Copy Numbers, Characters
	Manipulation	Read Numbers, Characters
	Shapes, Colours	Count 1-10

Table 8
Teachers and Parents views on Primary Responsibility for Teaching the Categories

	Teachers	Teachers perceive Parents	Parents	Parents perceive Teachers
1	Preacademic	Self-Sufficiency	Self-Sufficiency	Preacademic
2	Social Peers	Language	Social Adults	Social Peers
3	Language	Social Adults	Language	Language
4	Self-Expression	Self-Assessment	Social Peers	Self-expression
5	Self-Sufficiency	Preacademic	Preacademic	Social Adults
6	Motor/Physical	Self-expression	Self-Assessment	Motor/Physical
7	Self-Assessment	Social Peers	Self-expression	Self-Sufficiency
8	Social Adults	Motor/Physical	Motor/Physical	Self-Assessment

Comparisons between type of school and locality show that a similar pattern is found for kindergartens and day nurseries, as well as for the three localities.

Summary and Conclusions

Overall there is a great deal of agreement in the expectations of Hong Kong teachers and parents for early learning in children. Both groups agree that language, self-sufficiency, and social skills with peers are the most important areas of early learning and self-assessment and motor/physical skills are among the least important. This is true for the overall sample, for the two types of preschool and with minor exceptions for the three localities. One major discrepancy, however, is for preacademics that all parents with the exception of the Hong Kong group rank as very high, but that teachers rank as relatively low in importance. Teachers have a relatively accurate perception of parent's ranking priorities. Parents, on the other hand, misjudge teachers priorities with regard to preacademics. Parents believe that teachers rank this category as high as themselves, whereas in actual fact teachers rank it much lower. Not only is there a mismatch between parents and teacher in their ranking of preacademics, but there are also differences in the sub-skills that they consider important within this category. When parents select preacademics as an important category, they generally have in mind reading, writing and counting, or the specific skills of literacy and numeracy that are usually taught at the primary school level. Teachers when referring to preacademics tend to think of general readiness skills, such as manipulation, or concepts of classification and seriation. Both teachers and parents agree, however, that learning to count is an important preacademic sub-skill.

It is clear from the findings that parents not only expect young children to be learning the skills of formal literacy and numeracy, but that they also expect teachers to be responsible for teaching these. In other words, they expect preschools, both kindergartens and day nurseries, to prepare children for primary schooling by learning precisely those skills that children will be learning at the primary one level. In effect, what parents seem to expect from preschools is a lowering of the primary one curriculum rather than a preparation for this. This is a serious discrepancy between parents and teachers that could have harmful effects on educational practices. If parents' expectations are for preschools to teach the three Rs, and they put pressure on teachers to base their educational programme on such skills, an overly academic and developmentally inappropriate curriculum at the preschool level could be the result. This in turn could lead to more pressure on preschool children. Anecdotal and indirect evidence seems to suggest that this is the case in Hong Kong.

Another issue is primary teaching responsibility. The findings of the present study suggest that there is a great deal of agreement between teachers and parents on their respective roles in the early learning of children. Teachers are believed to be responsible for preacademics and social skills with peers, parents for self-sufficiency and social skills with adults, and both groups have joint responsibility for language. What is disturbing, however, is that neither group seems to assume responsibility, nor assign this responsibility to its counterparts, for motor/physical skills and self-assessment. Perhaps the assumption is that children will acquire these skills naturally with no help from adults. This is a dangerous assumption that does not serve the interests and well-being of young children. During the preschool period children acquire and consolidate many motor skills in areas such as coordination, balance, and control that not only serve as foundations for later physical development but also contribute to cognitive, social, and emotional skills. For overall development to proceed smoothly young children need ample opportunities to exercise and practice motor and physical skills. If neither group see this category as a primary responsibility,

young children in Hong Kong run the risk of growing up in environments that do not promote motor and physical skills at a time in their life when this aspect is a crucial component of overall development.

The lack of concern about self-assessment skills is another area which calls for action. These skills, which include self-knowledge about performance, awareness and expression of emotions, pride in accomplishment, positive feelings about self and ability to take risks and try out new activities, constitute the basis of present and future self-evaluation and esteem. During early childhood children become aware of themselves as individual and distinct persons, They also learn to evaluate and measure themselves in relationship to others. Self-assessment skills are the basis for realistic self-confidence and positive self-esteem and should form part of the early socialisation process, in both the home and the preschool.

In conclusion, the present study has highlighted some similarities and differences between the two groups of persons who take care of and educate young preschool children in Hong Kong. Generally the findings are encouraging and show that young children in the territory grow up in relatively homogenous settings. Some areas of discrepancy were found between parents and teachers, such as the importance of preacademic skills. In addition, the lack of assigned responsibility for motor-physical and self-assessment skills, needs to be addressed if the physical and psychological health, well-being and overall development of young children is to be safeguarded.

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