

The Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme of Hong Kong: A Promise of Quality Education Provision?

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The issue of education vouchers has been widely researched as they are seen by many people as an effective strategy for improving the quality of education services. Striving to enhance the quality of the kindergarten education service in Hong Kong, the government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region has committed a substantial sum of HK\$2 billion per year to run the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS) from 2007–2008. The PEVS aims to “Increase Investment, Enhance Quality” (Education Bureau, 2008b) in education services. But it is questionable whether offering a direct subsidy to kindergarten parents through the PEVS is an effective means to improve the professional quality of kindergarten services. This article discusses whether, given the peculiar Hong Kong context for such services, the PEVS indeed promises high-quality kindergarten education provision.

The issue of education vouchers has been widely researched as they are seen by many people as an effective strategy for improving the quality of education services. Striving to enhance the quality of the kindergarten (KG) education service in Hong Kong, the government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) announced in its 2006–2007 Policy Address a major financial commitment to KG education by allocating a substantial sum of HK\$2 billion per year

to run the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS) from 2007–2008, which aims to “Increase Investment, Enhance Quality” (Education Bureau [EDB], 2008b) in KG education services. In the past, the government has seldom taken such a supportive and affirmative stance on policies relating to KG education. As a new initiative, the PEVS is indicative of the government’s increasing commitment to professionalizing this education sector.

Since China resumed its exercise of sovereignty over Hong Kong in 1997, the HKSAR government has shown increasing commitment toward enhancing the quality of KG education. The education reform proposals prepared by the Education Commission in 2000 highlight that “early childhood education lays the foundation for life-long learning and all-round development” (Education Commission, 2000, p. 49). Furthermore, more and more financial resources have been allocated to this sector in recent years. Has this public money been well spent in improving the standard of KG education? And if so, why have the Quality Assurance Inspection annual reports continued to state that the learning and teaching in many KGs have been below the satisfactory standard (Education and Manpower Bureau [EMB], 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006; EDB, 2007)? Is the offering of a direct subsidy to KG parents via the PEVS an effective means to secure professional services? This article discusses whether, given the peculiar Hong Kong context for such services, the PEVS indeed promises high-quality KG education provision.

Education Vouchers as a Promise of Quality Education Provision

One of the most controversial issues in the realm of contemporary education is the introduction of voucher plans, which was proposed by Milton Friedman as catalysts for achieving educational change and quality education provision. Friedman (1962) asserts that when markets are allowed to run freely with minimal government control, both the efficiency of services and the quality of goods will be maximized. In the face of inefficient public education, Friedman also argues that if the government were to minimize its interference in the school system — a long-standing monopolistic enterprise — and allow it to be regulated by market forces, education would improve. The use of education

vouchers would increase parental influence over, and choices about, their children's education.

In practice, education vouchers are a scheme in which:

certificates ... would be issued by the government to parents to "purchase" schooling for their children. Parents would select schools — public or private — which would then collect the vouchers and turn them into the government to be redeemed for cash to run the schools. This would result in providing parents with a variety of schools from which to choose and would require schools to compete for students. (Tannenbaum, 1995, p. 7)

Such a regime would subject schools to competitive pressure, thus leading them to formulate clear and distinctive missions, improve their curricula, adopt innovative and learner-centered teaching strategies, develop a strong commitment to defined student outcomes, and establish collaboration and partnership with parents (Howell & Peterson, 2006). Schools would become more accountable for the services they provide and to the families they serve (Paulu, 1995). In short, Friedman (1962) argues that education vouchers could influence education quality by shifting provision from public to private enterprise and by building up market forces in the form of greater parental choice.

The benefits of privatizing and marketizing education services under a voucher scheme are not confined merely to the effectiveness of the service provision. Studies have found that the positive impacts of such a scheme extend to students and parents. By evaluating a private program supported by the national Children's Scholarship Fund voucher along with similar publicly funded programs in New York City, Howell and Peterson (2006) have observed that in private schools operating on the basis of education vouchers, the educational climate is more promising and conducive to learning. On average, students in private schools demonstrate fewer disruptive behaviors, such as fighting and property destruction. Incidents relating to racial conflict, truancy, and absenteeism are also relatively infrequent in private schools. MacInnes (2003) states that "test results ... show that students in private schools outperform students in public schools" (p. 33). Generally, private schools are considered to be more capable of promoting academic achievement than are public schools (Kahlenberg, 2003).

A number of studies have also reported that private schools competing for vouchers are more likely to orient their service provision

toward parental expectations, and are more willing to come to terms with market demands. Godwin, Kemerer, and Martinez (1998) demonstrate that voucher-using parents who moved their children from public to private schools reported higher levels of satisfaction with school performance in terms of both how much their children had learned and the effectiveness of school discipline. Naismith (1994) links parents' higher satisfaction with private schools to their ability to have greater involvement in their children's education. Naismith also notes that parents of children in private schools are better informed than are parents of children in the state sector. Moe (2001) observes that the satisfaction of voucher-using parents with private schools results from their having a greater degree of choice over the kind of education service they use and from their ability to obtain the most desirable education for their children; these parents are no longer trapped in the rigorous one-size-fits-all curriculum offered by public schools. Peterson (1998) remarks that "competition has positive effects on parental satisfaction ... student mobility, and test scores" (p. 68), which corrects many government failures and the failed monopoly of the public education system to produce satisfactory education services.

In summary, by promoting the use of the free market and the privatization of schools, education vouchers serve to break down the state monopoly in education provision. This grants schools the essential autonomy, as well as accountability, to make their own pedagogical decisions in response to parental expectations and market demand. Parents' free choice of desirable schools is also enhanced when they get a direct fee subsidy from the government. Ultimately, market competition also pushes schools to improve service quality (Bridges & McLaughlin, 1994). It accounts for the claim that private education services run on education voucher schemes almost always outperform those offered by the public system (Ball, 2007; Kahlenberg, 2003; MacInnes, 2003).

Underlying the argument for the use of education vouchers is the desire to empower parents with regard to school choice for their children (Sandler & Kapel, 1995). While parents have the absolute right to choose the school for their children, and while most parents would choose the school that they think is the best for their children, Wise and Darling-Hammond (1995) note that "parents vary in the amount of time, attention, and expertise they can bring to bear on educational and other decisions pertaining to their children Parents may not always recognize their children's potential. And parents may not know how to

choose an educational experience that will fulfill their children's potential" (p. 112). Poor parental choice may result. Opponents of parents' school choice argue that working-class parents in particular may be unable to make sound education decisions on behalf of their children (Ball, 2006a; Paulu, 1995). Levin (1979) also argues that "Parents will choose those school environments that they believe will maximize the probability of success as defined within the context of their experience. The working-class child will be provided with schooling that will reinforce working-class orientations" (p. 19). As Ball (2006b) remarks, "Choice of school for many families is part of a complex series of choices involved in the construction of individual educational trajectories and the production of children as educational subjects" (p. 136). The education voucher system clearly implies a notion that, as parents' school choice increases, parents become more involved in the education of their children and become more likely to push schools to improve and operate in ways that most accommodate their desires (Hakim, Seidenstat, & Bowman, 1994). Yet the question of parents' ability to make proper and sensible school choice for their children within the context of a private education market is a crucial factor in considering the education voucher system.

The PEVS: New Initiatives in Hong Kong Kindergarten Education

With the introduction of the PEVS, all KG-aged children in Hong Kong will be issued a "Certificate of Eligibility for Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme" (PEVS-Certificate). Children possessing the PEVS-Certificate are entitled to "receive fee subsidy when attending relevant classes in a kindergarten eligible for the voucher scheme"¹ (PEVS-KG) (EDB, 2008d). In other words, the PEVS enables all KG-aged children to "receive affordable and quality pre-primary education" (EMB, 2007, p. 1). For parents with young children attending a PEVS-KG, the PEVS offers a direct fee subsidy to alleviate the expense of KG education (EMB, 2007).

In assuring continuous quality improvement in KG services as well as effective investment of government funding, the EDB formalized a new quality assurance mechanism known as the "Quality Review (QR) Framework" alongside the introduction of the PEVS in the 2007–2008 school year (EDB, 2008c). The QR Framework is built upon "a set of

performance indicators (PIs) already established in consultation with the practitioners in the field of pre-primary education since 2000” (EDB, 2008c, p. 2). Also, “All KGs joining the PEVS are required to undergo the QR process for quality assurance purpose. Starting from the 2012/13 school year, only local non-profit-making KGs having met the prescribed standards established in the QR Framework may continue to redeem the voucher under PEVS” (EDB, 2008c, pp. 1–2). In a sense, then, the QR Framework is developed to guide and monitor the overall operation of KGs.

Another key initiative embedded in the PEVS is the subsidizing of professional development for all serving KG principals and teachers, accomplished by setting aside an amount from the voucher value per child per year (Table 1). The education quality in KGs is believed to be a function of the professional and pedagogical competence of the teaching staff. In this regard, the EDB has established a five-year policy (to run between 2007–2008 and 2011–2012) that aims to upgrade teachers’ professionalism. The policy targets the following outcomes:

- (a) all serving KG teachers will obtain the Certificate in Early Childhood Education qualification by the end of the 2011/12 school year;
[...]
- (c) serving principals and aspiring principals are expected to complete the certification course by the end of the 2011/12 school year, and all serving principals are encouraged to obtain the BEd(ECE) [Bachelor in Early Childhood Education] qualifications. (EMB, 2007, p. 3)

Table 1: The Allocation of Voucher Value

| School Year | Voucher value (HK\$/per child) | Amount of voucher allocated to fee subsidy (HK\$/per child) | Amount of voucher allocated to teacher development (HK\$) |
|-------------|--------------------------------|---|---|
| 2007–2008 | 13,000 | 10,000 | 3,000 |
| 2008–2009 | 14,000 | 11,000 | 3,000 |
| 2009–2010 | 14,000 | 12,000 | 2,000 |
| 2010–2011 | 16,000 | 14,000 | 2,000 |
| 2011–2012 | 16,000 | 16,000 | 0 |

Source: EMB (2007, p. 7).

At first glance, the PEVS appears to encompass a series of forward-looking new initiatives for KG education. KG children, parents, teachers, principals, service providers, and ultimately the entire community will benefit from it. The PEVS appears, at least on paper, to have actualized the government's intentions to professionalize KG services. Numerous international studies on education vouchers have clearly noted that they are indeed an effective means of quality improvement in a monopolized public education service. However, it is questionable whether the PEVS can also succeed within the peculiar context of the KG service sector of Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, the service provision is already privatized and market-driven, and parents already enjoy considerable freedom of choice over their children's early years of education. Parental influence over KG service provision has been regarded as acute (Cheng, 2008; Cheng & Stimpson, 2004; Fung, 2007; Li, 2004).

The Peculiarities of Kindergarten Services in Hong Kong: A Private Sector

Prior to the introduction of the PEVS, financial support from the government came in the form of fee assistance under the Kindergarten and Child Care Centre Fee Remission Scheme. Most services operate as profit-making businesses on a private basis, while the rest are supervised by non-profit-making groups categorized as non-government organizations (NGOs). The KG sector, therefore, has always been considered as falling within the private sector. Like all private corporations, KGs are always under financial pressure to maintain a balanced account (or perhaps even a profit margin). Their operation is inevitably driven by market forces.

As the major consumers in the service market of KG education, parents have always been treated as an important, if not the most important, party by KG principals and owners. Offering KG services and designing a curriculum to meet parental expectations and preferences is essential. Parental expectations of KG education services, as a market force, hence overshadow KGs' authority and autonomy in the adoption of learning and teaching strategies (Fung & Lam, 2008). In the "power struggle" between parents, KGs, and teachers, parents always have the upper hand. It is not uncommon for KGs to compromise their professional preferences. In fact, the situation has become more acute in recent years,

particularly given the reduction in total student enrollment in KG education from 156,202 in 2001–2002 to 138,393 in 2007–2008 (EDB, 2008a) as a result of the decreasing birth rate.

Parental Expectations as a Market Force: The Impact on Kindergarten Education

Under the influence of the traditional Confucian cultural belief that effort and will power are the essence of successful learning (C. C. Lam, Ho, & Wong, 2002; Lee, 1996), academic achievement is generally perceived in Hong Kong as marking the road to future success and as a ladder for life improvement (Chan, 2004; M. Y. H. Lam, 1999). Parents expect their children to take learning seriously. They uphold a belief that equates hard work with academic success (C. C. Lam et al., 2002; Li, 2004). Indeed, in the competitive and examination-dominated educational environment of Hong Kong, parents are likely to have overwhelming concerns about their children's academic progress, especially with regard to counting, reading, and writing. Every effort is directed toward training children to study diligently and to do well in their academic tasks.

An earlier study conducted by Fung and Lam (2008) documented similar parental concerns in the academic year 2006–2007.² The teachers interviewed reiterated that the teaching of pre-academic skills was predominantly geared toward preparing young children for primary schools and, in particular, toward preparing them to get into a “good” school:

Some of the parents would ask for lots of homework for their children ... they thought that the more homework, the more their children would learn ... most of the parents in our school are quite desperate for their children to be admitted to a prestigious primary school ... (Marlene, second interview)

Parents have more concerns over their children's homework than over their artwork ... they regard artwork as secondary to academic learning ... academic learning is more important ... and so is their homework ... (Marlene, third interview)

Some of the parents request more homework and handwriting assignments for their children ... they think that there will be even

more homework and handwriting assignments when the children move up to primary school ... so they believe that assigning homework and handwriting in kindergarten can prepare their children for primary school learning ... (Laura, second interview)

Most parents have major concerns about how well their children master the English language ... they are of the opinion that the more they master the language, the better prepared they will be for their future ... (Carmen, third interview)

Some parents expect their children to learn fast, to learn more, and to write more because they hope that their children will be admitted to prestigious primary schools ... (Nelson, fifth interview)

Parents in Hong Kong believe that a program which strongly emphasizes the rote learning of narrowly defined academic skills will best prepare their children for a competitive world. They believe that their children must strive for a good academic start in order to secure a place on the “fast track” to success. But they appear unaware of the arguments against early stringent academic instruction. Neither are they alert to the concerns relating to a premature start to the acquisition of academic skills. The concluding remark made by Oppen (1994) seems to capture the views of parents on the learning and development of their young children in Hong Kong:

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. (p. 50)

Furthermore, Fung and Lam (2008) also find that parents’ keen concerns about the education of their young children have interfered with teachers’ professional pedagogical decisions:

Parents’ concerns create tension for the school ... their complaints are like challenges to the school ... in fact, their complaints can force our school to modify its practices to meet their expectations ... (Marlene, third interview)

The reason we include writing in our curriculum is to appeal to the parents so that we can keep up our enrollment figures ... if we don't give homework to children, no parents will send their children to our school ... (Marlene, second interview)

We have to prepare the children for their primary school ... and that's done upon the request of the parents ... (Marlene, third interview)

Parents expect their children to learn to write, and so writing has to be part of the curriculum ... it cannot be dropped ... (Laura, first interview)

I personally think that KG education in Hong Kong is still influenced by the parents ... when planning our teaching, apart from dealing with the learning differences among children, we teachers have to meet the expectations of parents ... (Nelson, second interview)

Thus, in order to secure enrollments for their programs, teachers tend to suppress their own educational beliefs and values, modify their perceptions of the ideal KG education, comply with parental interference, and conform to parental expectations.

In other words, parents' expectations for, and concerns about, their children's academic upbringing have intervened in the professional mission and vision of KGs as well as in the pedagogical practice of teachers. Such a market-driven education service seems to run counter to the professionalization expected by the government and to the type of system characterized by a child-centered play-based curriculum that treats children as active learners, respects them as owners of their learning, fosters their holistic development, and nurtures their motivation for life-long learning. This could possibly explain the discrepancies between KG pedagogical practices and official expectations, as documented in the Quality Assurance Inspection annual reports since 2000–2001. The reports suggest that most KGs and teachers fail to take full account of children's needs, interests, capabilities, and levels of development when planning learning and teaching activities. They are inclined to place undue emphasis on intellectual matters (EMB, 2001, 2005), limiting the diversity of developmentally appropriate learning opportunities for young children and impeding them in mastering learning skills authentically (EMB, 2004). As EMB (2003) points out:

80% of the kindergartens still put much emphasis on writing skill training, giving excessive drilling and copying assignments to children. Some kindergartens even required children to memorize and dictate words. Children did not have much chance to use the language in authentic situations. (p. 4)

The One-sided Power Game between Kindergartens and Parents

In the privatized system, KGs are under pressure to sustain a balanced budget. The immense influence of parental expectations persists. However, the PEVS does not seem to have dealt with the problem of privatization in the Hong Kong KG service (Fung & Lam, 2008). Although the PEVS plans to purposefully empower parents in the choice of desirable KGs by reducing their financial burden, the PEVS has instead only magnified the issue by further reinforcing parental influence and enlarging their voice.

In such “one-sided power” circumstances, it is doubtful whether the PEVS can achieve its intended mission of professionalizing the KG education service in Hong Kong. Instead, KGs have no choice but to continue to satisfy parental expectations in their curriculum design, and even if parental expectations are not in line with official guidelines, KGs will have to continue orienting their pedagogical practice to parental wishes by packaging their curriculum with academic drills. As such, KGs and their teaching personnel remain trapped in a market-driven education realm. The circumstances described here make it reasonably obvious that KGs’ service quality will continue to deviate from the aims and objectives of early childhood education stated in the education reform document (Education Commission, 2000) for the 21st century:

(1) Aims

- To help children cultivate a positive attitude towards learning and good living habits in an inspiring and enjoyable environment.

(2) Objectives

We wish our children to:

- have curiosity and an inquisitive mind, as well as an interest to learn;

- experience a pleasurable and colorful group life, through which they can develop a sense of responsibility, respect others and have a balanced development covering the domains of ethics, intellect, physique, social skills and aesthetics; and
- be prepared to experiment and explore, to learn to face up to problems and find solutions, to develop self-confidence and a healthy self-concept. (pp. 30–31)

If KGs are to be empowered to counterbalance unhealthy market forces, a government subsidy provided directly to the KG education sector will be necessary. Neoliberalists believe that in an economy run according to laissez-faire policies, market forces bring about competition, which in turn promotes better services (Friedman, 1962). However, these economic dynamics do not seem fully applicable to the KG education sector in Hong Kong. As discussed above, parents hold conservative views on education that contradict the goals of the government and of professionals. It seems that parents are more concerned with the short-term benefit of securing for their children places in prestigious primary schools than with their children's whole-person development.

If the government does consider reallocating its subsidies, this should not be done through direct fee subsidy for parents but rather through direct funding support for the operation of KGs. Direct fiscal input given to KGs from the government will release KGs from the operational concern of maintaining a balanced budget, and in this way free them from the overwhelming concern of meeting parental expectations. Such a government subsidy would contribute to a more balanced power relationship between parents, KGs, and teachers. As such, KGs would be in a much stronger position to uphold their educational philosophies, and the pedagogical autonomy of teachers would be restored. Also, KGs would regain their professional control of education services. In short, with the presence of a government subsidy, the KG education sector would be *recontextualized* (Bernstein, 1996) and its power relations reorganized, restructured, and redistributed (Ball, 2006a).

When the government repackages its investment in KG education in the form of subsidies to schools, the KG sector will then shift from the private to the public sector. This will help address the problem of *privatization* (Ball, 2007) in KG education, and education will no longer simply be a service to be marketed. Schools and professional teachers

will regain their professional statuses. KGs will again take charge of their educational missions and visions, and teachers will be able to enjoy greater autonomy in tailoring their pedagogies to meet the developmental and learning needs of young children. On the other hand, with the present PEVS regulation governing the tuition fee charged by the PEVS-KG so that it might not reach a profit-making rate, and with the QR Framework serving as a quality assurance mechanism, it is most likely that repackaging the official money as direct subsidies to KGs could simultaneously and substantially enforce the professional standard of what would become “public” KG education services.

Moreover, the call for a government subsidy aims to reduce tension in KGs — tension that comes from the need to maintain a balanced budget, to redress the dominant parental influence on the pedagogical operation of the school, and to restore the pedagogical autonomy of teachers. More importantly, the call for a government subsidy aims to regulate the balance of power among the key parties involved in the well-being of children and their learning. With the subsidy, no longer will one party dominate pedagogical decisions or dictate the choice of pedagogical practice. Instead, parents, teachers, and KGs will work in close collaboration and communication in the education of young children. Parents will become not just customers of KGs but partners as well (Bridges, 1994).

Despite what have discussed above, they by no means propose to ignore and neglect parental expectations. Rather, as parents are the key stakeholders in their children’s education, their desires and expectations must be handled with care and respect. Also, parental expectations can serve as guidelines for teachers, suggesting how their pedagogical decisions and practices can best serve the children and their families (Milner, 2003). Yet there is a need for caution. When parents focus on their children’s academic outcomes but not on their holistic and balanced development, care should be taken to prevent parental expectations from overshadowing teachers’ pedagogical autonomy and superseding their professional judgment.

Concluding Remarks

Education vouchers could be a strategic means to improve the quality of education services by making use of market forces to strengthen parents’ voice and choice. Competition in the market promotes the responsiveness

of schools, pushing them to provide desirable services that conform to parental preferences. The use of vouchers advocates privatized education services driven by market principles and therefore seemingly regulates the public school system's drawbacks. However, an education voucher system that intentionally enhances parental influences on the pedagogical autonomy of schools could have an adverse impact on the professional quality of education services. This is the case in Hong Kong.

Prior to the introduction of the PEVS, the influence of parental expectations on KG education had been very substantial. Yet this influence has been exaggerated by the PEVS, leaving KGs no choice but to develop their curriculum and pedagogical practices under the shadow of parental preferences. From an educational point of view, acknowledging and appreciating the educational expectations that parents have for their children is valuable; it paves the way for a more sophisticated level of communication and harmonious collaboration between parents and teachers who are working toward some form of agreed professional practice directed at the well-being of their children (Foot, Howe, Cheyne, Terras, & Rattray, 2000; Matthews & Menna, 2003; Parker & Leithwood, 2000; Pecek & Razdevsek-Pucko, 2000; Siemer, 2001). However, when KGs compromise their curriculum choices and direct their pedagogical practices to didactic teaching and instructional learning so as to make their services attractive to parents' academic concerns and appeal to their PEVS-Certificate, does the introduction of the PEVS truly "Increase Investment" and "Enhance Quality" (EDB, 2008b) in the school system? The answer has been explicitly stated in this article. If the government does seek to frame KG education in a new milestone and to actualize its commitment to professionalizing the provision of KG services, government subsidies ought to be reallocated. Direct subsidies to fund the operation of KGs are urgently needed.

Notes

1. KGs eligible for voucher redemption must be: (a) non-profit making; (b) delivering the local curriculum; and (c) charging a tuition fee not exceeding \$24,000 per student per year for half-day classes (or \$48,000 for whole-day classes) (EDB, 2008d).
2. The study was a qualitative research conducted in the academic year of 2006–2007, investigating what KG teachers in Hong Kong did in class, how they planned their lessons, and what considerations they took in pedagogical decision. Field observation and interviews were used. Four KG

teachers with pseudo-names (Marlene, Laura, Nelson, and Carmen) were invited to be the teacher informants of the study. They were invited to the study not only because they all had a basic professional qualification to work in KGs, but also because they came from schools that fall within the two major categorizations of KGs in Hong Kong. Among them, both Laura and Marlene worked in a religious non-profit-making KG, whereas Nelson and Carmen were teachers in a private independent KG. Each teacher informant was observed three times. On average, each observation visit lasted over 2 hours, with some approaching 3 hours. The teacher informants were also interviewed before and after each observation visit, in addition to a round-up interview at the end of the data collection process. In total, each teacher informant was observed three times and interviewed seven times.

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