

Locality and The Quality of Preschools in Hong Kong

Sylvia OPPER

University of Hong Kong

The present study examined four indicators of quality in preschool programmes, parent involvement, class size, adult:child ratio, and teacher training, as reported by preschool heads parents. Comparisons between the three localities of Hong Kong island, Kowloon and the New Territories showed that the quality of programmes, as measured by these indicators, was less satisfactory in preschools in the New Territories, particularly for parental involvement and teacher training.

本文根據學前教育的校長和家長的意見，檢視四個顯示學前教育課程質素的指標，分別為父母的參予，班級人數，成人和小童的比例和教師培訓。當比較香港島，九龍和新界三個地區時，顯示新界地區的學前教育的課程質素呈現欠理想的情況，其中尤以父母參予和教師培訓較為顯著。

From an ecological point of view young children develop as a result of interactions between themselves and the changing properties of their environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). This environment can be viewed at different levels. At the microlevel it consists of socialisation settings, that is of relatively stable units where the processes of socialisation occur (Katz et al, 1984). The socialisation settings of young children are essentially the home and early education and care institutions. These are the regular, stable environments of young children which play an important role in their development and socialisation. In the past the home was the primary and possibly the sole socialisation setting for preschool children. However, in recent years early education and care centres are taking on equal, in some cases even greater, importance as a socialisation setting.

As more and more young children worldwide spend a major part of each week in early education and care settings, there is increasing concern about the quality of the programmes offered. Professional bodies (e.g., National Academy of Early Childhood Programs, 1984), parents, and other interested persons are engaged in efforts to ensure that high quality, appropriate services are provided for young children. These efforts have been supported by a growing body of research that has increased awareness of what constitutes quality programmes at the preschool level (Balaban, 1988; Bundy, 1991; Elkind, 1988; Greenberg, 1984). At present, quality is a major topic of study among early childhood educators (Bruner, 1980; Phillips, 1987; Ruopp et al, 1979).

The National Association for the Education of Young Children, NAEYC, (1987) has identified several important dimensions that can serve as indicators of quality in early education and care. These include parent involvement, group size, adult: child ratio and specialized educator training.

What is the situation of quality in Hong Kong preschools? Differences have been found between local kindergartens and day nurseries for both educational (Opper, 1990), and structural characteristics (Opper, 1991). Research has also shown that in Hong Kong locality is related to the socioeconomic status of families with young children (Opper, in preparation). Families with young children living in the New Territories have lower parental educational level, lower income, and a lower standard of living than those living in Kowloon and on Hong Kong island. Does locality also affect the quality of preschool education and care? The present study examines the question of quality preschool programmes in relation to locality, using preschools from the three administrative districts of Hong Kong island, Kowloon and the New Territories, and focussing on the quality indicators of parent involvement, group or class size, adult: child ratio, and teacher training.

Method

Sampling of Preschools

As part of a larger cross-national study into preprimary provisions, the IEA Preprimary

Project, a sample set of 80 preschools was randomly selected by locality in proportion to the total number of preschools in the territory. These were progressively invited to participate in the study. If any preschool refused it was replaced by another preschool in the same locality from the sample set. A final sample of 68 preschools was achieved (58 kindergartens, 10 day nurseries). 27 of these were located in Hong Kong island, 18 in Kowloon, and 23 in the New Territories.

Procedures

Two instruments were used to collect the information on indicators of quality in preschool settings:

1. Setting Survey
2. Parent Interview

The Setting Survey, an interview schedule given to the heads of the 68 sample preschools, covered various types of background information

on the preschool including the above four indicators. The Parent Interview, given to 3,000 parents who participated in the Preprimary Project, a survey into preschool children and their families, included questions about parent involvement in preschools.

Results

Parent Involvement

The most common contact between the preschool and the home is in the form of individual meetings between parents and teachers. At times these are scheduled regularly, once a year or once a term. Alternatively they are necessary when a child's progress or behaviour gives rise to concern: All preschools in Hong Kong and Kowloon and over 90% in New Territories have these individual meetings (see Table 1).

TABLE 1
Contacts between Preschools and Home in % of Preschools

Type of Contact	H	K	NT
Individual Parent Meeting	100	89	100
Handbook	96	94	91
Phone Calls	74	67	96 *
Group Parent Meeting	67	61	57
Parent helps with special activities	59	50	57
Home Visits	19	12	4
Parent as Teacher	7	11	0
Parent on Advisory Board	7	6	0

* $p < .05$

Another common form of contact, found in more than 90% of preschools in all three localities, is the handbook. The teacher fills in this handbook for the child to take back home, giving details such as the weekly theme and classroom activities, homework to be done, results of tests or exams, and regular measures of the child's height and weight. The handbook thus provides parents with a picture of the child's activities and progress throughout the year. It can also be used by parents to communicate their concerns about the child to the preschool.

Telephone calls are used more extensively in the New Territories than in Hong Kong and Kowloon, whereas group meetings between preschool and parents are slightly more common

in Hong Kong. In all three localities parents help out occasionally with special activities such as outings, annual graduation ceremonies, or social evenings. Home visits, and other contacts where parents are called upon to make an active contribution towards the regular educational programme are rare, particularly in the New Territories, where only 4% of preschools have home visits and none has parents help with teaching or sit on the preschool advisory board. The only contact for which there are statistically significant differences between locality is the telephone call.

The second source of information on parent involvement, the Parent Interview, gives details on the frequency with which parents engage in-

contacts with the preschool (see Table 2). These findings show that, with some exceptions, the pattern of preschool-home contacts is very similar between the three localities. The first difference that more New Territories parents report never having received a handbook than either of the two other localities. This lack of contact by means of the handbook, however, is compensated for by an

increase in telephone calls, 84% of New Territories families have monthly telephone calls, compared with 67% for Hong Kong island and 71% for Kowloon. A third difference between locality is for group meetings. More Kowloon parents participate in such meetings than those of the other two localities, 51% compared with 40% for Hong Kong island and 28% for the New Territories.

TABLE 2
Frequency of Contacts in % between Preschool Staff and Parents by Locality (as reported by Parents)

HK	Weekly	Monthly	< monthly	Never
<i>Handbook</i>				
HK	19	51	20	10
K	26	45	20	9
NT	23	51	11	16
<i>Informal Meeting</i>				
HK	1	85	6	9
K	0	90	5	5
NT	0	89	4	7
<i>Telephone</i>				
HK	1	67	28	4
K	1	71	24	4
NT	0	84	12	3
<i>Parent Participate School Activities</i>				
HK	0	0	98	2
K	0	0	97	3
NT	0	0	97	3
<i>Group Parent Meeting</i>				
HK	0	0	40	61
K	0	0	51	50
NT	0	0	28	72
<i>Parent as Teacher</i>				
HK	0	0	3	97
K	0	0	2	98
NT	0	0	0	100
<i>Parent on Board</i>				
HK	0	0	0	100
K	0	0	0	100
NT	0	0	0	100

It is clear from the parent reports that, apart from individual meetings, direct contact between the educators and parents of young children is relatively infrequent in all three localities. The main channels of communication about the child are indirect, often through written messages such as the handbook. The frequency of preschool-home contacts is similar in Hong Kong island and Kowloon, but less in the New Territories, although the differences are not statistically significant.

Class Size and Number of Teachers in Class

Responses to the Setting Survey indicate that class size varies considerably between preschools, ranging from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 80 children. All three localities have approximately the same mean of children per class; Kowloon preschools have 31, Hong Kong and the New Territories have 32. Most preschools in all three localities also have a class size ranging from 21 to

40 children. The New Territories is the only locality to have classes with over 50 children, but the percentage of these is small.

TABLE 3
Number of Children in Class in % of Preschools

	H	K	NT
8-14	0	6	0
15-20	8	6	13
21-30	24	35	44
31-40	48	41	35
41-50	20	12	4
> = 51	0	0	4
Total	100	100	100
Mean	32	31	32

The findings also indicate that in the majority of preschools, particularly those in the New Territories, classes have only one teacher (see Table 4). In Hong Kong a small number have 2 teachers, and in Kowloon a few preschools have 3 or more teachers, but in the New Territories no preschool has more than 2 teachers per class. Although the precise adult: child ratios for each class were not obtained, with so many classes having only one teacher, these ratios would be 1 to the class size or an average of 1 adult to 32 children.

TABLE 4
Number of Teachers in Class in % of Preschools

	H	K	NT
1	68	78	91
2	20	17	9
3	12	0	0
>3	0	6	0

Taken together, the information on class size and number of teachers per class portray a picture of large numbers of children with very few adults per class in all three localities. There are no significant differences for these two indicators of quality.

Teacher Training

Table 5 on the extent of trained teachers in the preschools shows clear differences between

Hong Kong and Kowloon, on the one hand, and the New Territories on the other. In Hong Kong 70% and in Kowloon 65% of the teachers are trained. In the New Territories only 37% are. While only one-quarter of Hong Kong and Kowloon preschool teachers are not trained, over one-half of the New Territories teachers have had no training. Of those teachers who are trained, the highest proportion having completed the longer rather than the shorter course is in Hong Kong, 46%, and the lowest in the new Territories, 20%. In other words, not only have more teachers been trained in Hong Kong, but they have also had a longer training.

TABLE 5
Training of Teachers in % of Teachers by Locality

	H	K	NT
<i>Trained</i>			
Short Course	24	26	17
Long Course	46	39	20
<i>In Training</i>			
<i>Untrained</i>	6	8	8
	24	27	55

Discussion

The findings of the present study reveal a pattern of differences between locality for most of the indicators of quality examined although few of these differences are statistically significant.

Regarding parent involvement, contacts between preschool and home do occur. For instance, over 80% of the parents engage in informal meetings at least once a month, 60% to 80% have a monthly telephone communication, and parents help the preschool on special occasions less than once a month. Nevertheless, parents' active contribution to the preschool programme is non-existent in the New Territories and virtually non-existent in the two other localities. This finding is contrary to the trend in other parts of the world where parents are becoming more active and involved in their child's preschool (Khoo, 1990; Powell, 1990). Such involvement often results in positive effects for parents, teachers and children (Becker, 1986; Honig, 1979). By not involving parents more in their activities, preschools in the territory are depriving themselves of a useful ally and collaborator in the task of educating and caring for young children, and are also not providing optimal conditions for high quality programmes.

As far as class size and adult:child ratios are concerned, research has shown that small class size and more adults per child result in more positive outcomes for children (Peck, 1988). The NAEYC (1987) recommends a group size of 20 children with an adult:child ratio of 1:10. While this may be an unrealistic goal in many countries, an average class size of 31–32 children with only one teacher, which is found in all three localities, would make it very difficult for a teacher to individualize instruction or to pay attention to the specific needs of each child in the class. Inevitably numbers such as these must affect teaching methods and strategies, and the type of experiences young children have in preschool.

Finally with respect to teacher training, there is ample evidence that specialized training is associated with good quality care and education (Phillips, 1987) and with positive outcomes for children, such as improved social, cognitive and language skills (NAEYC, 1987). The New Territories in particular falls short on this indicator, with more than half the preschool teachers being untrained. This must surely affect the quality of programmes in this locality.

Although more research is needed on additional indicators and dimensions of quality in preschool programmes, there is already some evidence that an inequality of quality exists between the three localities for the areas already studied. In particular young children living in the New Territories have less adequate preschool programmes than those living in the other two localities. If inequities in the provision of early education and care services to young children living in different parts of the territory are to be avoided, steps need to be taken to improve the situation, especially with regard to parent involvement and teacher training, the two dimensions where differences are the most apparent between locality.

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Author

Sylvia OPPER, Lecturer, Department of Education, University of Hong Kong, Pokfulam Road, Hong Kong.