



<i>Presentation Title</i>	Impact of Standardized Elementary Education Curriculum on Early Childhood Education in Hong Kong
<i>Format</i>	Paper Session [6.01]
<i>Sub-theme</i>	Supporting Transition – Interfaces at Pre-primary, Primary and Secondary Levels

Impact of Standardized Elementary Education Curriculum on Early Childhood Education in Hong Kong

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Abstract

The implementation of standardized curriculum in integrated kindergartens of Hong Kong posed one of the most critical transition issues between early childhood and elementary education. We analyzed the impact using a qualitative interview study that examined the provision of integrated kindergarten education for children with and without disabilities from the perspectives of implementing teachers in Hong Kong. Eight teacher informants were individually interviewed three times in tape-recorded sessions. Open-ended, in-depth interview was the primary data collection method for this study. The recordings were transcribed into formal research protocols and studied using typological analysis procedures. Two broad generalizations were identified: (1) teachers emphasized teaching academics to children without disabilities, but they focused on social development at the exclusion of academic instruction for children with disabilities, and (2) instructions were predominantly academic- and skill oriented. Policy recommendations to address the detrimental impact of the academic downward pressure from elementary education on early childhood education include: (1) government implementation of age appropriate curriculum in public elementary schools, (2) inclusion of early childhood education in the public schools, and (3) alignment of early childhood education with that of elementary education.

Keywords: early childhood curriculum, transition issues, education policy

INTRODUCTION

In 1985, the Hong Kong government collaborated with non-profit service providers to integrate children with mild disabilities into mainstream kindergarten programs that were initially designed for typically developing children. However, this collaborated integrated kindergarten education program was phased out in 2005-2006 school year. We conducted a qualitative study in 2004, prior to the termination of the program in Hong Kong, to examine the provision of quality education for children with disabilities from the perspectives of teachers implementing these integrated kindergarten programs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Hong Kong government's approach to the provision of early education for young children from birth through age six has been problematic in that services have been rigidly divided into two discrete sectors: kindergartens and child care centers (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997). Each sector serves either an education component or a child care service component. Kindergarten education has been officially assigned the education component. Since early childhood education is still excluded from the compulsory education system in Hong Kong, all kindergartens and child care centers are privately owned (Chan & Chan, 2003).

"Special thanks to David H. Lee, MD for his assistance in editing"

Because of minimal criteria for initial registration and inadequate quality assurance, most of private kindergartens in Hong Kong are of poor quality. Children of higher-income families tend to be in high quality programs, while children of low-income families typically attend poor quality programs (Waldfogel, 2006). Furthermore, because of the constraints imposed by limited financial assistance of the Hong Kong government, academic downward pressure from the primary education systems and the prevailing parental beliefs about the effects of academic kindergartens on children's learning outcome, many private service providers have opted to hire minimally trained teachers and thus implement developmentally inappropriate practices (Chan & Chan, 2003).

Integrated kindergarten education in Hong Kong was an add-on to the existing structure of kindergarten education system (Education Department, 2001). The overall structure of the education systems in Hong Kong has traditionally been rigid and highly competitive, contradictory to the principles of inclusive education (Jenson & Fraser, 2006). Teachers felt compelled to focus on students' academic achievement and self-regulation given the minimal official resources and the numerous constraints imbedded in integrated kindergarten programs. As the result, children with disabilities in integrated kindergarten programs were forced to fit themselves into the mainstream school environments (Cheuk & Hatch, 2006).

The attitudes of Hong Kong teachers toward integration are not entirely positive (Yuen & Westwood, 2002). Many teachers have developed the belief that children with disabilities are extra burdens who should be excluded from their stressful working environments (Cheuk & Hatch, 2006). The Hong Kong government's 2005-6 reform plan on Harmonization of Pre-Primary Services has changed many facets of early education systems. Of special concern was the termination of integrated kindergarten education. Consequently, children with disabilities are now only included in integrated child care centers (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2003).

The present study was undertaken to describe teachers' perceptions of provision of early education for children with disabilities in integrated kindergarten programs. Two questions formed the basis of this research: (a) How do early childhood educators describe their experience with integration? and (b) According to the teachers, what does instruction look like in integrated kindergarten programs?

METHODS

Participants

This study involved four integrated kindergarten programs in Hong Kong with two kindergarten teachers from each program participating as informants. All eight teachers had experience with teaching children with disabilities. Years of teaching experience in integrated kindergarten settings ranged from two to nineteen years. In the first program, one teacher had two integrated children, while the other teacher did not have any at the time of the study. In the second program, each teacher had one integrated child. In the remaining two programs, one teacher had an integrated child, while the other teacher did not. All participating teachers had obtained the one-year Qualified Kindergarten Teacher certificate, which was the minimum official requirement for registering as a kindergarten teacher before 2002.

Procedures

This study employed open-ended, in-depth interviewing as the primary data collection method. Each of the eight informants was individually interviewed three times in tape-recorded sessions. The tape-recorded interviews were transcribed into formal research protocols that were studied using typological analysis, a qualitative method that divides the overall data into categories based on prescribed typologies (Hatch, 2002).

FINDINGS

Analysis of informants' interview data led to the identification of two broad generalizations: (1) kindergarten teachers emphasized teaching academics to children without disabilities, but they focused on social development at the exclusion of academic instructions for children with disabilities, and (2) instructions was primarily academic- and skill-oriented in the integrated kindergartens.

Teaching Academics to Children without Disabilities

Most kindergarten teachers regarded their primary duty as giving academic instructions to children without disabilities. Their reasons for this emphasis included (1) the heavy influence of standardized curriculum produced by textbook publishers in Hong Kong, (2) parental expectations of their children's academic achievement, (3) primary schools' academic requirements, and (4) Hong Kong government's emphasis on students' academic achievement.

(1) Standardized Academic Curriculum

All the teachers from the four integrated kindergarten programs reported that their schools had been using a commercial curriculum package published by one of the three major Hong Kong publishers. These three commercial packages shared a common format that they all included a teacher guided textbook, theme books, and student worksheets. In addition, the curriculum packages were organized using the same twelve instruction themes: School, I and My Family, Autumn, Environmental Protection, Winter, Food, The People Serving the Community, Spring, Transportation, Summer, and Graduation.

According to the design of the curriculum package, the twelve themes were evenly distributed throughout the school year, and each theme was expected to be taught in a fixed amount of time. Each also encompassed a number of sub-themes. Implementation of the sub-themes was guided by an explicit teaching methodology that included teaching objectives (cognitive, psychomotor, and affective domains), scripted teaching procedures, and a variety of suggested activities. Each theme contained a list of difficult Chinese vocabulary words. The young children were expected to practice these vocabulary words as a part of the school routines. Worksheets were used as an evaluation tool for appraising the learning outcomes of students after a theme was taught. The design of the worksheets was set up to determine if children could select correct responses.

The teachers reported that based on the curriculum design, the twelve themes were to be repeatedly taught at each kindergarten level, from the nursery to lower kindergarten and to upper kindergarten class. The students at the earlier levels were provided with the basic understanding of the concept of a particular theme, and the level of complexity would increase at subsequent grade levels. After getting through all the required grade levels in a kindergarten, the young children were expected to attain a comprehensive understanding of the concept behinds all twelve themes.

(2) Parental Academic Expectations

The teachers reported that parents would prefer to place their children in academic kindergartens rather than developmentally appropriate programs because they firmly believed that their child would be able to succeed in school and society only through education in an academic kindergarten. Therefore, the teachers thought that parents' major goal of placing their child in a kindergarten was to prepare their child to make a successful transition into academic primary schools.

The teachers did realize that the parents' interpretation of quality early education was contrary to the developmental approach advocated by many early childhood professionals (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). A teacher noted:

“Parents would choose an academic kindergarten rather than one that focuses on learning process. What we interpret as quality early childhood education is extremely different from views upheld by parents. The parents expect their children to learn academics from school, not just to have fun and play around all day. They think they pay the tuition and expect their child to master difficult vocabulary.”

Parents valued academic primary schools in Hong Kong. They wanted their kindergarten children to be taught academics so that their children could be admitted into the

best academic primary schools. Thus, parents equated good kindergarten with providing their children with a lot of homework. They perceived that if their children were adequately prepared with academic skills in kindergarten, they would have less traumatic experience in primary schools.

Hong Kong parents emphasized learning outcomes rather than the learning process. They wanted teachers to produce worksheets for the children in order to provide evidence of what children had acquired in school.

(3) Primary Schools' Academic Expectations

The teachers perceived that primary objective of the Hong Kong primary school was academic, negatively impacting the curriculum implemented in the kindergartens. In response to downward academic pressure from the primary school, the kindergartens had to become more academic in order to prepare children for future schooling. The teachers reported that primary schools favored the implementation of an academic curriculum. Parents supported the academic primary school and pressured the kindergartens to become more academic. One teacher explained the issues:

“A few years ago, in this district, there were a number of primary schools newly established, and they all wanted to build their reputations. They chose to implement the second grade curriculum on the first graders. The parents thought that those schools are good, and they wanted kindergartens to teach their children academics. Otherwise, their children would have transition problems in the academic primary schools.”

The teachers reported that although the government always stated that there should be no written examination for primary school entry, in reality written examinations were prevalent in primary schools. The admission requirements of primary schools had become more difficult, putting more pressure on kindergartens to teach more academics. The teachers reported that the entire education system, including primary and secondary schools, required students to do a lot of homework. Because of this downward academic pressure from primary schools, homework has become a formal task for children in kindergarten.

(4) Government's Academic Expectations

The teachers held that the government expected Hong Kong primary school students to attain high academic achievement. However, the official government policy was to implement developmentally appropriate practices in Kindergarten Education. Simultaneously, the teachers saw that they were pressured to become more academic due to children's transitional problems into academic primary schools. Thus the teachers complained that the government's advocacy of developmental approaches put kindergartens in a difficult position. As one teacher explained:

“The Education Department does not encourage kindergartens to give homework to young children. But they need to consider they have allowed primary schools to assign students with lots of homework. There is inconsistency between kindergartens and primary schools. How can our children make a transition into primary schools

without having the experience of doing homework? If the Education Department ordered no homework in the junior primary schools, we would not have any problems. But, in fact, primary school students are given lots of homework assignments. What should we do? “

The teachers argued that although the government stated it supported developmental programs, it actually encouraged the implementation of an academic curriculum because children had to be ready for the academic requirements of primary schools. The teachers were compelled to address the concerns of parents and teach in ways that would prepare the children for attaining the prerequisites of the academic primary school.

Teaching Children with Disabilities

The teachers believed that their major role was to assist children with disabilities in acquiring social development at the exclusion of academic achievement. Their explanations for this emphasis included (1) it was the role of the specialized integrated teacher to teach academics to children with disabilities, and (2, 3, 4 & 5) the effects of constraints embedded in the system.

(1) Integrated Teacher Responsibility

According to the job description specified by the Education and Manpower Bureau, integrated teacher's major responsibility was to deliver 30 minutes of individualized, remedial training to children with disabilities each day. The kindergarten teachers realized that integrated children had a learning disability and they would not expect these children to reach the same standards as their typical peers in terms of academic accomplishment. They strongly believed the role of integrated teacher was to focus on the academic aspect of children with disabilities.

The teachers expected typical children to demonstrate the ability to follow the daily classroom routines and complete the academic tasks. But an integrated child had difficulty meeting the prescribed academic standards due to the child's disabilities. Therefore, individualized instruction given by the integrated teacher was necessary to enhance the learning experience of children with disabilities.

The teachers perceived that the individual differences among the integrated children were wide with below the standard academic achievement. The standard curriculum was inappropriate for these integrated children—they required individualized curriculum and instruction to address their special learning needs. Integrated teachers were more prepared to teach academics to the integrated children.

(2) Individual Level Constraints

The teachers did not have a positive attitude toward teaching children with disabilities. They felt that their schools did not offer the basic conditions and supports necessary for them to teach academics to integrated children. One teacher expressed negative feelings toward working with integrated children that paralleled the feelings of other

kindergarten teachers in this study:

“I don’t accept them. I don’t have a positive attitude toward them. Whenever my integrated child refuses to do the writing assignments and then throws a temper tantrum, I just can’t calm down myself. I was mad at them because I always need to repeat the same thing to them again and again. My positive attitude toward children with disabilities must derive from supports from the school and colleagues. But I have none of those supports from the school.”

The lack of comprehensive special education training and relevant teaching experiences with children with disabilities negatively impacted the feelings of teachers toward these integrated children. They were not able to acquire an understanding of the nature of children’s disabilities and skills necessary for addressing integrated children’s learning problems.

(3) School Level Constraints

The teachers thought the standard curriculum was developmentally inappropriate for young children with and without disabilities. The quantity and the complexity of the curriculum materials were beyond the ability of the children. The standard curriculum did not allow teachers to consider individual differences among the children. The teachers felt compelled to hurry the children in completing the prescribed daily activities according to the curriculum schedule. Consequently, due to learning disabilities, the integrated children could not keep up with the structured daily schedule. One teacher noted:

“We are bound by the curriculum. We are supposed to teach the prescribed objectives and to complete the related activities in the thematic teaching session. This curriculum does not allow them to consider individual differences among children. For instance, when I teach ‘fruit’ to the whole class, there are many components related to that concept such as its name, taste, smell, color, and quantity. We have many planned activities each day, and new activities need to be done on the next day. But an integrated child can only pick up one component each day. I can’t just teach one component each day and wait until that integrated child can fully understand the concept. So the integrated child is far behind the schedule.”

In addition to the inappropriateness of the academic curriculum, the teachers also noted that time restraint was another major issue, creating obstacles for them to teach adequate academics to the integrated children. Most of the time was spent hurrying the children to complete the assigned daily activities. The teachers also raised concerns about high child-teacher ratio and its negative consequences for children with and without disabilities. Under such bad conditions, teachers felt compelled to ignore individual differences among young children.

(4) Government Level Constraints

The teachers stated that the Hong Kong government did not provide adequate support of resources to integrated kindergarten programs but imposed numerous barriers to hinder the opportunity for teachers to provide integrated children with adequate academic achievement.

The government did not have a consistent policy on integrated education placement, creating transition problems for both integrated children and teachers. One teacher explained the effects of transition issues on integrated children's well-being:

“Over the past few years, the integrated children referred from the Education Department have not been as regular as the integrated children in the past. Prior, the newcomers of the integrated children must be at least age three and they came for the first year of the kindergarten program. Recently there have been more cases where these integrated children came in the middle of the school year, and they did not start from the first year. How can the integrated children adjust to the sudden change of the new school environments?”

The kindergarten teachers complained that they should have been comprehensive special education training necessary for effective teaching of integrated children. Kindergarten teachers received little or no training from the government. Three of the interviewed teachers had been integrated teachers for at least two years, and they were only provided with a part-time special education course. Even these trained teachers felt inadequately prepared for teaching academics to integrated children. They needed continuous professional training in order to properly address the special needs of integrated children. And they noted that even the part-time special education course was subsequently cancelled by the government.

The teachers reported that the government's support of resources distributed to integrated kindergarten programs had been reduced even before 2002, when the government announced the phase-out of the integrated kindergarten education in 2005. Without relevant, ongoing resources, the learning problems of the integrated children could not be properly addressed.

(5) Societal Level Constraints

The teachers observed that society was not receptive toward children with disabilities and that there was societal pressure on families of children with disabilities. One teacher explained the problem:

“There is pressure on families of children with disabilities from society. Everyone in my family tree was born to normal. However, in case that I give birth to a child with a disability, I know they would not blame on me. But I can understand how they feel toward the problem child. The big issue is that they have to face many sources of pressure such as relatives, friends, neighbors, and the public. This is Hong Kong, and the thinking of the Chinese people is more traditional.”

The teachers perceived that parents of children without disability did not like having integrated children in their child's class. Furthermore the teachers observed that integrated children were not accepted by many of their typical peers. The teachers noted that the worsening economic situations in Hong Kong negatively impacted families of children with disabilities. Both parents had to work overtime in order to raise their families, and the care their children suffered.

The teachers held that Hong Kong society reject individuals with disabilities and that the educational rights of children with disabilities are fundamentally ignored. Without the

availability of adequate support of necessary resources, appropriate early intervention and quality early childhood education, children with disabilities would not be able to attain academic success. Families of children with disabilities felt pressured by society to lower the expectations of their children's academic achievement. Because of economic constraints in most of these families, children with disabilities did not receive proper care. Consequently, the potentials of children with disabilities could not be fully realized and the long-term effect on these individuals and their families could be detrimental to the society as a whole.

DISCUSSION

Our study indicates that socio-political constraints imbedded in Hong Kong education system are hindering the development of successful integrated early education. We believe that any improvement of the integrated early education of Hong Kong must involve changes in the system of Hong Kong Education at the macro level. (Weisner, 2006). We propose the following three broad systemic changes along with policy recommendations and their implications:

Government Implementation of Age-appropriate Curriculum in Public Elementary School System

Kindergarten teachers in this study highlighted the tacit support of the Hong Kong government for implementing a standardized curriculum within the compulsory education school system. Because of the downward academic pressure from the elementary education system and the prevalent parental beliefs of the necessity of academic kindergarten programs for their children's future learning, teachers in integrated kindergarten programs have become default implementers of the standardized curriculum. From the perspectives of the kindergarten teachers, the levels of complexity and difficulty of the standardized curriculum were far beyond the cognitive functioning abilities of young children. Our study further suggested that the standardized curriculum implemented in integrated kindergarten programs is a key factor that prevents children with disabilities from receiving appropriate instructions by kindergarten teachers. Integrated kindergarten programs within this system simply could not meet the developmental and educational needs of children with and without disabilities.

We believe that only strong commitment from the Hong Kong government can address and reverse the detrimental impact of the standardized elementary curriculum on early childhood education (Jenson & Fraser, 2006). The Hong Kong government should enforce and implement its recommended developmentally appropriate curriculum in the public elementary education system. Early childhood education would greatly benefit from more uniform and consistent education of children in their formative year from ages six through twelve in public school elementary system, reducing the downward academic pressure.

Inclusion of Early Childhood Education in the Compulsory Education System

We urge the Hong Kong government to address the existing structural problems of early childhood integrated education in order to provide quality education to young children

with disabilities (Hooper & Umansky, 2009). It is our belief that the Hong Kong government's current education policy of excluding early childhood education from the compulsory education systems is a major cause of the overall poor quality in early education. Our study showed that without adequate funding from the Hong Kong government, even well-established, non-profit, private service providers could not deliver quality education for children with and without disabilities.

Since school year 2007-2008, the Hong Kong government has implemented a Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS) to improve the quality of early childhood programs (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2007). This government subsidy had given the parents the option of selecting their own kindergarten program. Our study indicated that most parents used the vouchers to enroll their children in academic kindergarten programs in order to prepare their children for a successful transition into academic primary schools. This result and other observations of past practices pertaining to voucher system implemented in other countries (Waldfogel, 2006) indicate that public funding of education voucher has led to the support of academic kindergarten programs instead of those with developmental approaches. Hong Kong government should revise its current education policy to include early childhood education within the compulsory education system so that all children could benefit from quality early childhood education experiences.

Alignment of Early Childhood Curriculum with that of Elementary Education

The Hong Kong government should enforce its education policy of implementing a curriculum that addresses the development of the whole child in early childhood education. Our study demonstrated that the implementation of standardized curriculum in integrated kindergarten programs severely impaired the teaching efficacy of kindergarten teachers. Kindergarten teachers felt compelled to discard the notion of individual differences among children due to the inflexibility and tight schedule of the standardized curriculum, inadequacy training in childhood development, and structural problems embedded within the integrated kindergarten programs. Consequently, young children were hurried to follow the tightly compacted schedule of the standardized curriculum, complete a large amount of academic tasks within a set time in the daily routines, and demonstrate their learning outcomes through standardized testing. Those young children who failed to keep up with such academic systems were consequently regarded as defective vessels and labeled as "learning disabled" (Elkind, 2007).

True education reform will only be realized when education is provided in an equitable and democratic fashion. Children of diverse family backgrounds, particularly those from families in poverty, have a right to high-quality early childhood education experience that can impact them to grow into functional members of society. Age-appropriate curriculum enables teachers to distinguish individual differences in mental abilities, learning rates and learning styles of young children. In addition to the appropriate curriculum, teachers must be sufficiently prepared with high-level professional training and supported by adequate resource funding. Under these conditions, teachers would be able to fully realize the developmental potentials of young children with or without disabilities. Thus, all children would have the chance to develop fully and later make a positive contribution to the society.

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