

Reform Disconnections between the Free Quality Kindergarten Education Scheme and Kindergartens in Hong Kong

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Abstract

National Association of Education for Young Children (NAEYC) (2009) stated early childhood education (ECE) practitioners are key agents who develop quality assured curriculum and conduct teaching through developmentally-appropriate practice (DAP). They play the vital role in providing quality education for enhancing children's whole-person development in early years, in the sense that, their importance and significance towards children's development is an undeniable fact. In order to retain and maintain a stable teaching team in kindergartens, whether or not ECE practitioners' salary could be guaranteed with statutory increment are the key concerns of different stakeholders in ECE, where appropriate, the Government of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) plays a pre-dominant role in policy-making on the subsidy of ECE in Hong Kong. This paper therefore examined the key initiative on the salary adjustment for kindergarten practitioners through the implementation of the Free Quality Kindergarten Education Scheme (Scheme) starting from 2017/18 school year (Education Bureau, 2017b). The latest three policy addresses on the direct subsidy to kindergartens joining the Scheme (Scheme-KGs), announced by the Government of HKSAR in 2016, 2017 and 2018, were extracted for examining the fault-lines in terms of direct subsidies for Scheme-KGs via content analysis. Developed by Walker (2006), the Five Reform Disconnections were adopted as theoretical framework for analyzing the disconnection between the Scheme and teachers' expectation on their salary adjustment. Practical recommendations were provided for alleviating the said disconnection.

Key words : Free Quality Kindergarten Education Scheme, reform disconnections, early childhood education

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Introduction

The kindergarten (KG) education policy in Hong Kong has been shifted and evolved over the past few decades. In terms of teaching qualifications, there was a watershed momentum for early childhood education (ECE) that all newly recruited KG practitioners should possess a Qualified Kindergarten Teacher (QKT) Qualification with effect from 1 September 2003 (Education Bureau Circular No.27/2002, Education and Manpower Bureau). From the 2004/2005 school year onwards, the Government of HKSAR requested all KGs should employ 100% of teachers with QKT qualifications (Education Bureau Circular No.28/2003, Education and Manpower Bureau). Accordingly, there is an increasing number of kindergarten teachers to become holders of QKT or Certificate in Early Childhood Education C(ECE). Compared with the percentage of serving kindergarten teachers who attained C(ECE) (38.4%) by 1998 and 60% of teachers who were qualified by 2000, 94.4% of teachers attained the QKT qualifications by 2005/06 (Rao & Li, 2009). In addition, the number of principals who receive Bachelor of Education Degree (BEd) in ECE had been increased because this is one of the requirements apply to those who are to be appointed as principals of KGs from 2019/10 school year onwards (Education Bureau Circular No.1/2007, Education Bureau).

Although more KG practitioners received recognized teaching qualifications such as QKT, C(ECE) and BEd(ECE), there is an increasing demand on the assurance of teaching quality in pre-primary education in society. KG practitioners are facing a wide array of challenges such as the changing ideology of meritocracy, elitism and egalitarianism in the society (Lim, 2016), the expectations and requirements on teachers' academic qualifications from different stakeholders are increasingly high (Tang, 2011; Yuan, 2016; Sari & Yolcu, 2017).

The introduction of new ECE curriculum initiatives also increase teachers' workload. The advocacy of integrating components of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) into kindergarten's curriculum has been advocated in the Guide to Pre-primary Curriculum (Curriculum Development Institute, 2006). In the latest Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide (Education Bureau, 2017a), the learning criteria of 'Science and Technology' was replaced by 'Nature and Life', the direction was changed

to arouse children's curiosity of Science from the Nature. As far as we know, there are different perceptions towards such changes in the industry. Given there is limited space in normal kindergartens, Even though the changes look more stick to the rationale of 'child-centered' in ECE, the limited space in normal local kindergartens made such changes become an extra burden on KGs. Given KG teachers need to figure out appropriate space, which is near KGs, for children's exploration in nature. Extra preparation on these explorative activities (For example, pre-field trip for evaluating the safeness of setting, the contingency plan for climate change, etc.) have to be conducted, in the sense that these work will increase teachers' workload.

Facing these multi-faceted challenges and difficulties ahead, the remuneration of KG teachers has not yet been guaranteed formally, which leads to a huge difference on remuneration among KG teachers from different organizations because there is no standardized pay scale. Such remuneration deviation, in other words, leads to loss of motivation to strive for excellence in teaching.

There are varied political, social and economic rationales derived from reforms that hold distinctive different perspectives (Walker, 2006). Research demonstrated that the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS) derived problems though it serves as a strategic tool to control quality by enhancing parent's voices and choices. Driven by market demand, there was a rapid decrease on KG's pedagogical autonomy and quality assurance because KGs strived for customizing direct services in favour of parents' preferences (Fung and Lam, 2008) in order to get survival with a stable enrolment rate. In response to parents' preferences, kindergartens brand their services with different features, which were bound by different teaching approaches. As far as we know, some KGs even promulgated their services with teaching approaches that focuses on their target parent groups' expectation in their living districts, leading to the adoption of teaching approaches advocated by Maria Montessori, whose teaching philosophy places emphasis on children's independent learning (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011). Another principal figure such as Reggio Emilia, tailored curriculum for parents with expectation on the respect of children's potentiality in learning (Dodd-Nufrio, 2011). Based on these theoretical foundations, KGs customized their curriculum and teaching approaches to attract their target parent groups for enrolments. It seems that these strategic promotion plans would enhance KGs' teaching quality on the one

hand, however, these plans lead to a negative competition among KGs located in the same district. As far as we know, KG practitioners had worked under a competitive environment, their pressure had not yet been decelerated. In particular, various disputes on the resources allocation for ECE have been resulted. In order for resolving the various disputes on the PEVS from the ECE community, the Committee on Free Kindergarten Education (Committee) was set up in 2013 as commissioned by the Education Bureau (EDB).

The Committee proposed a series of initiatives on 15-year free education policy (3-year free KG education and 12 years of free primary and secondary education) for the EDB. Accordingly, the 2016 Policy Address announced the implementation of the 15-year free education policy. With an attempt to enhance the quality of kindergarten education on various fronts, the Government introduced the Free Quality Kindergarten Education Scheme (Scheme) starting from the 2017/18 school year, which is one of the most influential measures in the 2017 Policy Address. The Scheme had replaced the PEVS introduced in 2007 and set up the long-term goal that all eligible children should have free schooling, which started a new chapter for over 170,000 kindergarten children in Hong Kong (Census and Statistic Department, 2018) and kindergarten teachers. Specifically, the Scheme highlighted the close relationship between quality education on pre-primary education and the professionalism of ECE community. Even though the Scheme aims to improve the quality of kindergarten education, the ECE community perceived the policy itself spelling out the acceleration of remuneration of new ECE teachers and it claims that there is a recommendation on providing a career ladder for “enhancing teaching quality”. From the perspectives of kindergarten practitioners, the said aspect could not improve an existing problem that there is no formal pay scale safeguarding teachers’ salary. As far as we know, such policy revealed the dimensions of recommendations on assuring teaching quality was not accepted by ECE teacher community, in the sense that there is a fault-line between policy initiatives and teacher community. Negative effects were such as the low morale of ECE teacher community were resulted.

In other words, if the linkage between educational policy and teachers’ perspectives could be made, the effects of such linkage between educational policy reforms and teaching quality will be minimized. With this pre-supposition, there is an immediate need to investigate the disconnection between ECE practitioners and the Scheme through the

analysis of the three latest policy addresses announced by the Government of HKSAR in 2016, 2017 and 2018 respectively. Then, I will examine the disconnections between Scheme and reform initiatives about the direct subsidies for teachers' remuneration using Walker's theoretical framework of Five Disconnections (2006). Finally, practical and constructive recommendations will be rendered for resolving such disconnection between the future policy address and ECE community at school level.

Method

Qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000) was adopted for the critique of the 2016, 2017 and 2018 policy addresses on direct subsidies for KGs in Hong Kong. Content analysis has been a common tool for analyzing documents and communication artifacts in different disciplines such as applied language sciences, linguistics, psychology and sociology and so forth (Patton, 2002). To examine the initiatives related to direct subsidies, the said addresses were analyzed through extracting the keywords about monetary such as salary range. Through qualitative content analysis, it is noted the progression of reform initiatives from the encouragement of establishing a salary range to the set-up of a unified starting point for all new teachers to be appointed in 2017/18 school year. All the Scheme-KGs were requested to in compliance with this measure. The data retrieved from the said addresses were descriptively analyzed along with the ecological environments of Scheme-KGs and the Scheme. Through the analysis, it is noted ambiguity, which is a common feature in reforms (Walker, 2018), is drawn upon. Walker (2006) stated that ambiguity in reforms would create disconnection among stakeholders. The reform disconnection model (Walker, 2006), which is an influential educational framework, was thus adopted explaining the reasons contributing to the fault-lines between the Scheme and the ECE industry.

The 2016 Policy Address

The 2016 Policy Address indicated that there should be a decrease of teacher-pupil ratio

to 1:11 (exclude principal) for enhancing teaching quality (The 2016 Policy Address, the Government of HKSAR), in other words, more teachers should be recruited accordingly. Nonetheless, the number of teachers available in kindergartens are subject to the amount of the Government's subsidies. The "basic half-day unit subsidy" in the Scheme is calculated upon the number of children in each KG. Normally, 60% of the grants are reserved for KG students' expenses and the remaining 40% is part of the daily operating expenses and teachers' remuneration. There is no more subsidies for recruiting more teaching assistants for teachers, however, teachers' workload was increasingly heavy facing the higher expectation from the public. Worse still, the Policy mentioned to encourage kindergartens providing competitive remuneration for teachers. Yet, what does 'competitive' mean in terms of the amount of remuneration that teachers could receive? The EDB only recommended a remuneration range (HK\$20,770 - \$36,930) for new kindergarten teachers with C(ECE) or above qualifications starting from the 2017/18 school year (Education Bureau, 2016). The Policy address also encouraged kindergartens to establish a career ladder for teachers, accordingly, a recommended salary range (Table 1) was proposed for discussion in Legislative Council in 2016. They also claimed that recommended salary range was more flexible than the pay scale (Education Bureau, 2016).

Compared with their counterparts working in primary schools or secondary schools, there is no standardized salary point increment every year. In other words, there is no guarantee whether or not the teaching staff of KGs can get higher salary when they get promotion. Henceforth, how can KGs assure quality of curriculum in reform implementation if teachers lack the security in remuneration increment?

Table 1. *Recommended Salary Range for Senior Teaching Staff (Education Bureau, 2016)*

Senior Teaching Staff	Recommended Salary Range (2013/14 price level)
Senior Teacher	\$24,000 – \$38,000
Vice Principal	\$30,000 – \$42,000
Principal II	\$34,000 – \$47,000
Principal I	\$40,000 – \$53,000

The 2017 Policy Address

According to the 2017 Policy Address, the Government mentioned that they used ‘the data of the three school years from 2017/18 to 2019/20 as a basis to assess the implications of a salary scale on the stability of the teaching force’. The circular to all Scheme-KGs mentioned that the feasibility of putting in place a salary scale for KG teachers (Education Bureau, 2017c).

The 2018 Policy Address

In the 2018 Policy Address, there are specific measures associated with the 2016 and 2017 Policy address that the Government confirm that the starting salary of teachers were HK\$21,680. The recommended salary range was HK\$21,680 to HK\$38,550 starting from the 2018/19 school year (Education Bureau, 2017c). Yet, the pay scale for KG teachers was not yet be established. Instead, the Government mentioned they explored the feasibility of devising a salary scale for KG teachers based on the data retrieved from “the three school years from 2017/18 to 2019/20” and they “have initially collected the data concerned and plan to start a review in mid-2019 on the implementation of the new policy, including the salary arrangements for kindergarten teachers”, and they “will consult stakeholders during the process” (The Policy Address 2018, The Government of HKSAR).

With reference to the above extracts from the Policy Address, the Government claims that the review will be undertaken based on the data. Yet, they did not mention what kind of data they are using for review and how they interpret the data. Hence, whether the results of review would contribute to the devise of a mandatory salary scale for KG teachers and senior teaching staff remain unknown. Although the starting salaries for new KG teachers are increased; however, there is no guarantee on salary increment, which is similar to the pay scale of their counterparts working in primary or secondary schools because there is no formal point increment from a statutory pay scale for KG practitioners. Whether or not practitioners could receive salary increment will subject to the financial situation of kindergartens and the Government’s subsidies. Even though the Government provide extra budget for recruiting teachers to cater for the decreased class size, all these practical

problems facing KGs remain unsolved. To date, the Scheme has reflected that Government did not directly address the needs of the ECE industry in terms of setting up a statutory pay scale for KG teachers and senior teaching staff, which lead to ambiguity to the industry.

To date, the description of the aforesaid reform initiatives in the 2016, 2017 and 2019 Policy Address provoke ambiguity among ECE practitioners. Allan (2018) mentioned that such ambiguity, which is one of the key features in educational reform, will lead to negative perceptions and experience with reforms from teachers. The efficacy and effectiveness of policy implementation will thus be affected. This paper will examine the reasons contributing to the ambiguity on reform initiatives of the above-mentioned policy addresses and propose respective practical recommendations for resolving.

Walker (2006) developed the theoretical framework, 'Reform Disconnection' categorizing the disconnections between reform initiatives and teachers into five areas, namely instrumental disconnection, intellectual disconnection, political disconnection, cultural disconnection and communicative disconnection. The description of these disconnections are as follows:

"Instrumental disconnection" means "the disconnection between what the reforms demand" and the authentic situation of teaching in schools. "Intellectual disconnection" means "the disconnection between purpose, thrust and content both within and between different reforms" "Political disconnection" means "the disconnections between the reforms and the broader governance and political structure and the established order underpinning the life of the Hong Kong education system". 'Cultural disconnection' means the disconnection between what "reforms demand" and the cultural situation of teaching in schools. The last disconnection is "Communicative disconnection' referring to how the inadequacy in reforms and "their outcomes are explained, communicate and sold within and outside the education community" (Walker, 2006, P.9-21).

Discussion

Intellectual disconnection

The culture of professional collaboration with different experts in universities and

institutes, continuous learning, lifelong learning and continuous improvements for the enhancement of teaching strategies, which are the original notions underpinning quality education in the Scheme, do not exist in school. The Policy aims to provide free quality education for all eligible children, which is a way forward to lay the foundation for children's development. However, the Scheme, which is the agent of delivering the ECE reform initiatives of 2016, 2017 and 2018 policy address, has increased teachers' workload in customizing curriculum aligned with the latest Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide (Education Bureau, 2017a). In order to get survival in the competitive market, teachers also bear loads of administrative work and liaison work with parents. Given teachers from different kindergartens are focusing on getting their pedagogic, administrative and liaison work done, there is a very weak professional learning community within their own school or across different schools under the same organizations.

According to the subsidy description in the Scheme, there is no extra subsidy offering to KG cum nursery schools. Teachers bear more workload in these schools accordingly. Given the 3-5 years old class and the 2-3 years old class do not single out as an individual class in kindergarten-cum-nursery schools, teachers need to conduct teaching and caring for two different age groups of children in one school. Worst still, the lack of budget makes these schools could not recruit more teaching assistants to alleviate teachers' workload. The Scheme could not provide specific initiatives for maximizing teaching quality, by contrast, it provokes negative perceptions from teachers' perspectives,

As mentioned earlier, there has been a huge difference of salary among teachers from different KGs. In compliance with the increased starting point of remuneration starting from AY2017/18, new teachers could receive higher starting salary point on the one hand. On the other hand, the deviation on salary among different KGs has been hugely greater because experienced teachers will not get higher salary because the suggested salary range does not imply that there is a stable increment for teachers per academic year whereas new teacher could receive higher or even the same salary as experienced teachers. As far as we know, the huge workloads, insecure salary and uncertainty on the career progression lead some teachers to act against their moral, forget their mission, and goals of quality education. To summarize, the intellectual disconnection between and the rationale underpinning the Scheme and the authentic ecological environment of ECE community affect the Scheme's

desirable outcomes of quality education.

Political disconnection

A disconnection between the governance of these initiatives and the established order underpinning the existing Hong Kong education system is occurred. Fullan (2001) stated that education change constantly evolves while economy is evolving, every country made changes. In response to the global changes on economic scenario, it is undeniably to increase investment on education for the betterment of ECE operation so that our future of generation could have competitive edge that the global citizens should have vis-à-vis students worldwide. According to the guidelines on subsidy to Scheme-KGs in housing estates operating in premises allocated under the EDB-administered school allocation or nomination mechanism (Nominated Estate KGs), rental subsidy will be offered to KGs if they meet the fill-up rate calculated according to the total enrolment in one session against the permitted accommodation (Education Bureau, 2016).

Given that the demographic ratio in each district is uneven, the calculation of the fill-up rate is unfair for those Nominated Estate KGs located in districts with low birth rate. As an instance, the government estimates a local Nominated Estate KG, which have standardized settings with 8 classrooms, should normally be filled in with the capacity of around 220 students. If the Nominated Estate KG could not recruit 50% or above of expected enrolment (i.e. about 110 students), this KG could not receive full rental subsidy from the EDB (Education Bureau, 2016).

If the government could provide full rental grant to Nominated Estate KGs, which could not meet the requirements of recruiting more than 50% of enrolments aligning with the school's capacity, this will ease the financial burden of these KGs. Nominated Estate KGs could further make use of the remaining budget as salary increment for teachers, which in turn stabilising their manpower resources.

In addition, the release of more classrooms could allow teachers, parents, subject-specific teachers to bear duties with various purposes. As an instance, the vacant classrooms could not only be reserved for pre-lesson preparation by subject-specific teachers such as Putonghua teachers and Native-English speaking teachers (NET), but also be used by onsite

social workers for conducting parental workshops, group tutorial for children with special educational needs (SEN). Teachers and members of Parents-Teachers Association (PTA) could conduct home-school collaboration events. Children will have more space to proceed with free play with activities aligned with the advocacy of implementation of free play as mentioned in Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide (Education Bureau, 2017a).

It is highly recommended for taking reference of other countries' approaches towards the blueprint of subsidization scheme will be a possible solution. In the east, the Korean Government subsidized both public/private kindergartens. In addition, the Government provide full grants for public kindergartens, teachers' salaries and promotion mechanisms are in accordance with civil servants (Na, 2010). For private kindergarten, tuition fees are required and the Government will provide partial funding including parent tuition, teachers' remuneration and allowance per number of classes (Starting Strong III: A Quality Toolbox for Early Childhood Education and Care, 2012).

Cultural Disconnection

The Scheme indicated that the necessity of creating Professional Learning Community (PLC) among KGs for sharing exceptionally good teaching practices. However, there is a competition on enrolment among KGs in the same district as mentioned earlier. Given each KG strives hard for survival, the exposure of effective teaching strategies with others will create a sense of insecurity towards their own competitiveness in the market. The ideal notion of fostering collaborative learning among ECE community, in other words, will not be popularized in the industry. The cultural disconnection occurred between demands of reform initiatives and the authentic cultural situations in KGs.

In order to link the reform initiatives and the pedagogic culture at KGS, there is a need for culture change in individual KG. It is recommended that the quota of paid study leave for a consecutive of 4 weeks or 8 weeks could be increased so that more ECE practitioners could be benefitted. The trained ECE teachers could become seed teachers to share their insights from the studies in school and in the sense that a sharing culture on teaching practices will be developed in their own schools. This will assist in relieving the fault-lines between the demand on professional sharing and the pedagogic culture at schools.

Choi and Walker (2018) stated that the implementation of reform-specific teacher development provision could let teachers perceive positive perception on reform. In this sense, the provision of teacher training programme could consider topics around reform initiatives could help teachers develop positive experience with reform. The provision of explicit blueprint for all local KGs to implement the newly launched curriculum initiatives such as the integration of 'Free play' elements in curriculum will be another possible solution to resolve the cultural disconnection aforesaid.

Instrumental disconnection

There is an instrumental disconnection (Walker, 2006) between the demands of the Scheme and the existing ecological environments of the ECE industry, affecting the efficacy of enacting reform initiatives. Given all the Scheme-KGs are requested to develop curriculums in line with the Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide (Education Bureau, 2017a), KGs are required to design free-play activities for children, however, there is a lack of explicit blueprint for school's implementation.

In view that all subsidized KGs are requested to undergo quality review by the EDB every five years, such transparency and openness on teaching pedagogies lead to unnecessary and misleading comparisons among KGs. The market driven style in ECE has pushed teachers and schools to act in ways to produce "branded" schools.

The increase in starting salary from 2017/18 school year onwards also imply the increasing societal expectation on teachers' professionalism from different stakeholders. In order to accommodate challenges derived from the Scheme and to secure the enrolment of KG, teachers are busy studying a BEd degree programme in ECE or master degree programmes. Even though they are striving for a survival, they also feel stressful and insecure. The instrumental disconnection between and the reform initiatives and the authentic lives of ECE community uncover the reasons contributing to an ineffectual outcomes of the Scheme.

Communicative disconnection

There was communicative disconnection between the governmental side of EDB and frontline teachers and the public such as parents. From teachers' perspective, the introduction of the Scheme has created dissonance between experienced KG teachers and new teachers. Given the group of experienced kindergarten teachers receive lesser or even the same remuneration as those new kindergarten practitioners with no teaching experience, they feel discontentious which lead to the decrease of morale and the resignation tide among experienced KG teachers. This may even lead to a dissonance between new KG teachers and experienced KG teachers and finally causing the conflict or disharmony in the industry.

From parents' perspectives, the Government has claimed to provide free education for kindergarten children (Government subsidizes HK\$ 34,320 per student (half-day), HK\$44,620 per student for the whole year (whole-day) (Education Bureau, 2016) In reality, parents still need to pay for other expenses and in other words, this will create negative perceptions and experience with education reform in particular for those low-income families, the extra expenditure on their children's schooling create financial burden on them, resulting grievances towards such changes. In addition, this will reveal the advocacy on 15-year free education is not 'free-of-charge' indeed. If the subsidy to school remains unchanged, it is recommended to release low-income family's financial burden by offering tax deduction or providing more allowances to offset the extra tuition to be paid for schools, which is similar to the measures undertaken by European countries such as Denmark, most Länder in Germany, Estonia, Croatia, Slovenia, Iceland, Turkey and Norway (European Commission, 2014).

Conclusion

To summarize, the 2016, 2017 and 2018 policy addresses primarily direct at quality education in terms of providing free education for all eligible children through the Scheme. With the aim of providing students with all round developments, respective initiatives such

as the direct subsidies to KGs, the increased salary starting point for new KG teachers, and the decrease of teachers-pupils' ratio have been derived from the Scheme. Also, the aforementioned reform initiatives have attempted to cater for the needs of different stakeholders in ECE sectors and the changing sociological and ideology of the society.

This paper indicates the reasons contributing to different levels of disputes from the ECE community and the public towards the Scheme are caused by disconnections (Walker, 2006) between the Scheme itself and expectations of different stakeholders on the notion of 15-year free education in Hong Kong (Education Bureau, 2017a). From the content analysis of the 2016, 2017 and 2018 policy addresses on subsidy towards ECE to the enactment of reform initiatives through the Scheme, it is concluded that there are instrumental, intellectual, cultural, political and communicative disconnections hindering the efficacy, effectual and meaningful implementation of the Scheme.

It is recommended explicit linkages between the Scheme and the existing ecological environments of ECE community, the culture of pedagogical sharing, the blueprint on reform-specific training for teachers, as well as communication channels should be constructed so as to facilitate the enactment of reform initiatives to its fullest.

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