Administrators’ Perceptions of Early Childhood Teacher Training in Hong Kong: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract
In Hong Kong, early childhood education and related teacher training have been neglected for a long time. Due to teachers’ work for the recognition of early childhood education and teacher training, the British-Hong Kong government gradually put more emphasis on early childhood education and its teacher training. After the handover, for the citizens to cope with the changing economic system from a manufacturing based to a knowledge based society, the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region has further conducted a series of education reform, as well as recognizing early childhood education as the foundation of young children’s life long learning. Therefore, training professional and quality early childhood teachers has become very important.

The aims of this study were to understand the perceptions of early childhood administrators on teacher training, their training work, and the difficulties they encountered in teacher training. One principal from a kindergarten and one supervisor from a childcare centre were interviewed. The findings indicated that the training did not pose additional pressure on early childhood administrators and their teaching staff. The findings also showed that the government’s policy had strengthened the profession’s confidence on teacher training and had attached greater importance to early childhood education.

When Hong Kong was a quiet fishery village a long time ago, three modes of education, private tuition, home tuition and voluntary teaching, were common in early days (To et al., 2003, p.112). Hong Kong became the colony of Britain in 1898. Although Eitel proposed setting up ‘kindergarten education’ (Hong Kong Education Annual Report, 1891), the response from the London Colonial Office was that “early childhood education is a luxury.” (Sweeting, 1990, p.264) Therefore, until the late 19th century, there was no opportunity for training for early childhood teachers in Hong Kong.

Early Childhood Teachers’ Training before the Handover

In the 1950s, as a result of the increasing number of working mothers, there was a need for early childhood institutions and early childhood teachers. Although both the Education Department (now termed Education and Manpower Bureau since January 2003) and the Social Welfare Department established in-service early childhood teacher training courses at different times, the government had no long term plan for the development of early childhood teacher training at that time. Instead, the government policy was so loose that it was described as “nursing where it feels pains only” (To et al., 2003, p.114).

In 1978, the British-Hong Kong government started to provide a 9-year free and compulsory education to children between age six and 15. Even though the early childhood education was not included in the government’s subsidised program, three in-service early childhood teacher training courses were offered by the Grantham College of Education in the early 80s: (1) 12-week Qualified Assistant Kindergarten Teacher (QAKT) Education Course (for
kindergarten teachers who had secondary three qualification) (2) Two-year Qualified Kindergarten Teacher (QKT) Education Course (for kindergarten teachers who had completed secondary five qualification and obtained at least 2 passes in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination); and (3) 16-week Education Course for kindergarten principals. Apart from these courses, the Hong Kong Polytechnic also offered training courses for childcare workers in the early 80s. While the profession assumed that early childhood education and its teacher training were beginning to be considered seriously by the government, the Education Commission pointed out in the Report No. 2 (1986) that “…there is not a…strong evidence to persist on the idea that kindergarten education is necessary” (Hong Kong Education Commission, 1986, p.31). Consequently, the commission suggested the expansion of QAKT, but QKT was only allowed to expand in the 90s. Many early childhood teachers in 80s or earlier only possessed secondary three qualifications and finished their training in a rather short period. Thus, we can only begin to speak of the professionalism of these early childhood teachers from then on.

In the 90s, having their material life fulfilled, the people in Hong Kong wish to have their spiritual to be life fulfilled as well. The British-Hong Kong government presented the people with an invaluable gift before the handover: to provide funding to the Hong Kong Institute of Education (HKIEd) for the establishment of various early childhood education courses. In addition, the government also regulated each kindergarten to employ at least 40% of QKT teachers by the year 1996-97 (Hong Kong Government, 1994). Under government support, besides continuously established new QKT courses, the HKIEd started the first Kindergarten Certificate of Education Course (CE-KG) in 1995. The establishment of this course was long coveted by kindergarten teachers. However, due to limited places, most students admitted to this course were experienced principals or head-teachers.

In sum, the ever-growing opportunity for training available to early childhood teachers before the handover implies that the government was beginning to perceive the importance of early childhood education.

**Early Childhood Teacher Training after the Handover**

In the year of handover, the HKSAR government made a new pledge (The Education Commission of the Hong Kong Special Administration Region, The People’s Republic of China, 1997) that all kindergarten must employ not less than 60% of QKT teachers before the end of September, 2000, and all kindergarten principals must complete the CE-KG Course by September, 2004. In order to accomplish the goal in every kindergarten, the government also promised to increase the number of in-service training courses.

With government subsidy, the HKIEd launched new in-service teacher training courses, and founded the first three-year pre-service courses - Early Childhood Certificate of Education in Hong Kong. Although this course was not the first pre-service teacher training course, its appearance transformed the situation of the traditional mode of kindergarten teachers’ admission to the profession without previous training.

Before the new millennium, the HKSAR government had laid down a series of education policies. The government “reestablished the status of early childhood education” (The Education Commission of the Hong Kong Special Administration Region, 1999, p.3). To achieve this goal, the government provided various training opportunities, for example, subsidizing a Bachelor of Education (ECE) course provided jointly by HKIEd and two foreign universities; encouraging early childhood institutions to apply for ‘Quality Education Fund’ (Hong Kong (China) Education Commission, 1999) in order to promote professional cognition among early childhood teachers; speeding up the attainment of CE-KG qualifications in 2002 by kindergarten principals.
In the new millennium, the HKSAR government aimed to prepare students for the political and cultural changes in Hong Kong as well as that in the world (The Education Commission of the Hong Kong Special Administration Region, 2000). Therefore, it aims at promoting a new generation of “charitable and courageous” people. Consequently, improving early childhood institutions administrators’ and teachers’ professionalism is the foremost aim of the education reform (ibid., 2000). For example, in the school year 2003-04, all novice early childhood teachers must complete a 1-year pre-service QKT course; by the end of school year 2005-06, and all in-service early childhood principals must complete CE-KG course or its equivalent. These measures could really enhance the quality of early childhood education.

In addition, all early childhood teachers were required to be fully trained by the academic year 2004-05. Although the target of ‘fully trained’ only demanded that teachers should obtain a QKT or its equivalent qualification, early childhood teachers, nevertheless, should practice ‘life long learning’, or the sustainable growth of the profession will suffer.

Research Aims

Owing to a schedule set for early childhood teacher training by the government, early childhood institutions must comply and design their own training schemes. The government policy on teacher training, as a result, gave them an affirmative direction to further improve the quality of early childhood education. The aims of this study were to understand the perceptions of early childhood administrators on teacher training, their training work, and the difficulties they met on teacher training. New directions of teacher training would also be explored.

Research Methodology

In order to understand the situation of teacher training in early childhood institutions under the education reform, two administrators of early childhood institutions (one a principal in a kindergarten and the other one the supervisor of a childcare centre) were selected to participate in the one-to-one semi-structured in-depth interviews. The participants will be named as ‘Principal Chan’ and ‘Supervisor Lee’ in subsequent sections.

The responses obtained were coded. Categories for emerging themes were then used to analyse and interpret the data (Denzin et al., 2000). The findings from this study are significant for future research in the area of teacher training in early childhood education.

Findings and Discussion

**The importance of early childhood teacher training**

For a long time, early childhood teachers, among whom many were untrained, often resorted to past experience to solve problems, leading to a difficulty to assess the appropriateness and effectiveness in the application of teaching strategies. Nevertheless, teachers’ confidence would suffer due to a lack of support for the use of certain teaching strategies. Fortunately, the government was beginning to perceive the importance of early childhood education and established early childhood teacher training courses. Realizing the idea that theory and experience are equally important, and should be linked, Supervisor Lee proactively encouraged teachers to commit to continual learning. As she said,

> The knowledge from ‘experience’ and ‘continual learning’ should be integrated. Another purpose of continual learning is for one to confide in oneself.

Continual learning and absorbing new knowledge could help you reestablish your own direction. Continual updating could allow one to integrate in society and time needs for improvement.
While Principal Chan agreed with the importance of experience, compared to Supervisor Lee, she thought that professional development and continual learning were more important than experience. As she explained,

If teachers are teaching without proper training, her knowledge will not allow her to understand young children and their physical and psychological development...they will not be able to choose the right strategies to help the young children too.

Even if experience can be accumulated, a lot of errors would precede the correct experience...possibly sacrificing a lot of young children before a correct way could be figured out.

From the above examples, Principal Chan’s attachment of importance to teacher training can be seen. She arranged various training schemes for teachers. No matter how experienced a teacher was, s/he would also be required to receive training.

Even though Supervisor Lee and Principal Chan had different opinions on the relationship between experience and training, both of them held the same view on the importance of training and further studies – teacher training was both important and necessary. Consequently, until now, both of them have been continuously taking courses on early childhood education.

In addition, Supervisor Lee and Principal Chan also had the same views about the role of an education leader. That is, h/she does not only need to encourage teachers to further their studies, solidifying his/her own knowledge and establishing a role model are also of high importance. Otherwise, how could s/he lead her/his colleagues, inspire teachers on learning orientation and cultivate a healthy learning culture? Furthermore, they also pointed out that the aims of teacher training are not only to fulfill the government’s requirement, but also help teachers to develop their professionalism which can affect the physical and psychological development of young children.

**The training programs for early childhood teachers**

Supervisor Lee believed that there were numerous ways of training, and different channels would provide different kind of inspiration. Therefore, she said,

The courses offered by the tertiary institutions can provide teachers with basic knowledge and information about the profession, while courses organized by the childcare centre can cater for relevant needs.

In order to provide high quality teaching, Supervisor Lee encouraged teachers to take courses in tertiary institutions, or in the community. The childcare centre would organize on-site training too. As she mentioned,

Teachers would take courses related to curriculum development, for example, early childhood education, dancing, etc, and short term courses, as well as participating in mainland exchange tours.

Our childcare centre would organize teacher on-site training every year...We would invite speakers to give a talk on early childhood education and its related issues.

Similarly, Principal Chan also arranged training activities for teachers, which resembled Supervisor Lee’s courses in terms of content and format. The training activities mostly comprised workshops in which the contents include academic issues, teaching and communication skills, etc. Teachers can attend the workshops according to their interests and needs.

Besides arranging the workshops, Principal Chan also arranged an exchange tour for the teachers every year. The places they visited were the educational organizations in Taiwan and...
Hong Kong. As she stated,

We normally visited the early childhood institutions with special characteristics. These institutions may not have plentiful resources and may not have expensive facilities, but young children have a high degree of flexibility in learning. We also found that these institutions do not necessarily rely on advanced equipment to promote interaction and learning, and thus the young children can be made to learn enthusiastically and feel interested in learning without advanced equipment.

It was better to see it than listen to a lecture… I believe the greatest benefit is the evaluation we made after the visits.

Besides organizing the afore mentioned training and visits, Principal Chan, being an educational leader, meets with teachers individually and regularly to share learning experience with them. As she said,

I would read with them articles every three months to enhance their knowledge on education.

Moreover, Principal Chan indicated that, after each training or visit, teachers have to write a learning report to express their personal opinions, share and exchange with colleagues what they have learned, in order to cultivate a healthy learning culture and atmosphere. Besides, Principal Chan also thought highly of her role as an educational leader, as a result, she kept enriching herself and made herself a role model for teachers.

On the content of the training, both administrators encourage teachers to take courses provided by the Hong Kong tertiary institutions, while the school would organize seminars and visits according to teachers’ need and interest, arrange constructive experience sharing, in order to enhance teachers’ professional knowledge, promote positive attitudes to learning among teachers and broaden teachers’ horizons.

**Difficulties in early childhood teacher training and forecasting future trend**

Early childhood teacher training is a long and difficult process, with a lot of difficulties and challenges to be resolved. Supervisor Lee thought the most difficult hurdle in training is the lack of capital and human resources. The centre has promised to support the employees in training, therefore, a large amount of expenses are spent on training every year.

If the training takes place outside office hours, teachers can apply for allowances. If the training takes place during office hours, the centre will arrange for leave for teachers.

The centre has also met difficulties in resource management during organizing training activities, for example, fitting office hours with the speakers timetable.

Although Principal Chan was very enthusiastic on training work, she also met difficulties of various aspects, including organization, arrangement and resources. She pointed out that in the most difficult part of the organization process was setting a topic, because,

If there is not a suitable topic, the teachers will not pay attention. Therefore, they can not learn or benefit from the training. The worst of it is the speaker will be scared by the teachers’ inappropriate attitude and never returned.

Besides, Principal Chan also met difficulties in organizing human and other resources. She gave an example,

Training within the school are paid by the school…while others…for example, visit in Taiwan or Mainland or taking courses from HKIEd have to be paid by the teachers themselves. Nevertheless, we would not deduct teachers’ salary because of leave for training. The school would also employ substitute teachers if it is necessary.

Needless to say, training teachers is very important, but, training leaders is just as important.
Principal Chan indicated that training for school administrators was insufficient. She explained,

No doubt, training is good that all young children should be taught by qualified teachers and through formal education. But trained school administrators are needed to incorporate in organizing the trainings.

It can be seen that Principal Chan thought that foremost requirement of qualified teacher training was principal training. She believed that the government should not bear the sole responsibility in training teachers, but a cooperative effort by educational leaders must be provided for the training to be effective.

Conclusion

Reviewing the government’s policy on early childhood education in early days progressing from a ‘loose’ policy to the proactive effort in raising teachers’ quality of late, early childhood education has been the focus of much attention. The government has encouraged early childhood teachers to complete fundamental training earlier and provided subsidies for training and setting training indicators and schedule. It is pleasing that this study have found that training do not pose additional pressure on early childhood administrators, because of the fact that various training activities and schemes are already in place in early childhood institutions well before the government policy was in effect, building a learning atmosphere in the institutions. Nevertheless, the government’s policy has strengthened the profession’s confidence on teacher trainings and has attached a highest-ever importance to early childhood education.

The importance of early childhood teacher training is not to be challenged, however, due to a lack of resources, training activities have been limited and difficult to be organized. A principal suggested that teacher training should not only rely on the government’s effort, but early childhood institutions should also work cooperatively to achieve “school-based in-service training” (Lo, 2003). Consequently, administrators should receive relevant professional training for the purpose of the “school-based in-service training” policy. Considering the difficulties involved, the government should input sufficient resources and support. School-based in-service training places high importance on school administrators on employee training and improves the effectiveness and efficiency in enhancing teachers’ quality, incorporating the characteristics, needs and development of early childhood institutions. Therefore, if more time is allowed for this work to place, this policy would yield twice the result with half the effort.

To conclude, this study has brought to light the effort the early childhood administrators put on training their employees and raising their quality. To further improve early childhood teacher training, the government should encourage ‘school-based training’. At the same time, in order to provide appropriate training to early childhood teachers, the distinction between meaning and functionality between in-service and pre-service training should be made clear, so that they can progress from fundamental training to continual learning, and strive continuously to make new progress.

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