

Education Reform Policy and Early Childhood Teacher Education in Hong Kong
Before and After the Transfer of Sovereignty to China in 1997

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The first of July in the year of 1997 marked the official removal of the British colonial legacy from Hong Kong and the birth of a new Special Administrative Region (SAR) in the People's Republic of China (PRC) under the guiding framework of "One Country, Two Systems." The autonomy of the city was reassured by the Sino-British Joint Declaration signed in 1984 and the Basic Law adopted by the Seventh National People's Congress of the PRC in 1990 . The return of Hong Kong to China inevitably created political tensions during the two periods of governance and when the quality education movement began to emerge in the early 1990s.

Mok and Currie (2002) note that the SAR government adopts a stronger intervention approach to public policy than the Colonial government. It is introducing more and more market principles into the education policy arena. Such actions are generally viewed as means of establishing and strengthening political control. In the earlier colonial years, the government made great efforts to legitimize its policies through carefully implemented consultative processes. Towards the end of the colonial period, the fear of possible interventions from the Chinese government has led to a series of "quick fixes." Since then, government officials have become less attuned to public opinion. Due to the lack of experience in governing its own people, the legitimacy of the SAR government is constantly being challenged (Cheng, 2002). Cheng (1998) comments that Hong Kong overall is not as strong in "democratic policymaking" (p. 66).

Whether before or after the change of sovereignty, the international status of Hong Kong has made it susceptible to continuous influences from other countries, especially those of the West in the era of globalization. Education initiatives, as much as economic development, reflect the impact of the global trends, notably, the practice of

neo-liberalism (Mok & Currie, 2002). There are many examples (e.g., School Management Initiative, Target Oriented Curriculum, Quality Assurance, Research Assessment Exercise) to show that both the Colonial and SAR governments are heavily dependent on educational ideas developed elsewhere for reforming the local education system and teaching profession. Nonetheless, the dominance of the British educational models on the reform agenda is not to be overlooked (Cheng, 2002).

What Hong Kong is experiencing in terms of education reform, therefore, is not unique in the sense that similar developments are taking place in countries like the United States, Britain, and Canada. Teaching competence, for example, has been in the spotlight of reform policy because it is deeply embedded in three dominant discourses, that is, the accountability call for more government control, the middle-class desire to maintain the same level of benefits, and the market-driven orientation to ensure adequately trained labor supply for economic development (Phelan, 1996). Teacher educators are increasingly challenged by the bureaucratic scrutiny of teacher education (Fenstermacher, 2002; Furlong, 2002).

The quality education movement in Hong Kong emerged in the early 1990s upon the completion of quantitative expansion at the end of the 1980s. This previous period, which began almost four decades ago, primarily focused on increasing access and building systemic structures. Some of the factors contributing to the rising prominence of the quality call include the difficulty in maintaining high standards as a result of switching from elite to mass education (Cheng, 2002), the discontentment with low levels of student performance and language proficiency expressed by businesses and academics, the perceived need to keep Hong Kong stable and prosperous after the handover in 1997,

and the worldwide momentum toward improving the quality of education (Dowson, Bodycott, Walker, & Coniam, 2001). Local policymakers have been criticized for their blind faith in managerialism, as replicating the British obsession for control in the disguise of market operations. With no clear vision and lack of focus on the ultimate goals, many reform initiatives have ended in failure or in a form of coercion (Cheng, 2002).

How does early childhood education fit into the quality reform movement in Hong Kong? From the very outset, the Colonial government gave very little attention to the field (Opper, 1993). The official commitment did not come until 1994. One of the most significant pledges made by the governor in his policy address was to allocate HK\$163 million over a period of four years for training kindergarten teachers. The other pledges included starting a kindergarten education certificate program in the form of part-time inservice training in 1995 and full-time preservice training in 1997, raising the academic requirement (from Form Three to Form Five level with at least two passes in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination) of new recruits who entered into the profession after September 1995, and having at least 40% of teachers in each kindergarten received Qualified Kindergarten Training (QKT) by 1997 (Hong Kong Government, 1994). The government even indicated an intention to consider subsidizing kindergartens so as to encourage employers to hire more trained teachers in accordance with the recommended salary scale.

As soon as Hong Kong reverted to China, the newly appointed Chief Executive of the SAR government reaffirmed the training goals set in the 1994 policy address and further expressed his intention to achieve the followings: (1) each kindergarten would

have at least 60% QKT teachers by 2000; (2) all new principals would be graduates of the Certificate in Kindergarten Education Course or an equivalent course starting from 2004; and (3) there would be additional 660 training places between 1998 and 2002 (Hong Kong Government, 1997). The Chief Executive also proposed a comprehensive review of the education system, that is, from pre-primary to tertiary levels. Subsequently, the Education Commission, headed by a newly appointed chairperson, launched a three-stage consultation process in 1999 with the hope of gathering territory-wide opinions and suggestions for formulating education reform.

For the very first time, the new reform proposals embrace the notion that “early childhood education is the foundation of lifelong learning” (Education Commission, 2000, p. 30). The goal is “to help children cultivate a positive attitude towards learning and good living habits in an inspiring and enjoyable environment” (p. 30). The proposed recommendations encompass five different areas, that is, to enhance professional competence, to improve the quality assurance system, to reform the monitoring mechanism, to facilitate the interface between early childhood and primary education, as well as to promote parent education and participation. It has even been suggested raising the entry requirement of the profession from the secondary to sub-degree level. A further upgrade to degree level, however, is subject to future assessments.

On the one hand, the reform proposals seem to show greater support of the SAR government for the sector and acknowledge the important role it plays in improving the quality of learning. On the other hand, the government does not convey a significant change in its conceptions of childhood and early education. Policymakers still see the sector as a private responsibility of individual families and as a business activity subject

to the operations of market forces. The lack of official commitment to early childhood education provisions is very similar to what has happened in Britain. There, the years of neglect have had to do with the increasingly narrow definitions of the roles of children and women (Moss & Penn, 1996; Tizard, Moss, & Perry, 1976) and the modern construction of early childhood institutions as “producer[s] of care and of standardized and predetermined child outcomes” (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999, p. 62).

As of today, all Hong Kong kindergartens for children of ages 3 to 6 remain in private hands. Despite the fact that approximately 85% of preschool children attend kindergartens (Hong Kong Education Department, 2000; Hong Kong Government, 2000; 2001), these early childhood institutions do not receive the necessary government support to improve their provisions. Kindergartens are more academically oriented than childcare centers. Both types of early childhood institutions, however, offer a very similar type of program to five-year-olds who will soon attend primary schools (Opper, 1992). Most parents choose to send children to kindergartens because of their great concern about academic success, a phenomenon in connection to such context-specific factors as the transient nature of local people with an over emphasis on pragmatism and achievement (Ng, 1984; Sweeting, 1995), and the cultural values of education, social mobility, collectivism, effort, and moral development (Cheng 2000; Gow, Balla, Kember, & Hau, 1996; Lee, 1996; Wu, 1996). Heavy academic pressure has adversely affected the well-rounded development of local young children (Opper, 1996). In terms of the early childhood teaching workforce, the majority of kindergarten teachers are secondary education graduates, and 25% of them remained untrained in 1997 (Hong Kong Education Department, 1999).

Hong Kong is certainly not alone in moving early childhood education into the reform arena. The same trend is observed in the United States (Day & Goffin, 1994; National Center for Early Development & Learning, 2002; Robinson, 2001) and Britain (Bruce, 1995; Moss & Penn, 1996). However, it is worth mentioning here that early childhood education around the world generally does not share the same histories with the other levels of education. For the most part, it has grown out of the need to care for young children whose mothers have to go to work. Hence, the field has a traditional focus on development rather than education (Genishi, Ryan, Ochsner, & Yarnall, 2001; Williams, 1996). Given the profession's long-term adherence to developmental psychology, early childhood research and policy have followed a very narrow path for decades. Such narrowness greatly limits actions that need to be taken. There is an obvious need to conduct research and policy analysis with alternative frameworks.

Genishi et al. (2001) point out that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to identify the image of the teacher as *instructor* in the early childhood literature forty years ago. Even in the more recent early childhood education professional publications, there are only few mentions of "teachers" or "teaching." The fact that Genishi and her colleagues choose to write about early childhood teaching in the latest *Handbook of Research on Teaching* indicates the paradigmatic shift (moving away from care or development as the focal point) that the field is currently experiencing, and the growing attention given to teachers' voices and their ways of knowing of the daily teaching practice. Recent evidence shows that early childhood teacher educators in Hong Kong are also making attempts to strengthen the dialectical relationship between theory and practice (Kwong, Chan, So, & Kwong, 2001).

The dichotomy between theory and practice highlights the tensions between propositional knowledge and practical knowledge in relation to the heated reform debates on teachers' professionalism. Propositional knowledge assumes that there is a body of truth primarily responsible for forming the professional knowledge base of teaching. Practical knowledge, however, is constructed based on teachers' personal experiences and understanding of specific classroom contexts. It involves the moral dimension of teaching that is found absent in propositional knowledge. Researchers are still struggling to incorporate practical knowledge into their realms of thinking (Munby, Russell, & Martin, 2001). In contrast to the dominant discourses in education policy, there is an increasing understanding among educators of the sociocultural situatedness of the process of knowing (e.g., Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Leont'ev, 1981; Vygotsky, 1978, 1981; Wertsch, 1985, 1991, 1998). New knowledge is constructed when actions are mediated by cultural tools in social contexts. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development symbolizes such transformation. Bakhtin's notion of discourse indicates that humans can come to ideological consciousness only through a constant struggle "for hegemony among various verbal and ideological points of view, approaches, directions, and values" (p. 345). "One constructs and reconstructs perspectives through discourse, through the ongoing interactions one has with others and with oneself, whether talking or reading or writing or thinking to oneself while acting" (Phelan & McLaughlin, 1995, p. 166).

Among the many American scholars who conduct sociocultural research on how meanings are made, James Wertsch is one of the few dedicated to extracting and adding the essence of Soviet psychology to the understanding of knowledge construction in the United States. Heavily relying on the works of Lev Vygotsky, Mikhail M. Bakhtin,

Aleksei N. Leon'ev, and others, Wertsch (e.g., 1985, 1991, 1998) develops a very elaborated account of mediation in an attempt to explain *mind as action*. “Mind is defined here in terms of its inherently social and mediational properties” (Wertsch, 1991, p. 15). Mediated action emphasizes agent and mediational means (i.e., cultural tools) on equal terms, thus acknowledging the “irreducible” tension between them. Given his or her own histories and experiences, the agent may choose to master, appropriate, or resist the cultural tools being provided in the specific contexts. Mediated action gives primacy to the sociocultural situatedness of action, including the dynamics of power and authority. It points to the importance of understanding the consumption of cultural tools along with their production (Wertsch, 1998).

With regard to the present study, this concept of mediation will highlight the tensions between policy initiatives and early childhood teacher educators in the quality education reform context of Hong Kong. It seeks to understand why certain policy initiatives were introduced and how propositional knowledge, power, and authority influence policy initiatives. It attempts to reveal how teacher educators’ practical knowledge, which is built upon daily practice, plays a role in mediating their actions in the policy process.

In general, the purpose of the present study is to describe and understand the role of education policy in shaping early childhood teacher education in Hong Kong before and after the transfer of sovereignty to China in 1997. Specific attention is given to the quality education reform movement that emerged in the early 1990s. Based on the premise of sociocultural analysis, the movement must be situated within the larger historical and cultural milieu that forms the context of investigation. The temporal

change in political control of Hong Kong creates another contextual dimension for inquiry. In this study, policy is viewed as *cultural tool*, along with Ball's (1994) definitions of policy as *text* and *discourse*. Policy as text is "what is enacted as well as what is intended" with "an interpretational and representational history" (pp. 10 & 17). Policy as discourse is "about what can be said, and thought," as well as "about who can speak, when, where and with what authority" (p. 21).

More specifically, the present study focuses on how early childhood teacher education changes as a result of the mediated actions of teacher educators in terms of their mastery or appropriation of relevant reform policies and how the change of political context may have influenced the ways teacher educators respond to these policies. It attempts to answer the following research questions:

1. What have been some of the educational opportunities and constraints created from the change of political context in 1997?
2. What have been some of the policy initiatives that teacher educators identify as facilitating or hindering early childhood teacher education before and after 1997?
3. How have teacher educators engaged themselves in the process of negotiation to deal with conflicts and tensions arising from policy change before and after 1997?
4. How has early childhood teacher education changed as a result of the negotiation processes that took place before and after 1997?

Comparative and interpretative approaches will be adopted for the present study. In relation to the comparative approach, the main task is to identify differences, if any, in the ways that early childhood education and teacher education have been conceptualized between the Colonial government (until June 30, 1997) and the SAR government (since

July 1, 1997). It is important not to assume that there was significant change overnight. Instead, it is the change over time, whether subtle or overt, that is of primary interest to this study. How has this change created new opportunities and constraints on the practice of early childhood teacher educators? How have early childhood teacher educators made sense of this change and the policies that are associated with the two politically different periods?

In terms of the interpretative approach, the main task is to “grasp the native’s point of view, his [or her] relation to life, to realize his [or her] vision of his [or her] world” (Malinowski, 1961, p. 25). In the process of investigation, Feinberg and Soltis (1998) emphasize the importance of understanding the “intentions of the individual players,” the “shared understandings of the reasons for the activity,” as well as the “rules” that “regulate (govern)” or “define (constitute)” the activity (pp. 90-92). This resembles the notion of activity proposed by Leont’ve (1981) and elaborated by Wertsch (1985). To recall Wertsch’s conceptualization of activity, “[an] activity or activity setting is grounded in a set of assumptions about appropriate roles, goals, and means used by the participants in that setting” (p. 212). It influences the choice and significance of actions and operations.

As for the present study, the activity can be conceived as reforming early childhood teacher education, and the motive (overt) can be envisaged as improving the overall quality of learning among young children. While the same motive can result in various goals and actions, it also leads one to decide what to sacrifice so as to accomplish the goals. What this means is even when those who participate in the process have a shared understanding of the overt motive for education reform, the same policy can be

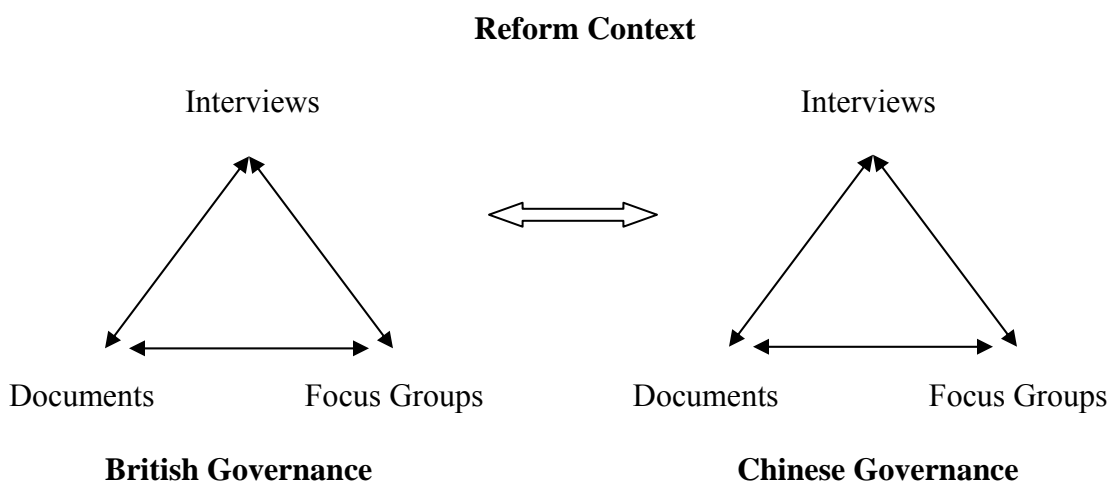
interpreted and acted upon differently by different people, like policymakers, teacher educators, and kindergarten principals, etc. Yet both the reform context and the policy itself can open up or limit the choice of actions of different groups of actors. What is sacrificed so as to accomplish other things may involve the use of power and authority. To deal with the “irreducible” tensions created by various policy initiatives (cultural tools), early childhood teacher educators have to engage in constant negotiations and make conscious decisions on how they want to master, appropriate, or resist the given initiatives, based on their own professional knowledge and theories of practice.

With teacher educators as the focal point of this study, data will be collected directly from them through interviews, as well as from early childhood leaders, policymakers, and kindergarten principals through interviews and focus group discussions. Different kinds of documents (i.e., government, organizational, and personal documents, as well as printed press) will also form the corpus of data. Given the data, temporal and multi-level comparative and interpretative analyses will then be conducted. The following two figures summarize the research methods adopted by the current study:

Figure 1. Comparative and Interpretative Analysis within Each Data Set and across Time

Data Set	British Sovereignty ↔ Chinese Sovereignty
Documents	Government documents ↔ Government documents ↓ Organizational documents ↔ Organizational documents ↓ Personal documents ↔ Personal documents ↓ Printed press ↔ Printed press
Interviews	Teacher educators ↔ Teacher educators ↓ Early childhood leaders ↔ Early childhood leaders ↓ Policy makers ↔ Policy makers
Focus Group Discussions	Kindergarten principals ↔ Kindergarten principals

Figure 3. Comparative and Interpretative Analysis across Data Sets and across Time



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