

Research Assessment Exercise 2020
Impact Case Study

University: [The Education University of Hong Kong |

Unit of Assessment (UoA): [41 Education (incl. curriculum & instruction, education administration & policy and other education)]

Title of case study: [Establishing Free Quality Kindergarten Education |

(1) Summary of the impact

[This research led to fundamental changes in government policy and the funding of early childhood education. It showed that the marketization model using a voucher funding decreased educational quality and increased social and economic inequities. The adoption of its findings by major professional and advocacy groups led to the government's abandonment of its policy of marketization and a new funding model of direct subsidies for not-for-profit kindergartens. The change has decreased the economic burden on families, particularly the poor, and improved teacher-student ratios and teachers' salaries which are key conditions for improving education quality. |

(2) Underpinning research

[Yuen, a member of the Department of Education Policy and Leadership at EdUHK, conducted research that revealed an urgent need to examine and address the social injustices inherent in a marketised education system, especially the effects of the voucher scheme on parental choice of kindergarten and the overall quality of early education. Her research, which involved knowledge transfer and public engagement, was backed by four sequential studies conducted at EdUHK between 2007 and 2012. It identified key limitations in Hong Kong government's 2007 policy of giving parents a fee subsidy in the form of a voucher.

Working with colleagues at EdUHK, Yuen piloted and launched the first large-scale study in Hong Kong on the effects of the scheme in an education market. Her work in this case study was supported by internal and competitive external grants (e.g. EdUHK's Strategic Planning Office; PPR #8013-PPR-10), and was also done in collaboration with the Council of Non-profit Making Organizations for Pre-primary Education in 2010.

The first two studies involved surveys, focus groups, and interviews with over 1,700 parents of different socio-economic backgrounds about their kindergarten choices and their views on the voucher scheme. The major finding was that compared with children from more affluent families, those from disadvantaged backgrounds encountered barriers in market access due to their parents' different ways of choosing and limitations in the choices available to them [R1, R2, R3].

The third study in 2010 for the Council of Non-profit Making Organizations for Pre-primary Education involved more than 10,000 parents. It identified the reasons they chose kindergartens with long whole-day classes – which receive limited government support compared to half-day classes – and the challenges they faced. The key insight was that these kindergartens were found to serve mostly children from poorer families with working mothers [R4]. Together, these studies generated clear evidence of the inequities and injustices arising from the marketised structure of early childhood education and Yuen offered policy recommendations for free quality provision. The fourth quantitative research, conducted in 2010 with colleagues from the Strategic Planning Office, surveyed over 1,400 kindergarten teachers. The key finding was that teachers faced intense pressure due to policy requirements for professional upgrading and quality assurance, heavy non-teaching duties, as well as low morale caused by the lack of a career path and the removal of the recommended salary scale. The study, built on the previous research, revealed that the voucher scheme and market forces were damaging the provision of quality early education [R3, R5].

These two strands of research provided the conceptual foundation for Yuen's extensive knowledge transfer and public engagement activities, where she worked collaboratively with the early childhood education sector and various stakeholder groups [R6].

Yuen's research contributed to new empirical evidence and knowledge about education vouchers, education markets, and activism in teacher professionalism. This was relevant to Hong Kong and internationally given the increasing policy interest in privatising and marketising school systems. Her publication in 2017 [R1] received the Outstanding Paper Award at the Hong Kong Studies Annual Conference 2017-18. |

(3) References to the research

[R1] Yuen, G., & Lam, M. S. (2017). Mothers' experiences of a voucher scheme within the context of Hong Kong's early education: Issues of affordability and justice. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 82, 185-194.

[R2] Yuen, G. (2015). Markets, choice of kindergarten, mothers' care responsibilities, and the voucher scheme in Hong Kong. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 48, 167-176.

[R3] Yuen, G., & Grieshaber, S. (2009). Parents' choice of early childhood education services in Hong Kong: A pilot study about vouchers. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 10(3), 263-279.

[R4] Yuen, G., & Yu, W. B. (2010). *Parents' choice of full-day early childhood services*. Hong Kong: Education Policy Forum, Department of Education Policy and Leadership, Hong Kong Institute of Education. (in Chinese).

[R5] Yuen, G., Lai, K. C., & Law, K. Y. (2010). *The work of early childhood teachers after the implementation of the pre-primary education voucher scheme*. Hong Kong: Strategic Planning Office, Hong Kong Institute of Education. (in Chinese).

[R6] Yuen, G. (2018). Masks, masquerades and ironic performances: Getting our(selves) heard. In K. J. Kennedy & J. C. Lee (Eds.), *Routledge International Handbook of Schools and Schooling in Asia* (pp. 441-449). London, New York: Routledge.

Research Funding: Research on the voucher scheme was funded by an Internal Research Grant (2007/08, value: HK\$131,080) [R3]; Public Policy Research Grant (Grant #: 8013-PPR-10, 2010/12, value: HK\$365,490) [R1, R2]; and the Education Policy Forum of the Department of Education Policy and Leadership in collaboration with the Council of Non-profit Making Organizations for Pre-primary Education (2010) [R4]. Research on the kindergarten profession (2010) was funded by the Strategic Planning Office of HKIEd (former of EdUHK) [R5]. |

(4) Details of the impact

Backed by research, Yuen advocated for the provision of free quality education amidst a largely market-driven sector which resulted not only in the reshaping of policy discourse, but also a subsequent major policy change that introduced Free Quality Kindergarten Education (FQKE) scheme to "provide good quality and highly affordable kindergarten education and enhance the accessibility of students to different modes of services" [S1]. The policy change benefitted children and parents, especially the socioeconomically disadvantaged, as well as kindergarten operators and teachers.

Reshaping policy discourse. Yuen's research provided insights that reframed understanding of the negative impacts of the marketised funding model and stimulated an alternative discourse of social equity and quality education for early childhood education.

In 2013, she was nominated as convenor of the Alliance on the Fight for 15-year Free Education (the Alliance) and was appointed to the Subcommittee on Objectives, Teacher Professionalism and Research under the Committee on Free Kindergarten Education established by the Education Bureau (EDB) to review the sector [S2]. In these roles, Yuen drew on the comprehensive proposal for 15-

year free education she wrote in 2012 based on her research into the voucher system, involving its accessibility and quality of early education provided [S3]. The proposal was adopted in 2014 as the Alliance's reform blueprint thus establishing a coherent policy framework of public provision [S4]. Maggie Koong, the subcommittee convenor, remarked that Yuen "contributed immensely to the development of the Proposed Framework of Kindergarten Education in Hong Kong" [S5].

As Alliance convenor, Yuen led public engagement with the equity, quality and justice issues highlighted in her research [R1-5] by organising public hearings, press conferences, teacher events, and meetings with legislators and EDB officials. Public awareness, reflected in references to these issues in 180 newspaper articles and nine international, nine television, and nine radio programmes, was further substantiated by numerous policy forum and seminar discussions attended by around 1,600 principals, teachers, parents, and organisation representatives [R6]. All of these accelerated the momentum previously initiated by the knowledge transfer activities of the four studies. Wong Siu Fung, a core Alliance member and kindergarten principal, reflected how Yuen's work "raised the awareness of the sector on the deep and widespread impact of policy on educational development, and prompted the sector's willingness to confront problems in education" [S6].

Ip Kin-Yuen, a legislator, said that the "research findings of Dr Yuen provided the community at large with solid information that enabled not only the education sector but also the policymakers to get rid of the voucher scheme and embrace the idea of 15-year free education... as Deputy Chair of the Legislative Council's Panel on Education, the impact of her works was very obvious as I myself and many early childhood education leaders frequently made reference to them" [S7].

Increasing access. Despite the difficulties in drawing exact causal connections in policy changes as local policymakers rarely cite specific research, it is significant that the government initiative to replace vouchers with direct subsidies for kindergartens drew upon Yuen's comprehensive proposal and public engagement.

Endorsed by the Chief Executive in the 2016 Policy Address, the implementation of FQKE in 2017 directly impacts an estimated 130,000 children aged 3-6 each year across 748 (97%) non-profit kindergartens in Hong Kong. With the government raising the annual recurrent expenditure from about HK\$4 billion to about HK\$6.7 billion in 2017 [S8], substantial fee reductions enabled 90% of kindergartens with half-day classes to offer free provision and 70% of those with whole-day classes to charge less than HK\$1,000 per month, as opposed to 5% in 2016 [S9].

Improving quality. Before the change to direct subsidies, the resources of long whole-day classes were limited compared to half-day and whole-day classes. In response to concerns about sustainability and quality, the new scheme introduced a basic subsidy unit for half-day operation and additional subsidies for whole-day and long whole-day operations, at 1.3 and 1.6 times the basic unit, respectively. The teacher-to-student ratio, excluding the principal, has improved from 1:15 to 1:11, facilitating more attention for students, especially those with special learning needs, and alleviating teachers' work pressure. A three-level teaching staff structure with a minimum-maximum salary range for each level was introduced in kindergartens to promote career progression and improve remuneration [S1]. Under FQKE, teachers in participating kindergartens have both higher salaries and higher percentage increases at 12.8%, compared to 7.5% for private for-profit kindergartens [S10]. The improved remuneration, along with a continuous professional development policy and further professional learning opportunities, helps shrink the gap between kindergarten teachers and school teachers [S9]. |

(5) Sources to corroborate the impact

[S1] 2016 Policy address: Education Bureau's Policy Initiatives. Legislative Council Panel on Education. 15 January 2016. <http://bit.ly/2uaRofo>

[S2] Children First, Right Start for All. Report of the Committee on Free Kindergarten Education. Legislative Council. LC Paper No. CB(4)1102/14-15(01). 28 May 2015. <https://bit.ly/2NCMKzm>.

[S3] Working Group of 15-year Free Education. (2012). *Full subsidy for early childhood education: Comprehensive proposal for implementing 15-year free education*. November 2012. (in Chinese) <https://bit.ly/2tWW34O>

[S4] Alliance on the Fight for 15-year Free Education. (2014). *Recommendations submitted to the Committee on Free Kindergarten Education* (in Chinese). 13 August 2014. <https://bit.ly/2IV8jP3>

[S5] E-mail communication with Maggie Koong, Convenor, Subcommittee on Objectives, Teacher Professionalism and Research. 3 May 2019.

[S6] Letter from Wong Siu-fung, a core member of the Alliance on the Fight for 15-year Free Education and Principal, Fanling Assembly of God Kindergarten (in Chinese). 7 March 2018.

[S7] E-mail communication with Ip Kin-Yuen, Member, Legislative Council. 5 March 2018.

[S8] EDB releases list of applicant kindergartens for Free Quality Kindergarten Education Scheme. 30 September 2016. <http://bit.ly/2W50DKd>

[S9] Implementation of Free Quality Kindergarten Education. Legislative Council. LC Paper No. CB(4)427/17-18(02). 5 January 2018. <http://bit.ly/2MseUwE>

[S10] Pre-primary education in Hong Kong. Statistical highlights, Legislative Council. ISSH33/17-18. 28 June 2018. <http://bit.ly/2S6AOew> |