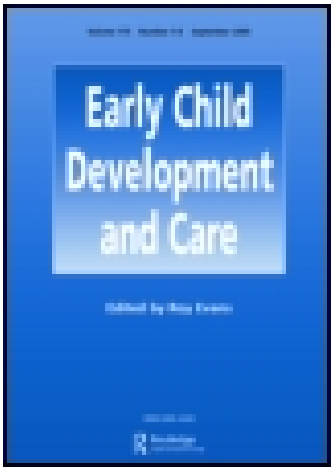

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Enhancing early childhood schooling of South Asian children in Hong Kong: beliefs and perceptions of kindergarten teachers and principals

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Enhancing early childhood schooling of South Asian children in Hong Kong: beliefs and perceptions of kindergarten teachers and principals

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Enhancing quality early childhood education and enabling access for ethnic minority South Asian (SA) children in kindergartens have increasingly been a social concern in Hong Kong. This empirical study examines the beliefs and perceptions of kindergarten teachers and principals towards educating SA children in their own educational settings. The research focus was sharpened by a case-study method to examine the effectiveness of SA children from two different kindergartens with significant demographic differences. In total, 10 focus group interviews with 29 teachers and individual interviews with the 2 principals were conducted to understand their perspectives on the learning and transitional needs of SA children. The findings reveal a remarkable difference between the beliefs and perceptions of both teachers and principals from the two kindergartens in response to the diverse needs of SA children. School policy, practice and the implications for the development of early years education are discussed.

Keywords: enabling access; South Asian children; ethnic minority; early childhood education; Hong Kong

Introduction

In Hong Kong, South Asians (SA) are the fastest growing student group, although they remain a distinct minority in mainstream classrooms (Yuen, 2013). They are defined as non-Chinese speaking (NCS) students as they come from homes where the local dialect, Cantonese, is not the primary spoken language, even though some NCS children can handle conversations in Cantonese. Between the school years of 2011/2012 and 2013/2014, there was an increase of NCS students in mainstream schooling from 11,570 to 12,029 in kindergarten, from 7703 to 8290 in primary and from 6373 to 7576 in secondary (Education Bureau, 2014).

However, these figures do not reflect the total SA population of school age. With regard to children aged 3–5 years, 19.4% of those born to Filipinos, 17.1% of those born to Filipino-Asian mixed, 16.1% born to Pakistani and 14.6% of those born to Nepalese did not receive any preschool education provision (Hong Kong Institute of Education, 2013). Moreover, they were also prone to falling further behind in their schooling in subsequent years (Zhao, 2013). The 2011 census reported that the

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enrolment ratio of ethnic minority children for pre-primary education in Hong Kong was only 86.9%. A comparison of the figures for 2001, 2006 and 2011 also shows that this ratio has been increasing during that period. The dropout rates of Nepalese (21%) and Pakistani (16%) senior secondary students were much higher than for mainland Chinese (6%) (China Daily Hong Kong Edition, 2013). From this, it is evident that there are noticeable disparities in the educational opportunities available to the different ethnic student groups in Hong Kong. While the need for more educational support to address the needs of SA children has recently become a visible policy issue, nevertheless, there is a lack of clarity over how best to move forward.

The international contexts

Enabling educational access is a universal, noble and basic initiative to eliminate inequality and discrimination against students from socially and economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Indeed, education for all (EFA) has been a key research focus within the international community (UNESCO, 2014). The EFA Global Monitoring Report of UNESCO pledges quality education for all those who face socio-demographic disadvantages and/or economic hardships. It further urges the raising of teaching quality in early grades. There is research evidence suggesting that preschool provision contributes to increased disparities in academic-related outcomes of childhood education among ethnic minority groups (Bhattacharyya, Ison, & Blair, 2003). Previous studies have identified a close relationship between the social context (family SES and education inequalities) and academic achievement (Hill & Sandfort, 1995; Maynard & Harding, 2010). In the UK, Bhattacharyya et al. (2003) note that children born to Pakistani, Bangladeshi and black families are more likely to receive free school meals and underachieve in public examinations than their white or Chinese counterparts.

The policy issues: immigrant children and school exclusion

Promoting educational success and preventing premature school dropouts are two sides of the same coin. Ethnic minorities in America are overrepresented in lower socio-economic and educational attainment groups (Paret, 2006). Researchers (see Gonzalez, 2007; Phinney & Rotheram, 1987) are concerned that a higher proportion of ethnic minority children have lower family SES than mainstream groups. Poverty and sociocultural factors are significant predictors for the resilience or vulnerability of ethnic minority students at school. Within the overarching topic of equality of access, increasing interest in such relationships has stimulated more research attention towards the quality of learning outcomes among those who are socially and economically disadvantaged (McCowan, 2010). This issue was addressed in the 11th UNESCO report entitled, 'Teaching and Learning: achieving quality for all' (UNESCO, 2014). This report also underscored the role of teachers in facilitating better learning outcomes, especially in early grades. In view of the global phenomenon of immigration, facilitating the learning of immigrant children and their success at school is a pressing issue (The Centre for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2011). A deep understanding of such a complex phenomenon requires, among other things, a careful examination of the nature of the support rendered to schools with high percentages of immigrant students. Gonzalez (2007) advocates a multidimensional perspective to investigate the interaction effects between biological, social and cultural factors to study the academic achievements of

minority students. Integration of family, schooling and community experiences can lead to higher levels of resilience and learning. School-based policies and provision for multicultural and multilingual classrooms should aim to remedy ethnocentrism in the traditional curriculum, deepen understanding and appreciation of different racial and cultural groups, defuse intergroup tensions and make the curricula relevant to the experiences, cultural traditions and historical contributions of the nation's diverse population (Brahim & Syarif Sumantri, 2010).

The professional issues: curriculum and teacher education

Arguments concerning the language difficulties of SA students centre on the validity of the watered-down Chinese language curriculum designed to help them cope with their learning challenges (Oxfam Hong Kong, 2014; Yeung, 2013). This has led to heated debates as to the root cause of the social and economic inequalities evident among SA students. The media and non-governmental organisations are unanimous in their criticism of the systematic segregation of SA children, which prevents them from receiving the right amount of learning support for Chinese language from pre-primary schooling onwards (Oxfam Hong Kong, 2014). Early Chinese language intervention can prevent premature dropout from school and help combat poverty (Li, 2014; Ming Pao Daily News, 2014). This issue has only recently been addressed through the reassurance of the Hong Kong government that early childhood education is an integral part of youth development, with the promise that the value of the pre-primary education voucher scheme would be increased accordingly (Government of the HKSAR, 2014). The policy document also calls for special support for curriculum design and teaching strategies necessary to enhance learning effectiveness and close the achievement gap between SA and Chinese students in Chinese language, and for more deliberated and concerted efforts to support SA students from early childhood education to secondary level.

Involvement of ethnic minority families

Working with ethnic minority families, Nagayama and Gilliard (2005) argue that cultural expectations regarding learning outcomes need to be acknowledged and reframed in order to achieve genuine home–school partnerships. A school curriculum has to be relevant to families with varied cultural backgrounds. Rigid and inward-looking ethnicity may create barriers and lead to divisions and tensions among diverse cultural groups (Brahim & Syarif Sumantri, 2010). Ponciano and Shabazian (Ponciano & Shabazian, 2012) note that curriculum differentiation is imperative to accommodate the cultural diversity within both a racial group and between groups, as each cultural context is unique for early learners and their families. Understanding the cultural backgrounds of preschool children can facilitate their active construction and acceptance of self-identities (Ogletree & Larke, 2010). The knowledge, skills and attitudes of teachers towards the cultural, religious and language diversity of families are determining factors towards positive school engagement of ethnic student groups (Birch & Ladd, 1997; Ponciano & Shabazian, 2012; Winterbottom & Leedy, 2014). In Hong Kong, previous studies reveal a mismatch between the ethnic diversity of student groups and the mono-cultural teaching environment whereby teachers are generally unprepared and insensitive to intercultural issues in the classroom (Grossman & Yuen, 2006; Yuen, 2013). Education towards assimilation is common among Chinese

immigrant students. Both teachers and parents of immigrants place strong emphasis on acquiring Hong Kong mainstream culture, even at the expense, in some cases, of giving up aspects of their home culture (Yuen, 2010b). Hitherto, cultural insensitivity has impeded effective learning and teaching in culturally diverse classrooms. Consequently, this is becoming one of the key issues in teacher professional development (Yuen, 2010a).

In childhood education, the role of families is as crucial as that of schools in enhancing positive school engagement (Ihmeideh & Oliemat, 2015). Such is even more the case for immigrant families, for with their children, they also bring their language, culture and aspirations. Johnson and Kossykh (2008) note that ethnic minority mothers are mostly homemakers and consequently tend to provide a positive home learning environment for children who do not attend preschool. Similarly, Phinney and Rotheram (1987) acknowledge the contribution of the cultural factor in the cognitive and social development of children regardless of the educational level of their parents. Positive engagement of parents in their children's educational process results in improved school attendance and outcomes (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). On the other hand, poor economic conditions, broken relationships and cultural barriers can hinder the involvement of ethnic minority families. A whole-school approach is recommended to mobilise resources so as to include these families into the school and reduce the impact of such obstacles (Gonzalez, 2007). Empirical studies of Asian societies confirm that home culture also correlates with students' emotional resilience and academic achievement (Sharma, 2012). Schools with children from diverse ethnic groups should provide bilingual personnel and embrace the values of multicultural education to address the needs of families from different cultures (Varela, 2008). Sharma (2012) has provided further information on the challenge in enhancing parental involvement in school engagement among ethnic minority students in Hong Kong.

Less is known, however, of the situation with regard to the perceptions, efforts (or lack of) and the nature of support for childhood education in Hong Kong in response to the perceived needs of SA students in their educational settings. A study of these issues will lead to a deeper understanding of how and why such disparities exist among personnel and the kindergartens in which they work. In response to this, this study examines the situation of young SA children in two Hong Kong kindergartens, with specific reference to the beliefs and perceptions of teachers and principals.

Method

This study aims to deepen public understanding of school personnel's perspectives on young ethnic SA children in Hong Kong kindergartens. Gonzalez (2007) argues that cognitive development and developmental outcomes of immigrant students cannot be measured by standardised tests. Second, the case-study method allows the researcher to attend multiple sources of evidences of a particular setting and formulate a holistic understanding of the case (Yin, 2009). Hence, an observation protocol was developed to guide the data collection process. It included a whole-week site-based participatory classroom observations, interactive conversations with the principal, teachers and students of each kindergarten. Deliberated attention was given to triangulate, examine and categorise the interview data with observation evidences to verify the data through consulting school personnel and literature (Roulston, 2014; Yin, 2009). The primary research question was 'What are the key educational concerns of young SA children in childhood schooling in Hong Kong?' This was supplemented by the following

sub-questions: In what ways does the concentration of SA children in a kindergarten make a difference to their social and academic engagement at school? Is home–school collaboration with ethnic minority families perceived as a major challenge, as most parents are shy away from school? What are the policy and provision recommendations for nurturing the developmental and achievement potential of young ethnic minority students in Hong Kong?

The researcher first identified two kindergartens with contrasting demographic profiles, one with high and one with low SA student populations and telephoned their principals to brief them of the project. Formal written invitation was mailed to them with details of the roles of the schools and the research team in the entire project. To acknowledge the partnerships, an individual school report would be provided upon the completion of the project. These kindergartens were selected to uncover the education process of SA children in both settings. In so doing, attention was also given to compare their similarities and differences in terms of policy, provision, schools' ethos and student engagement. The international research ethics standards were observed and prior consent from participants was obtained. All the names quoted below are pseudonyms.

To safeguard children's rights, the data collection procedures were first endorsed by the university's research ethics committee. Upon the approval of the committee and the school support, the fieldwork schedules were finalised. Primary data consisted of 12 taped conversations with 2 principals and 29 teachers, comprising 3 senior teachers, 6 native English speaking teachers, 2 SA teachers and 18 Chinese teachers (Tables 1 and 2). Ten focus group semi-structured interviews were conducted with the teachers, while the two principals were interviewed individually. Each interview lasted 60–90 minutes. All the participating teachers were invited by their principals. Among them, 3 had received postgraduate degrees, 15 a degree, 12 certificates of education and 1 a diploma. Prior to observations, the researcher first consulted the student record provided by the school and formal introduction of the researcher was given by the class teachers. In addition, field notes were taken along with filling the guided observations forms. Individual student tracking data were collected through interactions and formal school visits. All interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim (Roulston, 2014). A feedback session was conducted with each kindergarten to share the preliminary findings, to acknowledge participants' contributions and to triangulate the data. Both schools expressed difficulties in organising parent interviews. SA mothers mainly speak their own dialect and shy away from public while most fathers are engaged at work. Owing to the focus and space, the data reported in this article are concentrated upon the principals and teachers and their perspectives.

The two Kindergartens

In terms of student composition, the two kindergartens, Peace Kindergarten and King Kindergarten, are from opposite extremes in terms of size, funding and staff stability in addition to the differences in proportions of SA student population. In Peace Kindergarten, SA students represented more than 90 per cent of the total student population, while in King Kindergarten, they represented less than two per cent. Consequently, with regard to the development of policies and support measures designed to address the perceived needs of the SA students, noticeable differences were observed.

King Kindergarten is a member of an education group in the New Territories and has over 800 plus students. Each of the 3 K1 classes comprises 27 children with 3

Table 1. Interviewee profiles of peace kindergarten.

Name	Class	Gender	Highest qualification	Teaching experience (year)	Year in this kindergarten	Position
Principal Yoyo	n/a	F	B.Ed.	34	31	Principal
Teachers						
YW	K3	F	CE	8	2 weeks	Class teacher
KK	K2	F	B.Ed.	32	1 month	Class teacher
YL	K3	F	B.Ed.	16	4	Class teacher
NET JO	K3	F	M.Ed.	30	1	Class Teacher
NET SN	K1	F	CE	1.5	4 months	Class teacher
NET AK	K1	F	Master	NA	3	Senior teacher
NY	K2	F	B.Ed.	2	9 months	Class teacher
SY	K2	F	B.Ed.	25	5 months	Class teacher
YP	K1	F	QKT	8	1 week	Class Teacher
SA NS	K2	F	BA	4	1	Class teacher
SA BN	K1	F	PGDE	5	5	Class teacher

teachers, while each of the K2 and K3 classes comprises 31 and 29 children, respectively, with 2 teachers. There were only 11 SA students, mainly from India, Pakistan and Nepal. However, the school also has 100 plus cross-boundary Chinese students who live in Mainland China. Principal Teresa does not envisage the number of SA students to increase despite there being a large SA community in the school district. The mission and vision of the King kindergarten are shaped chiefly by its current student demographic profile, rather than the other way round.

> We are quite a popular school among the local Chinese parents, and all our promotional and curriculum materials are basically in Chinese catering for the Chinese students. [However] since last year our notices have been in Chinese and English as a response to parents' requests.

At King, there are 55 teaching staff and 22 clerical staff, including 5 administrative staff and 3 NCS teachers. The majority of teachers in King Kindergarten (70%) were long termers with more than 10 years' work experience. The medium of instruction (MOI) is spoken Cantonese, except for the English classes. King Kindergarten has 3 levels and comprises more than 800 children in 3-session modes, with a total of 298 morning, 271 afternoon and 212 whole-day students.

By contrast, of the 180 children attending Peace Kindergarten, 170 were SA students, 80% of whom were ethnic Nepalese, with half born in Hong Kong. The percentage of SA children has been stable for more than 10 years and Principal Yoyo does not think the proportion of SA children will ever reach 100%. The kindergarten is run by a non-profit-making charity and is owned by the supervisor. Yoyo has served the kindergarten for 17 years as principal and has developed a personal commitment to her job. Over half the teaching team are NCS and there are 12 teachers overall. All school notices and staff meeting materials are bilingual. Each of the two K1 classes comprises 25 children with one Chinese and one NCS teacher per class. Unfortunately, due to low salaries, the average duration of employment of NCS teachers is two to three years. Moreover, there were only one or two permanent Chinese teachers, the others being

Table 2. Interviewee profiles of king kindergarten.

Name	Class	Gender	Highest qualification	Teaching experience (year)	Year in this kindergarten	Position
Principal Teresa				25	22	Principal
YM	K1A	F	B.Ed.	4	4	Class teacher
TW	K1A	F	CE	10	10	Class teacher
WS	K1A	F	BA	1.5	NA	Class teacher
LY	K2A	F	CE	12	8	Class teacher
KY	K2A	F	CE	2	2	Class teacher
KW	K2C	F	B.Ed.	12	12	Class teacher and K2 coordinator
YC	K2C	F	CE	11	7	Class teacher
WF	K3C	F	CE	2.5	2.5	Class teacher
HK	K3C	F	CE	5	4	Class teacher
Senior teacher AY	N1,K1	F	B.Ed.	18	18	N1 and K1 Senior teacher
Senior teacher WY	K2	F	CE	25	19	K2 Senior teacher
Senior teacher CW	K3	F	B.Ed.	17	17	K3 Senior teacher
MP	K1	F	CE	17	17	K1 Coordinator
SK	K3	F	CE	15	15	K3 Coordinator
SJ	K1	F	B.Ed.	10	10	K1 Vice coordinator
SH	K2	F	B.Ed.	20	20	K2 Vice coordinator
HM	K3	F	CE	15	15	K3 Vice coordinator
NET KA	N1, K1	F	Master	8	6	N1 and K1 NET
NET AC	K2	F	PGDE	9	1 month	K2 NET
NET RH	K3	F	Diploma	10	10	K3 NET

employed on a short-term contract basis. Forty per cent of the teachers work part-time only, either in the morning or in the afternoon session. In view of the recent promotion of Chinese language competency among SA children, Peace Kindergarten has started a new policy whereby English is used as a MOI for only three days a week, ensuring that Spoken Cantonese is used for the other three days. Space was also an issue, in that there were only four registered classrooms for 180 children. Peace Kindergarten operates as a half-day school.

Curriculum development and teaching approaches

In King Kindergarten, curriculum development was the sole responsibility of three middle managers, each of whom was free from teaching duties. They were experienced staff with 17, 18 and 25 years of service with the school, though none of them were professionally trained in curriculum design for childhood education. They designed the curriculum on a 'one-size-for-all' basis and took little account of the differences in culture, language and family SES of individual students. Their unanimous opinion

was that there was no need to make such differences explicit so as to protect, paradoxically, against exclusion:

> We make no attempt to tailor the curriculum to cater for the SA students. As they all wish to integrate into our mainstream society and the Chinese culture … We simply treat them as one of us (Hong Kong persons) and encourage them to participate in all kinds of activities. (Head teacher CW)

> I feel that there isn't any difference between mainstream and ethnic SA children. Hence we will not distinguish them and give them special care. In doing so, they can mingle better. (Head teacher AY)

The head teachers believed that assisting SA children in assimilating into the mainstream culture was important. They also tended to focus more on celebrating cultural externals than addressing values, learning styles and non-verbal communications. There is an unspoken expectation that these young SA children would soon adapt to the host culture.

By contrast, Peace Kindergarten opted for a more collegial approach of curriculum development that empowered frontline teachers to initiate changes, as highlighted by Principal Yoyo:

> Every teacher is responsible for one area of their subject curriculum. Upon completion of each task we would collate and synthesize their works to make them as a comprehensive unit. My job is to advise, coordinate and support their curriculum development endeavours and let them determine the curriculum.

One of the advantages of this teacher-led approach was a shared vision and mission among the teachers from Chinese and NCS backgrounds. Such co-teaching arrangements also encouraged them to examine their professional insights as well as cultural values and assumptions related to race, culture, class, gender and their impact on practice (Abdullah, 2009). For example, the Chinese teachers found their NCS colleagues over-relaxed in administering discipline. 'We noted that students tended to talk louder and more freely and walked around when the class was taught by our NCS colleagues', said one teacher with consensual agreement from her Chinese colleagues. But such is part of the shared learning process.

With regard to personal commitment, the teachers generally had a greater sense of ownership, especially the Chinese Language teachers who were confident and proud of their professional knowledge in designing a school-based Chinese curriculum for the SA students. A Chinese teacher asserted that,

> Year after year we have accumulated some good experience in diagnosing the learning needs of the SA children. Chinese is a symbolic language and hence we rely on a large amount of images to help them to grasp the basic meaning of Chinese vocabularies. (Teacher YL)

However, the Chinese teachers admitted that due to the high SA student ratio, Peace Kindergarten failed to affirm sufficiently the 'need for learning Chinese' among their SA children. 'Most of our K3 graduates would opt for an English-speaking primary school which normally operates as an international school.' This has caused more concerns from SA parents over the future of their children's schooling. Consequently, Principal Yoyo was determined to strengthen Chinese education in the next step.

Academic engagement/achievement of language-minority students

Most SA children have limited or no personal experience in interacting with mainstream Chinese culture and the teachers had to use simple English to communicate with them. In their first year of schooling, it is exceptionally hard for SA students to appreciate conversations and understand classroom interactions. Because language is interwoven with culture, it requires a certain level of language competency in order to respond and interact with peers from another culture. However, the extent to which teachers might appropriately address these obstacles was unclear. A class teacher from King Kindergarten believed that SA children might use language as an excuse to misbehave.

> A NCS in my class, sometimes when I give instructions in Chinese, he will pretend that he doesn't know what I am talking about. When I tell him to do homework, for example, he seems to be daydreaming and when you tell him to get something, he asks questions back. (Teacher SK)

One possible reason for such comments could well be a lack of intercultural sensitivity and the adoption of one's own value constructs to explain student behaviour. Below is a further example.

> SA children should integrate into HK culture as they have chosen to come to study in HK therefore … I think we should use the same method to teach them to help them adapt to HK earlier. (Teacher KW)

Another class teacher recalled her experience in teaching an Indian boy, Taylor, who had problems in understanding verbal instructions.

> He needs more simple and slow instructions. Although he may give a reply, he may not be able to complete the task and I may have to guide him for a few times in order for him to complete it. (Teacher SK)

However, not all the teachers attributed Taylor's struggles to possible language barriers and a communication block between him and the teacher.

> Maybe he doesn't understand [Cantonese] or he lacks interest [in learning]. Maybe his family does not provide the concept of the need for him to work hard in school. NCS usually tend to be lazier. (Teacher SJ)

When dialogue was shifted to evaluating SA strengths, teachers, SK, KW and SJ, agreed that they are very active, playful and friendly. 'But if they were asked to do other things, they may be less interested and need constant reminders to keep them on task' (Teacher SK).

SA children were portrayed as being socially active, but academically passive, with a lack of concentration on deskwork and a tendency to veer off task. Mastering concepts is acknowledged as an area of concern for the SA children, as this requires deeper understanding of the instructional language. Because Cantonese is the MOI in King Kindergarten, this is a real problem for them. On the other hand, teachers were aware that SA children did not have much problem in doing sums compared with their local counterparts. One teacher observed that:

> In forms of calculation, there is not a big difference as both Chinese and SA children don't know the concepts anyway. But after you teach them, they will understand how to calculate it. (Teacher KW)

Learning by doing seems to be the golden rule here. Another teacher shared a similar observation that 'K1 only deals with simple concepts so there is no difference regarding mathematics' (Teacher SJ). But a K2 teacher reminded us that:

> K2 is special since it is in the middle. Yes, SA students are able to count from 1–10 fluently or recognize shapes, but when it goes into abstract mathematics concepts like bigger, thicker, wider & etc. then they will need to have more time to digest. They will have to have an object which they can touch, or feel in order to grasp the concepts, since they don't understand the meanings. It all depends on whether they know the Chinese words that we are saying or not. (Teacher KW)

This K2 teacher underscored the crux of teaching effectiveness in a multicultural classroom, where children have different levels of language competence. Some SA children simply had to make do with their partial learning. Teachers from Peace Kindergarten were able to give a critical appraisal of the plus and minus factors, of co-educating the local and SA children under the same roof.

> Some Chinese are introvert, they want to speak but they can't express themselves in English. But the Nepalese kids are more active and engaged. SA kids would do what the teachers teach them to. Maybe they come from a less privileged home hence are more curious about learning. (Teacher YL)

It would be fair to conclude that the judgements of teachers concerning the academic potential of SA children are somewhat coloured by perceptions of their learning behaviours as being more problematic. Subsequently, they may develop negative views on their academic ability (Tackey, Barnes, & Khambhaita, 2011).

Experiences of working with parents

In King Kindergarten, middle managers were very aware of the disadvantaged status of the SA children:

> King Kindergarten is a Chinese medium school and hence mastering the Chinese language is one big issue for effective home-school communication. Due to the lack of Chinese language proficiency, SA parents were unable to provide learning support for their children. (Head teacher CW)

She continued to assert that the government has a crucial role to play to assist SA parents.

> The government should provide more support for the parents, such as to advertise the importance of early childhood education among the SA parents. To reach the parents, promotional leaflets should be printed in their own language, be it Indonesian, Urdu and Hindi. Currently, we are using a third language, English, to communicate. However, English is foreign to all of us. (Head teacher CW)

For the three middle managers, teaching in an intercultural setting was perceived as a challenge to their professional practice.

> We accept children of all nationalities to apply but we shall not make any cultural adaptations for them. They were born in HK and having the same welfare benefits. We have to treat them as the same as the local … no need to provide additional support. Their parents

> should take care of their own kids, for their religious concerns, they should visit our website for lunch menu regularly. The government should provide more education for SA parents to engage in their kids' learning. (Head teacher CW)

There seems to be a genuine case for considering hiring bilingual personnel, to build bridges between parents and teachers, to strengthen home–school collaboration (Varela, 2008).

The general feeling for handling cultural differences in both kindergartens is that it is a frustrating reality. Teachers of King Kindergarten wished the government would offer more parental education in the local community to help them assimilate into mainstream schooling:

> The parents should learn Chinese. Since they decided to live in HK, they should learn the local language (Cantonese). The government should provide (Chinese) lessons with the parents to assist them in mastering Chinese then their children can get help in learning Chinese from both parents and the school. (Teacher SJ)

Even in Peace Kindergarten, cultural diversity was a real challenge to the teaching staff and created a lot of tension among teachers, the principal and parent stakeholders. Teachers generally believed that parents of SA children were too relaxed in offering home support for consolidating school teaching on discipline issues, such as for lining up for changing classroom, toilet training and raising hands before responding to and/or asking questions. Teachers admitted that training SA children with routines was very hard 'as these are something different from their home culture.'

> SA parents are too protective towards their own children hence they become unmanageable. I have to enforce the class rules and regulations repeatedly. (Teacher YW)

The differences of parents also affected academic expectations and home support for consolidating learning, especially through the lack of Chinese language proficiency, as emphasised by a class teacher of King Kindergarten.

> When HK students learn a new word, their parents may be able to help them revise. However, NCS students may not have this opportunity. By the end of the week, HK students may be capable of getting the new word, while NCS students may still be struggling. (Teacher SJ)

The development of professional judgement necessary for realising the differences among mainstream and SA students in learning does not come naturally. One teacher, for example, believed that all children have the same baseline in learning regardless of their cultural backgrounds:

> Every kid is under the same condition because they all have no prerequisite knowledge. They are the same because it is about whether they have mastered the concept of the space they have to write. However, once we've taught them the concepts, when they go home, it is up to their parents to follow them up. This is very important and there are remarkable differences in homework support among the SA and Chinese families. (Teacher SK)

Coming from a society that puts achievement first, it is almost unfair to expect these teachers to be natural bridges among diverse student home cultures (Brahim & Syarif Sumantri, 2010; Ponciano & Shabazian, 2012). Nevertheless, on a practical

level, it is noted that they attempt quite a lot in this regard, meeting with parents in school, holding telephone conversations with them personally to try and understand their difficulties. But given the complexities of the situation, it is unsurprising to discover that there were many challenges in home–school collaboration between the teachers and parent stakeholders (Hill & Sandfort, 1995). They each represent their own culture and their own expectations. Without a more deliberate and concerted effort to provide training in intercultural competence, the gap between school and home expectations is unlikely to be narrowed to any great degree.

Discussion and conclusion

This study was motivated by the perceived challenges of addressing the diverse cultural needs of SA children in childhood education in Hong Kong. Our findings have confirmed international studies that student composition (family SES, linguistic and cultural factor) was a paramount contributor to the school responsiveness to cultural diversity (UNESCO, 2014). Comparing the school-based policies and provisions of King Kindergarten with Peace Kindergarten, the former represented a distinctly assimilationist approach to understanding mainstream early childhood education in Hong Kong, whereas the latter signified more the struggle to be relevant and responsive to their students' ethnicities. The present study supports previous works on intercultural sensitivity that Hong Kong teachers generally have a high regard for their host culture and seek to assimilate the immigrant students into mainstream society (Grossman & Yuen, 2006; Yuen, 2010a). Additionally, they concentrate mainly on their similarities that they need to be fit for local primary education.

The teacher–child relationship is a key factor for positive school engagement (Birch & Ladd, 1997). King Kindergarten adheres to the teacher-centred model, and this is one reason why the adjustment of SA children there has not been so easy compared with those in Peace Kindergarten. For example, the struggle of SA in responding to their teachers' instructions, especially dealing with abstract concepts in Mathematics and Chinese, was seen as a problem of the student and/or their families rather than recognising a professional role for themselves in closing racial–ethnic disparities, even in childhood education. Consistent with previous studies (Paret, 2006), teachers are generally unprepared professionally to accommodate the educational needs of minority children in intercultural contexts (Gay, 2002). The findings also suggest that, unlike Peace Kindergarten, the senior management of King Kindergarten failed to see their role in fostering an equal and welcoming learning culture for all ethnic groups. Probably, it will require the experienced teaching staff, including Principal Teresa and senior teachers, to shift their own perspectives on educating non-local students so as to recognise the potential impediments of their Chinese-centric school ethos and to facilitate effective differentiation of current curricular and instructional designs. As elsewhere, promoting academic success is the dominant agenda at King Kindergarten. This informs school policies and support measures and also encourages a systemic assimilation approach towards narrowing diversity gaps from the beginning of student admission (Pastor, 2009).

The case of Peace Kindergarten was quite different. Compared to King Kindergarten, school personnel there were more sensitive to their alternative multicultural student population. Principal Yoyo has a strong mission towards enabling success for all. However, she was not entirely clear about how to take the school from A to B. The main challenge facing Principal Yoyo was the lack of policy and provision support

from the government, leaving her isolated and battling alone in this issue. Nevertheless, like elsewhere, and because of the lack of professional training, the high proportion of SA children has generated enormous tensions and stress among teachers and parent stakeholders, particularly with regard to curricular issues (Gonzalez, 2007). Even though Principal Yoyo attempts to empower teachers to take the lead in tailoring the curriculum for student diversity, the school suffers from high teacher mobility and disparities in teacher quality between the senior and junior staff, a phenomenon noted by other international studies (Cohen-Vogel, Feng, & Osborne-Lampkin, 2013). The school's aspiration to welcome international families is being hindered by the limited resources available to bring their vision into fruition (Hill & Sandfort, 1995).

By contrast, while Principal Teresa of King Kindergarten has more resources to call upon, addressing diverse student needs has not yet been incorporated into her school agenda. Following the prevailing practice of childhood education, she locates her kindergarten's mission squarely upon early literacy preparation for primary education. This practice is further reinforced by the popularity of the kindergarten among mainstream families precisely for its reputation for drilling their children in readiness for competitive primary schools (Rao & Li, 2009).

It is not surprising that SA parents in King Kindergarten face more challenges than those in Peace Kindergarten. Being a distinct minority, both ethnically and linguistically, they were being excluded from the school structure without acquiring the necessary contextual knowledge and expertise to be able to actively engage in their children's education. Because of their strong desire to assimilate into the host society, this in turn has inhibited their courage to voice out the hardships they are encountering. Consequently, they are invisible and are on uneven ground with the teachers when it comes to practical concerns. The school culture hinders any change associated with external and socio-contextual factors. The hegemony of the centralised top-down management and curriculum development are systemic barriers against any policy modification to enable success for all.

Implications for policy and provision

Childhood education should be at the forefront in the moving forward of policy and innovations and laying foundations of change that can impact successive years of schooling in all societies (Abdullah, 2009). In line with the global educational agenda, the government is charged with the task of equalising achievement gaps between the mainstream and ethnic minorities through the allocation of necessary funding, together with a credible mechanism, for monitoring the effectiveness of the beneficiaries (UNESCO, 2014). Only a territory-wide policy can facilitate the process of successful educational inclusion of ethnic minority. In Hong Kong, as elsewhere, educational policy and school leadership should be the means by which the basic rights of all children are upheld in accessing equal and quality education in society, beginning from childhood. To fulfil such obligations, this would mean, among other things, extending the current period of free and compulsory education from nine to 15 years. Moreover, in order to avoid the sanctioning of assimilation policies, effective teachers need to be encouraged to walk the extra mile to reach out to all children (Gay, 2002). Enhancing professional knowledge of ethnic diversity is the key to ending ignorance and resistance in this area (UNESCO, 2014). Intercultural sensitivity and competence should therefore be included as a core element in both preservice teacher education and professional development programmes (Yuen, 2010a).

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