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An extensive search through existing literature suggests a strong inter-relationship between effective leadership and quality provision in early years settings (Early and Weindling, 2004; Sylva *et al*, 2004; Siraj- Blatchford and Manni, 2006; Jones and Pound, 2008; Santer and Cookson, 2009; Ho, 2010). What is not clear is how this relationship has come into being and how the one affects the other, if at all. We therefore have two key questions that we wish to address;

- What informs quality and leadership practices? Given the multitude of quality criteria (including national minimum standards), we are interested in exploring things how those working in the early years interpret these and other factors to inform their leadership and wider practice?
- What is the nature and landscape of the inter-relationship between these two important aspects of the provision of services for early childhood education and care (ECEC)? In essence, has the natural emergence of high quality leadership within the early years sector influenced the creation of an internal culture of high quality provision or has the external imposition of quality assurance schemes that insist on high quality leaders being appointed to administer them been the key component of this inter-relationship?

The way in which services have been developed in Hong Kong and England provides an opportunity for investigating the different models of how quality in ECEC is led, assessed and improved. There are two reasons for choosing these two systems. First, England and Hong Kong have both recognised the importance of ECEC and are actively involved in seeking to establish a more rigorous approach to the development of services for ECEC. One consequence of this increased attention has seen both England and Hong Kong fund the provision of early years

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education via a voucher system in Hong Kong (the *Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme* for all three to six year olds) and a system of funded places in England (the *Dedicated Schools Grant* for all three and four year olds and two year olds in deprived areas). The two systems are similar in scope and intention, but the scheme in Hong Kong is different with settings who wish to redeem the vouchers having to sign up to a quality assurance scheme (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2007), which is currently not a mandatory pre-requisite in England. Secondly, Hong Kong was a British colony from the year 1841 to 1997 and it will be interesting to look at whether and how the colonial history remains influential on the development of the education system. Most critically, we feel that we have a unique opportunity to understand the interplay of different contextual factors in shaping quality practice in ECEC using the lens of comparative studies.

In England, early years services have been under the spotlight for several years (for example see Randall, 2000 and Lloyd 2008) with an increased emphasis on leadership and the quality of provision. Recently, England has seen Ofsted take responsibility for the inspection and regulation of services as well as the development of the Early Years Foundation Stage, which is expected to be applied in all settings providing services for children from birth to five years. The Early Years Foundation Stage offers an external benchmark for the provision of education and care to all children under school age. Against these benchmarks settings can be assessed by Ofsted, with the resulting information being accessible in easily digested form as to which settings offer quality early education. This development has seen a move away from the quality assurance schemes rolled out at the earlier stages of the National Childcare Strategy; towards the self improvement models promoted by EYFS (see Campbell-Barr, 2010 forthcoming). Furthermore, an increased emphasis on the amalgamation of social care and education has seen an often uneasy alliance between educating and caring for young children that also has implications for leadership and the provision of quality services.

In Hong Kong, matters related to the quality of ECEC did not come onto the agenda of policymakers until the last decade, following the change of sovereignty. In the last ten years we have seen a number of measures taken to improve ECEC: the upgrading of professional qualifications, the harmonisation of pre-primary education services, the implementation of a quality assurance framework, and the introduction of new curriculum guidelines. Hong Kong's

approach to quality has a key difference to the approach adopted in England. In Hong Kong, the Education Bureau aims at promoting continuous self-improvement in schools through a three-stage cycle: annual development planning, implementation of self-evaluation, and review and follow-up. Under the *Quality Review Framework*, each school has to work out its development plan and conduct self-evaluation for quality assurance inspection. That is to say, the school self-evaluation requires joint efforts and aspirations from all school stakeholders. The policy of quality review adopts a ‘bottom-up approach’ to enhancing the quality of ECEC in Hong Kong, which is in sharp contrast to the top down system found in England. However, there are criticisms with both systems suggesting the potential for the two countries to ‘learn from each other’s mistakes’.

What is not clear is how the quality criteria developed by OFSTED in England and QAI in Hong Kong are being used to inform practice or how they are used in relation to other factors that can inform the operations of an early years setting, such as an assessment of the caliber of leadership or the views of children and parents. Thus, it is also unclear as to the landscape of the inter-relationship between leadership and quality. Questions should be asked as to whether the existence of high quality leadership ensures high quality provision for children and families or do quality assurance schemes demand quality leadership or are the two so inter-dependent that they cannot be separated?

We are therefore currently working in a collaborative partnership towards developing an international research project that will examine the leadership of quality provision in early year’s settings in England and Hong Kong. The main objective of the research is to explore the relationship between quality leadership and quality assurance as well as comparing and contrasting the different experiences of providers of early years care and education and begin to draw some conclusions about the inter-relationship and inter-dependency of leadership and quality. This research will be of significant value to teacher educators and school leaders in their efforts to support the quality improvement agenda as well as helping to shape leadership education and training. It will also contribute to an understanding of the similarities and differences in the two systems and the interplay of different cultural contexts and dynamics in shaping early childhood education and care.

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