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Abstract

With a growing awareness of the importance of early childhood education, both the governments of Hong Kong and England have increased investment through providing fee assistance to parents for buying services and providing funding to providers for offering 'free' places respectively. Alongside the increased funding of early childhood education, a heightened interest in the quality of settings has arisen. This paper aims at developing a framework for comparative studies by addressing the similarities and differences in quality improvement of both systems. Three key issues are discussed including relevancy of the quality criteria for assessment, interpretations of quality improvement mechanism and its use on guiding practice, and the influence of contextual factors in terms of stakeholders' views in the quality process. It is argued that these key issues are fundamental to investigate if our own attempts to deepen our understanding of the interplay of different sociocultural contexts and dynamics in shaping the quality improvement of early childhood education.

Key Words: Early years education, quality, Honk Kong, England

Introduction

A substantial body of early childhood literature documents the close connections between the quality of early childhood education (ECE) and the nature of development and learning. Quality ECE is not only a concern of parents but also those of other different stakeholders including early childhood professionals, government officials, and policymakers in designing and providing educational services and programmes for young children. With a growing awareness of the importance of early years, open discussions have become increasingly devoted to the quality of ECE. The quest for quality improvement is high on the agenda of educational reform in many countries. In an age of globalization, policymakers tend to look aboard for promising solutions to local problems. However, much of the comparative literature has indicated that an uncritical transfer of educational policy and practice from one sociocultural context to another is problematic (e.g. Tikly et al, 2003). To address the issues of compatibility, comparative studies aim to create a context-relevant knowledge-base for education policy and practice in different contexts. This article looks to compare the issues of quality assessment and improvement in ECE in two countries: Hong Kong and England. The similarities and differences in educational systems will be explored in order to understand the interplay of different sociocultural contexts and dynamics in shaping quality improvement of early childhood. First, in recent years, both governments have recognized the importance of ECE with increased investment to enable parents to access services (i.e. *Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme* for all three to six year olds in Hong Kong and the *Dedicated Schools Grant* for all three and four year olds in England). Currently, efforts have been made to provide clearer guidance on what constitutes good quality ECE through the development of an early years curriculum framework (i.e. *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* in Hong Kong and *Early Years Foundation Stage* in England), and a set of

regulatory guidelines for quality service (i.e. *Performance Indicators* in Hong Kong *and Early Years Foundation Stage* in England). There has been an observable change of focus in the thinking of the two governments about school's own role and responsibility for leading service qualities and performance. Second, Hong Kong was a British colony from the year 1841 to 1997. The British government introduced an education system in Hong Kong based on their own model. More than ten years after the transfer of sovereignty from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China, the colonial history still has deep influences on the development of education system in Hong Kong. It would be interesting to understand the interplay of different contextual factors in shaping quality practice through the lens of comparative studies. In this way, research of this type will contribute to strengthening the dialogue between Hong Kong and England concerning how to address major challenges in improving the quality of early childhood education.

This article first provides definitions of ECE in Hong Kong and England. The following section takes up the topic of the importance of quality ECE. Then, it critically reviews the current issues of quality improvement. The first three sections lay the foundation for later discussion. The fourth section discusses the patterns of investment in Hong Kong and England to highlight the changes in economic operation of the early years sector which leave questions around the quality of service provision. The fifth section addresses the quality improvement policies of both educational systems to point out the tensions and potentials that they have for developing the quality of the sector. The concluding section fleshes out the fundamental issues of quality improvement calling for further research between Hong Kong and England.

ECE in Hong Kong and England

One of the key difficulties is reaching a clear definition of what is provided in early years settings, in other words what is their 'core business'? Some commentators write about Early Childhood Education, others write about Early Childhood Education and Care and increasingly the terms are interchangeable and used indiscriminately. Indeed, the term ECE has been used in the introductory paragraphs of this paper without fully defining what we mean by this. Clarity of definition is important in order to determine the essential requirements of providing a high quality environment for young children and their families. Therefore, a closer examination of these terms and a debate on what is emphasized or privileged through legislation, policy and/or practice should form a key aspect of any comparative research in order to determine the priorities of each nation. Here, Early Childhood Education (ECE) is the provision of services that facilitate the process whereby adults help young children to understand the world around them, as well as nurturing their all-round, holistic development. The term 'Early Childhood Education' used in this paper is comparable with 'early care' and 'early years education', as the current work of early childhood professionals focuses on intertwined aspects of education and care. This is a relatively new phenomenon as hitherto early years settings were regarded as most commonly providing either education (e.g. nurseries, pre-schools) or care (e.g. childminders, daycare nurseries). As both service provision and policy intervention have increased in both Hong Kong and England, the boundary between education and care has become blurred. In Hong Kong this has occurred since the harmonization of pre-primary services in 2006 and in England there have been various policy developments, such as bringing childcare and education services under the remit of the same government department (the Department of Children School and Families, which has since become the Department of Education under the coalition Government elected in

May 2010) and the introduction of the *Early Years Foundation Stage*. However, despite the blurring of boundaries, there are still divisions in the recognition and funding of early years education and care services in both countries. In general, ECE programmes include any type of programmes that serves children in the early years before the commencement of statutory education, usually between the ages of zero to six, dependent on the jurisdiction of education authority. ECE refers to services provided by kindergartens, preschools, nurseries or infant/child care programmes.

In Hong Kong, ECE refers to kindergartens, kindergarten-cum-childcare centres, and child care centres, including crèches, residential centres and day nurseries, which cater for various needs. Day nurseries provide day care services for children whose parents are both working. Crèches and residential centres serve children who lack normal family care and provide either permanent family services or residential care. After the harmonisation of pre-primary services in 2006, kindergartens, registered with the Education Bureau, provide services for children from three to six years old. Childcare centres are registered with the Social Welfare Department and include nurseries, catering for children aged two to three; and crèches, looking after infants from birth to two. Kindergarten-cum-childcare centres are required for dual registration and provide two types of services just mentioned. In England, the introduction of the *Early Years Foundation Stage* means that all providers offering services for children aged birth to five are delivering the same curriculum. Service providers represent those more commonly associated with education including schools, pre-schools and nursery schools and those associated with care, including day nurseries, childminders and wrap around care facilities. All service providers are registered by the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted). Within these providers there will be those who receive the Dedicated Schools Grant to offer free early years education to three and four year

olds (e.g. schools, pre-schools, nursery schools, daycare and childminders) and those who provide care services to support working parents (e.g. childminders and daycare), but with no state funding going directly to the provider. For the purpose of this paper, however, the focus is on those settings that receive the *Pre-primary Education Voucher* in Hong Kong and the *Dedicated Schools Grant* in England.

Why quality ECE is important?

There is little doubt about the importance of early childhood education in contemporary societies. In discussing this subject, there are two main perspectives: developmental and human capital. The developmental perspective focuses on the impact of ECE on children's physical, social, verbal, cognitive, and intellectual development. Many scholars argue that positive experience in early childhood lays the foundation for future development, learning and wellbeing of young children (e.g. Bowman et al., 2000). High-quality ECE has a positive influence on language and cognitive development (Resnick and Snow, 2009). The Effective Pre-school and Primary Education (EPPE) project conducted by Sylva et al. (2010) is a large-scale European study (conducted in England) that has shown that quality ECE enhances children's social and intellectual development. Quality ECE has a positive impact on children's later school success and on the prevention of learning disabilities (National Institute on Child Health and Human Development Early Child Care Research Network, 2003). Moreover, in a comprehensive review of research on ECE, Lamb (1998) concludes that the quality of these settings clearly has positive effects on children's holistic development and future growth, 'especially when children would otherwise experience impoverished and relatively unstimulating home environments' (p.104). Quality ECE helping to reduce the negative effects of poverty for disadvantaged children have

been demonstrated in some current research (Woodhead, 2009). In short, there is not much controversy on the view that quality ECE can benefit the all-round development of young children in both the short and long term.

Currently, the role and function of early childhood institutions is shifting not only for nurturing individual development but also for expanding the human capital of a society. The main factor contributing to the need of rethinking the function of ECE today is connected with the development of the knowledge-based economy. In the global context, knowledge is recognized as the key to productivity and economic growth. World Bank (2003) highlights that building knowledge-based economy has emerged as effective means by which to achieve global competitiveness. The report of OECD (1996) also pinpointed that this new form of economy is featured by increasing demand for more highly-skilled labourers. Governments increasingly stress upgrading human capital through investment in education to improve the competiveness of their countries (Jalongo et al, 2004). In many countries, such as the UK, USA, Canada, Australia, China including Hong Kong, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore, governments are facing an increasing political and economic pressure for reviewing their childcare policies. To sum up, the human capital view is to claim the direction relationship between investment in education and increased economic growth. In this view, the question of why quality ECE is important now touches upon the broader visions of the education and objectives set for it in society at large.

Issues of quality improvement

Quality ECE and its impact upon subsequent individual development and human capital of a society has been discussed previously. Cheng (1995) defined education quality as follows:

> ‘Education quality is the character of the set of elements in the input, process, and output of the education system that provides services that completely satisfy both internal and external strategic constituencies by meeting their explicit and implicit expectations.’ (p.125)

In the field of ECE, defining quality has been expressed in terms of universally applicable indicators, based on expert knowledge (e.g. Harms et al, 1998) and as a subjective, value-based and culture-bound phenomenon (e.g. Penn, 1998; Woodhead, 2000; Moss and Dahlberg, 2008). Fthenakis notes that criteria for measuring quality have process-oriented, structural, and contextual aspects (cited in Oberhuemer, 2004). Melhuish (2004) argues that the attributes that can be seen to determine the quality of a setting can be classified as either structural (e.g. accommodation and size of setting) or process aspects (e.g. how children interact with a setting and the learning experiences). The difficulties inherent in making judgments about the quality of process aspects has led to a concentration on the more measurable structural attributes of a setting (Melhuish, 2004; Cassidy et al, 2005). We have therefore seen the creation of structural rating scales based on the assumption that where structural quality exists, process quality will follow. Cassidy et al (2005) argue that previous research into the application of quality standards have not sufficiently defined the structural and process attributes and thus do not offer clear evidence that this is the case. Regarding the contextual aspect of quality criteria, Melhuish raises how quality can vary depending on an individual’s values. Tobin (2005) goes further, voicing his disquiet concerning externally applied measures of quality, arguing that quality standards are cultural constructs that should be negotiated within the local context:

> 'Attempts to come up with universal, decontextualised, external standards of quality are conceptually flawed, politically dangerous and counterproductive.' (p.425).

Pence and Moss (1994, p.173) call for an 'inclusionary paradigm' that defines quality by engaging with the views of all stakeholders. Melhuish (2004) and Pence and Moss (1994) raise independently an important question: What do early years education leaders use to inform the development of quality practice? Although many settings will have come across quality measures and scales, it is not known how they are used within settings to inform the leading of quality practices. Further, to what extent do the tools that are available guide settings? Or are settings guided by their own values or those of parents? Being guided by parents, the 'purchasers' of the service being provided, could be a key driving force in determining practices in the non-maintained sector, where many settings need to generate business to remain viable. Yet Barnes (2001) argues that the reasons for measuring quality can often become the determining factor for how quality is assessed. As such quality can be assessed in relation to looking at child outcomes or for regulation and licensing purposes.

Hong Kong and English Investment

Historically, preschool teaching was and has been viewed as an extension of mothering (Opper, 1992). In Report No. 2, the Hong Kong Education Commission questioned about whether early childhood education is essential. The report said, 'there was a phenomenon known as the "suntan effect"…students who have been through pre-primary education do not retain an

intellectual (cognitive) advantage in the long run' (1986, p.38). Given this historical background, very little support in the form of legislation, finance, inspection, teacher training and curriculum was provided (Koo, 2001). All local preschools, whether profit-making or non-profit, are private. Most rely on fees for their funding, so this education sector has been running almost under free market conditions. In 1997, Hong Kong was changed from a British colony to a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China. Matters related to the quality of ECE did not come onto the agenda of policymakers until the last decade. In recent years, the local government has taken a more active role in ECE through a number of measures: upgrading teacher qualifications, harmonizing pre-primary education services, implementing a quality assurance framework, and introducing new curriculum guidelines. For funding the ECE sector, the local government implemented the *Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme* (PEVS) in 2007. It aims at improving efficiency of schools and increasing parental choice. Fee assistance in the form of an education voucher is provided to parents who have children between three to six years old and enrolling in non-profit-making kindergartens. No household income assessment is required. Under the PEVS, those parents are entitled to receive a voucher of HK$13,000 per child per year. By 2011, the amount of voucher per child will be HK$16,000. The voucher can be used in non-profit making kindergartens which tuition fees is under HK$24000 half-day programme and HK$48000 full-day programme per year according to their student intake. If the amount of tuition fee exceeds the voucher, parents have to pay on top of that. To implement the PEVS, investment in the ECE sector has been increased up to an additional HK$2 billion each year by 2011(Hong Kong Government, 2006, para.45). This policy initiative is taken to answer the public pressure and call from the local community for more support to families in nurturing young children and more investment in ECE for the future development of society. However,

there is a controversy over the issues of equality of choice among parents. Several local studies have shown that the PEVS could ease parents' financial burden, but on the contrary it would create inequality of choice among parents, as only affluent parents would have more choices (e.g. Li et al, 2008; Lee, 2006).

In England, the pattern of investment and interest in ECE has been similar to that of Hong Kong. National policy developments and investment in and around ECE were limited prior to 1996. Early years education first became an entitlement for all four year olds in England under *The Nursery Education and Grant-Maintained Schools Act 1996* (HMSO, 1996). Under the Grant all parents of four year olds received a voucher worth £1,100 to go towards the cost of nursery education. The system was criticised for not securing enough places for all children or for ensuring the quality of settings (Randall, 2000). In 1998, the newly elected Labour administration continued the support for early years education via the introduction of the National Childcare Strategy under the Green Paper *Meeting the Childcare Challenge* (DfEE, 1998). The National Childcare Strategy saw various initiatives and investment aimed at supporting both the supply and use of early years services. Various waves of developments (see Lloyd, 1998; Campbell-Barr, 2009b) have culminated in *free* early years education now being available for all three and four year olds for 12.5 hours a week for 38 weeks a year. Pilots are taking place to extend the free entitlement to 15, flexible hours a week (with full implementation from September 2010) and pilots have also made places available to two year olds in the most deprived areas. The funding is now allocated to local authorities, which then determine the rate of funding to be passed on to providers (Sure Start, 2006; Stokes and Wilkinson, 2007). The rate of funding is not without criticism, as there are concerns that the level of funding is too low

(Campbell-Barr, 2009b; Clemens et al, 2005) and that 'free' at the point of consumption does not always mean free (Butt et al, 2007). To support the offer of free early years education for all three and four year olds in England, the National Childcare Strategy also sought to address the criticisms of the Nursery Education Grant as it was introduced in 1996, by looking to address the availability and quality of early years education settings. To support the availability of places, funding was made available to expand the provision of early years education places via the mixed economy. Under various funding initiatives, local authorities were tasked with ensuring there was sufficient early years education provision. The funding to expand the number of places was targeted at the non-maintained sector as is evident in the small incline of maintained early years education places since the introduction of the National Childcare Strategy (see Phillips et al, 2009). However, the reliance on the mixed economy of early years education has been criticised in relation to the rate of funding (Penn, 2007), whether the sector is sustainable (see Campbell-Barr, 2009a; Sylva and Pugh, 2005; Osgood, 2004), and the realities of how markets operate in different areas (Lloyd, 2008). These economic criticisms leave questions around whether the funding to provide ECE is sufficient for developing the quality of the sector in England (Campbell-Barr, 2009b). Further, the maintained sector has been found to deliver higher quality provision, resulting in questions as to whether the mixed economy is the best way to deliver ECE (Campbell-Barr and Garnham, 2010).

Quality in Hong Kong

The Hong Kong government initiated a comprehensive education reform in 1997. It aims at improving school effectiveness through decentralizing education, raising standards, and increasing professionalism and accountability. In the Education Commission Report No. 7, a

quality assurance framework was recommended be introduced for improving school effectiveness (Hong Kong Government, 1997). In response to this recommendation, the Quality Assurance Inspection (QAI) of the Education Bureau published the first edition of *Performance Indicators* for preschools in 2000. The document provides a new framework of quality and accountability for ECE. Schools are inspected on all aspects of their work, including children's development, management and organization, learning and teaching, support to children and school culture. Overall performance of a school is graded at four levels: unsatisfactory, acceptable, good, and excellent. Quality Criteria on curriculum organization, and learning and teaching of the *Performance Indicators* are built on the three basic tenets: age appropriateness, individual uniqueness, and responsive practice which have been strongly advocated in the position statement on Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) since 1980s (Wien, 1996). For example, in the *Performance Indicators*, it said

> '…a child-centred curriculum is planned, through various play activities, to provide broad and balanced learning experiences for children… Teaching, which is child-centred, can construct knowledge, provoke thinking, develop learning abilities and foster positive values and attitudes.' (Education Bureau, 2002, p.5).

As defining quality is context-bound which has been stated earlier, the transference of values across different cultural contexts is potentially difficult (Walker and Dimmock, 2000). A study on defining quality ECE conducted by Ho (2006) has shown that the views of school stakeholders including principals, teachers, and parents have been begun to move from child rearing to developmental nurturing, but with an emphasis on academic learning. These views are

somewhat different from the three basic tenets in the *Performance Indicators*, originally drawn from the DAP of NAEYC. Findings from the study raise an important question about how relevant the *Performance Indicators* developed by QAI is for measuring quality of ECE in a Chinese context. Further, there are questions around how it is interpreted and used both by early childhood professionals and inspectors to guide quality practice. For example, Ho (2010) found that the quality assurance inspection was one of the critical factors influencing leadership practice in the process of curriculum change as the inspection imposed some constraints on professional autonomy in curriculum and pedagogical decision-making.

To further enhance the quality of ECE, the QAI published the *Quality Review Framework* in 2004 and formally implemented it in 2007. It 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. The QAI conducts a follow-up inspection to provide an external review on the overall performance of the school. As stated in *Quality Review Framework*, 'This [school self-evaluation] helps bring about coherence and strengthen collaboration, communication and ownership among members of the school community' (Education Bureau, 2006. p.1). That is to say, the school self-evaluation requires joint efforts and aspirations from all school stakeholders. Different from the nature of quality assurance inspections, the policy of quality review adopts a 'bottom-up approach' to enhancing the quality of education in preschools. The bottom-up approach is built onto the Western notion that initiatives are likely to be succeeded with the commitment and active participation of all school stakeholders in decision making and problem solving at all levels. A bottom-up approach to leadership is often associated with the power sharing of all stakeholders

in the setting. Early childhood education in Hong Kong has long been featured by a centralized and top-down style of leadership. Several recent studies have indicated that the leadership power and authority is centralized in a single headship (Wong, 2003; Ho, 2005; 李子建 & 尹弘飚, 2007). Under these new circumstances, a potential shift of moving from top-down centralized to bottom-up decentralized leadership creates tensions between the lead and the led. This raises an important question: How does the school self-evaluation enforced as a 'bottom-up approach' to enhancing the quality of education work in local preschools where they are predominated by a top-down style of school leadership? Moreover, with the implementation of school self-evaluation, the duration of external inspection has been reduced from 4 days to 2 days. Its scope and functions delimits to validating the school self-evaluation report instead of conducting an integrated approach to collect data to assess school performance. Research into quality assurance has shown that a complemented use of external inspection and school self-evaluation is important to school improvement (Nevo, 2001; Block, 2008). A local study conducted by Wong and Li (2010) has also suggested that an effective quality assurance mechanism should maintain a balance between those two types of evaluation in early years settings in Hong Kong. Implicitly, there are questions around school self-evaluation used as a sole mechanism for quality improvement. For example, what are the opportunities and difficulties that local preschools might have in the process of self-evaluation.

To speed up the pace of quality improvement, the Hong Kong government has tied up the policy of quality school review with the implementation of the *Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme* (PEVS). As stated earlier, all local preschools are private and most rely on fees for their funding. The local ECE sector is market-driven in nature. The decreasing birthrate after 1997 turns the

sector into an oversupplied market. For example, the number of student enrollment decreased from 138,393 in 2007/08 to 137,630 in 2008/09 and the number of schools also dropped from 986 to 964 (Education Bureau, 2010). Therefore, opting for the PEVS is essential to secure the funding for operation to the majority of local preschools. The statistics compiled by the Education Bureau has indicated that 802 out of 907 preschools have already joined the PEVS in 2010. Meeting the prescribed standards of *Performance Indicators* and conducting school self-evaluation have become mandatory for the preschools joining the PEVS. As Cheng (2009, p.361) argues, under these new circumstances:

> 'quality assurance now functions as a market standard…Quality is "improved" as the success and failure of the schools in the system will rest on the decisions made by consumers [parents] as they exercise choice through their use of the vouchers.'

The study conducted by Ho (2008) mentioned earlier has also shown that the form and structure of preschooling has been strongly shaped by market forces. The two schools in her study had to put much efforts on formulating strategies to work between professional values and parental preferences, and that they have achieved this successfully. This is evident that parents as consumers have significantly influenced the operation of school. This has implications on the leading of quality in a market-driven context. Further, those preschools having passed the inspection can redeem the voucher. This would lead to another quality issue which is that the service quality of a school at the 'acceptable' grade level presents the minimum standards. For example, the work of Campbell-Barr (2010) identified that providers in the English context having 'passed' an inspection do not always recognise the need for quality improvement.

Quality in England

In England, all providers are now required to meet the minimum standards as set out by Ofsted. Historically this was not the case and the minimum standards that providers had to meet reflected the mixed economy of provision. Ofsted was responsible for the registration and monitoring of early years education places in the maintained sector, whilst those in the private voluntary and independent (PVI) sectors were registered via individual local authorities. In 2000 the Care Standards Act (OPSI, 2000) laid out plans for the PVI sectors to also be registered by Ofsted (see HM Treasury, 2004), with those who offered childcare services being required to have separate care and education registrations. In 2009, the introduction of the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) brought together the care and education registrations and also ensured that both the maintained and PVI sectors were required to meet the one set of minimum standards. The minimum standards focus on structural (and supposedly objective) aspects of quality. Whilst there is now one set of minimum standards, like in Hong Kong, there are different grades within the system: poor, satisfactory, good and outstanding. These grades were also evident in the dual registration system and represent how, despite a national set of standards, there are still variations in the standards of ECE services being provided. Beyond the minimum standards, those in the early years may also be involved in quality assurance/improvement schemes, creating another level in the hierarchy of quality (e.g. Campell-Barr, 2005). Similar to Hong Kong, there are also questions around the relevance of the minimum standards for the various stakeholders. For example, Bryson et al (2006) in their parental survey of formal childcare use found that whilst the majority (although not all) of the parents were aware of the inspection process, of those who were aware, less than half were influenced by the inspection report. With regards to providers there has always been an assumption that those meeting the standards will

understand them (Gilroy and Wilcox, 1997). Callender (2000), in her study of childcare providers, found the interpretation of legislation and regulation was a problem for providers and could hinder the future of childcare. Penn (2002) also found that inspections were inconsistent, misrepresentative, and did not always show an understanding of early years provision. Campbell-Barr (2009b) found that local authorities had concerns around whether inspectors knew enough about the early years, the frequency of the inspections, the duration of the inspections and whether they helped promote self improvement. The registration process has changed since these studies were conducted and Ofsted have signalled that they want to address the inconsistencies that have previously been identified (Ofsted, 2007). However, there is little to explore whether the minimum standards reflect the quality criteria of all stakeholders or how they reflect the context of the setting.

The varying levels of quality within the registration process (and outside of it) suggest that an aspect of the registration process is quality improvement. As a part of the inspection process providers are required to complete a Self Evaluation Form (SEF). The SEF is not grounded in the 'bottom-up' principles of the one in Hong Kong. In England providers are required to show that they are engaging with the views of parents as part of a wider demonstration of how they monitor quality, provide evidence of how they meet the curriculum guidance and set out their vision for the setting, including aspects of quality improvement. The system of the inspection is similar, to an extent, to that of Hong Kong as the SEF is used to give inspectors a flavour of the setting's strengths and weaknesses. Inspectors will then 'test out' the compatibility of the comments on the SEF with what they see, whilst also collecting data on a setting's performance. Thus Ofsted still operate as an external surveillance system. The difficulty is that quality improvement is an assumed outcome of the Ofsted inspection process, as opposed to an enforced

one, such as the systems in place in France and Finland (Matthews and Sammons, 2004). As Ehren and Visscher (2006) discuss, there is an ambition to realise 'improvement through inspection' (an Ofsted phrase). Yet the literature around the effect of inspection on improving quality is mixed largely as it is dependent on a number of variables. For example, Ehren and Visscher (2006) identify the inspectors relationship with the school, communication styles, feedback characteristics, preventing negative side effects of the inspection process, the schools reactions and external support as all being factors that will influence whether inspections lead to school (not early years) improvement. Creemers et al (2007) explored school improvement across Europe and found that there were contextual factors (e.g. external agents involved in improvement programmes, external pressure to start improvement), school level factors (e.g. positive attitude towards change, school culture, shared values, vision on education, school organisation that facilitates chance) and classroom/teacher level factors (e.g. teacher motivation and involvement in processes and decisions, teacher collaboration) that impacted on school (again, not early years) improvement. Thus, it is not the inspection, but how the inspection is viewed and interpreted that results in improved quality in the English context[i].

To address quality improvement through inspection, many local authorities will operate a system whereby they help practitioners to look at their inspections and generate change as is appropriate, but there is no causal connection between the inspection and quality improvement (Campbell-Barr, 2010 and Matthews and Sammons, 2004). In England, some local authorities are beginning to introduce a system whereby ECE providers who do not meet the minimum Ofsted standards or who receive a 'poor' grading are no longer able to draw down the funding to offer the free early years education places until such a time that they have improved the quality of their settings (Campbell-Barr, 2010). The implications of this approach to funding are yet to be seen, but given

the market driven context of ECE in England, opting out of the funding is unlikely to be an option, similar to Hong Kong. When the initial expansion of place took place quality was only monitored once the setting was established and Ofsted did their registration. Under the new system the commissioning of services and quality are in greater synergy, but this is still dependent on individual local authorities. Without the intervention of local authorities there is a perception that the inspection system actually constrains practice as opposed to enhancing it. Campbell-Barr (2010) found that local authorities felt that providers can be fixated on the process of 'passing' the inspection and that those who get an 'outstanding' grade can feel that this means they do not need to improve the quality of their setting. Therefore, improvement through inspection is a misnomer.

Concluding remarks

Both the governments of Hong Kong and England have increased investment in ECE through providing fee assistance to parents for buying ECE services in Hong Kong and providing funding to providers for offering 'free' places in England. Alongside the increased funding of ECE and the expansion of the sector comes a heightened interest in the quality of settings. By nature, definitions of quality ECE are complex with a multitude of different rating scales and measures that consider both the characteristics of a setting and the outcomes that they contribute towards. Both Hong Kong and England have systems in place to monitor the minimum standards of ECE settings. The two systems have a number of similarities in the way in which they operate such as the allocation of grades, the use of SEF and a desire to generate quality improvement. However, these are no more than surface level similarities, as closer inspection of the use of SEF and the mechanisms for quality improvement highlight two different systems. In Hong Kong the SEF is

the central aspect of the inspection, to the extent that the inspection becomes a form of validating the SEF. This provides a 'bottom-up' approach whereby quality improvement is the focus of the inspection and it is generated by stakeholder 'buy-in'. Whilst the system in Hong Kong is not without criticism, the notion of stakeholder 'buy-in' and 'bottom-up' addresses the criticisms of the English system where it has been identified that these are some of the characteristics needed in order to generate change through inspection (e.g. Creemers et al, 2007; Ehren and Visschar, 2006). Whilst the English system offers the characteristics of an external surveillance system that addresses some of the criticism of the Hong Kong system, the idea of generating change through inspection is an assumed one without ensuring systems are in place to drive forward the change (such as stakeholder 'buy-in'). It is too simplistic to say that a meeting in the middle of these two systems will provide a solution to their quality monitoring, as there is a need to be mindful of their cultural specificity. In particular, both systems have criticisms around how meaningful the inspections are, as it is not clear whether they reflect the views of all stakeholders and there are concerns over the actual quality of the inspections themselves (for example the time that is taken to conduct an inspection). Rather, given the similarities in the history, political interest, investment and market driven context in ECE in the two countries, there is potential to share lessons in the development of their inspection systems.

In summary, we have identified three fundamental questions in the area of quality improvement. First, how relevant is the quality criteria developed by QAI in Hong Kong and Ofsted in England for measuring quality in their own early years setting? Second, how are these quality criteria interpreted and used to guide practice? Third, how are they used in relation to other contextual factors that can inform the operations of an early years setting, such as the views of inspectors and parents? There is a need for research into the issues of quality improvement in early years

settings in Hong Kong and England. Research of this type not only will be of value to policymakers, teacher educators and school leaders in their efforts to support quality improvement, but will also contribute towards an understanding of the similarities and differences in the two systems and the interplay of different sociocultural contexts and dynamics in shaping early childhood education and development .

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[i] The research that has looked at quality improvement and the registration process has been focused on schools. Although some of these schools may be responsible for delivering early years education, there are many other practitioners who deliver early years education who lie outside of schools. As such, the work looking at the role of Ofsted inspections in schools can only provide an indication of how the sector improves quality as a result of Ofsted.