Current Issues in Education
Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College • Arizona State University
PO Box 37100, Phoenix, AZ 85069, USA

Volume 14, Number 1 ISSN 1099-839X

Empowering Parents' Choice of Schools: The Rhetoric and Reality of How Hong Kong Kindergarten Parents Choose Schools Under the Voucher Scheme

FUNG, Kit-Ho Chanel
The Chinese University of Hong Kong

And

LAM, Chi-Chung
The Hong Kong Institute of Education

Citation

Fung, K. & Lam, C. (2011). Empowering Parents' Choice of Schools: The Rhetoric and Reality of How Hong Kong Kindergarten Parents Choose Schools Under the Voucher Scheme. *Current Issues in Education*, 14(1). Retrieved from http://cie.asu.edu/

Abstract

School choice gives parents greater power over their children's education. But ever since the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS) was introduced in Hong Kong in 2007, school choice has become a hotly debated topic. The scheme was introduced to empower kindergarten parents in choosing a school for their children by offering them direct fee subsidies that, in return, could propel education quality forward. Parents in the private kindergarten sector, however, have long enjoyed the privilege of choice, and they have been preoccupied with an intense interest in their children's academic upbringing, even if it means compromising the holistic development of their children. This runs counter to the principles of a quality education. Therefore, the urge to further promote parental kindergarten choice will likely allow parental academic interests to continue to prevail and hence invalidate the PEVS' promise to improve

education quality. The result is a unique dilemma between school choice for parents and the promise of education quality within Hong Kong's unique private kindergarten sector.

Keywords: school choice, parental school choice, voucher scheme, kindergarten education, Hong Kong

About the Author(s)

Author: Fung, Kit-Ho Chanel

Affiliation: The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Address: Rm. 308, Ho Tim Building, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Faculty of Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Shatin, New Territories, Hong Kong

Email: kithofung@cuhk.edu.hk

Biographical information: Assistant Professor of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Faculty of Education, The Chinese University of Hong Kong

Author: LAM, Chi-Chung

Affiliation: The Hong Kong Institute of Education

Address: Department of Curriculum and Instruction, 10 Lo Ping Road, Tai Po, New Territories, Hong Kong

Email: lancc@ied.edu.hk

Biographical information: Professor of the Hong Kong Institute of Education

Current Issues in Education

Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College • Arizona State University
PO Box 37100, Phoenix, AZ 85069, USA

Empowering Parents' Choice of Schools: The Rhetoric and Reality of How Hong Kong Kindergarten Parents Choose Schools Under the Voucher Scheme

Strengthening parental school choice is not a new idea; indeed, in the past three decades it has become a global trend in education management. Gordon (2008) observed that giving more power to parents in choosing schools is "a powerful rallying cry for reform" (p. 177). On the academic side, studies of parental school choice have not been restricted to the philosophical rationale that supports parent rights in education; empirical research has also generated evidence that school choice increases parent satisfaction and student performance.

In Hong Kong, this has become a hot issue ever since the launch of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS) in 2007.[1] The scheme aims to empower kindergarten parents to choose a school for their children by offering them direct fee subsidies, which in theory could exert pressure on schools to improve education quality. Yet, kindergarten parents in Hong Kong have long had a choice of schools, because the kindergarten sector has always been privately run. So to what extent would increasing parental choice of kindergartens help propel education quality within the private kindergarten sector in Hong Kong? Since little research has been done to address the question the new scheme raises, this study focuses on this question. Through survey questionnaires and focus-group interviews with parents, the study (a) identifies the school choice preference of kindergarten parents, and (b) documents the concerns underpinning parental choice. In addition, the findings will facilitate discussion about the tension between empowering parents in school choice and the promise of the PEVS to improve education quality in Hong Kong's private kindergarten education sector.[2]

---

[1] The Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme introduced to the Hong Kong preprimary education sector in 2007/2008 aims to "increase investment, enhance quality." Parents of young children who attend kindergartens that have registered with the Scheme are offered a direct fee subsidy, which then empowers them with the financial ability to choose a school.

[2] Kindergarten education in Hong Kong has never been recognized as part of the formal education system. Prior to the PEVS, government subsidy of kindergarten education was very limited. Instead, kindergartens have been run by a large number of service providers with different backgrounds under the private education sector. In Hong Kong, kindergarten education is offered at three levels: Kindergarten Level 1 (K1) is for children aged 3–4, Kindergarten Level 2 (K2) is for those aged 4–5, and Kindergarten Level 3 (K3) is for those aged 5–6. Most kindergartens run a half-day service, with some offering full-day classes.

School Choice: How Is It Perceived?

School choice is an issue that has attracted much attention in the education realm. The promises of school choice have been widely discussed in the literature and have been articulated from different perspectives.

School choice under the parents' purview: A philosophical justification

Parents are prominent stakeholders in the upbringing of their children. The philosophical justification for school choice says that parents should have exclusive authority over educational decisions. It argues that permitting parents a good deal of power and control over how their children are educated is the right of parents in a democratic society (Reich, 2008). Lubienski (2008) further made sense of the philosophical rationale of assigning parents the primary school decision role for a number of reasons: (a) parents know the strengths and weaknesses of their children best and will act in their children's best interest, so it is right for them to exercise responsibility over their children's education; (b) families are interested in reinforcing their values in their children, and so it is appropriate for a family to look for schools that serve the values they practice at home; (c) parents are proxy consumers for their children in school, and rolling back the decision about schooling within the parents' purview will strengthen the institution of the family; and (d) parental choice is encouraged simply because it is the divine right of parents, who place the best interests of their children at the forefront of their concerns. In short, school choice empowers the voices of parents and protects the family's desire to give their children the best education possible (Cohen & Farrar, 1995; Wise & Darling-Hammond, 1995). At its roots, school choice is a manifestation of social trust. Parents are trusted to make their own sensible educational choices among a variety of options, and families are drawn back into the education system (Leone, 2003; Paulu, 1995).

Empirical grounds for the benefit of expanding parental choice

Some empirical work has supported the argument that parents should be respected with the right to decide which school to send their children to. Houston (2004) argued that expanding

parents' right of school choice made them more inclined to invest themselves in their children's education. Because parents would be more involved, there would be more collaboration between home and school. At the same time, Godwin, Kemerer, and Martinez (1998) and Teske, Fitzpatrick, and Kaplan (2007) found that parents who had some say over the choice of schools reported higher levels of satisfaction with school performance in both how their children were educated and the effectiveness of school discipline. After being given more choice, fewer parents raised complaints about their schools (Bracey, 2008; Raty, Kasanen, & Laine, 2009). Naismith (1994) found a link between this satisfaction and feelings of greater involvement and the feeling of pride of ownership; Moe (2001) correlated parents' satisfaction with having a greater degree of choice over the kind of education service they used.

Children's academic achievement has also shown the positive effects of parental choice. Studies have shown that school choice can benefit children in multiple ways. Weinschrott and Kilgore (1998) stated that "increasing parents' choice over how and where their children are educated gives parents a sense of ownership and enthusiasm that contribute directly to improvements in students' performance" (p. 307). Raywid (1995) added that the concept of school choice recognizes that learners are individuals with unique talents and specialized needs, and choice gives parents the freedom to find a school that will design curricula to accommodate their needs. In the same way, when school choice can help with student diversity, it can also improve learning motivation and academic progress (Perkins-Gough, 2008). Howell and Peterson (2006) found that school-choice students, on average, demonstrated fewer disruptive behaviors, including fighting, property destruction, racial conflicts, truancy, and absenteeism.

School choice for education quality: A market theory perspective

School choice that empowers parents to decide which schools their children attend injects the education system with "a degree of consumer-driven, market-style competition" (Feinberg & Lubienski, 2008, p. 2). Weidner and Herrington (2006) argued that "market theory applied to educational settings postulates that parents are the best judge of which school their children

should attend and that parental choice among schools will lead to increased competition" (pp. 27-28). From an economic perspective, competition in a market economy creates incentives for schools to provide services and goods that fulfill the needs of the market, and so schools should improve their service and quality (Kahlenberg, 2003). Similarly, school choice forces schools to compete for student enrollment. If schools are to survive in a competitive education market and attract families, they will have to improve the quality of the education they offer in order to truly reflect parental wishes. In this way, schools become more accountable to parents (Lips & Feinberg, 2007). Heid and Leak (1995) listed the various ways in which school choice can improve schools: "bringing about needed structural changes, recognizing student diversity, fostering competition and accountability, improving educational outcomes, and increasing parental involvement in the educational process" (p. 390). Freedom of choice for parents and market competition become a promise for better schools. And when school administrators are forced to be responsive to parent preferences, the locus of control shifts and changes in school governance are brought about. Parental choice and market competition further reform the consumer-provider relationship between parents and schools, replacing it with a collaborative partnership (Ball, 2007).

Parental Preferences and School Choice

What factors do parents consider when choosing a school for their children? Weidner and Herrington's (2006) study on the Florida McKay choice program found that parents based their decisions on a school's academic quality, teacher quality, special education, curriculum, and class size. Weinschrott and Kilgore (1998) found that most parents in the Educational Choice Charitable Trust choice program in Indianapolis, Indiana, took into account academic performance, financial aid, religious values, and school safety. A series of studies spanning the US, New Zealand, Chile, and Great Britain all found that the academic performance of a school was central to parent decisions (Armor & Peiser, 1997; Fiske & Ladd, 2000; Gauri, 1998; Gewirtz, Ball, & Bowe, 1995; Glatter, Woods, & Bagley, 1997).

Parents in Asian countries have the same concerns, as found in a number of studies on early childhood education programs. A cross-cultural study carried out by Zhou, Ma, and Aoyagi (2007) on parental expectations for early childhood education found that parents in China, Japan, and Korea held high expectations for their children's academic achievement. Among them, "Chinese parents had the highest expectation of their children's education" (p. 145). Hewitt and Maloney's (2000) work on Malaysian parents' perceptions of preschool education revealed that parents saw preschool education as "a formal academic preparation" (p. 86) for their children, and their most preferred school activities were those that improved their children's academic development.

Studies of Hong Kong's early childhood education sector have found similar results. A large-scale study organized by Opper (1994) on early childhood education and services in Hong Kong in the 1990s showed that parents "expect preschools, both kindergartens and day nurseries, to prepare children for primary schooling by learning precisely those skills that children will be learning at the primary one level" (p. 50). Ebbeck (1995) found that Hong Kong parents had extreme visions of the purpose of early childhood education and expected their children to be assigned large amounts of homework each day, even at the very young age of three. Parents in Cheng, Lau, Fung, and Benson's (2009) study made it clear that they preferred schools where teachers used traditional academic drills and rote learning to ensure the academic readiness of their children for primary school.

The findings of these studies across nations have a great deal in common: the predominant interest of parents in their children's academic well-being. Economists would likely argue that parents worldwide are primarily interested in high-performing schools because those schools are thought to be better able to "enhance the economic prospects for their children" (Lubienski, 2008, p. 107). If this is how parents handle school choice at an individual level, to what extent do their overwhelming academic concerns serve to stimulate quality improvement in the education realm? While economists and market theorists have argued that empowering

parents is a vehicle for creating incentives for schools to improve performance and thus promise education quality, might there not be pitfalls that come with school choice, particularly when parents are focused mainly on developing their children's intellect at the cost of other skills? The situation is even more complex in Hong Kong's private kindergarten education sector, where the voice and choice of parents have always been highly respected and kindergartens have long marketized their services to fit with parents' desires (Fung, 2007; Fung & Lam, 2009). In such a case, what dilemma arises between expanding parental school choice and improving education quality, both of which are the initiative behind the PEVS? The current study aims to answer this question.

Method

This research, split into two consecutive phases, used (a) self-administered questionnaires first to capture an overview of the considerations embedded in parental choice in the first phase (between May and July, 2009), and (b) focus group interviews with parents to document their school choice preferences in the second phase (between July and October, 2009). This is a mixed approach, bringing together quantitative data in the first phase and qualitative data in the second. The qualitative interview data supplemented the quantitative questionnaire data and enhanced the overall richness of the field data gathered. Collectively, both sets of data supported an empirical analysis of the characteristics of parental school choice after implementation of the voucher system in Hong Kong.

Parents as key informants

Parents of kindergarten children were the key informants in the study. They were selected by a three-step process of stratified quota sampling. First, government statistics were examined to identify and select 30 of the 758 kindergartens from all 18 districts of Hong Kong that had registered with the PEVS (Education Bureau, 2008) in academic year 2008/2009. Coverage of all districts ensured that families from the upper, medium, and lower social classes were included in the study. Special care was also taken in the selection to ensure that no two schools chosen were

run by the same service provider. Second, with participation consent obtained from the kindergartens, the present study was introduced to the parents of these schools, who were invited to fill out a parent questionnaire. It was hoped that 30 parents (10 from each of the three kindergarten grades, i.e., K1, K2, and K3) from each school would agree to take part in the questionnaire survey. This design ensured that the data would broadly represent the perceptions of parents from all three kindergarten levels. It was clear to all participating parents that their participation was voluntary. Lastly, upon completion of the questionnaire survey, invitation was once again extended to the parents who had taken part to participate in focus group interviews. In the end, nine groups of parents from nine kindergartens expressed willingness and so were interviewed. The anonymity and confidentiality of the identity of individual parents were guaranteed.

Research Instrument

Parent questionnaire: A quantitative tool to gather an initial impression of concerns in parental choice

The parent questionnaire focused on parental considerations when choosing a school. The questionnaire listed 24 items, including education quality and ancillary school characteristics (Table 1 shows details of the list). Respondents were requested to tick the factors they considered in choosing a school. They were also asked to rate the importance of the factors by ranking them in order and completing a 4-point Likert scale survey. The second section of the questionnaire covered respondent demographic data.

Table 1

Kinds of kindergarten (KG) school information

Education quality of schools	Ancillary school characteristics	
1. Academic content - School missions and visions - Teaching methods and strategies	- Background of the kindergarten service provider - Members of the school board - Records of school board meetings and decisions - School organization and the management team - Monthly salary range of principal and teaching staff - School fee - School financial information - Link with parents - No. of teaching staff	- Quality review: results and report - KGs' self-evaluation report - No. of classes - No. of students - School facilities - Outdoor playground and facilities - Additional charges for extracurricular activities - Network with other KGs and primary schools
2. Academic performance - Academic achievement of other children in the school - Primary school allocation for KG graduates		
3. Program-related data - Professional qualification of teaching staff - Choice of extracurricular activities - Program offerings (half-day/full-day)		

Of the 900 questionnaires distributed to the parents of the 30 participating kindergartens, 862 were returned. Of these, 841 were found completed and regarded as effective questionnaires; the remaining 21 were incomplete with missing data and so were discarded, giving a satisfactory response rate of 93.4%. This high response rate reflected not only the interest of the participating parents in the study, but also their interest in issues relating to the practice of the PEVS, being a milestone of the kindergarten sector.

The parents who filled out the questionnaires had different educational backgrounds with different total monthly household incomes. Table 2 lists details of the parents' demographic particulars.

Table 2

Demographic particulars of parents who filled out the questionnaires

	Education background			Total monthly household income			
	Form 5 level	Matriculated level	University degree or above	Less than HK $10,000	Between HK$10,000 and HK$20,000	Between HK$20,000 and HK$40,000	Over HK $40,000
K1 parents	157	40	88	52	91	94	48
K2 parents	153	31	89	40	88	79	66
K3 parents	180	35	68	41	96	74	72
Total	490	106	245	133	275	247	186

Each completed questionnaire was coded individually and grouped under one of the three kindergarten levels to form three data sets (K1, K2, and K3). To classify into various categories parental considerations when choosing a school, an exploratory factor analysis was conducted. After the major underlying factors were identified, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to test for significant differences in these factors among parents from different kindergarten grades. In addition, to test whether education and income levels affected parental school choice, a correlation analysis was carried out to check for a relationship between these two variables. Since both were ordinal variables, Pearson's correlation was selected to recognize the correlation. PASW (Predictive Analytics Software) Statistics 18 was adopted to perform the statistical analysis.

Focus group interviews: A qualitative means to invite parental sharing of choice preferences

To complement the data derived from the questionnaires, focus group interviews with parents were conducted to gather more in-depth information and the views of parents on choosing a school. The interviews were designed to be natural, conversational, and semistructured with "grand tour questions" (Goodwin & Goodwin, 1996). The guide was refined and revised upon reflection on the pilot interviews conducted with another three groups of parents who had also filled out the parent questionnaires. All interview questions were open-ended and framed mainly around the criteria that parents had considered when deciding on a kindergarten for their children. The aim was to invite them to share their "deep" and internal perspectives (Gorman & Clayton, 2005). Ceja (2006) remarked that "this data collection method allows the researcher to obtain data in the participants' own words from which the researcher can then develop insight on how participants interpret a particular phenomenon" (p. 91). Of the 81 parents from the nine schools who initially showed an interest in the focus group interviews, some could not attend the interview meetings for various personal reasons. Ultimately, 49 parents, consisting of 46 mothers and 3 fathers, with 17 from K1 classes, 15 from K2 classes,

and 17 from K3 classes, were interviewed. The length of the interviews varied from 40 to 77 minutes. All interviews were conducted by the chief investigator at the kindergartens and were audiotaped with permission. The audio recordings were later transcribed.

Parent responses collected at the interviews were examined, coded with Corbin and Strauss's (2008) "open coding" method, and categorized into groups by making reference to the nature of their responses. The systematic management of the qualitative interview data facilitated comparisons and contrasts across categories, the addition of new phenomena to the research areas, and the discard of materials falling outside the research focus. In the end, the interview findings were cross-analyzed with the statistical data to enrich the interpretation and articulation of findings.

Results

Factor structure of parental choice of a school

From the 841 questionnaires filled out and returned, all responses of parents to the 24 items on school information were analyzed using factor analysis. The analysis sought to reveal groupings, if any, of the numerous concerns hidden within the parents' choice of a school. The analysis extracted six factors from the parents' responses, which explained 64.36 of all variance. These six factors included School Hardware, School Software, School Background, School Administration, School Performance, and Finance and Charges (Table 3).

Table 3

Factor loadings of the structure underpinning parental choice of a kindergarten (KG) school

Items	Factor loadings					
	1 School Hardware	2 School Software	3 School Background	4 School Administration	5 School Performance	6 Finance & Charges
No. of students	0.795					
No. of classes	0.771					
No. of teaching staff	0.690					
Outdoor playground and facilities	0.644					
School facilities	0.612					
Choice of extracurricular activities	0.565					
Professional qualification of teaching staff	0.492					
Teaching methods and strategies		0.678				
Program offerings (half-day/full-day)		0.650				
Link with parents		0.611				
Quality review: results and report		0.507				
School missions and visions			0.739			
Background of kindergarten service provider			0.674			
School organization and management team			0.612			
KGs' self-evaluation report			0.452			
Records of school board meetings and decisions				0.850		
Members of the school board				0.710		
Monthly salary range of principal and teaching staff				0.614		
Primary school allocation for KG graduates					0.788	
Network with other KGs and primary schools					0.763	
Children's academic achievement in the school					0.691	
School fee						0.770
Additional charges for extracurricular activities						0.589
School financial information						0.581

Group differences underpinning parental school choice

Upon derivation of the factor structure, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to explore whether significant group differences prevailed among the K1, K2, and K3 parents. The ANOVA analysis revealed significant group differences across all six factors; therefore, a post-hoc Tukey analysis was further applied to delineate these differences. They are reported as below.

School Hardware. The post-hoc Tukey analysis on significant group differences for School Hardware, $F(2, 829) = 29.26$, $p < 0.01$, revealed that whereas the K2 parents ($M = 3.19$) and the K3 parents ($M = 3.16$) considered school hardware similar in importance when choosing a kindergarten, their perceived level of importance was below that of the K1 parents ($M = 3.48$), although all means were higher than the midpoint of 2.5.

School Software. The post-hoc Tukey analysis on significant group differences for School Software, $F(2, 832) = 9.92$, $p < 0.01$, showed again that whereas the K2 ($M = 3.36$) and K3 ($M = 3.32$) parents perceived the importance of school software similarly, their perceived level of importance was lower than that of the K1 parents ($M = 3.48$), although the means were unanimously higher than the midpoint of 2.5.

School Background. Similar post-hoc comparison results were found for the factor School Background, $F(2,826) = 9.09$, $p < 0.01$. This showed that the K1 parents' ratings ($M = 3.20$) were significantly higher than those of the K2 parents ($M = 3.08$) and the K3 parents ($M = 3.07$), with a midpoint at 2.5.

Finance and Charges. The post-hoc Tukey analysis on significant group differences for Finance and Charges, $F(2,800) = 17.39$, $p < 0.01$, once again disclosed a similar difference in group patterns as with School Hardware, School Software, and School Background. That is, the K1 parents ($M = 3.02$) regarded finance and charges a piece of school information vital to their

school choice decision more than the K2 parents ($M = 2.81$) and the K3 parents ($M = 2.72$), with a midpoint at 2.5.

Worth noting, the K1 parents consistently rated the above four factors as higher in importance compared with the K2 and K3 parents, though the latter groups also recognized the importance of these four factors at a level higher than the midpoint. Perhaps the findings suggest that the K1 parents, being new to a school, were relatively more eager than their K2 and K3 counterparts to familiarize themselves with the different aspects of a school when deciding on one. This information also possibly informed them as to whether they needed to choose a different school for their children for K2 and K3.

School Administration. The post-hoc Tukey analysis unfolded a different pattern with respect to significant group differences for School Administration, $F(2, 775) = 8.51$, $p < 0.01$. For this particular factor, both the K2 ($M = 2.51$) and the K3 ($M = 2.45$) parents rated it with a mean higher than that of the K1 parents ($M = 2.29$); the means calculated from the K1 and K3 questionnaire data, however, were below the midpoint 2.5, whereas that of the K2 data was just slightly above the midpoint. Indeed, the overall mean ($M = 2.41$) of this factor was below the midpoint of 2.5. Such results actually portrayed an interesting picture for this factor, suggesting that school administration was not a crucial element in determining school choice.

School Performance. The post-hoc Tukey analysis exhibited yet another group difference pattern in the factor School Performance, $F(2,825) = 3.57$, $p < 0.05$. Both K1 ($M = 3.32$) and K2 ($M = 3.23$) parents shared similar views concerning the importance of this factor, the mean of which was higher than that of the K3 parents ($M = 3.20$). Nevertheless, all means were still higher than the midpoint of 2.5.

The relatively low rating for School Performance derived from the K3 data can likely be explained by the point of time at which the K3 parents were asked to fill out the questionnaires. The questionnaires were distributed to the parents in the last month (June) of the 2009 academic year. This was also the time when all K3 children had been centrally assigned a primary school

place, to which the children would move on with their primary school education the following year. Thus, it was understandable that when the K3 parents no longer needed to make further kindergarten choices for their children, a kindergarten's performance might not be as relevant to their interests, although the observed mean (3.20) was still higher than the midpoint.

Parental interest shown in a wide spectrum of school information

Despite the significant group differences in how parents across the three kindergarten levels observed the importance of a factor with respect to their school choice, the statistical means derived from the parent questionnaires revealed that all parents rated all factors as central to their choice of a school, with most associated means higher than 2.5 (Table 4). These sets of descriptive findings suggest that all parents took into consideration a wide spectrum of school features when choosing a school for their children. In other words, the parents were very serious about their children's education and made their school choice cautiously.

Table 4

Descriptive data of the six factors of all parents

		N	*M*	*SD*
School Hardware	K1 parents	282	3.48	0.44
	K2 parents	269	3.19	0.46
	K3 parents	279	3.16	0.45
	Total	830	3.28	0.47
School Software	K1 parents	285	3.48	0.45
	K2 parents	270	3.36	0.46
	K3 parents	278	3.32	0.43
	Total	833	3.39	0.45
School Background	K1 parents	279	3.20	0.44
	K2 parents	268	3.08	0.44
	K3 parents	280	3.07	0.43
	Total	827	3.12	0.44
School Administration	K1 parents	268	2.29	0.54
	K2 parents	247	2.50	0.53
	K3 parents	261	2.45	0.48
	Total	776	2.41	0.52
School Performance	K1 parents	278	3.32	0.57
	K2 parents	267	3.23	0.48
	K3 parents	281	3.20	0.46
	Total	826	3.25	0.51
Finance and Charges	K1 parents	278	3.02	0.50
	K2 parents	254	2.81	0.56
	K3 parents	269	2.72	0.46
	Total	801	2.85	0.52

* midpoint = 2.5

Prevalence of academic concerns in parental choices

Although parents were interested in a large number of school characteristics, cross-examining the descriptive data with the qualitative data gathered from the parent focus-group interviews uncovered a prevalence of academic concerns when choosing a school. Of the six factors characterizing parental school choice, School Software, with an overall mean of 3.39 (midpoint = 2.5), was rated the most important factor of all. Making up this particular factor were four items on school information, namely, "teaching methods and strategies," "program offerings (half-day/full-day)," "link with parents," and "quality review: results and report." Table 5 lists the mean of each item; teaching methods and strategies had the highest mean calculated across all three groups of parents. In terms of the mean derived statistically from the questionnaire responses, the K1, K2, and K3 parents all weighted teaching methods and strategies as the most important item determining their school choice compared with the remaining 23 items on school information.

Table 5

Means of the five school information items in the School Software factor

	K1		K2		K3	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Teaching methods and strategies	3.64	0.54	3.43	0.53	3.44	0.55
Program offerings (half-day/full-day)	3.57	0.54	3.40	0.54	3.36	0.55
Link with parents	3.41	0.59	3.38	0.58	3.28	0.55
Quality review: results and report	3.30	0.64	3.21	0.62	3.19	0.62

* midpoint = 2.5

Keen parental interest in the kinds of teaching methods and strategies used by schools was reflected in the parents' sharing at the focus group interviews:

> This KG [kindergarten] assigns lots of homework and delivers a curriculum that drills the children … I don't mind drills … it can secure a smooth transition to primary school studies. (K1, DS-021-I/6/8)[3]
>
> This school designs plenty of worksheets for children and assigns them Chinese and English writing exercises every day … I have confidence that my daughter is going to benefit from its primary school-type learning and teaching. (K2, CH-010-I/1/29)
>
> This school delivers the hardest curriculum in the district … frequent dictations … it helps to prepare my child for future primary studies … and I find this a desirable school. (K1, DS-021-I/2/24)

Given the choice between didactic learning and child-centered, activity-based learning (advocated as the best professional practice to promote quality learning; Curriculum Development Council, 2006), 28 of the 49 parents interviewed opted for didactic learning. Of these 28 parents, 17 had children who were in the final year of kindergarten and would be moving up to primary school the following year. Many of these parents stated in the interviews that they expected kindergartens to prepare their children for a smooth transition to primary school study by ensuring they were academically ready.

> This school equips children well for the demanding learning in primary schools … and the school is my first choice. (K1, SV-011-I/5/19)
>
> I do think that KGs should teach to the primary school curriculum … develop children's readiness for primary school studies … Primary Level 1 holds high expectations of the children … if KGs can follow the primary school curriculum, the children would then be guaranteed a smooth transition to their primary school learning. (K2, TM-008-I/7/25)
>
> I find that what my daughter is learning at K3 can prepare her well for primary school studies … and so I find this KG a desirable school. (K3, CH-010-I/1/30)

[3] (K1, DS-021-I/6/8) is an interview transcript entry code. It is made up of five parts. "K1" refers to a parent from a K1 class; "DS" represents the name of a kindergarten; "021" is the voice file of the interview; "I" stands for "interview data"; "6/8" indicates the page and entry number, respectively, of an interview transcript.

> This kindergarten stresses language learning heavily and training in both Mandarin and English … a good foundation in language proficiency and usage is vital to my son's future learning; in particular he is going to primary school level one next year … and so I made no school choice other than this one. (K3, WK-007-I/1/20)

These interview transcripts implied that most parents thought that "the principal aim of KG education is to lay a solid foundation for the children for subsequent primary school learning" (K2, WK-018-I/4/4). With this personal perception in mind, parents did not limit their academic concerns to "teaching methods and strategies," but extended them to "academic achievement of other children in the school" and "primary school allocation for kindergarten graduates," which were enfolded in the factor School Performance. This factor, with an overall mean of 3.25 (midpoint = 2.5), was another one perceived by parents as influential in their choice of a school, and parents with children in all three levels rated highly the items "academic achievement of other children in the school" and "primary school allocation for kindergarten graduates" (Table 6):

> Most of the graduates of this kindergarten are placed in a prestigious primary school … some are even assigned to the "gifted" class. (K1, SV-011-I/5/19)
>
> I find this kindergarten gets a satisfactory academic record in terms of both the intellectual readiness of its graduates and the kinds of primary schools where its graduates are placed … it secures for my daughter a smooth transition to the subsequent primary school studies, and so I have chosen it. (K2, DS-021-I/2/1)

Table 6

Means of the items "academic achievement of other children in the school" and "primary school allocation for kindergarten graduates"

	K1		K2		K3	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Academic achievement of other children in the school	3.27	0.70	3.19	0.58	3.19	0.56
Primary school allocation for kindergarten	3.49	0.62	3.34	0.60	3.29	0.59

graduates						

* midpoint = 2.5

Parental academic interest did not stop after parents had decided on a school; instead their interest kept up throughout the course of their children's kindergarten study. In another question asking parents, "Which aspects of school information would you like to learn more about in the future through the schools' dissemination of information?", 63% of K1 parents, 62% of K2 parents, and 52% of K3 parents said they would continue to be interested in the kinds of teaching methods and strategies delivered in school (Appendix 1). Similarly high percentages of the K1 (64%) and K2 (61%) parents showed eagerness to learn about primary school allocation for kindergarten graduates when answering the same question, even though they were not equally interested in the "academic achievement of other children in the school" after deciding on a school. Again, fewer K3 parents responded to this question with a curiosity toward the "primary school allocation for kindergarten graduates" of their children's school *in the future*. As articulated earlier, when the K3 parents were asked to complete the questionnaires (June and July, 2010), their children had already been officially assigned a primary school placement. Any further information regarding primary school allocation would not be of great interest to them because their children would shortly be leaving kindergarten.

Analyzing the questionnaire data alongside the interview transcripts made it obvious that a majority of kindergarten parents shared a common concern about the quality of teaching, in particular the academic content delivered by the schools and that related directly to their children's academic learning. They were desperate to choose a kindergarten that practiced a "pre-" primary learning curriculum and that gave their children a primary school mode of teaching and learning. Parents believed that preprimary learning would equip their children with the essential qualities for a smooth transition to primary education, and could further guarantee success in their children's primary school learning. The overwhelming concern of parents over their children's next stage of academic learning appeared to have inhibited their awareness of the

arguments against early academic instruction. They were also unable to recognize the undesirable effects of premature academic drilling. This view is in contrast with the government's and most preprimary educators' preference for student-centered education. For some time, both academics and the government have argued that young children should be encouraged to be "active constructivists" and that schools should provide them with a rich learning experience to enable them to experiment and explore. This approach encourages them to construct knowledge actively and go through progressive developmental stages at their own pace (Chan & Chan, 2003; Curriculum Development Council, 2006; Dupree, Bertram, & Pascal, 2001; Vygotsky, 1978).

Pragmatic concerns in parental choice

The questionnaires and interviews suggested that academics were not the only concern of parents. The data also revealed their pragmatic and nonacademic concerns, such as "the teaching team of the school is very caring" (K3, TM-008-I/4/18), "the school offers nutritious snacks freshly prepared by the school cook everyday" (K1, WK-020-I/2/2), "the school gets a regular cleaning routine" (K2, WK-019-I/1/10), and "the school is spacious, with an outdoor playground and a number of special rooms for activities" (K3, PL-002-I/1/23). Among the myriad of pragmatic and nonacademic aspects that parents mentioned, the geographical proximity of a school, full- versus half-day program offerings, and religious affiliation were the most common ones named in the interviews.

School location

The influence of school location was exemplified by the parents' intention in picking a neighborhood school for the sake of convenience. Although school location was not an item given to parents to check in the questionnaires, 40 of the 49 parents interviewed referred to choosing kindergartens located "close to where I live" (K1, AN-009-I/1/6); "on the ground floor of the building" (K2, AN-009-I/1/6); "downstairs in my building" (K2, AL-012-I/2/2); "within walking distance of the housing estate" (K3, PL-002-I/1/8); and "across the road" (K1, CH-010-

I/2/15). Other parents added that the proximity of a kindergarten "saves a child the trouble of traveling" (K2, DS-021-I/2/11); "accommodates the family routine of dropping off their children to school and picking them up after school, in particular for a working mother" (K2, WK-019-I/1/28); and "facilitates a mother of three children to cope with the hectic schedule of caring" (K1, AL-012-I/2/17). To parents, proximity meant convenience (Hsieh & Shen, 2000); they identified a school within their local, residential district. In a sense, parental choice of a kindergarten was geographically defined.

Full-day versus half-day programs

Another pragmatic ground influencing parent decisions was the choice between full- and half-day programs. Most parents were highly interested in information on the kinds of program offerings available. The statistical means that parents gave to "program offerings (half-day/full-day)" showed that K1-K3 parents all considered this variable equally important, and their ratings were significantly higher than the midpoint of the scale (see Table 5). Indeed, this item was considered by the K2 and K3 parents as second only to the most important item, "teaching methods and strategies," among the 24 school information items listed in the parent questionnaire.

In addition to the survey, 29 parents explicitly stated in the interviews that they wanted full-day programs because "I have to work" (K1, WK-020-I/1/14), "it fits with my working schedule better" (K2, TM-008-I/3/8), and "I am a working mother" (K3, PL-002-I/1/8). Traditionally, the family offers the first socialization setting for young children, and parents are their primary caregivers and educators. These functions, however, have been increasingly supplemented by other socialization agents as a result of the rapid increase in the number of families where both parents work (Opper, 1992). More and more parents in Hong Kong have thus become consumers of kindergarten services as a way to compromise between their parental and work roles. This was a major reason these parents wanted full-day programs for their young children.

Religious affiliation

In the interviews, 21 of the 37 parents whose children attended religious schools cited this affiliation as another important reason for their selection. They were inclined to pick a kindergarten because "of its religious background" (K1, PL-002-I/1/16) or "the Protestant background of the school" (K2, TM-008-I/3/6). These parents were religiously observant, which was reflected also in their responses to the survey item labeled "background of the kindergarten service provider." All ratings of this particular item were over 3.00, which was significantly higher than the midpoint (Table 7).

Table 7

Means of the items "background of the kindergarten service provider"

	K1		K2		K3	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Background of the kindergarten service provider	3.10	0.59	3.11	0.55	3.03	0.52

* midpoint = 2.5

In short, parents explored and chose religious schools in order to select one that possessed a religious background compatible with the religious values of their family. Goldring, Hawlety, Saffold, and Smrekar (1997) noted that "when parents choose schools, their choices reflect value-based preferences" (p. 370). As Lubienski (2008) added: "Families have an interest in reproducing their values in the next generation" (p. 104). Obviously, schools present young learners with a vital socialization setting outside the home and are one of the first and key microsystems that surround children (Bronfenbrenner, Moen, & Garbarino, 1984). As such, parents who hold high aspirations for the development and upbringing of their young children make careful school choices for their youngsters on behalf of their family. They therefore choose schools that affirm their family values and beliefs (Weidner & Herrington, 2006). Furthermore, these schools continue to nurture these family beliefs and values outside the home (Wringe, 1994).

Prioritizing academic over pragmatic concerns

Although parents expressed their concerns about the academic and nonacademic aspects of kindergarten education services in the questionnaire, a thorough scrutiny of the interview transcripts made it clear that, when academic desires conflicted with pragmatic desires, academic interests always ranked above all other considerations.

Although parents were prone to choose a kindergarten in their neighborhood, many maintained their focus on academic performance. As a strategy, parents first considered several of the kindergartens near their home, and among them preferred the one that delivered a curriculum that was heavily weighted academically:

> There are three kindergartens located on the ground floors of different buildings in our housing estate … but this school delivers the hardest curriculum in the district … frequent dictations … it helps to prepare my child for the future primary studies … and I find this a desirable school. (K1, DS-021-I/2/24)
>
> There is a kindergarten underneath the block where I live, but I did not put my daughter there … Instead, I chose to enroll my daughter in this school and walk her to school every day for five minutes … because I find this kindergarten has a satisfactory academic record in terms of both the intellectual readiness of its graduates and the kinds of primary schools where its graduates are placed … it secures for my daughter a good preparation for her subsequent primary school studies, and so I have chosen it. (K2, SV-011-I/5/21)

Likewise, when parents opted for a full-day program, it was not merely because "the full-day program keeps my child at school for most of the day … it means more free time for me [the mother] … to make my life easier" (K1, SV-011-I/1/ 29). Also, a full-day program "means engaging my son longer in formal learning" (K2, SV-011-I/2/13). A sense of academic concern was a vivid underpinning in parents' preferences for full-day programs. One parent made this point clear:

> To select a kindergarten that offers a full-day program is indeed one of my concerns … but to enroll my child in a school that teaches to the primary school curriculum to secure him a

> smooth transition to the subsequent primary school studies is even more important … and this school delivers a curriculum close to that of the primary school … so even though I have to bus my child to school every day, I still find this school my best choice. (K2, SV-011-I/5/11)

Lastly, when parents chose a school for its religious background, it seemed at first glance to reflect their desire for a school with the family's religious values. But a closer look into the parents' hearts told another side of their intention. Such a choice may not necessarily mean that the parents wanted their child exposed to a particular religious creed. One K3 mother, for example, shared her reasons for choosing a Catholic school despite herself being Protestant.

> I ultimately decided on this kindergarten because it is a Catholic school … though I myself am Protestant … studying in a Catholic kindergarten makes it easier to get into a Catholic primary school because they are administered by the same Catholic school board … Catholic schools are often academically better than other schools … If I can get my girl into a good Catholic primary school … she probably has a higher chance of being placed in a good Catholic secondary school in the future, and then getting into a good university afterwards. (K3, SV-011-I/4/5)

This mother was willing to compromise her religious preference in order to obtain an academic start that would secure her child a smooth transition from kindergarten through to primary, secondary, and even university education. This example vividly illustrates the overwhelming concern for academic performance among parents of kindergarten-age children in Hong Kong.

Kindergarten parents seemed to combine their acute academic values with many other pragmatic and nonacademic values, but when the pragmatic concerns conflicted with academic interests, the latter almost always came first and determined their school choice. Indeed, the overwhelming academic concern of parents found in this study echoes much of what previous

research has found (Cheng, Lau, Fung, & Benson, 2009; Ebbeck, 1995; Opper, 1994). It suggests once again that a long-standing, overwhelming academic concern is central for most parents.

Academic consideration as a shared and overriding concern in parental choice across different socioeconomic groups

The academic concern of parents revealed in the study was found to be shared by parents from different socioeconomic backgrounds. A Pearson's correlation analysis on the demographic data collected in the questionnaires examined whether a relationship prevailed between parental education levels and income levels. The results showed that education levels were significantly related to income levels in a positive direction ($r = 0.326$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that the more education the parents had obtained, the higher their income levels. To facilitate subsequent analysis, parents of each kindergarten level were categorized into four socioeconomic groups: high (Group 1), medium high (Group 2), medium low (Group 3), and low (Group 4). That is to say, all K1 parents were divided into these four socioeconomic groups, as were the K2 and the K3 parents. By the same token, parent responses to the questionnaires were reorganized and compiled into separate data sets according to the socioeconomic groupings. This facilitated analysis of any differences in school choice concerns among parents from different socioeconomic groups.

The statistical means derived from the parent questionnaires on these reorganized data sets divulged that parents from all socioeconomic groups shared a concern over school education quality. Whether quality was reflected in the academic content, the academic performance, or the program-related data of the kindergartens making up the construct of the parent questionnaire, parents across the four socioeconomic groups rated each item related to education quality with a mean higher than the midpoint 2.5 (Tables 8, 9, and 10). These items were also the ones occupying most of the top positions when all 24 items of school information listed in the questionnaire were ranked by their means.

The descriptive statistical data further showed that parents from the same kindergarten levels but of different socioeconomic backgrounds gave each education quality item a fairly similar rating. Despite the observed range in the means, all ratings were over 3.0 on a 4-point Likert scale, implying the importance of these items to the parents' choice of school. Among the diverse items of school information mirroring the education quality of schools, "teaching methods and strategies" was rated by parents from all socioeconomic groups with the highest mean of all, between 3.39 and 3.84. In a sense, whether the parents belonged to the high or the low socioeconomic group, they all were concerned with the pedagogical practices adopted by the kindergartens.

These statistical analyses, together with the parent views documented in the interviews, made it explicit that academics was a shared concern among the kindergarten parents and was not restricted to a particular socioeconomic group. Whether they were well-educated or not, whether they had a high income or not, parents in general bore a keen concern over the academic preparation and the intellectual development of their children. This specific concern then drove them to choose a kindergarten based upon the school's academic performance, thinking that it could ensure their children's academic readiness for the subsequent primary school studies and help them confront the competitive educational context in Hong Kong.

Table 8

Means of all four socioeconomic groups of K1 parents rating items related to school education quality

School education quality	Group 1 (High socioeconomic group)		Group 2 (Medium-high socioeconomic group)		Group 3 (Medium-low socioeconomic group)		Group 4 (Low socioeconomic group)	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Academic content								
- School missions and visions	3.34	0.57	3.33	0.63	3.45	0.54	3.54	0.50
- Teaching methods and strategies	3.59	0.56	3.84	0.44	3.80	0.40	3.78	0.42
Academic performance								
- Children's academic achievement	3.30	0.69	3.44	0.61	3.34	0.68	3.42	0.62
- Primary school allocation for KG	3.52	0.60	3.53	0.61	3.48	0.62	3.63	0.53

graduates								
Program-related data								
- Professional qualification of	3.50	0.62	3.57	0.50	3.64	0.53	3.43	0.62
teaching staff	3.48	0.57	3.49	0.51	3.57	0.52	3.51	0.55
- Choice of extracurricular activities	3.50	0.57	3.68	0.47	3.75	0.43	3.80	0.40
- Program offerings (half-day/full-day)								

* midpoint = 2.5

Table 9

Means of all four socioeconomic groups of K2 parents rating items related to school education quality

School education quality	Group 1 (High socioeconomic group)		Group 2 (Medium-high socioeconomic group)		Group 3 (Medium-low socioeconomic group)		Group 4 (Low socioeconomic group)	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Academic content								
- School missions and visions	3.25	0.55	3.32	0.54	3.23	0.68	3.29	0.53
- Teaching methods and strategies	3.47	0.53	3.39	0.52	3.49	0.56	3.50	0.50
Academic performance								
- Children's academic achievement	3.21	0.59	3.16	0.54	3.20	0.61	3.22	0.56
- Primary school allocation for KG graduates	3.33	0.62	3.29	0.63	3.45	0.53	3.40	0.59
Program-related data								
- Professional qualification of teaching staff	3.37	0.54	3.30	0.57	3.34	0.51	3.32	0.54
- Choice of extracurricular activities	3.23	0.55	3.15	0.61	3.31	0.58	3.28	0.52
- Program offerings (half-day/full-day)	3.43	0.53	3.35	0.56	3.49	0.53	3.45	0.50

* midpoint = 2.5

Table 10

Means of all four socioeconomic groups of K3 parents rating items related to school education quality

School education quality	Group 1 (High socioeconomic group)		Group 2 (Medium-high socioeconomic group)		Group 3 (Medium-low socioeconomic group)		Group 4 (Low socioeconomic group)	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Academic content								
- School missions and visions	3.13	0.56	3.18	0.49	3.32	0.63	3.42	0.53
- Teaching methods and strategies	3.40	0.56	3.41	0.56	3.54	0.53	3.63	0.49
Academic performance								
- Children's academic achievement	3.13	0.56	3.17	0.51	3.23	0.58	3.32	0.57
- Primary school allocation for KG graduates	3.23	0.58	3.19	0.53	3.44	0.61	3.42	0.53
Program-related data								
- Professional qualification of teaching staff	3.22	0.62	3.15	0.62	3.41	0.60	3.30	0.50
- Choice of extracurricular activities	3.17	0.54	3.08	0.55	3.23	0.52	3.19	0.51
- Program offerings (half-day/full-day)	3.33	0.56	3.32	0.56	3.44	0.50	3.57	0.50

* midpoint = 2.5

Discussion

"Bounded rationality" in parental school choice

As revealed in the data analysis, parents' interest in the education of their children focused primarily on the academic status of the kindergarten, and particularly on how well the school prepared their children for primary school learning. This academic interest is justified by the influence of China's Confucian heritage culture. Confucianism holds that effort and willpower are the essence of successful learning (Lee, 1996). Parents thus uphold a belief that equates hard work with academic success (Lam, Ho, & Wong, 2002), and they expect their children to take learning seriously. And in the competitive and exam-dominated educational environment of Hong Kong, people generally see academic achievement as a road to future success and a ladder to a better life (Chan, 2004; Lam, 1999). So it is not surprising to find that parents are highly concerned about their children's academic performance. Parents make every effort to train their children to study diligently and do well in their schoolwork. And with this strong academic value, parents choose schools for their kindergarten-aged children by looking for programs that deliver instructional curriculum, that practice didactic teaching, and that adhere to rote learning. These are the pedagogical practices that parents in Hong Kong generally believe can equip their children with the intellectual readiness needed to succeed later in the formal education system (Fung & Lam, 2009).

In market theory, parents are ambitious consumers of education services. They are assumed to be rational judges in choosing a school in the best interests of their children (Goldring, Hawlety, Saffold, & Smrekar, 1997). Moreover, these rational choices should "increase their children's likelihood of success" (Willms & Echols, 1993, p. 64). Beyond a doubt, all parents in the study very much wanted to get the best education for their young children. Yet the way they defined "best education" was restricted to their personal perceptions

of how to succeed in Hong Kong's competitive academic environment. Ultimately, school choice was determined by the parents' very subjective definition of the best education. This makes the rationality of their school choice a "bounded rationality," according to the framework of Simon (1983) and March (1986). Wells (1993) describes the concept of bounded rationality:

> The theory of bounded rationality acknowledges that the decision maker's perception of the real world affects his or her decisions, whether it is an accurate perception or not. Such constraints on the decision making process lead to … "satisfying" as opposed to maximizing … In other words, decision makers choose the satisfactory school given the amount of information they have on the available options and their perception of where they fit into the society, but it may not be the same school they would choose given more information or experience. (p. 32)

In other words, parents are not irrational. They make rational choices for their children to secure for them a good academic start and a place on the fast track to success. But their rationality was based on their overriding concern for drilling their children to prepare for subsequent primary school studies. This sidetracked concerns for the holistic and balanced development of their children, as continually denounced in the Quality Assurance Inspection (QAI) annual reports[4] (Hong Kong Education Commission, 2000/2001, 2001/2002, 2002/2003, 2003/2004, 2004/2005, 2005/2006, 2006/2007). If such is the case, what is likely to happen when the PEVS further empowers parents to make school choices based on such a narrow academic focus? To what extent will the expansion of parental school choice actually improve education quality, an official intention of the PEVS?

The dilemma between school choice and the promise of education quality

[4] The Quality Assurance Inspection (QAI) is conducted annually by the Quality Assurance Division of the Education Bureau of Hong Kong. The annual QAI focuses on four key domains: (a) management and organization, (b) learning and teaching, (c) support for children and school ethos, and (d) children's development.

School choice and education quality are dominant topics in contemporary education reform. The concept of school choice as a means to improve education quality is "carried primarily through the language of vouchers" (Tannenbaum, 1995, p. 12). The idea behind education vouchers is that when the key consumers of education (parents) decide where and how to educate their children, their desires will become the market demands. These demands are channeled through market forces, pushing schools to undertake "new educational ventures, which would presumably succeed only if they truly reflected the wishes of parents" (Cohen & Farrar, 1995, p. 43). The result is that schools become market-driven. Under this theory, school choice guarantees education quality by strengthening market forces. This positive effect of school choice on education has been widely discussed (Brighouse, 2008; Feinberg & Lubienski, 2008; Heid & Leak, 1995; Kahlenberg, 2003; Lips & Feinberg, 2007; Weidner & Herrington, 2006).

Hong Kong's kindergarten sector, however, is quite peculiar. It has never been recognized as part of the formal education system or incorporated into the government subsidies for free education. Rather, it has long been run as a kind of private education business by individual parties and nongovernmental organizations, such as churches. So the status of kindergartens as a private business has not changed with the introduction of the PEVS. Resembling instead the operation of businesses in the commercial sector that are driven by market forces, kindergarten services are run like private businesses that are inevitably market-oriented to ensure their survival.

As the major consumers in this private education market, parents enjoy total freedom of school choice. They are free to buy whatever kind of education best fits their preferences. And kindergartens have always seen the power and control parents have as the dominant "invisible

hand." Parental school preferences may even have come to overshadow the authority of kindergartens in determining which learning and teaching strategies to use (Fung, 2007). Kindergarten curricula are thus often designed to meet parental expectations. Although kindergartens are well aware that they should observe official government curriculum guides (Curriculum Development Council, 2006; Curriculum Development Institute, 1996), many opt to adjust their service mission to fit parental preferences. This way, many schools end up formulating their policies and culture to satisfy parents and so compromise their professional stance because of the intense competition in the private kindergarten market. In the power struggle between parents and kindergartens, parents always have the upper hand.

If parents have been enjoying the privilege of school choice and kindergartens have been operating in line with parental preferences, any further expansion of parental school choice by the PEVS will only magnify the one-sided power struggle between parents and kindergartens. The influence of parental preference will become more acute. Parental choice dictates pedagogical practice and undermines the autonomy of kindergartens. This sort of parental influence on the pedagogical practice of kindergarten teachers was documented in an earlier study conducted by the authors in academic year 2006/2007 (Fung & Lam, 2009): "The Pedagogical Decision Making of Kindergarten Teachers in Hong Kong: Professional Autonomy versus Market Orientation."[5] To secure enrollment for their programs, teachers in the study had

[5] The study was a qualitative research, conducted in academic year 2006/2007, investigating what kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong did in class, how they planned their lessons, and what they considered in making pedagogical decisions. Field observations and interviews were used. Four kindergarten teachers with the pseudonames Marlene, Laura, Nelson, and Carmen were invited to be the teacher informants of the study. They were invited not only because they all had a basic professional qualification to work in kindergarten, but also because they came from schools that fell within the two major categorizations of kindergartens in Hong Kong. Among them, both Laura and Marlene worked in religious, nonprofit kindergartens, whereas Nelson and Carmen were teachers in a private independent kindergarten. Each teacher informant was observed three times. On average, each observation visit lasted over 2 hours, with some approaching 3 hours. The teacher informants were also interviewed before and after each observation, in addition to a round-up interview at the end of the data collection process. In total, each teacher informant was observed three times and interviewed seven times.

to compromise their own professional beliefs and values about how children should learn. In other words, the ability of parents to choose a school and their concerns about their children's academic upbringing were intruding on the professional mission and vision of kindergartens, as well as the pedagogical practice of teachers. This kind of market-driven education service runs counter to the education style that the government advocates. It is in opposition to child-centered, play-based curricula that treat children as active learners, respect them as owners of their learning, foster their holistic development, and nurture their motivation for life-long learning. The influence of parents' traditional education values could explain the criticisms documented in the QAI Annual Reports since 2000/2001, which have criticized kindergartens for placing undue emphasis on intellectual matters, limiting the diversity of developmentally appropriate learning opportunities, and not allowing children to learn skills naturally. Yet if the PEVS further expands parental school choice, it will only make these problems worse, which in turn will undermine its promise to improve education quality.

The above analysis of Hong Kong's unique kindergarten sector makes it clear that the good intentions behind the PEVS are not feasible in Hong Kong's already market-driven kindergarten sector. Any attempt to further empower parents in school choice increases the adverse parental influence on the pedagogical choice of schools. The current situation calls for attention, especially when many parents are unaware of the arguments against early academic instruction and premature academic drilling. Many studies and local schools have noted the influence of parents on kindergarten education. But the urge to promote school choice through the PEVS and to intensify the marketization of kindergarten education has probably overlooked the undesirable effects that parental influence can have on the professional quality of

kindergarten education services. And so there has emerged a unique dilemma between school choice and education quality within Hong Kong's distinctive private kindergarten sector.

Conclusion

In general, parents try to get the best education for their young children. Therefore, it makes sense philosophically to argue that "permitting parents to select a school for their children is crucial" (Reich, 2008, p. 21). Family advocates have also argued that entrusting parents with school decisions is to respect the liberty, rights, and interests of parents in a democratic society (Feinberg & Lubienski, 2008). Libertarians argue explicitly that giving parents control over school choice encourages them to play a proactive role in the education of their children (Bell, 2008). It invites parents to communicate their desires and needs to the schools. In return, schools and families are more likely to collaborate smoothly. And parents become more satisfied with the education they have chosen for their children. Furthermore, economic theory argues that, when school choice turns parents into education-service consumers, their choices become a powerful market force to push schools—in particular the schools not chosen—to improve their education to fit the needs and wants of parents. School choice thus benefits the different stakeholder parties in children's education through the motivating force of parental control.

When parental choice is central to school decisions, parental preference becomes crucial and cannot be neglected. Care should be taken, however, when parents focus primarily on their children's academic outcomes and the schools' academic excellence without considering the holistic and balanced development of their children. Also, the problem of allowing parental preference to dominate the pedagogical autonomy of kindergartens should be resolved. On the contrary, schools should take every possible and potential opportunity to educate parents about their children's developmental levels and learning needs. Schools should teach parents the basic

educational principles of early learning and development and encourage them to adopt proper, developmentally appropriate expectations for the education of their young children.

References

Armor, D., & Peiser, B. (1997). *Competition in education: A case study of interdistrict choice*. Boston, MA: Pioneer Institute.

Ball, S. J. (2007). *Education policy and social class: The selected works of Stephen J. Ball*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Bell, C. A. (2008). Social class differences in school choice: The role of preferences. In W. Feinberg & C. Lubienski (Eds.), *School choice policies and outcomes: Empirical and philosophical perspectives* (pp. 121-148). New York, NY: State University of New York Press.

Bracey, G. W. (2008). Schools-are-awful bloc still busy in 2008. *Phi Delta Kappan, 90*(2), 103-114.

Brighouse, H. (2008). Educational equality and varieties of school choice. In W. Feinberg & C. Lubienski (Eds.), *School choice policies and outcomes: Empirical and philosophical perspectives* (pp. 41-59). New York, NY: State University of New York Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U., Moen, P., & Garbarino, J. (1984). Child, family, and community. In R. Parke (Ed.), *Review of child development and research* (Vol. 7, pp. 283-328). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Ceja, M. (2006). Understanding the role of parents and siblings as information sources in the college choice process of Chicana students. *Journal of College Student Development, 47*(1), 87-104.

Chan, L. K. S., & Chan, L. (2003). Reforming early childhood education in Hong Kong: Meeting the challenges. In L. K. S. Chan & E. Mellor (Eds.), *International developments in early childhood services* (pp. 81-96). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishers.

Chan, Y. M. E. (2004). Narratives of experience: How culture matters to children's development. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 5*(2), 145-159.

Cheng, D., Lau, G., Fung, C. K. H., & Benson, P. (2009). *Play-based pedagogy in early childhood classrooms in Hong Kong and its impact on quality education*. An unpublished research report submitted to the Research Grants Council, The HKSAR Government.

Cohen, D. K., & Farrar, E. (1995). Power to the parents? The story of education vouchers. In M. D. Tannenbaum (Ed.), *Concepts and issues in school choice* (pp. 41-67). New York, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press.

Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (3rd ed.). Los Angeles, Calif.: Sage Publications, Inc.

Curriculum Development Council. (2006). *Guide to the pre-primary curriculum*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Government Printer.

Curriculum Development Institute. (1996). *Guide to the pre-primary curriculum*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Government Printer.

Dupree, E., Bertram, T., & Pascal, C. (2001). *Listening to children's perspectives of their early childhood settings*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED457963)

Ebbeck, M. (1995). Purposes of early childhood education: Expressed views of teachers and parents in Hong Kong. *International Journal of Early Years Education, 3*(2), 3-18.

Education Bureau. (2008). *School lists of 18 districts*. Retrieved February 2010 from http://chsc.edb.hkedcity.net/kindergarten/

Feinberg, W., & Lubienski, C. (2008). Introduction. In W. Feinberg & C. Lubienski (Eds.), *School choice policies and outcomes: Empirical and philosophical perspectives* (pp. 1-20). New York, NY: State University of New York Press.

Fiske, E. B., & Ladd, H. F. (2000). *When schools compete: A cautionary tale*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institute Press.

Fung, C. K. H. (2007). *Practice-expectation gap and the pedagogical decision-making of teachers in the pre-primary sector in Hong Kong*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong.

Fung, C. K. H., & Lam, C. C. (2009). The Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme of Hong Kong: A promise of quality education provision? *Education Journal, 36*(1-2), 153-170.

Gauri, V. (1998). *School choice in Chile: Two decades of educational reform*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Gewirtz, S., Ball, S. J., & Bowe, R. (1995). *Markets, choice, and equity in education*. Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.

Glatter, R., Woods, P. A., & Bagley, C. (1997). Diversity, differentiation and hierarchy: School choice and parental preferences. In R. Glatter, P. A. Woods, & C. Bagley (Eds.), *Choice and diversity of schooling: Perspectives and prospects* (pp. 7-28). London, UK: Routledge.

Godwin, R. K., Kemerer, F. R., & Martinez, V. J. (1998). Comparing public choice and private voucher programs in San Antonio. In P. E. Peterson & B. C. Hassel (Eds.), *Learning from school choice* (pp. 275-306). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

Goldring, E., Hawlety, W., Saffold, R., & Smrekar, C. (1997). Parental choice: Consequences for students, families, and schools. In R. Shapira & P. W. Cookson, Jr. (Eds.), *Autonomy and choice in context: An international perspective* (pp. 353-388). New York, NY: Elsevier Science.

Goodwin, W., & Goodwin, L. (1996). *Understanding quantitative and qualitative research in early childhood education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Gordon, L. (2008). Where does the power lie now? Devolution, choice and democracy in schooling. In W. Feinberg & C. Lubienski (Eds.), *School choice policies and outcomes: Empirical and philosophical perspectives* (pp. 177-196). New York, NY: State University of New York Press.

Gorman, G. E., & Clayton, P. (2005). *Qualitative research for the information professional: A practical handbook*. London, UK: Facet.

Heid, C. A., & Leak, L. E. (1995). School choice plans and the professionalization of teaching. In M. D. Tannenbaum (Ed.), *Concepts and issues in school choice* (pp. 390-399). New York, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press.

Hewitt, B., & Maloney, C. (2000). Malaysian parents' ideal and actual perceptions of preschool education. *International Journal of Early Years Education, 8*(1), 83-92.

Hong Kong Education Commission. (2000/2001). *Quality assurance inspection annual report*. Retrieved July 2010 from http://www.edb.gov.hk/index.aspx?nodeid=744&langno=1

Hong Kong Education Commission. (2001/2002). *Quality assurance inspection annual report*. Retrieved July 2010 from http://www.edb.gov.hk/index.aspx?nodeid=744&langno=1

Hong Kong Education Commission. (2002/2003). *Quality assurance inspection annual report*. Retrieved July 2010 from http://www.edb.gov.hk/index.aspx?nodeid=744&langno=1

Hong Kong Education Commission. (2003/2004). *Quality assurance inspection annual report*. Retrieved July 2010 from http://www.edb.gov.hk/index.aspx?nodeid=744&langno=1

Hong Kong Education Commission. (2004/2005). *Quality assurance inspection annual report*. Retrieved July 2010 from http://www.edb.gov.hk/index.aspx?nodeid=744&langno=1

Hong Kong Education Commission. (2005/2006). *Quality assurance inspection summary reports*. Retrieved July 2010 from http://www.edb.gov.hk/index.aspx?langno=2&nodeID=5862

Hong Kong Education Commission. (2006/2007). *Quality assurance inspection summary reports*. Retrieved July 2010 from http://www.edb.gov.hk/FileManager/TC/Content_2325/kg_annualreport0607.pdf

Houston, P. D. (2004). *Outlook and perspectives on American education*. London, UK: Scarecrow Education.

Howell, W. G., & Peterson, P. E. (2006). *The education gap: Vouchers and urban schools* (Rev. ed.). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

Hsieh, C. L., & Shen, J. (2000). *The effects of parental characteristics on school choice*. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. EA030491)

Kahlenberg, R. D. (2003). Public school choice: Student achievement, integration, democracy, and public support. In R. D. Kahlenberg (Ed.), *Public school choice vs. private school vouchers* (pp. 137-152). New York, NY: The Century Foundation Press. Lam, C. C., Ho, E., & Wong, N. Y. (2002). Parents' beliefs and practices in education in Confucian heritage cultures: The Hong Kong case. *Journal of Southeast Asian Education, 3*(1), 99-114.

Lam, M. Y. H. (1999). A study of Hong Kong parents' views on kindergarten education. *Early Child Development and Care, 159,* 17-24.

Lee, W. O. (1996). The cultural context for Chinese learners: Conceptions of learning in the Confucian tradition. In D. A. Watkins & J. B. Biggs (Eds.), *The Chinese learner: Cultural, psychological and contextual influences* (pp. 25-41). Hong Kong: Comparative

Education Research Centre; Victoria, Australia: The Australian Council for Educational Research.

Leone, R. C. (2003). Myth #2: Vouchers are part of the new civil rights movement: Voucher and Brown v. Board of Education. In R. D. Kahlenberg (Ed.), *Public school choice vs. private school vouchers* (pp. 61-62). New York, NY: The Century Foundation Press.

Lips, D., & Feinberg, E. (2007). *Utah's revolutionary new school voucher program*. Retrieved July 2010 from (www.heritage.org/research/education/wm1362.cfm)

Lubienski, C. (2008). The politics of parental choice: Theory and evidence on quality information. In W. Feinberg & C. Lubienski (Eds.), *School choice policies and outcomes: Empirical and philosophical perspectives* (pp. 99-119). New York, NY: State University of New York Press.

March, J. G. (1986). Bounded rationality, ambiguity, and the engineering of choice. In J. Elster (Ed.), *Rational choice* (pp. 142-170). Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell.

Moe, T. M. (2001). *Schools, vouchers, and the American public*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

Naismith, D. (1994). In defense of the educational voucher. In D. Bridges & T. H. McLaughlin (Eds.), *Education and the market place* (pp. 34-39). London, UK: Scarecrow Education.

Opper, S. (1992). *Hong Kong's young children: Their preschools and families*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.

Opper, S. (1994). Adult views on learning and development in Hong Kong preschool children. *Educational Research Journal, 9*(1), 44-51.

Paulu, N. (1995). Improving schools and empowering parents: Choice in American education: Benefits of choice. In M. D. Tannenbaum (Ed.), *Concepts and issues in school choice* (pp. 452-470). New York, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press.

Perkins-Gough, D. (2008). Do private high schools help low-income students? *Education Leadership, 65*(7), 93-94.

Raty, H., Kasanen, K., & Laine, N. (2009). Parents' participation in their child's schooling. *Scandinavian Journal of Education Research, 53*(3), 277-293.

Raywid, M. A. (1995). Public choice, yes; vouchers, no! In M. D. Tannenbaum (Ed.), *Concepts and issues in school choice* (pp. 400-416). New York, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press.

Reich, R. (2008). Common schooling and educational choice as a response to pluralism. In W. Feinberg & C. Lubienski (Eds.), *School choice policies and outcomes: Empirical and philosophical perspectives* (pp. 21-40). New York, NY: State University of New York Press.

Simon, H. (1983). *Models of bounded rationality: Behavioral economics and business organizations*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Tannenbaum, M. D. (1995). Vouchers. In M. D. Tannenbaum (Ed.), *Concepts and issues in school choice* (pp. 7-15). New York, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press.

Teske, P., Fitzpatrick, J., & Kaplan, G. (2007). *Opening doors: How low-income parents search for the right school*. Washington, DC: Daniel J. Evans.

Vincent, C., Braun, A., & Ball, S. (2010). Local links, local knowledge: Choosing care settings and schools. *British Educational Research Journal, 36*(2), 279-298.

Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Weidner, V. R., & Herrington, C. D. (2006). Are parents informed consumers: Evidence from the Florida McKay scholarship program. *Peabody Journal of Education, 81*(1), 27-56.

Weinschrott, D. J., & Kilgore, S. B. (1998). Evidence from the Indianapolis voucher program. In P. E. Peterson & B. C. Hassel (Eds.), *Learning from school choice* (pp. 307-334). Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press.

Willms, J. D., & Echols, F. H. (1993). The Scottish experience of parental school choice. In E. Rasell & R. Rothstein (Eds.), *School choice: Examining the evidence* (pp. 49-68). Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute.

Wise, A. E., & Darling-Hammond, L. (1995). Educational vouchers: Regulating their efficiency and effectiveness. In M. D. Tannenbaum (Ed.), *Concepts and issues in school choice* (pp. 104-118). New York, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press.

Wringe, C. (1994). Markets, values and education. In D. Bridges & T. H. McLaughlin (Eds.), *Education and the market place* (pp. 105-116). London, UK: Scarecrow Education.

Zhou, A., Ma, X., & Aoyagi, H. (2007). Parental expectation of early childhood education: Comparison between China, Japan, and Korea. *Frontiers of Education in China, 2*(1), 140-147.

Appendix 1

Ratings Given by All Parents to School Attributes They Would Like to Know More about in the Future from the School

Which aspects of school information would you like to learn more about in the future through the schools' dissemination of information?

	K1 parents			K2 parents			K3 parents		
	Yes	No	NA*	Yes	No	NA*	Yes	No	NA*
Background of the kindergarten service provider	24%	75%	1%	38%	59%	3%	36%	61%	3%
School mission and vision	41%	59%	0%	45%	53%	2%	41%	57%	2%
Members of the school board	6%	93%	1%	17%	81%	2%	15%	82%	3%
Records of school board meetings and decisions	13%	87%	0%	34%	64%	2%	29%	68%	3%
School organization and the management team	31%	68%	1%	36%	62%	2%	29%	67%	4%
Monthly salary range of principal and teaching staff	9%	91%	0%	23%	74%	3%	17%	79%	4%
School fee	29%	71%	0%	36%	62%	2%	27%	69%	4%
School financial information	15%	85%	0%	34%	63%	3%	26%	71%	3%
Link with parents	56%	44%	0%	48%	49%	3%	37%	59%	4%
No. of teaching staff	40%	59%	1%	38%	59%	3%	30%	66%	4%
Professional qualification of teaching staff	53%	47%	0%	60%	37%	3%	48%	49%	3%
Quality review: results and report	56%	43%	1%	73%	25%	2%	72%	25%	3%
KGs' self-evaluation report	45%	54%	1%	49%	48%	3%	46%	50%	4%
No. of classes	41%	59%	0%	39%	59%	3%	28%	68%	4%
School capacity	45%	55%	0%	44%	53%	3%	30%	66%	4%
School facilities	66%	34%	0%	48%	50%	2%	38%	58%	4%
Outdoor playground and facilities	68%	32%	0%	48%	49%	3%	36%	60%	4%
Choices of extracurricular activities	58%	41%	1%	48%	49%	3%	40%	57%	3%
Additional charges for extracurricular activities	26%	74%	0%	33%	64%	3%	28%	69%	3%
Program offerings	58%	41%	1%	61%	37%	2%	42%	54%	4%
Teaching methods and strategies	63%	36%	1%	62%	36%	2%	52%	45%	3%
Academic achievement of other children in the school	42%	58%	0%	46%	51%	3%	33%	63%	4%
Primary school allocation for kindergarten graduates	64%	35%	1%	61%	36%	2%	47%	49%	4%
Network with other kindergartens and primary schools	41%	58%	1%	52%	45%	3%	35%	61%	4%

* NA = No answer.

Current Issues in Education

http://cie.asu.edu

Volume 14, Number 1 ISSN 1099-839X

Authors hold the copyright to articles published in *Current Issues in Education*. Requests to reprint CIE articles in other journals should be addressed to the author. Reprints should credit CIE as the original publisher and include the URL of the CIE publication. Permission is hereby granted to copy any article, provided CIE is credited and copies are not sold.

ASU Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College
ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

Editorial Team

Executive Editors
Lori Ellingford
Andrew Darian

Assistant Executive Editor
Krista Adams

Layout Editor
Jennifer Wojtulewicz

Copy Editor
Lucinda Watson

Faculty Advisers
Gustavo E. Fischman
Jeanne M. Powers
Debby Zambo

Section Editors
Hillary Andrelchik
Meg Burke
Douglas Deiss
Miriam Emran
Tracy Geiger
Sarah Heaslip
Melinda Hollis
Afzal Hossain
Seong Hee Kim
Younsu Kim
Alaya Kuntz
Angeles Maldonado
Carol Masser
John Michael
William Mitchell
Elizabeth Reyes
Lindsay Richerson
Rory Schmitt
Tapati Sen
Jennifer Shea
Kara Sujansky
Melissa Tarango
Andrew Tesoro
Jill Wendt