

A Critical Review of the Early Childhood Education (ECE) Curriculum Documents in Hong Kong

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Early childhood education has long been recognised globally and locally as significant in laying the foundations for lifelong learning and all-round personal development. The same recognition is prominent in the education reform proposals of Hong Kong. To facilitate kindergarten teachers to design quality curricula, several government bodies issued curriculum related documents to serve teachers as guidelines. A study of these government-published materials reveals a degree of consistency among them in terms of what the government expects of the kindergarten curriculum, despite the fact that their publication spans the two decades 1984 to 2006. This paper, divided into two parts, attempts to analyse the aforementioned documents from three broad, multiple curriculum perspectives. The first part will cover the categories and questions inherent in a Tylerian perspective. The second part will cover the notion of Schwab's practical perspective and associated curricular "commonplaces" (teacher, student, subject matter and milieu) (Reid, 2006), which address related pedagogical questions such as what, when, how, why, to whom, and by whom (Heydon & Wang, 2006). Finally, we shall offer some comments from critical perspectives.

Key words: Early childhood education curriculum, Tylerian perspective, Schwab's curricular "commonplaces", critical perspectives, Hong Kong

Early childhood education has long been recognised globally and locally as significant in laying the foundations for lifelong learning and all-round personal development. The same recognition is prominent in the education reform proposals of Hong Kong prepared by the Education Commission in 2000. Reform initiatives embodied in the Reform Proposals apply to the entire education system, with specific ones covering particular sectors of education. For those dealing with kindergarten education, the Hong Kong Education Commission (2000, p. 49) suggests "Building a New Culture for Quality Early Childhood Education". Here, the principal stated aim of kindergarten education is "to help children cultivate a positive attitude towards learning and good living habits in an inspiring and enjoyable environment" (p. 30). Further, pre-primary education should enable children to

have curiosity and an inquisitive mind, as well as an interest to learn; experience a pleasurable and colorful group life, through which they can develop a sense of responsibility, respect others and have a balanced development covering the domains of ethics, intellect, physique, social skills and aesthetics; and be prepared to experiment and explore, to learn to face up to problems and find solutions, to develop self-confidence and a healthy self-concept. (p. 31)

The reform directions put forth for kindergarten education indicate an official determination to push for quality service provisions that go beyond behaviouristic perceptions and lead away from the teacher-directed approach. The reform initiatives propose a bond with constructivism, cooperative learning, and child-centredness. In a sense, they encourage teachers to create an inspiring learning environment that is conducive to a creative and exploratory spirit. They also expect teachers to design a quality curriculum that can contribute to the whole-person development of young children.

To facilitate the enactment of the reform initiatives by kindergarten teachers, several government bodies issued curriculum related documents all of which serve as guidelines for teachers to design quality curricula. These documents include *Performance Indicators — For Kindergartens* (2000), *Performance Indicators (Pre-Primary Institutions) — Domain on Learning and Teaching* (2001), and *Learning to Learn — The Way Forward in Curriculum Development* (2001). A new curriculum guide, the 2006 *Guide to the Pre-Primary Curriculum*, was also released to replace the *Guide to the Pre-Primary Curriculum* issued in 1996. Earlier relevant documents were the 1984 *Guide to the Kindergarten Curriculum*, the 1987 *Guidelines on Nursery Class Activities*, and the 1993 *Guide to the Kindergarten Curriculum*.¹

A study of the government-published materials reveals a degree of consistency among them in terms of what the government expects of the kindergarten curriculum, despite the fact that their publication spans the two decades 1984 to 2006. Encapsulated in these government documents are pedagogical aspects that can be grouped into a number of categories: the aims of learning and teaching; the principles of curriculum organisation; the teaching and learning strategies of the curriculum; the developmental domains and the learning areas to be covered in the curriculum; and the assessment of learning and development. Each of these five categories helps uncover what the government has been looking for in the kindergarten curriculum. This paper, divided into two parts, attempts to analyse the aforementioned documents from three broad, multiple curriculum perspectives. The first part will cover the categories (known as macro-curricular commonplaces) and questions inherent in a Tylerian perspective (aims/objectives, content/areas of learning, organisation, evaluation/assessment) (Lee & Wong, 1996, p. 414). The second part will cover the notion of Schwab's practical perspective and associated curricular "commonplaces" (teacher, student, subject matter and milieus) (Reid, 2006), which address related questions such as: What should be taught? To whom should it be taught? How should it be taught? When should it be taught? By whom should it be taught? Why should it be taught? (Heydon & Wang, 2006, p. 31). Finally, we shall offer some comments from critical perspectives (Jungck & Marshall, 1992).

Analysis of Macro-curricular Commonplaces from a Tylerian Perspective

Aims of Learning and Teaching

The aims of learning and teaching in kindergarten education have remained much the same since the 1980s, recognising kindergarten education as a kind of vital pre-school service in nurturing the younger population. Although the 2006 *Guide to the Pre-Primary Curriculum* simply states, “The aim of early childhood is to foster children’s whole person development” (p. 16), the 1996 *Guide* (p. 1) elaborates the aims in more detail:

The care and education services provided by pre-primary institutions in Hong Kong help to foster children’s balanced development in their physical, intellectual, language, social and emotional aspects. Such services also develop in children an interest in learning which helps to prepare them for future education. (1.1.1)

Apart from the acquisition of academic knowledge, children should also equip themselves with other life skills, such as self-care skills, communicative skills, social skills, etc, so as to enable them to adapt to society. It is through direct life experiences, sensory perception and interesting activities that children develop good habits, establish confidence in themselves and in other people, comprehend things around them, as well as live up to social expectations. (1.1.2)

In general, it is expected that kindergartens should play both a developmental and sociological role in the education of young children. The dual foci stress that fostering the social self of young children is just as important as nurturing their academic self in order for them to achieve “whole person development”. That such a sociological role should be served by kindergartens is also noted in the 1984 *Guide to the Kindergarten Curriculum* and the 1993 *Guide to the Kindergarten Curriculum*:

Kindergarten education is the foundation of a child’s life-long process of learning; it also serves as a bridge between the child’s home and school. (1984 *Guide*, p. 2)

The general aims of the kindergarten curriculum are both enabling and preparatory, bridging the gap between the family and an outside social group ... aimed at enlarging children's view of the world from their family to that of their school. (1993 *Guide*, p. 3)

Kindergartens are looked upon as safe and trustworthy places to help children “[form] good habits, develop social skills and manage their emotional behaviour in a socially acceptable way” (Curriculum Development Committee, 1987, p. 4). This is also the first away-from-home setting to extend a child's circle of connections from home to school, which then prepares him or her to enter the larger social world and to be a “good citizen” in the community. In the education reform blueprint (Hong Kong Education Commission, 2000), the sociological function of education is expected to extend further to “contribute to the future well-being of the nation and the world at large” (p. 30).

Alongside the expected aims of kindergarten learning and teaching, the curriculum guides make further suggestions for kindergarten teachers on the kinds of curriculum to provide and the types of learning and teaching to deliver in classrooms. As the 1996 *Guide* urges, “Children should be educated in a natural and pleasant environment, and it is through various activities and life experiences that children attain a balanced development in different aspects” (p. 1). These pressing statements hint at the underlying principles of organisation for the kindergarten curriculum.

Principles of Curriculum Organisation

As early as the mid-1980s, the government warned against “a rigid, compartmentalized curriculum and a formal teaching approach which assumes that children progress at a uniform pace” (Curriculum Development Committee, 1984, p. 3). This warning raises two major governmental concerns. First, the type of curriculum to be designed for early learners, and secondly, the principles that should underpin the teaching approach. A curriculum that places undue emphasis on subject teaching and a teaching approach that is concerned merely with imparting knowledge of different subjects are both regarded as

uninspiring (Ede, 2006). Neither is it responsive to the divergent developmental characteristics or is tailored to the individual learning needs of young children. Nor can it present to youngsters the kind of self-motivated learning that can lead to “modification in children’s knowledge, skills, habits and attitudes, both in terms of quality and quantity, resulting in a change of behavior which will persist” (CDC, 1996, p. 16). Rather, it will “deprive the child of the essential joy of pre-school education [which] ... could have an adverse effect on attitudes to learning in later school life” (Curriculum Development Committee, 1984, p. 2).

In the light of its concerns, and against the launching of a subject-based curriculum, the government expects the curriculum to be “comprehensive and well-balanced”, catering to children’s holistic and interrelated development in the cognitive, language, physical, affective, social, and aesthetic aspects (CDC, 2006). The government also expects the adoption of a “thematic approach”, which was first advocated in the 1984 *Guide to the Kindergarten Curriculum*. A thematic approach features the use of “teaching themes which are closely related to the child’s experience”, whilst “various ‘subject’ aspects related to these themes are taught through individual and group activities” (Curriculum Development Committee, 1984, p. 3). This thematic approach, recognised as “an integrated approach” in the 1993 *Guide to the Kindergarten Curriculum*, is considered to take “ ‘play,’ ‘learning’ and ‘care’ ... as a whole ... to contribute to the overall development of a child” (p. 5). This official expectation is made a performance assessment item in the *Performance Indicators (Pre-Primary Institutions)* (2001) in tracking the performance of service providers:

A child-centered curriculum is planned, through various play activities, to provide broad and balanced learning experiences for children. The curriculum is diversified, flexible and coherent across levels to foster life-wide learning. (p. 5)

Parallel to the concern over the design of an integrated, comprehensive, and well-balanced curriculum is another official concern anchored to the underlying principles of the practising teaching

approach. For this latter concern, the government states explicitly the prerequisite that teachers have knowledge of the basic principles of “children’s development” and “children’s learning”: “Teachers’ understanding of these two aspects will directly affect curriculum planning and arrangement for learning and teaching” (CDC, 2006, p. 10). As the *Performance Indicators (Pre-Primary Institutions)* also notes, “Teaching, which is child-centred and clear in objectives, can construct knowledge, provoke thinking, develop learning abilities, and foster positive values and attitudes” (p. 5). In concrete terms, teachers who can draw on these two specialised sources of knowledge as the basis for organising a kindergarten programme are more capable of setting “reasonable learning objectives and design[ing] a curriculum which suits children’s abilities and interests” (CDC, 1996, p. 4). Ultimately, it more effectively secures a balanced and all-round development for young children.

The focus on “children’s development” and “children’s learning” in the curriculum represents the core value of kindergarten education in “child centredness”. Yet, Walsh (2005) argues that while these two dimensions are the fundamental ones to ground in the early childhood education curriculum, they are not sufficient to assure quality early education services (Matthews & Menna, 2003). A child’s development and learning does not take place in isolation, but within the complex interplay between family, school, and society. The 2006 *Guide* notes explicitly that “appropriate co-ordination among the three parties will enable children to develop their potential and lead them to a healthy life ... developing good learning habits and interest in learning ... [and] be well prepared for lifelong learning” (p. 8). Identical messages can also be found in the 1996 *Guide*:

The pre-primary educator should take into account parents’ ways of bringing up their children, their habits, and education and economic backgrounds. ... co-ordination and mutual understanding between the institution and family life, and both parties can play their roles more effectively. The pre-primary educator should help parents understand the needs of their children and familiarize them with the activities carried out in the institution so that the nurturing method of the family is in line with the institution. (p. 24)

“Children” is a part of our society. Curriculum planning should be in line with the needs and development of society. When the pattern of daily living in our society changes, various life skills required by children will also change. The contents of the curriculum should therefore, be updated and revised in response to the prevailing developments in society. ... Children should be guided to keep abreast with the progress of the community and be informed of the available community facilities, services and activities. In this manner, children’s social and civic awareness, and their relationship with the community will be enhanced (CDC, 1996, p. 24).

Besides drawing the attention of teachers and kindergartens to the tripartite relationship among family, school, and society, the 2006 curriculum guide seeks to introduce for the first time in kindergarten education in Hong Kong the concept of a “school-based curriculum”. This concept is not obvious in any of the previously issued curriculum guides. While advocating, on the one hand, that kindergartens should adopt appropriate teaching strategies to accommodate children’s learning characteristics, collaborate closely with parents, and respond to the changing needs of society, the 2006 curriculum guide also suggests kindergartens develop their curriculum in consonance with their own specified educational missions and visions. It states that only when practitioners are clear about their educational stance can they devise a curriculum that is “in line with the sponsoring body’s mission and expectations of early childhood education” (CDC, 2006, p. 64), and that best copes with the divergent interests of different parties, including children in kindergarten, parents of kindergarteners, and the larger societal demands. The ability of teachers to design a school-based curriculum is regarded as an emerging professional competence in the education reform era:

Pre-primary institutions are encouraged to adopt the recommendations set out in this Curriculum Guide, where appropriate and with due consideration of their own circumstances and needs, to achieve the pre-primary education objectives. (CDC, 2006, p. 4)

Following the rising standard of professionalism in the field of pre-primary education, pre-primary institutions are encouraged to develop a curriculum

tailored to their own needs. ... In designing their curriculum, institutions have to take into account their background, characteristics and missions, as well as children's abilities and developmental needs. (CDC, 2006, p. 13)

In sum, it is quite clear that the government expects that the kindergarten curriculum be organised in an integrated, comprehensive, well-balanced, and school-based framework, which is underpinned by the principles of children's development and learning. The government also expects the curriculum to be embedded in the coordination and mutual understanding of the crucial parties surrounding children, namely, family, school, and society.

Approaches to Learning and Teaching

To enable kindergarten teachers to abandon a "spoon-feeding" teaching approach and to achieve the expected standard of education, the 2006 *Guide* carries direct and concise suggestions: " 'Learning by doing,' 'Learning through play,' Sensory activities are the media of learning. Observation, exploration, thinking and imagination are the essential learning approaches" (p. 12). These suggestions are in line with an argument made in the 1996 *Guide*:

Factual knowledge obtained through stereotype textbook teaching or rote-learning is only superficial. These teaching methods will only curb the creativity and cognitive thinking of children, and do not guarantee that children can remember and make use of the knowledge acquired. (CDC, 1996, p. 1)

Indeed, "play", "active participation" and "first-hand experience" are the common foci threading through the curriculum guides and documents of different years (Curriculum Development Committee, 1984, 1987; CDC, 1993). "Play", which is what children are fond of, allows them to enjoy the freedom and fun of learning in a pleasurable atmosphere (CDC, 2006; Woodhead, 2002). A play-based curriculum looks at the process of engaging in learning activities but not at the outcomes of learning (Kieff & Casbergue, 2000; Wood & Attfield, 2005). The tension-free environment thus created motivates children to

participate actively in playful learning activities, out of which they are offered chances to interact with and to explore first hand the real world (CDC, 2006; DeVries, 2002). Consequently, the sensory experiences thus obtained, the direct observations thus made, and the reasoning and thinking thus inspired instil in children an interest in learning, develop their basic learning skills, enrich their daily experience, and build their knowledge about the relationship between them and society. Strategic learning and teaching approaches that bear these characteristics fulfil the expectations of the Education Reform, noting that children should be treated as active learners and owners of their learning. These notions can also be traced in the *Performance Indicators (Pre-Primary Institutions)*:

As masters of their own learning, students should make the best use of every opportunity to learn. They should take the initiative to think, question, communicate, collaborate, participate, experiment and explore so as to construct knowledge, develop multiple abilities and enhance their personal quality, thereby laying a sound foundation for life, work and lifelong learning. (Hong Kong Education Commission, 2000, p. 150)

Pre-primary institutions [should] provide a pleasant, open and stimulating learning environment for children, and encourage proactiveness, sharing and collaborating, and exploratory thinking ... [and] enable children to become life-long learners who enjoy learning, are effective in communication, creative and have a sense of commitment. (Hong Kong Education Department & Social Welfare Department, 2001, p. 5)

Besides discussing the effectiveness of particular strategic approaches for the learning of children, the curriculum guides also pay attention to the important roles teachers should play when employing those strategies. Teachers are the key agents in actualising the principles of early childhood education and in contributing to the success of the curriculum's implementation. Their competence in mastering the rationale and concepts of curriculum planning, and their possession of attitudes and skills in conducting activities, directly affect both the effectiveness of curriculum implementation and the learning of young children (Dijkstra, 2004; Li, 2001). To nurture children to become active learners, teachers should reform their roles from transmitting knowledge in a technical manner to facilitating children's knowledge construction

on their own (Hong Kong Education Commission, 2000). A section is reserved in both the 1996 and 2006 *Guide* specifying these roles, which can be summarised as follows:

Attend to the developmental characteristics and the personal qualities of young children, which may include but are not limited to cultural background, personalities and temperament, styles of living, health conditions, habits, abilities, and previous experiences;

Establish a good and trusting relationship with children;

Serve as a good model for children;

Create a pleasurable, stimulating, and supportive learning atmosphere;

Provide varied and enriching learning experiences;

Promote the overall coordination, cooperation, and mutual understanding within the institution.

The first three dimensions covered so far convey the government expectations on “what” kindergarten education should aim for, “how to organise” a kindergarten curriculum, and “how to implement” such a curriculum. The next dimension that enriches the comprehension of the kindergarten curriculum is that which deals with “what” should be delivered through the curriculum. The content of this “what” dimension consists of the developmental domains and the learning areas to be organised and implemented in a particular way to serve the expected aims of learning and teaching.

Curriculum Content: Developmental Domains and Learning Areas in the Curriculum

To address the developmental needs of young children, a curriculum is looked upon as embracing developmental objectives in a number of key aspects, including physical, cognitive and language, affective and social, and aesthetic (CDC, 2006). A similar developmental emphasis can also be identified in the 1996 curriculum guide as well as those published in 1984, 1987, and 1993, though the underlying makeup is in a rather different combination: physical, imaginative, sensory, arts and crafts, and music. Whatever developmental aspects are named in the

curriculum guides, all share similar developmental objectives, striving to direct the attention of kindergartens towards the all-round and continuing development of young children.

To achieve these developmental objectives, an integrated curriculum incorporating different learning areas is strongly suggested in the curriculum guides. These learning areas are, in fact, the curriculum domains that predominantly represent subject-based learning. In the 2006 curriculum guide, six learning areas are highlighted, namely, the core curriculum disciplines of “Physical Fitness and Health”, “Language”, “Early Mathematics”, “Science and Technology”, “Self and Society” and “Arts” (CDC, 2006, p. 21). The learning contents covered in these learning areas are much like those specified in the 1996 curriculum guides, except for the learning area “Science and Technology”. The learning area “Experience with Natural Science” in the 1996 curriculum guide has been expanded to “Science and Technology” in the 2006 curriculum guide. This expansion incorporates learning skills in information technology into the original discipline, and is a response to the emerging educational needs of young children alongside the societal changes in information technology over the past 10 years.

Lastly, the learning elements of “Knowledge”, “Basic Skills” and “Values and Attitudes” are the “what” to be learned by and developed in children through participating in the activities of the developmental aspects and their learning of the curriculum domains. Both the 1996 and 2006 *Guide* describe in detail what “Knowledge”, “Basic Skills” and “Values and Attitudes” entail in learning. “Knowledge” means the understanding of things and grasp of abstract concepts; “Basic Skills” refers to the abilities acquired from learning to accomplish a task; and “Values and Attitudes” conceptualise “value judgment, power of appreciation and a person’s orientation in behavior” (CDC, 1996, p. 17).

Although the developmental domains and the learning areas to be covered in the curriculum are grouped respectively into individual aspects and separated disciplines, it is by no means intended that early learning and teaching should be pursued in “a subject-bound, text-bound and rigid curriculum” (Curriculum Development Committee, 1984, p. 5). Instead, all the curriculum guides stress that a balanced

and integrated approach should be employed, coupled with play-based activities.

Assessment of Learning and Development

Once a curriculum plan is laid down that explains what to teach and when and how to teach it, the next issue to be considered is the choice of mechanisms to collect evidence of children's learning and to evaluate the extent to which the classroom learning and teaching have achieved the aims of kindergarten education. Assessment of children's learning and development becomes another important dimension and an integral part of learning and teaching (CDC, 2001). The 2006 *Guide* describes this as "a significant component of the curriculum and an indispensable constituent of the learning and teaching process" (p. 59). Proper use of assessment can reflect the appropriateness of the learning content to the developmental levels of young children. Making good use of assessment can simultaneously reveal the effectiveness of the teaching approach in actualising the concept of child-centredness, and in bringing about a comprehensive, well-balanced, integrated, play-based, and school-based curriculum, which is at the core of the aims of kindergarten education.

In line with the principle of child-centred education, the main purpose of assessment is to record authentically and systematically the progress of children in learning and development. Such an authentic record is highly appreciated as beneficial to all the stakeholders involved: teachers, children, and parents. For teachers, such a record gives them a chance "to understand the developmental needs of children, to evaluate whether the curriculum has achieved the learning objectives ... [whether] the content and method of the activities are appropriate ... [and whether] the activities match the interests, needs and abilities of children" (CDC, 1996, p. 54). Information thus gathered in the assessment process can then shed light on the kinds of improvements that need to be made in the current curriculum, as well as how to make the necessary modifications in the future (CDC, 2006). For children, the authentic assessment of their learning and development allows them to "understand their own learning performance and progress; know what to learn and what to do; and cultivate interest in learning with the

assistance and encouragement of teachers and parents” (CDC, 2006, pp. 59–60). Finally, for parents, the record helps them to “understand their children’s learning progress in school ... [and] ... the growth of their children; establish reasonable expectations towards their children; and understand the institutions’ learning and teaching arrangements and co-operate with teachers, with a view to providing children with the best education” (CDC, 2006, p. 60).

To achieve an authentic assessment record of children’s learning and development, both the 1996 and 2006 *Guide* describe in great detail the principles of implementing assessment. These principles, which are also shared by the historical curriculum guides (Curriculum Development Committee, 1984; CDC, 1993), and which teachers are expected to follow, can be synthesised as follows:

1. Assessment should address both the overall developmental needs of children and the curriculum objectives of early childhood education.
2. Assessment should avoid placing undue emphasis on the academic learning in an individual curriculum area while neglecting the performance of children in other aspects, such as social, emotional, and creativity development. As such, the assessment task should be conducted in daily learning activities and should reflect real-life situations. In this case, the conceptual learning of children can be transformed into practical knowing through application. In contrast, examinations (either written or oral) that assess only children’s partial or fragmented knowledge and that impose unnecessary pressure on them are not suited for the stage of early childhood and should be replaced.
3. Assessment should be made a regular and on-going practice throughout the whole school year, and before, during, and after each activity. Pre-activity assessment assists teachers in designing an activity that best accommodates children’s abilities and past experiences. Assessment conducted during an activity that captures the children’s learning process and product in the activity helps teachers to familiarise themselves with the genuine needs and interests of the children. Post-activity assessment, in comparison with pre-activity assessment, shows teachers the

effectiveness of the activity in enhancing children's learning, and the kinds of adjustments, if any, that should be made to the activity in the future.

4. Assessment should be based upon information gathered from multiple sources and reported in the form of portfolios. The diverse sources from which assessment information can be collected include teachers' continuous observation and documentation of children's participation in daily learning activities and their objective analysis of children's class work, parents' sharing of how their children behave at home and outside the classroom, and children's self-reflection on their learning and growth as guided by teachers.
5. Assessment should be sensitive to the individual particulars of every child, such as his or her age, family, and cultural background, and his or her previous living and learning experiences. Thus, assessment of children's learning and development should never attempt to make comparisons among children or be held against some rigid standard. Rather, comparisons should be made between the past and present performance of the same child. With such a very personalised comparison, a child's progress and his or her trends and pace of development, together with identified areas that are not yet well developed in the child, can be recognised instantly.

This delineation of the five pedagogical dimensions — the aims of kindergarten learning and teaching, the principles of curriculum organisation, the teaching and learning strategies of the curriculum, the learning areas to be covered in the curriculum, and the assessment of learning and development—reviews the development of the kindergarten curriculum over the past two decades. It also uncovers the key concepts that are deeply infused in the curriculum, which are “child-centred”, “developmentally appropriate”, “balanced”, “comprehensive” and “integrated”. They are the key and fundamental concepts that have been globally advocated to underpin early childhood education services (Copple, 2006; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2005; Ritchie & Willer, 2005).

Analysis of Curricular Commonplaces from Practical and Critical Perspectives

Curriculum Commonplaces (Teacher, Student, Subject Matter and Milieus) from Practical and Deliberative Perspectives

As argued in previous sections, the rhetoric of the curriculum guide for pre-primary curriculum tends to emphasise “developmentally appropriateness” and “child-centredness”. It was interesting to note the impression of Spodek’s brief one-month visit to Hong Kong in 2000 that the kindergartens he had visited were “quite academically oriented and represented programs oriented toward cultural transmission” (Spodek & Saracho, 2003, p. 8). In addition, they raised questions such as “As we reflect on these programs [in Hong Kong and Japan], we wonder whether one set of programs was more developmentally appropriate than the other?” (p. 8) and a comment that “early childhood education should again become a marketplace of ideas, where many alternative views are expressed and are treated with respect, but where we do not have to accept any particular ideas” (p. 9). Hsieh (2004, p. 313) commented on the Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) in Early Childhood Programs, which was seen to “adopt too much of Piaget’s developmental theory and does not focus enough on the diverse perspectives of childcare and education, especially with regard to minority groups...[and] superficially promote a general assumption about the knowledge of the culturally appropriate practice, without showing respect for the traditional values of each culture...” Hong Kong, like many societies in the Chinese communities, has been influenced by the “Confucian heritage cultures” (CHC) (Kennedy & Lee, 2008) or East Asian culture of schooling. Lee and Dimmock (1998, p. 12) have explained that “This culture is characterised by an emphasis on ‘excellence’, which is underpinned by student preparedness to conform to uniform requirements, in particular to examination ideologies and their belief in perseverance. From the school perspective, this culture highlights hard work and effort as an aim of education” (Cheng, 1995). To some extent, these values may not match the DAP which values equity and justice and successful learning experiences (Hsieh, 2004). An overseas scholar further remarked that “There are also differences

between what the *Guide* (CDC, 1996, 2006) encourages, Chinese culture, and local constraints. Some of these are explained in Li's (2004) analysis of nine kindergarten teachers, which revealed competing and conflicting constraints that teachers encountered in their daily work, including the vision of early childhood education according to curriculum documents such as the 1996 *Guide*" (Grieshaber, 2006, p. 19).

In analysing the related sections of the 2006 *Guide* from the commonplace of "milieus", which may cover and range from classroom, school, district/locality, nation and to the globe, we find that the discussion in the sections on "Trends of global development in early childhood education" (1.1.1), "Hong Kong education system and curriculum reforms" (1.1.2) and "The ecology of early childhood in Hong Kong" (1.1.3) has not given due attention to challenges encountered by some kindergartens that "are unable to resist the downward pressures and have chosen to adopt an inappropriately difficult and academically oriented curriculum that is more suited for primary classes" (Chan & Chan, 2003, p. 13). As regards the section on "Trends of global development in early childhood education" (1.1.1), the authors referred to the relevance of human brain research, multiple intelligences theory and constructivist learning theory to the ECE but the notion of early childhood care and education (ECCE) was grossly neglected. The issue of early childhood care warrants attention as there are such important scenarios as the changing role of women, declining fertility, increase of working parents and increase of lone-parent families in increasingly technological and knowledge-based economies like Hong Kong (Melhuish & Petrogiannis, 2006a). Because pre-primary education is not "subsidised" as fully as the primary and secondary school sectors, there is no mention of the possibility of running "boarding programmes" which opened daily for five-days a week and throughout the year (Melhuish & Petrogiannis, 2006b).

As regards the commonplace of "teacher", Reid (2006, p. 91) argued that "teachers are a unique source of knowledge on how the institutional curriculum can be reconciled with the practical demands of schools and classrooms". One issue deserving attention is that whether pre-school teachers in Hong Kong have the beliefs and practices compatible with

the DAP or child-centred pedagogy. One research study indicated that “despite the philosophy of early childhood education, firm traditional kinds of teaching with emphasis on planning, preparation and external judgement were perceived as important. There was not much emphasis on children asking questions. Learning would be conducted in a teacher-directed mode” (Li, 2003, p. 28). Given the increasing emphasis on accountability and quality assurance in Hong Kong, we also need to consider whether teachers may resort to creative mediation, adaptation or resistance processes for implementing ECE curriculum policies (Wood, 2004). In the section on “Direction and Strategies for Curriculum Development” (CDC, 2006, 1.5, p. 13), it was interesting to note that the term “pre-primary institution” rather than “teacher” was used to depict the engagement in curriculum development activities. In addition, “parents” were mentioned to become collaborative partners and “tertiary institutions” be worked together with “pre-primary institutions” in curriculum research and development endeavours. Moreover, while a mechanism is recommended for curriculum review and monitoring, there is no mention of curriculum deliberation except that “teachers are encouraged to exchange their teaching experiences and share exemplars with peers, and work as a team to solve problems encountered” (p. 41). Nonetheless, it was suggested that “Curriculum leaders of pre-primary institutions should exercise their professional knowledge to make good use of feedback from children, teachers and parents” (p. 42). This raises the issues of who are curriculum leaders (principal as curriculum leader and/or teacher as curriculum leader) and how teachers could participate democratically and collectively in pre-school-based curriculum development. Also, it is worthwhile to consider whether teachers are ready and efficacious to engage fully in curriculum reform that emphasises group and deliberative decision-making.

As regards the commonplaces of “student” and “subject matter”, Drummond (2003, p. 367), based on Fromm’s (1976) *To Have or To be?*, argued that insufficient attention was being paid to children’s powers and “what children are, rather than where they are, or what we want them to have”. She quoted New Zealand’s example of using five commonly agreed goals as the basis for developing early childhood education curriculum: well being, belonging, contribution,

communication, and exploration. In the context of Hong Kong, is there a consensus, taking into account students' views and voices and even parents' aspirations, on the commonly agreed goals and principles for developing an ECE curriculum? Apart from goals and principles, there may be some concerns about whether kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong could handle the diversity arising from children recently arrived from the Chinese Mainland (Grieshaber, 2006).

Curriculum Analysis from Critical and Postmodern Perspectives

The rhetoric of “child-centredness” and DAP have been under critical scrutiny by various scholars. Yelland and Kilderry (2005a) lamented that “...when considered critically, it is apparent that a ‘child-centred curriculum’ is an adult-dominated arena, heavily developmentally laden with inherent bias and modernist views” (p. 4) and “DAP has privileged certain ways of being and knowing that do not recognise the diverse qualities of children and their families in a global context...even though the DAP view also wants the best for children, this developmental paradigm can be uncompromising at times and has assisted in the perpetuation of white middle-class views of the world and the ways in which they may be universally achieved in the field” (p. 5). Grieshaber (2006, pp. 19–20) cited some of Burman’s (1994) viewpoints and suggested that “Developmental psychology has been critiqued for perpetuating race, class, and gender domination through the normalization of Anglo middle-class cultural practices...The counter argument is that children should be seen in the context of their families and not as individual entities. Another aspect of the critique of child development is that it blames individuals for deficits...” It is important to take into account the social, economic, political or structural factors that may create social and economic inequalities, which may then have shaped children’s upbringing in socially deprived family settings. As regards multiple intelligences theory which has been mentioned in the curriculum guide for pre-primary curriculum, its advocacy of “individually configured education” could have substantial potential for

linkages with traditional Chinese culture (Cheung, 2006, p. 104), which could be further elaborated.

In the context of the 2006 *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* (CDC, 2006), parents' knowledge of ECE, parents' knowledge of their children's activities at home and family participation have been highlighted as "essential for the success of early childhood education" (p. 9). This implies that to make ECE successful, it requires the parents to have substantial cultural capital and professional knowledge in ECE as well as economic capital (free time and resources for family participation), which might not be prevalent in Hong Kong families. Ng (2001, pp. 26–28), through his study of three primary schools, found that parents were subjected to the influences of "marginalisation of parents' roles", "empty rhetoric of partnership", "parents as instruments of school initiatives" and "monopolisation of participation" by the middle class. Whether such influences will be dominant in the pre-school needs further investigation.

To conclude, Yelland and Kilderry (2005b) have posed a number of questions for our critical inquiry and reflection in ECE (selected and adapted from p. 246):

- How can we act as a *critical advocate* for early childhood education?
- Is the *over-emphasis of developmental theory* in early childhood education a problem? In what ways is it or is it not?
- Is there a place and time to enact *risky and socially-just teaching*?
- How do we create spaces for *children's views and voices*?
- Why do we seem to yearn after notions of the "*ideal child*", "*good child*" or "*normal child*" in early childhood settings?
- What are the consequences for the child who is not considered to be "ideal" for the programme?
- What does the term *critical diversity* mean? How is diversity conceptualised and manifested in your educational setting?
- How do *popular culture, information and communication technologies (ICT) and other new technologies* impact on the lives of young children and how are they relevant to early childhood programmes?

- What is your vision of *literacies or multiliteracies* in early childhood education?

This paper attempts to analyse the pre-primary curriculum guides from various perspectives. Ongoing deliberation, systematic inquiry and critical reflection, among the academic, practical and various social communities, on the substantive and procedural questions of our pre-primary curriculum in Hong Kong are encouraged so as to make our landscape of ECE curriculum and instruction more diverse and alive.

Note

1. The eight ECE curriculum documents discussed in this paper are listed chronologically as follows:

Curriculum Development Committee. (1984). *Guide to the kindergarten curriculum*.

Curriculum Development Committee. (1987). *Guidelines on nursery class activities*.

Curriculum Development Council [CDC]. (1993). *Guide to the kindergarten curriculum*.

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香港幼兒教育課程文件：回顧與檢討

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摘要

幼兒教育素被視為終身學習與全人發展的一個重要基礎。它的重要性亦在香港的教育改革中被認定。為了確保幼稚園的課程質素，教育局等政府部門印製了不同的文件以供老師參考。這些課程文件反映出政府對幼稚園課程的期望在這些年來是一致的。本文分為兩個部分，並嘗試從三種廣義的課程觀去分析上述文件：第一部分是經典的泰勒式課程觀去分析；第二部分是施瓦布的實用性課程觀去討論；最後，我們將從批判的視角出發評論這些文件。

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