PARENTAL PERCEPTIONS OF HOLISTIC EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN HONG KONG

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ABSTRACT

Early Childhood Education is important in developing ethical, intellectual, physical, social, and aesthetic aspects of children together with cognitive skills. Parents play an important role in their children's early life and provide a role model. Additionally, holistic education seeks to incorporate principles of wholeness, interconnectedness and spirituality. This study examined how well parental perceptions of kindergartens (KG) aligned with goals of Holistic Early Childhood Education (HECE) in Hong Kong. Written survey responses were received from 1383 parents and 165 teachers, including principals from 22 kindergartens across three Districts in Hong Kong. The findings of the study indicated that parents' and teachers' perceptions of kindergartens aligned with HECE policy in HK for young children's development and practice in the kindergarten programs. These findings clearly indicate a cohesion between parents' and teachers' concern and official Hong Kong education documents regarding holistic development of young children in kindergartens in Hong Kong.

INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education is important in developing the ethical, intellectual, physical, social and aesthetic aspects of a child as well as his/her language and cognitive skills in the early part of life (HKSAR, 2013). As pointed out by the Committee on Free Kindergarten Education, "Parents play a very important role in their child's early life and are their role model. Parents, being the child's primary educators at home, can be a major influence on the child's healthy development and effective learning at schools. Their support and proactive involvement with kindergartens help consolidate the child's learning and development during the schooling in kindergartens." (Committee on Free KG Education, 2015, p. 98). On the other hand, the holistic education movement seeks to integrate the idealistic ideas of humanistic education with philosophically holistic ideas including the principles of wholeness, interconnectedness and spirituality.

In 2007 the HKSAR government introduced a "Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme" (PEVS) as a sign to demonstrate the government's commitment to improve the quality of KG education (Hong Kong Curriculum Development Council, 2006). The Committee on Free Kindergarten Education (the 2015 Committee) reported that "parents' involvement" and "quality holistic education" are two important aspects of KG education. The committee also helped to provide equitable access to quality holistic KG education that promotes lifelong development of a person. The government responded positively to the report stating that free "quality kindergarten education" policy will be planned for action in the academic year of 2017/2018 (Leung, C.Y. 2016, HK Government News, 13/1/2016). However, research on parental perceptions on holistic childhood education is still lacking in Hong Kong. Proper understanding of parental perceptions on holistic early childhood education is an important starting point for identifying parental involvement in early childhood education.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the parental perceptions of holistic early childhood education in Hong Kong to find out the extent of parents' agreement with the teachers and the HKSAR government policies. This article only covers the six aspects of Holistic Early Childhood Education (HECE) portion of a broader study which also includes expectations, involvement and provision of the holistic early childhood education services.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Major Research Question:

What are the parental perceptions of holistic early childhood education in Hong Kong?

Sub-questions:

- a. How well do parents' perceptions of HECE match official statements on Early Childhood Education in Hong Kong?
- b. How well do parents' perceptions of HECE match those of the teachers in Hong Kong kindergartens?

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

This study is significant in several ways. First, it revealed the current situation of parental perceptions of holistic early childhood education in the Hong Kong context which is lacking at the moment. Second, it identified the level of significance that parents in Hong Kong place on their children's holistic development and growth. Third, it also showed the extent of agreement between the parents' perceptions and the teachers' views on the characteristics of holistic early childhood education. It is hoped that the findings from this study will inspire scholars to undertake further studies on holistic education for young children.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Concept of Holistic Education

For Mayes and others, quality education should be seen as "whole-person education" and cannot be completed without the wholistic aspect of education (Mayes, et al., 2007). According to Rossiter (1996), personal development is a central objective of education through which aesthetic sensitivity and emotions are linked together with attitudes, values and beliefs. In the Chinese cultural context, holistic education includes ethical, intellectual, physical, social, aesthetic, and spiritual aspects of education (Chan, 2011; Lau, 2010).

Earlier researchers had proposed education be seen as an art of cultivating the ethical, social and psychological dimensions including creativity and self-realization of the developing child (Dewey, 1916 & 1938). Other researchers also advocated that the development of the ethical, emotional, social, and spiritual aspects of the child is vital for overall development, and that the development of these areas must start from early years (Gardner, 1969; Isaacs, 1932.).

In the USA, Ron Miller advocated holistic education for children as a response to the dominant worldview of conventional education, claiming that all needs of a child's life should be considered in education (Miller, 1988). Though there might be different emphases in the term used, many would agree that holistic education is whole-person education and more attention should be given to the holistic aspect of education (Miller, 2000). In short, holistic education is not one method of technique or curriculum, nor is it simply a child-centered approach to teaching. It is indeed a new educational paradigm, based on a new set of assumptions about human life and human potentials,

especially the interconnectedness of everything in the universe (Clark, 1991).

Development of Holistic Education in the Asian Context

Lin (1996) proposed another theoretical framework for the study of holistic education in a Chinese context, suggesting that holistic education should be concerned with, and keeping balance in, the development of the whole person, hence each student's body, mind and spirit. Besides the provision of comprehensive, general knowledge education and the training of life-skills, it should also care for the development of good character, high standard of morality, social responsibility, and a holistic worldview. Nakagawa (2011) described the four dimensions of holistic education as physical, mental, emotional and spiritual, and argued that the neglect of emotional and spiritual aspects in education would end up in the deterioration of human's unity and insufficient development.

The Hong Kong Council of Social Service (2015) reported that both the parents and teachers were showing awareness that the development of loving and trusting relationships and holistic childhood development were the two most important components in early childhood education. Ho (2002) affirmed the importance of parental participation as essential both for effective schooling as well as healthy growth and development of children. Additionally, results of Lau's study (2011) also indicated a significant correlation between the parents' involvement and their young children's readiness for primary school education. Lau argued that Spirituality Education should be seen having a closer connection with humanistic education rather than with religious education. She also confirmed that about half of the schools in Hong Kong and Macau upheld spiritual education in addition to the five commonly known domains, namely: moral, intellectual, physical, social and aesthetic. She claimed that spiritual education should be the sixth domain of school education, and hence, the missing gap of holistic education.

According to Lau (2014), there was still a gap between the expectations of parents and kindergarten educators on how kindergarten education should be delivered. Parents have expressed their dissatisfaction regarding the communication between parents and the KG. This current study on parental perceptions of holistic early childhood education was planned to provide some new insights into the viewpoints of both parents and kindergarten educators.

METHODOLOGY

Project Design

This study is aimed at examining the perceptions of parents of kindergarteners on holistic early childhood education in Hong Kong. A survey design with both quantitative and qualitative components was used to collect relevant data from parents in a randomly-selected cohort of kindergartens. Research data were also collected from teachers and principals on items that were similar to those completed by parents. These data were analyzed by using statistical measures for comparison.

Participants

Random sampling was used to select a total of 51 kindergartens (KGs) from a grand total of 1,014 kindergartens from 3 major districts in Hong Kong. Of the 51 kindergartens selected, 22 agreed to participate in the survey. All the teachers and parents in these 22 kindergartens were invited to participate in the study.

The Survey Instruments

The researcher composed two four-page survey questionnaires, based on relevant literature and

input from parents, teachers and school principals; one for parents and one for teachers and principals. The demographic questions had appropriate response sets, ranging from three to six responses. The investigative questions made use of a 5-point Likert scale for responses ranging from 5 = very important, 4 = important, 3 = neutral, 2 = less important to 1 = not important. The instruments were reviewed by six kindergarten principals, eight teachers and ten parents associated with early childhood education. The structure and content of the questionnaires were scrutinised to ensure their appropriateness, comprehensiveness, readability and accuracy.

A pilot test and retest on the two questionnaires were carried out with 45 parents and teachers who were not participants in the research project. Following the pilot test, two focus group interviews were held with eight parents and six teachers including principals of KGs separately, to refine the structure and contents of the questionnaire. The final version of the survey questionnaires was divided into two sections, A and B. Section A has six main questions asking for demographic information of the parent/teachers involved. Section B of the survey questionnaire had five subsections. Subsection (1) asked for parents'/teachers' views on the importance of six aspects of Holistic Early Childhood Education, namely (a) ethical aspect (b) intellectual aspect (c) physical aspect (d) social aspect (e) aesthetics aspect (f) spiritual aspect (with or without religion). Subsection (2) elicited responses on 24 topics that respondents thought should be included in Holistic Early Childhood Education, based on the nominated 5-point scale. A twenty-fifth item was allowed for qualitative comments revealing other areas of concern, relevant to HECE. Since this article reports part of an entire study, other subsections relating to expectations, provisions and parental involvement are not included in this report.

Data Collection

Lists of kindergartens in the 3 major districts in Hong Kong were obtained from the Hong Kong Education Bureau. The principals of the kindergartens, selected by random sampling, were contacted in sequence for permission to conduct the survey with the parents and teachers of their respective kindergartens, who were then invited to participate on a voluntary and anonymous basis. Twenty-two principals agreed to participate, within the tight time frame available, to distribute, collect and return the survey forms. Participation in the study was voluntary and responses were anonymous, ensuring confidentiality for participants, thus enabling them to freely express their views from the privacy of their homes. The participating principals and teachers were also invited to complete the survey in their own time. As a result, completed survey forms were received from 1439 parents/guardians and 165 kindergarten teachers including principals.

Data Analysis

For the quantitative responses of the parents, teachers and principals, frequency counts, means and standard deviations were assessed using SPSS for Windows Version 21. Parents' and teachers' quantitative responses were compared by using t-test to determine if any significant differences existed in the responses of the two groups. T-test was also employed to examine if any of the demographic variables made any difference in the parents' and teachers' responses. Systematic analyses of the data were undertaken to identify the significant relationships present within the six aspects of HECE. Principal Components Analysis was undertaken with these six aspects to see if a reduced number of factors could emerge from the six aspects. Correlations were also employed to test relationships between key variables between parents and teachers. Qualitative responses of parents' perceptions of 'other areas of concern for HECE' were carefully examined and evaluated to reveal how well they fitted into the six aspects of HECE listed in the HKSAR documents.

RESULTS

The Demographic Properties of Participants

Of the fifty-one kindergartens that were invited to participate in this research project, twenty-two responded positively, with 1,604 completed questionnaires from 1439 parents and 165 teachers. Of all the parent participants, 10.91% were from Hong Kong Island, 15.91% from Kowloon and 73.18% from the New Territories. A similar trend in distribution was noted among the teachers with 7.27% from Hong Kong Island, 19.4% from Kowloon and 73.33% from the New Territories. Parents from the New Territories (57.2%) in this study were reported to have significantly higher Socio-Economic Status (SES) compared with parents from the other districts. It was found that 1% of the parents completed primary school, 58% secondary school, 35% four-year university and 6% post-graduate education.

Parents' and Teachers' Perceptions toward Kindergartens

Perceptions of six aspects of holistic early childhood education

Parents' and teachers' views were sought with reference to the six aspects of HECE listed in the HKSAR official documents on HECE using the five-point Likert scale. The results in Table 1 below confirm that parents' and teachers' perceptions on HECE are in agreement with HKSAR Government policy and scholars' understanding of holistic education. The only difference in responses between parents and teachers was shown on the spirituality aspect (4.33 vs 3.89) in favour of the parents.

In order to see if a reduced number of factors could emerge from the six aspects, Principal Components Analysis was undertaken with the six aspects related to HECE. Before performing Principal Components Analysis (PCA), the data were assessed for suitability for data analysis. Coefficients of .3 and above were found for each of the six aspects in the correlation matrices for staff and parents. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin values were .84 and .85 respectively, which were well above the recommended minimum value of .6 and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity reached statistical significance in each sample, supporting the factorability of the correlation matrices.

Principal Components Analysis revealed just one factor in each sample, with eigenvalues exceeding 1 (see Table 2), which explained 63.3% of variance among the teachers and 56.3% of variance among the parents. The resultant factor obtained by combining these six aspects was called HECE, because it relates to principles and practices of Holistic Early Childhood Education. The alpha values for the HECE factor were .88 for teachers and .80 for parents, which are above the accepted minimum of .7.

Table 1.	Comparing	parent and	l teacher	scores on	HECE

Aspects	Participants	N	Means	SD	T-value	Significance
Ethical	Teacher	165	4.79	.42		
	Parent	1383	4.78	.43	.33	No
Intellectual	Teacher	165	4.44	.53		
	Parent	1383	4.49	.55	-1.04	No
Physical	Teacher	165	4.42	.54		
	Parent	1383	4.38	.61	.80	No
Social	Teacher	165	4.66	.50		

	Parent	1383	4.59	.54	1.63	No
Aesthetic	Teacher	165	4.39	.56		
	Parent	1383	4.35	.65	.92	No
Spiritual	Teacher	165	4.33	.66		
	Parent	1383	3.89	.92	7.72	Yes

Table 2. Component matrices from Principal Components Analysis of six aspects in HECE

Aspects	Teacher HECE	Parent HECE	
Ethical	.671	.674	
Intellectual	.857	.799	
Physical	.891	.841	
Social	.795	.824	
Aesthetic	.869	.826	
Spiritual	.656	.468	
Eigenvalue	3.796	3.381	

Demographic difference in HECE

Demographic data of parents and teachers were examined for any difference in the perceptions of parents and teachers in their responses to holistic early childhood education. The age of parents and teachers, and teachers' educational background and teaching experiences were investigated in this study.

Age

Parents' and teachers' ages were divided into two groups: (1) under 30 years old and (2) 30 years old or older. Significant influence on the six aspects of HECE was not found by age of parents and teachers. T-test was used to examine the difference in the HECE responses between the two age groups of parents (t = .223) and teachers (t = .978). No significant difference was detected in the parents' and the teachers' responses by their corresponding age groups.

Education level

Parents' education was classified by two levels: (1) primary to Form 3 secondary and (2) Form 4 secondary to university. Teachers' education level was classified by two levels: (1) secondary up to college and (2) undergraduate to post-graduate. A significant relationship was found for the influence of parental education level on HECE overall (t = -2.50, p<.05) with more highly educated parents expressing greater agreement with HKSAR HECE policy. Teachers' level of education (t = -1.91, p=.058) narrowly missed showing significant influence on HECE policy.

Teachers' years of work

Teachers' years of work was divided into two groups: (1) under15 years; and (2) 15 years or more. Teachers' years of work did not quite show significant influence on their perceptions of HECE policy as a result of t-test analysis (t = -1.79, p = .076).

Parents' Feedback on Holistic Early Childhood Education

The qualitative comments made by 31 parents, in response to question B(2)(y), have been sorted

into categories that line up with the six main aspects of HECE presented in the HKSAR official documents, in the form of citations.

Ethical aspect – Additional comments by parents support the ethical aspect of HECE. Some parents even place ethical emphasis above academic importance. Some representative quotations from parents are cited as follows:

- "Children should learn to accept responsibility"
- "Children should love and respect parents",
- "Building good character and positive values are more important than acquiring knowledge",
- "Develop children's sense of responsibility and positive values"

Intellectual aspect – Issues in this aspect are focussed on developing children's recognition of their own potential; initiation to learn; and creativity to problem solving. In general, parents felt that in addition to knowledge acquisition, children's positive attitude to learning needs to be developed at an early age. Some citations from parents include:

- "Build up children's self-confidence",
- "Knowledge is secondary to children, learning experience and to express feeling are more important",
- "Children should learn to have initiative, self-aware, and be optimistic",
- "Children should learn to solve problems"

Physical aspect – Parents confirmed that physical skills and health were important while appreciation of sports should also be developed. Parents agreed that learning could take place in outdoor physical environments rather than confined in classrooms of four walls. Some citations from parents are:

- "More sports and healthy body are important to children"
- "More outdoor activities, more learning outside classroom"

Social aspect – Parents' comments addressed children's care, love and sharing with others. Children need to recognize their unique contributions to society and learn to appreciate other people and acquire communication skills. Some citations from parents are:

- "Encourage more communication with classmates"
- "Teach children social responsibility"
- "Children should learn sharing of experience and belongings with others"

Aesthetics aspect – Children should be educated to express themselves clearly with admiration of aesthetics, to appreciate the beauty of nature, and learn to value natural resources. Some citations from parents are:

- "Children should learn emotion management"
- "Children should learn to value world resources e.g. water, paper and avoid unnecessary wastages"
- "Teach children to appreciate beauty of nature e.g. water, flowers, trees, birds, animals, etc."

Spiritual aspect – Children's education needs to include the development of spiritual thoughts and their love and care for their fellow human beings with all their heart. Some citations from parents are:

- "Children should learn to love parents, brothers and sisters, friends and classmates"
- "Perfect life is to love others, love self and love God".

It is clear that through inspection of quantitative and qualitative data in this study there is a high degree of congruence between the quantitative and qualitative findings. The qualitative comments add support to the quantitative findings with actual citations of parents' exact words. This confirmation of the overall findings of this study through a triangulation approach makes the recommendations of this study more convincing.

DISCUSSION

The lack of strong findings on demographic variables significantly predicting variation in HECE may be due to two reasons. First, it could be said that the factors used were not sensitive enough or not adequate for the task. Maybe more variables should have been used, such as personal income, religious affiliation, and number and age of children in the family. Alternatively, it can be said that the results from this study show that young children have near to equal opportunity for development in HECE in Hong Kong kindergartens, irrespective of any differences between their parents or teachers (as assessed by demographics), who are all working hard together with the desire and effort to do their best to effect young children's holistic education.

The HKSAR Government's policy in early childhood education has been supported by parents and agreed upon as being basically in the right direction, in line with proposals of many current educators of early childhood education. Although academic study for children was considered important by parents and teachers, respondents showed support for the clear trends from developed nations that, for holistic education of young children, development of good character (e.g., honesty, happy learning, follow rules), and quality (e.g., positive attitude, love and respect parents, obedience) are considered more important than academic study. This point came through clearly in both the survey results and freely provided comments. Young children need to enjoy life and be nurtured in a secure environment by loving, caring adults and encouraged to discover and optimise their (God-given) potential, to be the best they can be, for holistic early childhood education to be fully realised.

It is believed that the parents in this study are truly representative of all, or even the majority of parents in Hong Kong. If they follow through in carrying out the activities they consider important for developing their children's holistic education by working with kindergarten teachers and their children personally, the development of Holistic Early Childhood Education will be much facilitated. Additionally, if increased funding from HKSAR government could provide improved opportunities, in quality and quantity, through more student places, teacher and parent education focussed on the six aspects of Holistic Early Childhood Education, then the future for holistic education of young children in Hong Kong will look very positive.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER POSSIBLE STUDIES

Further studies could follow on from the research reported here. They would all be beneficial to further developing holistic early childhood education:

This study reported briefly on the perceptions of parents and teachers who did not comment on their understanding of current practices in kindergartens in Hong Kong. So, having objective observers noting actual practices over a period of time, in different settings with different groups at different times of day would help give a clear picture as to how well the desirable goals of holistic education are being put into practice in Hong Kong kindergartens.

A longitudinal study could track the children from kindergarten to primary school to determine whether the holistic education foundation being constructed in kindergartens would positively influence their subsequent schooling with emphasis on academics.

Studies could be developed to examine what education would benefit kindergarten parents in helping them work with their children in their holistic development. This could include psychology, active listening skills, motivation, relaxation, and assisting children's learning.

Additionally, it could be of benefit to review the significant emphasis of academics on the kindergarten holistic curriculum. Besides, the meaning of spiritual well-being and its application to development of genuinely holistic early childhood education in kindergartens in Hong Kong is also worth investigating.

No single study is likely to comprehensively address all factors related to a given topic. Hence, further research projects could follow from this study to extend understanding of holistic education from young children's points of view, as well as drill down further on effectiveness of current practices in kindergartens and by parents, in addition to assessing any added benefits to the holistic education of young children that could result from improved education of teachers and parents.

CONCLUSION

This study focused on the perceptions that parents have for the holistic education of their young children in kindergartens in Hong Kong. It was very timely considering the fact that the HKSAR had recently announced a sizable increase in funding for kindergartens in 2017/18 academic year. The findings of this study revealed the current state of parental perceptions of holistic early childhood education in Hong Kong and confirmed the level of significance that parents in Hong Kong place on their children's holistic development and growth. The study also showed the extent of high agreement between the parents' perceptions and teachers' views on the characteristics of holistic early childhood education. This finding of agreement in Holistic Early Childhood Education is of vital importance, not only for young children currently in kindergartens but also for increased opportunities being provided by more funding to support the operation of kindergartens by the HKSAR government from 2017. Overall, parents and kindergarten teachers in this study reported a high degree of agreement with the educational views expressed in HKSAR official documents in the six key aspects of ethical, intellectual, physical, social, aesthetics and spiritual aspects, being the major components of holistic early childhood education.

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APPENDIX

Relevant sections of the survey questionnaire employed in this study

(A) Info	ormation about paren	ts of child	d (Please ✔ [□ as appropria	ate)			
(1)	District of Kindergarten							
	НК		KLN		NT	I		
(2)	Relation with Child Father Grand Mother		Mother Auntie		Grand Other	l Father s		
(3)	Age of Parent 25-30 41-45		31-35 46-50		36-40 Others			
(4)	Highest Education l Primary	Level of F	Parent High So F1-F3	chool		High School F4-F7		
	College Graduate			sity Graduate		Master or Abo	ove	
(5)	Nationality of Parer Mainland China Taiwan	nt (Or Dis	l Ho	dency) ng Kong ners		Macau		
(6)	Class of Child K1		K2		□ k	Κ 3		
(7)	(a) with yourself (b)with other peop (c)with the enviror (d)with God (or he	le nment	e following Very Important	relationships to Important		Less Important	No Impor	
	ase ✔ □ as approportant	priate, V	ery Importa	ant, Importan	t, Normal,	Less Import	ant, No	t
(1)	(1) For your child's holistic early childhood education, strong emphasis should be placed on :							
	(b) Ethical aspect (a) Intellectual as (b) Physical aspect (c) Social aspect (d) Aesthetics asp (e) Spiritual aspec (with or withor religion)	pect et pect	Very Important	Important	Normal	Less Important	Imp	Not cortant

(2) Holistic early childhood education should include the following:

		Very Important	Important	Normal	Less Important	Not Important
(b)	Love & respect to parents Obedience to parents					
,	Love & care for brothers & sisters					
	Paying respect to principal & teachers Honesty					
(f)	Happy learning					
_	Learning of Social skills General knowledge					
	skills (e.g. language, mathematics, music etc) Self-confidence &					
(i) (j)	reflection learning Facing failure & losses					
	Physical & motor skills					
(1)	Maintain physical health					
	Appreciation of all kinds of sports					
(n)	Follow discipline & rules					
(o)	Building trust of others					
(p)	Sharing of love & belongings					
(q)	Care & concern for others					
(r) (s)	culture & arts					
(-)	(sky, land, mountains, water, flowers, trees &	П		П	П	
(t)	living creatures) To love & value living					
	Appreciation of blessings & happiness					
. ,	Love & care towards the young & animals					
	Love & care towards flowers & plants Love & respect God					
(y)	(or other transcendents) Others (Please list areas of concern					
	on the lines provided)					
		ENI	O OF SURVE	EY		