

TEACHERS' PERCEPTION OF IN-SERVICE TRAINING IN HONG KONG CHINA, AND CAREER COMMITMENT TO THE FIELD OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN HONG KONG, CHINA

Carol Logie¹, Vega Poon Sung Wai Ting², So Wai Ying³

University of the West Indies¹, HK Institute of Vocational Education (Shatin)², HK Institute of Vocational Education (Shatin)³

c.logie@sta.uwi.edu¹, st-cecs@vtc.edu.hk², st-cecs@vtc.edu.hk³

ABSTRACT

The study investigated teacher's perception of in-service training in Hong Kong China. Career commitment to the field of Early Childhood Education was also examined. A questionnaire was administered to 85 kindergarten teachers and administrators in both Cantonese and English to teachers who were in the last year of in-service training. The study found that typically, most in-service practitioners were satisfied with the governmental training programme (69.9%). Although 77.4% found it useful, participants did not all feel privileged to attain it (59.1%). Sixty nine percent were happy to spend the rest of their career as an early childhood practitioner. Conversely, practitioners thought they had few options besides working as a kindergarten teacher or administrator, this career was the best option at that moment. Additionally, the study found when practitioners in Hong Kong stayed longer in the teaching profession, they are more willing to continuously commit to their profession.

Keywords: in-service training, career commitment, early childhood education

INTRODUCTION

Research findings consistently argue that early childhood education has the potential to significantly transform the lives of children, families and the wider society significantly (Schweinhart et al. 2005; UNESCO 2007; UNESCO 2011; Berlinski, Galiani, & Manacorda, 2007). Central to the argument which focused on quality early childhood programmes, is the selection of committed teachers who are able to effectively meet the needs of young children. Studies have consistently identified a relationship between the qualifications of early childhood teachers and the quality of their practice. Teachers who have certification in early childhood education have been noted to, very often, deliver higher quality programming (Whitebook, Howes & Phillips, 1989; Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford, & Howes, 2002).

Prior to the Jomtien Conference in 1990 and the highlighting of early childhood education in the Education for All Framework for Action, a global policy that targeted the educational needs of pre-primary children did not exist. This international declaration has given countries greater impetus to provide and coordinate early childhood care and education services. Furthermore, the international framework for action has given a more central position within national discourse to global issues and policies that impact on education of early childhood practitioners. More far reaching for practitioners around the world, globalization has led to the interweaving of cultures, reshaping of pedagogical paradigms to create new global standards of practice.

It has been argued that Hong Kong has undergone extremely rapid development in early childhood education under the pressure of globalization in the new millennium. The Government of Hong Kong in an effort to improve the quality of practice of kindergarten staff, implemented a voucher policy in 2006, aimed at improving teacher qualification and programme quality at the early childhood education level. This was in keeping with the argument that further training would improve early childhood delivery at centres (Epstein, 1993). Under the voucher scheme, professional training was mandatory. It attempted to upgrade teachers' qualifications with some financial assistance from the government. Subsidies were given directly to parents, in the form of vouchers, to relieve their financial burden and enhance their choices of kindergartens. A one-off grant was offered to all kindergartens in Hong Kong in the 2006/7 school year for school development. In addition, a quality assurance mechanism that combined kindergarten's self-evaluation with external review by the Education Bureau (EDB) is also developed and linked to the scheme. Within the context of the study, in-service training of educators was defined as an organized effort to improve the performance of personnel already assigned to positions within a school setting (SAPP, 1996 cited in Bayrakci 2009).

THE CONTEXT

Hong Kong is a metropolitan city with dense and intensive urban environment, as well as large and spacious rural areas which are sparsely populated. According to the Hong Kong Housing Authority and Housing Department of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (2012), urban spaces include the Hong Kong Island and Kowloon as well as several extended urban districts, which altogether are about 313.26 squared kilometres in size (Planning Department, 2003a, 2003b; Survey and Mapping Office, 2012). On the other hand, there are about 1249.84 squared kilometres of non-urban space in Hong Kong, including 442.39 squared kilometres which are designated as country parks (Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, 2011; Planning Department, 2003a; Survey and Mapping Office, 2012). Some of these non-urban space are areas of New Territories and Islands which are sparsely populated, or even unpopulated, as in areas of or near country parks.

As a result of the unique environment in Hong Kong, most of the kindergartens and preschools are located in the urban areas. According to the Education Bureau of the Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (2011), there are 658 kindergartens and preschools in the urban areas, and 293 in the non-urban areas.

Most kindergartens in Hong Kong fall under two categories: private or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) which can be categorized as non-profit making kindergartens or private independent kindergartens depending on the background of organizations (Education Bureau, 2012). According to the figure from the Education Bureau in 2011 (Education Bureau, 2011), there are 749 non-profit making kindergartens and 202 private independent kindergartens in Hong Kong.

In the 21st century, improving early childhood delivery through quality assurance mechanisms and early childhood teaching qualifications remain the focus of the Hong Kong Government. In line with these objectives, the Education Bureau launched the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme since 2006, which provided non-profit making kindergartens and preschools with governmental funding so as to improve the quality of early childhood education (Working Group, 2010). Under the voucher scheme, in-service professional training was made mandatory to upgrade teachers' qualifications with financial assistance from the government. The in-service teachers' training, funded by the government,

aimed to provide teachers with opportunities to review their curriculum, enhance quality assurance mechanism and increase accountability in the field of early childhood education.

The research participants attended the three year part-time evening in-service training course-“Higher Diploma in Child Care and Education” while working during day time and attending the training course three nights a week. The Higher Diploma in Child Care and Education offered by the Hong Kong Institute of Vocational Education included a course in Putonghua and Chinese Writing Skills (Vocational Training Council, 2011).

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research study was designed to investigate the impact of government policy and funding on in-service training of early childhood practitioners on teachers’ organisational commitment. The objectives of the survey conducted in Hong Kong were as follows: (1) to understand the impact of in-service training on early childhood practitioners, within the context of new policy initiatives of upgrading qualification levels as national policy; (2) to examine practitioners opinions and perceptions of current mandated policies in Hong Kong; and (3) to analyze practitioners beliefs, experiences and expectations from in-service training as well as their evaluations pertaining to the effects of the in-services training.

METHOD

Target Population

The target group here defined as practitioners, (kindergarten teachers and administrators), engaged in the last year of government funded in-service training. The purpose of this new national policy initiative was to upgrade all practitioners to a Higher Diploma in Child Care and Education. More precisely, the target population focused on practitioners with less than a Higher Diploma level, but with at least the Certificate/Diploma level. The study sampled therefore was considered as Qualified Kindergarten Teacher (QKT) and typically had under-gone different short term in-service training before enrolling in the programme under study.

Sample Size and Profile

A total of 85 female in-service practitioners participated in the study. Practitioners attending the Higher Diploma in Child Care and Education were randomly selected for the study. Typically, the average in-service practitioner was a 30-39 year old female who attended secondary school and held a QKT certification. She was employed on contract at a non-profit making centre and had 11-20 years of experience working with children under 6 years of age.

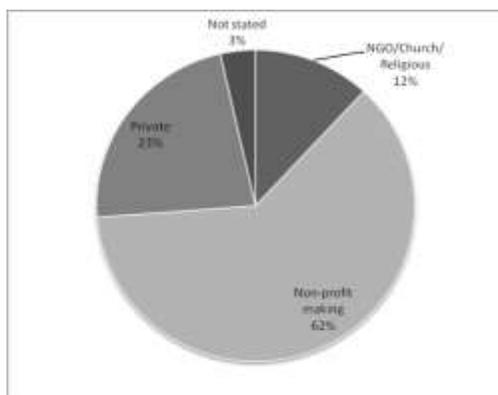


Figure 1: Ownership of Early Childhood Settings

With respect to their role in the workplace, most were teachers (90.6%) whose ages ranged from under 20 to over 50, the majority (55.3%) falling in between the 30-39 age bracket. A minority (29%) worked for private or non-governmental/church/religious organizations; the majority (59.1%) worked at non-profit institutions (see Figure 1). Ninety percent of all participants were employed on contract while the remaining 10% were permanently employed by their organization. The majority of practitioners (48.2%) worked with children under the age of 6 for 11-20 years while those who worked with children for 6-10 years (27.1%) were the second largest group.

In relation to their educational background, most practitioners attended either the secondary (49.4%) or post-secondary (technical) schools (47.1%). The highest level of certification achieved was the QKT (82.4%), with 15.3% attaining the higher diploma or a university degree (1.2%). A significant percentage (61.2%) completed some form of government training before enrolling for the present in-service training programme.

Instrument and Statistical Analysis

A questionnaire was administered after it was pre-tested and administered in both Cantonese and English to the study participants. Experienced educational researchers/interpreters from Hong Kong were also on site to answer any questions. The questionnaire gleaned information on participants' profile, demographics, perceptions of career options and the impact of training on their career choice. Additionally, the instrument provided the information on practitioners' level of commitment and turnover intention.

The Three-Component Model (TCM) of organisational commitment was used. Allen and Meyer (1990, p. 67) identified these three components of organisational commitment as: affective commitment, continuance commitment and normative commitment. The authors refer to commitment as a psychological state that defines the relationship between an employee and the organisation for which he or she works. The model is described as follows:

Affective commitment refers to the employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organisation. Employees with a strong affective commitment continue employment with the organisation because they want to do so. Continuance commitment refers to an awareness of the costs associated with leaving the organisation. Employees whose primary link to the organisation is based on continuance commitment remain because they need to do so. Finally, normative commitment reflects a feeling of

obligation to continue employment. Employees with a high level of normative commitment feel that they ought to remain with the organisation.

The TCM Employee Commitment Survey measured the three forms of early childhood practitioner commitment. For example affective commitment referred to: desire-based I want to, obligation-based I ought to (normative commitment), and cost-based I need to (continuous commitment). From within this model emerged three well-validated sub-scales: (1) the Affective Commitment Scale (ACS); (2) the Normative Commitment Scale (NCS); and (3) the Continuous Commitment Scale (CCS). Each sub-scale consisted of eight items. Each sub-scale was scored separately and used to identify the commitment profile of kindergarten teachers and administrators in Hong Kong. Items within each scale were scored on a five-point Likert Scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Statistical Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were utilized to gain information on the following three factors: (1) positive impact of career development and expansion; (2) positive impact on work-related/personal empowerment; and (3) negative impact on programme shortcomings. An estimation of reliability by Cronbach's alpha yielded .85 on section B. These factors explain 60.8% of total variance and were identified by principled components analysis followed by varimax rotation. A post hoc test with Bonferroni was also utilised.

FINDINGS

Practitioners Career Expectations during In-service Training

When practitioners' commitment to the job was further examined, practitioners were noted to be highly committed as they 41.94% believed that a person must always stick to his/her professional calling no matter what circumstances with a no opinion rate of 31.2%. Similarly, respondents felt that people who change jobs frequently without being forced to do so seem unethical and unfaithful. Furthermore, 68% of practitioners felt emotionally attached to the children in their care and 45% admitted that they were taught to believe in the value of remaining faithful to a career and the job to pay their bills. It must be noted that there was a high no opinion response of 15 and 29.4% respectively to the last two statements (see Table 1).

Finding from practitioners' responses to their perception of the relevance of the training also gleaned interesting data. For example, 73% stated that training improved their skills and ability as Early Childhood workers. Fifty-five percent of respondents, where there was a 31.2% no opinion given, felt that they were now better able to serve children and communities having engaged in the present in-service training. It must also be noted that over 80% found the duration of the in-service training was too long and conflicted with family arrangements (see Table 2).

Table 1: *Teacher's Commitment to the Job*

<i>Statement</i>	Percentage				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	No opinion	Agree	Strongly agree
I believe that a person must always stick to his/her professional calling no matter what the circumstances.	3.23	23.66	31.18	34.41	7.53
Whenever I am addressing problems relating to my work as an ECCE teacher, I feel as though I am dealing with my own personal issues.	2.15	27.96	30.11	33.33	6.45
People who change jobs frequently without being forced to do so seem unethical and unfaithful to me.	4.30	24.73	20.43	41.94	8.60
I believe that loyalty is important and therefore, a person should feel a strong sense of moral obligation to remain in his/her job.	6.45	27.96	27.96	29.03	8.60
I feel emotionally attached to the children at my school/Centre.	2.15	4.30	15.05	59.14	19.35
I was taught to believe in the value of remaining faithful to my career and the job that pays my bills.	4.35	20.65	29.35	43.48	2.17

Table 2: *Teachers perception of relevance of training*

<i>Statement</i>	Percentage				
	Strongly disagree	Disagree	No opinion	Agree	Strongly agree
Training improved my skills and ability as an Early Childhood Worker.	1.09	9.78	16.30	57.61	15.22
Training advanced my knowledge of quality early childhood education.	0.00	10.87	17.39	59.78	11.96
Training helped my professional development in Early Childhood.	1.08	3.23	21.51	61.29	12.90
Training boosted my self-confidence and understanding of Early Childhood issues.	2.15	4.30	21.51	61.29	10.75
I am now able to better serve children and communities.	1.08	12.90	31.18	46.24	8.60
Most of the material covered I already knew.	1.09	16.30	40.22	36.96	5.43
The content of the programme was too difficult.	1.08	23.66	41.94	23.66	9.68
The in-service programme was too long.	3.23	4.30	11.83	41.94	38.71

Effect of Practitioner Training on Career Development

When factor analysis was used to explore the positive effect of training on career development, it was found that practitioners who had participated in previous governmental training programme, and felt this training useful scored higher on the composite factor one, when compared to practitioners who did not feel the previous governmental training useful ($F [1, 78]=7.97, p=.01$), reflecting that these teachers agreed more on the positive impact that training could bring to their development of competency and career.

Similarly, practitioners who felt privileged to be selected to attend the present in-service training programme scored higher on the composite factor one, when compared to teachers who did not feel privileged to be selected to attend the present training ($F [1, 88] = 10.42, p = .00$).

Finally, practitioners who felt the present in-service training programme useful scored higher on the composite factor one, when compared to practitioners who did not feel the training useful ($F [1, 89] = 28.81, p = .00$). This is rather obvious: if one feels that the training is useful, then he or she would be more likely to agree that training can bring about positive results. When participants were asked why they signed up for the programme, typical responses were as follows:

- Because I can become a real Early Childhood Education teacher.
- I didn't have any in-service training until I took this course.
- Obtain a professional qualification upon graduation.
- It is a value added to teachers, enabling me to follow the trend and become a professional teacher.

Effect of Practitioner Training on Work and Personal Empowerment

Affective Commitment

It was found that teachers who felt privileged to be selected to attend the current in-service training had a stronger affective commitment, when compared to teachers who did not feel privileged to be selected to attend the training ($F [1, 87] = 25.29, p = .00$). Similarly, teachers who perceived the current in-service training as useful had a stronger affective commitment, when compared to teachers who did not perceive the training as useful ($F [1, 87] = 7.88, p = .01$).

It was also found that practitioners who had different anticipation in terms of their remaining working time as an Early Childhood Education practitioner scored differently on the composite factor two marginally ($F [2, 84] = 2.88, p = .06$). A post hoc test with Bonferroni revealed that practitioners who anticipated remaining as an Early Childhood Education teacher for 3 to 5 years scored marginally higher on the composite factor two, when compared to teachers who anticipated remaining as an Early Childhood Education teacher for 1 to 3 years ($p = .08$). This implied that practitioners who anticipated a longer remaining working time agreed more on the empowerment effect that training could bring on their work and personal living, when compared to teachers who anticipated a shorter remaining working time.

There were also findings that were similar to that were found in factor one. For example, practitioners who had participated in previous governmental training programme, and felt this training useful scored higher on the composite factor two, when compared to teachers who did not feel the previous governmental training useful ($F [1, 76] = 5.41, p = .02$). Also, practitioners who felt privileged to be selected to attend the present in-service training programme scored higher on the composite factor two, when compared to teachers who did not feel privileged to be selected to attend the present training ($F [1, 85] = 6.49, p = .01$). Finally, practitioners who felt the present in-service training programme useful scored higher on the composite factor two, when compared to practitioners who did not feel the training useful ($F [1, 86] = 12.51, p = .00$). Similarly, practitioners typically found the government's assistance

to have them trained important and as Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch and Topolnytsky (2002) found, this perceived support for them was an antecedent of affective commitment. Desire-based responses that highlighted their affective commitment to the job included the following statements:

- Can learn new knowledge and teaching methods which are relevant to the actual working situation.
- Can learn some theories that are related to the actual working environment, can apply learned materials into practices.
- Enhance my understanding on children. Course materials also covered theories and skills in Early Childhood Education.
- It is challenging and can enhance my academic knowledge.
- The course contains practical sessions that enable me to learn how to be an Early Childhood Education teacher and other relevant materials in actual practices.

Continuance Commitment

Allen and Meyer (1990) identified the antecedents of continuance commitment as the investments that an individual makes in an organisation and the lack of alternative options. As the employee makes greater investments of time and energy in an organisation, he/she develops relationships, acquires skills that may not be easily transferred to another setting and amasses benefits, which increase the difficulty of detaching him/herself from the organisation. The greater the investments made by an employee, the stronger the level of continuance commitment.

This present study found that practitioners who have longer years of working experience scored differently on their continuance commitment ($F [3, 86] = 3.13, p = .03$). A post hoc test with Bonferroni revealed that teachers who have over 20 years of working experience reported a marginally stronger continuance commitment than teachers who have 11 to 20 years of working experience ($p = .07$). In other words, when practitioners in Hong Kong stayed longer in the teaching profession, they are more willing to continuously commit to their profession.

Normative commitment

In-service practitioners who felt privileged to be selected to attend the current in-service training had a stronger normative commitment, when compared to teachers who did not feel privileged to be selected to attend the training ($F [1, 87]=18.58, p =.00$). In addition, it was interesting to discover that teachers' time used to travel from their working location to the institution in which they took the in-service training (estimated by using the travel direction function of Google Map) was related to their normative commitment positively and significantly ($r =.22, p =.05$).

Turnover intention

Age was also linked to staff turnover intention ($F [4, 82]=2.47, p=.05$). A post hoc test with Bonferroni revealed that the turnover intention of teachers who aged 45 to 64 years old was lower when compared to teachers who aged 30 to 34 years old ($p=.05$), and marginally lower when compared to teachers who aged 35 to 39 years old ($p=.07$). In other words, older practitioners were less willing to change their job and engage in a career shift.

Practitioners who had participated in previous government training programmes, were committed to remain in the early childhood education field and reported a lower turnover intention, when compared to teachers who were not satisfied with previous training ($F [1, 76]=4.85, p=.03$). Additionally, kindergarten teachers and administrators who felt privileged to be selected to attend the current in-service training had a lower turnover intention when compared to teachers who did not feel privileged to be selected to attend. ($F [1, 86]=6.99, p=.01$).

Programme Training Shortcomings and Practitioners' Reflections

It was interesting to note that practitioners of different education background scored marginally different for the composite factor three ($F [2, 89]=2.53, p=.09$). A post hoc test with Bonferroni revealed that practitioners who had obtained a higher degree (higher diploma or university degree) scored marginally lower on the composite factor three (i.e., felt that the present training had less shortcoming), when compared to those who did not obtain a higher degree ($p=.08$). This implied that teachers who had a lower education background saw more shortcomings on the programme, and hence they were more likely to feel discontented with the programme.

Finally, practitioners who felt privileged to be selected to attend the present in-service training programme scored lower on the composite factor three (i.e., felt that the present training had less shortcoming), when compared to practitioners who did not feel privileged to be selected to attend the present training ($F [1, 89]=7.77, p=.01$). Typical responses when asked to itemised shortcomings of the in-service training programme included:

- Cannot be implemented in private kindergarten.
- In-service training is physically and mentally stressful, adversely affecting daily teaching and life.
- Many course contents are not relevant to actual working needs, e.g., English, fieldwork visit.
- No financial subsidy from the government, the tuition fee is too high and is difficult to afford. Also, finishing the course requires much time.
- The current in-service training is almost the same as what I've learnt previously. Three evening lessons per week is making the life of Early Childhood Education teachers more and more stressful.

CONCLUSIONS

In-service training is essential to quality early childhood education worldwide including Hong Kong. This study found that, even though most of the teachers were satisfied with the in-service training programme and believed that the programme would enhance their professionalism as teachers. It was also found that teachers who felt privileged to be selected to attend the in-service training with more experiences in the field had shown stronger affective, continuance and normative commitment towards their career with a lower turnover rate when compared to their younger counterparts.

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