



Mothers' experiences of a voucher scheme within the context of Hong Kong's early education: Issues of affordability and justice



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines issues of affordability and justice using the concept of “basic structure” as developed by Iris M. Young in order to produce a more nuanced account of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme. We draw on the experiences of Hong Kong mothers of different socio-economic status who have participated in the voucher scheme. The scheme aims to provide affordable quality early education by giving parents a flat-rate voucher so as to assist them in enrolling their children in non-profit local kindergartens. We base our arguments on the central premise that socially just policy requires meticulous attention to the basic structure that determines distributive patterns. We go on to argue that the basic structure is governed by institutional assumptions, rules, and practices about class, gender, and markets. Our analysis references both quantitative and qualitative data of a three-phased mixed-method study with > 1400 mothers. The key findings reveal how mothers of different socio-economic backgrounds experienced the voucher scheme where power structures and relations are legitimized, thus contributing to the structural processes that reproduce constraints and injustice. Mothers' articulation regarding the policy recommendation of free early education adds insights into the constraints they experience and a notion of collective responsibility in supporting the education of young children.

1. Introduction

Social justice in education is commonly understood in distributive terms, i.e., how educational resources and opportunities are organized and distributed equally and fairly. However, such an understanding is inadequate given that education manifests a complex system of social structures (Robertson & Dale, 2013) and a tendency to reproduce social inequalities over time (Macpherson, Robertson, & Walford, 2014). Theorizing structure as the subject of justice from her feminist perspective, Young (2006) critiques the distributive paradigm for its inadequate attention on the basic structure, i.e., structural processes that produce distributive patterns. She defines structural injustice as “the outcome, often unintended, of a multitude of routine and deliberate actions within institutions” (Young, 2011, p. 180). While education is subject to the governing forces of politics, policies, and practices (Robertson & Dale, 2013), the globalization of neoliberalism adds additional challenges to issues of justice at various levels, including early education (Ball, 2015; Connell, 2013b).

Neoliberalism is a political-economic ideal of human progress grounded in an institutional framework that values private property rights, free choice, and free trade to liberate the entrepreneurial

individual in society (Harvey, 2005). “In a neoliberal universe, the answer to a policy problem will always be expanded markets, more competition, more flexibility, more entrepreneurialism and more private ownership” (Connell, 2013a, p. 285). The use of vouchers to stimulate market demand and heavy reliance on the private sector for provision delivery is a common phenomenon in early education (Adamson & Brennan, 2014; Naumann, 2011). Under the banner of privatization, institutional arrangements (e.g., funding schemes, quality audit, surveillance measures) are put in place to ensure market flexibility and hierarchical control on the one hand and the minimization of public funding on the other. According to Connell (2013a), rationing resources (e.g., through vouchers) means access to education can be commodified and privileged through fee paying and other practices, thus legitimizing “winners” and “losers” in the competitive market. In researching the neoliberal turn to privatization, Ball (2013) indicates that inequality is a structure rather than an outcome of education markets.

This paper examines issues of affordability and justice using the concept of “basic structure” as developed by Iris M. Young (1990, 2006, 2011) in order to produce a more nuanced account of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (thereafter voucher scheme). From the

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British colonial governance till the present Special Administrative Region (SAR) period, early education in Hong Kong was and still is a fully privatized sector. Between 2006 and 2007, the SAR government implemented the voucher scheme - a move undertaken against a call from many in the sector for free provision (Yuen, 2017). Our study draws on the experiences of Hong Kong mothers of different socio-economic status (SES) who have participated in the voucher scheme. The scheme aims to provide affordable quality early education by giving parents a flat-rate voucher so as to assist them in enrolling their children in non-profit local kindergartens (Education & Manpower Bureau, 2006). We base our arguments on the central premise that socially just policy requires meticulous attention to the basic structure that determines distributive patterns. We go on to argue that the basic structure is governed by institutional assumptions, rules, and practices about class, gender, and markets. Our analysis references both quantitative and qualitative data of a three-phased mixed-method study with > 1400 mothers.

As noted, given the long-held market approach to early education, we think the concept of basic structure offers us a different entry point in order to examine the voucher scheme. We focus on mothers both because of their primary role in care responsibilities, as well as their gendered position in a patriarchal structure where their voices are very often marginalized in policy (Pasoli, 2015). While our main focus is on affordability and its interrelationship with social justice, we also pay some attention to notions of quality and the idea of free early education as both are implicated in the data. Three research questions are used to orientate the paper:

1. What are the intended and unintended outcomes of the voucher scheme?
2. How do mothers of different SES backgrounds articulate their views on free provision as an alternative policy option to improve early education?
3. In what ways do the policy outcomes and mothers' articulation on free early education reveal the structural processes and constraints being neglected by the voucher scheme?

In the next section, we elaborate Young's conceptualization of the basic structure. We then align this with neoliberal governance through markets, paying particular attention to the Hong Kong early childhood education market. We further discuss vouchers as a policy tool in general before offering insights from the context of Hong Kong.

2. The basic structure

2.1. Structural processes and justice

By structural processes, Young (2011) refers to human actions and interactions and their cumulative effects in society. Young's moral perspective on structural processes is a response to Rawl's distributive justice, which limits the analysis of social justice to institutions (e.g., family, school, government) only. Institutions situate individuals in different social positions (e.g., gender, class, ability) that affect access to opportunities and options in relation to one another. The distributive paradigm takes the basic structure as given and defines justice based on the allocation of material (e.g., wealth, income) and nonmaterial (e.g., right, power) goods through instrumental principles. It reduces human nature to a unified self, neglecting differences in social relations and positions (e.g., men and women; middle and working classes) while accepting the outcomes as inevitable (Young, 1990, 2011). Young (2011) argues that it is equally important to promote both just institutions and just outcomes. From her perspective, the focus on possessions draws attention away from "what people are doing, according to what institutionalized rules, how their doings and havings are structured by institutionalized relations that constitute their positions, and how the combined effect of their doings has recursive effects on

their lives" (Young, 1990, p. 25). Young (2006) problematizes three important aspects of structural processes: division of labor, decision-making power, and normativity.

These three important aspects of structural processes produce cumulative effects on the "background conditions" in which individuals choose and act, as well as distributive patterns themselves (Young, 2006). In terms of division of labor, how occupations are defined determines how individuals are categorized and distributed, and in so doing produce both possibilities and constraints that are associated with social positions. Take as an example care work. Here, stereotypical gender assumptions concerning care work permeate institutions thus devaluing and stigmatizing the work, resulting in both the creation and hardening of structural divisions of labor where the power to make decisions tends to be confined to those with privileged social positions (Young, 2006). The care work example illustrates women's experiences in being marginalized and prevented from equal participation in matters that affect them and the people they care for. These experiences are more profound among those with limited resources. Given that institutional rules and practices often carry unspoken or unnoticed assumptions, these then facilitate normativity; that is, the normalization of standards for evaluating individuals and their actions - the results of which can adversely affect the lives of many (Young, 2006). In the case of early education, what constitutes, for instance, "good parent/mother," "good consumer," or "care responsibilities" would have important implications for policy and practice.

Structural injustice is understood as a "system wrong," one that requires collective responsibility to improve present conditions (Young, 2011). As a result of converging forces, including the actions and practices of masses of individuals within masses of institutions, those who are privileged within existing power structures play a part in producing and reproducing injustice. As a consequence, Young (2011) argues that everyone, especially the privileged, shares in the responsibility to ensure that both the structures and outcomes are more just. Governments in particular have greater capacity to organize individual actions so as to reduce structural injustice. However, the turn to neoliberalism by governments globally actively reshapes local education governance frameworks, where the responsibility for change is gradually shifted from the collective to the individual (Robertson & Dale, 2013).

2.2. Neoliberal governance through markets

Neoliberalism creates a hierarchical structure of governance in education to construct "[t]he ideal citizen... an autonomous subject, in no way dependent, with rights but also matching responsibilities, self-governing and responsible for managing his or her risks through making market choices" (Dahlberg & Moss, 2005, p. 44). In essence, it orchestrates a system of institutional assumptions, rules, and practices to enhance market functioning, giving minimal concern about the three important aspects of structural processes as previously mentioned. Competition and choice are core to achieving efficient resource allocation through markets and realizing the perceived benefits, e.g., meeting diverse needs and preferences, reducing production costs, raising standards, and self-regulating services. In a competition market, consumers are supposed to find what they want at the lowest possible price (Moss, 2009). To survive competition or make profits, providers need to stay responsive to market conditions (e.g., keeping costs down, transferring costs to consumers). Given the right to choice, consumers - which within the context of early education tend to be mothers - have to be informed customers. For example, they have to search for information, weigh the costs, and try to assess quality. Effectively, such mothers need to personify the "economic man," that is rational, isolated, and motivated by self-interests to maximize personal satisfaction according to their ability to pay (Moss, 2009). This explains why, in general, markets tend to privilege consumers who are in more advantaged positions and therefore function on the basis of inequality.

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