



Markets, choice of kindergarten, mothers' care responsibilities, and the voucher scheme in Hong Kong



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines choice of kindergarten by mothers of different socio-economic status (SES) for children aged 3 while using vouchers in Hong Kong. It identifies potential market failure to meet needs and preferences and ensure access to preferred options for all, and thus challenges the global prevalence of the market approach to early childhood services. It questions gendered responsibility and policy that prevents mothers from fulfilling care responsibilities for young children. This paper presents data from a mixed-method study including an analysis of mothers' options in terms of convenience and their views on the impact of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (thereafter voucher scheme) and local provision. Data were collected from two questionnaires, seven focus groups, and government documents. The quantitative data covered two-parent households using vouchers, with 1572 and 1360 mothers responding to the initial and follow-up questionnaires, respectively. The qualitative data from 33 mothers were coded and analyzed to capture recurring themes and nuances. Official figures were tabulated to investigate market adjustments relating to changes in demand and supply. The results reveal mothers' strong emphasis on convenience when making choices of kindergarten, the significance of SES in their choice and views, and issues of access linked to market situations and failure. They are discussed in terms of the nature, allocation, and fulfillment of care responsibilities in markets. The results lend support to the international call for active government involvement to achieve the dual goals of early childhood services (meeting children's educational needs and parents' employment needs) and show how markets may neglect the specific nature of care responsibilities, which in turn can exacerbate historical injustices in society.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I adopt a feminist democratic ethic of care (Tronto, 2013) to examine choice of kindergarten by mothers of different SES backgrounds in Hong Kong and potential market failure in the policy context of the voucher scheme implemented since 2007/08. Choosing a kindergarten for children as young as age 3, I argue, is one of the many care responsibilities shouldered by mothers. Tronto (2013) studies the nature of care responsibilities and how they are allocated and fulfilled in markets. Like other commodities, care is considered to be naturally good. So are women for the caring job. Tronto problematizes the devalued position of care as a private matter and thus the historical injustices being forgotten and reproduced as a result, in terms of not only gender but also class, race, and so forth. The political construction of what counts as private justifies gendered responsibility and policy. In Tronto's view, paternalism is about having too much power to allocate responsibility. It excludes women from full participation in politics and society. Tronto attests that governments should enable citizens to meet the caring needs of one another in ways that

are "consistent with democratic commitments to justice, equality, and freedom for all" (p. 23). This paper draws on data collected through a public policy study on parent choice and the voucher scheme. It centers upon how mothers make choices of kindergarten in care responsibilities and if they have access to preferred options that can meet both child and adult needs. Such an investigation can help facilitate a critical examination of how well markets work in practice while adding new understanding in an Asian setting.

Markets are premised on the economically oriented neoliberal ideology. Neoliberalism is "a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade" (Harvey, 2005, p. 2). It has grown into a hegemonic discourse in human history, advanced by globalization at an accelerating speed (Harvey, 2005). Assumed as most efficient for allocating resources, markets give choice to individuals who are motivated by self-interests to meet needs and preferences through rational thinking (e.g., weighting cost and quality, and measuring personal satisfaction) (Stein, 2001). Neoliberalism emphasizes choice as an end (Stein, 2001) and access to institutions only (Tronto, 2013). It confines justice, equality, and freedom to the private sphere, and positions personal

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responsibility as the legitimate form of responsibility (Tronto, 2013). Regardless of its hegemony, empirical evidence showing markets of early childhood services actually work as claimed remains scant.

The increasing trend of government reliance on markets to provide early childhood services (Penn, 2012) goes in tandem with the international call for active government involvement to achieve the dual goals of early childhood services, i.e., meeting children's educational needs and parents' employment needs (OECD, 2006). This in turn can mitigate widening inequalities and inequities of marginalized groups (e.g., women, low-income families and ethnic minorities) in the age of globalization (OECD, 2006). Market failure has been noted for early childhood services (Paull, 2012), and markets do not perform as predicted across contexts (Moss, 2014). In fact, research has repeatedly demonstrated the complexities and constraints experienced by parents—mostly mothers—in choosing and accessing early childhood services (e.g., Davis & Connelly, 2005; Himmelweit & Sigala, 2004; Pungello & Kurtz-Costes, 1999; Vandenbroeck, Visscher, Nuffel, & Ferla, 2008; and Vincent, Braun, & Ball, 2008). Vincent and Ball (2006) describe early childhood markets as peculiar, complex, practical, classed, and gendered. Markets support some at the expense of others and do not attend to the outcomes of personal responsibility on historically marginalized groups and society as a whole (Tronto, 2013). In this light, the market approach is a policy discourse that justifies whose interests are privileged and traded off (Ball, 1994).

In Hong Kong, the market approach to early childhood services is a continuation of the British colonial legacy and an intensification of the globalized discourse of neoliberalism in the post-colonial era (Yuen, 2010). The Special Administrative Region government introduced the voucher scheme to offer a flat-rate subsidy to parents with children aged 3–6 enrolled in local non-profit kindergartens (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2006). To allow the market to work more freely, the scheme has removed the minimal subsidies to eligible kindergartens (Yuen, 2010). Situated in a temporal position of the global-local connection (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010), Hong Kong offers a distinctive opportunity to understand the politics regarding the public-private divide of care responsibilities (Tronto, 2013).

The next section gives a detailed account of the Hong Kong market, followed by a review of market failure of early childhood services and pragmatic considerations in choice, and a conceptualization of the study in terms of care responsibilities.

2. The Hong Kong market in perspective

The local market is well-sustained by a stable demand for the education of young children. Over 90% of children aged 3–6 in Hong Kong attend kindergarten (Census and Statistics Department, 2012a). The cultural aspiration for education and keen awareness of the education race in a competitive society (Lui, 2011) partly explain the high attendance. Nevertheless, there is insufficient information on how effective the market is in meeting needs and preferences.

The government relies solely on the market for provision of kindergarten education, which is mostly non-profit in nature. Nearly 90% (763 of 856) of local kindergartens are non-profit (School Education Statistics Section, 2012). Unlike their counterparts, are required to keep their profit at 5% of the total revenue and disclose operation information online to increase transparency and facilitate parent choice. Since center-based services dominate the provision, the choice between half-day and full-day sessions is the main consideration. Hence, “service type” in this study refers to half-day or full-day sessions, denoting a difference in service hours.

Half-day sessions constitute a major market share. In 2011/12, 751 local non-profit kindergartens were registered with the voucher scheme. Of these voucher kindergartens, 527 operated half-day sessions (morning and afternoon sessions; 3 h per session) and 224 full-day sessions (Education Bureau, 2012). Three-quarters of the half-day kindergartens also offered limited full-day sessions running from

9:00 am to 4:30 pm. Parents using full-day kindergartens can drop off their children as early as 8:00 am and pick them up by 6:00 pm. Monitored by the welfare branch until 2005, full-day kindergartens play a significant role in supporting working parents, children with special needs, and vulnerable families with multi-professional services. More than half of their users come from less resourced or disadvantaged backgrounds (Yuen & Yu, 2010).

The demand for half-day and full-day sessions shows distinctive geographical patterns. In 2011/12, almost 70% of children (90,318 of 129,151) were enrolled in half-day sessions, while the rest (38,833) attended full-day sessions (Education Bureau, 2012). Based on the median monthly domestic household income statistics (Census and Statistics Department, 2012b) and kindergarten enrollment rates in 2011 (School Education Statistics Section, 2012), the highest demand for half-day sessions fell in districts with above-average household income. In contrast, the highest demand for full-day sessions was clustered in districts with lower household income than average.

The current provision reflects a paternalistic policy trajectory that privileges half-day sessions. Officials reiterate that half-day sessions are good enough for young children and that parents (*presumably mothers*) should spend more time with their children (Education Bureau, 2010). This explains why parents receive a flat-rate voucher whether they choose half-day or full-day sessions. The per-head calculation of the voucher discourages kindergartens from converting half-day sessions into full-day sessions. It disadvantages full-day kindergartens because they serve only one group of students for the whole day, whereas half-day kindergartens can have two different groups of students due to their bisessional mode of operation. The formula used to calculate standard provision in new town planning (730 half-day places and 250 full-day places for every 1000 children; Planning Department, 2011) offers another glimpse of the paternalistic power structures embedded in government policy. In a society where more than half of mothers with children under age 6 work full-time (Census and Statistics Department, 2012c), the decade-long policy positions on half-day/full-day sessions and parents'/mothers' responsibility have undermined the development of full-day sessions, thus constraining choice in the market.

The voucher scheme is limited to supporting parents financially. As mentioned earlier, the market approach focuses primarily on access to institutions. Governments use demand-side policy to improve access by enhancing choice, thus stimulating demand and supply (Moss, 2009). Providing parent subsidies like vouchers is an example of demand-side policy. Some researchers have cast doubt on the effectiveness of providing subsidies alone without attending to market situations (e.g., distribution, characteristics, and supply of services) and parent choice of early childhood services (Ball & Vincent, 2005; Davis & Connelly, 2005; Ertas & Shields, 2012; Houston, Chang, & Gennetian, 2002). A study in Hong Kong with a small sample of parents found that the voucher scheme had enabled them to save money for extra-curricular activities (Li, Wong, & Wang, 2010). It is not known whether parents had increased kindergarten options and/or access to preferred options. Yuen (2012) highlights issues of the voucher scheme in terms of disadvantaging those who use or operate full-day sessions. Hence, it is worth investigating more closely the policy impact and effectiveness of the market approach. The non-profit, center-based nature of early childhood services in Hong Kong, a market context quite different from elsewhere, adds a unique dimension to such an investigation.

3. Market failure of early childhood services

Markets are said to offer the best possible mixture of options at minimum costs to meet the dual goals of early childhood services (Paull, 2012). Competition and choice are the two core neoliberal tenets for achieving efficient allocation of resources. Proponents assume that markets can better meet needs and preferences, improve or close failing

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