

# Unpacking neoliberal policies: Interrupting the global and local production of the norms

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*Abstract:* Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has been constructed as a new site for educational, sociocultural, political, and economic investment. Coupled with such a growing and popular recognition of ECEC as a significant period of children's learning and development are critical issues concerning accountability, affordability, and accessibility to quality education and care for all. Highlighting the preschool education systems in Taiwan and Hong Kong as two examples from Asia, this paper aims to open up a discursive space for reconceptualizing the effects of neoliberal discourse and how such a system of reasoning reconstructed notions of inclusion/exclusion to limit the making of quality education and the provision of care for all.

*Keywords:* preschool education system, neoliberalism, vouchers

## Introduction

Investment in quality education and care for future economic development and social returns has been mobilized as the dominant global educational reform rhetoric. For example, in *Starting Strong* (OECD, 2001 and 2006), it is argued that high quality early childhood education and care would make a major contribution to any country's national development and success in the new global knowledge-based economy. Another contemporary example of this similar thread of logic is a special emphasis on the economics of early childhood (Heckman, 2006) that emphasizes the benefit of quality early childhood education as an effective approach for promoting economic growth in the future. It is obvious that the logic underpins the core arguments of these two examples. Both share a strong root in the neoliberal political economic system of reasoning.

As noted by Apple (2001), “for neoliberals, one form of rationality is more powerful than any other – economic rationality” (p. 38). This move to think within economic rationality has worked to reconfigure a new common sense for all. The magical formula of neoliberalism is to rationalize, with an economic reasoning system as the miracle solution, to fix sociocultural, educational, political, and economical problems. Through this mode of reasoning, a cost-benefit analysis and a vision of efficiency have appeared to become the dominant norms for creating standards to promise quality for all.

Borrowing such a magical formula into the field of education changes the philosophical foundation of education for all in that, rather than thinking about the field of education as a sociocultural site, it is transformed into a “quasi-market” or “free-market” (for example, see Friedman & Friedman, 1990; Chubb & Moe, 1990; Friedman, 1995). As the field of education is redefined as a marketplace, whether it’s a semi-market, quasi-market or free-market, the parents and children/students are reconfigured as *consumers* while educational programs are commodified.

While it may appear to make sense to rationalize through the mode of economics and to articulate the fact that every dollar we spend or invest at the present moment for quality ECEC programs will bring us valuable social returns within a few years, it is dangerous to underestimate the effects of this neoliberal political economic system of reasoning. As Apple (2001) reminds us, “rather than taking neoliberal claims at face values, we should want to ask about their hidden effects that are too often invisible in the rhetoric and metaphors of their proponents” (p. 70). Therefore, working against the dominant global trend of accepting neoliberalism in the educational reform discourse as the miracle solution to ensure quality and to promise freedom and equity for all, this paper unpacks the glocal effects of neoliberalism on early childhood education, care, and policy by highlighting the preprimary education systems in Taiwan and Hong Kong as two examples from Asia.

The first section of this paper introduces the preschool education systems in Taiwan and Hong Kong as two examples from Asia to question the effects of neoliberal policies in education reforms. While the two education and care systems in Taiwan and Hong Kong are very different and cannot be comparable or compatible with each other, the shared trend of making a “right” turn through neoliberal policies to reform preschool education is noteworthy. The second section of this paper presents a critique of neoliberalism from a post-structural perspective to discuss the effects of neoliberal discourse. In sum, the discussions in this paper aim to address how neoliberal policies work to create conditions for the (im)possibilities of quality education and provision of care for all.

## Preschool Education Systems from two of the four Asian Dragons: Taiwan and Hong Kong

Both Taiwan and Hong Kong have been known as two of the four Asian Dragons.<sup>1</sup> Recognized for their capabilities in achieving and maintaining rapid growth in economic development, the Taiwanese government and both the colonial Hong Kong regime and the post-colonial Hong Kong government (also known as the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region after its political handover in 1997) have been placing economic growth and development at the center of their contemporary sociocultural and political imaginaries. In particular, both Taiwan and Hong Kong have accepted capitalism and have been highly influenced by neoliberal policies from the West (particularly political and economic influences from the United States and British governments).

In this section, I will introduce the systems of preschool education in Taiwan and Hong Kong to build a foundation for further discussion on the effects of neoliberal policies in preschool education reforms.

### *System of ECEC in Taiwan*

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is not included in the 9-year national compulsory education system. While there are both public and private kindergartens and childcare programs, it is important to note that more than 70% of the programs are in private institutions.<sup>2</sup> The structural divide between education and care for young children can be seen through the different governing bodies and regulations, as well as the different emphases of the programs. For example, nursery schools are for children between ages 1-6 to place a stronger emphasis on care while kindergartens are for children between ages 3-6 to stress the importance of education in the early years. Moreover, nursery schools are regulated by the Ministry of the Interior whereas kindergartens are governed by the Ministry of Education. Currently, ECEC in Taiwan has been under reconstruction through a process of integration to echo the Scandinavian notion of *educare*. The term 'Preschool' for children between ages 2-6 will be formally adopted for all ECEC programs after the projected official integration by 2014.

In addition to the notion of *educare* to recognize the equal importance of

<sup>1</sup> The term Asian Dragons refers to the four highly developed economy geopolitical spaces including: Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea, and Singapore for their rapid economic development and industrialization between the 1960s and 1990s.

<sup>2</sup> While 70% of the ECEC programs in Taiwan are private, it is important to note that at the elementary level, according to official and public statistics from the Ministry of Education, 98.53% are in public schools.

education and care in the early years, another significant change in Taiwanese preschool education is a proposal to include five-year-old kindergarten as part of the new national compulsory education system<sup>3</sup>.

*Issues Concerning Preschool Accessibility and Affordability in Taiwan.* It is obvious that with the limited availability of public ECEC programs for all children, many parents have no other options but to choose private programs. However, such a logic operates under the assumption that parents who choose to opt out of public programs are financially capable of affording private programs as options<sup>4</sup>. Not being included as part of the national compulsory educational system, it is harder to get the real story of the enrollment rate at the preschool level. Although the Taiwanese government states that most children still attend preschools even though ECEC is non-compulsory, a closer read of the government's public statistical records from the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of the Interior could help to offer some critical facts to the real story. For example, to highlight the school year of 2007-08, there were 138,287 children attending public kindergartens and childcare programs, whereas there were 295,474 children in private provisions. Among the total population of 3-5 year olds for the 2007-08 school year, 37.33% of the children 3-5 years old did not attend any public or private kindergartens/childcare programs. Taking such an official record as an example for discussion, this simple statistical calculation elucidates that accessibility to public programs (whether kindergarten or childcare programs) for young children is relatively limited and the affordability of private programs may be an expensive option for numerous families with young children in Taiwan. This issue of affordability is represented by the alarmingly high percentage of children not attending any program. For that, while being careful not to make an over-generalized conclusion about the 37.33% of young children who are not enrolled in any type of public or private programs, given the common parental belief in early childhood education in Taiwan, it is possible to interpret that a significant number of children in the 37.33% may come from financially disadvantaged families whose parents may not be able to afford private ECEC services.

<sup>3</sup> A new proposal to implement a 12-year compulsory education system is projected by the 2014 school year. In this new proposal, it will include 6 years of elementary education, 3 years of junior high, and 3 years of senior high or vocational education for all children. It has been proposed to augment the five-year-old kindergarten into this new proposal of 12-year compulsory education reform to modify it to a K-12 compulsory education system.

<sup>4</sup> The cost for private preschool education and care in Taiwan is about three to four times more compared to public programs.

Noting the problems of accessibility and affordability of preschool education, Chao-Xiang Yang, a former Minister of Education (from June 1999 to May 2000), stated that preschool vouchers should be thought of as a “promise” for *all* children and their families. In an interview on preschool education, Yang (2000) supported the formation of preschool vouchers in Taiwan:

*Please Promise Me a Future*

*While calls for “extending education to young children” are becoming ever more widespread, the educational budget for early childhood education is simultaneously and paradoxically being oppressed within the national education budget. A reason for deploying early childhood educational vouchers is not to let economic barriers exclude any child from accessing early education.* (Abstracted and translated from Reengineering Education-Yang’s (2000) oral narratives, p. 51)

This local adaptation of a neoliberal preschool policy has been brewing not only as an educational issue but also as a political debate since the 1990s in Taiwan (for example, see Lee, 2009). The intelligibility of preschool voucher policies in Taiwan has been scaffolded by the global circulation of neoliberalism as a miracle solution to ensure freedom to choose as well as to address issues concerning accessibility and affordability.

### *System of pre – primary education in Hong Kong*

The field of early childhood education and care has been under major reconstruction in Hong Kong since its historical transition from a British colony to a Special Administrative Region of China in 1997. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, different from the British colonial era, education is considered as the key to the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region’s (HKSAR) future development in the global economy (Hong Kong Education Commission, 1999; Mok & Chan, 2002). Under the first Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa’s administration, a blueprint for the development and reform of the education system in Hong Kong was proposed. In that report, the notion of ‘life-long learning’ was deployed to lay the foundation for a major reconstruction of the education system (Hong Kong Education Commission, 2000). As noted by Chan and Chan (2003), the production of this government report helped to acknowledge the field of early childhood education as “the foundation for life-long learning” (p. 8). The dramatic change from the “Cinderella of the education system” (Oppen, 1993, p. 88) to “the foundation for life-long learning” (Chan & Chan, 2003, p. 8) has had a profound influence on the outlook and development of pre-primary education in Hong Kong (Rao, 2005).

One of the most important and notable impacts of the development of pre-primary education is the change in the Hong Kong Government's role in pursuing the provision of quality (Rao & Li, 2009). Becoming more actively involved in the pre-primary sector in the post-colonial period, the HKSAR Government has taken on several major neoliberal policy initiatives that focus on "building a new culture for quality early childhood education" (Hong Kong Education Commission, 2000, p. 49). In responding to the recommendations of the Education Commission, the HKSAR Government has worked on promoting and building quality education and care in the early years through implementing several major initiatives and policies. For instance, the implementation of the new "Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum" (EDB, 2006), the announcement of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS) since the 2007/08 school year (EDB, 2006), and the introduction of the Quality Assurance Framework since the 2000 school year all work together to mark milestones in the making of quality preschool education in Hong Kong.

*Issues Concerning Preschool Accessibility and Affordability in Hong Kong.* Currently, all programs in the pre-primary education sector are private. The lack of public funding in pre-primary education since the British colonial period has constructed the field of ECEC as a free market. With no public ECEC programs, education and care for young children in Hong Kong have historically been thought of as private matters of individual families' choices. Attempting to address issues concerning accessibility and affordability in the pre-primary sector without forgoing the free market model, a pre-primary voucher scheme under the logic of neoliberalism certainly makes perfect sense. Although this voucher scheme appeared to increase the accessibility of early childhood education as well as make preschool education and care more affordable for all families by providing vouchers as tuition reimbursements to relieve the financial burdens of parents, the effects of such a policy ironically work to further marginalize many families that have already been disadvantaged. For example, a critical read into the voucher policy could reveal how children of lower income families may be the ultimate others to be excluded through this scheme.

To be specific about the effects of this voucher scheme, it is important to note that all children of legal residents in Hong Kong are eligible to apply for vouchers regardless of their household income levels. However, children of lower income families have been singled out in the text of the policy as a special case in that lower income families who are on social welfare schemes should choose only between welfare subsidies for children's education costs and the voucher scheme. This either-or condition in the voucher scheme for families in poverty has made preschool less accessible and harder to afford.

Furthermore, it is important to note that since the implementation of this pre-primary voucher scheme, many previously existing social welfare subsidies for young children have been gradually subsiding in Hong Kong. From this perspective, the current neoliberal policy of the voucher scheme does very little to address the problems of accessibility and affordability for children from disadvantaged families.

### *Vouchers: the problematics of neoliberal policies*

Neoliberal policies, such as preschool vouchers in Taiwan and Hong Kong, have been creating illusions of freedom, equality, and democracy (Lee, 2010). From the level of critical analysis, preschool vouchers amplify socio-economic differences and sustain or even further perpetuate the existing status quo for children and their families. Such a false hope about vouchers is a global phenomenon and is associated with the limitation of neoliberal policies for their inability to challenge deeper social inequalities with an economic rationality. As Whitty (1997) argues:

Atomized decision-making in a highly stratified society may appear to give everyone equal opportunities but transforming responsibility for decision-making from the public to the private sphere can actually reduce the scope for collective action to improve the quality of education for all. (p. 58)

Approaching social inequalities through economic rationality and shifting collective responsibility to individual responsibility through neoliberal policies can dangerously miss the complexities of power/knowledge relations in that, rather than challenging inequalities towards social justice, neoliberal policies like vouchers ironically work to reproduce traditional social stratification.

When going beyond the face values of neoliberalism, as informed by a post-structural perspective, neoliberal policies—such as vouchers—function as social and cultural administration in which new “norms” and “truths” are produced to (re)define the normative ways of thinking, acting, and being. That is, under neoliberal logic, voucher policies work to produce socio-cultural disciplinary guidelines to create a new normative understanding of what a good parent and appropriate preschool program shall look like. Moreover, informed by Foucault’s notion of governmentality (a power that “produces” rather than “represses” our subjectivities), it becomes possible to critique how neoliberal reform discourses, such as preschool vouchers, produce a different kind of “knowledge” as the truth.

Hence neoliberal policies can be conceptualized as ‘technologies of the



self' through which the governing of others and the governing of the self are interlaced by reform discourses to instruct how one should act or think or be (Foucault, 1978/1990). Thus, neoliberal policies, like those concerning vouchers, are less about emancipation and more about specifying the conduct of conduct (for example, see Lather, 2004; Popkewitz, 2006). Who we are and how we should be to become autonomous and productive selves are internally desired by ourselves rather than externally required. This alteration concerning how we are governed while we simultaneously become self-disciplined as we accept the economic rationalities through neoliberal policies as the "norms" and "truths" is a significant effect of neoliberalism that needs to be examined.

## Unpacking Neoliberalism

Many critical analyses and critiques of neoliberalism and neoliberal policies have focused on the dangerous shift to a market approach in education and issues concerning privatization of education (for some examples, see Apple, 2001, Giroux, 2002; Olssen & Peters, 2005; Perez & Cannella, 2010; Whitty, Power & Halpin, 1998). While acknowledging the importance of critical analyses on neoliberalism and neoliberal policies in education, it is significant to unpack neoliberalism as a grand narrative and to examine how contemporary reform discourses and policies surrounding neoliberal rationalities circulate to constitute a new regime of truth to create desirable norms. Unpacking neoliberalism as a grand narrative, Lindblad and Popkewitz (2004) emphasize how theoretical labels such as neoliberalism could dangerously steer us away from a deeper understanding of the effects and tensions that have co-existed in reform discourses and policies. They note:

Neoliberalism is planet-speak, a magical concept that is seen as the solution to all problems or as the evil that creates those problems. The world serves as a central 'marker' about the promises of progress from conservatives and as the roots of the evil that the left sees as taking away all of the won benefits of the security nets of the welfare state in caring for its populations. The use of neoliberalism as a conceptual framework to understand the social and historical transformations is clearly problematic when one considers the alliances between minority groups and conservative politicians in supporting school choice in the U.S. or the election of social democratic and Labour governments that maintained related policies but with different rhetorical configurations. Neoliberalism is a symptom and not a cause. That is,



the word never stands by itself as it is itself embedded in a number of historical patterns that exist prior to its formal label of neoliberalism and which need scrutiny. For example, neoliberalism is used in different places and with different political and cultural agendas that seem, at first glance, as strange bedfellows. (Lindblad & Popkewitz, 2004, p. xix)

While vouchers have been analytically associated with neoliberal discourses and classified as governing policies of the “Right” that are either good or evil, if we are “trapped” by such binaries in our reasoning and analysis, we risk ignoring the complexities and multiple dimensions of educational reform discourses that we ought to scrutinize (Lindblad & Popkewitz, 2004; Popkewitz, 2006).

It is from such a standpoint that I shift towards a post-structural dimension of analysis related to the intelligibility of preschool vouchers as a case of educational reform discourses through which the making of a particular vision of the future is crafted.

*(IM)POSSIBILITIES OF QUALITY PRESCHOOL EDUCATION FOR ALL?* While there are different objectives in different reform policies, it is important to acknowledge that all reform discourses, whether we like it or not, have some level of good intentions and attempt to address issues concerning accessibility, affordability, and accountability. Simple put, who would want to put children, the hope for our collective future, in danger? It is only when we shift to a deeper analysis of the intelligibility of reform discourses and policies to understand their socio-cultural and political reasoning particularities that we will be able to unpack the layers of meaning making.

Take the preschool voucher policies from Taiwan and Hong Kong as examples and let us shift to a discussion on the core rationality of vouchers—“freedom to choose.” The concepts of freedom and choice are woven together to scaffold and mobilize the concept of vouchers as a form of progressive educational reform. “Freedom” has become a “worldwide good” and has become understood as a universal desire or ultimate emancipation. Simultaneously, “choice” is thought of as a form of empowerment tagging along with the universal concept of “freedom.” Coexistent, freedom and choice become elevator concepts which have “no known origin and serve as a magic concept as they seem to cover the solution for all problems” (Lindblad & Popkewitz, 2004, p. xviii). In fact, who does not desire or want to have the “freedom to choose?” Lindblad and Popkewitz (2004) note that the danger in elevator words or concepts is that they have been “accepted as singular and universal terms that refer to some fact or reality and do not need to be explained” (p. xviii). As elevator words, “freedom” and “choice” have repackaged the

concept of the educational voucher as an effective means for change, progress, and democracy. That is, when the educational voucher discourse is linked with the notions of “freedom” and “choice,” it becomes difficult to argue against freedom and choice as such concepts are the core foundation of liberal democracy. Having the freedom to make a choice in itself appears to be a form of democracy and liberation. However, when infused into the preschool voucher discourses globally, the notion of “freedom to choose” could be dangerous as it appears to wear the “skin” of progressive liberal democratic change. After all, to have power or to be freed or emancipated is highly desired as the ultimate achievement of modernization and democratization (Rose, 1999).

Hence, when we turn to the texts and the rules of the preschool voucher policies from Taiwan and Hong Kong, it becomes possible to elucidate that this particular notion of “freedom to choose” is socially constructed and economically reconfigured to transform our common sense while prescribing a particular way of being, acting and behaving. For example, through the circulation of preschool vouchers as a form of educational reform, not only are parents being disciplined by the rules of the voucher policies, but also the field of early childhood education and care is regulated through the process of being chosen by parents. In other words, through voucher policies, parents are simultaneously governed and self-governed, as their choices are shaped by the rules of the voucher policies to think of what kinds of programs are classified as *appropriate* high quality or *normal* early educational and childcare institutions (Dahlberg, 2000; or see Dahlberg et al., 1999).

Unpacking the effects of preschool vouchers as examples of neoliberal reform discourse opens up a discursive space to rethink the (im)possibilities of the making of a quality preschool for all. Saturated within the neoliberal rationality, contemporary preschool education is at the crossroads in this new millennium. A variety of recent examples of reform policies in Taiwan and Hong Kong, such as official productions of curriculum guidelines and quality assurance as well as licensing regulations, all point to that fact that governments are becoming more involved in the highly privatized sector of preschool education. Moving out of the previous “hands off” attitude in preschool matters, both the Taiwanese government and the HKSAR government’s active involvement create ruptures and interject new possibilities for a better development in the field of ECEC in that a glimmer of hope to address critical issues of accessibility, affordability, and accountability in preschool education may very well still resurface under the public gaze and discussion in Taiwan and Hong Kong, despite the global tidal wave of neoliberal rationality.

## Some Concluding Thoughts

Through the different arguments in this paper, my primary intention is not to examine whether contemporary neoliberal reform policies, such as vouchers, are good or bad or right or wrong. Instead, the presented analyses aim to unpack the global effects of neoliberalism in order to shed light on the embedded *systems of reasoning* that underpin the intelligibility of neoliberal policies through which our “common sense” or knowledge is (re)organized and constructed. What I have intended to do through the arguments in this paper is a theoretical, methodological, and analytical shift toward social epistemology (Popkewitz, 1991; 1999) through which the construction and intelligibility of the new subject and subjectivity are problematized and destabilized for a deeper understanding of the effects of educational reform discourses. This shift allows me to focus on how reform discourses such as neoliberal policies function as normalizing technologies to produce normative narratives by simultaneously denaturalizing the production of the hope of progress and unpacking the production of a silent panic. Analysis of the double production of contemporary neoliberal educational reform discourses is rooted in ethical concerns to elucidate how neoliberal constructions of freedom, equity, and democracy at global and local levels have been dangerously interpreted and constructed to constitute a dominant but conservative trajectory of modernization.

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