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A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF INTEGRATED KINDERGARTEN PROGRAMS IN HONG KONG

A Dissertation
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Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
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Wai Yung Jenny Cheuk
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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my eldest brother, Wai Lun and my sister-in law, Margaret, who act as role models for me to learn not to fear challenges but to turn them into opportunities with perseverance and diligence. I also have to express my heartfelt thanks to my sister, Wai King, who gave me a long-distanced call every morning from Hong Kong and incessantly sent me parcels of excellent Chinese food. The unconditional love from all of my family members fueled my exhausting mind and body and kept me alive to fulfill the goal of accomplishing this dissertation. Moreover, I particularly thank Professor Lorna Chan, my most respected person who nurtures me with her care. Last, but not the least, I need to thank my God who never left me in the lonely journey of pursuing this study in the US.

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dissertation constructively and imaginatively because I knew he accepted my weaknesses and appreciated my strengths. Most important were his stringent expectations for me to become an excellent professional both in early childhood education and qualitative research. Also, he offered me concrete, practical, and effective strategies necessary for accomplishing this task. Under his caring, helpful, and professional guidance, I was able not only to accomplish this dissertation but also attain enjoyment as a novice writer during the process of writing up the dissertation.

Abstract

Since 1985, the Hong Kong government has been collaborating with the selected non-profit private service providers to implement integrated kindergarten education in mainstream kindergarten programs initially designed for typically developing children. The term "integrated" is roughly equivalent to "inclusive" in the United States. This study's purpose is to describe kindergarten teachers' perspectives on the provision of quality integrated education for children with disabilities in Hong Kong contexts. The findings of this study offer empirical data that suggest ways to improve the quality of integrated kindergarten programs so that young children with disabilities can attain a high-quality early childhood education experience that lays a solid foundation upon which successful subsequent schooling can be built.

In-depth, open-ended qualitative interviewing was the primary data collection method for this study. Four integrated kindergarten programs in Hong Kong were involved, and two kindergarten teachers from each program participated as informants. Each of the eight informants was interviewed three times; and data were analyzed using typological techniques. Two research questions guided the study: (a) How do early childhood educators describe their experience with integration? and (b) According to the teachers, what does instruction look like in integrated kindergarten programs? Findings were descriptions of teachers' perspectives on working in integrated kindergartens in Hong Kong.

Analysis of informants' data identified two broad generalizations: (a) Kindergarten teachers in this study emphasized teaching academics to children without

disabilities, but they focused on social development at the exclusion of academic instruction for children with disabilities, and (b) According to the teachers, instruction was academic and skill-oriented in the integrated kindergarten programs. The results documented that kindergarten teachers felt compelled to teach academics to children without disabilities primarily due to the schools' academic goals, the standardized curriculum, parents' expectations for their children's academic achievement, primary schools' academic requirements for entering pupils, and the Hong Kong government's demand for students' academic competence. Contradictorily, kindergarten teachers felt no pressure to teach academics to children with disabilities due to negative teacher attitudes toward children with disabilities, resource constraints within school systems, the Hong Kong government's unsupported policy toward integrated education, and an unreceptive culture toward individuals with disabilities. Kindergarten teachers in this study commented that the integrated kindergarten programs they provided did not serve the interests of children with or without disabilities.

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Chapter I
Introduction

Overview of the Study

Since 1985, Hong Kong has been implementing integrated kindergarten education in early childhood programs that were initially designed for children without disabilities. The purpose of this study was to describe general education teachers' perspectives on the provision of integrated kindergarten programs for children with disabilities in Hong Kong contexts. The study's findings offer insights into how to improve integrated kindergarten programs in Hong Kong so that children with disabilities can attain a high-quality early childhood education experience and their development can be optimized.

The methodology utilized in this study was qualitative interviewing. Four integrated kindergarten programs in Hong Kong were involved, and from each program, two kindergarten teachers were invited. Altogether, there were eight participating kindergarten teachers. Each teacher was interviewed three times, and data were analyzed using typological techniques (Hatch, 2002). Findings are descriptions of teachers' perspectives on working in integrated kindergartens in Hong Kong.

Research Questions

The intent of this qualitative interview study was to acquire approximations of reality regarding integrated early childhood programs in Hong Kong. The goal was to capture kindergarten teachers' understandings of their reality. Charon (1998) explains, "we can understand what is going on only if we understand what the actors themselves believe about their world" (p. 210). I believe the teachers who are directly implementing integrated early childhood programs are the most significant and appropriate informants

because they have acquired a personal understanding of their specific contexts. Through studying the perspectives of those experiencing that world, I was able to capture close approximations of the reality under study (Hatch, 2002). Thus, the design of this inquiry allowed me to study the perspectives of general education teachers working in integrated early childhood programs in Hong Kong.

Two questions formed the basis of this research and guided this qualitative interview study. They were: (a) How do early childhood classroom teachers describe their experience with integration? and (b) According to the teachers, what does instruction look like in integrated kindergarten programs?

Theoretical Framework

Substantive Theory

This research project was guided by my attraction to theoretical models that suggest that a multiplicity of factors contribute to teachers' beliefs about inclusion (called integration in the Hong Kong context). Bricker (2000) asserts that at least three conditions need to be met to ensure successful implementation of inclusion: positive beliefs about inclusion, professional knowledge and skills, and resources within the school system. Each of these is addressed below.

Positive Beliefs about Inclusion

Early childhood teachers' beliefs regarding inclusion are categorized by Stoiber, Gettinger, and Goetz, (1998) as having three domains: core perspectives, expected outcomes, and classroom practices. Data from the research on successful inclusive models attach particular meanings to each domain. In the area of core perspectives, teachers perceive that children with disabilities have the right to study alongside their

typical peers in inclusive programs originally designed for the latter. These teachers have positive expectations, believing that children with disabilities are capable of attaining desired learning outcomes. Accordingly, teachers will alter their classroom practices to accommodate the diverse needs of children with disabilities so as to help them accomplish learning goals. This model identifies positive inclusive beliefs on the part of teachers as the most crucial factor related to successful learning experiences for children with disabilities in inclusive settings.

Professional Knowledge and Skills

Training has been proven to be an effective strategy for promoting positive beliefs about inclusion (Mulvihill, Shearer, & Horn, 2002). The attainment of sound basic preservice teacher education, along with ongoing inservice training, assists teachers in developing and maintaining positive inclusive beliefs. Due to exposure to interdisciplinary approaches as required by sound teacher training programs, teachers perceive children to be diverse learners. They see that, with assistance, children with disabilities are capable of learning in inclusive settings. As special education components are taught within the context of regular education materials, teachers perceive the needs of children with disabilities to be effectively accommodated through the use of individualized instructional methods. Moreover, teachers in strong programs have been prepared with problem-solving strategies that help them resolve various pragmatic issues in a variety of classroom situations where the program goals may not be congruent with the principle of inclusion. Empowered with these effective strategies, teachers perceive that they are in control of the learning environment and, therefore, are better able to make professional decisions in the best interest for all children in inclusive contexts.

Resources within the School System

Buysse, Skinner, and Grant (2001) have identified two conditions operating within school contexts that are crucial in facilitating teachers' positive inclusive beliefs. The pre-existence of a high-quality early childhood program serves as a foundation upon which to build quality inclusion. A quality inclusive program provides individualized early intervention for children with disabilities. The outcomes of a quality inclusive program strengthen teachers' inclusive beliefs that appropriate actions to accommodate diverse needs of children with disabilities are fully supported by all stakeholders, such as colleagues, specialists, administrators, and parents of children with and without disabilities.

Likewise, teachers perceive the provision and availability of ample resources by school administrators as explicitly demonstrating their commitment to the principles and implementation of inclusion. Fully backed by this resource support system, teachers are more motivated and more dedicated in their efforts to include children with disabilities in educational contexts.

The literature on successful inclusive models underscores the importance of three basic conditions, including teacher positive inclusive beliefs, professional training and continuous staff development, and supportive school systems. I believe these must be in place in order to generate successful inclusive outcomes. Hence, these successful inclusive markers can be regarded as useful evaluative criteria to determine the effectiveness of inclusive programming.

The ultimate purpose of this study was to describe teachers' perspectives on the provision and availability of quality early childhood integrated programs for families and

children with disabilities in Hong Kong contexts. Findings are based on rich, firsthand data about early childhood integrated programs provided by educators working in integrated programs. The markers related to high quality programs offered clues to help me identify elements within the contexts of early childhood integrated programs that may facilitate or hinder the development of successful early childhood integrated education. Hence, the results of this study offer empirical data on how to improve the quality of early childhood integrated programs in Hong Kong so that children with disabilities can attain a high-quality early childhood integrated education experience.

Methodological Theory

My interest in the research questions that guided this study and my way of thinking about research are rooted in a postpositivist approach to qualitative research (Hatch, 2002). As a postpositivist, I believe that reality actually exists for the participants in my study, but that it can never be fully apprehended by me or any other researcher. I also believe that by applying rigorous data collection and analysis strategies, I can capture important information that will help others understand and learn from the situations of the teachers I studied.

I relied on Blumer's (1969) symbolic interactionist theory as a tool for exploring the meanings that my participants made of being teachers in integrated early childhood settings in Hong Kong. Blumer's notions of how meaning is constructed in social contexts guided the organization and execution of this study. Three premises of symbolic interactionism provided a framework for understanding the experiences of my participants: (a) human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them; (b) the meaning of such things derive from, or arise out of, the

social interaction that one has with one's fellows; and (c) these meanings are handled in, and sometimes modified through, an interpretive process used by individuals in dealing with the things they encounter. These premises are consistent with my postpositivist assumptions and articulate the basis of my beliefs about what it is possible to know about human ways of making sense of the world.

The rationale for doing a qualitative interview study to answer my research questions is spelled out in Chapter 3 of this dissertation. For now, it is important to make it clear that my substantive and methodological theory bases provided a solid framework on which to build my study. I turn next to the study's significance.

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study offer empirical data related to integrated early childhood programs in Hong Kong, revealing elements that may facilitate or hinder the development of young children with and without disabilities. I hold the belief that children with disabilities should be provided with a high-quality early childhood education experience. Strong integrated early childhood programs can effectively provide children with disabilities with sound tools, particularly the intellectual capacities necessary for succeeding in subsequent schooling as well as in their future careers. The findings of this study offer empirical information for the Hong Kong government and all the stakeholders involved in integrated early childhood education. It is hoped that this information will influence the development of programs so that children with disabilities can attain a high-quality early childhood integrated education experience and that their optimal development can be ensured.

Organization of the Dissertation

Following this introductory chapter is a review of pertinent literature related to inclusive early childhood education in the United States and integrated early childhood education in Hong Kong. This chapter is followed by a description of the methodology used in this study. The next chapter explains the findings organized around the two research questions. The final chapter reports conclusions based on the findings and suggests implications for the Hong Kong government, schools, early childhood educators, teacher education institutions, and researchers.

Chapter II
Review of the Literature

Introduction

Most of the systematic empirical research on inclusive early childhood education has been conducted in classroom settings in various early education programs. The major focus of this literature review is also centered on inclusive practice in early childhood classrooms. In this chapter, two sections will be presented: inclusive early childhood education in the context of the United States, and Hong Kong's integrated early childhood programming. The major goal is to provide the reader with descriptions of the evolving field of inclusive early childhood education in the US and the development of integrated early childhood education in Hong Kong.

Many inclusive early childhood advocates emphasize that the implementation of inclusion should not be restricted to classroom settings. Rather, they suggest that the value of normalization should be adopted for families of children with disabilities. According to their perspective, the primary goal for educating children with disabilities in inclusive contexts is to enable families to live lives that are as normal as possible based on their own personal and cultural definitions (Bailey, McWilliam, Buysse, & Wesley, 1998). However, Mulvihill, Shearer, and Horn (2002) argue that because so much of the discourse in the field regarding inclusion has been focused on classroom inclusion, little empirical work has been done in contexts beyond the classrooms. This imbalance is reflected in my review.

Inclusive Early Childhood Education in the United States

Stages of the Inclusion Movement and its Changing Definition

What does inclusion mean? The current meaning of inclusion is deeply rooted in two historical traditions: mainstreaming and integration. Connotations associated with these two traditions have significantly impacted how the meaning of inclusion has been constructed, ultimately affecting teachers' teaching practices as well as students' overall learning outcomes. Despite federal laws pertinent to protecting the educational rights of children with disabilities first introduced in 1975, the current structure of inclusive early childhood education did not take shape overnight. It has taken several decades for inclusive education to evolve into the present form. Two distinctly different stages preceded inclusive education. In each phase, different meanings of inclusion were constructed in conjunction with how classroom practice should be implemented.

The movement toward inclusion involves three distinctly different sequential stages: mainstreaming, integration, and inclusion. The adoption of the particular term at each stage indicates its unique approach to educating children with disabilities into the context of general education classrooms (Wong, 2002). The specific meaning of these terms at various stages of the movement is discussed below.

Mainstreaming

This term was initially used to refer to educational settings for older school-age children and was later applied to early childhood programs. Historically, mainstreaming emerged during the early implementation of special education laws and was associated with the placement of children with disabilities into their community schools. According to Kochhar (1996) mainstreaming means a student with disabilities takes part in activities

in the general education classrooms as long as he/she shows an acceptable level of performance and behavior. Although many children with disabilities attended mainstream community schools, many were still being educated in separate classrooms and even separate buildings or trailers on the school grounds (Kochhar, 1996). Thus, the approach of mainstreaming was criticized as viewing typically developing children as "mainstream," while children with disabilities were not. Accordingly, children with disabilities had to earn their way into the activities and settings occupied by the mainstream group (Mulvihill, Shearer, & Horn, 2002).

Integration

Early efforts to place young children with and without disabilities in the same early childhood classrooms were referred to as integrated programs. Efforts included giving extra support to students with special needs without a major restructuring of content or delivery of the mainstream curriculum. Although integration was considered philosophically and educationally superior to segregation, this approach came under criticism as having "push in" arrangements that remained hierarchical and unequal (Mulvihill, Shearer, & Horn, 2002).

Inclusion

The conceptualization of inclusion in the US is framed by egalitarian ideology and statutory governance. Inclusion is viewed as a value, with the primary intent to plan, promote, and conceptualize the education and development of young children. The underlying principle of inclusion is that children with disabilities should not be excluded from general education classrooms because of their disabilities. Thus, stakeholders involved in inclusive early education programs are required to create a school and

classroom culture that includes children with diverse backgrounds, abilities, and contributions. Rather than requiring children with disabilities to adjust to existing programs, efforts should be made on the part of the school to reorganize curriculum content and alter modes of instruction to accommodate diversities (Mulvihill, Shearer, & Horn, 2002).

Three different terms have been adopted at various stages of the inclusion movement. Each term has a unique meaning that signifies a frame of reference on how to include children with disabilities in the context of general education classrooms. Both the development of inclusive education options and the quality of education for children with disabilities have progressively improved as the inclusion movement has progressed. At this particular stage, the definition of inclusion is designed to protect the rights of children with disabilities. The egalitarian principle at its base implies that children with disabilities should be perceived as children first, regardless of their disabilities. The school culture will be designed and implemented in ways that provide these children with a quality education and necessary accommodations. The next section presents reasons for supporting the inclusion movement.

Rationale for Inclusive Early Childhood Education

The literature on inclusive early education in the United States provides a wide range of strong arguments for supporting inclusion. Bailey, McWilliam, Buysse, and Wesley (1998) contend that the current state of inclusive early childhood education is deeply rooted in four historical traditions: legal, moral, rational, and empirical. Collectively, all of these traditions provide a strong foundation in support of the implementation of inclusion. Each of these historical traditions is discussed below.

Legal Foundations

A number of federal laws have been enacted to protect the education rights of young children with disabilities. Several of these are outlined as follows:

a. The first event of significance to early childhood was the 1968 requirement that at least 10% of the Federal Head Start Program's enrollment be children with disabilities.

b. The Education for all Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142) passed in 1975. The law stipulated that educational placements for children with disabilities should abide by the principle of least restrictive environment (LRE). Accordingly, children with disabilities should receive their education in school environments that were, as much as possible, like those they would be in if they did not have a disability.

c. The Education of All Handicapped Children Act (P.L.94-142) was amended in 1990, and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA; P.L. 101-476) was enacted. The principle of LRE was extended to preschool children with disabilities.

d. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was enacted in 1990. Further support was granted to ensure that children with disabilities have access to and participate in public and private preschools available to children without disabilities.

e. Additional language was added to Part C of IDEA (P.L. 105-17) in 1997. The principle of LRE was extended to infants and toddlers with disabilities. Accordingly, these children should be served in the natural environments.

Moral Foundations

The moral assertion at the base of inclusion is that children with disabilities have the right to participate in the programs and activities of daily life available to other children. Driven by the belief that systematic segregation of any group of children or families is unacceptable, the moral argument is based on the assumption that inclusion is the right thing to do and, therefore, must not be compromised (Bailey, McWilliam, Buysse, & Wesley, 1998).

Rational Foundations

Rational arguments are based on the assumption that policy on inclusion should be implemented because it will benefit both children with and without disabilities. Benefits of inclusive settings for children with disabilities encompass the provision of a more challenging and stimulating learning environment, opportunities for these children to observe and learn from more competent peers, a real life setting for learning skills, and a more socially responsive and facilitative setting. Benefits of inclusive practice for children without disabilities include helping them learn about diversity in human development, promoting the development of a more accepting attitude toward children with disabilities, and assisting them in becoming more accepting of their own strengths and weaknesses (Bailey, McWilliam, Buysse, & Wesley, 1998).

Empirical Foundations

Pertinent research on inclusive early education provides strong scientific justification for inclusive practice. When compared to students from mainstreamed and segregated programs, preschool children with disabilities in inclusive settings attained more optimal development in the areas of social competence, play behavior, and

engagement. Moreover, placing children with disabilities in inclusive contexts did not show any interference with the development of typically developing children (Bailey, McWilliam, Buysse, & Wesley, 1998).

Schweinhart and Weikart's (1988) 19-year longitudinal research is perceived as one of the most significant empirical studies for demonstrating that quality inclusion can improve overall development for children with disabilities. The study was intended to examine the effects of Perry Preschool Project on the developmental outcomes of young at risk children from disadvantaged families. The results documented that the attainment of a high-quality inclusive early childhood education experience encompassing sound early intervention strategies provided opportunities for children with disabilities to grow into more self-sufficient adults. One implication of this research is that providing high quality programs helps society to reduce costs that would be spent on social welfare programs over the course of a lifetime.

In sum, each single argument provides its own justification for the implementation of inclusive education, but the combination of the four foundations generates a strong argument in support of the inclusion movement. However, Mulvihill, Shearer, and Horn (2002) contend that the role of the legal evolution appears to have surpassed other kinds of influences and become the most powerful vehicle for precipitating a philosophical and linguistic change in how program planners, developers, and administrators view the participation of children with disabilities in their settings. Next, the present challenge for the field of inclusive early childhood education is discussed.

The Present Challenge

At the present time, inclusion is the most popular term being used among early childhood educators in the field. They talk about inclusion in their daily discourse in formal or informal contexts. They, however, do not seem to buy into the notion of inclusion. Instead, early childhood educators appear to adopt the position that simply placing children with disabilities with typically developing peers in the same classroom context equals inclusive practice. However, simply placing children with disabilities in the general education classrooms without providing them with appropriate facilitation will not result in desirable learning outcomes for children with or without disabilities. Over the past few years, this issue has increasingly become a problematic social phenomenon, particularly in the context of the public schools (Cook, Tankersley, Cook, & Landrum, 2000; Stockall & Gartin, 2002; Proctor & Niemeyer, 2001).

This is important because the inclusion of children with disabilities into general education classrooms has direct implications for the educational opportunities and quality of life for students with and without disabilities (Cook, Tankersley, Cook, & Landrum, 2000). Without being given the opportunity to experience quality inclusive education, children with and without disabilities will not be able to accomplish optimal developmental outcomes. Thus, the field of inclusive early childhood education is critically challenged by the issue of how to establish a consensus on the meaning of inclusion among teachers based on current understandings. If teachers buy into the egalitarian ideology of inclusion, they will implement teaching practices appropriate for children with and without disabilities. Ensuring that children with disabilities are provided with quality inclusive education not only enriches their lives, but also sustains

the development of the inclusion movement. A rationale for exploring teachers' beliefs about inclusion is presented below.

Teacher Beliefs and Inclusion

Inclusion is a movement that has emerged as a major systems-level change, affecting early childhood programs across America. In order for systems-level change to be effective, the change process must be participatory (Stoiber, Gettinger, & Goetz, 1998). Since teachers are directly involved in the change process, their voices should be heard because they provide valuable perspectives and information concerning the inclusive programs they provide (McDonnell, Brownell, & Wolery, 2001; Buysse, Skinner, & Grant, 2001). It is important to understand the beliefs of teachers because beliefs influence the development of inclusive options and standards of practice. More specifically, teacher beliefs may determine whether and how inclusive approaches involving young children are implemented. Thus, information about teacher beliefs is needed to provide a framework for interpreting the actions and reactions of persons integral to inclusion (Stoiber, Gettinger, & Goetz, 1998). The dynamic and intricate relationships between teacher beliefs about inclusion and teaching practice are addressed below.

As Stoiber, Gettinger, and Goetz (1998) highlight, historically the interest in exploring teacher beliefs was largely due to a paradigm change from stressing effects of inclusion to emphasizing constructs that influence inclusive practice. Thus, research should be conceptualized in terms of how and what influences practice so as to advance an understanding of the issues concerning implementing inclusion policies. Pertinent studies confirmed the relationship between teacher beliefs and educational practice. With

respect to inclusive education, a growing body of research has emerged over the past few decades, documenting that teacher beliefs may have a significant influence on the process of placing children with disabilities in normalized preschool settings as well as critically determining the effectiveness of ongoing service provision (Eiserman, Shisler, & Healey, 1995).

Teacher beliefs can be defined as values, plans, and ideologies about teaching practice (Stoiber, Gettinger, & Goetz, 1998). The construct of teacher beliefs has been perceived as a psychological state that predisposes a person to action. Teacher beliefs encompass affective, cognitive, and behavioral dimensions. Stoiber, Gettinger, and Goetz (1998) suggest that teacher beliefs should be characterized by identifiable domains, and they have constructed three components of teacher beliefs about inclusion, including core perspectives, expected outcomes, and classroom practices.

The formation of teacher beliefs about inclusion is based on teachers' personal experience. Their unique experiences related to inclusion are used by teachers to form expectations about how a child might function in a classroom or about the outcomes of inclusion (Stoiber, Gettinger, & Goetz, 1998). Teacher beliefs about inclusion are significant in that they influence how teachers think and act and eventually affect teaching processes and students' learning outcomes. Thus, what teachers believe is a key element that significantly influences teachers' decision-making about inclusive practice and determines whether and how inclusive approaches involving young children are implemented (Stoiber, Gettinger, & Goetz, 1998). The conceptualization of teacher beliefs about inclusion is a complex phenomenon that evolves based on personal experiences.

Lieber, Capell, Sandall, Wolfberg, Horn, and Beckman (1998) argue that there is a dynamic and reciprocal relationship between teacher beliefs and teaching practice. The researchers cite the model constructed by Clark and Peterson (1986) to substantiate their view. After reviewing and summarizing the strands of literature on teachers' beliefs and their actions included in The Handbook of Research on Teaching, Clark and Peterson concluded that teachers' thought processes encompass planning, interactive thoughts, decisions, theories, and beliefs. Their thought processes affect and are affected by teachers' classroom behavior as well as student learning outcomes. Thus, the relationship between teacher beliefs about inclusion and teaching practice should be perceived as a dynamic and circular process in which both elements mutually influence each other.

Teachers' personal experience, such as educational and training backgrounds as well as direct experience serving children with disabilities, exerts considerable impact on their inclusive teaching practices. Stoiber, Gettinger, and Goetz (1998) remind us that it is imperative to examine teacher beliefs in school contexts in which children with disabilities are being educated because the context of schools plays an important role in belief development and maintenance. Specifically, program goals and culture within school contexts guide teachers' overall classroom behavior and their interactions with children with and without disabilities. In return, the outcomes of teachers' classroom behavior and relationships with their students further affect teachers' beliefs about inclusion.

Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) assert that in order for inclusion to be effective, general education educators who are directly responsible for its success should be receptive to the principles of inclusion. Teachers' positive beliefs are identified by

Council for Exceptional Children (1994) as 1 of 12 principles for successful inclusive models (Lieber, Capell, Sandall, Wolfberg, Horn, & Backman, 1998). Because of the perceived importance of teacher positive beliefs about inclusion, teacher belief studies represent one of the largest bodies of research in the inclusion literature (Cook, Tankersley, Cook, & Landrum, 2000). Moreover, ample pertinent literature documents that positive teacher beliefs about inclusion impact the success of the inclusive experience for both children with and without disabilities (Lieber, Capell, Sandall, Wolfberg, Horn, & Beckman, 1998; Marchant, 1995; Buysse, Wesley, Keyes, & Bailey, 1996; Proctor & Niemeyer, 2001). Thus, the development and maintenance of teacher positive beliefs about inclusion is particularly important to the provision of quality education for children with and without disabilities.

The attainment of positive teacher beliefs about inclusion is basically a result of learning from a culture conducive to the development of inclusion, and learned beliefs and behavior about inclusion are further reinforced within the context of schools (Proctor & Niemeyer, 2001). However, if the dominant culture and mainstream school culture are incongruent with and unsupportive of the ideology of inclusion, it is very difficult for teachers to develop and maintain positive beliefs about inclusion. The next section will discuss how teachers' beliefs about inclusion are negatively mediated by cultural and financial factors.

Influences on Teachers' Beliefs

Teachers have raised concerns about how the dominant culture and the mainstream academic culture in public school systems negatively impact the development and maintenance of positive beliefs about inclusion. The next sub-sections

discuss the negative effects of a problematic societal and school culture on teachers' beliefs about inclusion.

Cultural Influences on Teacher Beliefs about Inclusion

Lieber, Capell, Sandall, Wolfberg, Horn, and Beckman (1998) interviewed 29 teachers from 16 inclusive early childhood programs (eight public schools, six Head Starts, and two Community-based childcares). Classroom observations were also conducted to examine the variety of ways in which teachers enact their beliefs in the classroom. This study was framed by findings of previous studies related to inclusive practice. In those studies, teachers were generally supportive toward the ideology of inclusion, but their ability to accomplish the associated benefits varied.

In the Lieber and colleagues' study, the participating teachers' beliefs about inclusion were consistent with those of teachers' surveyed in previous studies. They valued an inclusive philosophy but enacted their positive inclusive beliefs in actual inclusive classrooms in various ways. First, teachers believed that typically developing children would learn to accept differences among people, but they enacted the positive beliefs by ignoring individual differences or dealing with children's questions about differences only as they arose. Second, concerning pluralism, children with disabilities were perceived by teachers to be members of the larger group. But teachers enacted their beliefs about group membership by delivering instruction in large-group contexts and expected children to take from that instruction whatever they could. Third, with respect to the relationship between children with and without disabilities, teachers believed that children with disabilities would benefit socially through interactions with typically

developing peers. However, they enacted the beliefs either by putting children in proximity or pairing them without rendering any appropriate facilitation.

In this study, teachers adhered to the concepts of mainstreaming or integration to define how to include children with disabilities in inclusive settings, rather than relying on the genuine meanings associated with inclusion. Since they did not really uphold the ideology of inclusion, they did not generate teaching practices that fit what inclusion should be. The concepts that teachers enacted, however, were reflective of the current dominant culture, emphasizing a group norm perspective. These normative cultural beliefs imposed barriers for teachers to accommodate their old perspectives with the current definition of inclusion. Next, how teachers' beliefs about inclusion are further reinforced by the academic culture within the public school systems is discussed.

School Cultural Influences on Teacher Beliefs about Inclusion

Cook, Tankersley, Cook, and Landrum (2000) make the case that instead of examining teachers' positive attitudes toward the general concept of inclusion, teacher attitudes toward included students with disabilities represented a more trustworthy predictor of the quality of education for included students. They advocate this position because they say teachers' attitudes toward included students directly influence student-teacher interaction and related educational opportunities. Altogether, 70 general education teachers from kindergarten through elementary grade levels in nine highly inclusive public elementary schools were included in the study by Cook and associates. Participating teachers were asked to nominate three of their included students with mild disabilities based on prompts corresponding to the attitudinal categories of attachment, concern, indifference, and rejection.

The study's findings were consistent with theory-based predictions in that included students were significantly underrepresented in attachment, but overrepresented in rejection, concerns, and indifference categories. Teachers' perceptions of the compound problems of having students who are difficult-to-teach and who exhibit disruptive behavior appeared to limit positive interaction between teachers and included students. Teachers' rejecting attitudes toward included students appeared to be a persistent phenomenon, and the provision of additional instructional supports did not alter the formation of teachers' rejecting attitudes toward those students. It is significant to note that including students with mildly disabling conditions contributed to the high teacher rejection rate. Compared to students with severe disabilities, students with mild disabilities are particularly vulnerable to being rejected by peers because the latter are held to modal expectations due to the "invisible" nature of their disabilities.

One implication of this study is that teachers had been heavily influenced by the dominant academic school culture within the public school systems to develop a group norm toward children with and without disabilities. The learning goals of the public schools primarily focused on students' academic excellence and self-regulation. Thus, teachers wanted all of their students to demonstrate success in academics and self-regulation. Students with mild disabilities, however, were perceived by their teachers as being difficult-to-teach or disruptive. Teachers felt that those students with disabilities were a source of difficulty and frustration, thus, they fell outside of teachers' range of instructional tolerance. Teachers showed concern by rendering assistance to those included students without behavioral problems. Students with academic problems plus persistent behavioral issues were rejected, and teachers wanted them to be excluded from

their classrooms regardless of the provision and availability of instructional resources. The academic school culture influenced teachers to develop a negative frame of reference about students with mild disabilities. The blending of the dominant culture and mainstream academic school culture made it very difficult for teachers to develop and maintain genuine positive beliefs about the principles of inclusion as well as receptive attitudes toward children with disabilities.

Another study by Stockall and Gartin (2002) also focused on the effects of an academic school culture on teachers' beliefs about inclusion. The researchers selected a blue-ribbon inclusive elementary public school for their 2-year qualitative study. They interviewed teachers from kindergarten through 5th grade levels. They also observed in 19 classrooms. A major finding from this study was that the appearance of inclusive practices does not guarantee the implementation of truly inclusive programs. Based on what appeared to be active participation by students with and without disabilities in cultural activities within groups, this public school looked like a successful inclusive model; but it was not. It was merely a drama of benevolent collusion between teachers and students with disabilities. Students with disabilities acquired coping strategies, such as complementing school authority and serving the learning needs of advanced students, to avoid social rejection. In order to protect those included students from being rejected by their peers, teachers masked the academic limitation of students with disabilities by publicly acknowledging their social contribution. But the authors suggest that the best way to protect children with disabilities from social rejection is to properly address their academic limitations with effective diagnostic intervention and to assist them in accomplishing core cultural knowledge, particularly the ability to read so that these

children can attain legitimate power within the world of school and in the larger community.

The findings of this study reveal that the program goals and academic culture in the public school governed teachers' definition of inclusion and teaching practice, which turned out to be incongruent with the ideology of inclusion. Teachers' definitional consensus on inclusion was based on school's organizational directives requiring active participation of students with disabilities in group activities primarily within the social domain, thereby limiting cognitive development. Teachers' individual beliefs and actions regarding inclusive practice were further constrained by the school's subcultural rules. Consequently, teachers felt compelled to push typically developing students to excel in academics, while students with disabilities focused on accomplishing social skills. Teachers' overall teaching strategies did not serve the needs of children with or without disabilities. As the academic culture of the public school was incongruent with the principle of inclusion, it left little room for teachers to develop and maintain positive beliefs about inclusion. Next, how teachers' beliefs about inclusion are negatively mediated by the lack of resource supports within public school systems is discussed.

Lack of Resources and Teacher Beliefs about Inclusion

Proctor and Niemeyer (2001) argue that despite teachers' stated positive beliefs regarding the ideology of inclusion, they still raised concerns about being able to provide quality instruction for children with disabilities in inclusive settings. Teachers perceived that a number of resource constraints kept them from being effective, including the lack of administrative support, time, and money, high child-teacher ratios, and heavy

workloads. Other studies document that a perpetual lack of resources erodes teachers' positive beliefs about inclusion (Marchant, 1995; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996).

One study by Proctor and Niemeyer (2001) examined the development of preservice teachers' beliefs about inclusion. Researchers selected six preservice students from an undergraduate teacher education program specifically tailored to prepare students to work in real world inclusive early education settings. At the beginning of the practicum, three students were assigned to teach at the university lab school, while the other three taught in public schools. Various qualitative research methods were employed to uncover their beliefs about inclusion during the process of the practicum.

A major finding from the Proctor and Niemeyer (2001) study was that student teachers from the lab school said that their positive inclusive beliefs were reinforced by the provision and availability of relevant resource supports in the ideal inclusive program. The teachers from the public schools, however, pointed out that resource constraints inherent in the public school systems critically hampered their ability to render quality inclusion for children with and without disabilities. Thus, they concluded that the public school system did not support the implementation of inclusion. Under those constraints, teachers began to believe that inclusion was not a positive experience, and they doubted that the public schools could serve the needs of individual children. This study has substantiated the findings of the previous study that student teachers are particularly vulnerable to the maintenance of their positive beliefs about inclusion unless they are placed in settings that truly support inclusive practices (Stoiber, Gettinger, & Goetz, 1998).

An additional implication of this study is the importance of teacher education programs with respect to the development and maintenance of teachers' positive beliefs about inclusion. Preservice students adequately prepared with sound teacher training, including the specific component of understanding the negative impact of the academic school culture in the public school systems on their beliefs about inclusion, are better able to develop and maintain their positive beliefs about inclusion. Prospective teachers need to know that their beliefs will be challenged in systems where resources for inclusion are limited.

Summary

In the United States, the field of early childhood education is critically challenged by the problematic social phenomenon that many teachers have not internalized the ideology of inclusion. Instead, they use underlying beliefs aligned with the concepts of mainstreaming or integration to guide their teaching practice. The limitations of teacher positive beliefs about inclusion negatively impact both teachers' effectiveness and learning outcomes for children with and without disabilities. But, it is unfair to blame teachers for the failures of the implementation of inclusive education. Since the core reasons for the problems of teachers arise from societal and school levels, it is the duty of policy makers and administrators to take responsibility for the developing and maintaining positive teacher beliefs about inclusion. When program goals and culture are directly reflective of the mainstream culture, teachers' beliefs about inclusion are significantly mediated by the dominant culture.

Explicitly stated, advocacy for the ideology of inclusion and genuine support for inclusive actions can not only advance the education of children with and without

disabilities, but also can educate people in the community at large. When the dominant culture and mainstream school culture are both congruent with the principles of inclusion and supportive to the implementation of inclusive practice, conditions are right for teachers to develop and maintain their positive beliefs about inclusion. Then children with and without disabilities can attain a quality inclusive early childhood education experience, building a solid foundation for success in subsequent schooling.

Integrated Kindergarten Education in Hong Kong

The basic organizational structure of integrated kindergarten education in Hong Kong is very similar to that of most of the inclusive early childhood programs in the US, in that children with mild disabilities are included in general early education classrooms initially designed for typically developing children. The integrated kindergarten education programs in Hong Kong are imbedded in the structure of early childhood education systems. Thus, for clarity, the organization of this part of my literature review encompasses three major parts: the structure of early childhood education systems in the Hong Kong context before 2005, the structure of the integrated kindergarten education system before 2005, and anticipated changes for integrated kindergarten education after 2004.

The overview of the structure of early education systems is centered around the year 2004 because my interview study was conducted in Hong Kong from September through December, 2004. New policies regarding integrated early education have been recently introduced by the Hong Kong government, and the current implementation schedule is set for the school year of 2005-06. I believe these anticipated major changes to the overall early childhood education systems will critically affect the education of

young children with and without disabilities. The recent past and anticipated changes are discussed in the following three sections.

Early Education Systems before 2005

The structure of early childhood education systems in Hong Kong will be described in five domains: governance structure, quality assurance mechanisms, funding policies, professional training for early childhood educators, and interface arrangements between early childhood education and primary education. Each domain and its existing problems are discussed below.

Governance Structure

To date, in contrast with primary and secondary education, early childhood education continues to be neglected. It has been excluded from the nine years of free and compulsory education system (6 years in elementary and 3 in secondary schools) by both of the former British government and the present Special Administrative Region government (Rao & Koong, 2000). Thus, all early education services have been privately owned (Chan & Chan, 2003). Both of the former and the present Hong Kong government have rigidly divided the services of early childhood education into two distinctly different categories: education and care. Therefore, two different private organizations, namely kindergartens and child care centers, have been established. Kindergartens serve children of three age groups: nursery classes for three-year-olds, lower kindergarten classes for four-year-olds, and upper kindergarten classes for five-year-olds. Child care centers provide two different services for children from zero through six: day nurseries and day crèches. Day nurseries render services for children of four age groups: nursery one (N1) for two-year-olds, N2 for children who are three years of age, N3 for four-year-olds, and

N4 for five-year-old children. Day crèches serve infants and toddlers up to the age of two. The separate services given by kindergartens and day nurseries overlap so that both sectors serve a common pool of children from the age of three through five.

Without any independent accreditation body, these private service providers are regulated and monitored by two separate government departments: the Education and Manpower Bureau, and the Social Welfare Department. The responsibility of the Education and Manpower Bureau is to oversee the provision of education by kindergartens through the Education Ordinance, while the Social Welfare Department is to monitor services rendered by child care centers through the Child Care Services Ordinance (Rao, Koong, Kwong, & Wong, 2003).

In 1997, the Hong Kong sovereignty crisis created new hope and the possibility of reconstructing the controversial education system established by the former British government. The Education Commission, an advisory and officially appointed body, comprising members from various sectors of the community, was given a significant task by the newly established Special Administrative Region government in 1997. They were asked to review and make necessary changes to the academic education system, starting from early education through tertiary levels. In the year 2000, the Education Commission's Reform Proposal was finalized. The Reform Proposal noted that the new education system should be conducive to students' all-round development and life-long learning. The key function of education, the proposal announced, is to prepare citizens with relevant knowledge and skills in order to make Hong Kong a more diverse, tolerant, democratic, civilized, dynamic, and cultured cosmopolitan city.

The Reform Proposal suggested ways to raise the credibility of the governance mechanism in order to more effectively regulate the delivery of pre-primary services. The proposed ideas included harmonizing the operation of the two separate private sectors. In fact, since 1995, the Education and Manpower Bureau and Social Welfare Department have been working together to address certain more controversial issues and subsequently have established a set of common standards for kindergartens and child care centers. Such issues include basic professional training for the workforce, a formally recommended salary scale, and an appropriate curriculum model for young children.

On the other hand, the Reform Proposal continued the rigid approach through which the structure of early education systems is separated into the two components of education and childcare. Many believe that the Education Commission and government officials failed to understand that all early education institutions must serve young children with the dual purposes of education and care (Chan & Chan, 2003). Since the approach to the provision of early education services for young children upheld by government officials is problematic, it is unrealistic to expect officials to hold appropriate standards for assessing the effectiveness of programs in order to ensure that quality early education for young children is rendered by private service providers.

This dissertation primarily focused on exploring and uncovering kindergarten teachers' perceptions of integrated kindergarten programs in Hong Kong. Hence, the following sections focus on the major components in the kindergarten sector.

Quality Assurance Mechanism

The former and the present Hong Kong government have not found ways to insure the provision of quality kindergarten education from private service providers.

There have been lax registration requirements and insufficient quality assurance mechanisms for regulating and monitoring the provision of services by kindergartens. The initial registration requirements for kindergartens primarily focus on meeting the minimal requirements of the structural dimension, including physical facilities and resource requirements. For instance, the mandated teacher-student ratio before 2003 was 1:30 among 5-6 year olds and 1:20 for 3-4 year olds. It was not until the school year of 2003-2004 that the improved teacher-student ratio of 1:15 was extended to all classes. Moreover, before 2004, only 60% of teachers in each kindergarten were required to attain the status of the Qualified Kindergarten Teacher (QKT). It was not until the school year of 2004-2005 that the mandated percentage of teachers with QKT qualification was raised to 100% (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2005, Working Party on Harmonization of Pre-primary services: Consultation Document).

The process dimensions that can be reflective of the quality of program, such as the implementation of the developmentally appropriate curriculum and encouraging quality teacher-child and child-child interaction, are completely ignored (Rao, Koong, Kwong, & Wong, 2003). Moreover, the existing monitoring strategies employed by the Education and Manpower Bureau for quality assurance, including providing the formal recommended curriculum, performing two annual inspections, and conducting internal evaluation by program staff, are inadequate (Chan & Chan, 2003). Each of these monitoring tools and its inadequacy is discussed in the following.

Formal Recommended Curriculum

In 1996, the Curriculum Development Institute of the Education Department published a "Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum" (Rao & Koong, 2000), providing a

framework for program organization and content. The goal of the curriculum is to provide young children with well-balanced learning experiences favorable for them to develop into life-long learners. The teaching philosophy is to render children with a safe, happy, and stimulating environment in which instruction is targeted at integrating all learning around a central theme. Chan and Chan (2003) point out that the recommended developmentally appropriate curriculum and authentic teaching philosophy, however, have often been ignored by most of the kindergarten programs. Instead, most of the private service providers have opted for a difficult academic curriculum, and their teaching approaches are test-oriented and teacher-directed. Teachers believe their major role is to prepare children with the prerequisite knowledge and skills in order to be admitted into those academic primary schools favored by parents. The employment of developmentally inappropriate practices that potentially damage the development of young children has been a common and problematic phenomenon in kindergarten contexts. Because of a lack of oversight and commitment, I believe the Education and Manpower Bureau should be held accountable for the occurrence of problematic early schooling experiences in most of the kindergartens.

Performing Two Annual Inspections

The prevalence of developmentally inappropriate practices in kindergartens is reflective of the ineffectiveness of the monitoring mechanism. The primary job of inspectors from the Education and Manpower Bureau is to conduct two annual inspections to ensure that private service providers continue to comply with the minimal requirements on the structural dimensions intended for registration purposes. The inspectors examine the preplanned program activities submitted annually by

kindergartens and physically look into at the site of activity. But, if the inspectors really underscored the importance of implementing the recommended curriculum by the private service providers, the developmentally appropriate curriculum and practices would have been enforced in kindergartens. Thus, the monitoring strategy adopted by the Education and Manpower Bureau is seen by many as superficial and ineffective (Chan & Chan, 2003).

Internal Evaluation by Program Staff

In 2000, the Advisory Inspectorate of the Education and Manpower Bureau issued a draft set of performance indicators for kindergartens, serving as a framework for assessing program performance in local kindergartens. The framework is composed of two components: internal evaluation by program staff; and external evaluation by inspectors from the Education and Manpower Bureau. The performance indictors encompass four domains to assess program quality, including management and organization, teaching and learning, support for children and school ethos, and children's development. The draft performance indictors were circulated to kindergartens by the Department and Manpower Bureau for implementation. Chan and Chan (2003) criticized that many practitioners in the field have experienced difficulty using the prescribed assessment tools for assessing the effectiveness of their programs. They advised that the Education and Manpower Bureau should assume the responsibility for assisting private service providers in setting up and implementing the self-evaluation systems for enhancing program quality as well as to guide practitioners in addressing the target problems for improvement after the internal evaluation.

The Reform Proposal suggested ways to enhance the quality assurance mechanisms for early education. But, without specifying clearly how to insure that the recommended developmentally appropriate curriculum was enforced in kindergartens, the Reform Proposals encouraged private service providers to conduct internal evaluations by using the given performance indictors and to perform the objective external evaluations by involving professionals in the field. Simply placing the responsibility of educating young children in the hands of private service providers cannot insure that quality education will taken place. The provision of quality education for young children should be the responsibility of the Hong Kong government and the community at large (Chan & Chan, 2003).

In sum, there are minimal requirements for the initial registration as a kindergarten institution, and these primarily focus on structural dimensions. In addition, insufficient quality assurance strategies for insuring the provision of quality education rendered by private service providers are in place. The present overall quality assurance strategies employed by the Education and Manpower Bureau fail to insure quality education for young children can be accomplished by private service providers.

Funding Policy

To date, the Hong Kong government has given meager subsidies to needy parents and insufficient funding to kindergarten programs, even those programs run by non-profit organizations. In 1995, the Kindergarten Subsidy Scheme (KSS) was initiated by the Education and Manpower Bureau for upgrading the quality of non-profit organizations by hiring trained kindergarten teachers. In order to be eligible for the KSS, non-profit organizations must meet three basic conditions: charging school fees below the specified

scale, meeting the mandated percentage of trained kindergarten teachers, paying teachers according to the recommended salary scale, and accepting a degree of government control. Eligible kindergartens are given a fixed amount per class to assist with teaching staff salaries (approximately 15-20% of the salary cost).

Chan and Chan (2003) criticized that financial assistance and funding strategies have provided inadequate incentives for private service providers to upgrade the quality of their services. They advised that the funding strategies should be directed to assisting kindergarten programs in making improvements in the education of young children. Thus, direct subsidies should be given to programs for hiring experienced and qualified kindergarten teachers. Even though professionals in the field rendered practical and constructive suggestions on how to improve the quality of education for best serving the interests of young children, the Reform Proposal did not mention anything about increasing the financial assistance for kindergarten programs.

In response to the Hong Kong government's unsupported policy toward early education, private service providers have attempted to cut costs by employing minimally trained teaching personnel in order to maintain the operation of services and make profits. In order to achieve quality, there must be a professional educator who can competently direct a program (Rao, Koong, Kwong, & Wong, 2003). However, in the absence of such crucial persons, the goal of providing each child in Hong Kong with a quality early childhood education experience seems to be unreachable.

Professional Training for Early Childhood Educators

Historically, early childhood educators have not been recognized by the Hong Kong government and the community as significant persons in children's learning.

Kindergarten teachers have often been labeled by the public as "nannies for young kids." Thus, kindergarten teachers have been treated differently from teachers in the primary and secondary sectors, in terms of entry requirements, professional development, and condition of salary. Each of these elements is discussed in the following sub-sections.

The mandated entry requirements for early childhood educators have been low-level in terms of education qualifications. It is important to note that no preservice professional training was required to become a kindergarten teacher until the school year 2003-2004. From then onwards, all newly appointed kindergarten teachers were required to attain the Qualified Kindergarten Teacher qualification (QKT). The basic one-year, part-time QKT course introduced in 1995 was described as the benchmark for the Hong Kong government's more systematic efforts to professionalize early childhood educators (Wong, 1999). At least, this was an opportunity for those completely untrained to be minimally trained through basic inservice teacher training. Since kindergarten teachers' mandated entry requirements for education and professional qualifications are low, it follows that their entry salaries have been far behind the salaries of teachers in the primary and secondary sectors. Although, a recommended salary scale exists for kindergarten teachers, as a result of collaborative efforts made by the Education and Manpower Bureau and Social Welfare Department since 1995, many private service providers pay their teachers at a level below the recommended salary in order to cut costs (Chan & Chan, 2003).

The Reform Proposal began to acknowledge the importance of upgrading kindergarten teachers' professional qualifications in order to improve program quality and children's learning outcomes. The professionalization of kindergarten teachers was to

be accomplished by two major means: providing professional training, and raising the entry requirements. The entry requirements for upgrading professional standards for kindergarten teachers were to be accomplished through three sequential stages. In the first stage, all prospective kindergarten teachers had to attain the status of QKT. In the second stage, the entry professional qualification requirement was raised to sub-degree. In the third stage, a degree level status was required.

Since the Hong Kong government's current policy toward professionalization of early childhood educators is targeted at a low level of basic preservice teacher training, it is unrealistic to expect that quality services will be rendered by minimally trained educators. Unless early childhood educators are given sound preservice teacher training plus continuous and ongoing professional development in early childhood education, kindergarten teachers will continue to be inadequately prepared for assisting young children in accomplishing optimal development that lays the foundation for them to develop into life-long learners.

Chan and Chan (2003) pinpoint two major obstacles that urgently need to be resolved in order to accomplish the goal of upgrading kindergarten teachers' professional qualifications. First, since kindergarten teachers' entry salaries have lagged far behind those of primary and secondary teachers, it is difficult to attract potential teachers into the profession. Second, because kindergarten teachers have often been underpaid by private service providers, there is little incentive for those teachers to pay a huge sum for tuition in order to upgrade their professional qualifications. When the entry professional requirements for kindergarten teachers are raised to the degree level and teachers are paid

according to their qualifications, kindergarten teachers will be better able to deliver a high-quality early education.

Interface Arrangement between Early Education and Primary Schooling

Historically, private early education institutions were deliberately established to prepare young children for getting through qualifying examinations required for admission into a limited number of primary schools (Rao & Koong, 2000). Today, although there are adequate placements in primary schools for kindergarten graduates, the key goal of early education continues to target preparing students for getting through the Primary One Admission System in order to be admitted into academic primary schools favored by most of the parents.

Most of Hong Kong parents' ultimate goal for their children's learning is to attain success in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination and then get into the university (Chan & Chan, 2003). Parents believe that their children's lives will become more secure and prosperous with the completion of a university education. But, only about 30% of the school-leaving age group currently gains admission into the university (Rao, Koong, Kwong, & Wong, 2003). Hence, the whole school system from primary through secondary has been highly competitive, academic, and rigid. Most of the parents hold the belief that their best option is to send their children to academic kindergartens where the goals of the program, curriculum, and teaching approaches, are congruent with those of academic primary schools. As a result, their children are adequately prepared with the required knowledge and skills to be admitted as well as to attain a smooth transition into academic primary schools.

Since kindergarten programs have been privately operated with limited financial assistance from the Hong Kong government, service providers' decision-making concerning curriculum and teaching approaches is highly susceptible to the interests of parents. Driven by parents' expectations and goals pertinent to their children's learning, many private service providers have implemented the primary one knowledge-transmission curriculum and use teaching approaches that stress rote learning, uniformity, and conformity (Chan & Chan, 2003). Those early education programs that still advocate the employment of the recommended curriculum and teaching philosophy have been facing critical challenges because of downward pressure from the academic primary school system.

In 1996, the Ad Hoc Sub-Committee on Pre-primary Education initiated an investigation into the problematic interface arrangement. The findings revealed that there were gaps between early education and primary schooling in terms of curriculum, teaching approaches, classroom routines, and classroom environment (Chan & Chan, 2003). Academically-based curricula and test-oriented and teacher-centered instructional approaches were prevalent in primary schools. A large number of students were seated in rows in a small classroom, and they were expected to listen to lectures from different teachers on a rigidly fixed classroom schedule. In fact, entering students were required by primary schools to have possessed a certain degree of competence in Chinese, English, and Mathematics.

The Reform Proposal also touched upon the controversial issue of the interface between early education and primary schooling. The government advised that necessary changes should be made to the Primary One Admission System, and the use of written

and oral examinations should be abolished. But, simply changing the Primary One Admission System cannot properly fix a spectrum of persistent problems bought forward by the strongly academic and highly competitive school system. Unless the Hong Kong government and the general public are truly supportive of systemic change in the whole school system in Hong Kong, kindergartens currently operated by private service providers will not be able to resist the pressure downward from the academic primary schools.

In sum, the structure of early education systems in Hong Kong up to the end of 2004 encompassed five domains: governance structure, quality assurance mechanisms, funding policy, professional training for early childhood educators, and interface arrangement between early education and primary schooling. The Hong Kong government's approach to the provision of early education services to young children has been problematic in that early childhood education services have been divided into two distinctly different sectors, namely kindergartens and child care centers. Each sector serves either education or child care services for young children. In the area of kindergarten education, due to minimal criteria for initial registration and insufficient quality assurance strategies, most of the kindergartens run by private service providers are of poor quality. In the face of meager financial assistance given by the Hong Kong government, prevailing parents beliefs about the effects of academic kindergartens on children's learning, and pressure downward from the academic primary school systems, many private service providers find it necessary to hire minimally trained early childhood educators and to adopt developmentally inappropriate practices. Unfortunately, most kindergarten programs do not best serve the interests of young children. The next section

provides a brief overview of the integrated kindergarten education system in Hong Kong before 2005.

Integrated Kindergarten Education before 2005

As mentioned above, Hong Kong's integrated kindergarten programs are built upon the structure of kindergarten education system. Children with mild disabilities are given the opportunity to study alongside typical peers in general education classrooms initially designed for typically developing children. The Hong Kong government's initial formal policy on integration could be traced to a White Paper titled: "Integrating the Disabled into the Community: A United Effort" issued in 1977. Since Hong Kong was a British colony, the Hong Kong government's education policy on the implementation of integration followed the lead of the British government. In 1981, the Education Department initiated more systematic efforts in promoting and implementing integrated education in the primary and secondary sectors (Crawford, Heung, Yip, Yuen, & Yim, 1999). Despite the fact that early education has been excluded from the mainstream education system, the Hong Kong government attempted efforts to encourage private service providers to implement integrated education in early childhood programs.

Since 1985, the Hong Kong government has been collaborating with non-profit kindergarten programs, particularly those with better organizational structures and reputations to include mildly disabled children into their programs. A kindergarten program that joins the integrated education program plan with the Education Department sets aside six places for children with mild disabilities. In return, the program is eligible to receive a subsidy for the employment of an additional remedial teacher who is given a basic, nine-month, inservice special education training. This teacher's salary and benefits

are reimbursed by the Education and Manpower Bureau (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2004).

The integrated education program plan organized by the Education Department of the Hong Kong government was intended to include children with disabilities from three to six years of age. But, only children with disabilities of a mild grade are given the experience of integrated early education in mainstream kindergartens. Specifically, four types of children with disabilities are integrated in these kindergarten programs: mild mental disabilities, mild physically impaired without any severe problem in mobility, mild visual impairment without severe mobility problems, and moderately impaired in hearing. Moreover, young children with disabilities are required to go through a formal medical screening and procedure by the Child Assessment Center in order to be admitted into integrated kindergarten programs. After a formal medical evaluation, there is still a process of formal referral between two different government departments. Eligible children with disabilities are referred by the Child Assessment Center to the Education Department for locating an appropriate integrated education placement (The Hong Kong Education Department, 2001). Thus, families of children with disabilities need to wait patiently before their children can attain a placement in an integrated kindergarten program, which may not be in proximity to their home.

The Hong Kong government's minimal distribution of resources to integrated kindergarten programs cannot insure that quality integrated education are provided to children with and without disabilities. Resources rendered by the Hong Kong government include offering professional advice from educational psychologists, paying for annual inspections, providing advice from school development officials, and allowing access to

special education teaching materials made available from the Hong Kong government's Special Education Resource Center (The Hong Kong Education Department, 2001).

Yuen and Westwood (2002) contend that although many countries have employed the approach and concept of inclusion to refer to the process of educating children with disabilities in mainstream education, the term "integration" is still currently used in Hong Kong government official documents, particularly Education Commission, 2000, as well as the homepage of Education and Manpower Bureau, 2004. Moreover, Wong (2002) points out that the definition of integrated education utilized by the Hong Kong government obviously means fitting children with disabilities into existing structures, without changing the current school environment, ethos, curriculum content, or teaching approaches to accommodate all children. Consequently, there have been insufficient resource supports, few guidelines for classroom management, and minimal special education training rendered by the Hong Kong government for participating schools to implement integrated early education.

According to this conception, included children with disabilities are required to cope with what is offered by the ordinary schools. Even worse, if an integrated child with disabilities fails to fit into the ordinary school setting and encounters adjustment problems, the school has the power to reject the child and send him/her back to a segregated, special school placement (Vaughan, 2001). This situation ignores pertinent literature on successful inclusive models, which underscores the importance of having continual systemic changes on the part of the mainstream school systems which involve reorganization of school ethos, curriculum content, mode of instruction, and classroom environments in order to accommodate diversities (Lieber, Capell, Sandall, Wolfberg,

Horn, & Beckman, 1998; Proctor & Niemeyer, 2001; Cook, Tankersley, Cook, & Landrum, 2000; Stoiber, Gettinger, & Goetz, 1998).

The entire education system in Hong Kong, starting from kindergarten, through elementary and secondary levels, has been famous for its high level of competitiveness and rigidity (Wong, Pearson, Ip, & Lo, 1999). Even the Education Commission, 2000, admitted that the mainstream school system and the academic curriculum were not favorable for the development of students (Wong, 2002). But, advocates of the mainstream academic school system, including the Hong Kong government, school, and parents of children without disabilities, have preferred to narrow their focus on students' academic achievement and self-regulation. Thus, Wong (2002) argued that Hong Kong's academic school system is completely contradictory to the underlying ideology and principles of inclusive education.

In the dominant school culture, where the goal of pursuing academic excellence is explicitly highlighted and greatly valued (Wong, 2002), teachers directly serving children with and without disabilities in integrated kindergarten programs are expected to implement academic curricula. But, simultaneously, under the constraints of generally large class sizes, heavy administrative and teaching workloads, as well as the need to maintain the teaching schedule to cover the required content of the mainstream school curriculum, teachers are compelled to rely heavily on strategies of classroom discipline that engage a large group of students in order to accomplish the academic goals of the program (Yuen & Westwood, 2002). Consequently, young children as young as three years of age are required to be disciplined, self-restrained, and to sit quietly throughout the lessons (Rao, Koong, Kwong, & Wong, 2003).

In addition to socio-political pressure and severe structural problems within integrated kindergarten programs, general educators have not been given any systematic special education training or adequate resource supports to enable them to effectively include students with disabilities. As kindergarten teachers generally lack the capacities to address the diverse needs of individual students with disabilities, they need to rely heavily on special education teachers to make necessary accommodations for these children. But, in an integrated kindergarten program, a special education teacher is only assigned by the Education and Manpower Bureau to deliver a thirty-minute session of individualized and specialized services to a child with disabilities on a daily basis. The early childhood educators hold full responsibility for directly working with included students with disabilities throughout the rest of the day. Driven by the academic goals and constraints of programs, general educators consider themselves inadequate and unprepared to deal with the demands of integrated education (Wong, 2002). Thus, Yuen and Westwood (2002) anticipated that the attitudes of Hong Kong teachers toward integration will not be entirely positive.

Crawford, Heung, Yip, Yuen, and Yim (1999) argue that the success of integrated education in Hong Kong has been limited to isolated cases where it has been largely due to individual effort and advocacy, rather than the result of policy and reform. The role of early childhood educators is particularly important in the endeavor of educating children with disabilities. Early childhood educators, however, are viewed as holding less than positive beliefs toward integrated education. Without teachers' strong support, the future development of integrated early education in Hong Kong appears to be gloomy at best. When the development of integrated early education deteriorates, more young children

with disabilities will be denied membership into mainstream schools and return to special schools, where their families believe they are being left behind academically (Vaughan, 2001). Under this adverse system, young children with disabilities are blamed for their own inadequacy because they lack the ability to make academic progress and achieve self-regulation as a result of their disabilities.

In sum, the integrated kindergarten programs in Hong Kong are merely an add-on to the structure of kindergarten education systems. Since the structure of the overall education system in Hong Kong has been highly competitive, academic, and rigid, it is contradictory to the underlying ideology and principles of inclusion. This dominant academic school culture has been strongly advocated and continually reinforced by the Hong Kong government, schools, parents of children without disabilities, and the public at large. Under the current definition of integration upheld by the Hong Kong government, children with disabilities are to fit themselves into mainstream school environments. Accordingly, there are minimal resources distributed to integrated kindergarten programs.

Teachers are forced to focus on students' academic excellence and self-regulation. Further constrained by the lack of relevant expertise in special education and insufficient relevant resources, they consider themselves inadequately prepared for teaching children with disabilities. Subsequently, they develop the belief that children with disabilities are extra burdens that should be excluded from their stressful working environments. Consequently, integrated kindergarten programs in Hong Kong do not serve the interests of children with disabilities. The next section describes anticipated changes in the structure of the integrated kindergarten education system after 2004.

Anticipated Changes in Integrated Kindergarten Education after 2004

The Hong Kong government's new policy in early childhood education is to unify the systems of pre-primary education services. A Working Party on Harmonization of Pre-primary Services was formed by the Hong Kong government in April 2000, and its main role is to advise the Hong Kong government on how to unify pre-primary services. The Working Party is staffed by officials from the two government departments responsible for early education, the Education and Manpower Bureau and the Social Welfare Department. The post-2004 systemic changes in the overall early education system proposed by the Working Party have precipitated fundamental change to the entire early childhood education system. It has also exerted a negative impact on the future development of the overall integrated early education in Hong Kong.

The Working Party formulated the plan for unifying the structure of the pre-primary services and issued the reform plan in a Consultation Document in April 2002. Although the voices of the pre-primary sectors and the general public were sought by the Working Party, a two-month consultation period was all that was offered, despite the fact that many stakeholders did not have time digest the content of the Consultation Document. The Working Party hastily finalized its Consultation Document and presented it to the LegCo Panel on Education, and it was subsequently accepted by the Hong Kong government.

An official document dated 17 February 2003, was dispatched to private service providers (LegCo Panel on Education: LC Paper No. CB (2)1125/02-03(01) Way Forward for Harmonization of Kindergartens and Child Care Centers). The major intent of the document was to inform pre-primary sectors about modifications made to the

initial Consultation Document based on the feedback from the pre-primary sectors and the public. The implementation schedule of harmonization measures for pre-primary services was set for the school year of 2004-05. However, in the same year, another official document issued by Secretary for Education on 26 November 2003 (Education and Manpower Bureau: Circular Memorandum No.314/2003) altered the implementation schedule to the school year of 2005-06. The implementation schedule was changed in response to the effects of several adverse and unfortunate incidents, including the continued decrease in child population, the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) incident in 2003, and overall deteriorating economic conditions. More critically, the Working Party admitted that concerns had been raised by the two sectors of kindergartens and child care centers about how to operate their services in order to achieve harmonization targeted by the Working Party, and they asked for a longer preparation period before the new measures were introduced.

The harmonization measures proposed by the Working Party involve a fundamental change in the structure of the overall early education system in Hong Kong. The Working Party perceived that the same pool of children from three to six being served by both sectors of kindergartens and day nurseries (DNs) was problematic and that it led to disparities in service delivery and financial assistance to children. Currently, kindergartens serve children from three to six and focus strongly on education, while DNs render care to children from two to six with the additional services, such as extended service hours and occasional child care for needy parents. To the Working Party, unification of these separate services was essential to avoid causing further confusion for service providers and parents. The key element to address the problem of disparity in

service delivery between these two sectors was to define the admission age to kindergartens at the age of three. Although the Working Party acknowledged that pre-primary services should serve young children with the dual purposes of education and care, upon the implementation of harmonization, there will be only two types of pre-primary services: kindergartens will provide education for children from three to six, while child care centers render care services with a welfare component for children under the age of three.

The Working Party considered another major problem to be the disparity in financial assistance to children when systems overlapped. Thus, the Working Party proposed changing the funding strategy for service providers and revising the mode of financial assistance to parents. In the area of financial assistance to private service providers, the Hong Kong government provided non-profit kindergartens with minimal financial assistance through the Kindergarten Subsidy Scheme (KSS), and a 5% Subsidy Scheme was given to identified day nurseries. The goal of the establishment of the different types of subsidy strategies is to enhance program quality by providing funding for kindergartens to hire trained kindergarten teachers, while the 5% Subsidy Scheme was designed to assist day nurseries with maintaining their care services for children from disadvantaged families, particularly during the critical time of continued low enrollment.

Upon harmonization, the existing 5% Subsidy Scheme for aided day nurseries will be replaced by the enhanced KSS as the new strategy of financial assistance for both kindergartens and child care centers. But, since the basic form of calculating subsidy of the expanded KSS is based on a group of students rather than on a class basis, unless

child care centers attain adequate enrollment, these child care centers may face the challenges of closure.

Upon harmonization, the mode of financial assistance to parents will also be changed. The Working Party acknowledged that in comparison of the old system, needy parents generally will be granted less financial assistance under the new arrangements. Under the old system, a low income parent with social needs whose child attending a whole-day aided day nursery institution benefited from a grant for the full-day rate of fee remission. But, upon harmonization, since the admission age for kindergarten is defined at the age of three and the fee remission for needy parents is granted on the basis of the school fee for half-day kindergartens, their financial assistance will be reduced.

The Hong Kong government's attitude toward the education of young children with disabilities was revealed in the Consultation Document prepared by the Working Party. In the Consultation Document, the item related to integrating children with disabilities in mainstream early education programs was placed under the category of ancillary services, where extended hours service and occasional child care services were mentioned. As part of harmonization measures, integrated kindergarten programs are to be gradually phased out. The reason for phasing out the integrated kindergarten programs was that there have been integrated early education programs rendered by both selected kindergarten programs and day nurseries. Since both were serving similar target children with the similar objective, integrated kindergarten programs were considered redundant and, thus, to be gradually phased out. At the same time, the Working Party promised that the same number of integrated placements and existing resources in integrated kindergarten programs will be gradually phased into integrated child care centers.

According to the officially specified schedule of the full implementation of the harmonization measures, it is expected that integrated kindergarten programs will be completely terminated in the school year of 2005-06. Although the Working Party proclaimed that its rationale for harmonization measures was to consider the developmental and educational needs of children as the first priority and that the diversity and scope of existing services would not be reduced, phasing out the integrated kindergarten programs reflects a reduction of availability of integrated early education programs for families of children with disabilities. Instead of demonstrating its continued support toward the integrated education movement by increasing integrated education options, it is unfortunate that the Hong Kong government chose to limit the availability of such services. Consequently, the anticipated future development of the overall integrated early education in Hong Kong seems to be gloomy, and the developmental and educational needs of children with disabilities and their opportunity to attain a high-quality early childhood education experience seem to have been ignored.

In sum, the Working Party's plan on Harmonization on Pre-primary Services has precipitated changes of the structure of the current early childhood education systems in five major areas, including the officially defined admission age to kindergarten education, the remaining two types of pre-primary services, the new mode of funding strategies, the new mode of financial assistance to parents, and phasing out of the integrated kindergarten programs. Of special concern, the integrated kindergarten programs in Hong Kong will be phased out in the school year 2005-2006 and from that point on children with mild disabilities will only be included in integrated child care programs.

Summary

This chapter is composed of the overview of inclusive early childhood education in the US and integrated kindergarten education in Hong Kong. These two types of programs are different not only in geography but also in the terminologies employed to describe education services rendered to children with disabilities in mainstream school contexts. Otherwise, programs from Hong Kong and the US share several major similarities. First, both of these early education programs are not specifically tailored to address the special needs of children with disabilities. Rather, these programs are built upon the existing structure of established early childhood education systems. Accordingly, children with disabilities study alongside typical peers in general early childhood programs initially designed for typically developing children. Consequently, any changes to the mainstream early childhood education system surely impacts the inclusive/integrated kindergarten education system and vice versa.

Second, although different terms have been employed by these two programs (US programs have preferred to use the term "inclusive" education, while the Hong Kong government has insisted on the use of "integration"), using different terminologies does not necessarily mean that there are many differences in practices and learning outcomes for children with and without disabilities. The Hong Kong government has officially adopted the concept of integration as the policy toward including children with mild disabilities in mainstream schools. Accordingly, children with disabilities are required to fit themselves into mainstream integrated school environments, while very limited relevant resources have been provided by the Hong Kong government. Young children with disabilities who lack the ability to adjust to the academic demands imposed by

mainstream school systems can be deprived membership by mainstream schools. It is even worse that parents of children with disabilities submit to mainstream school systems and adopt the mistaken belief that it is the inadequacy of their children that makes them unfit for mainstream schools.

In the US, although most of the mainstream early childhood programs that include children with disabilities have preferred to use the term "inclusion", their practices do not necessarily reflect the ideology and principles of inclusion. In particular, many public inclusive early childhood programs do not necessarily accommodate their curriculum content, modes of instruction, and learning environments in order to assist children with disabilities in addressing their special learning needs. Moreover, in these programs, many teachers are not provided with adequate resources and genuine concrete support from administration to enable them to effectively include students with disabilities. Thus, children with disabilities are required to adjust themselves to the academic requirements imposed by the mainstream school systems. Those children with disabilities who consistently demonstrate either academic inadequacy or disruptive behavior are highly susceptible to being excluding from classrooms by their teachers. Although the term "inclusion" has been widely used by most early education programs across the US, particularly those in the public sectors, many of their common practices and students' learning outcomes reflect the approach and concept of integration.

Third, Hong Kong's mainstream school culture has been notorious for being highly competitive, academic, and rigid. Neither the former British government nor present Special Administrative Region government have invested adequate funding in education to serve the learning needs of all children, particularly children from

disadvantaged families. Schools, starting from early childhood through primary and secondary levels, have been evaluated by the Hong Kong government, parents of children without disabilities, and the general public based on students' academic excellence and the capacities in self-discipline.

Parents hold the beliefs that it is the best option for their children to be admitted into highly academic kindergarten programs, which are congruent with those of the mainstream primary schools systems. Privately owned kindergartens, even non-profit integrated kindergarten programs, believe they need to follow the interests of parents to train young children with the knowledge and skills necessary for making success in academic primary schools. Under this academic approach, which is incongruent with the underlying ideology and principles of inclusion, academically-oriented, integrated kindergarten programs do not serve the interests of children with and without disabilities.

The mainstream school culture in the US greatly values academic achievement and self-regulatory capacity among its students. Schools have been assessed by state and federal governments based on students' academic achievement. Public schools and teachers who are unable to accomplish the goal of pushing students to reach required standards in academics are threatened with sanctions. Parents of children without disabilities feel good about their children's academic success and develop the belief that schools should become more academic and test-oriented. The program goals of most of the public inclusive early childhood programs primarily focus on students' academic achievement and self-regulation, which is again contradictory to the principles of inclusion. In sum, neither of the integrated kindergarten programs in Hong Kong nor the

inclusive early childhood programs in the US serves the interests of both children with and without disabilities.

Chapter III
Methodology

The Purpose

The intent of this qualitative interview study was to acquire approximations of reality regarding integrated early childhood programs in Hong Kong. The goal was to capture kindergarten teachers' understandings of their realities. Charon (1998) explains, "we can understand what is going on only if we understand what the actors themselves believe about their world" (p. 210). I believe the teachers who are directly implementing integrated early childhood programs are the most significant and appropriate actors because they have acquired a personal understanding of their specific contexts. Through studying the perspectives of those experiencing that world, I was able to capture close approximations of the realities of teaching in integrated kindergartens (Hatch, 2002). Thus, the design of this research inquiry was to study the perspectives of general education teachers working in integrated early childhood programs in Hong Kong.

Research Questions

Two research questions formed the basis of this research and guided this qualitative interview study. They were: (a) How do early childhood classroom teachers describe their experience with integration? and (b) According to the teachers, what does instruction look like in integrated kindergarten programs?

Guiding Questions

The following guiding questions were designed to guide conversations with teachers during the course of interviewing. The questions were developed based on

Hatch's (2002) description of three categories of interview questions: descriptive, structural, and contrast questions. Descriptive questions enable the informant to spotlight the specifics of a social scene. Structural questions seek out the categories that the informant uses to organize his/her cultural knowledge. Contrast questions explore how informants make meaning in their social worlds.

Based on Hatch's (2002) framework, I developed a set of guiding questions, which were related to the research questions and the purpose of the study. During the process of interviewing the informants, I systematically made use of those three types of guiding questions to assist the informants in sharing with me what was on their minds related to the integrated early childhood programs in order to solicit sufficient data to answer the research questions. The guiding questions were:

(a) Tell me about a typical day in an integration classroom.

(b) When and how did you first become a teacher in an integration setting?

(c) Why did you become a teacher in an integration setting?

(d) What do you do that non-integration teachers don't do?

(e) What is different and same about how you teach children with and without disabilities?

(f) What is difficult or easy about teaching children with disabilities?

(g) How has the role of teacher who serves children with and without disabilities altered your life?

(h) Describe what you feel defines a good teacher in such an educational setting.

(i) What would you share with others as important about being a teacher for groups of children with varied educational needs?

Theoretical Framework

Substantive Theory

This research project is guided by my attraction to theoretical models that suggest that a multiplicity of factors contribute to teachers' beliefs about inclusion (called integration in the Hong Kong context). Bricker (2000) asserts that at least three conditions need to be met to ensure successful implementation of inclusion: positive beliefs about inclusion, professional knowledge and skills, and resources within the school system. Each of these is addressed below.

Positive Beliefs about Inclusion

Early childhood teachers' beliefs regarding inclusion are categorized by Stoiber, Gettinger, and Goetz (1998) as having three domains: core perspectives, expected outcomes, and classroom practices. Data from the research on successful inclusive models attach particular meanings to each domain. In the area of core perspectives, teachers perceive that children with disabilities have the right to study alongside their typical peers in inclusive programs originally designed for the latter. These teachers have positive expectations, believing that children with disabilities are capable of attaining desired learning outcomes. Accordingly, teachers will alter their classroom practices to accommodate the diverse needs of children with disabilities so as to help them accomplish learning goals. This model identifies teacher positive inclusive beliefs as the most crucial factor related to successful learning experiences for children with disabilities in inclusive settings.

Professional Knowledge and Skills

Training has proven to be an effective strategy for promoting positive beliefs about inclusion. The attainment of sound basic preservice teacher education along with ongoing inservice training assists a teacher in developing and maintaining positive inclusive beliefs. Due to exposure to interdisciplinary approaches as required by the sound teacher training programs, teachers perceive children to be diverse learners. They see that, with assistance, children with disabilities are capable of learning in inclusive settings. As special education components are taught within the context of regular education materials, teachers perceive the needs of children with disabilities to be effectively accommodated with individualized instructional methods. Moreover, teachers in strong programs have been prepared with problem-solving strategies that help them resolve various pragmatic issues in a variety of classroom situations where the program goals may not congruent with the principle of inclusion. Empowered with these effective strategies, teachers perceive they are in control of the learning environment and, therefore, are better able to make professional decisions in the best interest for all children in inclusive contexts (Mulvihill, Shearer, & Horn, 2002).

Resources within the School System

Buysse, Skinner, and Grant (2001) have identified two conditions operating within school contexts that are crucial in facilitating teachers' positive inclusive beliefs. The pre-existence of a high-quality early childhood program serves as a foundation upon which to build quality inclusion. A quality inclusive program provides individualized early intervention for children with disabilities. The outcomes of a quality inclusive program strengthen teachers' inclusive beliefs that appropriate actions to accommodate

diverse needs of children with disabilities are fully supported by all stakeholders, such as colleagues, specialists, administrators, and parents of children with and without disabilities. Likewise, teachers perceive the provision and availability of ample resources by school administrators as explicitly demonstrating their commitment to the principles and implementation of inclusion. Fully backed by this resource support system, teachers are highly motivated and, therefore, more dedicated in their efforts to include children with disabilities in educational contexts.

The literature on successful inclusive models underscores three basic conditions, including teacher positive inclusive beliefs, professional training and continuous staff development, and supportive school systems. I believe these must be in place in order to generate successful inclusive outcomes. Hence, these markers of success can be regarded as useful evaluative criteria to determine the effectiveness of inclusive programming.

The ultimate purpose of this study was to describe teachers' perspectives on the provision and availability of quality early childhood integrated programs for families and children with disabilities in Hong Kong contexts. Findings are based on rich, firsthand data about early childhood integrated programs provided by educators who are currently working in integrated programs. The markers related to high quality programs offered clues to help me identify elements within the contexts of early childhood integrated programs that may facilitate or hinder the development of successful early childhood integrated education. Hence, the results of this study will offer empirical data on how to improve the quality of early childhood integrated programs in Hong Kong so that children with disabilities can attain a high-quality early childhood integrated education experience and their optimal development can be ensured.

Methodological Theory

The research paradigm that best fits my worldview is postpositivist. Thus, my research is framed by postpositivist assumptions. According to Hatch (2002), there are three key components in the belief systems of postpositivsts. First, postpositivists believe that reality exists but is never fully apprehended, only approximated. Second, the researcher is the primary data collection instrument in postpositivist studies. And third, rigorously defined qualitative methods are used. I believe my assumptions fit these major elements related to the postpositivist research paradigm.

As my intent was to acquire an understanding of the meanings that eight early childhood teachers utilized to understand and to participate in the integrated early childhood education programs Hong Kong, I acted as a data collection instrument and used disciplined research techniques to ensure the quality of data collection. Those efforts enabled me to capture close approximations of the social realities that were empirically represented in carefully collected data (Hatch, 2002).

I have adopted Blumer's (1969) symbolic interactionist theory as a conceptual tool for systematically exploring participant meaning structures. Three premises of symbolic interactionism signal the central importance of meanings: (a) human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them; (b) the meaning of such things derive from, or arise out of, the social interaction that one has with one's fellows; and (c) these meanings are handled in, and sometimes modified through, an interpretive process used by individuals in dealing with the things they encounter.

Blumer's (1969) symbolic interactionism is the methodological theory base for this interview study. First, all qualitative research is about understanding the meanings

individuals construct in order to participate in their social lives (Hatch, 2002). Second, Blumer was convinced that the real world exists, but that it can only be known through studying the perceptions of those experiencing that world (Hatch, 2002). I share Blumer's postpositivist ontological and epistemological assumptions. Thus, it appears to be natural for me to use Blumer's symbolic interactionism theory as the tool for systematically exploring understandings.

Qualitative interviews have been utilized as the primary data source in many research projects. Qualitative interviews are special kinds of conversations, which are intended to uncover the meaning structures that participants use to organize their experiences and make sense of their worlds. The central strength of interviewing is that it offers a means for doing what is very difficult or impossible to do any other way, that is, finding out "what is in and on someone else's mind" (Patton, 1990, p. 278). Because what is on informants' minds are often hidden from direct observation and taken for granted by participants, qualitative interview techniques offer tools for bringing these meanings to the surface. I believe that a qualitative interview study allowed me to acquire a deep understanding about the meanings the early childhood teachers in my study used to understand and to participate in their worlds.

Research Design

Participants

Altogether, eight informants were involved in this qualitative inquiry. Shared characteristics of the participating teachers included: each was working as a general education teacher in the integrated early childhood programs in Hong Kong contexts at the time of the study; all the interviewed teachers' nationality was Hong Kong Chinese.

The basic medium of language used by the informants and myself was Cantonese, the dialect most commonly used among the majority of Hong Kong Chinese. There was no restriction on the years of teaching experience related to integration. Informants could be novice or experienced integrated teachers in the field. All eight informants had taught kindergarten classes that included children with disabilities. Five had children with disabilities in their classrooms during the study.

Integrated kindergarten programs in Hong Kong serve young children with and without disabilities from ages three to six. In Hong Kong, kindergarten is a three-year sequence. Basically, kindergartens cater to children from three age groups: nursery classes for three year olds, lower kindergarten classes for four year olds, and upper kindergarten classes for five year olds (Chan & Chan, 2003). Again, there was no grade-level constraint on the participating teachers' involvement in the study.

My research purpose, research questions, and methodology gave insights into the kind of relationship that was desirable between the participating teachers and me. From Hatch (2002), I identified three suggestions for postpositivist researchers in order to establish appropriate relationships with the informants. These suggestions include that participants be willing to allow researchers to talk with them about their actions and intentions. Postpositivists see themselves as data-gathering instruments, so they also need close relationships with informants in order to have access to the data they require. And, researchers often enlist the assistance of key informants or guides with whom they have a special relationship that allows them insight into the settings they are studying and access to people and events they cannot obtain on their own.

Based on these guidelines, during the process of interviewing, I tried my best to establish rapport and then develop close relationships with the informants so that they would feel comfortable in revealing their inner worlds to me. More importantly, I conducted three in-depth interviews (each interview took an average of three hours) in order to access and understand the meaning structures of the informants. In addition, I asked the informants to assist me in drawing pictures and diagrams about their integrated early childhood programs, including the daily schedules, the routine activities, the physical structures of the classroom settings, and the immediate environment outside the kindergartens.

Contexts

Interview Contexts

During the research project, all eight participating teachers for this study were drawn from the general education teachers who were working in integrated early childhood programs in Hong Kong. The ultimate purpose of this investigation was to describe the meanings the individual teachers utilized to understand and participate in integrated early childhood programs and then to discover the manifested patterns of understandings across the eight teachers. Instead of approaching and interviewing the participating teachers in the formal integrated early childhood settings, I interviewed the participating teachers in informal contexts because it was a more desired option for gathering relevant data. Thus, it was unnecessary to access and to gain entry to the formal integrated early childhood settings in order to recruit the participating teachers. I believed that some teachers would feel uncomfortable being interviewed in the formal school

settings in which they might have difficulties revealing their inner worlds in the presence of the other stakeholders, particularly their supervisors.

The selection of the informal contexts to interview the participating teachers was deliberately considered. The basic criterion for a desirable informal setting for interviewing was that it had to be quiet and comfortable so that the teachers would relax to talk freely about their experiences and meanings concerning the integrated early childhood programs. Some participating teachers were interviewed in my home. It was a quiet, warm, and comfortable place. Essentially, in my home, I controlled external interference and could improve the smoothness of the interviewing procedures. Some participating teachers were very nice, and invited me to their homes. I considered all the elements in the environments of their home to be desirable and that the quality of the data was ensured.

Integrated Teachers

Although they were not interviewed for this study, integrated teachers were an important part of the contexts of this research project. According to the job description defined by the Education and Manpower Bureau, integrated teachers have been assigned with a specific role in the contexts of integrated kindergarten programs in Hong Kong. The major responsibility of an integrated teacher is to deliver 30 minutes of individualized, remedial training to children with disabilities each day. The purpose of that training is to render remedial support that is conducive to these children's overall development. An integrated teacher's salary and benefits are to be reimbursed by the Education and Manpower Bureau (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2004). According to the information provided by the teachers interviewed in this study, integrated teachers

were required by the government to attend a one-year, part-time special education training course in order to become integrated teachers in integrated educational settings.

Phasing Out of Integrated Kindergarten Programs

During the data collection portion of this study, I discovered that the Hong Kong government decided to phase out its support for integrated kindergarten programs. In 2000, a Working Party on Harmonization of Pre-Primary Services was formed by the Hong Kong government. The establishment of the Working Party was to advise the government on matters concerning how to harmonize kindergarten programs and child care centers. In April 2002, the Working Party issued the Consultation Document on Harmonization of Pre-Primary Services, and a consultation period that lasted from May to June was given to seek views from the pre-primary sector and the general public. In February 2003, the Working Party finalized its recommendations and then presented them to the LegCo Panel on Education; and they were subsequently accepted by the Hong Kong government (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2005, Harmonization of Pre-primary Services).

In late December 2004, while I was still in Hong Kong collecting data from the participating teachers, I called the office of Quality Assurance of Education and Manpower Bureau and talked with the chief inspector of the kindergarten section. Based on her information, it was confirmed that, according to the schedule of the timetable proposed by the Working Party, the final termination date for the integrated kindergarten programs would be the summer of 2005 (See chapter 2 for a detailed discussion of the implications of these changes).

Access and Entry Procedures

Based on the research purpose and the nature of the research questions in this study, it was not necessary to gain access and entry to the formal integrated early childhood programs in order to recruit the participating teachers. I focused my efforts on locating early childhood teachers in Hong Kong who would be willing to be interviewed and provide me with rich firsthand information concerning the phenomenon under examination.

As I had been studying in Knoxville for more than two years, I lost many direct contacts with the people who either had direct or indirect contacts with the target teachers. In order to address the issue of recruiting the appropriate participants, I made contacts via emails and telephone calls with those persons who had connections with potential participants. When such a teacher was located, I immediately contacted her. I also asked that teacher to recommend her colleagues or other potential informants to me. That process is called "snowball" sampling in the literature (Hatch, 2002).

Concerning the entry process, I conducted an informal visit to each participating teacher before the actual interview was conducted. That personal contact served as a welcoming ceremony, and I used this opportunity to begin to develop rapport with the informant. During the informal visit, each participant received a copy of the research bargain, and the details of the study were clearly explained to her. Essential information in the research bargain included specifications of the roles and responsibilities of the researcher and each participant, the purpose of the study, the recording methods for collecting data, the duration and location for each interview, a variety of ways for

informants to access the researcher if they have concerns about the study, and a description of possible uses of teachers' data for publication (Hatch, 2002).

Data Collection Methods

Open-ended interviewing was the primary data collection method employed for this study. I believed that in-depth interviewing could provide the teachers with the time and opportunity to think through and to relate significant past experiences concerning integrated early childhood programs. The optimal effects of using open-ended, in-depth interviewing enabled me to attain rich, firsthand data from the informants.

Three individual interviews were scheduled for each participating teacher. The first one lasted about two hours. During the initial phase of the interviewing, I took time to develop rapport with the informant. Even though the informant had already agreed to the research bargain in the previous personal contact, she was reminded of her rights and how her confidentiality was safeguarded. Then, background information included age, marital status, religion, years of working experience related to integration, education and training, the numbers of students with and without disabilities in her classroom and their grade level, as well as the number of colleagues was obtained.

Next, the teacher was asked to describe a typical day in the integrated program. Subsequently, the teacher was told to assist me in completing the daily schedules and the routine activities of a typical day in her classroom. The informant was also asked to draw a picture of the physical setting of her classroom and another picture about the outside environment in which the integrated early childhood program was situated. In order to ensure the smoothness of the interviewing process, I showed my concern about

participants' perspectives toward the interviewing process, and they were periodically asked about their feelings toward the interview (Hatch, 2002).

Data were recorded using two audiotape recorders (in case one recorder did not work); and subsequently, the tapes were transcribed in Cantonese. To improve the reliability of the data, the transcripts of the first interview were handed to the informant in the second interview for a member check. Member checking is a verification or extension of information developed by the researcher (Hatch, 2002).

The second interview was held approximately three weeks after the initial one. It lasted about three hours. At the initial stage of this interview, the informant was provided with a copy of the transcripts of the first interview and was asked to assist me in clarifying any misunderstandings. Then the informant was asked more specific questions, such as what instruction looked like in the integrated kindergarten setting. Last, the informant was reminded to read the first transcripts again sometime later and that she was welcome to make any changes.

During the process of interviewing, I was careful not only to focus on asking the specified guiding questions, but I also followed the lead of the informant because only the informant had access to her meaning structures related to the integrated teaching experience. When the informant showed her willingness to reveal her unique meanings, I took the opportunity to follow the lead of the informant in order to attain a deeper understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Again, data were recorded by two audio-tape recorders, and subsequently tapes were transcribed in Cantonese. In order to improve the reliability of the data, the transcripts of the second interview were returned to the informants in the third interview for member checking.

The last interview was held approximately three weeks from the second one. It lasted about four hours. The purpose of this last meeting was not only to clarify any misunderstandings which arose from the previous interviews, but also to ensure that there were sufficient data to answer the research questions. More specifically, the informant was asked to help me draw a diagram indicating the kinds of persons involved in her program, including administrators, colleagues, teaching aides, specialists, monitoring supervisors from the Education Department, and parents of children with and without disabilities. The informant was also asked to describe relationships among these stakeholders. I concluded the last interview with the informant with my expression of appreciation for her efforts, and I also gave her my home phone numbers in Hong Kong and the US, in case she had any concerns about the study. Again, data were recorded by two audio-tape recorders, and subsequently tapes were transcribed in Cantonese. The transcripts of the third interview were mailed or emailed to the individual informants for a member check.

Data Analysis Procedures

To safeguard the quality of the results, postpositivist data analysis procedures are rigorously defined. Typological analysis is a deductive model that starts by dividing the overall data set into categories based on predetermined typologies (Hatch, 2002). I considered a modified typological analysis as the appropriate data analysis method for this study because my research questions were developed to address specific topics. The collected interview data provided lots of evidence related to the topics of interest. Moreover, word processing programs were employed to copy and paste data from the original protocols to help make the task of data analysis easier.

In this research study, eight informants were interviewed individually, and I organized the process of data analysis into two phases. The first phase involved analyzing data of each individual informant. Subsequently, I drew specific hypothetical generalizations and then brought them together under more general statements (Hatch, 2002). The second phase involved developing overall generalizations from examining individual general statements across data sets from eight participating teachers. In the first phase, based on the procedures of the modified typological analysis, each of the steps involved in analyzing the data of individual informants was competed as described below:

(a) The whole data set was divided into two segments according to the nature of the research questions. Accordingly, data related to each segment were grouped under the headings of the individual teacher's account of her experiences with integration, and descriptions of how instruction looks in an integrated kindergarten.

(b) The data that were found to be significantly related to the prescribed categories were copied from the protocol and then pasted under the assigned categories. Despite the procedures involved in taking data apart from the whole data set, the original protocol was left intact. The protocol was marked so that entries showed which data were related to their prescribed typologies.

(c) A summary was made for each entry in the categories. This step taught me to put the original research protocol aside and then focus my attention to those data related to each category.

(d) The data within each of the categories were closely examined to seek meanings. As a result, hypothetical patterns, relationships, and themes were constructed from the data within a category.

(e) All of the patterns, relationships, and themes developed from the data within a category in the previous step were treated as hypothetical. Deliberate actions to verify these hypothetical assumptions were required to ensure the internal consistency and accuracy between the original data set and the data related to the assumptions. Verification included revisiting the original protocol and pulling out all those data related to the typologies.

(f) The previous steps were to examine the relationships, patterns, and themes drawn from the data within a category. The focus of the next step was to look for relationships across the two categories.

(g) Generalizations were developed from examining the relationships drawn from the data within and across two categories.

(h) In the final step, I drew examples from the protocol to support the generalizations.

After completing the required work of the first phase, I proceeded to the second phase. In the second phase, I developed overall generalizations from examining individual general statements across data sets from eight participating teachers. Again, some of the procedures of the typological analysis were utilized to help me analyze the data across eight participating teachers. Each step is described below:

(a) The first step was to look for connections across the generalizations identified from each participating teacher.

(b) The next step was to develop analytic generalizations by examining relationships drawn from the overall data sets of eight informants.

(c) The final step was to draw examples from the protocols of each individual informant to support the broad generalizations.

Pilot Study

During the Christmas holiday in 2003, using the same research questions, I conducted a pilot study with a general education teacher who had worked for almost six years in an integrated childcare program in Hong Kong. The ultimate purpose for that pilot study was to acquire an initial understanding about the existing conditions of integrated early childhood programs in Hong Kong, and to seek out possible barriers of doing a full research study in the future. The results of the pilot study documented that that specific integrated childcare program in Hong Kong was academic-and skill-oriented. The participating early childhood teacher who was directly responsible for educating the children with and without disabilities did not believe that her program could serve the needs of all her children.

Instead of imposing the assumptions and findings from the pilot study on data in this study, I treated the results of the pilot study solely as a frame of reference for thinking about what anticipated findings might look like. During the processes of interviewing and data analysis, I disciplined myself to be open to any new possibilities of the nature of the findings in this study and truly listened to voices of my informants.

Translation Issues

It appeared that translation procedures would be a major methodological issue in the present study. Due to the research purpose, I stayed in Hong Kong for an extended

period of time and repeatedly interviewed the early childhood teachers in order to attain a deep understanding of the phenomena under study. Cantonese is the basic medium of language spoken by the majority of Hong Kong Chinese and, therefore, the conversations of the participating teachers and myself were naturally in Cantonese during the process of interviewing. The tapes were transcribed in Cantonese rather than translated into English.

Qualitative research is about understanding "the meanings individuals use to understand social circumstances" (Hatch, 1985, p. 143). Therefore, the informants were encouraged to talk freely about their experiences with integration in their native language, and to include jargon, which they commonly used in their daily social engagements. The transcripts included the exact wordings, jargons, pauses, and exclamations voiced by the informants, so that the original meanings constructed by the informants were not altered. Thus, the final research protocols were in Cantonese, and they included the actual language used by the informants.

As the final report of this study was required to be written in English, I was forced to answer the question, "At which point should I translate the data?" The method that I employed to analyze the data provided me with an insightful clue to answer this question. Typological analysis encompasses altogether nine steps. If I translated each data set given by the individual informant from Cantonese into English at the early stage, I was not sure to what extent I could maintain the originality of the meanings constructed by the informant. At worst, I might misunderstand the informant's meanings and then interpret the data from my own perspective during the translation process. If so, the data would no longer truly reflect my informant's perspectives.

As a postpositivist, I saw myself as data collection instrument, and I sought to report generalizations based on rigorous analysis of my interview data (Hatch, 2002). Thus, I did not translate the data until I reached an analysis step that required me to select data excerpts to support the generalizations. At that specific point, I translated those data excerpts which could support the generalizations. The rationale behind the delay of the translation was that I could attain a deeper understanding of what the informant said and how she felt about the meanings about integration. The steps prescribed by typological analysis provided me with ample opportunities to attain that deep understanding of the individual informant's meanings constructed to make sense of her actions and intentions.

In addition, I employed specific strategies, such as keeping a research journal and research log to assist me in capturing a clear understanding of the individual informant's meanings related to integrated early childhood education programs. My research journal served as a filter, helping me to be aware of my own impressions and feelings regarding integrated programs and early interpretations from descriptions during qualitative data collection (Hatch, 2002). Journal entries required me to keep track of the affective aspects of my research experiences. Those records offered me a place where I came to understand my own assumptions, feelings, and preconceptions about the phenomenon under investigation. I could then strive to put them aside in my analysis and final report. As a result, I was more open and receptive to what I was trying to understand (Hatch, 2002).

A research log was kept to organize the overall data throughout the data collection process. The components of the research log included records of where, when, with whom, and for how long interviews were held (Hatch, 2002). Keeping both the research

journal and log enabled me to reconstruct the stories told by the informants in a nonbiased and efficient manner. Thus, I was better able to approximate the social realities experienced by teachers in integrated early childhood programs in Hong Kong.

Chapter IV
Findings

Introduction

The following research questions guided this qualitative interview study: (a) How do early childhood classroom teachers in Hong Kong describe their experience with integration? and (b) According to the teachers, what does instruction look like in integrated kindergarten programs? In an effort to answer these broad questions, I gathered data for this interview study in Hong Kong during the period from September to December 2004.

It is important to provide the reader with basic information about the geographical context of Hong Kong. Hong Kong is situated in the southeastern tip of China. It is comprised of Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, the New Territories, and outlying Islands. It has a total area of about 1,100 square kilometers and is one of the most densely populated regions in the world. The population density averages 6,354 persons per square kilometer. Its urban environment and lack of land significantly impact on the quality of most of Hong Kong's kindergartens. For example, while the overall size of most kindergartens is relatively small, outdoor play areas are rarely provided (Rao, Koong, Kwong, & Wong, 2003).

School Contexts

In November 2004, I conducted a telephone interview with the chief inspector (kindergarten section) from the Quality Assurance Division of the Education and Manpower Bureau. It was confirmed that in the school year 2004-2005, there were about 15 integrated kindergarten programs serving children with disabilities. Four of these

programs were selected for this study. Two programs were from Kowloon, one was from the New Territories, and the other was from the Hong Kong Island. Each of the integrated kindergarten programs is described below, and the names of the programs are pseudonyms.

Settings

The particularity of each of the four integrated kindergarten programs is highlighted below. Elements described include location, nature of the governance organization, prescribed program goals, school fees, physical structure, classroom components, numbers of teachers and students, numbers of integrated children and integrated teachers, and socio-economic status of the students.

South Sea kindergarten is situated in the New Territories and adjacent to a famous public garden park. Hence, this kindergarten is naturally situated in a site surrounded by an abundance of green plants and colorful flowers. On the site, there are multifaceted community services, including a church, a public library, a health center for the elderly, a restaurant, a hostel, and a car park.

Inside the school, there are four spacious classrooms. At the center of the classrooms are several large children's tables. Areas are set aside for reading, English, Chinese, Mathematics, computers, and art, and toys, are arranged at the edge. There is also a listening station with headphones, cassette player, and children's audiotapes. On a spacious playground, there is a variety of facilities such as slides, magic mirrors, tunnels, and child-size cars. The school also offers a parent-child resource center, where many different types of books about children are available for reference.

South Sea is organized under a well-established, non-profit, religious organization. The primary purpose for its establishment was to offer relief and rehabilitation services to the poor and the distressed as a result of the Second World War. Presently, it offers a wide range of community services, including social work, education, medical care, and community development.

This center provides dual services, including full-day and half-day programs for children from ages of 3 to 6. The annual fee for the half-day program is HK$19,500 (approximately US$ 2500), and the full-day program costs HK$ 29,000. During the study, the total number of students was 76, and there were 11 teachers. In the school year of 2004-05, two integrated children were placed in the upper kindergarten class, and one integrated teacher was available. The majority of the students' families were from the middle class, and many of the parents were professionals. Half of the students' mothers were housewives. The children of working mothers were taken care of by their grandparents or maids.

Grasshopper kindergarten is situated in the ground floor of a low-cost public housing estate in the northern part of Hong Kong Island. This public estate is more than twenty years old, and the design of the facilities is considered to be outdated. But, there are a number of newer private estates in proximity. Thus, the home communities of Grasshopper's students varied. Right in front of the kindergarten is a set of food stalls, a fresh food market, and a mini-shopping mall, where a McDonald's restaurant is located. On its left, there is a flyover for pedestrians, a bus stop, and a main road, where transportation seems to be busy throughout the day.

Inside the school, there are 6 small classrooms. Large children's tables and storage cabinets are noticeable in these classrooms. But, this leaves tiny space for areas such as housekeeping, computers, reading, art, and science. There is a mini playground where a slide, several child-sized cars, and a few fruit-shaped chairs are available. On the other side of the playground, there is a table-tennis table and a set of large window cabinets where the children's competitive awards are stored.

Grasshopper kindergarten is under a non-profit charitable organization established to serve the community with medial, social welfare, and educational services. Grasshopper kindergarten is one of 27 kindergartens under this charitable organization.

This center runs bi-sessional classes, comprising nursery, lower kindergarten, and upper kindergarten classes for children from 3 to 6 years. The total numbers of students enrolled during the study was 300, with 13 teachers. The annual fee for the half-day program is HK$ 10,100. The students' families are largely from the upper sector of the lower class. A few families are from the middle class, and a few are middle class Chinese immigrants. In the school year of 2004-05, there was one integrated child in the upper kindergarten class, and one integrated teacher was available.

North Star kindergarten is located close to the busy and prestigious shopping centers in Jordan district in Kowloon. It is one of 17 kindergartens under a charitable organization, but its locality is uniquely different from those of the other kindergartens. It is situated in an enclosed and isolated area where there is the provision of a number of social and educational services for troubled children and young children with disabilities, including a hostel for children from broken homes or parents with chronic illnesses. It

also includes a nursery, an early intervention center for children with disabilities, a car park, and an administrative building.

The kindergarten stands at the extreme end of the complex, and it is located in a three-story building. There are two playgrounds adjacent to the building, where children's facilities such as slides, tunnels, rocking chairs, and a mini basketball goal are available. Inside the building, there are 6 large classrooms on the ground and first floors. The staff rooms are on the second floor. The designs of all the classrooms shared a similar pattern in that there is children's furniture clustered in the middle part of the classrooms while areas for computers, art, reading, and music are placed at the rim. It seems that there is a large gap between the center and the edge, and there is much unused space.

North Star is under a non-profit charitable organization initially established with the intent of caring for the young and protecting the innocent. Today, it continues to serve the community with more diversified aims, including social welfare and educational, cultural, and recreational services.

The kindergarten provides dual services, including a.m./p.m. sessions and full-day kindergarten for children from ages 3 to 6. The total numbers of students was 130, with 10 teachers. The annual fee for bi-sessional classes was HK$ 13,500 and HK$ 27,000 for the full-day program. In the school year of 2004-05, there was one integrated student in lower kindergarten class and one integrated teacher in the school.

A half of the students in the school were from the hostel and the other half from outside. Almost all of the students' families were from the lower class, and only a few

students were from the middle class. In most families, both parents had to work, some families were on welfare, and some families were poor Chinese immigrants.

Honey Bee kindergarten is also one of the 27 kindergartens under the same non-profit organization as Grasshopper kindergarten. It is close to the center of a town in Kowloon. It is situated on the second floor of an old two-story commercial building, which is surrounded by a network of urban transportation, such as Mass Transit Railway, public buses, and mini-buses. Underneath the kindergarten, there is a wide range of commercial services, including a Chinese restaurant, a 24 hour food store, and a medical center that are attractive to residents living nearby.

People can access the kindergarten via lifts or stairways. Inside the school, the hallway is more spacious than the classrooms. In each classroom, a set of areas, including reading, science, writing, language, mathematics, computers, and art surrounded several large children's tables, which are placed at the center. There are many posters, newspapers, children's songs, word puzzles, and children's work all around the classroom. There is a mini playground standing at the heart of the kindergarten. In the middle of the playground, there is a colorful climbing stand, and many child-size cars are parked alongside.

Honey Bee kindergarten provides bi-sessional classes for children of ages from 3 to 6. The annual fee is HK$ 10,370, and there are 7 classrooms. The total number of students was 409 at the time of the study, with 20 teachers. In the school year 2004-05, there were two integrated students in the upper kindergarten classes, and one integrated teacher was available. Due to the location of the school, the socio-economic status of the students' families varied. The majority of the students' families were from the upper

sector of the lower class, a few were from the middle class, and a few families were on social welfare.

Teachers

Qualitative interviewing was the primary data collection method for this study. Eight teachers were invited from the four integrated kindergarten programs described above. Two teachers were involved from each program. In one program, one teacher had two integrated children in her classroom, while the other teacher did not have any integrated children at the time of the study. In the second program, each teacher had one integrated child. In the final two programs, each of the teachers had an integrated child, while the other teacher did not.

It is important for the reader to become acquainted with each teacher at the start. Having some sense of each teacher's background, length of experience teaching both in kindergarten and integrated kindergarten contexts, and personal belief systems concerning teaching young children in integrated kindergarten settings is necessary to interpreting the findings as they unfold.

Included in the descriptions to follow are the age ranges, the numbers of years experience teaching both in kindergarten with and without children with disabilities, and any teaching experiences other than kindergarten. The teachers ranged in age from 25 to 47 years. The years experience teaching in kindergarten settings without children with disabilities ranged from 2 to 17 years, and years of teaching in integrated kindergarten settings with children with disabilities ranged from 2 to 19 years. Of the 8 teachers, there were 3 teachers who had previously been integrated teachers for between 2 and 5 years.

Concerning the educational backgrounds of the teachers in this study, all of them were Form 5 graduates with at least five passes on the Hong Kong Certificate Examination (equivalent to high school graduation in the US). In terms of teacher education training experiences, all of them acquired the qualification of one-year, part-time Qualified Kindergarten Teacher, which was set by the government as the minimum entry requirement for registering as a kindergarten teacher before 2002. At the time of the study, 5 teachers were currently studying more advanced courses in teacher professional development, such as the Advanced Diploma in Early Childhood Education or Certificate in Kindergarten Education. One teacher was granted the Higher Diploma in Child Care and Education from a Vocational Education Institute in 2004. Only two teachers did not pursue any advanced courses in teacher professional development.

In the descriptions below, I have included a quote from the formal research protocol of each of the teachers that gives a sense of that teacher's philosophy of teaching young children in the integrated kindergarten settings or an issue of importance to them. The descriptions of teachers are arranged in alphabetical order by teachers' last names. In all cases, the names are pseudonyms. Because all of the teachers in this study were females, feminine pronouns will be used throughout the reporting.

Au Fong Yan

Yan is 43. Her home is far away from the school, and she spends more than two hours in public transportation each day. The total time of her experience teaching in kindergarten is 24 years. She has 20 years of experience teaching in integrated kindergarten contexts, and she is the most experienced teacher in such a context among the teachers under study. During this study, she was teaching the upper kindergarten class

and two integrated children. The teacher-child ratio was 2:30, and the integrated teacher rendered needed assistance to the integrated children, especially in the morning session. During the study, she was attending an advanced program in early childhood education. About her responsibility as a kindergarten teacher, she said,

These young children follow me throughout the whole day in the school. That's why I consider my responsibility is very important. They always watch me and imitate my behavior. For instance, I'm a very expressive person. I think they'll learn to be expressive too. But, if a teacher is quiet, they will be too. Their styles are totally influenced by their teachers. That's why I think the teacher's image is very important. My image to the children must be positive and happy. I'm a humorous person, and so they will be too. The teacher must have many-sided strengths. I don't know how to play piano, but I know how to incorporate music into a variety of musical games. I know how to dance, play magic, and use of funny ways to arouse children's interest. That's why they like to follow me because children like to play funny games. We don't need the professional music teacher, but the good teacher must have knowledge and skills in different fields in order to enrich the lives of young children.

Au Yeung Ming Ming

Ming Ming is 25 and is youngest among the teachers in this study. Additionally, she has three characteristics that set her aside from the other teachers involved in this study. After the attainment of the preservice teacher training in Child Care, she worked as a childcare worker in a childcare center without joining the integrated programs. Later, she joined the present integrated kindergarten program as a kindergarten teacher. She is also the only one who had completed the advanced course in Early Childhood Education. Her overall experience teaching both in childcare and integrated kindergarten contexts totals 6 years. At the time of the study, she was teaching the lower kindergarten class without any integrated children. The teacher-child ratio was 2:35, and there was an additional teaching aide during certain periods. She summed up her impressions of her preservice and inservice teacher education training and experience in this way,

I feel that theories in child development and actual experience in teaching are both important. During the instructional process, I always think of the theories that I acquired from the teacher education institutions. But, at this point, I consider actual teaching experience is far more important than those theories. Because as I have been working as a teacher in the real classroom settings, I have learned which methods work better and which don't work out at all. I think those theories that I learned were developed from what the educational theorists considered to be important for children. But, I think those theories are dead stuff. When I started working as a teacher in the school, I have come to know things more clearly. After working at the two different schools for 6 years, I have gained actual working experiences. Rather than the theories, these real life experiences with the children have formed the basis for me to improve my teaching. So, I think experience is more important than theories.

Nancy Chan

Nancy's age is 42. She is married and has two grown-up girls and one girl at aged 10. Her overall experience in teaching as a kindergarten teacher is more than 25 years. Her teaching experience in integrated kindergarten contexts is only 8 years, but she had been an integrated teacher for 5 years. Thus, she had attained the one-year special education training. During the study, she was studying for an advanced course in Early Childhood Education. She was teaching the upper kindergarten class and one integrated child. The teacher-child ratio was 1:30, and extra staff were added during small-group sessions. As the integrated child in her classroom exhibited disruptive behavior toward typical peers, the integrated teacher was needed to render assistance to the integrated child. Nancy revealed her beliefs on teaching and learning,

The young children are like clay. I think it is the best descriptor about the children. There must be someone who would like to play with clay and then produce a doll out of it. But, if nobody touches it, it is still clay. Children are clay and whether they can grow into a good or bad person really depend on the art of the people who shape the clay. I know some parents who were irresponsible and destructive and eventually they produced a bad doll. But, some parents were very caring and responsible and they could produce a very beautiful doll.

Cheung Oi

Oi is aged 47. She is married and has a grown-up boy and a three-year-old girl. Her overall teaching experience in the field of early childhood education is more than 26 years, and she is the most experienced general education teacher among all of the teachers in this study. As her school joined the integrated education scheme with the government in the late twentieth century, her experience in teaching integrated kindergarten settings equals only 8 years. Currently, she is studying for an advanced course in Early Childhood Education. During the research project, she was teaching the upper kindergarten class that catered to an integrated child. As her integrated child's ability was close to that of a normal child, the integrated teacher did not often render assistance. The teacher-child ratio was 1:30, and extra staff came to render help during small-group sessions. Oi emphasized her philosophy in teaching kindergarten,

I'm happy about teaching in kindergarten. I saw the kids crying when they first came to the school, and then they gradually grew up, and finally they left the school filling with a lot of stuff in their heads. These little kids are very interesting. For instance, when I mark the students' writing assignments, I often give stickers to those students who can write properly. Once, I overheard a child talked to his peer, "Oh! Your handwriting is really more beautiful than mine. That's why you got the stickers." See, the children talked like that as if they didn't mind about the rewards. Rather, they learned that it was their fault for not getting the stickers. When they compare their work with their peers, they can figure out who is better in terms of the output of their work. Yes, there are competitions among the children. But, I think it is practical and beneficial to the children. They also know that their teacher is fair to them. The ones who did not get the rewards this time learned to be more careful in their work next time.

Hung Siu Ling

Ling is 30. Her home is only a few blocks away from the school. Her overall experience teaching in kindergarten is 10 years. Within these ten years, she had been an integrated teacher for two years. Hence, she acquired the one-year special education

training. She is one of the two teachers who did not attend any advanced courses in teacher professional development. At the time of the study, she was teaching in a lower kindergarten class, without any integrated children. The teacher-child ratio is 1:15. Ling was highly aware of the negative impact of continual low enrollment on the school and the students,

Our administrator is constantly worried about the continued low enrollment. She said that our participation in the external competitions had been too low. We should try to boost it, and to get more awards. Getting more awards is one of the effective ways to gain popularity. I know that many schools have selected a small number of elites from each class and invested all resources in those few intelligent kids. So, the chance to get awards is greater. It seems that our school has chosen to follow. For instance, we just hired a professional teacher in dancing to train the kids for an external dancing competition. The selected kids initially were very excited about being involved in the external competition. During the first few rehearsals, they saw it as a kind of play activity. But, later, when they were required to have more practices, they began to show you how tired they were. Especially, when they could not follow the proper ways, the teachers would scorn them. In order to keep their interest in practicing, we had to use candies or whatever to reinforce them. So, I am stressed and feel like I am doing something to the children that I shouldn't do.

Lee May

May's age is 30. She is married. Her cumulative experience teaching in kindergarten is 8 years. Within those years, she had been an integrated teacher for two years. Thus, she attained one-year special education training. Presently, she is working toward an advanced course in Early Childhood Education. By the time of my last interview with her, she told me that she had resigned from the kindergarten and would leave the school by the end of December 2004. She added that she would then take up the post as an integrated teacher in an integrated childcare center. When she was teaching as a regular education teacher in the integrated kindergarten program, she taught the upper kindergarten class in which there was one integrated child. The teacher-child ratio was

2:32. There was an integrated teacher in the school. May expressed her vision about soon becoming an integrated teacher in the new working environment,

I have a vision. I feel like I'll have a new challenge for myself. I didn't get any satisfaction from teaching children in the integrated setting. I don't want to work like a robot doing the same thing again and again each day. This school does not give me any room to teach the children. After taking the advanced course in Early Childhood Education, I have reflected on my previous experience in teaching the children. It seemed like I'm only working for the salary. But, my job should be to teach the children well. So, I made the choice to jump out of this school. That's why I chose the integrated childcare center. Because I know that there are many therapists to follow the cases of the integrated children in the childcare centers. Even though I took the special education training, I believe I don't have the ability to give effective training for the disabled children. But, the therapists there can give me direction and advice on how to help the disabled children. See, I'll learn new knowledge and skills in order to help the children.

Lei Tai Ping

Ping's age is 37. She is married and has a two-year-old boy. She has a total of 17 years teaching experience in kindergarten. Within those years, 8 years are experience teaching in integrated kindergarten settings. Her teacher education training is quite different from other teachers in the study. She acquired the one-year special education training, but she had never worked as an integrated teacher. Moreover, she is also one of the two teachers who did not attend any advanced courses in professional development. During the study, she was teaching the upper kindergarten class with one integrated child; the teacher-child ratio was 1:28. The integrated teacher always took that integrated child out of the classroom for one hour of individualized training, and additional staff were added during small-group sessions. The teacher described her beliefs about how to teach young children,

In fact, the young children are like a vacuum, and they simply fill in what you give them. The teacher can apply any teaching method on young children as they like, and the children will follow the lead of the teacher. For instance, in this year, the teacher prefers

to clap her hands twice as a signal to the children that they should be in a line in order to go to the rest room. In next year, the teacher may prefer to use the sound of a bell instead of clapping her hands to signal to the children to be in line. The teachers may use any teaching method they like to train the children to perform any task. In fact, the children are very passive.

Viola Tsui

Viola is 29. She has been working in kindergarten for 15 years. Within those, 11 years comprised her integrated teaching experiences. Several years ago, she studied a long-distance course offered by a university in Mainland China. Later, she acquired the Bachelor of Education in Early Childhood Education from that university. Currently, she is pursuing an advanced course in Kindergarten Education offered by one of the teacher education institutions in Hong Kong. It is interesting to note that among all the teachers in this study, she constructed the highest number of areas in her classroom, even though the size of her classroom was the smallest. It is also worthy to note that sociodramatic play was one of the areas she constructed. She was teaching the upper kindergarten class without any integrated children. The teacher-child ratio is 1:30 and 2:30 during the small-group session. Viola was conscious of the detrimental impact of an emphasis on academic achievement on children's psychological well-being,

I knew that some of our smart graduates had performed excellently in academics since kindergarten, and they got into the best primary and competitive secondary schools. But, when these smart kids found out that their test or examination results were not as good as their peers in the same class, their responses were beyond your imagination. It is not rare to hear from the news that students committed suicide because of too much frustration toward their academic results. So, I always ask myself these questions, "Did I ever teach these children the needed skills to cope with failure?" "Did I ever become aware that I am also responsible for making the fatal problems of these children?" But, what I did in the past was when I found a child with talents in certain areas, I tried to push them to become the top student in the class. Their self-image had been inflated by my praise and rewards. At last, they couldn't accept the fact someone's performance was better than them. I am pressured about being a teacher. The pressure is not related to the workloads, I'm held

responsible for the children, even when they grow up. I'm stressed and can't tell if what I am doing to the children is right or wrong.

Each kindergarten teacher under study was uniquely different from the other teachers, in terms of their own experiences, concerns, and personal philosophy of teaching young children with and without disabilities in integrated kindergarten settings. Below are analytic generalizations based on the interviewed teachers' descriptive data.

Analytic Generalizations

Early data analysis led me to a large set of analytic generalizations related to the broad research questions listed above. As analysis proceeded, the following generalizations served to organize the complex components of my findings: (a) The early childhood teachers in this study emphasized teaching academics to children without disabilities, but they focused on social development at the exclusion of academic instruction for children with disabilities, and (b) According to the teachers, instruction was academic and skill-oriented in the integrated kindergarten programs. The findings of this section are a description of data supporting these broad generalizations.

Teaching Academics to Children without Disabilities

The teachers who were interviewed perceived that their primary responsibility as teachers in their integrated kindergarten contexts was to teach academics to the children without disabilities. Their explanations for this emphasis included descriptions of the influence of standardized curriculum produced by textbook publishers in Hong Kong, parents' expectations for academic achievement, primary schools' academic expectations, and government emphasis on academic outcomes in primary school. Each of these perceived constraints is described below.

Standardized Academic Curriculum

All the teachers from the four integrated kindergarten programs revealed that their schools had been using a commercial curriculum package published by one of the three big Hong Kong publishers, namely Education, Modern, and Yau Choi. Of the four kindergarten programs, two are part of a large organization established to serve certain elements of the community, including the elderly, poor, children from broken homes, and individuals with disabilities. Both of these programs chose Education. Between the independent programs, one selected Yau Choi, and the other one opted for Modern.

The teachers revealed that the decision making processes for selecting curriculum packages were split into two forms: the school administrators, or the individual teacher at the school. The teachers from the two independent programs said that it was basically the administrators of the school who decided which curriculum package was to be used. The teachers from the two programs that were under the same organization revealed that the individual teacher was the one to decide which curriculum was selected. The rationale for allowing the teachers to decide the curriculum was to avoid bribery. One teacher summed up the reason and process of choosing the curriculum,

By the end of each school year, the administrators will pass us a list of curriculum packages to choose one curriculum. Actually, I don't have many choices. There are only a few curriculum packages available in the market, mainly Education, Modern, Yau Choi, and Oxford. After I made the decision, I passed the paper back to the office. Then all the principals from the kindergartens under the organization will gather together to decide which curriculum will be used in the upcoming school year. They will select the one with the majority votes. This practice has been done over the past few years to avoid being charged of corruption. We have a large number of kindergartens and the numbers of the curriculum packages that our parents are going to order are huge.

The teachers reported that there were many similarities among three major commercial curriculum packages. They revealed that no matter which curriculum

package the programs bought, the materials inside the packages were almost the same. They all included a teacher guided textbook, theme books, and student worksheets. One teacher described what the curriculum package looked like,

The publisher sent us a sample of the curriculum package. Inside the curriculum package, there are several materials, including the teacher guided textbook, theme books, and students' worksheets. The textbook offers the themes, duration of each theme, teaching methodology, ways to design the classroom space, theme songs, suggested activities, and worksheets to evaluate students' learning outcome after a theme is taught.

A major similarity among the different commercial curriculum packages was that they were organized using the same twelve themes. One teacher outlined these twelve themes,

As far as I know, the commercial curriculum packages used by most of the kindergartens are organized using the same twelve themes. The common themes for the first semester include school, I and my family, autumn, animals, environmental protection, winter. Other themes, such as food, the people serving for the community, spring, transportation, summer, and graduation are often used in the second semester.

According to the design of the curriculum package, the twelve themes were evenly distributed throughout a school year, and each theme was expected to be taught for a fixed amount of time. Each theme encompassed a number of subthemes, each to be taught within a small segment of time. For example, one teacher who taught the lower kindergarten class described subthemes under the I and my family theme,

Last week, I just finished teaching a set of subthemes under the theme of 'I and my family'. This large theme is further divided into two subthemes including 'I', and 'My family'. Under the category of 'I', the stated subthemes include the different parts of the body such as eye, ear, nose, mouth, hands, and legs. The functions of each part of the body are also included. As each major theme lasts about four weeks, I used one week to complete the content of these subthemes.

The teachers noted that there was an explicit teaching methodology written to guide teachers as to how to implement the stated subthemes in the actual classroom contexts. First, it included teaching objectives such as cognitive, affective, and skill. Second, it included steps and procedures in how to teach the subthemes. Third, a variety of related activities including artwork and songs was suggested to be used for teaching the subthemes. One teacher in lower kindergarten class explained how she used the teaching methodology prescribed by the curriculum,

This morning, I just finished teaching the children in lower kindergarten class about eyes, which was one of the subthemes under the theme of 'I and my family'. According to the teacher guided textbook, the stated objectives for this particular subtheme included knowing its position, developing a proper attitude toward taking care of one's eyes, and how to protect one's eyes. From the steps prescribed under the section of the teaching methodology, I learned to highlight the position of eyes and their functions. I also included one of the suggested activities on how to make a pair of sunglasses as the extended activity in the afternoon session.

The teachers told me that there was even a section on how to organize the space in the classroom so as to achieve the teaching objectives for the subthemes. One teacher in lower kindergarten class described how she designed the classroom space based on the suggestions offered by the curriculum,

When I taught a set of subthemes, including eyes, ears, nose, mouth, hands, and legs under the theme of 'I and my family', I noted that there were many suggestions offered by the curriculum on how to design the classroom space in order to accomplish the objectives of teaching these subthemes. So, I placed a large box of different scents in the science area. I also placed several audiotapes of interesting stories in the language area. On the wall of the English area, I pasted a poster of alphabets that look like the one used in the optical shop. Then, I asked the children to explore these materials by using different parts of the body.

A list of the Chinese vocabulary words was included with each theme. Accordingly, the students were expected to write these vocabulary words as part of their school tasks. One teacher who taught lower kindergarten class described the Chinese vocabulary words,

In the first semester, the Chinese vocabulary words that are listed in the curriculum are far more difficult than those in the second semester. I think the selection of vocabularies is imposed by the themes of the curriculum. For example, in the first semester, the first theme is 'school', so the assigned vocabularies include those very difficult words, such as 'school', 'teacher', and 'class roommates'. But, in the second semester, the words listed under the theme 'spring' include those easier words, such as 'little flowers', and 'little grasses'. But, generally speaking, the assigned vocabularies are difficult. In particular, certain vocabularies, such as 'airplane' 'ship' under the theme of transportation are very difficult for the young children.

The teachers described worksheets to be used as an evaluation tool to appraising the learning outcomes of students after a theme is taught. The design of the worksheets was set up to see if children could select correct responses. One teacher described the worksheets,

After teaching a theme, we often use the given worksheets to check if the children can understand the concepts of the subthemes. The design of the worksheets is quite monotonous. For instance, there is a worksheet showing a boy's different parts of the body, there are answers like eyes, mouth, nose, and ears are provided. The children are required to match the correct words with the different parts of the boy's body on the picture, or the children are required to color a given picture.

The teachers revealed that although the curriculum presented the subject matter in the Chinese language, it also included a series of textbooks for other subjects, including English and Putonghua. The themes of these textbooks matched with those in Chinese. The textbooks would be revised regularly to update the content. One teacher outlined the content of these textbooks,

Basically, the content of the curriculum is directly related to Chinese language. But, the same publisher also published a series of other textbooks, such as English, Mathematics, and Putonghua. The themes of these textbooks are very similar to those included in Chinese language. We picked up one of the English textbooks from the same publisher because we think it is more appropriate to be used for our children. These textbooks are updated from time to time. The textbooks on Putonghua and English mostly are in story-form and focusing on the listening skills.

The teachers reported that according to the curriculum design, the twelve themes were to be repeatedly taught at each grade level, starting from the nursery through upper kindergarten class. The students at earlier levels were provided with the basic understanding of a concept under a theme, and the level of the complexity of the concept increased at the subsequent grade levels. The teachers perceived that after getting through all the required grade levels in a kindergarten, the children should be able to attain a comprehensive understanding of a concept under a theme. One teacher explained the design of the curriculum,

The same 12 themes are repeatedly taught to the children from nursery through upper kindergarten class. But, the level of difficulty of the content a concept varied at different grades. Let's say 'I and my family', I teach the children in nursery class about each child has a name and a gender. Then I teach the lower kindergarten class that they have a growing body and each part is very useful to them. In the upper kindergarten class, they are taught that all of them are one of the members in a family and each member has a specific role. So, after being in the kindergarten for 3 years, they should have a better understanding about themselves.

From the teachers' perspectives, there were definite similarities among the different curriculum packages sold by the three big publishers in Hong Kong. The teachers perceived that the different curriculum packages shared basic components, including: a fixed teaching timetable for the twelve themes and their subthemes; subject matter of the themes divided into individual subjects, including Chinese language,

English, Mathematics, and Putonghua; increased complexity of the subject matter of each subject throughout the grade levels; step-wise and well-defined objectives; the availability of the suggested activities; the design of the classroom space; and product-based assessments. The curriculum was standardized, and teachers felt compelled to teach the academics stipulated in the curriculum materials. The next section will deal with why parents buy into the notion of the standard curriculum.

Parents' Expectations

The teachers perceived that parents would prefer to place their children in kindergartens that implemented an academic curriculum. The teachers believed that there were many factors driving the parents to expect an academic curriculum. The teachers said that they thought that the parents were pressured by the society to force their children to attain the ability to read and write at the kindergarten level. As a result of early success in literacy, they believe that their child could seek a good job in the future.

The teachers projected that the parents believed that the general public values people who can exhibit proficiency in reading and writing. Therefore, the parents expected the kindergarten to offer ample opportunities for their children to master writing and reading. In addition, the teachers perceived that the parents expected the early education rendered by kindergartens to be congruent with the educational policy in Hong Kong and to assist their children in attaining the academic training necessary for getting through the academic educational system.

The teachers perceived that the parents' interpretation of quality early childhood education was contrary to the developmental approach advocated by many early childhood professionals. As one teacher said,

From the parents' perspectives, they would rather choose an academic kindergarten, instead of a kindergarten that focuses on the learning process. What we interpret the quality early childhood education is extremely different from those upheld by the parents. The parents expect their child to learn academics from the school, not just to have fun and play around all day over there. They think they pay the tuition and expect their child to learn to master writing very difficult vocabularies. They are proud of their child who can master the difficult words at their early age.

The teachers told me that the parents valued the academics taught in Hong Kong primary schools. They wanted their children taught academics so they could be admitted into an academic primary school. A teacher explained,

The parents whose children who got into the primary schools came back to visit us and told me that parents always like comparing their child with other children in terms of their academic achievement. They often ask each other which primary school their child got into. They also want to send their child to get into one of those academic primary schools. So, they always press us to become more academic. As a result, their child can have a better chance to get into the good primary schools.

The teachers perceived that the parents believed that the role of kindergartens was to prepare their child to make a transition into the primary schools. Hence, the parents believed a good kindergarten meant providing their children with a lot of homework. The parents believed that if their children were adequately prepared with academic skills, their children would have less traumatic experiences in the primary schools. A teacher noted,

The parents whose children were our former students came back to visit us. They told us that they knew some parents whose children previously studied in those kindergartens with less focus on writing and homework. Those parents complained that their children got into trouble when they entered into the primary schools. Their children were required by the primary schools to do a lot of homework, tests, and exams throughout the entire school year. But, their children were not prepared by the former kindergartens for doing the academic stuff in primary schools. As a result, their children had all kinds of troubles with school work, some often cried, while others complained they had headaches. I think that's the reason why parents always press our kindergarten to give their children more academic stuff.

The teachers reported that many parents believed that their child should be adequately trained by the kindergarten with the ability to copy. The parents believed if their child was adequately prepared with this skill, that child would be able to make an easy transition into the primary schools. One teacher explained,

The parents always tell us that they want their child to have the ability to copy. Because they know that in primary schools, the students are required to do many copying tasks, including copying the homework assignments from the blackboard onto their student record book, and copying sentences, and even a short essay. The parents explained that if their child was not trained with the skills in copying, their child would have problems in copying when they get into primary schools.

The teachers perceived that the parents also believed that their children should be adequately trained not only in the mastery of writing English vocabulary, but also in spelling more difficult words. Parents also pushed the kindergarten to provide their children with the ability to take dictation in English and master difficult Math skills, all with the intent of preparing children for primary schools.

The teachers argued that the parents stressed learning outcomes rather than the learning process. Thus, the parents believed that kindergarten teachers needed to produce worksheets for the children so as to present concrete evidence of what children had acquired from the school. One teacher explained,

I think the parents focus more on the product rather than the process in learning. As they cannot come to school to see their children's learning process, they think their children's learning outcome is much more important. They consider it is more practical to see the output. For instance, their children's worksheets show exactly how much their children have learned from schools. That's the concrete evidence about their children's learning output.

The teachers believed that parents had bought into the notion of an academic curriculum. They perceived that parents believed that only through placing their child in an academic kindergarten program would their child be able to attain success in school

and society. Hence, the teachers believed that parents' major goal of placing their child in a kindergarten program was to attain achievement based on academics.

The academic achievements that parents expected from their child included proficiency in the writing of Chinese and English, the acquisition of skills in doing homework, copying, spelling, worksheets, dictation, and taking examinations. As a result, if their child was adequately prepared with these academic skills, their child could be better prepared to make a transition into Hong Kong's academic primary schools. I will next describe the kinds of expectations held by the primary schools, from the teachers' perspectives.

Primary School Expectations

The teachers perceived that Hong Kong primary schools were academic and that they negatively impacted on the curriculum implemented by the kindergartens. Hence, the kindergartens had to become academic in order to prepare children for future schooling. Otherwise, the kindergarten graduates would not be able to gain a placement in the academic primary schools. In interviews, kindergarten teachers told me that primary schools favored the implementation of the academic curriculum. Parents were supportive toward these academic primary schools and pressured the kindergartens to become more academic. One teacher noted,

> The problem is that primary schools want to implement an academic curriculum. A few years ago, in this district, there were a number of primary schools newly established and they all wanted to establish their reputation. They chose to implement the second grade curriculum on the first graders. The parents thought that those schools were good. It pressured the kindergartens to become more academic. Otherwise, their kindergarten graduates would have transition problems in those academic primary schools.

The teachers reported that the admission requirements of the primary schools were getting more difficult, putting pressure on kindergartens to teach more academics. Primary schools also started using written examinations as part of admissions requirements. A teacher explained,

In order to get a placement in primary schools, an interview examination had been common over the past few years. But, nowadays, primary schools require more. Although, the government always said that there should be no written exams for primary school entry requirements, in reality, written exams are still very common. If you think that a kindergarten graduate can master writing from A to Z in capital and small letters is very smart, then you are wrong. The children are required to do many difficult academic tasks on the written exams. Those academic tasks are intended for the second and third graders. During the interview, the teachers in primary schools ask the children questions in Chinese and English, and they expect the children to give them the answers in complete sentences.

The teachers perceived that the primary school teachers imposed a high academic demand on their first graders, including the ability to write orderly Chinese characters, taking Chinese and English dictation, and doing Mathematics. The teachers also perceived that there was a gap between kindergartens and primary schools in terms of the copying skills. The primary schools placed a high academic demand on the students' copying skills. Therefore, as one teacher explained, the kindergartens tried to bridge the gap by enhancing the children's copying skills,

You know what has happened in real primary schools! If the kindergartners did not require writing and copying words, once the children got promoted to primary schools, they would have troubles in copying. They are required to copy the homework assignments, sentences, and even short essays from the board onto their homework books. If their ability in copying was weak, they would miss many words and could not complete the required tasks. So, there is a gap between kindergartens and primary schools, and we are trying to bridge the gap.

The teachers complained that the whole education system, including the primary and secondary schools, required the students to do a lot of homework; and it has become a formal task for the children in kindergarten. One teacher said,

In kindergartens, doing homework has become a formalized task for young children. The children must do a lot of homework assignments everyday. Actually, I don't want to give them any of those assignments. It is developmentally inappropriate. But, the children in primary schools are required to do a lot of homework. The given assignments are not only related to those core subjects, such as English, Chinese, and Mathematics, there are many other subjects. Doing homework is one of the basic requirements of the academic education system in Hong Kong.

The interviewed teachers noted that teachers in the primary schools focused on classroom management, and the students were expected to be very quiet in order to attend lessons and tasks. This meant that kindergarten teachers felt pressured to prepare their students for the behavioral expectations in primary schools. A teacher explained,

In most of the primary schools, each lesson lasts more than 40 minutes, and students must sit properly. There is also a change of teachers in different lessons. So, I require the children in upper kindergarten class to be very quiet when they are doing the writing tasks. That's the basic requirement in primary schools. If students are not disciplined now, they surely will get into trouble when they get promoted in primary schools. That's why I am very strict in disciplining them when they are on tasks. The mother with a child who was our former student told me that her child had no problem following this demand in the primary school because of our disciplinary training in this kindergarten.

The teachers perceived that the primary schools had adopted an academic curriculum due to the advocacy made by parents and expectations from the government. The primary schools required the kindergarten graduates to go through an examination-oriented interview in order to gain an educational placement. The first graders were expected by the primary schools to have acquired many prerequisite academic skills, including proficiency in writing Chinese and English, mastery of basic mathematics such as addition, subtraction, and algebra, and the acquisition of skills in copying, dictation,

taking written examinations, and doing homework. Moreover, the academic primary schools required their first graders to have acquired the ability to control their own behavior in the classroom so that they would sit quietly listening to the teacher's lecture and finish the class work. All these expectations lead kindergarten teachers to provide more academic programs for children without disabilities. The next section will present the kinds of expectation held by the Government on their primary school students, from the teachers' perspectives.

Government Expectations

The teachers also perceived that the government expected Hong Kong primary school students to attain achievement based on academics. The teachers argued that although the government says it supports developmental programs, it turns out that it really encourages the implementation of an academic curriculum because children have to be ready for academic primary schools. The teachers perceived that they were continually pressured by the parents to become more academic due to the academic pressure downward from the primary schools. The kindergartens welcomed the government's encouragement for them to adopt more developmentally appropriate practices for the young children, but this placed kindergartens in a difficult position. The teachers believed that when the government continually pressed the kindergartens to adopt more developmentally appropriate practices, they were aware that there would be a gap between early childhood programs and the primary schools. As one teacher explained, that meant kindergarten teachers were caught in a dilemma,

The Education Department does not encourage kindergartens to give homework to young children. But, they need to consider that they have approved primary schools to give homework. There is inconsistency between kindergartens and primary schools. How can

our children make a transition into primary schools? If the Education Department ordered no homework in the junior grades in primary schools, we would not have any problem in kindergartens. But, in fact, students are required to do a lot of homework assignments in primary schools. Then, what should we do?

The teachers perceived that the whole elementary school system was academically based. They were more conscious of the parents' concerns on the transitional problems into the primary schools than the government's proclamations about developmental curriculum approaches. The teachers perceived that despite the fact that they were under the pressure from the government to be less academic, they were more inclined to address the parents' concerns about their children's transitional problems into the academic primary schools.

As the whole primary school system was academically based, the teachers interviewed believed that the government had bought into the notion of the academic curriculum. The primary schools had exerted high levels of academic pressure on their students, including doing a lot of examinations, dictation, writing, and homework. The teachers were aware that the policy of the government was to implement developmentally appropriate practices for the young children. The Government, however, had not demonstrated its efforts to restructure the academic situations in the primary schools. Hence, the teachers believed that they should address the concerns of parents and teach in ways that prepared the children to accomplish the academic skills required by the primary schools.

In summary, kindergarten teachers expressed their feelings of being pressured to teach academics to their students without disabilities. They felt no such pressure, however, to do the same for those children being integrated in their classrooms. The next

section will describe conditions for children with disabilities in Hong Kong integrated kindergartens.

Teaching Children with Disabilities

The kindergarten teachers in this study perceived that a major responsibility in their integrated kindergarten contexts was to assist the children with disabilities in attaining social development at the exclusion of academic instruction. Their explanations for this emphasis included (a) their expectations that it was the role of the integrated teachers to teach academics to children with disabilities and (b) their perceptions of the effects of constraints inherent in the context of Hong Kong. Each of these domains is described below.

Integrated Teacher Responsibilities

The teachers who were interviewed assumed that their major role, as prescribed by the schools and the government, did not include teaching academics to the integrated children. The teachers revealed that the integrated children, who were referred to the integrated kindergarten settings either by the Education or the Social Welfare Department, had been previously diagnosed with disabilities of a mild grade. Hence, the teachers discerned that those children had special learning needs. One teacher described the referral process of the educational placement of the integrated children,

> The integrated children were referred either from the Education Department or the Social Welfare. First, they had already gone to the government's children assessment clinic for an assessment and were diagnosed to have a disability with a mild grade. Their personal files were then passed to the two departments for educational placement. Most of them are borderline cases, such as speech and language impairment, learning disability, emotional disability, and autism. Our kindergarten normally will admit these children.

The teachers reported that their schools would arrange a preliminary interview with the integrated children and their parents before the first semester started, with the intent that both parties would gain a better understanding of each other in order to address the special learning needs of the integrated children. The kindergarten teachers were not invited. The integrated teacher was obligated to attend that meeting and was expected to develop a collaborative partnership with the parents of children with disabilities. Hence, the kindergarten teachers believed that the integrated teacher could attain ample firsthand information about the integrated children's learning problems. One teacher complained about being excluded from that meeting,

> We didn't see each other! We did not have an interview to talk with the parents of children with disabilities. It was not until I became their children's teacher that we had the chance to see each other. On the first parent meeting with all the parents, I had the chance to meet the integrated children's parents. But, I know that right before the summer vacation, there should be an interview held by the school administrators to talk with the families of children with disabilities. During that interview, only the integrated teacher was included. I wasn't involved. Why didn't they include me? I guess that's the school culture.

The teachers raised concerns that they were not involved in the processes of the classroom assignment of the integrated children. That decision was solely made by the school administrators. Their schools did not provide kindergarten teachers with any relevant information concerning the nature of children's disabilities or their learning problems. One teacher described the processes of the placement of the integrated children,

> The school administrators will consider the nature of those children's disability and their age, and then to decide which class they should be placed. We are not involved in this procedure. We are quite passive, even though we have concerns over the decisions. Right before the beginning of the first semester of a new school year, we will be given a list containing the basic information about which class to teach and the names of the

children. A name marked with an asterisk means that that child is an integrated child. That's all we know from the office about the integrated children.

The teachers reported that the integrated teacher had been granted the approval by their schools to have access to the personal files of the integrated children. The kindergarten teachers, however, thought that they were not entitled to read the integrated children's personal files due to confidentiality issues. All the information about the integrated children had to be obtained from the integrated teacher. The kindergarten teachers considered the given information to be minimal for them to develop a better understanding of the integrated children's history and learning problems. Thus, the teachers believed that the integrated teacher was the appropriate person to address the leaning problems of the integrated children. One kindergarten teacher expressed her grievance about not being properly informed,

I won't read the integrated children's personal files. I think it involves confidentiality issues. But, the integrated teacher is entitled to read it. If I want to know more about the integrated children, I have to ask the integrated teacher. Actually, right before the first semester starts, she will give me the very basic information about the integrated children, like the kinds of learning problems the children have. But, it doesn't necessarily mean that you know much about the children's background, learning problems, and how to help these children to learn.

The teachers reported that the salary of the integrated teacher was reimbursed by the Education Department; and the role descriptions of the integrated teachers written by the Education Department were to render individualized instruction to the integrated children. Moreover, the integrated teachers were required to attend a relevant special education training course in order to address the special needs of the integrated children. Hence, the teachers believed that the integrated teacher was the best person to render

individualized training to address the learning problems of the integrated children. One teacher outlined the job descriptions of the integrated teacher,

The integrated teacher is different from us. Her monthly salary is reimbursed from the Education Department. Her job assignment written by the Education Department is to take care of the six integrated children and to give each integrated child 30 minutes individualized training everyday. The government also gave her a one-year, part-time special education training course.

The teachers noted that one of the major duties of the integrated teacher was to construct and implement an individualized lesson plan for each of the integrated children. The teachers said that the integrated teacher always attempted to include curriculum components in the individualized lesson plan in order to provide the opportunities for the integrated children to work with academic tasks. One teacher described how the integrated teacher writes the individualized lesson plan,

We have the integrated teacher who writes the individualized lesson plan for each of the integrated children in the kindergarten. Very often, when she writes the individualized lesson plan, she always comes to ask our opinions on the kinds of learning problems the integrated child has in the classroom. I know that she has tried to include our curriculum components in the individualized lesson plan so that the integrated child can learn the academic stuff.

The teachers noted that the integrated teacher was required to submit many reports concerning the education of the integrated children to the department concerned. Moreover, inspectors from the Special Education Department regularly came to render professional advice to the integrated teacher so as to ensure the appropriateness of education being given to the integrated children. One teacher revealed the quality assurances made by the department concerned,

The integrated teacher has to do a lot of paper work concerning the education of the integrated children. She needs to write the individualized lesson plans and the evaluation

reports on the integrated children's learning progress and submit the reports to the departments concerned. The inspectors from Special Education Department come to the school regularly to give advice to the integrated teacher on how to improve teaching skills for working with the integrated children.

The interviewed teachers noted that there were resources given to the integrated teachers on how to assist the families of children with disabilities to improve their children's learning opportunities. The resources included relevant information about a wide range of the training courses for both the parents and their children. The parents of children with disabilities were kept informed of those courses by the integrated teachers. As a result, the parents would attain better understanding and skills in assisting their children to address their learning problems. The teachers perceived that the integrated teacher was the person best able to support parents in addressing the learning problems of their integrated children. One teacher described the resources,

The school has often received documents, newsletters and pamphlets sent by the Special Education Department or other related Association such as Heep Hong, etc. They provide valuable information, such as the training courses designed for parents of children with disabilities. So, through those training courses, the parents can learn more about the nature of their children's disabilities and learn effective ways to help their children. There are also various training courses offered for the disabled children, such as speech and language training and play therapies. Those brochures are directly passed to the integrated teacher.

The kindergarten teachers discerned that integrated children had a disability, and they would not expect the integrated children to reach the same standards as their typical peers in terms of the academic accomplishment. They strongly believed that it was the responsibility of the integrated teacher to focus on the academic aspect of the integrated children's learning. One teacher illustrated the impact of a disability on teachers' expectations of the children's learning outcomes,

The integrated children are welcome to attend the thematic teaching session as the typical children do. But, we do not focus on helping them to get through their problems with the academic work. I do not expect the integrated children to attain the same standards as the typical children. For instance, if the integrated child has problem in his fine motor skill, he will be asked to do the pre-writing exercises, such as drawing lines and connecting dots. He isn't required to follow the same tasks as the typical children. The integrated teacher will take care of the integrated children's academic work.

The teachers told me that they required the children to follow the flow of the lecture so as to accomplish the planned teaching objectives as required by their schools. The teachers saw that the integrated children's learning abilities were incompatible with the typical children, and that they were below the average. Moreover, the teachers believed that the standard curriculum applicable to the typical children was inappropriate to the integrated children. The integrated children were unable to follow the same learning pace as the typical children. One teacher stated that she wanted the children to have the same learning pace,

When I plan an activity or a curriculum for the typical children, I always construct a standard based on the average abilities among all the students in the classroom. The overall abilities among typical children are much better than those of the integrated children. So, the flow of the teaching process is smoother and I can easily lead the children to accomplish the teaching objective. Comparing to the typical children, the learning abilities of the integrated children are worse and they learn slowly. They often retard the learning pace. You really need to involve many materials to help them learn. The typical children can follow the instruction quickly. But, the integrated children don't understand what you say, and you need to repeat many times in order to ensure they understand the instruction.

The teachers expected the children to demonstrate the ability to follow the classroom routines and complete the academic tasks. But, the integrated children could not demonstrate the ability to complete those tasks. Hence, the teachers believed that they

needed individualized instruction given by the integrated teacher in order to enhance their ability. One teacher defined the required ability,

The integrated children have become part of the whole once they entered into my classroom. I see the integrated children as normal if they have the same ability as the typical children. If they can follow the classroom routines and complete the tasks as required for the typical children, I see them as normal. If these disabled children have difficulty understanding the academic concepts, this is not my responsibility. Then these children need the individualized training. The integrated teacher can help them get through those academic tasks.

The teachers said that they required their students to accomplish academic tasks independently, without requiring extra time from their teacher. The integrated children, however, could not complete the academic tasks independently; and they required a lot of extra time from their teacher in order to finish the tasks. They believed that the integrated teacher was supposed to supply the time needed to assist the integrated children. One teacher revealed her perspective,

The typical children do not require us too much time to take care of their academic work. But, the integrated children simply don't have the ability to do all the academic tasks. Comparing to the typical kids, the integrated children's ability in learning are too weak. The typical kids can do the tasks by themselves, and afterwards, they present their work to you for correction. But, the integrated children do not merely require you to give them one or two seconds. You have to spend several minutes to teach them how to complete writing one single vocabulary word or how to finish doing a worksheet. They require a lot of extra time.

The teachers revealed that they expected their students to be able to pay their full attention to their teacher during the lecturing session. But, the integrated children were inattentive to the teacher's lecture. Thus, they perceived that the one-on-one attention rendered by the integrated teacher would best serve the special learning needs of the integrated children. One teacher illustrated the expectation,

The integrated children's patience and attention span are weak. You cannot use the same teaching methods that work for the typical children, such as engaging them in activities, or telling them interesting stories. You must use other ways to attract their attention. I think the integrated children get used to the one-on-one teaching method. The adult gives them full attention. In the normal classroom situation, the typical children always try to be good and to give their full attention to the teacher. But, if the teachers don't give the integrated children full attention, they will completely lose track.

The teachers stated that they expected their students to be actively involved in classroom activities and able to demonstrate their intelligence through their academic achievement. By contrast, the teachers saw that the integrated children did not have confidence to try academic tasks. Thus, the teachers believed that the integrated teacher should spend ample time to develop a trusting relationship in order to enhance the confidence of the integrated children. One teacher explained the requirement,

The typical children can learn new concepts and finish homework quickly, work in fast pace, and are very active in answering the questions. But, the integrated children are totally different. They are slow in learning, passive, and have no initiative. Even when the teacher encourages them, they still refuse to try. They just sit there with their blank eyes. Even you give them one-on-one individualized training, they just nod down their heads.

The teachers said that they expected their students to be able to demonstrate learning outcomes right after instruction by the teacher. In contrast, the integrated children had difficulty showing the learning outcomes, even when the teacher taught them many times. One teacher stated,

If you teach the typical children one concept, they can absorb that quickly. Afterwards, they can show you they have acquired that concept with their excellent performance. But, the integrated children are very different from them. The integrated children don't reward you the same as the typical children do. For instance, if you teach them one single word, the typical children can pick it up after reading that word five times. The integrated children need to read more than 10 times, but he still cannot make it.

The teachers perceived that the individual differences among the integrated children were large and their abilities below the standard. The standard curriculum was inappropriate to be used with these children. Hence, the teachers believed that children with disabilities required individualized curriculum and instruction in order to address their special learning needs. One teacher explained how to address the learning problems,

> The integrated children need individualized training, and they need to repeat doing the same thing again and again. Their individual differences are too huge and their abilities are below the standard. They cannot follow the curriculum designed for the typical children. They have special learning needs. So, you must design an individualized curriculum to address their problems in learning.

The teachers revealed that they wanted the children to be able to discipline themselves and listen to the teacher's directions. The integrated children, however, did not show their ability to control their behavior. Moreover, the teachers saw that no single method could work effectively with the integrated children, and they had to consider many factors in order to properly address the problems of the integrated children. One teacher discussed the behavioral issue,

> Teaching the typical children is easier! I just need to spend several weeks, and then I can remember their names and characters. But, I never understand the integrated children. They are very quiet and passive and you just don't know what's wrong with them. When you approach them, their language abilities are too weak to express themselves clearly to you. They often have temper tantrums, and the teacher must be very alert at all times in order to avoid behavioral problems. The typical children have emotional and behavioral problem too. When I ask them to calm down, they will do so. But, the integrated children don't listen to my order. Instead, they will fall on the ground and cry loudly. The worst is there is no single method that is workable with them. You must consider many factors, such as the environment and think of the best way to deal with them.

The teachers knew that the integrated children had special learning needs due to the nature of their disabilities. But, they argued that their schools did not provide them

with adequate information about the integrated children's history and their learning problems. By contrast, the integrated teachers had been provided with all the necessary sources of information concerning how to properly address the integrated children's learning problems.

The kindergarten teachers noted that the integrated teachers' salaries, job descriptions, training experience, actual workloads, and supervision were designed by the government with the intent of teaching integrated children in the kindergarten contexts. More specifically, they observed that the integrated teachers were required to tailor an individual education plan for each integrated child and conduct a 30 minutes individualized instruction on a daily basis.

The teachers in this study revealed that there was a set of prerequisite abilities they expected from the kindergartners, including keeping the learning pace and following classroom routines, accomplishing academic tasks independently, paying full attention to the teacher's lecture, participating in classroom activities, demonstrating learning outcomes intelligently, and listening to the teacher's directions. The teachers reported that they did not believe the integrated children could demonstrate those abilities as required in the integrated kindergarten settings.

On the contrary, the integrated children were perceived by the teachers to be slow, to lack motivation and confidence, to be below average in academic achievement, and to frequently fail to comply with the teacher's instruction. The teachers noted that individual differences among the integrated children were large in comparison to typical children. In order to properly address the special learning needs of the integrated children, integrated teachers should implement individualized curriculum and instruction,

and concrete materials tailored for those children should be used. The teachers under study held a strong belief that the integrated teachers possessed the relevant qualifications and resource supports to teach academics to the integrated children. In addition, kindergarten teachers did not teach academics to children with disabilities because they believed that constraints inherent in the context of Hong Kong, reduced teachers' opportunities teach academics to their integrated children. These constraints are discussed below.

Constraints

The teachers perceived that constraints on four levels, including individual, school, government, and society, did not allow them to deliver academics to their integrated children. Each of these perceived constraints is described in turn.

Individual Level Constraints

The teachers did not appear to have a positive attitude toward teaching children with disabilities. They felt that their schools had not offered them the basic conditions and resource supports necessary for teaching academics to integrated children. One informant expressed negative feelings toward working with integrated children that paralleled the feelings of other kindergarten teachers in this study,

I don't accept and tolerate them. I don't have a positive attitude toward them. Whenever my student refuses to do the writing assignments and then has a temper tantrum, I just can't calm down myself. Instead of teaching the child how to control his emotional problems, I use force against force. I only see the child's problems instead of the problems within myself. If I had a positive attitude toward him, I would see his special needs and try to find resources to help him out. My positive attitude toward the children with disabilities must derive from the supports from the school and my colleagues. But, I have none of those needed supports from the school.

The teachers perceived that lack of training and previous teaching experiences with children with disabilities negatively impacted their feelings toward these children. They said that they did not acquire the understanding of the nature of children's disabilities and skills necessary for addressing integrated children's learning problems. One teacher expressed her negative feelings,

When I had finished the preservice teacher training and joined this school, I didn't have any previous experience teaching the children with disabilities. When I initially encountered these integrated children, I didn't know how to handle them properly. I knew nothing about the nature of their disabilities and didn't learn any skills to help them with their learning problems. I was mad at them because I always needed to repeat the same thing to them again and again. But, they still couldn't make it. Oh, it is very difficult teaching them if you don't have any previous teaching experience with them.

School Level Constraints

The teachers perceived that the standard curriculum described above was developmentally inappropriate for young children with and without disabilities. The quantity and the complexity of the themes and subthemes were beyond the ability of their young children.

The teachers also believed that the standard curriculum did not allow them to consider individual differences among the children. The teachers felt compelled to complete the planned daily objectives and required activities according to the curriculum schedule. The integrated children, however, could not keep up with the planned daily schedule. As in the example, many were left behind,

We are bounded by the curriculum. Everyday, we are supposed to teach the planned objectives in the thematic teaching session. Of course, we need to consider the individual differences among the children. But, this curriculum does not allow me to do so. For instance, when I teach 'fruit' to the whole class, there are many components related to that concept to be taught, such as its name, taste, smell, color, and quantity. But, this integrated child can only pick up one component each day. We have to finish many

planned activities each day, and new activities should be done on the next day. I can't just teach one component each day and wait until that integrated child fully understands the concept. So, we can't wait for him, this integrated child's learning pace is far behind the schedule.

In addition to the inappropriateness of the academic curriculum, the teachers also noted that time was another big issue, creating obstacles for them to teach academics to the integrated children. The teachers believed that they could not spare any additional time in order to guide the integrated children's academic work. Time was fully occupied with the assigned activities of the typical children. One teacher described how time was used,

Time is a big issue, it is even far more important than manpower. They can send me an additional aide. But, the children come back just for 3 hours. I have to fit in all the assigned activities into the three hours. That's why I need to manage time effectively and use it wisely. No matter in snack time or during the process of the activities, I always hurry the children to complete the activity within the set time. Why didn't I allow them to talk for 3 more minutes during the snack time? I know the children love to chat with each other during the snack time. Because it will take away 3 minutes from the next activity. I take each second and minute very seriously.

The teachers perceived that the limited time for each individual lesson had imposed a great hurdle for them in order to distribute adequate time to take care of the needs of both types of children. One teacher stated the problem,

I am not the integrated teacher who is supposed to take care of the six integrated children. Her job is to give each integrated child intensive care. But, when the integrated child comes to my classroom, I simply cannot give him an extra proportion of time. According to the classroom schedule, each session only takes 20 minutes. For instance, in the singing lesson, if I take 10 minutes to teach him, the rest of the children have the other 10 minutes. I have 30 students. If I divide the 10 minutes by 29 students, it is not fair for the typical children.

The teachers raised concerns about the high teacher-child ratio, and they also noted that there were negative consequences for children with and without disabilities.

The teachers reported that under this constraint, they had disregarded the notion of individual differences among young children. The children were merely seen by the teachers as a child with the same ability. One teacher spelled out the negative effects,

I have 30 four-year-olds in my classroom. But, the curriculum is arranged to be completed within 10 months. Everyday, we have many assigned activities to be done within the three hours. I know there are individual differences among young children. But, under these bad conditions, how can I see their individual differences? So far, all I have done is to forget about the uniqueness of each child and to see all of them as one child. That's all I can do to ensure the 30 children in the classroom can finish all the required tasks within the set limited time.

The teachers noted that the individualized instruction with the integrated children was an effective teaching method to improve the ability of the integrated children to perform the academic tasks. But, their schools did not give them any time to conduct the one-on-one individualized instruction with the integrated children. One teacher stated the problem,

You must use one-on-one method with the integrated children. During that period, he can concentrate and listen to what you say. If he comes up with any problem in learning, you can help him get through the difficulty. When he can accomplish the tasks, you feel happy. But, in reality, we don't have time to do that one-on-one individualized training with the integrated children.

The kindergarten teachers reported that due to time constraints, they did not communicate with the integrated teachers concerning the integrated children's current academic progress. Thus, the teachers considered themselves unable to gain a better understanding of the integrated children's learning problems. One teacher stated the shortcoming,

Because the integrated teacher delivers the individualized training to the integrated children everyday, she is the person who knows exactly about the integrated children's

academic performance. As both of us are super busy everyday, we don't have time to talk with each other concerning those children's learning progress.

The teachers complained that their superiors did not support them for delivering individualized instruction needed by integrated children. Their supervisors encouraged kindergarten teachers to focus on the academic progress of the children without disabilities. One teacher raised her concern,

During the free-choice playtime, I had tried to train the integrated child with manipulatives. My partner was my superior and she told me that I shouldn't use too much time to do the individualized training for the integrated child. I should let the child play with toys or with the typical peers. I understand my superior's point. I am not an integrated teacher anymore. I should pay more attention to the typical children's learning progress, such as taking record of their learning performance.

The teachers also perceived that they needed additional staff to take care of the integrated children's academic work while they were busy helping the typical children to accomplish the required tasks. Without the presence of additional staff, the teachers noted that integrated children's progress of academic work would be basically ignored. One teacher highlighted the role of additional staff,

The difficulty is we don't have an additional aide to help the integrated child with his academic work. If the integrated child does not have any temper tantrums, I allow him to explore the areas and play inside. I need to help the typical children finish the assigned tasks and then to ensure all of them have written down the correct vocabulary words in their homework books. But, by the time I realize that I need to help the integrated child with his homework assignment, time is up for that session. It seems like he is not one of the students in my classroom.

The teachers complained that the emotionally disturbed integrated children were the most difficult cases to deal with. One of their major problems was the disruption of classroom routines. The teachers did not believe they had any effective methods to handle

the specific problematic behavior of emotionally disturbed children. One teacher depicted the behavioral problems of those children,

There are many individual differences even among the children with mild disabilities. Some are easier to teach because they only have difficulties expressing themselves. But, a few of these integrated children always exhibit disturbing behavior that interrupts classroom routines. This is the most difficult case to deal with, and I don't know how to handle them. For example, when he has temper tantrums, he always pushes everything off from the table. As I don't know how to control him, I simply let him do it. But, when he calms down after the outburst, I will ask him to do the clean up. At least, I should teach him to bear the consequence for his outburst. Then, he knows he has done something wrong. But, he really disrupts the classroom routines.

The teachers were concerned that the emotionally disturbed integrated children would exhibit harmful behavior toward the other children and the teachers. Parents of children without disabilities raised concern about the safety of their own children. The teachers argued that there should be additional teaching staff to take care of such a child's behavioral problem. One teacher described the scenario,

When he refuses to do the writing exercise or any task that he thinks he can't do, he will do something quite harmful to the other children. For instance, yesterday, when he couldn't write the vocabulary words, he scribbled on the worksheets of the child sitting next to him. That child didn't understand his problems, and he quarreled with the integrated child. I immediately ran over to stop them and that integrated child bumped his head against my stomach. It hurt me. Recently, the parents of children without disabilities have complained to me about his aggressive behavior, and they asked me to remove their child from that emotional child's table. But, someone has to sit with him. I need an additional aide to help with that difficult situation.

The teachers also noted that it was difficult to deal with the emotionally disturbed integrated children's disruptive behavior. The typical children would copy their negative behavior, and the teachers had to take time to do follow-up with them. One teacher stated the potential negative effects of the integrated children,

That integrated child always falls on the ground and cries loudly. The typical children like to copy his behavior, and they think that that is funny. If I allowed the integrated child's disruptive behavior, the other kids would think that they could behave exactly the same as the integrated child. If they really copied the integrated child's behavior, I surely would punish them. Then, they would think I was not fair to them.

The teachers perceived that the integrated children with autism were another difficult type of integrated child to deal with. They needed extra staff to take care of this kind of integrated child. One teacher described the problems of autistic children,

My child with autism is very stubborn and self-centered. He always ignores others around him. He won't listen to what I say. It seems like he doesn't like to be included in society. It is the very difficult case. For instance, when we have an outing and need to be on ride in the school bus. When he gets off from the bus, he likes to run away from us with quick speed. So, I need to escort him and hold him tightly to ensure that he has no chance to run away. In case he really runs away, you must chase him with all your energy. Because we are afraid that he may get killed by cars. That's why we need extra staff or voluntary workers to look after him intensively. But, is it always possible to get enough teachers for the outing?

The interviewed teachers expected that in the integrated kindergarten contexts, there should be adequate resource supports rendered by their schools, such as time, and additional teaching staff in order to help the integrated children attain academic achievement. The teachers reported that in reality, they did not see those resources were available. Instead, they saw numerous constraints inherent in the kindergarten settings, including a difficult standard curriculum that was developmentally inappropriate for children with and without disabilities, a high teacher-child ratio, and heavy workloads.

Moreover, the teachers were concerned that there were negative effects of the academic curriculum on integrated children's learning outcomes. They knew that under these constraints, many integrated children could not keep up with the curriculum schedule, and they were left behind. Since they could not render the assistance necessary

for addressing their learning problems, the teachers lowered their expectations for integrated children in academic achievement.

Furthermore, the teachers reflected that they lacked training and experience in teaching integrated children. They reported how difficult it was for them to teach academics to emotionally disturbed children who would often express their disruptive behavior toward their typical peers. So, they argued that in addition to the lack of supports rendered by their schools, their role of teaching academics to integrated children had not been taken seriously by the government.

Government Level Constraints

The teachers revealed that the Hong Kong government had provided few resources to support the integrated kindergartens programs but had imposed numerous barriers to hinder the opportunity for teachers to provide integrated children with academic accomplishment. The teachers argued that the government did not have a consistent policy on integrated educational placement. Under this constraint, they saw that some of the integrated children were older than six, and they came in the middle of the school year. As a result, it created transition problems for both the integrated children and the teachers. One teacher explained the problem,

Over the past few years, the integrated children referred from the Education Department have not been as regular as the integrated children than before. Before, the newcomers of the integrated children must be aged three and they came attend the nursery class. But, recently, there have been more cases where these integrated children came in the middle of the school year, and they did not initially start from the nursery class. It is even more awkward that a few of these children's ages are older than 6. How can the integrated children adjust to the sudden change of the new school environment? I also have difficulty in taking enough time to get to know the integrated children. My training only prepared me to teach children from birth to 6. How can I handle them if their ages are older than 6?

The kindergarten teachers believed that they should have special education training in order to render effective education to the integrated children. Kindergarten teachers received little or no training from the government. Three of the teachers who were interviewed had been integrated teachers for at least two years, and those teachers were provided with a part-time special education course. Even these teachers did not feel adequately prepared to teach academics to children with disabilities. They said that they needed continuous professional development in order to properly address the special needs of the integrated children. And they noted that even the part-time course was cancelled by the government. One teacher stated her needs,

I consider what I have learned from that part-time special education course to be very limited. It is not enough to help the integrated children in learning. It should be a continuous professional development course. After I took that specific course, they offered the course for one more year. Many teachers in the fields of early education and special education needed that course, such as teachers from the integrated childcare centers, integrated kindergartens, and special education centers. But, after that year, the course was cancelled by the government.

The teachers reported that services rendered by the government for the integrated kindergarten programs had been reduced even before 2002, when the government announced the phasing out of the integrated kindergarten programs in 2005. Without those relevant resources, the learning problems of the integrated children could not be properly addressed. One teacher traced the history,

Long time ago, there were psychologists who came from Special Education Department to the school once or twice yearly to render parent education to those parents of children with disabilities. That department also arranged some related courses, such as speech and occupational therapies for these children. But, those services had already been cancelled. Recently, I asked the parents of a child with speech and language impairment, if they had received such services from the departments concerned. They said that they did apply the needed services from the public hospitals, but they needed to wait at least several months or even one year to get the service. Actually, before the government announced the

phasing out of the kindergarten integrated programs in 2005, the related services for the integrated kindergartens have been continually reduced.

The teachers perceived that the government had not demonstrated its willingness to offer adequate resource supports to the integrated teachers so that they could teach the integrated children academics. They said that when these special teachers tried out the new methods with the integrated children, they needed feedback from the supervisors of the department concerned to ensure the effectiveness of the teaching. The teachers also saw that the government had not demonstrated its determination to provide the integrated teachers with the relevant resources to properly address the problems of the integrated children. The integrated teachers had requested assistance from the departments concerned, but the departments did not offer any follow-up treatment for the integrated children. One teacher stated her grievances,

When I was working as an integrated teacher, I once had an autistic integrated child, and he had serious behavioral problems. I couldn't help him with the methods that I learned from the special education course. So, when the inspector from the Special Education Department came, I told her about the child's problem. Soon, a school psychologist came to see him. But there were no more follow-ups either from the Special Education Department or the school psychologist. I was alone to deal with that integrated child's problems.

The teachers perceived that they could not rely on the department, which was supposed to offer assistance to the teachers regarding the integrated children's transitional education issues. The teachers felt that they were left alone to resolve the specific educational problems of the integrated children. One teacher described her lonely journey,

The Special Education Department didn't provide us with adequate information concerning the transition educational issue for the integrated children. For instance, once,

I had an integrated child in the upper kindergarten class who needed to get an educational placement in primary schools. So, I needed to know which primary schools in this district would offer the integrated placement for this integrated child. I called that department, but they said that they couldn't offer me with that specific information. Then I had to take time to search the Primary School Directory page by page in order to locate those suitable primary schools.

The teachers raised the issue that the integrated teacher would take each of the integrated children out of the classroom for only 30 minutes per day. The kindergarten teachers were required to take charge of the integrated children throughout the rest of the time. Thus, they complained that they should be given special education training and access to more government resources in order to teach the integrate children academics.

The teachers noted that resource supports rendered by the government during the past few years had been continually reduced. Those subsiding resources included parent education for parents of children with disabilities, speech and occupational therapies for the integrated children, and financial supports for related activities for parents and their integrated children. Also of concern were the closure of the part-time special education course, the lack of monitoring supervisions, and the scarcity of long-term follow-up treatments for integrated children from the department concerned.

In addition to the fading out of resource supports by the government, the teachers also noted that recently there was another obstacle imposed by the government to the integrated kindergarten contexts. There was no consistency in the integrated educational placements completed by the government. Accordingly, the integrated children came in the middle of the school year. That unfavorable arrangement severely impacted the learning outcomes of the integrated children, and the integrated children had to adjust to all the elements in the new school environment. In addition, the teachers

pointed out that there were numerous obstacles inherent in society that contributed to conditions for children with disabilities in integrated kindergartens.

Societal Level Constraints

The teachers revealed their beliefs that Hong Kong society rejects individuals with disabilities and that the educational rights of the children with disabilities are fundamentally ignored. They argued that without the availability of adequate resource supports and sound early intervention training, those children would not be able to attain academic achievement. The teachers said that society was not receptive toward children with disabilities and that there was societal pressure on families of children with disabilities. One teacher revealed the problems,

There is pressure on families of children with disabilities from society. Everyone in my entire family tree was born to be normal. In case, I gave birth to a child with a disability, I know they wouldn't blame me. But, I can understand how they feel toward the problemed child. The big trouble is that they have to face many sources of pressure, such as neighbors, family members, friends, and the general public. This is Hong Kong and the thinking of the Chinese people here is more traditional.

The teachers perceived that the parents of children without disabilities did not like having integrated children in their child's class. In addition, the teachers saw that the integrated children were not accepted by many of their typical peers. One teacher described the children's negative attitude,

Whenever the integrated child comes to the board, he always tends to move his body restlessly. The children always like to laugh at him. I guess when one started laughing, the rest just follow. Then, he gets upset and shows more awkward gestures. It only brings the children more laughter. When I give a question to the integrated child, the typical kids always say, "Teacher, please don't ask him; and he will not be able to give you the answer." Whenever I find something broken lying on the ground and ask the children who did that, they point to the integrated child.

The teachers pinpointed that the worsening economic situation in Hong Kong negatively impacted the families of children with disabilities. Both parents had to work overtime in order to raise their families, and the care their children suffered. One teacher illustrated the problem,

There are the issues of time and money. To the family of children with disabilities, time is a big issue. Now, the economic situation in Hong Kong is deteriorated. Both parents have to work to raise the family. It is very difficult for the mother to stay home in order to take care of the child. Without the proper care given by their parents, children with disabilities suffer.

The teachers complained that society had not rendered sufficient resource supports to individuals with disabilities to attain academic achievement, and the educational rights of the integrated children were largely ignored. The teachers argued that there should be adequate resource supports, such as early intervention training given to the integrated children at an early age so that they could make progress in their learning. The teachers perceived that society did not care about the welfare of children with disabilities, and there was no opportunity open for them to make progress. The teachers pointed out that the potentials of the children with disabilities were wasted. One teacher expressed her concerns,

No one seems to bother to take care of the education of children with disabilities. I feel that their potentials are wasted. But, they are members in the community and they are members in the world. These children seem like they cannot achieve anything or make any progress. But, we should give them the chance to try. At least, let them try.

The teachers revealed that the general public in Hong Kong society did not have a positive attitude toward children with disabilities. The educational rights of these children were fundamentally ignored, and insufficient funding was distributed to provide

those children with appropriate education at their early age. The families of children with disabilities felt pressured by society to lower their expectations regarding their children's academic achievement. Due to the economic constraints in most of those families, the disabled children were not given proper care. As a result, the potentials of the children with disabilities were not fulfilled. The teachers seemed highly aware that because they could not teach academics to the integrated children, their role should focus on the social development of their integrated students.

Social Development for Children with Disabilities

The kindergarten teachers emphasized that their major role in relation to the integrated children was to assist these children in maximizing their social development. Analysis of teacher interviews revealed three areas of concern for the teachers. These included: (a) encouraging positive relationships between typical and integrated children, (b) promoting a desired relationship between the teacher and the integrated children, and (c) educating parents of children without disabilities to develop a receptive attitude toward the integrated children.

Peer Relationships

Kindergarten teachers pointed out that the essence of placing children with disabilities in the integrated kindergarten context was to focus on their social development. They said that these children had demonstrated difficulties in social and emotional domains. Thus, the teachers said that they had coached both children with and without disabilities on how to interact appropriately with each other. A teacher summarized,

The major problem among the integrated children is their social and emotional aspect. These children may not know how to interact and make friends with others. So, the teacher must save time to teach the integrated children how to interact with their typical peers. The typical children should be taught how to make friends with the disabled children.

The teachers thought that the typical children should not know the nature of integrated children's disabilities, so this information was not revealed to the typical children. Instead, the teachers said that they told children that each individual was a member of the classroom community, and each should help the other. Moreover, the teachers considered that revealing the integrated children's disability to the typical children was to label the integrated children. The teachers' goal was for typical children to be sympathetic toward the integrated children's problems. The typical children were also taught that they were more competent than the integrated children, so it was their job to take care of the integrated children. One teacher stated her rationale,

When the integrated child exhibited his disruptive behavior, like kicking and hitting his peers, some typical children came to me and asked, "Teacher, why did you not punish him?" I didn't tell them that he was a disabled child because I didn't want to label him. I told them that I was sympathetic toward his problems. I taught the typical children to learn to tolerate his problems because they were more competent than him.

The teachers perceived that there should be helping behavior in the classroom community and that children should learn to offer their help to others. Thus, the teachers designed ways to involve all the children in serving others by collecting materials and doing the clean up. One teacher described the helping tasks,

Can't you see there is a roster at the back of the classroom? We have a roster that involves a group of children to serve others in the classroom. It can promote helping behavior among the children. The children have already been divided into 6 groups, and each group has 6 children. For instance, the first entire group is assigned to serve the other groups on Tuesday. They sign their names on the roster and to help the other groups

to collect materials and do the clean up. Each child, including the integrated child, is involved. They should learn how to help others in the classroom.

The teachers noted one strategy of pairing an integrated child with a younger child whose ability was similar to that of the integrated child. When the integrated child felt that his ability was similar to the younger child, his motivation and enthusiasm were elevated, and he demonstrated more willingness to actively participate in the activities. One teacher described the following scenario,

> We have small-group activities, and he is one of the members in the group. But, he still doesn't have enough confidence to try to work with the typical peers. I usually arrange a younger child to work with him in a group. The younger child still has difficulties expressing himself clearly, but the integrated child is very mature in his verbal ability. The difference between them is smaller. The integrated child seems to be very comfortable working with the young child, and both of them get along well. He has become more active and showed his willingness to engage in activities.

The teachers said that the children with and without disabilities had ample opportunities for interaction as they were placed together in the same classroom. As a result, the typical children were very helpful toward the children with disabilities. An example is,

> The typical children are very cute, and they won't say anything bad to the integrated children. They always say things like, "He doesn't know how to do the task, and we need to teach him. We need to help him out with his problems." They have a lot of opportunity for interactions. They stay together and do the same activities in the kindergarten throughout the whole day. The integrated child will not be taken away except the 30 minutes individualized training.

The teachers perceived that the integrated children had problems in social skills, and they did not have many friends. Hence, the teachers declared that they had created

opportunities for those children so that they could obtain friendships with the typical peers. One teacher stated,

Some integrated children have problems in language and social skills. Because they don't know how to communicate with others, they don't have many friends to play with them. So, I need to create the opportunity for them to make friends. For instance, in the singing class, I will pair the integrated child with a typical peer to dance. The typical children accept the integrated child. So, the teachers must be more proactive to help them make friends with each other.

The teachers warned that teachers should not always keep children with physical disabilities by themselves. Instead, they said that they had encouraged the typical children to take care of those physically handicapped children because it created the opportunity for both children to interact with each other. One teacher suggested this option,

One child has difficulty walking, and he easily falls down. It takes time for him to walk to the music room, rest room, and playground back and forth. Instead of accompanying him to those places myself, I have found some typical peers to help him. He needs to learn how to interact with the typical peers rather than interacting with me. I also teach the typical peers on how to help him. Then, it will not take away the time for me to take care of the other children. It also gives him more chances to interact with peers.

The children with disabilities in the integrated settings were identified by the interviewed teachers as lacking in social skills, and they had demonstrated difficulty in obtaining friendships from their typical peers. The teachers reported that they had constructed a classroom community in which all the children were members. The nature of integrated children's disabilities was kept secret from the typical peers because the teachers did not want to label the integrated children. Accordingly, the teachers thought that the typical children would not be able to identify the integrated children. Most essentially, helping behavior among group members was encouraged by the teachers. The

typical children were encouraged by the teachers to offer their help to members who were less able.

Teacher-Child Relationships

The teachers knew that a mistrusting relationship between themselves and integrated children would negatively impact the children's social development. Thus, the teachers tried to develop a trusting relationship with the integrated children so that their experiences in school would be improved. One teacher said that sitting with the integrated child during snack time was one of the ways to achieve that goal,

The integrated child has not yet developed an intimate relationship with me. Instead, he has developed a better relationship with the integrated teacher because he has already followed her for a year. I hope that he will trust me more. If he trusts me, he will tell me everything about himself. But, he doesn't seem to trust me. He doesn't tell me anything, and it also affects his learning in the classroom. He is passive and has no confidence to answer questions. I need to develop a trustful relationship with him. So, during snack time, I often sit with him, hug him, and chat with him. I hope that it will enhance our relationship.

The teachers were aware that integrated children had many unsuccessful learning experiences. The teachers said that the integrated children could distinguish that their abilities were weaker than their typical peers. Thus, the teachers reported that the integrated children should be helped to develop a sense of achievement in their school performance, so that they would feel valued by their peers. One teacher stated the positive effects,

The children with disabilities have had more failure experiences than successful ones. They know their abilities are weaker than the typical peers. Many people say that teaching the disabled children should use behavioral modification, and to give them the rewards to reinforce the desired behavior. But, I feel that when they grow older, they want the acknowledgment and praise from their peers rather than the candies. We should invest more time to help the integrated children develop a sense of achievement in their tasks.

The teachers stated that the integrated children must not be excluded from non-academic tasks of the daily routines, and teachers should render the assistance necessary for accomplishing these tasks. One teacher described how she assisted an integrated child in getting through a non-academic task, such as the artwork,

I require the integrated child to engage in all the activities of the daily routines. But, I won't expect him can achieve the same standards as the typical children. For instance, he doesn't like to play with clay. I tell him if he can touch it, it will be ok. I think at least if he learns not to refuse touching it, he makes a little progress. He also refuses to do the artwork because he doesn't know how to make it. I always work with him together to complete the artwork. At least, he knows that he needs to finish all the required tasks everyday.

The teachers perceived that the integrated children should be required to learn how to behave properly in the classroom. The responsibility of the teachers should include disciplining all children so that they will know how to behave when they grow up. One teacher stated the needs,

The integrated child is very wild in his behavior. For instance, in the singing class, the children were allowed to move around to do the necessary movements with the music. He often got too excited and moved around like a butterfly, and he always bumped onto the other children. Afterwards, I taught him how to behave in the classroom. I can't let him to do whatever he wants. I told him that what he had done was wrong. Although, he may not be able to do the proper behavior next time, I need to discipline him. If nobody teaches him even if he has done something wrong, he doesn't know how to correct it. When he grows up, that is not good for him.

The teachers emphasized that a trusting relationship must be established between the teacher and integrated children with the intent that these children would be confident to explore and participate in the classroom activities in the kindergarten. Since integrated children experienced more failure, the teachers' role included providing these children with a sense of accomplishment by collaboratively working with them on difficult tasks. The teachers highlighted that they cared about integrated children's social

adjustments in adulthood. So, they also disciplined integrated children to help them acquire the proper ways to behave in classroom contexts.

Educating Parents

The teachers perceived that typical children and their parents were not receptive to children with disabilities. Hence, the teachers did not reveal the nature of integrated children's disabilities in order to avoid labeling the integrated children. When the problems of the integrated children were noticed by the typical peers and their parents, the teachers masked children's disabilities by saying the integrated children were only immature. One teacher stated her rationale,

Some integrated children only have mild learning problems, such as writing or speech problems; I see them as normal children. The children with and without disabilities should get to know each other. I teach them how to get along with each other. I don't tell the typical children about the nature of the integrated child's disability. I don't want to label the integrated child. I think typical children and their parents will look down upon the integrated child if I say so. When they notice the integrated child's awkward behavior, I will explain to them that the integrated child is less mature.

The teachers reported that the parents of children without disabilities did not accept harmful behavior toward their child from children with disabilities. Those parents taught their children to get away from the disabled children. Hence, the teachers perceived that their role was to educate these parents and their children to be more understanding toward the integrated children's behaviors. One teacher revealed the parents' negative attitudes,

I can't say that 100% of typical children are willing to accept the integrated children. I heard that some parents of children without disabilities don't accept them. Once, I had an integrated child whose muscle tone was very tight; he sometimes unintentionally hit the peers sitting next to him. A typical kid's parent complained to me and said, "That child always hits my son, you should remove him to another table." Or a child came to me and said, "My mammy tells me that I should not play with him or stand close to him because

he always hits others." I removed the integrated child to another table and explained to the typical children's parents that that child was unable to interact with others properly. I asked the parents of children without disabilities to teach their children to understand and help that problemed child. I feel that I also taught those parents to accept the children with disabilities.

The kindergarten teachers who were interviewed raised concerns that the integrated children were unable to develop friendships with their typical peers in the integrated kindergarten contexts. So, their major responsibility was to assist those children to attain friendships. They believed that the parents of children without disabilities and their children did not accept the children with disabilities. The teachers stirred up the group dynamics between the children by promoting positive relationships among members in the classroom community. The teachers in this study acted as role models for the typical children to demonstrate desired behavior toward the integrated children. The kindergarten teachers offered opportunities for both sets of children to develop a range of desired behavior toward one another. The teachers also believed that it was important to educate the parents of children without disabilities to develop more positive attitudes toward the children with disabilities.

The interviewed teachers perceived that they needed to be proactive in promoting the desired relationships between the teacher and the integrated children and between the typical children and the integrated children. They also thought it was important to educate the parents of children without disabilities to develop a receptive attitude toward the integrated children.

Summary

The early childhood classroom teachers who had been serving in the integrated kindergarten contexts told me that their primary responsibility was to teach academics to

children without disabilities. They said that they were compelled by the parents, the primary schools, and the government to do so. Parents chose academic kindergartens rather than kindergarten programs based on developmental approaches. Parents wanted their children to be adequately prepared with prerequisite skills necessary for making a successful transition into academic primary schools. The primary schools expected the kindergarten graduates to have mastered the basic skills and to be able to discipline themselves. The government wanted primary school students to demonstrate achievement based on academics.

Kindergarten teachers revealed that they, however, were not compelled by parents of children with disabilities, their schools, the government, or society to teach academics to children with disabilities. Parents of children with disabilities were pressured by society to lower their expectations of their children's academic potential. The schools and the government expected special education teachers to teach academics to children with disabilities. Society, in general, did not support the distribution of adequate resources to support the education of children with disabilities.

The early childhood teachers revealed that they knew the detrimental effects of disabilities both on the academic performance and emotionally well-being of children with disabilities. They, however, felt that they were not adequately prepared to address the special needs of these children. In addition, they reported that the learning and behavioral problems of children with disabilities were noticeable to their typical peers, and this recognition often led to rejection. Kindergarten teachers reflected that the special needs of children with disabilities were not met after being in their kindergartens for three

years and that their potentials were not fulfilled. Hence, they concluded that their integrated kindergarten programs did not serve the needs of children with disabilities.

The teachers interviewed complained that, in reality, they were not given the basic support needed to meet the needs of typical children or children with disabilities. They reflected that the needs of neither children with nor children without disabilities were met after being in their kindergartens for three years. In the chapter to follow, conclusions and implications based on these findings will be discussed.

Chapter V
Conclusions and Implications

I believe that the most significant finding of this study is that there are a number of local constraints imbedded in the Hong Kong context that are hindering the development of successful integrated early education. In order to effectively address the problems originating at the macro-level, I consider that any improvement of integrated early education in Hong Kong must involve systems-level change (Stoiber, Gettinger, & Goetz, 1998). In this chapter, I propose broad systemic changes that involve certain key components, including the Hong Kong government, integrated kindergarten programs, early childhood educators, teacher education institutions, and educational researchers. Their contributions to integrated kindergarten education could function as a constellation of resource supports for creating quality integrated early education for young children with disabilities. Recommendations and implications for each component are described below.

For Government Policy

I urge the Hong Kong government to properly address the existing structural problems of early childhood education and early childhood integrated education in order to provide quality inclusion to children with disabilities (Bailey, McWilliam, Buysse, & Wesley, 1998). It is my belief that the Hong Kong government's current education policy of excluding early childhood education from the compulsory education system is the major cause of the overall poor quality in early education. The results of this study show that without the Hong Kong government's continuous and sufficient funding of early childhood programs, even the well-established, non-profit organizations could not render

quality education for children with and without disabilities. Thus, the Hong Kong government must revise its current educational policy to include early childhood education within the compulsory education system so that all children can attain quality early childhood education experiences.

Moreover, my data strongly suggest that the standardized curriculum implemented in the integrated kindergarten programs is a major cause of excluding children with disabilities and keeping them from receiving academic instruction by kindergarten teachers. Kindergarten teachers in this study pointed out the Hong Kong government's support for implementing a standardized curriculum within the academic school system. Therefore, in addition to including early education into the larger education system, the Hong Kong government should enforce its education policy of implementing a curriculum that addresses all-round development in early childhood education. Accordingly, quality inclusion can happen in integrated kindergarten programs. The implications for early childhood education and integrated early education are more thoroughly discussed below.

Early Childhood Education

Kindergarten teachers in this study reported that in their integrated kindergarten programs they had implemented a standardized curriculum and that they deemed their primary responsibility to be teaching academics to children without disabilities. In particular, they believed that they were required by the schools to assist students without disabilities in attaining the prerequisite skills necessary for making a transition into primary schools. Kindergarten teachers explained that under the adverse conditions of continued low enrollment, many kindergarten programs, including those with

developmental approaches, had been closed down over the past few years. Teachers perceived that parents preferred to place their children in academic kindergartens rather than those considered to be developmentally appropriate. The teachers knew that their programs had devised many strategies to attract enrollment in order to sustain their operation. Kindergarten teachers strongly believed that the primary goals of their programs were dictated by parents' interest in preparing students for first grade work.

The interviewed kindergarten teachers lamented that parents knew that their children experienced stress resulting from the academic tasks prescribed by the standardized curriculum. Parents, however, felt that such an approach was the best way to prepare their children for subsequent schoolings because parents knew that the entire school system in Hong Kong was academically-oriented. So, parents placed their children in academic kindergartens with the intent that their children would be adequately prepared with the basic academic skills necessary for first grade work. As a result, their children would be better able to get through the academic school system, obtain an educational placement at the university, and eventually secure a good job.

The kindergarten teachers under study reported that primary schools in Hong Kong exerted high levels of academic pressure on students. Kindergarten graduates were required to go through examination-oriented interviews for entry into academic primary schools. The first graders in primary schools were expected to have acquired the prerequisite academic skills, including proficiency in English and Chinese, mastery of basic mathematics, skill in copying, dictation, taking written examinations, doing homework, and the ability to control their behavior. The teachers commented that

kindergartens had continually become more academic due to academic pressure pushed downward from the primary schools.

The interviewed kindergarten teachers felt certain that the Hong Kong government wanted primary school students to attain achievement based on academics. Despite the fact that the educational policy of the Hong Kong government was that kindergarten programs become more developmentally appropriate, the government did not take any concrete action to reform the dominant academic structure of primary schools. But parents raised concerns about developmental approaches, and they continually pushed kindergartens to become more academic. Thus, the teachers strongly believed that the Hong Kong government expected its primary school students to attain academic achievement.

The Hong Kong government's attitude toward the value of early childhood education is incongruent with those of the interviewed kindergarten teachers. Kindergarten education has not been perceived by the Hong Kong government as the foundation upon which subsequent schooling is built. Thus, kindergarten education has been excluded from the compulsory educational system in Hong Kong (Rao & Koong, 2000). The Hong Kong government's policy of having no entry requirement or basic readiness for first graders was reported in Wong's (2003) article on kindergarten children's difficulties in transitioning to primary school in Hong Kong. Wong's article documented the Hong Kong government's proclamation that "all the primary syllabus did not require any prerequisite knowledge or assume any level of attainment when a child of 6 was admitted to primary one" (Education Department, 1993, p.17). As kindergarten graduates were not required to have any fundamental knowledge or skills by primary

schools, kindergarten education was perceived by the Hong Kong government to be an informal education experience for young children.

The results of this empirical study have shown that primary schools' academic requirements for kindergarten graduates contradict what has been the official policy of the Hong Kong government since 1993. The kindergarten teachers under study stressed that Hong Kong primary schools had implemented academic curriculums due to forces applied by the Hong Kong government and parents. According to the teachers' perspectives, a child who was not educated in kindergarten would not be able to make a smooth transition into primary schools. Therefore, from the teachers' perspective, kindergarten education was the most important foundation to prepare students for success in subsequent schooling.

Rao, Koong, Kwong, and Wong (2003) asserted that high-quality programs with better qualified teachers, low teacher-child ratios, relevant teaching materials, and stimulating learning environments are beneficial to young children's learning outcomes. In contrast, poor-quality kindergarten programs are staffed with minimally trained teachers, have high teacher-child ratios, and provide poorly equipped learning environments. These researchers documented that poor-quality kindergarten programs negatively impact students' short-and long-term learning outcomes. Rao, Koong, Kwong, and Wong (2003) commented that only wealthy people in Hong Kong could afford placing their children in high-quality kindergarten programs so that their children could attain success in later schooling. But disadvantaged families could only send their children to poorer quality programs that not only could not assist students in accomplishing cognitive development, but might also harm their psychological well-

being. As a result, children from disadvantaged families did not possess the academic abilities necessary for getting through the academic school system, starting from primary through university. As Wong (2003) illustrated, Hong Kong is a knowledge-based society. Without achievement based on academics, an individual may not be able to obtain a good job.

Families' economic situation is a significant factor that impacts students' achievement in schools, as well as success in society. While children of the rich are provided with favorable conditions to become successful in their schooling and career, children of the poor are deprived of the opportunity to improve their lives. This situation will only increase the problems of disparity between the rich and the poor.

The rationale behind compulsory education is to provide each child with an equal opportunity for attaining an education, regardless of a family's economic situation. Chan and Chan (2003) point out that up to now, the Hong Kong government did not intend to include early childhood education into the compulsory education system. Equal opportunity for education is particularly important for children from disadvantaged families. Education becomes a tool for disadvantaged students to break the chain of poverty as well as accomplish upward social mobility. Accordingly, education has special meaning to the poor and the distressed as a way to improve their stressful lives.

Based on these incongruities, I believe the Hong Kong government should include early childhood education as part of the compulsory education system. It should provide quality early childhood education to all children, regardless of their families' economic situation. Accordingly, each child's equal opportunity for quality early education will be safeguarded. When individual citizens in society believe there is equal opportunity for

everyone, then they are more willing to become functional members of society and make an effort to be successful in their schooling and career.

The spirit of equality among individuals is particularly important to Hong Kong because its economy has heavily relied on foreign trade. Hong Kong needs to present a positive image to foreign investors so that it can attract more long-term investment. If Hong Kong really wants to become more stable and prosperous, it must include early childhood education into the compulsory educational system. Doing so will be a significant step toward making Hong Kong a fairer society.

Early Childhood Integrated Education

The findings of this empirical study have shown that programs' curriculum and goals significantly impact teachers' perceptions of appropriate learning outcomes for children with and without disabilities. Most strikingly, the results have documented that kindergarten teachers in this study held similar expectations of learning outcomes for children with and without disabilities, regardless of teachers' age, length of service (both in early childhood education and integrated kindergarten contexts), and types and levels of teacher education training.

Kindergarten teachers reported that their integrated kindergarten programs' primary goal was to prepare students for first grade work in primary schools. As primary schools already implemented an academic curriculum, their programs also implemented a standardized curriculum with the intent of preparing their students for transition. The standardized curriculum adopted by the four integrated kindergarten programs all shared similar characteristics: a fixed teaching timetable for the twelve themes and their subthemes; subject matter of the themes divided into individual subjects, including

Chinese language, English, Mathematics, and Putonghua; increased complexity of the subject matter of each subject throughout the grade levels; step-wise and well-defined objectives; the availability of the suggested activities; the design of the classroom space; and product-based assessments.

According to Hatch (2005), standardized curriculum approaches are behaviorist in nature. The operation of behaviorist classrooms looks like those in academic primary schools. One of the problems of implementing behaviorist-oriented curriculum in kindergarten education is that children are perceived to be passive recipients of pre-programmed knowledge. As behaviorists primarily focus on academic learning, essential components of child development, such as children's individual variation and their families' and the community's socio-cultural contexts are often ignored (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). As Weber (1984) asserted, behaviorists assume that school's curriculum should be constructed by adults according to their needs and that children should be raised in such ways that they can live in a completely controlled society.

Kindergarten teachers in this study reported that under the constraints of the standardized curriculum, they had focused their teaching on learning outcomes for typical children. Kindergarten teachers explained why they came to this normative approach toward their students without disabilities. They said that due to the difficult curriculum and its academic tasks, plus a number of constraints inherent in the integrated kindergarten settings (e.g., rigidly fixed classroom routines, a limited time at each individual session, a high teacher-child ratio, and heavy workloads), they abandoned the notion of individual differences among children. In order to accomplish the preplanned

daily teaching objectives prescribed by the standardized curriculum, teachers chose to devalue individual differences in children.

Kindergarten teachers' normative approach toward children without disabilities hindered the opportunity for teachers to deliver academics to children with disabilities. Compared to typical children, the integrated children were perceived by kindergarten teachers as being slow, lacking in motivation and confidence, below average in academic achievement, and failing to comply with the teacher's instruction.

There were negative attitudes among kindergarten teachers toward teaching children with disabilities because teachers felt that their schools did not support them in teaching academics to special children. Instead of showing its advocacy for integrated kindergarten programs by investing more funding and relevant resources to the improvement of education of children with disabilities, the Hong Kong government withdrew resources from the integrated kindergarten programs. Teachers told me that the general public in Hong Kong rejects individuals with disabilities, and they don't seem to care about the well-being of such individuals. Teachers argued that without public support, adequate funding, or resource support to render effective early intervention to young children with disabilities, it was very difficult for those children to make progress in learning.

Kindergarten teachers reported that they were not adequately prepared with sound special education training and needed more support from the Hong Kong government. They felt inadequate to effectively teach academics to children with disabilities. Thus, kindergarten teachers concluded that children with disabilities did not learn academics after being in the integrated kindergarten programs for three years.

Teachers believed that children with disabilities in the integrated kindergarten programs were not adequately prepared with the prerequisite academic abilities necessary for making the transition into primary schools. Without the needed fundamental skills, it is likely that these children will not be able to cope with the high levels of academic pressure exerted by primary schools. It will be even more difficult for these children to get through the academic primary school system, not to mention the secondary and university levels. If these children continue to experience failure and frustration in their school work, they will likely lose interest in learning, and some may drop out of school. It is anticipated that when these minimally educated disabled children grow into adulthood, they will have difficulty obtaining a good job in a knowledge-based society such as Hong Kong.

Without a stable job, it is even more difficult for adults with disabilities to support themselves independently, given the high-priced housing available in Hong Kong. Most probably, they will need to rely on the support of their parents throughout their lives. When their parents pass away, most of them have to depend on social welfare. This picture represents the continuation of a relatively common social phenomenon.

We should not forget that all the children with disabilities who are referred to integrated kindergarten programs have a disability of a mild grade. The nature of these children's disabilities includes speech and language impairment, learning disability, emotional impairment, and autism. If these mildly disabled children drop out of primary schools and grow into adulthood without being properly socialized to operate in social settings, they may not be able to regulate themselves and behave properly toward others. Without sufficient knowledge and skills to support themselves economically, mildly

disabled adults may be forced to use illegal means to satisfy their needs. This picture is rather bleak, but we cannot deny the possibility that it happens in the real world.

To ensure the stability of the Hong Kong society, the Hong Kong government should include early childhood education in the compulsory education system, and it should enforce its policy of implementing developmentally appropriate curriculum and practices in early childhood education. This is important because developmentally appropriate practices are based on a comprehensive knowledge of child development, respect for individual variation, and consideration of socio-cultural contexts of families and communities (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).Under such desirable practices, kindergarten teachers will be better able to see individual differences among young children and be more willing to tailor sound curriculum to meet the needs of individual children with and without disabilities. When children with disabilities are given the opportunity to attain success in school, they can support themselves economically as well as contribute to the making of a more stable and prosperous society.

For Integrated Kindergarten Programs

The results of this study have shown that teachers believed that programs' academic goals and the implementation of a standardized curriculum produce detrimental effects on the overall development of children with and without disabilities, the effectiveness of teachers, and the effectiveness of programs. Kindergarten teachers reported that under the constraints of the standardized curriculum, there were short-term negative effects on students' overall developmental growth. Kindergarten teachers lamented that their students lost interest in learning. They observed that during free-choice time, their students with and without disabilities loved playing with toys and

computer games, but that those subject matter areas, such as Chinese, English, Mathematics, Science, and reading were barely visited by the students (unless they were compelled by the teachers). Kindergarten teachers needed to rely on reinforcement and disciplinary strategies in order to make students engage in academic tasks.

Kindergarten teachers reported that there were also long-term negative effects that may be damaging to students' psychological well-being. As academic success is greatly valued and rewarded by teachers, that means stress for students. When well prepared kindergarten children get into the best academic primary and then competitive secondary schools, they always compare themselves to others in terms of academic achievement. Each student wants to excel in relation to peers. When they find out that their academic results are behind their peers, they do not accept that it happened and got frustrated. In extreme cases, some commit suicide, while others suffer psychologically.

Kindergarten teachers reported that their teaching effectiveness was severely hindered by the standardized curriculum. They argued that according to the standardized curriculum, teachers were forced to think of students as passive recipients to be filled with preplanned knowledge and skills. Students' learning outcomes were measured by product-based assessment tools. There was no room for teachers to challenge students with tasks just beyond students' current level of development in order to maximize their cognitive functioning. Thus, kindergarten teachers commented that after being in kindergartens for three years, their students could not attain optimal development in general, and cognitive capacity in particular.

Teachers believed that the standardized curriculum negatively impacted program effectiveness. The results demonstrated that the implementation of the standardized

curriculum and constraints inherent in integrated kindergarten programs did not help the programs to attain their primary goal. In contrast, the standardized curriculum became a barrier, depriving teachers of the opportunity to help guide students' intellectual development. Without attaining optimal cognitive development, students would not be able to cope with high levels academic pressure exerted by primary schools. Thus, I propose that integrated kindergarten programs should implement a curriculum that addresses all-round development in order to advance their programs' effectiveness.

The interviewed teachers in this study underscored the importance of assisting children with disabilities in maximizing their social development. They provided many examples to show that children with disabilities did not have the basic social skills necessary for establishing friendships with their typical peers. In order to help these children improve their peer relations, teachers believed they had to be proactive. Specifically, there were three areas of concerns for kindergarten teachers: developing a trusting relationship between teachers and disabled children, promoting a desired interpersonal relationship between children with and without disabilities, and educating parents of children without disabilities to establish a positive attitude toward children with disabilities.

Kindergarten teachers realized that their unfavorable attitude toward children with disabilities produced detrimental consequences on these children's overall development, and in the social domain in particular. According to the teachers' descriptions, these children were not confident in the classroom environment, and they did not show any initiative or interest in participating in school activities. In order to enhance these children's confidence and social skills, kindergarten teachers chose to build a trusting

relationship with the disabled children by sitting with them during the snack time or assisting them in accomplishing an artwork. They believed that through such arrangements, these children would have enough confidence to explore and interact in the classroom.

Kindergarten teachers were aware that there was mistrust and rejection between the children with disabilities and themselves. They explained that that mistrust originated from the academic requirements imposed by the standardized curriculum and the constraints inherent within the school system. Accordingly, they were forced to discard the notion of individual differences among young children and to operate on the belief that children with disabilities did not possess the ability to accomplish academic tasks. Moreover, the teachers themselves felt inadequate about addressing the learning problems of children with disabilities because they were not prepared with relevant knowledge and skills in special education. They let the integrated teacher teach academics to these children and lowered their expectations for their children with disabilities. They considered the integrated teacher (who possessed relevant knowledge and skills in special education) to be the more appropriate person to claim ownership of teaching the children with disabilities.

My analysis revealed that the relationship between teachers and children with disabilities was a mixture of estrangement and doubt. Although, kindergarten teachers attempted to enhance these children's social skills, I worry that these efforts were less than adequate. As one of the teachers highlighted, what children needed most was not teachers' material rewards, they wanted peers' acknowledgement. I believe that as long

as these children's academic problems are not properly addressed, they will not be able to develop the confidence needed to be successful in school.

Kindergarten teachers observed that, due to the lack of social skills, children with disabilities did not obtain friendship from their typical peers. Kindergarten teachers knew that without the teacher's assistance, the children with disabilities would likely become loners in the context of integrated kindergarten. They also believed that since children with disabilities would not be accepted by their typical peers, the nature of these children's disabilities should not be revealed. Instead, they masked these children's disabilities by attempting to construct a classroom community in which strong group cohesiveness and helpfulness existed among group members. In particular, more competent students were trained by teachers to render help to those less able. Kindergarten teachers believed that with teachers' purposeful guidance, there should be a desirable relationship between children with and without disabilities.

Kindergarten teachers revealed that children with disabilities were rejected by their typical peers and seemed to be loners in the integrated kindergarten settings. Even though the teachers did not disclose the nature of children's disabilities, the typical children knew that children with disabilities were different from them. Particularly, they noted that disabled children were removed from their classroom each day by the integrated teacher in order to assist them in competing academic tasks. Moreover, comparing their given assignments, the typical children realized that those children's assigned tasks seemed to be easier. In addition, some competent children were selected and trained by the teachers to render assistance to those children. Thus, the typical

children thought that, in comparison to them, children with disabilities were inferior in academic achievement.

As kindergarten teachers explained, their integrated kindergarten programs wanted their kindergarten graduates to enter into academic primary schools because it would attract enrollment. Kindergarten teachers felt pressured to push their students toward academic excellence. Accordingly, the students were reinforced by rewards to accomplish academic tasks. Academic achievers were highly valued and were portrayed by the teachers to be role models for other students in the classroom. Each student wanted to excel in relation to his/her peers in order to fulfill the teacher's expectation, and competitive relationships were established among young children.

Children with disabilities, however, were noted by typical children as having difficulties in academic achievement. Even the teachers' attempted efforts to arrange more competent peers to take care of the disabled children's academic problems did not produce caring and desirable relationships. On the contrary, it only demonstrated more examples to typical children that children with disabilities were academic inferiors. Based on the teachers' data, children with disabilities often became the target of teasing, blaming, and alienation by their typical peers.

Kindergarten teachers emphasized that the implementation of the standardized curriculum and academic school culture severely restricted social relationships in the classroom. One of the participating teachers raised concerns that she felt regret about pushing young children for academic excellence. That pursuit not only imposed stress on young children, particularly the high and low academic achievers, but also threatened the trusting relationship between teacher and children with disabilities, and playful and

friendly relationships among young children. This teacher said that she should have taught young children to know the uniqueness within a person, each with his/her own strengths and weaknesses. In the past, she only inflated the self-esteem of those talented students and did not teach them how to cope with failure. Instead, students should be taught to be proud of their strengths and simultaneously learn constructive ways to improve on their weaknesses.

The implication that I learned from this teacher is that there are dangerous effects of the standardized curriculum and academic school culture on relationships between teacher and child, and among children. In fact, this kindergarten teacher believed schools should discard the standardized curriculum because it only drove teachers to primarily focus on students' academic achievement and push students for academic excellence. I completely concur with what the teacher said. Moreover, in order to accomplish that teacher's vision of assisting students in balancing strengths and weaknesses within themselves, I recommend schools implement a curriculum with developmental approaches because teachers will be guided to respect individual variation among young children (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

When teachers discern there are multifaceted strengths within a child, they are better able to render assistance to meet leaning needs of individual children (Hatch, 2005). Accordingly, teachers are more willing to assist students in accomplishing optimal development in general and cognitive functioning in particular. More specifically, students will be assisted by the teacher to accomplish cognitively challenging tasks that are just beyond their current level of development. Throughout the process of

collaboratively working with the teacher, students will learn to accomplish the difficult tasks on their own (Berk & Winsler, 1995).

Students who experience such desired learning contexts will learn to respect individuals with special learning needs because of teachers' modeling of positive attitudes toward students with diverse learning needs. Through the challenging tasks given by their teachers, students will learn to construct a context in which to both improve on their own weaknesses and demonstrate their academic excellence. Rather than making comparisons to their peers in terms of academic achievement, they will learn to grow internally.

Kindergarten teachers reported that parents of children without disabilities did not want children with disabilities to be included in their children's classroom because they were afraid that such children would retard the normal learning pace and affect their children's academic outcomes. Thus, kindergarten teachers chose not to disclose the nature of their students' disabilities. When parents of children without disabilities raised concerns about harmful behavior toward their children by children with disabilities, the teachers masked children's disabilities by informing parents that the problemed children were less mature. Kindergarten teachers also knew that parents of children without disabilities taught their children to stay away from disabled children. Thus, teachers considered it to be very important to educate parents of children without disabilities to be sympathetic toward disabled children's behavioral problems and that parents be advised to send the same message so that their children would be receptive toward children with disabilities.

Rather than informing parents about the nature of children's disabilities in advance, kindergarten teachers chose to wait until parents raised concerns about harmful behavior toward their children. Kindergarten teachers even believed that it was important to promote a sympathetic attitude toward disabled children's behavioral problems among typical children's parents. I believe that masking the nature of children's disabilities not only did not improve the relationship between families of children without disabilities and children with disabilities, it only created more misunderstandings.

The data analysis showed that kindergarten teachers' rationale for not revealing the nature of children's disabilities to families of children with disabilities might be due to the values of the school culture. Kindergarten teachers reported that their schools did not provide them with adequate information concerning the nature of disabilities and learning problems of children with disabilities. They considered the information given by the integrated teachers to be minimal, and they thought that they were not supposed to access to disabled children's personal file due to confidentiality issues. Moreover, they knew that they were not included in the preliminary interview with families of children with disabilities. The integrated teacher was invited and was expected by the school to establish a collaborative relationship with the affected families. The teachers assumed that since their relationships with families of children with disabilities were not as close as those of the integrated teacher, it was inappropriate to seek extra information from such families by themselves. Instead, they thought they should obtain the information from the integrated teacher. Since kindergarten teachers did not obtain adequate information concerning the nature of children's disabilities, they believed that they were

not in a position to reveal the nature of children's disabilities to families of children without disabilities.

The data showed that kindergarten teachers shared similar concerns with families of children without disabilities regarding disabled children. They worried that having children with disabilities in their classroom would retard the normal leaning pace and deprive typical children's opportunity to learn. I believe that the lack of information related to the nature of children's disabilities created misunderstandings toward children with disabilities. Thus, I recommend that schools provide teachers with more concrete information about the nature of children's disabilities so that teachers and families of children without disabilities can acquire a better understanding of the needs and potential of children with disabilities.

The findings of this study evidenced that teachers were not involved in the process of decision-making concerning the education of children with or without disabilities. Important decisions were made by school administrators and eventually passed down from the top. Teachers' voices and grievances were rarely heard. As their expertise, experience, and concerns were not valued by schools, it was difficult for them to derive satisfaction from their jobs. When teachers were working simply for salaries, it was difficult for them to develop ownerships of their responsibilities. It was even more difficult for them to develop a genuine collaborative relationship with their colleagues in order to share and improve their experiences related to teaching.

Pertinent literature on early childhood education pinpoints that teachers should be given opportunities to be decision-makers in schools (Hatch, 2005; Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). Thus, schools need to alter their traditional perceptions of teachers and

their roles. School administrators should think of teachers as decision-makers whose expertise, experience, and concerns are valued as important school assets. There should be greater teacher involvement concerning the education of children with and without disabilities, and school administrators should establish genuine two-way communication with teachers so that teachers' voices and grievances can be heard. When teachers feel that their participation is valued by schools, they are more likely to be motivated to establish caring interpersonal relationships with students and their families, and they are better able to develop collaborative relationships with their colleagues. When teachers' job satisfaction is maximized, they make more valuable contributions to schools.

For Early Childhood Educators

The early childhood educators interviewed felt that they were helpless and inadequate in the contexts of the integrated kindergarten programs in this study. Kindergarten teachers raised concerns about how academic tasks created stress for both children with and without disabilities. The teachers themselves were also stressed because they were the ones who implemented what they considered to be an inappropriate curriculum. They, however, said that they did not have the confidence to try to persuade parents of the detrimental effects of the standardized curriculum on the overall development of young children. They strongly believed that their schools would not allow them to talk with parents concerning the problems of the standardized curriculum.

One of the participating teachers in the study resigned from her job. She told me that she would work as an integrated teacher in an integrated childcare program in the spring semester of 2005. The reason she gave for her resignation was that she wanted to

work under the guidance of a team of specialists working at the integrated childcare center. With the assistance rendered by a team of specialists, she believed that she would better able to address the special needs of children with disabilities But in the integrated kindergarten context, she saw herself working like a robot to fill children without disabilities with academic stuff and felt helpless about not having adequate expertise and relevant resource supports to teach academics to children with disabilities.

I think we should encourage teachers to remain in the field of early childhood education, even in the face of hardship. In particular, this is the critical time for the development of early childhood education in Hong Kong because the field has been continually challenged by the government's unsupported educational reform, continued low enrollment, and the closure of many programs with developmental approaches. While many integrated kindergarten programs have gradually changed their strategies to pursue the standardized curriculum, what the field essentially needs is a pool of well-qualified early childhood educators who are committed to serving the best interests of children with and without disabilities.

One of the teachers under study, who received a Bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education from China, demonstrated her efforts by constructing 13 areas in her tiny classroom, including socio-dramatic play. Her efforts showed us that a teacher empowered by quality teacher training in early childhood education could overcome environmental barriers in order to best serve the needs of children. The insight that I get from her is that early childhood educators should upgrade themselves to meet professional standards through continued professional development.

Kindergarten teachers reported that they relied heavily on classroom management strategies to force students to pay attention to teachers' lectures and complete required academic tasks. It is recommended that teachers make use of socio-dramatic play to assist young children in attaining the ability to self-regulate (Berk & Winsler, 1995). I believe that the positive effects of self-regulation work much better than ineffective behaviorist strategies used by many teachers. When teachers' decisions on the content of curriculum and strategies of instructional practices are guided by the research literature on early childhood education, teachers are better able to tailor appropriate curriculum and sound teaching strategies in order to best serve the individual needs of children with and without disabilities (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

Outcomes from high quality programs provided by professional early childhood educators will earn respect and acknowledgement from schools, parents, the Hong Kong government, and the general public. In return, teachers will derive more satisfaction from their jobs. Thus, early childhood educators must enhance their professional preparation in order to deliver sound educational experiences to children with and without disabilities. In general, they can assist young children in attaining optimal development in all domains, and maximize children's intellectual capacities in particular.

For Teacher Education Institutions

The current study suggests many implications for teacher education institutions regarding early childhood education and early childhood special education. It is striking to note that kindergarten teachers in this study, regardless of their age, years of services in early childhood education and integrated kindergarten settings, as well as types and levels of teacher education training, held a normative view about children with and

without disabilities. The normative approach adopted by kindergarten teachers was based on students' academic achievement. Kindergarten teachers' normative approach toward typical children included keeping the learning pace and following classroom routines, accomplishing academic tasks independently, paying full attention to the teacher's lecture, participating in classroom activities, demonstrating learning outcomes intelligently, and listening to the teacher's directions. But children with disabilities were perceived by the teachers as being slow, lacking in motivation and confidence, below average in academic achievement, and failing to comply with the teacher's instructions. Children with disabilities were seen as falling outside of the norm for typical children and were not expected to accomplish the same things.

The results of this study document that there were powerful effects of the schools' academic culture on teachers' perceptions of young children and their instructional practices. Kindergarten teachers explained that the constraints of the program goals, the implementation of the standardized curriculum, and the lack of resource supports forced them to take a normative approach toward young children. Thus, teacher education institutions must help their future teachers realize that there are genuine impacts of the culture in schools on teachers' perceptions of appropriate early childhood curriculum and effective instructional practices.

Research documents that preservice teachers' commitments to developmentally appropriate practices acquired from teacher education institutions are particularly vulnerable when school cultures are contradictory to those promoted in the teacher education institution (Proctor & Niemeyer, 2001). The current results document that the desired effects of teacher education training could not counteract the pressure exerted by

the schools' academic culture. In particular, under the constraints of the academic school cultures, one participating teacher, who received high quality preservice teacher education training, could not enact her beliefs about appropriate developmental approaches in the real classroom.

Kindergarten teachers pointed out that they valued the experience of working in schools more than the training experience in teacher education institutions. The teacher who obtained preservice teacher education training criticized theories in child development acquired from teacher education institutions as impractical and useless in the actual school contexts. One of the most experienced teachers in this study (who was studying for an advanced teacher education course) commented that she did not buy into the notion of developmentally appropriate practices preached by the teacher educators in the teacher education institution because, under the constraints of the academic school culture, she was not allowed to apply the theories in actual classroom settings.

Therefore, teacher educators should be more understanding and empathetic toward teachers' frustration and feelings of helplessness. It is the responsibility of teacher education institutions to prepare teachers to work in the real classroom situations in which the school cultures may be contradictory to those of the teacher education institutions (Hatch, 2005). Teachers should be exposed to a variety of approaches in child development and prepared with a wide range of sound instructional strategies in order to assist young children in attaining optimal development in all domains. More specifically, teachers should be prepared with sound instructional strategies to assist students in accomplishing the academic standards expected by schools, parents, and the Hong Kong government. When teachers are well-informed of the potential negative effects of

schools' academic cultures and they are empowered with sound instructional strategies to assist students to accomplish academic achievement in particular and optimal development in general, they are in a more favorable position to expand their beliefs about appropriate practices.

The current findings reveal that kindergarten teachers lamented that their integrated children were taken out of their classrooms for only 30 minutes of individualized instruction each day. They felt the burden of taking care of the integrated children for the rest of the day. They felt inadequate and even had negative attitudes about teaching academics to children with disabilities. They reported that they needed special education training and relevant special education materials in order to address the special needs of children with disabilities. They also raised concerns that they did not possess the needed skills to properly deal with the traumatic and disruptive behavior exhibited by children with emotional impairments. Furthermore, they expressed that they had difficulty teaching children with autistic features.

I believe that the primary goal of including children with mild disabilities into the integrated kindergarten contexts is to offer these children the opportunity to study alongside their typical peers, as well as acquire social skills by engaging in mutual and meaningful interaction with them. Thus, children with disabilities should be encouraged to participate in daily classroom activities as much as possible. Simultaneously, it is important to render effective remedial strategies for these children via specialists in early childhood special education in order to properly address these children's special learning needs based on the nature of their disabilities (Buysse, Skinner, & Grant, 2001; McDonnell, Brownell, & Wolery, 2001).

I believe it is the responsibility of teacher education institutions to provide general education teachers with relevant knowledge and skills in special education so that teachers feel comfortable and confident teaching children with disabilities. Kindergarten teachers in this study reported that the one-year, part-time special education course had been cancelled by the Hong Kong government. Instead, special education courses are now taught as part of the advanced courses in Early Childhood Education in teacher education institutions. These introductory special education courses should be available to general education teachers. The courses can prepare general education teachers with basic information about children with disabilities, including a rationale for inclusion, pertinent laws regarding education of children with disabilities, referral processes, types of children with disabilities, effective remedial methods, various assessment measures, and parent involvement. As a result, general education teachers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of children with disabilities; and they are in a better position to accept these children.

I think there are good reasons for the schools of early childhood education and early childhood special education to merge into one faculty. Teacher education institutions should incorporate special education components into the various courses of early childhood education as much as possible. When general education teachers' exposure to knowledge and skills in special education increases, they learn to think of children with disabilities as children to be served in their classrooms (Proctor & Niemeyer, 2001). Regular education teachers should be prepared with effective remedial strategies to adjust regular education teaching materials in order to deliver individualized instruction to children with disabilities (Hatch, 2005).

In response to teachers' quest for effective skills for handling the traumatic and disruptive behavior exhibited by emotionally disturbed children, teachers should be prepared with sound behavioral modification strategies to properly address the specific problems of such a child. When regular education teachers are empowered by sound teacher education training that encompasses early childhood education and early childhood special education, they are better able to render effective individualized instruction to address the special learning needs of children with disabilities.

For Educational Researchers

Pertinent literature on early childhood education and early childhood special education points out that general education teachers are the most crucial persons in determining the successful implementation of inclusive education (Smith & Dlugosh, 1999; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Proctor & Niemeyer, 2001; Mulvihill, Shearer, & Horn, 2002). Hence, the intent of this in-depth qualitative interview study was to listen to the teachers' voices; to walk on their shoes. Kindergarten teachers were given a good deal of time (at least 10 hours for each teacher) to talk about their experiences regarding integration. Thus, the teachers' rich, firsthand accounts served as a solid foundation for me to do the data analysis. I strongly believe that the generalizations derived from teachers' detailed descriptions of the integrated kindergarten programs fairy represent the overall early childhood education and integrated early childhood education context of Hong Kong.

It is expected that integrated kindergarten programs will have been phased out by the end of summer, 2005. Children with mild disabilities will be served only in the contexts of childcare programs. It is very important to continue to conduct research in

integrated childcare programs in order to ensure that quality education be provided to these children. One of the participating teachers resigned from the integrated kindergarten program to take up a post in an integrated childcare program as an integrated teacher because she said that she was fed up with the conditions in the integrated kindergarten program. In particular, she wanted to work with the assistance of a team of specialists made available in the integrated childcare programs. She said she believed that, with the extra resource supports, she could better serve children with disabilities.

I worry that adequate and relevant resource supports for integrated childcare programs will be rendered by the Hong Kong government. In 2003, I conducted a pilot study with a general education teacher who worked in the integrated childcare program. The results showed that that program had implemented a primary one curriculum for children from ages of 5-6. That program's instructional practices, assessment tools, and design of the classroom space were very similar to those in the integrated kindergarten programs involved in the current study. There were insufficient resource supports provided by the school, and the Hong Kong government failed to support teachers who taught children with disabilities. Consequently, children with disabilities did not obtain appropriate education from that particular setting. Based on this evidence and observations of past practices, I am not hopeful about the future. Hence, there is urgent need for researchers to continue to conduct research in integrated childcare programs in order to monitor the education of young children with and without disabilities.

Reflections

I recognize that I began this study with presumptions about the negative effects of kindergarten teachers' insufficient educational backgrounds and minimal teacher

education training on students' learning outcomes. Additionally, pertinent literature on early childhood education in Hong Kong confirms that kindergarten teachers' poor preparation for working in integrated settings is one of the contributing factors leading to undesired learning outcomes (Cheng, 2001; Li, 2003). During the course of doing and writing up this study, I did my best to bracket my own perspectives and rely on my data to tell the story.

Spradley (1979) taught me that in order to tap rich firsthand information from participants, researchers must adopt a learning approach in relation to their informants. Thus, I employed many strategies, such as writing monthly journals and submitting them regularly to my professor for perusal in order to ensure my personal biases toward kindergarten teachers would be bracketed during data collection (Hatch, 2002). Moreover, at the start of each interview, teachers were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time during the research process, despite the fact that I knew that I certainly would have difficulties if anyone really dropped out from the study. But, I believe that the friendly reminder not only could make participating teachers feel more comfortable in their relationship with me, but they could also gain a sense of control over the interviewing processes.

I feel that I was fortunate to be able to obtain rich, firsthand information from the participating teachers regarding integrated kindergarten programs in Hong Kong. I was shocked as the study was unfolding during the analysis and interpretive processes. In particular, I was surprised that kindergarten teachers under study held a normative approach toward children without disabilities, and that children with disabilities were perceived as falling outside the expected norms for typical children.

The specific finding about teachers' normative approach has proven that my initial presumption about the inadequacy of kindergarten teacher preparation was wrong. Rather, I found that a school's academic culture negatively impacts teachers' beliefs regarding children with and without disabilities, and constrains the kinds of instructional practices to be implemented in the actual classroom settings. The results also show that any form or level of teacher education training did not produce a counteractive effect on the influence of the school's academic culture. The participating teachers included a teacher who had preservice teacher education training, another with the Bachelor's degree in early childhood education, and four teachers who were currently studying for the advanced courses in early childhood education; and all adopting similar approaches toward children with and without disabilities.

Accordingly, teachers became implementers of the school culture. Schools and parents insisted on an academic curriculum and served to perpetuate the dominant academic school system in Hong Kong. Due to worsening economic situations in Hong Kong, the new government chose to follow the academic school system formerly established by the British government in order to save funding.

I believe that without genuinely listening to kindergarten teachers' voices and concerns, I would not be able to tap the data that permitted me to do my analysis and interpretation. If I was influenced by my initial presuppositions about the inadequacy of kindergarten teachers, it only drove me to be more careful in my analysis and to keep more careful track of my own impressions. Hence, it is my belief that one value of qualitative research is to gain a better understanding of myself by studying "others" (Vidich & Lyman, 2000). The increased understanding of myself serves as the vehicle for

making improvements. The results of this study teach me to learn from others with an open mind.

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