Using the Performance Indicators for Preschool Self-Evaluation and Improvement: A Chinese Model

Margaret N C Wong
The Hong Kong Institute of Education

Hui Li
The University of Hong Kong

Date of Resubmission: 24 April, 2008

This article arises from a research project supported by the Quality Education Fund, HKSAR. We thank all the collaborating colleagues and the children and staff at the participating pre-primary institutions. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Margaret Wong at the Faculty of Professional and Early Childhood Education, The Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong. Electronic mail should be sent to mwong@ied.edu.hk.
Abstract

This study investigated how the *Performance Indicators* (PIs), a quantifiable check of school effectiveness and accountable issued by the government, was used by Chinese preschools to do self-evaluation and improvement in Hong Kong. Sixty-four representative pre-primary institutions of 15,035 children and 1,600 practitioners, and 9 project members worked collaboratively through the self-evaluation and improvement cycle within 18 months. Post-project surveys, group interviews, documentation analysis, and multiple case studies were conducted to gauge the participants’ views on the progress and problems regarding school improvement. The results indicated that: (1) the revised 7-step Chinese model of self-evaluation and improvement was workable for Hong Kong pre-primary institutions; (2) the institutions did benefit from the project and got better understanding of the PIs, reflections on children’s learning and teacher’s teaching, professional development, heightening of organizational morale and team spirit; (3) the common difficulties encountered in the processes were time limitation, lack of resources, and under-qualified teachers; and (4) the successful experiences might include strong leadership, team work with deep collaboration, school-based training, peer observation, useful instruments, and support from external advisor. The sociocontextual factors and the educational implications of these findings are discussed.
Using the Performance Indicators for Preschool Self-Evaluation and Improvement: A Chinese Model

Performance indicators, school effectiveness and accountability, self-evaluation and learning standards are the topical terms nowadays in educational arguments among policy makers, politicians and economists worldwide. The key policy focus has shifted from “how much can we invest in education” and “how many schools can we build” to “how good the schools are doing.” In this new climate of school accountability, the quality and improved performance of schools have therefore being demanded (Reezigt & Creemers, 2005; Li & Wang, 2007). Hong Kong, keeping up with this international trend, has in recent years launched the Performance Indicators (PIs) for pre-primary, primary, secondary, and special schools to enhance school effectiveness and accountability (Rao, Koong, Kwong, & Wong, 2003). The PIs for pre-primary institutions, for instance, consist of a set of indicators on preschool effectiveness and quality education which all settings are required to meet. Those kindergartens failing to pass the major indicators in the quality review conducted by the educational authorities will be no longer eligible to receive financial subsidy through the pre-primary education voucher scheme. This top-down approach to monitoring and improving preschool performance has created not only opportunities but also challenges to all the institutions. There is, however, not enough attention given to investigating whether, how and why these performance indicators could facilitate school improvement in the pre-primary institutions, “the Cinderella of the education system” that has been neglected by the Hong Kong government for decades (Opper, 1993, p.88). The present study is therefore conducted to investigate the process of implementing the PIs in Hong Kong pre-primary institutions, to understand the benefits and problems of this topdown implementation, and finally to de-contextualise the findings for educators at large to identify and reflect on these experiences.
The Performance Indicators for Pre-primary Institutions in Hong Kong

Performance indicator is “a policy-relevant statistic designed to provide information about the condition, the stability or change, the functioning, or the performance of an education system or a part thereof. Education indicators may point to – or index- on certain aspect of the condition, functioning, or performance of an education system, but they are not the phenomenon itself” (Bottani & Tuijnman, 1994, p.48). This definition on indicators in education makes the distinction between those which are performance indicators and those which are education indicators. The term performance indicator is often interpreted as referring to final outputs and that of education indicator is often used to refer to intermediate outputs and educational processes. However, Hong Kong educational authorities treat all indicators in education as performance indicators that encompass both the process and output elements. To enable a thorough evaluation on the performance of a pre-primary institution, the PIs are designed to cover the following areas of work under four major domains: (1) 'Management and Organization': leadership, planning & administration; (2) 'Learning and Teaching': curriculum, learning & teaching; (3) 'Support to children and School Culture': pastoral care, personal, social and cultural development; and (4) 'Children's Development': academic performance, non-academic performance. The first three domains are process indicators, reflecting the pre-primary institution’s provision of desirable learning environment conducive to the development of quality education. Those in domain IV are outcome indicators, covering the progress of children in different aspects to reflect the effectiveness of the pre-primary institution (EMB, 2001). Each PI is sub-divided into performance items with four levels: excellent, good, capable and unsatisfactory, against each item the pre-primary institutions are expected to check their own performance supported with evidence. This quality assurance framework comprising of 4 domains, 32 performance indicators and 97 performance items thus constitutes a comprehensive and systematic
benchmark that all early childhood settings are expected to observe when conducting self-evaluation and school improvement, and is a reference for quality review conducted by the educational authority.

*Using the PIs for self-evaluation in Hong Kong kindergartens*

Nowadays, all children of 3 to 6 years would go to kindergartens and the younger children under 3 years would be enrolled in childcare centres or crèches in Hong Kong. All the kindergartens must use the PIs to conduct self-evaluation and the Quality Assurance Inspection teams from the educational authority will also use the PIs to evaluate the effectiveness of individual setting. Failure to comply with the PIs leads to a warning in the Inspection Report, which will be released on the governmental webpage and is accessible to parents, teachers, and the public. Starting from September 2007, those failure cases will not be eligible to join the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme which entitles a child HK$13 000 per annum. This latest regulation has greatly weighted the importance of the PIs in the authorities’ quality review which is vital to the survival of the local pre-primary institutions.

As a consequence of a set of governmental initiatives toward school accountability, interest as well as stress concerning the implementation of the PIs has therefore been increasing in the Hong Kong early childhood sector since 2000. However, being the single tool that pre-primary institutions can use to evaluate and facilitate early learning and teaching, the *PIs* have also brought up some difficulties that might become the barriers to successful outcomes. First, few guidelines are offered by the educational authorities to help pre-primary institutions to go through the self-evaluation and self-improvement process. Second, pre-primary staffs are not familiar with using the PIs to conduct self-evaluation and may lack confidence to begin the process. Third, the PIs have not been used extensively and difficulties in interpreting and implementing them have not been fully identified (Wong, Li,
This pressure can be positive for schools which are able to cope, but it can be damaging for schools that do not have the capacities to initiate changes, especially if they do not have adequate support.

Envisaging the challenges and difficulties caused by these initiatives, the authors have conducted two projects aiming at using self-evaluation as a tool to create a culture of continuous improvement in the Hong Kong early childhood settings. The first project was a pilot study conducted in collaboration with 12 representative pre-primary institutions. Altogether 5,747 children and 284 staff volunteered to implement the Performance Indicators within two years, and the processes were studied and reported (Li & Wong, 2007). All the participating settings have completed the full cycle of self-evaluation and self-improvement consisting of five sequential stages: understanding the Performance Indicators, self-evaluation, action planning, school improvement, and reflection (Li & Wong, 2007). These are very similar to the five stages identified by Reezig & Creemers (2005): evaluation of improvement needs; diagnosis of improvement needs and setting of detailed goals; planning of improvement activities; implementation; evaluation and reflection. An interactive information package, Guide to Using the Pre-primary Performance Indicators in Learning and Teaching was produced and published for dissemination to all the early childhood practitioners in Hong Kong. This practical manual detailing the self-evaluation and improvement model consists of a collection of written materials, a CD to provide practice examples, and a floppy disk with tools and checklists.

It was anticipated that this manual might be able to alleviate many problems encountered by the early childhood practitioners who seek to evaluate and improve their own practices for the first time. But many kindergartens reported that they were not able to implement the PI, even with the help of the practical manual and the five-stage framework. Thus, a follow-up study is launched to involve a larger cohort of pre-primary institutions.
going through the self-evaluation and improvement process using the Package, and to investigate the following questions:

1. What are the workable procedures for conducting self-evaluation and self-improvement through implementing the Performance Indicators in Hong Kong pre-primary institutions?

2. What are the benefits, difficulties and experiences encountered by Hong Kong pre-primary institutions in implementing the cycle of self-evaluation and school improvement?

Method

Participants

Sixty-four kindergartens and child care centres with a total of 15 035 children and approximately 1 000 staff (teachers and principals) volunteered to participate in the present study. These participating settings were selected on the basis of their type, size, and location, to represent as far as possible the varying background and condition of pre-primary institutions in Hong Kong. They were assigned to a group of eight from a similar geographical location, with a project member as the external advisor who worked with them during the whole process. Each group formed a school net and the advisors attended monthly group meetings rotationally hosted by each institution. The basic demographic information is presented in Table 1. Twenty-eight pre-primary institutions were labelled as small setting as their capacities were below 200 children, 34 medium settings catered for 200 to 500 children, and 3 large settings holding 500 to 2 000 children. Participating practitioners had Qualified Kindergarten Teacher (QKT) status with a basic training of 360 hours, or Certified Childcare Worker (CCW) with a basic training of 200 hours. Some had more advanced qualifications of Certificate of Early Childhood Education (CE) or a Bachelor Degree. They had considerable teaching experience and all settings featured an average history of more than 5
years, some had 24 years.

--------------------------------
Insert Table 1 about here
--------------------------------

One Preschool Development Officer (PDO) was identified by each participating setting to represent them and to facilitate their self-evaluation and improvement. They were usually principal or head teacher that possessed at least a Certificate of Early Childhood Education (equals to college level), had more than 5 years of teaching experience, with good communication, negotiation and problem-solving skills, and were able to mentor teachers and engage in collaborative teamwork. Their role was to foster within-site and between-site collaborative practice, scaffold the knowledge and skills of the staff as they engaged in the self-evaluation and improvement of teaching, and to organize ongoing professional development activities that enhance the quality of teaching. To effectively guide the school through each step of the self-evaluation and self-improvement, they had to work collaboratively with the external advisers, the Project Administrator and the participating staff and children, forming trust relationships with all the stakeholders in the project, collaborating with them to plan and implement the workshops and seminars. They also need to gather data to document and track the self-evaluation and self-improvement process in the preschool.

The research team consisted of 9 teaching staff of the School of Early Childhood Education, the Hong Kong Institute of Education, the major provider of early childhood teacher education in Hong Kong. Each member of the research team served as the external adviser for eight pre-primary institutions, and participated in collaborative networks to help the PDOs and their colleagues to achieve their goal of evaluating and improving learning and teaching. Their responsibilities included working closely with the PDO and the schools
throughout the project, giving them advice on the self-evaluation and self-improvement
process through group meetings or on-site consultancy providing specialist training to the
PDOs and workshops for the PDOs and their staff to improve teaching that respond to the
schools’ needs. They can be guest speakers or workshop facilitators when necessary.

**Instruments**

*Guide to Using the Pre-Primary Performance Indicators in Learning and Teaching.*

This manual offers ideas that practitioners can use or adapt to evaluate the strengths and
needs of their own pre-primary institutions. The materials in this guide give examples of the
tools, approaches and strategies that were found helpful to the participants in the first stage
project (Li & Wong, 2007). The guide aims to: (1) help practitioners to evaluate learning and
teaching in systematic ways; (2) identify strengths and areas to strengthen; and (3) make
improvements to learning and teaching. To achieve these aims, it provides: (1) materials that
help practitioners use the PIs to evaluate and improve learning and teaching, including
suggested ways to evaluate and examples of checklists, forms and photographs; (2) video CD
that gives practitioners some examples of practices that are related to the PIs and can help
them think about and evaluate their own practices; and (3) disk that has copies of forms and
checklists for practitioners to select or adapt for their own use.

*Survey.* This survey aimed to investigate the PDOs’ views of the whole cycle of
self-evaluation and improvement in their own settings. The questionnaire was designed and
validated by a team of experts for the present study to elicit the following information: (1)
school background, demographic information, the curriculum they adopted; (2) why and how
to conduct the self-evaluation and improvement; (3) the problems and difficulties in the
whole cycle; and (4) the effectiveness and efficacy of the strategies and approaches they used.
Fifty-eight PDOs of the 64 participating settings completed the questionnaire within one
month after they finished the project. The other 8 settings failed to finish this survey because
the PDOs had left.

**Semi-structured interviews.** One institution willing to share their lessons and experiences was chosen from each group to undergo the follow-up studies. The 8 external advisers, who were very familiar with the PDOs and had in-depth understanding of the real situation in each school, interviewed the PDOs and their teams during the project to understand what they knew about quality teaching and how they enacted it at the initial stage. After the project, the PDOs and the participating teachers were interviewed again to gather information about their views of the self-evaluation process, difficulties, encountered changes emerged and other issues. The protocols for the interviews were fixed and stringently followed (See the Appendix for more details). The purpose of the interviews was to cross check the information the PDOs put forth in the questionnaires and the self-evaluation reports and to further explore how the project had affected their learning and teaching in the early childhood classrooms.

**Document analysis.** All the documents that the participating settings produced for implementing the Performance Indicators were collected, and those of the 8 follow-up cases were systematically analyzed by their external advisors. The documents include curriculum materials such as the school-based syllabuses, lesson plans, and time-tables, school meeting minutes, monthly consultation records, field notes, self-evaluation portfolio, and action plan for self-improvement. The self-evaluation portfolio is a complete collection of the information describing and documenting the evaluation process. In the self-evaluation report, each setting was asked to reflect on how the implementation was initiated and administered and their strengths and weaknesses in learning and teaching. In the action plan, the settings were asked to discuss the problems and challenges brought by the implementation and their proposed solutions. The documents from all settings were scrutinized by the research team to identify the similarities and differences in the implementation and to verify the findings from
the group interviews and classroom observations.

**Procedures**

To understand the patterns and discrepancies in the processes of self-evaluation and school improvement in Hong Kong, the present study was conducted in two stages as follows.

**Stage 1:** All the 64 participating settings were guided to go through the cycle of self-evaluation and improvement within 18 months: understanding the Performance Indicators (Months 1-2), self-evaluation (Months 3-9), action planning (Month 10), improvement (Months 11-17), and reflection (Months 18) (Li & Wong, 2007). All the participating institutions were asked to complete the questionnaire within one month after they completed the project.

**Stage 2:** Among the 64 pre-primary institutions, 8 volunteered to be followed up for case study. The 8 advisers interviewed the PDOs and their teams to gather information on their views of the self-evaluation and improvement process, difficulties encountered, solutions formulated and other issues. All the interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the same research assistant. The transcriptions were scrutinized by the authors to generate the themes, topics, and foci, which could be shared by others.

**Results**

The 64 participating pre-primary institutions have gone through the self-evaluation and improvement cycle within 18 months, completely but hurriedly. All the documents, observation notes, audio and video data, reports, checklists and meeting records produced in the project were collected as part of the multi-method, multi-source data collection process. These data and those elicited from the survey and interviews served to triangulate the reliabilities and validities of the multi-source data. Analyses on these data unveiled the commonalities and differences in self-evaluation and school improvement across these
A Seven-Step Model of School Improvement

The authors (Wong, Li, & Yung, 2006; Li & Wong, 2007) found in the first project the school improvement cycle consisted of five stages: understanding the Performance Indicators, self-evaluation, action planning, improvement, and reflection stage. Further, the present study has fractionized the stage of understanding PIs into three chronological steps: building the task force, understanding the Performance Indicators, and working out the strategies for self-evaluation, as shown in Figure 1.

Step 1: Building up the task force. This was the first task the participating settings had to undertake when the school improvement cycle started. The two approaches to team building found in the first study (Li & Wong, 2007) were used by the participants: (1) Small setting approach: The principal or supervisor took responsibility for leading the work. A senior staff member was assigned to work with the principal and all other staff were assigned some responsibilities; (2) Medium-to-large setting approach: The principal herself or an appointed senior staff member led a Performance Indicator team to take charge of evaluation process. The team will include the principal or head teacher, other senior staff, and staff with special responsibilities such as curriculum leaders in different grades (age level) while each member in this core team will have an identified role and responsibilities. Meanwhile, all other staff in the setting will be involved in the evaluation and improvement process in one way or other. It was found that the settings with a capacity of less than 200 children used the first approach, and the larger pre-primary institutions took the second approach to establish their machinery of self-evaluation and self-improvement.

Step 2: Understanding the Performance Indicators. The task force worked together to co-construct meanings about each indicator of the PIs, first amongst themselves, and later with other staff. This step was to guarantee that the Performance Indicators were thoroughly
understood and used consistently, and this was conducted through an extensive moderation process. Classroom observations and peer observations with video tapes were used to collect examples for discussion. With the help of the Guide and the video clips, this step has become easier for the participants than before.

**Step 3: Working out the Strategies for Self-evaluation.** Before starting the self-evaluation process, the task force would have to work out how to conduct the evaluation, and to collect evidence on the performance items for classes of different grades in the setting. In Hong Kong, most pre-primary institutions use Thematic Approach to organize their teaching, and some use ‘Spiral Teaching’ in which classes of all levels have the same theme at the same time, but with varying focus and depth. In the present study, the following strategies were identified amongst the participating schools: (1) “Same theme, Same time” strategy: all the participating classes at different age levels, conducted the self-evaluation on the same theme simultaneously; (2) “Different themes, Same time” strategy: classes in each grade chose a different theme to evaluate the learning and teaching process during the same period; and (3) “Different themes, Different times” strategy: each grade chose a different theme to evaluate at different times. Subsequently, the four sections in the learning and teaching domain, teaching and caring, children’s learning, curriculum design, evaluation of learning experience would either be covered by each grade, or some might choose to cover one or two sections only to begin with. Group interviews and field notes indicated that it was crucial for the preschools to have careful planning to cater for the specific context of each grade and class to ensure that good progress was made.

**Step 4: Self-evaluation using the Performance Indicators.** The task force and their colleagues used the Performance Indicators and the Guide to assess the learning and teaching activities and collected evidence for self-evaluation. The quality of practice in relation to the 7 dimensions of quality learning and teaching outlined by the Performance Indicators were
carefully documented and evaluated by using the instruments and measures provided by the Guide. All the qualitative and quantitative data were then collated into a carefully structured "Self-Evaluation Report" by each institution. The external advisor collected and reviewed these reports to guarantee that all indicators were covered and analysed.

Step 5: Planning for Self-improvement: The task force formulated an action plan for the self-improvement process, which identified the strengths and weaknesses in learning and teaching of the setting, the priorities for improvement and, importantly, the resources and expertise required to achieve these. It was found that the school improvement activities, with the professional support from the research team and other external advisors, should included: (1) communicating clearly to all those involved the rationale and procedures of the action plan; (2) helping staff to feel involved, and giving them ownership and acknowledgement in the improvement process; (3) organizing tailor-made workshops to help staff develop the required professional knowledge and skills; and (4) organizing meetings for the participating school to provide opportunities for dialogues and sharing.

Step 6: Implementing the Action Plan: The action plan was implemented at this stage and the progress was monitored. The participants were encouraged to collect evidence and reflect upon their actions on the quality of learning and teaching in the setting. Meanwhile, the external advisors would come to the participating institutions to offer school-based consultancies and in-house training, to help them go through this stage smoothly. The implementation phase was the most demanding phase in the cycle and would generally involve more staff than the other phases. In our observation, this stage took time, resources and energy, especially in those settings that had several improvement areas in their action plan.

Step 7: Reviewing the Improvement: The participants reflected upon the self-evaluation and improvement process, and reviewed the impact of their action plan on learning and
teaching. The external advisors helped the participating preschools to assess, by means of the self-evaluating procedures and the Guide, whether the goals of improvement had been achieved. Focus was on the improvement areas, especially by comparing the results with the previous ones to capture the changes in learning and teaching. At this stage, the quantitative and qualitative data collected by the settings before and after Step 6 would be used for comparison, under the guidance of the external advisors. If goals were achieved, they would go back to the action plan and select another area to improve by repeating steps 5 and 6. This seven-step model represents a full cycle of self-evaluation and improvement and takes at least 18 months to complete.

PDOs’ Views on the School Improvement Processes

The statistics on the participants’ views about the project is shown in Table 2. It is important to note that their reported purposes in joining this project were: (1) to enhance school effectiveness (93%); (2) to learn to use the Performance Indicators (85%); and (3) to prepare for the external inspection by the educational authority (57%). The majority (71%) of the participating settings reported that it was the principal or supervisor who made the decision whether to join this project; some settings (21%) made the decision collaboratively with the staff; a couple of settings (5%) had to leave the decision to the school board of directors. Noticeably, most of the principals (77%) chose themselves as the PDOs for their settings; a minority of them (21%) appointed the head teacher as the PDO. These findings indicated that most of the principals were reluctant to involve their staff in decision-making and responsibility-taking.

--------------------

Insert Table 2 about here

--------------------

Regarding the foci of self-evaluation and improvement with the teaching and learning
domains, almost all the PDOs were most concerned with teaching and caring (93%) and children’s learning (91%); and comparatively less so on curriculum design (78%) and evaluation of learning experience (76%). All participants used the Guide to Using the Pre-Primary Performance Indicators in Learning and Teaching in the self-evaluation and improvement processes, and most of them (82%) found the Guide very useful. The major improvements brought by using this Guide were: (1) enhancing the quality of teaching (78%); (2) improving the evaluation of learning experiences (72%); (3) enhancing children’s learning (52%); and (4) facilitating curriculum development (50%).

Most PDOs (79%) reported that they were satisfied with the results of self-evaluation and school improvement. The most satisfying improvements reported were as follows: (1) teaching and caring for children (69%); (2) curriculum planning (62%); (3) children’s learning (60%); and (4) evaluation of learning experiences (50%). Meanwhile, the pre-primary institutions were not satisfied with their own performance in the following areas: (1) evaluation of learning experiences (43%); (2) curriculum planning (36%); (3) teaching and caring for children (33%); and (4) children’s learning (26%). Significantly, almost all the PDOs (97%) reported that the major difficulty they encountered in school improvement was time limitation. Other difficulties included the lack of resources (staff, equipments, ICT hardware, etc) (88%), the under-qualified teachers (57%), and the lack of parental support (8%).

Benefits, Difficulties and Experiences found in follow-up case studies

Benefits. Teachers reported that they were more committed to their teaching, had enhanced teaching and observation skills, deepened understanding of child development and motivated to try out new ideas.

“I got to understand my strengths and weaknesses in the process of self-evaluation. In addition, this exercise has enhanced my understanding of children’s learning.
Therefore, I could pre-examine the learning activities in my teaching plan to see whether they were varied and balanced before really putting them into practice. Further, I found the video-taped classroom observation very helpful, I could observe directly from the video clips and thoroughly understand where and how to improve…”

(Teacher’s benefits, Teacher A3)

They reported that the children experienced enhanced quality of learning activities and enriched learning experiences, had more developmentally and culturally appropriate learning activities, demonstrated heightened learning interest, more engagement and initiative in learning.

“To me, it was a mixture of positive and negative feelings. It was negative because our workload had increased, but positive because at the end it was a very rewarding experience benefiting us and the children.” (Teacher and Children dimensions, Teacher H2)

In summary, the benefits repeated reported by the participating principals and teachers were: better understanding of the Performance Indicators, reflections on children’s learning and teacher’s teaching which resulted in improvement in lesson planning and pedagogy, professional development, heightening of organizational morale and team spirit.

Difficulties. The major concerns and difficulties reported by the 58 PDOs in the surveys were also found in the interviews: time limitation, pressure and overload, lack of human resources, need of professional support and relief teachers. The following excerpts describe the major difficulties shared by the interviewees, namely, time limitation, need of professional support, pressure and overload.

“It took us much time to discuss and communicate on the Performance Indicators and the Guide package. We had to work every weekend during the self-evaluation phase. The peer observation and paper works were not so
tough to us, but the analysis of data to judge the performance level was not easy. Worse than that, they were very time-consuming.” (Time limitation, Teacher B1)

“We felt helpless when the project started. We did not know how to conduct self-evaluation with the Performance Indicators. So I think the major difficulty was we had no idea of what to do and how to do it properly. We were in urgent need of experienced teachers or experts.” (Need of professional support, Teacher C4)

“This project was an added-on job; we were already overloaded, so we were under great pressure.” (Pressure and overload, Teacher D2)

“We had paid so much in the process (of self-evaluation and school improvement). For example, we had to attend the Saturday Seminars delivered by our Project Team, had to participate in the monthly meetings with other schools in the same group. These have aggravated the burden on our teachers. In my memories, we had lots of things to do during that period, for example, self-evaluation plan, Open Day of our own school, monthly meeting report, Quality Assurance Inspection (by EMB) and so on. All these things happened in a chain, and we were pressed badly.” (Pressure and overload, Principal D)

Experiences. In the follow-up case studies, the commonly successful experiences were reported by most of the participating preschools: (1) The role of leadership (7 schools); (2) Collaboration and team work among the staff (8 schools); (3) school-based training (6 schools); (4) Support from external advisor (6 schools); (5) The establishment of the culture of peer observation (6 schools); and (6) Detailed guidelines and useful instruments for self-evaluation and improvement. The following excerpts provide illustrations of some of these successful experiences.

“We could not use the Performance Indicators right away to conduct
self-evaluation. We had no idea of how to choose, collect and process the evidence related to our school performance. The Guide designed by the project is the key to our success. It is very comprehensive and easy to use; it has analyzed and explained the Performance Indicators thoroughly and detailedly. Even with an experienced person like me, who has been working in the field for decades, it is very difficult to develop the detailed measures for the Performance Indicators as those checklists, forms and instruments in the Guide (The Guide, Principal B)

“Without the guidance from our external advisor, we would have been working like ‘the blind men feeling the elephant’ (each grasping only a small part). The series of seminars and workshops arranged by the project team is an assembly of various expertise and experiences in the field. They have empowered us to understand the four areas of the Performance Indicators. This is a good strategy. In addition, it is a good arrangement to have an external advisor for a group of 8 schools. With the hand-holding guidance from this experienced advisor, the whole group could achieve their consensus in understanding and implementing the Performance Indicators.” (The External Advisor, Principal D)

“The greatest achievement of this project is building up a good communication channel between us. We did communicate before, but without really knowing what each other thought. We didn’t even know why we had to join this project. Therefore, we just worked loosely” (Team work, Teacher B2)

“Our principal gives us a lot of freedom and encouragement. She respects us, supports us with professional advice and teaching resources.” (Leadership, Teacher A1)

In these quotations, the interviewees mentioned repeatedly and consistently several factors contributing to the successful completion of the quality assurance cycle: good
leadership and team work, hand-holding guidance from the advisor, useful instruments
provided by the Guide, varying expertise and experiences shared amongst the school
network, and peer observation which was highly recommended by the participating schools.

Discussion

In this section, we will discuss on the Chinese model of preschool self-evaluation and
improvement emerged from the study, the benefits, difficulties and successful experiences
that may have implications for early childhood educators in other societies.

A Workable Chinese Model of Self-Evaluation and Self-Improvement

The present study found that the participating settings had to go through seven steps to
complete a quality assurance cycle instead of the 5-stage model in our previous study (Li &
Wong, 2007). Two more steps, (1) building up the task force and (2) working out the
strategies for self-evaluation were built in to precede and follow the step of Understanding
the Performance Indicators. Evidence from the previous study (Li & Wong, 2007) indicated
that the participants were not familiar with the PIs and experienced anxiety, confusion and
doubt during the evaluation process. Establishing a good working team is therefore critical to
the success of self-evaluation. Teachers involved must feel motivated and committed to the
improvement plans so that they would consciously and forwardly initiate actions to improve
their teaching. And accordingly, these initiatives could also heighten their morale and team
spirit, as found in the present study. Team work with deep collaboration was found the key to
success which is strongly related to commitment, motivation and the morale of the staff. It is
therefore important to create the shared vision and commitment of a learning organization as
the cornerstone for an improvement initiative (Senge, 2000).

Further, these two steps relating to the organization of human resources and the
evaluation schedules were considered pragmatic and crucial to the implementation process,
as a more detailed framework is needed by the underqualified professionals in Hong Kong
than their counterparts elsewhere. Also, these participating settings varied in their type, size, location, school history and ethics. Appropriate and individualized strategies must be worked out before launching the quality assurance cycle. The participating schools in general endorsed this seven-step model as the protocol for quality assurance.

It is interesting to note that there is a difference in stage one of the two models: the Reezig and Creemers model (2005) began with “assessment of improvement needs” whereas the Li and Wong model (2007) started with “understanding the PIs”. The seemingly top-down Li and Wong model was attributed to the fact that the Government has imposed a set of PIs for the pre-primary institutions to follow. The Reezig and Creemers model appears to be more bottom-up catering for the need of the stakeholders in the school. The revised 7-step model of the present study and the 5-step Reezig and Creemers model have illustrated how different approaches of self-evaluation and school improvement match with different contexts. By adding in two more steps (building up the task force and working out the strategies for self-evaluation) to the previous model (Li & Wong, 2007), we have considered more the needs of the stakeholders and thus softened the top-down nature of the PIs.

The Difficulties encountered by Chinese preschools

The present study found three major difficulties in the process of Chinese preschool self-evaluation and improvement. Time limitation was the first difficulty all participants had to overcome in the project. School improvement should be considered a professional task that simply cannot depend on the goodwill and spare time of the school staff (Reezigt & De Jong, 2001). This is apparent in Hong Kong, where there are plenty of opportunities for staff to be involved in professional training sessions but no cover is provided for teachers, which poses problems for the pre-primary institutions. All participating staff including the principals and teachers expressed their concern about time consumption in going through the self-evaluation and improvement exercises, and relief teachers are urgently needed. This
implication has been recognized by the educational authorities and therefore the forthcoming pre-primary education voucher scheme subsidizes employing relief teachers.

Related to the time issue is the lack of human resources and school-based support that most of the pre-primary institutions had encountered. Louis and Miles (1990) believed that support to school is crucial to the change process, as improvement efforts are resource hungry. System support in the form of money is therefore indispensable to sustain reform initiatives in schools. The participating PDOs reported that without resources, their institutions were likely to experience difficulties in their improvement efforts, which were heavily influenced by working conditions of the teachers and the number of teachers available. When there was barely enough personnel for daily routines, improvement efforts were usually suppressed. The daily workload of teachers, defined by their number of teaching hours and the size of classes, influenced their motivation to be involved in improvement initiatives. The European studies (Reezig & Creemers, 2005) also found that while the educational authorities often set the background for improvement, local support could influence the efforts of schools much more directly.

The under-qualified teaching force is another concern for the participating settings. Teachers with basic professional preparation were not prepared to face the challenges brought by the new quality assurance initiative. They had difficulties in translating the concepts of effective learning and teaching into classroom practices. Their low professional self-image also led to passiveness and over-reliance on the leaders. This explained why the process of self-evaluation and improvement could be time consuming to the PDOs and staff.

The Chinese Experiences in Self-evaluation and Improvement

Strong leadership was found an influential factor at the school level. The Hong Kong experience in the present study confirms the findings of many researchers that the principal’s
role is crucial to school effectiveness and school improvement (Fullan, 1985; Cheng, 1990, 1993): without good leadership, improvement efforts are unlikely to succeed (Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Reynolds, Creemers, Stringfield, Teddlie, & Schaffer, 2002). The participants pointed out that the role of leadership is crucial to change, and that some PDOs in the present study were able to inspire their staff to work collectively towards successful improvement. It is important therefore that at least one person or a critical mass is qualified to take the lead in the improvement efforts of the school and have a core role in the change process. Noticeably, most of the PDOs in the present study were the principals of the participating schools, who were the natural leader of the staff. The kind of leadership needed in Hong Kong early childhood settings is a blend of instructional and transformational leadership, as practitioners in Hong Kong are of a comparatively low professional profile and are less confident of themselves. Transformational leadership includes the pursuit of common goals, empowerment, and maintenance of a collaborative culture, teacher development and problem-solving (Leithwood, 1992). Involvement of teachers and middle managers in leadership is also important for improvement success (Muijs, Harris, Chapman, Stoll, & Russ, 2004). Hence the setting up of the task force at the beginning of the project is a crucial first step.

Second, school-based staff development was found another key strategy. As Fullan (1991) stated: “as long as there is the need for improvement, namely, forever, there will be need for professional development” (p.344). Teachers with inadequate professional preparations were not ready to face the challenges brought by the new quality assurance initiative. For improvement to be successful, teachers need to be willing to participate in training, development, and collaboration with other teachers (Hargreaves, 1993; Timperley & Robinson, 1998). Adequate professional training will enable the teachers to have a better grasp of the concept of quality learning and teaching, and be more confident and resourceful
in coping with issues arisen out of the school improvement process. This is very in-service training and professional development was found very useful for the preschools in the present study. In addition, the key to improving children’s learning is to enhance teacher learning. Teachers play the key role in enhancing the quality of early learning and teaching, and their professionalism is crucial to the successful school improvement. Hence, school-based staff development has been and will continue to be the key strategy for change and there is an urgent call for more governmental resources in teacher education. It is hoped that the incoming Pre-primary Education Voucher scheme will solve this problem by providing direct subsidy to teacher’s professional development.

Using a multi-method, multi-source data collection strategy, the present study was able to collect quantitative and qualitative evidence to validate the findings, to verify and to improve on the model found in the previous study. Clearly, further research is needed to corroborate these findings with larger and more representative samples. Nevertheless, the present study may help policy-makers and educators to understand how important the school is as a meaningful unit for improvement and how to facilitate school improvement through implementing the **Performance Indicators**. Specifically, four major findings and their implications have emerged, each relating to a stakeholder in the school improvement process. For teachers who are the most important change agent, enhanced professionalism is the key to resolving many of the problems identified. For leaders in the pre-primary institutions, strong leadership is crucial to school improvement. Let the staff have ownership of the process and give them timely support will ease much of the negativism arisen both internally and externally. For policy makers with a view of improving school quality, the formulation of quality standards should be complemented by providing resources and support in various forms and shapes, from monetary terms to providing school-based support and consultancy. Last of all, it is important for the early childhood settings to build up their own support
system, with parents, external consultants and the community as partners, and with other schools as a network, for practical and mutual support.
References


Senge, P.M. et al. (2000). *Schools that learn: a fifth discipline fieldbook for educator;*
parents, and everyone who cares about education. New York: Doubleday.


Table 1

Summary of the Demographic Information for the 64 Participating Pre-primary Institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location</th>
<th>Number of school network</th>
<th>Number of settings</th>
<th>Number of children</th>
<th>Number of teachers</th>
<th>Teacher qualification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hong Kong Island</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Range: 74-600</td>
<td>Range: 7-46</td>
<td>QKT/CCW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total: 2054</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kowloon</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Range: 97-540</td>
<td></td>
<td>QKT/CCW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total: 6005</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Territories</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Range: 72-623</td>
<td></td>
<td>QKT/CCW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Total: 7139</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>15198</td>
<td>896</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 2

**Percentages of the PDOs’ Responses to the School Improvement Survey (N=58)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Why your setting decided to participate in this project? (Purpose)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. to enhance school effectiveness</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. to learn to use the Performance Indicators</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. to prepare for the external inspection by the educational authority</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. others</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who made the decision to participate in this project?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. the principal/supervisor</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>71%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. all the staff</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. the school board</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. others</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who was the PDO of your setting?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. the principal</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. the head teacher</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. others</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was the focus of self-evaluation and improvement in your setting?</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. teaching and caring</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. children’s learning</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. curriculum design</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. evaluation of learning experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is the Guide helpful to your self-evaluation and improvement?</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Very helpful</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. helpful</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. no comments</td>
<td></td>
<td>--</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. not helpful</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the major improvements brought up by the Guide?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. enhancing the quality of teaching</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>78%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. enriching children’s learning</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. facilitating curriculum development</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. improving evaluation of learning experiences</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e. others</td>
<td></td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the difficulties you encountered in school improvement?</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. time limitations</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. lack of resource (staff, equipments, ICT hardware, etc)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. under-qualified teachers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. lack of parental support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you satisfied with the results of self-evaluation and school improvement?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. satisfied</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. not satisfied</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Option</td>
<td>No.</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. no comments</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which part of school improvement are you most satisfied with?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. teaching and caring for children</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. curriculum planning</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. children’s learning</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. evaluation of learning experiences</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Which part of school improvement did not satisfy you?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. teaching and caring for children</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b. curriculum planning</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>c. children’s learning</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d. evaluation of learning experiences</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure 1.

Seven Steps for Self-Evaluation and Improvement of Educational Quality in Hong Kong Pre-primary Institutions.
The Protocols for the Two Group Interviews

The First Group Interview
Welcome! Thanks a lot for your positive participation in the project. We sincerely invite you here to share your feelings and feedback about the project, especially after the one-year implementation of school improvement. Your comments, no matter positive or negative, will be very valuable to us. Please feel free to say anything you have in mind, and just tell us what you think about the project. Please kindly note that the interview data will be kept highly confidential. Your names and school will not be identified in the transcripts and reports.

A. The decision process
1. What major purposes your school had when deciding to participate in this project?
2. Who made the decision? Please briefly talk about the decision making process.
3. What was the reaction or feedback you got from the staff in your school when they know about the project?

B. The planning process
1. How did you set up the task force for this self-evaluation and improvement project? Who was the leader of this team?
2. How many members were there in the team? Please briefly describe their roles and responsibilities.
3. How many teachers and classes in your school were involved in the project?
4. What were the strategies you used for self-evaluation? Please talk about the advantages of using these strategies.
5. What areas in the Teaching and Learning domain have been evaluated by your school?
6. How helpful were the seminars and workshops delivered by the research team? Were the regular/monthly meetings helpful? Why or why not?
7. What difficulties did you encounter in the self-evaluation process? How did you overcome them?

C. The implementing process
1. How useful was the resource package, Guide to using the PRE-PRIMARY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS in learning and teaching?
2. During which period did self-evaluation take place?
3. What was the outcome of your self-evaluation?
4. Are you satisfied with the result? Why or why not?
5. What reflections did you get from the self-evaluation?
6. Please share your feelings towards the whole process of self-evaluation in your school.

D. Self-improvement action plan
1. Please briefly introduce the self-improvement plan of your school.
2. How many classes and teachers were involved in the plan? What sort of resources or support were needed?
3. How did you plan for the areas that need to be improved? How did you evaluate the effectiveness of self-improvement?
The Second Group Interview

We have completed the project, and thank you so much for your positive participation in the past years. Now we are inviting you to reflect on the whole process of self-evaluation and improvement in the past two years. Your comments and suggestions are very welcome and please feel free to tell us your feelings and thinkings about the project. We will keep all information in confidence and you will not be identified in the transcripts and reports.

A. Self-improvement implementation and effectiveness
1. Please tell us your stories in the self-improvement process.
2. What would you say about the effectiveness of the school improvement?
3. What would you do after this project?

B. Looking back and into the future
1. After one and half year, could you see any changes in the learning and teaching in your school? If yes, what are they? Why? If no, why not?
2. What kind of support and guidance did you get from the external advisors? How helpful were their support?
3. Look back and tell me when you started to benefit from the project?
4. Are there any memorable moments you wish to share?
5. How helpful was self-evaluation in improving the quality of early childhood teaching?
6. Looking into the future, how would you utilize the experiences you gained from this project to improving the quality of learning and teaching?