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Preschool Education

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Research conducted in various countries indicates that attendance at preschool programmes promotes children's cognitive development and school success, and narrows the achievement gap between children from low income families and their more advantaged peers. These findings, along with increasing attention to research on the effects of environmental stimulation on early brain development and governments' acceptance of lifelong learning, have led to an emphasis on early childhood services across the world.

Over the past few decades, investigators in different countries have examined the relationship between the quality of preschool programmes and children's developmental outcomes. This research has tended to use structural or process dimensions, or both, to gauge the quality of programmes. Structural measures of programmes include staff-child ratios, staff qualifications, teaching experience and stability, health and safety factors, and the physical setting. Process measures refer to the quality of interactions between staff and children (Lamb 1998). Structural and process measures are related to each other (Howes 1997; Rao, Koong et al. 2003) and to child outcomes (Howes et al. 1992; National Institute of Child Health & Human Development 2003).

In Hong Kong, preschool institutions are in the private sector and come under the jurisdiction of two government departments. The Education & Manpower Bureau (EMB) oversees kindergartens, whereas the Social Welfare Department (SWD) ensures that child-care centres meet government standards. Child-care centres serve children from six weeks to six years, and children in Hong Kong between the ages of three and six years can be enrolled in kindergartens. The government decided in 2003 that from 2005 onwards the EMB would regulate all services for children between three and six years, and that guidelines issued by the SWD would be used to monitor all services for children less than three years. Most kindergartens offer bisessional classes of around three hours each, while most child care centres offer whole-day programmes.

In Macao, by contrast, kindergartens operate on a whole-day basis. The government operates a small number of kindergartens through the Department of Education & Youth, but most kindergartens are private institutions which operate under the regulations of that Department. In both territories, over 90 per cent of children aged three to five are enrolled in some form of preschool education (Hong Kong, Education & Manpower Bureau 2003a; Macau, Direção dos Serviços de Estatística e Censos [DSEC] 2003).

This chapter examines commonalities and differences in preschool education in Hong Kong and Macao. Given the two territories' colonial heritage, relatively small size

and geographic location, one would expect much similarity. However, significant differences exist, and the factors underlying these differences will be explored. The chapter will compare coverage and provision, assumptions about what children should learn, and the professional preparation of those who teach in preschools. These matters have been markedly influenced by governments, and the nature of policies at particular times has significantly influenced continuity and change.

Preschool Education in Macao

The ratification of the Sino-Portuguese Joint Declaration in 1987 stimulated far-reaching reform, and was a watershed for educational policy in Macao. Another watershed was the resumption of Chinese sovereignty in 1999. Accordingly, the following discussion begins with the situation before 1987. It then considers the period 1987 to 1999, before turning to the situation since 1999.

Government Policy before 1987

During most of the colonial period, the Macao government, in so far as it was concerned about education at all, was chiefly concerned with the education of Portuguese-speaking children. Education for the Chinese-speaking population was mainly left to churches and other voluntary agencies. In the preschool sector, the first government kindergarten was established in 1923 and operated in Portuguese. In the 1950s, a second government kindergarten, operating in Portuguese and Chinese and known as a Luso-Chinese institution, was opened and affiliated to an official primary school. The number of government kindergartens remained at two until after the signature of the 1987 Sino-Portuguese Declaration which set the timetable for the territory's political transition in 1999.

Private kindergartens were much more numerous. The first, operating in Chinese, was set up by the Catholic Church in 1919. In 1987, the territory had 55 private kindergartens. Of these, 53 were Chinese-medium, one was Portuguese-medium, and one was English-medium (Macao, DSEC 1990). Thus, in Macao the education of three to five year olds was mainly undertaken by the private sector.

The differences in government attitudes towards the education of the Chinese-speaking and Portuguese-speaking communities created different patterns of control. The government exercised full control over the two official preschools through the inspectorate. Private preschools, in contrast, had considerable autonomy. The government did have a Private Schools Auxiliary Unit, but it was staffed by education officers rather than inspectors. It mainly played a liaison and advisory role in registration of new schools and distribution of grants. The monitoring of the quality of preschool education was generally beyond the authority of the unit, and its officers were not empowered to supervise the preschools. Government standards for initial and continued registration of preschools focused on safety and hygiene of the premises. Institutions were left to be self-regulating, and the government did not even set standards of minimum quality.

The Macao government became slightly more active in the sector after the 1974 overthrow of the right-wing regime in Portugal. A 1977 law permitted private schools to receive direct subsidies and exemption from taxation, and families of students in financial difficulty could apply for assistance. A 1985 policy took intervention further