

COLLOQUIUM

Formations of New Governing Technologies and Productions of New Norms: the dangers of preschool voucher discourse

I-FANG LEE

Hong Kong Institute of Education

ABSTRACT Contemporary reform discourses have been interlaced with a neo-liberal political economic reasoning system globally and locally. Taking the preschool vouchers in Taiwan and Hong Kong as examples, this article seeks to encourage a shift towards a post-structural perspective of theorizing and analyzing as an alternative to problematize how Milton Friedman's voucher model constitutes and shapes our construction of freedom to choose, equality, and social justice in education.

For governments around the world, conceptualizing early childhood education and care as a site for an early start on educational, social, and economic investments has become a dominant trend of educational planning. Educational policies, both locally and globally, reflect the effects of a neo-liberal political economic reasoning system (Keeley, 2007). Voucher discourse is a good example to explain how neo-liberal notions of freedom, equality, and choice can become a problematic embodiment of democracy. In this article, I highlight preschool vouchers in Taiwan and Hong Kong to discuss how reform discourses, such as vouchers, can rework and reconstruct the ways in which we come to construct and desire equality and social justice in education.

Preschool vouchers in Taiwan and Hong Kong currently function as the new hope for policy makers and parents as a way to imagine changes and progress. While the structures and governance of preschools are very different in Taiwan and Hong Kong, the idea of preschool vouchers has appeared to promise improvements in educational quality. In Taiwan, since 1994, preschool vouchers have been constructed as an effective reform policy to increase young children's access to early educational programs, to support parental rights to choose their children's educational programs, to facilitate positive competition in the field of early childhood education for higher quality, and to encourage non-licensed programs to become licensed.[1] In Hong Kong, starting in 2006, the political rationale for deploying preschool vouchers has been to support the family by distributing educational vouchers as a form of tuition assistance to ease the financial burden of parents/families with young children in preschools, as well as to improve educational quality.[2] Although voucher schemes in Taiwan and Hong Kong are very different in many aspects, they both have similarities to characteristics of Milton Friedman's voucher model.

Conceptualizing educational problems as a socio-economic problem, Milton Friedman (1955) mobilized the concept of educational vouchers as an effective institutional change to crack the central government's monopoly on power and control in the field of education in the name of *freedom to choose*. Conceptualizing the field of education as an education industry, Friedman (1955) suggested and proposed that educational vouchers could restrain the role of the government in education but still ensure schooling would meet sets of minimum standards to guarantee the

educational quality of all future citizens. In fact, who would not want a quality education for their children? Moreover, who would not want the freedom to choose? Thus, Friedman's idea on vouchers in education makes good common sense and it is impossible for all in general to reject 'freedom'.

Although Friedman's conception of educational vouchers has played an important role in providing new hopes toward greater individual freedom, as well as empowerment, the concept of educational vouchers can also provide limited understanding and has dangerous implications in the field of education. The ambiguities and tensions of preschool vouchers in Hong Kong and Taiwan can provide a window to study the formation of governance and regulation that come together to sustain the production of new norms and standards in early childhood education and care (Lee, 2006; Yuen 2007). We should not ignore the effects of educational vouchers that could ironically perpetuate sociocultural differences by privileging certain families over others. Preschool vouchers in Taiwan and Hong Kong paradoxically function as an 'othering' practice to sustain distinctions as well as a governing practice to shape the field of early childhood education and care and to discipline the choosing parents. Therefore, critics of vouchers have argued that vouchers are analytically associated with neo-liberal discourses and can be classified as governing policies of the 'Right' that are insufficient and dangerous (see the work of Apple, 2001). In order to recognize the complexities and multiplicities of voucher discourse, a shift towards a post-structural dimension of theorizing and analyzing to understand the intelligibility and desirability of preschool vouchers is crucial.

From this perspective, educational reform discourses such as vouchers could spell danger by prescribing who we are through the deployment of policies to govern the subject while upholding a certain desirable subjectivity as the norm. Reform discourses thus are 'technologies of the self' through which the governing of others and the governing of the self are interlaced to instruct how one should act or think or be (Foucault, [1978] 1990). Reform policies such as vouchers, understood within such analytical modes, are less about emancipation and more about specifying the conduct of conduct (for example, see Lather, 2004; Popkewitz, 2006).

Within the framework of such theoretical and analytical perspectives, educational reform policies such as preschool vouchers in Taiwan and Hong Kong become a tactic to care for as well as to regulate both the field of early childhood education and care, and family choice in their children's preschool education. This is thought to be a form of reasonable modern state intervention in governing and cultivating the subjects-as-citizens' lives in a democratic approach toward normalization. That is, governance or regulation is no longer done through brute force but through laws and policies which are thought to be formed in a democratic manner rather than under a dictatorship. The disciplinary tendencies of reform discourses and policies highlight a close link between power/knowledge relations and the making of subjectivities as well as the process of subjectification. Having pointed to the 'biopolitics' (Lather, 2004) of reform policies, an intention of this research project includes the problematization of contemporary reform discourses as a form of salvation narrative for all.

The concept of 'biopolitics' is rooted within Foucault's ([1978] 1990) notion of 'bio-power' through which 'diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of population' (Foucault, [1978] 1990, p. 140) are made. The preschool vouchers make young children and parents with preschool-aged children into population categories. Thus, through the deployment of vouchers, not only the parents but also the preschools are regulated to fit the 'rules/codes' of a voucher system/policy. While the parents are becoming 'entrepreneurial' selves through self-governance, how to appropriately practise self-governance is also prescribed. In other words, 'docile bodies and minds' are created through the formation and deployment of educational reform discourses and policies. From such a perspective, reform policies can be thought of as instruments of the state, as *institutions* of power to ensure the maintenance or the production of relations and orders (Foucault, [1978] 1990). Thus, reform discourses and policies such as vouchers should be thought of as 'techniques of power present at every level of the social body and utilized by very diverse institutions' (i.e. the family, schools, and the administration of collective bodies) to sustain norms and orders (Foucault, [1978] 1990, p. 141). Therefore, to make the taken-for-granted construction of vouchers problematic is to disturb the habitual ways of reasoning of our time to

reconceptualize what is said and not said. This is to challenge the production of 'truth' and to re-imagine how present and future conditions could be otherwise.

The examples of vouchers in Taiwan and Hong Kong are helpful for us to rethink how neo-liberal political economic discourse at the global and local levels has not only ruptured the field of education but also become a dominating reasoning logic to (re)constitute educational norms. In the name of freedom, democracy, and equity, the idea of preschool vouchers has been dangerously constructed as the miracle solution to address issues of affordability and accessibility in Taiwan and Hong Kong. While I do not ignore the fact that preschool vouchers do make early childhood education and care more affordable and accessible for some parents and families, I argue we should be critical in reconceptualizing how freedom to choose is constructed. When preschool vouchers in Taiwan and Hong Kong appear to promise freedom, choice, and quality education, shouldn't we question to whom do vouchers promise social justice and equity?

Correspondence: I-Fang Lee, Department of Early Childhood Education, Hong Kong Institute of Education, 10 Lo Ping Road, Tai Po, New Territories, Hong Kong SARC (iflee@ied.edu.hk).

Notes

- [1] The idea of preschool vouchers first appeared as Mr Chen Shui-Bian's political campaign promise during his term as the Mayor of Taipei City from 1994 to 1998. Preschool vouchers have been available to all five-year-old children who are attending licensed private kindergartens or childcare institutions throughout Taiwan since 2000.
- [2] The Hong Kong Special Administration Region government has introduced a voucher scheme for all children aged three to six. This voucher scheme has been implemented in the 2007 school year and it is expected to continue for five years. All children aged three to six in Hong Kong are qualified for vouchers as long as they attend non-profit preschools that charge an annual tuition fee under \$24,000 HKD.

References

- Apple, M.W. (2001) *Educating the 'Right' Way: markets, standards, God, and inequality*. New York: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Foucault, M. ([1978] 1990) *The History of Sexuality: an introduction*, trans. R. Hurley. New York: Random House.
- Friedman, M. (1955) *The Role of Government in Education*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press.
- Keeley, B. (2007) *Human Capital: how what you know shapes your life*. Paris: Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development.
- Lather, P. (2004) This is your Father's Paradigm: government intrusion and the case of qualitative research in education, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 10(1), 15-34. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/1077800403256154>
- Lee, I.F. (2006) Illusions of Social Democracy: early childhood educational voucher policies in Taiwan, in M. Bloch, D. Kennedy, T. Lightfoot & D. Weyenberg (Eds) *The Child in the World/The World in the Child: education and the configuration of a universal, modern, and globalized childhood*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Popkewitz, T.S. (2006) Hopes of Progress and Fears of the Dangerous: research, cultural theses, and planning different human kinds, in G. Ladson-Billings & W.F. Tate (Ed.) *Education Research in the Public Interest: the place for advocacy in the academy*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Yuen, G.W.K. (2007) Vouchers in Hong Kong: a new milestone of early childhood education? *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 8(4), 355-357. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2007.8.4.355>