

## **The development of learning as the leading activity for Hong Kong immigrant families in Australia**

**Pui Ling Wong**

*Monash University, Australia*

**Marilyn Fleer**

*Monash University, Australia*

**Key words:** Cultural–historical theory, child development, leading activity, learning, Hong Kong–Australian families, family studies

### **Abstract**

Many parents work hard to foster a culture of learning early in their children’s development. The desire for children to learn as early as possible is common among Hong Kong–Australian families. These children continue to perform well academically. Little is known about the pedagogy that underpins such development in the family or on the appropriateness of this for children’s development. Through an intensive case study of three Hong Kong–Australian families investigating their family practices, it was found that learning as a leading activity can be established at an early age. Such findings problematise the expected norms and milestones for traditional maturational theories of child development, as well as raising questions about the specific aspects of leading activity and periodisation promoted by cultural–historical theorists. The findings also reveal the importance of cultural and temporal factors in the development of pedagogical approaches in families.

### **Introduction**

The notion that “knowledge changes destiny” (知識改變命運) is deeply embedded in the minds of Hong Kong community members (P. Wong, 2007). This notion shapes the way of life of the Hong Kong diaspora, among whom learning is privileged as the prime activity for their children. Hong Kong–Australian parents believe that learning is crucial for their children’s development. They include school–like formal learning in their children’s everyday lives at a very early age across institutional settings, including family, kindergartens, schools and enhancement classes (K. Wong, 2000; Pe-Pua, Mitchell, Iredale & Castles, 1996; P. Wong, 2007).

A review of the literature reveals that the prevalent phenomenon of Hong Kong parents (regardless of where they live), who want their children to learn at an early age, and as much as possible, has cultural, historical and societal underpinnings (Appledaily News, August 17, 2011; Archer & Francis, 2007; Louie, 2004; Pe-Pua et al., 1996; Phillipson, 2010; Sethi, Este & Charlebois, 2001). The values and practices of many Hong Kong families, both inside and outside Hong Kong, are influenced by Chinese culture and the traditional Chinese values brought from Confucian traditions (Guo, 2006; Ho, 2000; Mak & Chan, 1995; Shek & Chan, 1999). Reagan (2005) indicates that Confucius strongly emphasized the importance of learning, remarking that “by nature men [sic] are nearly alike; but through experience they grow wide apart supported [by] the efficacy of [their] schooling, [whereby]... a man from humble origins could rise to a position of power based on his intellectual skill and talent” (p. 141). Many Chinese proverbs still in constant

use in families and within the wider society demand that children concentrate on learning and studying hard from a young age in order to build a successful future. Examples include: “If one does not exert oneself in youth, one will regret it in old age” (少壯不努力, 老大徒傷悲), “It is only when it comes time to apply knowledge that you regret not acquiring enough of it” (書到用時方恨少), and “Diligence has its reward, play has no benefit” (勤有功 戲無益).

Historically, an elite system has developed and influenced Hong Kong society, originating in the imperial civil service examination system in 605 A.D., carrying over into the period when Hong Kong became a British colony for more than a century, and continuing with the reversion of sovereignty to China in July 1997, where Hong Kong became a special administration region. Even today an elite system mediated by education still operates in Hong Kong society (P. Wong, 2012). Throughout history the elite system has provided the pathway for the top talents, regardless of their background, to ‘rise’ to the top tier of the society (Cheng, 1998; Ho, 2000; K. Wong, 2000). This has led Hong Kong parents to place a high value on their children learning more and studying hard to become members of the elite.

Due to the fear of dramatic deterioration of freedom and living conditions that might result from the communist governance of China, the majority of Hong Kong people wanted to immigrate to other countries during mid 1980s and mid 1990s (P. Wong, 2007; Zhao, 2000). However, only the very wealthy or those with good education qualifications and professions were welcomed by Western countries such as Australia, Canada, the UK and US. As immigrants in those countries, they realise that they are in a slightly disadvantaged position. Many Hong Kong immigrants believe that through academic study, having good educational qualifications, and gaining a professional career, is the most secure and viable way to avoid discrimination, re-establish themselves and find a place in the host countries (Ho, 2000; P. Wong, 2007). As a consequence, the academic and economic achievements of the Hong Kong immigrant community in their host countries have resulted in their being categorized as a model community in countries, such as Australia, Canada, the UK and US (Archer & Francis, 2007, Louie, 2004; Zhao, 2000). Thus, many Hong Kong immigrant parents deeply value learning and good education as the key to having a good life and gaining social mobility. They place demands on their children to make efforts in learning and equip themselves with better qualifications and credentials to outperform their peers in their host countries.

The literature gives the general picture of the cultural, historical and societal influences behind Hong Kong parents’ desire for their children to learn as soon and as much as possible. Much of the research has gathered data through surveys or interviews of parents’ beliefs and values about education. Very little is understood about the actual pedagogical practices that are enacted within families to meet these educational ideals. Knowledge through expansive interviews and observations of actual practices in family homes and children’s responses are limited, particularly for Hong Kong–Australian families.

Cultural–historical studies on child development in Russia and Europe have been influenced by research and theory showing that child development under the aegis of ‘leading activities’ which change over time according to certain age periods. Kravtsova (2006) suggests that the notion of leading activity is an important concept in contemporary child psychology. A leading activity defines the specific nature and direction of a child’s development at each age period (Elkonin, 1971; Kravtsova, 2006; Veresov, 2006). The study reported in this article draws on this rich concept of leading activity and the related notion of periodisation to investigate what happens to

support children's development in Hong Kong–Australian families that come from very different socio-cultural contexts from those that have been heretofore researched. The study seeks to understand the mechanism and effects of the family pedagogy of having children engage in formal learning at an early age, and to identify whether, and therefore how and when learning becomes a leading activity for the Hong Kong–Australian children. In the next section, the concepts of leading activity and periodisation are discussed, followed by the research design, findings and discussion.

## **Concepts of leading activity and periodisation**

### *Leading activity*

A leading activity refers to a dominant form of activity, which shapes important changes in the child's mental development and personality at a given age period. The concept of leading activity was first introduced by Vygotsky (1966) in his elucidation of play and its functions in child development. It has since been elaborated and applied in other contexts by A. N. Leontiev and D. B. Elkonin (Kravtsova, 2006). According to Vygotsky (1998), each age interval of mental development is characterized by a dominant relation between the child and social reality. A transition from one age interval to another is marked by a shift in leading activity and the leading relationship of the child with the environment. Thus, at a given period, a specific type of activity will be more prominent, and will play a leading role in development, while other activities will play less significant roles (Elkonin, 1971).

### *Periodisation*

According to Elkonin's (1971) periodization framework, the leading activity identified for preschool children is role-playing and that for early school-aged children is formal learning. Elkonin (1971) referred to role-playing as "play in its most expanded form" (p. 555). In role-playing a child creates an imaginary situation which creates associations with the roles of adults and the society, s/he plays out the roles of adults from their everyday lives, such as being a mother or father, or in their community, such as a fire-fighter. Indeed, when Vygotsky discusses play, the key feature is the imagination developed in play. Thus the playing of roles or the manipulation of objects to represent something different (e.g. a stick becomes a horse or a block becomes a car) in other forms of play are all driven by the child's imagination. This article adopts Vygotsky's focus on imaginary play as the leading activity for preschool children. Elkonin (1971) referred to formal learning as activity that is akin to the school instructional type of activity "through which the child acquires new knowledge and for which a system of instruction should provide proper guidance ... [whereby] the intellectual and cognitive forces of the child are actively molded during the course of this process" (p. 556).

### *Mechanism for the development of a leading activity*

A cultural–historical theory of child development foregrounds the dynamic relations between the child and his/her social and material environment, and it is this relation that is the source of child development. In this reading of child development, it is important to understand the mechanisms and psychological criteria for framing a leading activity.

The leading activity for each age period is linked and related to Vygotsky's (1998) concept of the social situation of development where the child's changing relations with the social and material environment are instrumental for children's development. According to Kravtsova (2006), when a child develops a new relationship to his/her social reality as a result of a crisis, how this situation is

dealt with, is important for the personality development of the child. During a critical period, the child realizes a new formation in communication with the social others around him/her, and with the help of the significant social others (e.g. parents), begins to acquire the cultural and social meanings associated with new situation. The child begins to perceive what s/he does in a different way from before and relates to others in new ways. This is followed by a stable period. The child's new self-awareness arises from the stable period, which shaped interactions and expectations for the child and those in his/her social world. The result of these interactions and expectations leads to the emergence of a new activity that plays a significant role in the child's mental development, forming the leading activity during the stable period. For example, when a pre-school child reaches the age at which the society expects the child to study at school, this creates a crisis and a new self-awareness in the child who is just entering primary school. The new self-awareness of the child is that s/he needs to be engaged in school with other children and learn to do reading, writing, maths, socialise with others and matters related to a school child. With the help of the teachers (and parents), s/he learns the subject matters, develops a learning motive and works towards mastery of the knowledge and skills gradually during the primary school years. Thus, formal learning becomes the leading activity for a school child leading his/her mental development.

The concepts of leading activity and periodization provide a helpful framework with which to identify the ways family practices and pedagogies of the Hong Kong–Australian families operate and to see how and in what way early engagement in formal learning as the prime activities in everyday life supports children's development.

### **Research design**

The study sought to specifically examine the practices of the Hong Kong–Australian families in order to better understand the conditions that parents create to support their children's development. Values and beliefs about education were investigated alongside of the pedagogical approaches that were used by the parents in the upbringing of their children. This article scrutinises the family pedagogy used by the Hong Kong–Australian parents, who foster early learning. Family pedagogy is referred to as the systematised set of family practices aimed at development and informed by a unified philosophy and value set.

### *Participants*

The sample consisted of three Hong Kong–Australian families living in Melbourne, Australia. The Chan family had a daughter (Jessica, 6) and a son (Vincent, 9) studying at a local government primary school, the Lee family had a newborn baby (Simon) and an elder son (Steven, 7) studying at an independent religious school, and the Cheung family had a son (Micky, 5) and two daughters (Betty, 7 and Jenny, 11) all studying at private schools. All children except Steven were born in Melbourne. Steven was born in Hong Kong, migrated to Melbourne when he was five. The Chan and the Lee families were recruited through a Cantonese speaking Chinese church and the Cheung family was recruited through a weekend Chinese school. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the privacy of the participants. The Chan parents (Flora and Ivan), Lee parents (Terri and Tony) and Cheung parents (Linda and Andrew) were aged in their late 30s to early 40s and were brought up in Hong Kong where they had had their schooling. All parents had tertiary education and five of them had done this in Australia.

The families lived in suburbs that are densely populated with Hong Kong–Australian families. During the data collection period, Linda and Terri were not in the workforce and were taking care of their children full time, while the other parents were in paid employment. All the families had at

least some extended family members living in Melbourne. All parents spoke Cantonese and English, and sent their children to learn Chinese. Visits back to Hong Kong had occurred at least once every two to three years.

#### *Data generation and analysis*

Data were collected initially for a period of seven months with a follow up visit to interview the mother of each family regarding the activities in which each of their children had participated since birth. These additional interviews were conducted four months after the completion of the initial data collection to capture the history of the process of development for the children.

Video observations of the children's participation in their everyday activities at home, school and enhancement centres were made. In addition to interviewing parents about extracts of data (e.g. video clips) that the researcher chose from the video observations, the children and parents were also interviewed about the photos and video clips that they had provided to the researcher regarding the children's preferred activities and other activities the parents regarded as important for their children's learning and development. Interviews in relation to the photographs and video clips were conducted using stimulated recall methodology (Lyle, 2003). This was seen as important for gaining insights into the values and practices associated with particular activities, especially for gaining the children's perspectives on the extra curricula activities planned by the parents and the additional tuition and classes that the children attended.

Video observations were usually made by using two cameras to ensure that data gathering could occur all over the household, as family members were not always in the same room. The camera followed the children as they went about their everyday activities in the household and community (e.g. going to Church), when they were going to and from school, and when they were at extra curricula enhancement activities that the families had scheduled (e.g. music lesson). At the times when community (e.g. Boys Brigade) or enhancement activities were being video observed, only the focus child who was being studied and those who had given consent were video recorded with field notes being made of the context.

A total of 46 field visits were made: 22, 19 and 15 visits for the Chan, Lee and Cheung families respectively, each visit lasting between 30 minutes and 5.5 hours. Overall, 80 hours of video and 18 hours of audio were recorded and over 150 photos, 90 short video clips and various documents were gathered (as contributed by participants).

Data analysis focused on the practices representing the family pedagogies supporting their children's learning and education from birth for the three Hong Kong–Australian families in the study. The categories used in the analysis were framed in relation to the children's everyday activities, the family practices, parental demands, the child's motives and the child's competences. Data were examined in relation to the theoretical perspectives within and across observations, interviews, and video clips, photos and documents related to children's education that were provided by participants. Video and audio recordings were viewed several times during data interpretation and analysis to strengthen the inquiry.

### **Findings**

The findings are focused around four interrelated data sets – (1) The interviews with mothers regarding their children's activities since birth, (2) Document analysis of family timetabling and other scheduled activities for the children, (3) The video observations of everyday family practices

and children's activities, and (4) The interviews with children and parents regarding the practices that dominated the children's lives. While findings revealed that there are differences among the three families in relation to their values and practices, it came out strongly from all the three families that they were adopting a pedagogical approach of promoting/structuring formal learning in their children's everyday activities to support development.

*An early focus on formal learning activities in children's everyday lives*

Findings from the interview with the mother of each family regarding the activities that each of her children had participated in since birth revealed that when the children were very young, parents had already engaged them in many formal learning activities. For example, in the Chan family, Flora started to teach Vincent and Jessica to recognise shapes and colours at home when they were a few months old. When they were around one year of age, she started to teach them to understand the content of children's songs, to recite A to Z, and to recognise letters from books. Flora enrolled Vincent in a playgroup with a structured learning program and a Baby Gym motor skill training program at around 12 months. Vincent and Jessica attended weekend Chinese language school when they were three. Jessica started piano class from the age of four. In the Lee family, Terri and Tony bought a *Disney Learning English* kit for Steven and started following the program to teach him English when he was a few months old. It was claimed that the English learning kit could provide the essential materials for a child to learn a sufficiently good standard of English from newborn to eight years old (Ming Pao News, August 5, 2007). He participated in playgroup once a week when he was one year old, and he started attending full day nursery at two years (8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday to Friday), where learning activities such as learning literacy and numeracy were formally structured in the daily program. Steven also started attending Mandarin lessons before he was three years old and took a classical Chinese prose class at the age of four. In the Cheung family, Jenny started a childcare program when only a few months old, while Betty and Micky attended a Montessori program at around the age of three and two respectively. All three children started to attend Chinese language school at the age of three and were at least one grade ahead (Micky was two grades ahead) of their formal day schools. Analysis also revealed that the family practices since birth showed a trend towards the number of activities that the children participated in increasing as the children grew older.

Not only was formal learning viewed by the families as an important activity for fostering their children's development, but it was also considered crucial that it should begin as early as possible. Traditional theories of child development developed in Western communities, drawing upon predominantly European theorists, such as Piaget, would suggest that infants, toddlers and preschoolers would not be intellectually ready to participate in most of these cognitive tasks at such a young age (see Karpov, 2005 for extensive review). In these theories of child development, age is used as the criterion for expectations associated with development and this is mostly presented as developmental milestones (see Fleer, 2010 for critique). The practices described by these Hong Kong–Australian parents did not in any way use age as a criterion for determining when high level cognitive tasks should be introduced to infants, toddlers or preschoolers, as would be noted in Western theories of child development. Rather, the data gained through the interviews suggest that the parents viewed the introduction of formal learning practices beginning from an early age as developmentally appropriate for children growing up in these families. In order to understand how these activities were perceived by the children, we now turn to the responses of children and their parents regarding their family practices.

*Children's orientation towards formal learning*

Findings of the study show that even though the participant children started their formal learning very early, they all enjoyed their school learning and achieved good academic performance at school. Although parents reported that there were individual issues (regarding the operation of the kindergartens) that had caused Vincent, Betty and Micky to experience adaptation problems in their kindergartens, all children achieved well and had no transition problem when they began their formal study at school. In particular, Jenny had received excellent results, scoring above the reported range in the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN), a nation-wide standardised literacy and numeracy test. Jenny had been the top student at her school, as well as in all of her after school enhancement classes. She had seven enhancement classes per week, most of them with homework or practice to do during the week, in addition to attending an academically oriented school 5 days per week. When the researcher asked her how she found these activities, she immediately replied that she liked all the activities and found the amount of activities she participated in was just right. She had received numerous prizes. According to Linda, all Jenny's teachers since she was at childcare had observed that she enjoyed learning. An analysis of the interview data illustrated that Jenny had developed a learning motive and displayed self-encouragement. Examples include:

“Among all the activities that I have, I like to go to school most because all the activities there are joyful. Apart from that I most like the tuition class ... I like to do the take home exercises, there are English, mathematics and science exercises ... school don't have science yet ... I enjoy doing all these exercises, they are interesting.”

(She then continued to list almost all of her enhancement activities and indicated that she also liked these activities, as she could learn the knowledge and skills and get 'better' from them)

...

“I want to do better, ... I want to accumulate more prizes ... the more I get, can remind me how well I had done before and now I need to do even better and get more prizes than before.”

(Jenny, Video recorded Interview, Visit 13 of Cheung family)

In the Chinese language school graduation ceremony which the researcher attended, all the three Cheung children received awards as the top students of their classes and many other related prizes.

Jessica from the Chan family also demonstrated a strong desire to learn. Flora told the researcher that Jessica had liked to learn new things and enjoyed participating in all of the organised events/lessons ever since she was young. The data collected across institutions (home, school, Sunday school, children's choir, gymnastic and piano lessons), illustrated that Jessica was cheerful, often smiling, and actively participating. For example:

A morning at home having breakfast, Jessica discovered a workbook designed for junior primary students that her mother had bought for her brother earlier but which he had not used. She grabbed it and wanted to do the exercises from there (at her grade she did not have homework). Flora asked her to finish breakfast first. Jessica then quickly finished her breakfast and started to do the exercises with her mother as companion ...

(Jessica, Video observation, Visit 5 of Chan family)

From the interviews with Vincent and Steven, the researcher found that they were not always willing to do all the scheduled learning activities that their parents wanted them to do. Steven was impatient when doing some of his homework that resulted from his weekly enhancement classes. Terri and Tony commented that they were working out appropriate ways to encourage him to develop a learning motive and learn to be patient. In the beginning of the data collection period, Vincent demonstrated a lack of motive and competence to participate in some of the activities that his parents wanted him to do, and in which they had enrolled him without consulting him. His guitar learning experience was one of the examples. Nevertheless, with his parents' encouragement, he gradually developed a learning motive and was pleased to engage in this enhancement activity of guitar practice and lessons (Wong & Fleer, 2012). The parents' encouragement is an important factor to facilitate their children's development of a learn motive and their mastering of the learning. It supports the mechanism involved in forming learning as the leading activity for the children. Both Vincent and Steven had received good results in their recent NAPLAN test. According to his parents and an analysis of the video data, Vincent could learn quickly, but sometimes he had behavioural problems in some of his enhancement classes, where he liked to play little tricks to make his own fun. In the interview with Flora regarding Vincent's past activities, she commented that overall Vincent had been happy and actively participated in his early learning activities.

The case for Steven was similar to that of Vincent. Terri remarked that Steven had been a happy learner when he was in Hong Kong. For instance, despite long hours in nursery, he was a happy learner because the maids and teachers there were good to him. She said this was reflected in the fact that every day Steven happily wore his uniform, took his bag and went to his nursery school, showing his desire to go. His active and happy participation in learning activities were also clearly shown from his progress reports and his photos taken in nursery. Terri added that when Steven started school in Melbourne, his class teacher had lent her teaching materials to practise with Steven at home and he had improved his English quickly. Many teachers commented to Terri that Steven was clever and learned quickly but showed some problems with concentrating in class. These characteristics were also revealed in the video observations of Steven's participation in his enhancement activities, such as Chinese language school and Sunday school at his local Church.

When the family beliefs and values for formal learning are considered alongside of how the children viewed and engaged in their school and enhancement learning activities, mostly the children were pleased to participate and they valued their own achievements. However, it is evident that some children were not always predisposed to these activities. But on the whole the findings show that the positive comments far outweighed the negative comments. What came through strongly from the interviews and video observations was that the children, like their parents, valued a learning orientation from an early age.

In all three families formal learning was valued, accepted and generally found to be a positive and enriching experience with the reward of school success. The outcomes of the interviews of the three families and their children suggest that the parents and the children enjoyed and valued learning. In order to gain a better understanding of how much formal and enhanced learning activities were occurring within each of the three homes, we now turn to an analysis of the scheduling of activities done by the families and video recorded observations made in this research project.

*Scheduled family practices*

The video observations showed that all three families structured formal learning tasks for their children's everyday lives. Table 1 presents the weekly schedule that was developed for the school term for Jessica and Vincent in the Chan family, illustrating that the majority of their time was spent immersed in educational and instructional learning activities. This timetable was provided by Flora at the beginning of the data collection period, when the researcher asked her about the enhancement activities that Jessica and Vincent participated in. A content analysis of family practices shown in the video observations confirmed these practices. In general, the situations and the timetable of practices for the Lee and Cheung children were similar.

**Table 1:** The Chan children's activity timetable during school term

Time	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thur	Fri	Sat	Sun	Time
0730	wake up, breakfast, wash face & brush teeth							0730
0800	get dressed, pack up, practise piano*/guitar#, help with housework if time allows					wake up, breakfast	wake up, breakfast	0800
0830	set off to school, drive everyday except Tuesday							0830
0900	<b>school</b>					Chinese School	practise piano*/guitar# or review Bible verse	0900
0930								
1000							Choir 1 <sup>st</sup> , 3 <sup>rd</sup> week	1000
1030								
1100							Church Sunday School	1100
1130								
1200								
1230							lunch	1230
1300								
1330								family table tennis time (the son attends training#, other members play table tennis) at Table tennis Club
1400			shopping with parents if not, back home	1400				
1430				1430				
1500				1500				
1530	school finished at 15:30							1530
1600	gymnastics*/guitar# lesson	back home and have some snacks					homework (if any)	1600
1630		take home reading	roller skating lesson				free time: practice piano*/guitar#;	1630
1700	take home reading	swimming lesson		reading; practise piano*/guitar# & table tennis#, homework (if any)			reading; computer	1700
1730					back home			1730
1800	dinner					dine out or dinner with grandparents	dinner	1800
1830								1830
1900	reading; homework (if any), Bible time (15 mins 2-3 times a week); help with housework, computer play (30 mins but not everyday); practice piano*/guitar#, TV or free time*/table tennis# (not everyday)				piano lesson*/boy's brigade#	free time may include Bible reading, TV		1900
1930								2000
2000	shower and brush teeth						shower, brush teeth	2030
2030								2100
2100	bed time Bible story*/prayer#, bed time						bed time Bible story*/prayer#, bed time	2100
2130						shower, bed Time		2130

(Note: Activities marked with “\*” are for Jessica and activities marked with “#” are for Vincent)

In Table 1 we see that from Monday to Friday that the Chan children came home from school and usually had a quick snack before going on to organised activities or scheduled homework tasks or skills practice, such as table tennis. This occurred up until dinnertime. After dinner the Chan children engaged in homework, did musical instrument practice or had some free time for TV or computer play (although the latter was not available each day). Only an hour was made available for this on Mondays to Thursdays before preparing for bed, including time devoted to Bible study and prayer. On Fridays the Chan children had a piano lesson or attended the Boy's Brigade until bedtime. Here we see that most of the time in the afterschool period and after dinnertime, is scheduled by the parents. On the weekend, the Chan children participated in Chinese school, went to church, participated in training sessions for table tennis with the extended family, and did homework if needed. Whilst most of the activities were scheduled, some periods of free time were

available on Sundays in the late afternoon. Once again we see that the weekend activities were scheduled for the Chan children by their parents.

The data revealed that a central family pedagogical practice placing demands on their children to be constantly engaged in organised activities was prevalent in all three families. Table 2 gives an overview of the types of enhancement activities that dominated in all three families. These activities are framed as educationally oriented and indeed represent the kind of competences and interests that the parents wanted their children to develop for their wellbeing in accord with the family pedagogy.

**Table 2:** Types of enhancement activities taken by child participants during data collection period

Activities	Chan family		Lee family	Cheung family		
	Jessica	Vincent	Steven	Jenny	Betty	Micky
Chinese language	√	√	√	√	√	√
Swimming	√	√	√	√	√	√
Musical instrument	√ Piano	√ Guitar	X before Violin	√ Piano	√ Piano	√ Violin
Other sports	√ R.Skating Gymnastics	√ R.Skating Table tennis	√ football	X	X	X
Sunday school	√ Church	√ Church	√ Church	X	X	X
Church choir	√	√	X	X	X	X
Private tuition	X	X	√ English, from 2010	√ Mandarin	√ Mandarin	√ Mandarin
Chess	X	X	√	√	√	X
Drama	X	X	√ stopped 2010	X	X	X
Kumon	X	X	X	√	√	X
Scholarship class	X	X	X	√	X	X
Boy's Brigade	X	√	X	X	X	X

Table 2 shows that the participant children engaged in four to seven extra-curricular activities each week, and these were mainly oriented to formal learning. It is clear from the data analysed that all of the participant families were devoted to structuring formal learning and this kind of activity was the dominant practice that their children participated in. For example, swimming lessons are one of the activities to which all three families sent their children. Instead of viewing learning to swim as a leisure activity for the children, it became a regimented instructional time for the children. All

the activities were oriented towards learning as the leading motive, the motive that the parents were hoping to develop in their children.

The findings also indicate that the parents seldom supported imaginary play activities of their children. Analysis of the parent interviews indicates that play was considered by the parents as an activity which involved taking their children to the playground and letting them play on the slides, swings and monkey bars, riding the bicycle or simply playing with toys as objects and board games, or other types of games where children had to follow instructions. The families did not suggest that play could act as a family pedagogical tool for facilitating their children's development (see Kravtsova, 2006; Kravtsov and Kravtsova, 2010). When the researcher asked the mothers about role-playing or other kinds of fantasy play activities (e.g. Bretherton, 1984; Pramling and Fler, 2009), Flora recognised that the only role-playing activity that she had with her children was to play cooking with Jessica with the toy cooking utensils (only a few times) when Jessica was two to three years old. She noticed that there was no imaginary play activity between Jessica and Vincent either. Terri remembered that she had played "bus driver and passengers" and "doctor and patient" with Steven when he was in kindergarten. These play events were all initiated by Steven and only lasted for a short period of time then stopped altogether. Linda remarked that she had not engaged in any form of imaginary play with her children. However, she recently noticed that Micky and Betty liked to play "teacher and students" at home, which she had not noticed in the past.

Analysis reveals that all the participant parents of this study not only placed high value on their children's education and learning, but they actively participated in ensuring that their children gained the most from all enhancement activities. Cultural-historical theory of child development suggests that imaginary play is the leading activity of the preschool child. In this study, play was not something that the families valued or actively supported and promoted within the family practices. Rather the families in this study created the conditions for formal learning from an early age. The families valued learning and worked towards developing their children's motive for learning rather than play. The findings of the study suggest that the family practices foregrounded formal learning as the leading activity and not play, problematising the suggested content of the configuration of the periodisation put forward by Elkonin (1971) where imaginary play emerges prior to formal learning as the leading activity for preschool age.

## **Discussion**

This paper explores family practices and values about learning and play for three Hong Kong-Australian families in order to examine the leading activities of their children. It is understood that a leading activity is not equal to the activity that the child frequently engaging in. According to Kravtsova (2006), the mechanisms and criteria for leading activity are that it is period-specific and has a psychological underpinning for child development. Periodisation by Elkonin (1971) suggests that direct emotional contact, manipulation of objects, imaginary play and then formal learning are the leading activities for the development of infants, in early childhood, for preschool children, and early school-age children respectively. This study found that imaginary play was not occurring within the three families in the manner suggested by Elkonin (1971) or as is expected in maturational theories of child development that have dominated the Western literature. The tight scheduling of enhancement classes, and their related homework tasks dominated the children's lives, and limited time was made available for child-initiated activities. Play was not valued by the families as a source of development, and consequently less time was scheduled for free time, which could have been used for play. Consequently, formal learning, and not imaginary play, was valued by the families for their children's development in their early years in this study.

The findings of this study indicate that because of the value placed on formal learning early in children's lives, that the parents placed demands on their children to engage in learning activities, but they also helped them to acquire the meaning of learning, supporting them to develop a learning motive. An orientation to learning, rather than imaginary play, appeared to be actively constructed by the parents, and formal learning became the most typical everyday activity for the children from their early years, resulting in high levels of learning achievement for the children in this study. It was also found that the children took pleasure in formal learning and valued this form of activity at home. It would appear that the parents' efforts at orienting their children to learning through the scheduling of enhancement activities starting at an early age, encouraging and helping them to master their learning activities, had resulted in formal learning becoming the leading activity for these Hong Kong–Australian children, raising their competence early, and it would appear that this success developed the motive for continued formal learning.

This study also found that family pedagogy matters; it provides evidence of a particular form of pedagogical practice, which results in a different leading activity prevailing to that reported in other communities for early childhood period. This has given these Hong Kong–Australian children a different focus and direction for their development. When examining the process of development from the child's perspective, the participant children demonstrated that they had appropriated the values and meaning systems of their families. The children were generally willing to comply with their parents' demands. Although sometimes they were at odds with what others wanted them to do, gradually as they achieved mastery of expected activities through the encouragement and guidance of adults, they were motivated to learn more and achieve higher competence. In this way they oriented a motive to learn from a young age, which problematises Elkonin's (1971) periodisation, who specified *formal learning as a leading activity for school children*.

The overall finding of this study of child development for three members of the Hong Kong–Australian community demonstrated that intellectual development was emphasised, and a belief that learning is the most important activity for supporting their children's development. Thus, the parents actively structured formal learning activities to their children from their early years and helped them to master their learning activities. This study has shown how high achieving families oriented children to learning and facilitated the development of a learning motive. That is, the parents placed demands on their children according to their cultural values, which they believed could provide the optimal benefit to their children's development, yet at the same time they were responsive to their children's motives and competences. It is not surprising then that newspaper headlines in Hong Kong feature stories about very young children achieving mastery of competence in advance of their ages, such as that of a two-and-a-half year old girl being trained by her mother to pronounce accurately and recognise more than 1,000 words in English (Apple daily News, August 22, 2011). Wu (2004) also states that a boy in China started to follow his parents' 'tailor made for him' study plan at the age of two, began to write his diary at four, commenced his publication at five, and finished a novel of 120,000 words at six. The findings of this study of three Hong Kong–Australian families is not isolated, indeed there are many examples frequently reported across Asian communities and this phenomenon is growing in many Western and immigrant societies.

## **Conclusion**

Elkonin (1971) argued that Blonsky and Vygotsky laid the foundations for the study of children's development, but "their theoretical research" did not lead "to a solution to the problem" (p. 10) of

periodisation of child development. It was only from the late 1930's that Russian scholars began to consider the place of a *motive* for explaining the principles governing and distinguishing specific periodisation, as noted by Vygotsky (1998), Elkonin (1971), and later Bozhovich (2009) and Kravtsova (2006), and more recently in Western communities by Hedegaard (2009), Fleer (2010) and P. Wong (2013). The findings of the study reported in this paper also support the view that the concept of motive is central to understanding the periodisation framework of Hong Kong–Australian children who participated in the study. The development of a motive for formal learning was valued by the families and children alike, as evidenced by most of the children's positive responses to the activities that occupied their available time.

The theoretical work of Elkonin (1971) supports the view that a young child's motive for imaginary play later becomes subordinate to a motive for formal learning. Child development as understood in this theorisation, foregrounds not only motive as the central force, but also conceptualises progression of development as moving from one leading activity to another. In light of these concepts of leading activity and periodisation, Elkonin (1971) presented the progression of leading activity as having a particular order, where imaginary play is the leading activity for preschool children, and formal learning is the leading activity for school children. The findings of the present study problematise this particular progression identified by Elkonin (1971) because imaginary play was not the leading activity or even an activity (only occurring very rarely) for the children from the three Hong Kong Australian families.

In the Hong Kong–Australian families, the parents actively organised enhancement activities for the children from their early years, which were mostly framed as either formal learning or learning which was highly routinized. Many enhancement activities required homework or skill development practice to be undertaken in preparation for the next enhancement activity in a subsequent week. Only a small amount of free time was available to the children. Through the family organisation of the enhancement activities, and their encouragement and celebration of their children's achievement, the children were continually oriented towards formal learning starting from an early age rather than to play. Findings from this study suggest that it is culturally specific to Hong Kong–Australian families for '*formal learning*' to be adopted much earlier as the 'leading activity'. The families provide ample learning opportunities for their children at an early age. The social situation in such formal activities means that the children's self-awareness around play is not realized. The process accords with the theoretical work on leading activities and child development, but not necessarily with the age periods as discussed by researchers within the Russian community (Elkonin, 1971; Kravtsov, 2006; Vygotsky, 1998) or as evident in maturational theories of child development traditionally drawn upon elsewhere in European heritage communities (e.g. Allen and Marotz, 1989; Beatty, 1990; Berk, 2006).

The findings problematise both theories of play and child development which suggest that imaginary play is the leading activity of preschool children (Elkonin, 1971) or where play is thought to be the dominant form of activity of all young children (Smilansky, 1968). In this study we see that formal learning is valued and taken as the leading role at an early age within a psychological system of leading activities for the three Hong Kong–Australian families. This finding provides insight into why the Hong Kong–Australian students are highly successful in academic achievement. However, this study also shows that consciousness and development of imaginary play does not emerge for these particular Hong Kong Australian children. In this regard, Bozhovich (2009) points out that "if we accelerate the development of abstract thinking in an untimely and artificial way, we destroy the orderly course of mental development and the

qualitatively distinctive structure of children's age-related features" (p.60). She also added that "artificial acceleration of a particular function's development can undermine the harmonic structure of child development" (Bozhovich, 2009, p.60). This implies that if families focus too heavily on learning at a young age, this may adversely affect their children's development. The present study does not have sufficient data to take a position on this matter. However, it suggests an important direction for further research where the impact of early formal learning on Hong Kong families (even extending to Asian families from contexts such as China and Singapore) could be examined. Further research into this area may bring new insights and help unlock the longstanding problem noted by some studies (e.g. Poon & Wong, 2008), of the lack of creativity found among Hong Kong students.

The contradiction noted in this study is in fact the strength of Vygotsky's work because it supports the view that the social and material environment of the child is actually the source of a child's development (Vygotsky, 1994). Elkonin (1971) constructed a particular periodisation which was related to a particular time (the Soviet era) and cultural community (Russia). This social and material environment is very different to the Hong Kong–Australian families of this study. The framework of Elkonin's periodisation is valuable as it allows us to identify the leading activity for different periods and develop programs or activities accordingly so that the child can develop fully in all psychological dimensions. When the concepts are used in different cultural contexts, they are not universal, but culturally and temporally framed because the family conditions and values are different across communities. We have to understand this complexity. In addition to the cultural nature of the community, the issues arising from technological advances and globalization may influence the social situation of the child's development. This paper suggests that those who use the concepts of leading activity and periodisation need to take account of cultural and temporal factors when drawing upon the works of Vygotsky, Elkonin and Kravtsova.

## References

- Allen, K.E. & Marotz, L. (1989). *Developmental profile: Birth to six*. New York: Delmar.
- Appledaily News. (2011, August 17). *Kindergarten students join study tour to Europe, tour fee over HK\$10,000, parents accompany, more than 200 people per tour (in Chinese)*. Retrieved August 17, 2011, from <http://hk.apple.nextmedia.com/news/art/20110817/15531452>
- Appledaily News. (2011, August 22). *Hong Kong 'Tiger mother' trained her two-and-a-half year old daughter to recognise 1,000 words in English (in Chinese)*. Retrieved August 22, 2011, from <http://hk.apple.nextmedia.com/news/art/20110822/15544709>
- Archer, L. & Francis, B. (2007). *Understanding minority ethnic achievement*. London: Routledge.
- Beatty, J.J. (1990). *Observing Development of the Young Child* (2nd ed.). New York: Merrill.
- Berk, L.E. (2006). *Child Development* (7th ed.). Boston: Allyn & Bacon.
- Bozhovich, L. I. (2009). The social situation of child development. *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, 47 (4), 59–86.
- Cheng, K. M. (1998). Can Education values be borrowed? Looking into cultural differences. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 73(2), 11–30.

El'konin, D. B. (1971). Toward the problem of stages in the mental development of children. *Voprosy psikhologii*, 4, 538–563.

Fleer, M. (2010). *Early learning and development: Cultural–historical concepts in play*. Melbourne, Australia: Cambridge University Press.

Guo, K. (2006). Raising children in Chinese immigrant families: Evidence from the research literature. *Australian Journal of early Childhood*, 31(2), 7–13.

Hedegaard, M. (2009). Children's development from a cultural–historical approach: Children's activity in everyday local settings as foundation for their development, *Mind, Culture and Activity*, 16(1), 64–81.

Ho, L. (2000). *Migration of elite: The adaptation of Hong Kong skilled migrants in Australia*. Unpublished Doctoral thesis, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia.

Karpov, Y. V. (2005). *The neo-Vygotskian approach to child development*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kravtsova, E. E. (2006). The concept of age-specific new psychological formations in contemporary developmental psychology. *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, 44 (6), 6–18.

Kravtsov, G.G. & Kravtsova, E.E. (2010). Play in L.S. Vygotsky's non-classical psychology. *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, 48 (4), 25–41.

Li, J. (2001). Chinese conceptualization of learning. *Ethos* 29(2), 111–137.

Louie, V. (2004). *Compelled to Excel: Immigration, education, and opportunity among Chinese Americans*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.

Lyle, J. (2003). Stimulated recall: A report on its use in naturalistic research. *British Educational Research Journal*, 29 (6), 861–878.

Mak, A.S. & Chan, H. (1995). Chinese family values in Australia. In R. Hartley (Ed.), *Families and cultural diversity in Australia* (pp. 70–95). Sydney: Allen & Unwin.

Ming Pao News. (2007, August 5). *Parents spent HK\$90,000 on one set of BB learning kit hoping their children future success (in Chinese)*. Retrieved August 18, 2007, from <http://www.mingpaonews.com/20070805/gaal.htm>

Pe-Pua, R., Mitchell, C., Iredale, R., & Castles, S. (1996). *Astronaut families and parachute children: The cycle of migration between Hong Kong and Australia*. Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service.

Phillipson, S. (2010). Parental role in relation to students' cognitive ability towards academic achievement in Hong Kong. *The Asia–Pacific Education Researcher*, 19(2), 229–250.

Poon, A. Y. K. & Wong, Y. (2008). Education reform in Hong Kong: The “through-road” model and its societal consequences. *International Review of Education*, 54, 33–55.

Pramling-Samuelsson, I. & Fleer, M. (Eds.) (2009). *Play and learning in early childhood settings*. The Netherlands: Springer.

Reagan, T. (2005). *Non-western education traditions: Indigenous approaches to education thought and practice*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Sethi, S., Este, D. C. & Charlebois, M. B. (2001). Factors influencing child-rearing practices of recently migrated East Indian and Chinese women with children from infancy to age six. *The Hong Kong Nursing Journal*, 37(3), 14–20.

Shek, D. T. L. & Chan, L. K. (1999). Hong Kong Chinese parents’ perceptions of the ideal child. *The Journal of Psychology*. 133(3), 291–302.

Smilansky, S. (1968). *The effects of sociodramatic play on disadvantaged pre-school children*. New York: Wiley

Veresov, N. (2006). Leading activity in developmental psychology: Concept and principle. *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, 44 (5), 7–25.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1966). Play and its role in the mental development of the child. *Voprosy Psikhologii*, 12(6), 62–76.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1994). The problem of the environment. In R. van der Veer & J. Valsiner (Eds.), *The Vygotsky reader* (pp. 338–354). Cambridge: Backwell.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1998). *The collected works of L.S. Vygotsky, Vol. 5: Child Psychology* (M.J. Hall, Trans; R.W. Reiber, Ed.). New York: Plenum Press.

Wong, K. M. (2000). Achieving a world class education: Two papers on developments in Hong Kong. *LARTV Seminar Series Papers, No.98*.

Wong, P. L. (2007). The Education values of Hong Kong community in Australia: A review of the literature. *ANZCIES 2007 Conference Proceeding*, p.313–326.

Wong, P. L. (2012). Hong Kong–Australian parents’ development of values, expectations and practices for their children’s education: A dialectical process. In P. W. K. Chan (Ed.), *Asia Pacific education: Diversity, challenges and changes* (pp. 68–86). Melbourne, Australia: Monash University Publishing.

Wong, P. L. (2013). How encouragement in everyday family practices facilitates Hong Kong–Australian children’s motive for learning. In S. Phillipson., K. Y. L. Ku, & S. N. Phillipson (Eds.). *Constructing educational achievement: A sociocultural perspective* (pp. 201–214). London/New York: Routledge.

Wong, P. L. & Fleer, M. (2012). A cultural–historical study of how children from Hong Kong immigrant families develop a learning motive within everyday family practices in Australia. *Mind Culture and Activity*, 19(2), 107–126.

Wu, J. (2004). *Wishing for dragon children: Examining changes and continuities in the ways China and Australia educate their children*. Unpublished master thesis, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia.

Zhao, Z. (2000). *Community profiles 1996 Census Hong Kong born*. Canberra: Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs.

**Pui Ling (Pauline) Wong** is a PhD candidate (nearing completion) in the Faculty of Education at Monash University, Australia. Her research interests include children's learning and development, parental education values, family practices, Hong Kong immigrant families in Australia, cultural-historical theory and dialectical and visual methodology.

[Pauline.wong@monash.edu](mailto:Pauline.wong@monash.edu)

**Marilyn Fleer** is a professor and the Foundation Chair of Early Childhood Education at Monash University, Australia, and is the President of the International Society for Cultural Activity Research (ISCAR). Her research interests focus on early years learning and development, with special attention on play, pedagogy, culture, science and technology. More recently she has investigated child development in the contexts of home and school.

[marilyn.fleer@monash.edu](mailto:marilyn.fleer@monash.edu)

Mailing address for both authors:

Faculty of Education, Early Childhood Education, Monash University,  
Peninsula Campus, McMahons Road, Frankston, Victoria 3199  
Australia.