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The politics of teacher wellbeing: 'Sung baang', neoliberalism and power struggles in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

The concept of wellbeing has attracted global attention from governments and transnational organisations concerned with the 'teacher crisis' in education. Since 2006, the Hong Kong government have introduced a suite of policies ('sung baang') to address the problem of teacher stress and burnout. Education pressure groups are critical of these efforts, however, pointing to evidence that other, celebrated policies in vogue, such as decentralisation, exacerbate the problem. In this paper we adopt the analytic of discursive institutionalism to capture the politics of teacher wellbeing as policy text and discourse, with a unique focus on how meanings of teacher wellbeing are struggled over and mobilised by different stakeholders competing to leverage their power for political gains.

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Introduction

Teacher wellbeing has been recognised by various national governments and transnational organisations as crucial for addressing the teacher crisis and related problems of teacher shortages, high attrition rates and the intensification of poor health among teachers (Farley and Chamberlain 2021). Governments around the globe have initiated various policies to support teacher wellbeing through a focus on improved economic incentives, better working conditions, clearer career structures and progression pathways, and the establishment of quality standards (Viac and Fraser 2020). There is a plethora of evaluative studies that assess the impact of these policies on teachers, with a view to providing evidence-based recommendations for policy improvement that supports teachers (see OECD 2018; The World Bank 2023). However, these studies, what we might describe as evaluative-intervention research (see Dreer and Gouasé 2022; Tamilselvi and Thangarajathi 2016; Vo and Allen 2022), views teacher wellbeing in fixed terms as something auditable or scientifically measurable, and therefore overlooks the dynamic nature of wellbeing as something that is discursively produced, that is, negotiated over and contested by policy actors (Ball et al. 2012). Our contention is that evaluative-intervention studies on teacher wellbeing appear to engage only with the resulting tropes/repertoires of these discursive processes, taken to be given, universal and therefore politically neutral, thus failing to take account of how agreed definitions of wellbeing are arrived at, naturalised and installed through the interaction of competing actors operating in specific institutional environments (Lin 2020). These studies do not sufficiently explain how meanings of teacher

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wellbeing are discursively negotiated and produced among policy actors, for example, pointing to an important knowledge gap which this paper seeks to address.

To explain how policy emerges through the political dynamics of institutional environments, Schmidt (2008, 2010, 2015) developed a useful analytical framework called discursive institutionalism. Different from other institutional perspectives, such as historical institutionalism and sociological institutionalism, which generally view policy change as institutional fact construction through 'path-dependence' or by cultural rules and norms, discursive institutionalism regards policy change as a political reality constituted by the content of socially circulating ideas, such as meanings, and the interactive process of discourse which include methods of presenting, communicating and negotiating ideas (Schmidt 2015). Discursive institutionalism therefore is useful to problematising the content of policy ideas – as agreed, universal or given – by investigating how the meanings of policy ideas are negotiated and contested by policy actors through discourse (Sivesind and Wahlström 2017). This paper aims to fill the previously discussed knowledge gap by adopting discursive institutionalism to explain how meanings of teacher wellbeing are struggled over by policy actors competing to leverage their power for different political gains in the context of Hong Kong.

Since the introduction of neoliberal education reform from the 1990s, a large proportion of teachers in Hong Kong have reported to suffer from stress, anxiety and depression (Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union 1995, 2010, 2018), leading to calls from education pressure groups for policy change (see Ta Kung Pao 2006; The Sun 2002). From 2006, the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government has implemented specific measures to address the problem of teacher stress and burnout, such as providing schools with additional resources to support teachers' work and improve school accountability mechanisms to reduce teacher workload (HKSAR Government Press Release 2006c). Education pressure groups, like the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union (HKPTU) (2010, 2018), have criticised the scope and robustness of these policies, calling attention to evidence that other, celebrated policies, such as decentralisation, exacerbate rather than alleviate the problem of poor mental health among teachers. Although the HKSAR government is led by the Chief Executive, someone who was elected by 1,500 members of Election Committee and advised by the appointed members of the Executive Council under 'One Country, Two Systems' arrangement with China, policy decisions must undergo examination and approval by the Legislative Council in which 55% of the council members are elected by the people of Hong Kong. This 'semi-democratic' governance structure has contributed to tensions between the HKSAR government and education pressure groups during the development and implementation of different education policies (Lo and Hung 2022). The unique political-governance arrangement of Hong Kong makes it a novel context for the study of teacher wellbeing through the application of discursive institutionalism. More specifically, it allows for an original study of how meanings of teacher wellbeing are discursively produced through the interactions and bargaining of policy actors vying for political power.

Discursive institutionalism

According to Schmidt (2008, 2010, 2015), everyday social actors, from citizens to public service workers, are active subjects rather than passive recipients of policy change. Discursive institutionalism expands this view to take account of the ideas or discourses that underpin the actions of everyday social actors working in institutional environments. Here, ideas can be understood as frames of reference or interpretive repertoires (including tropes, metaphors and even imagery) that equip social actors with culturally sensitive ways of discussing and evaluating actions or events and which provide the basis for collective action towards the realisation or operationalisation of events (Bates, Choi, and Kim 2021). In this framing, ideas do not only provide 'mental' guidelines and shared maps for political actions which serve to legitimate a common ground for action; they also attach values to political actions and therefore serve to legitimate a certain course of action (Nordin and Sundberg 2018). In this respect, ideas may be regarded

as sources of power or ideational power to more precise, that is, the ability to generate, monopolise and/or institutionalise ideas which can be used effectively to shape people's thoughts and actions (Schmidt 2008).

According to Carstensen and Schmidt (2016), ideational power has three forms: (i) power *through* ideas; (ii) power *over* ideas; and (iii) power *in* ideas. Power *through* ideas involves persuading others through presenting compelling ideas that resonate with and uphold pre-existing values and beliefs. Power *over* ideas refers to control over the meanings ascribed to ideas through the authoritative allocation of values and norms intended to shape how events might be understood and interpreted with a given context. Power *in* ideas entails the 'institutionalization' of ideas, enabling them to become dominant or acquire naturalness as taken-for-granted thoughts, often at the expense of other (competing) ideas. Therefore, the extent to which policy actors have the capacity to mobilise power depends on how meaningful their ideas are to their audience (Schmidt 2015). In this sense, the effective communication of ideas can enable policy actors to frame policy processes in ways that might be perceived by others as legitimate.

To leverage ideational power effectively, policy actors are required to engage in presenting, communicating and negotiating ideas through the availability of discourse (Schmidt 2008, 2010). In the framing of discursive institutionalism, discourse is the active process through which policy actors share and influence ideas (Schmidt 2015). This discursive process does not occur in a vacuum but rather is embedded through institutional environments. According to Schmidt (2015, 183), the institutional environment is 'the setting within which their [policy actors'] ideas have meaning, their discourse have communicative force, and their collective actions make a different'. In other words, the institutional environment serves as an anchor for meaning, one that shapes the interpretation or framing of ideas and the logic of communication that guides its emergence and articulation or co-option and translation by others. At the same time, the institutional environment simultaneously constrains and enables policy actors to think, speak and act, thereby producing degrees of policy change or continuity, while also being constituted by and constitutive of formal institutions like schools (Schmidt 2015). In this sense, discursive institutionalism opens up possibilities for a critical investigation of the discursive process through which policy actors create, communicate and negotiate ideas in particular institutional environments, with particular focus on 'who said what to whom, where, when, and why', rather than any exclusive focus on 'what is said' (Schmidt 2010, 83).

Teacher wellbeing in Hong Kong

Since the 1990s, teacher suicide has been a recurring topic in news and especially social media (Siu 2008). According to education pressure groups, such as HKPTU (1995, 2010, 2018) and the Hong Kong Federation of Education Workers (HKFEW) (2008, 2022), during the period 1995–2022, over 60% of teachers reported experiencing high work stress, over 40% reported suffering from anxiety and over 25% reported struggling with depression. These reports coupled with ongoing media coverage of teacher suicide have increased public awareness and concerns regarding teacher wellbeing (Lun 2010). A common explanation for the above trends is the nature of education reforms in Hong Kong, especially those implemented after handover of Hong Kong from the United Kingdom to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1997. After handover in July 1997, the HKSAR government initiated a series of education reforms based on neoliberal ideas, such as decentralisation, market accountability and performativity. This included a strong emphasis on the economic function of education, specifically preparing children for the future global knowledge economy (Lee, Kwan, and Li 2020) and a wider focus on equipping children with generic skills and competencies to enhance their employment opportunities and adaptability to changing labour market conditions, such as problem-solving and lifelong learning.

To achieve this, the HKSAR government implemented various curriculum changes and reforms. To ensure schools and teachers enacting these reforms, the HKSAR government proposed a

framework of School Based Management (SBM) in 1997, one that redeemed core elements of decentralisation, market accountability and performativity, and later fully implemented SBM in 2005 when the Education Ordinance came into force (Lee, Kwan, and Li 2020). Although SBM ensures that schools enjoy certain freedoms to manage themselves as administrative self-governing entities, permitting them to use the block grant (a government fund allocated to schools) flexibly for school management, it also requires schools enhance transparency in their management practices through excessive bureaucratising structures and procedures for school operation and quality insurance. This requirement is captured through the development of school profiles, plans and reports that outline school priority areas, targets for implementation, short-term and long-term goals, and progress monitoring. To facilitate the implementation of SBM, the HKSAR government developed various performance measures to help guide schools as administratively self-governing entities, including the School Administration Guide, the framework of teacher appraisal, Performance Indicators, and the school accountability framework (Tsang 2019). Owing to these measures, all publicly funded schools in Hong Kong since 2003 are required to conduct annual self-evaluations which are complemented by external school reviews conducted by the Education Bureau every four years. In this sense, schools and teachers in Hong Kong have become managerially accountable for their performance.

A key outcome of these education reforms is work intensification. As HKPTU (2010) indicates, Hong Kong teachers have been required to perform on average 80 separate duties since the implementation of neoliberal education reforms, mainly owing to the additional administrative and pastoral work these reforms demand. A condition of meeting these demands is that teachers in Hong Kong must spend longer hours working. HKFEW (2008) suggests that Hong Kong teachers need to work on average 10–12 h per day and 51–60 h per week to satisfy these demands, resulting in insufficient time for rest or recreation. Moreover, the strong emphasis on the economic function of education made explicit within these reforms has displaced the instructional values of teachers' work and replaced it with managerial values, in effect making it increasingly difficult for teachers make meaningful connections with their work (Tsang 2019). These conditions are both widespread and nefarious in Hong Kong, contributing negatively to teacher wellbeing (Lee, Kwan, and Li 2020). Since the implementations of these reforms, both the HKPTU (e.g. 2010, 2018) and the HKFEW (e.g. 2008, 2022) have reported that a high proportion of Hong Kong teachers have experienced severe mental health challenges such as stress, anxiety and depression. The ratio of teachers suffering from mental health challenges is 2–3 times higher than members of the Hong Kong general public (Fung 2012).

Politics and Hong Kong education reforms

In addition to global influences of neoliberalism, Lo and Hung (2022) illustrate how local politics play a significant role in shaping and enabling education reform in Hong Kong, mainly owing to issues of legitimacy deficit. Compared to 55% of the members of the Hong Kong Legislative Council who are elected by eligible voters from geographically demarcated constituencies and professional or special interest groups, the Chief Executive of the HKSAR government is elected only by an Election Committee and therefore has been challenged for its non-elected status. The unelected status of the Chief Executive has been a persistent problem for the HKSAR government who appear far less adept at resolving the problem compared to the previous British Colonial Hong Kong (BCHK) government (Ngok 2011). The main issue is the economy.

In the colonial period, especially between the 1950s and the 1990s, the BCHK government steered Hong Kong society through state bureaucracy to initiate and implement public policies using a top-down approach, supplemented by a controlled process of engaging local elites through consultative or advisory bodies as well as public consultation (King 1975). Although this form of governance created a political legitimacy deficit, the BCHK government successfully resolved the above problem by strengthening its performance legitimacy, i.e. establishing public acceptance

based on its outstanding performance, especially economic performance. Performance legitimacy was secured by expanding certain domains of welfare provision like education, housing and health care to satisfy public need and facilitate economic development (Scott 2010). Yet despite these advances in welfare and the economy, Hong Kong experienced an economic downturn after the handover in 1997, making it difficult for the incoming HKSAR government to maintain said performance legitimacy.

The economic performance of Hong Kong was first affected by the Asia Financial Crisis in 1997 and then the Global Financial Crisis in 2007–2008. A corollary of this was increased work instability and labour market polarisation in Hong Kong. For instance, Chan (2009) indicates that unemployment in Hong Kong increased from 2.2% to 4.8% and underemployment rose from 1.1% to 2.4% between 1997 and 2007. During this period, the unemployment and underemployment peaked at 7.9% and 3.5% respectively. As a result, income and economic inequality became a serious problem in Hong Kong, as indicated by the high Gini coefficient that was reported to be above 0.5 between 1996 and 2017 (Oxfam 2018). The HKSAR government was unable to stem the tide of rising unemployment, leading to fierce public criticism of government inaction and their legitimacy to govern (Scott 2010).

Another reason why the HKSAR government faced a legitimacy crisis is because of changes in the political values of the Hong Kong public. During the British colonial period, Hong Kong people generally held an instrumental view of governance. More specifically, they were more accepting of a non-democratic political system to the extent it guaranteed economic prosperity and stability (Ngok 2011). Economic prosperity and stability endured as a dominant political narrative for BCHK during the colonial period, with the effect that Hong Kong people were positioned as apolitical subjects rather than engaged democratic citizens (Wong 2022). Nevertheless, since 2000, Hong Kong people, especially the young and educated, have expressed a strong, even militant desire for democratic political rule and related principles of human rights, freedom and equality (Sing 2020). As Wong (2022) observes, new narratives of democracy and freedom have replaced the old narratives of economic prosperity and stability in post-colonial Hong Kong. This is captured through the tireless political activities of Hong Kong people who have participated in various social movements advocating for democratic reforms. These social movements include the 2003 demonstration against Basic Law Article 23 which Hong Kong people criticised as a threat to human rights; the 2012 protest against National Education which was characterised as a technology designed to brainwash people into purblind communists; and the 2014 Umbrella Movement which was as a civil disobedience campaign and call for universal suffrage (Sing 2020). All these social movements cumulatively and gradually provoked major public distrust of the HKSAR government, making it increasingly challenging for the HKSAR government to gain legitimacy (Scott 2010). In response, the HKSAR government has attributed economic and political challenges to the inefficiency of state bureaucracy and subsequently enforced a series of neoliberal public sector reforms to address these problems (Scott 2010). These reforms include education policies designed to force through rapid, dramatic and substantial curriculum and school management reforms since 2000 (Lo and Hung 2022).

Methods

Drawing on the analytic of discursive institutionalism, this paper explores the ideas through which multiple policy actors in Hong Kong have influenced the history and discourse of teacher wellbeing policy between July 1997 and December 2022. This specific time period was chosen because of strong evidence of increasing policy concerns about teacher wellbeing in Hong Kong during this time and related public concerns with teacher stress, anxiety and depression (Fung 2012; Hong Kong Federation of Education Workers 2022). Qualitative analysis was conducted of several key documents produced during this time, including newspapers articles, Legislative Council's records and policy documents. In total 1,251 documents were analysed. These key documents, together with discursive institutionalism as our analytical framework, are useful for capturing the discursive

history framing teacher wellbeing as a political and policy construct. These key documents are also significant for capturing the main arguments and evaluations of different policy actors and education pressure groups who at the time engaged in struggles to define teacher wellbeing. Analysing these key documents provide essential insight into how policy ideas come to be discursively presented, communicated and negotiated by policy actors, which in turn are essential for making sense of the complicated historical development and implementation of teacher wellbeing policy in Hong Kong (Bowen 2009).

In this study, WiseSearch (Media News Searching Platform) was first used to search for relevant newspaper articles. WiseSearch is a database containing various newspapers, magazines and websites published in Hong Kong, mainland China, Taiwan, and Macau since 1998. To capture only relevant newspapers articles, the search was filtered to include articles published in mainstream newspapers in Hong Kong between 1st January 1998 and 31st December 2022. Mainstream newspapers included: *Apple Daily*, *Hong Kong Economic Times*, *Ming Pao*, *Oriental Daily*, *Sing Pao*, *Sing Tao Daily*, *South China Morning Post*, *Ta Kung Pao*, *The Standard*, *The Sun*, *Wen Wei Pao*, and *HKSAR government Press Release.* The following keywords were used in both Chinese and English to limit the search further: 'teacher well-being', 'teacher burnout', 'teacher stress', 'teacher anxiety', 'teacher depression', 'teacher mental health', 'teacher health', 'teacher emotions', 'teacher exhaustion', 'teacher well-being policy', 'education reform', and 'curriculum reform'. Initially, 2,054 newspapers articles were captured using the search engine. Among them, a total of 1,232 articles were selected for analysis on the basis that they reported the perspectives of policy actors and pressure group engaged in debates about issues affecting teacher wellbeing and related policy issues in Hong Kong.

Another important source of evidence used in the study was the Legislative Council Library which contains records that document the contributions and perspectives of legislators, policy makers and pressure groups concerning public policies. By applying the same above keywords in both Chinese and English, 512 documentary records were searched. Among them, 12 records were selected for analysis as they addressed issues directly related to teacher wellbeing, such as teacher workload, stress and mental health, or issues indirectly related to teacher wellbeing, such as working hours and teacher-student ratio. Finally, our search included key education policy documents produced by the HKSAR government following the handover on 1 July 1997. These documents were analysed because of the strong view held by others (Fung 2012; Lee, Kwan, and Li 2020) that education reform is the major force affecting teacher wellbeing in Hong Kong. The policy documents analysed in this study included: *Education Commission Report No.7*, *Consultation Document on Learning to Learn*, *Consultation on Learning to Lear: Public Views and Comments*, *Learning to Learn: The Way forward Curriculum Development*, *Learning for Life Learning through Life: Reform Proposals for Education System in Hong Kong*, *Review of the Academic Structure of Senior Secondary Education*, and *Ongoing Renewal of the School Curriculum: Focusing, Deepening and Sustaining*. All the documents above were analysed using a thematic analysis approach. The data analysis relied on open coding, involving a line-by-line reading of the documents to develop initial codes that captured key meanings, including dominant tropes and repertoires. Following this, focused coding was employed to cluster together similar codes to form potential themes. To enhance the credibility of the data analysis, the study applied a constant comparison method in which incidents reported in data were compared with other incidents, incidents with themes and themes with other themes during the coding process (Corbin and Strauss 2008).

1997–2000: The rise of sung baang and neoliberal reform

Between 1997 and 2000, the HKSAR government conducted a series of public consultations to guide education reform directions and proposals for specific changes to the school curriculum. During the consultation period, the HKSAR government expressed concerns about teachers' workload, even though the issue of teacher wellbeing was not explicitly addressed. It did so

to gain support from the public, especially education pressure groups like HKPTU and HKFEW, for its education reform initiatives. When the HKSAR government communicated with the public and education pressure groups, it reiterated the policy idea of *sung baang* (translated into 'loosen bindings') or *chaak coeng sung baang* (translated into 'tear down walls and loosen bindings'). To be more precise, *sung baang* or *chaak coeng sung baang* implied the reduction of bureaucratic regulation and constraints imposed by the HKSAR government that limit school and teacher autonomy. In the consultation stage, these policy ideas were used by the HKSAR government to echo and redeem the neoliberal imperative for decentralisation. For instance, Antony Leung, the Chairman of Education Commission from 1998 to 2001, which was an advisory body to the HKSAR government on the overall development of education, made the following comment:

> *Chaak coeng sung baang* is the spirit of education reforms, because it can give teachers and principals more autonomy and freedom to improvement education effectively. (Wen Wei Po 2000)

The HKSAR government's commitment to *sung baang* reflected a set of policy initiatives aimed at creating a flexible and autonomous environment for teachers. Underpinning the HKSAR government's commitment to *sung baang* therefore was an emphasis on decentralisation and the importance of delegating financial autonomy to schools. At the same time, these policy initiatives were designed to hold schools accountable for their performance. For instance, the Chairman of Education Commission (1997, 37–38) stated,

> … schools should be given management and funding flexibility as incentives to practise school-based management. At the same time, as they were given greater autonomy in the use of resources, they should be held more accountable for their performance.

In this sense, *sung baang* not only contained desires for decentralisation, but also re-centralisation through increased accountability (Wilkins 2016). On the one hand, the HKSAR government implemented *sung baang* to secure measures like setting up additional fundings and grants for schools to flexibly allocate resources, hire additional staff and purchase outside services to relieve teachers' workload. On the other hand, the HKSAR government implemented a variety of strict accountability measures like school self-evaluations and external school reviews for monitoring schools' performance.

2001–2006: The rise of accusations of illegitimacy and anti-reformism

Education pressures groups, especially HKPTU, quickly realised that the proposed education reforms were not designed to liberate or empower teachers through unshackling them from tight regulatory frameworks. On the contrary, these education reforms had the effect of limiting teachers' professional autonomy and intensifying their workload, leading to increased distress (The Sun 2002). For example, it was observed that teacher suicide was a prevalent phenomenon *after* the implementation of *sung baang*, as evidenced by eleven media reports published between 2001 and 2006 (The Sun 2006). In response, HKPTU urged the HKSAR government to take seriously the issue of teacher wellbeing and *sung baang*. Although HKPTU and other education pressure groups repeatedly talked about *sung baang*, they did not offer up any concrete policy solutions or guiding principles to achieving *sung baang* as a mechanism for improving teachers' work. On the contrary, HKPTU and other education pressure groups used the idea of *sung baang* to evidence what may be considered illegitimate reforms, that is, reforms which run counter to the promise of empowering teacher autonomy and wellbeing. For example, Cheung Man Kwong, the president of the HKPTU, demanded the HKSAR government relax their commitments to *sung baang* to test its efficacy for improving teachers' lives:

> The reforms should be stopped for a while, regardless of how good they are. The public needs to know that these policies are fulfilled by human beings. There should be priorities. (The Standard 2006)

Choi Kwok-kwong, the Chairman of Education Convergence, made a similar comment:

> The government was too rushed in implementing so many education reform policies. These have put great pressure on teachers, while there are not enough resources to cope with many changes. The EMB [Education and Manpower Bureau] should examine whether some policies can be postponed and also give more resource to support schools'. (The Standard 2006)

In opposition to the HKSAR government, many education pressure groups did not treat *sung baang* as a model for effective policy but rather equated it with anti-reformism. This is reflected in their concerns about the legitimacy of these education reforms, reforms which appear to insensitively impose demands on teachers without adequate consideration of the situational and structural pressures in which they are located. For instance, a teacher representative publicly denounced the HKSAR government's commitment to *sung baang* by making the following comment:

> Education reforms seem very busy, but teachers don't know what they are busy with. Teachers feel it is very meaningless, which naturally increases their stress. (The Sun 2002)

Moreover, these reforms were considered illegitimate by many because of their strong association with, and embodiment of, authoritarian governance. For example, a famous secondary school principal, Ho Hon Kuen (2006), wrote an editorial titled 'Revisiting Educational *sung baang*' in which he argued that the HKSAR government enforced measures and policies without entering into meaningful consultation with and listening to teachers' concerns. These accusations are best captured through the slogan 'big government, small teachers':

> From the *sung baang* angle, current school-based assessments are undoubtedly tightly binding teachers and students. When we think of other educational reform measures, the implication of "big government, small teachers" is very strong … All of these are policies of constraint … It is clear that in recent years, the numerous educational directives issued by the government prioritize the overall interests of society while dismissing the personal honour and disgrace of teachers … The government is confident that the establishment of each of these systems serves as justification for exercising its power, and the exercise of power is coercive, thus solidifying the system. From the government's perspective, this creates a virtuous cycle, but for teachers, it is indeed a step-by-step process of increasing pressure.

2006: Teachers' stress relief demonstration

The strong resistance of education pressure groups and teachers resulted in significant mobilisation of the public against these education reforms, forcing the HKSAR government to take seriously the issue of teacher wellbeing in 2006. In January 2006, Fanny Law, the permanent secretary for Education and Manpower Bureau between 2002 and 2006, responded to social media inquiries regarding two cases of teacher suicide that occurred during that month. In response, Fanny Law rejected the idea that recent education reforms contributed to the teacher suicide, stating:

> I believe there must be other reasons. Education reforms have been implemented in many schools. Why did only two teachers [commit suicide]?'. (The Standard 2006)

This speech was perceived as a gaffe by the wider public and sparked significant public outcry, with criticism directed at the HKSAR government for being indifferent towards and disregarding of teachers' concerns while prioritising its own interests. This incited more than 10,000 teachers to take to the streets in January 2006 (one-fifth of all teachers in Hong Kong at the time) to urge the HKSAR government to discontinue their education reforms and take immediate action to alleviate the problem of teacher stress (Hong Kong Daily News 2006). In response to this criticism, the HKSAR government expressed regret and empathy regarding the highlighted cases of teacher suicide. At the same time, the HKSAR government argued that recent education reforms were not a significant factor affecting teacher wellbeing (Ming Pao 2006a). Public criticism of the HKSAR government continued as a result. In January 2006, the Legislative Council put forward a motion titled 'Reducing Teacher Workload and Mental Stress' to address this public outcry. In the meeting, over twenty

legislators with diverse political views expressed deep concern regarding the excessive workload and pressure on teachers, urging the HKSAR government to review the impact of education reforms on teacher wellbeing as well as commit to effective policy solutions for reversing the effects of said policy (Ta Kung Pao 2006).

2006–2022: The development of teacher wellbeing policy

Due to social and political pressure by legislators, education pressure groups and the wider public, in February 2006, the HKSAR government initiated several policy measures to explicitly address the issue of teacher wellbeing. An important one was a so-called 'nine-point plan' designed in principle to allocate more resources to schools and improve school accountability mechanisms in ways that best serve teachers (HKSAR Government Press Release 2006c). This included $1.65 billion government grant to schools over three years; introduction of 2,800 permanent teaching posts (1,400 newly created); changing the position of primary school curriculum coordinator to a permanent establishment; increasing teacher-to-class ratio in secondary schools; improving and simplifying the administrative arrangement for external school review of the implementation of territory-wide assessment; and reviewing the implementation of territory-wide assessment. Moreover, the HKSAR government set up a Teachers' Helpline, a support service designed to assist teachers who were struggling with work-related pressures (HKSAR Government Press Release 2006b).

However, the effects of these interventions did very little to relieve teachers' workload and their stress. Nor did these interventions appear to improve the positive conditioning of teacher wellbeing. For example, there were least 16 cases of teacher suicide in Hong Kong attributed to heavy workload (South China Morning Post 2010). HKFEW (2008, 2022) and HKPTU (2010, 2018) also indicated a consistent high level of work stress, anxiety and depression experienced by teachers in Hong Kong. Despite this evidence, calls for the HKSAR government to give greater attention to teacher wellbeing were not realised. For example, despite consistent discussion about teacher workload, stress and working hours in the Legislative Council between 2012 and 2016, there is no evidence of any significant pressures on the HKSAR government to modify or change their (lack of) approach to the problem of diminished teacher well-being.

Ideational power

The history of teacher wellbeing policy can be viewed discursively as a dynamic power relation in which the HKSAR government and education pressure groups compete for influence through practices of fact construction and the management of stakes and interests. While educational pressure groups were successful in forcing the HKSAR government to implement policies that went some way towards supporting teacher wellbeing, they did not gain sufficient influence in the way of executive or some other authority to combat the worst excesses of neoliberalism and therefore tackle the various external problems affecting teacher wellbeing, key among being the structural reforms initiated through *sung baang*. Despite the politically contested language surrounding teacher wellbeing, the HKSAR government ultimately retained executive power to determine the aims and outcomes of teacher wellbeing policies as well as the measures used to design and evaluate it. These power dynamics are important for understanding the role of ideational power to the policy process.

Power through ideas

In terms of power *through* ideas, educational pressure groups in Hong Kong appear far more powerful than the HKSAR government, especially during the period 2001–2006. During this time, they effectively communicated ideas of illegitimacy and anti-reformism to the public and were very successful in persuading others that their values and beliefs resonated with the wider

public. In response to public concerns about teacher suicide cases, the HKPTU conducted biannual surveys to assess teacher stress levels in Hong Kong. To publicise the survey results, it typically held press conferences to attract media attention. Key members of the HKPTU, such as Cheung Man-kwong and Ip Kin-yuen, served as legislative council members at the time, representing the education functional constituency from 1998 to 2020 respectively. Owing to their political influence, the media would frequently seek comments from the HKPTU on issues concerning teacher well-being and education more generally, giving the HKPTU a powerful base to leverage their influence over the public and mobilise public support for their advocacy work. During these press conferences and media interviews, the HKPTU would not only raise awareness about teacher wellbeing in Hong Kong but use cutting, incendiary language to criticise the actions of the HKSAR government. For instance, the HKPTU was quoted saying, 'The Education Department has become a tiger, driving teachers to the edge of a cliff' (Oriental Daily 2001). In other interviews they responded with: 'We find that all the teaching pressures indeed come from the bureau itself. Teachers are often asked to shed unnecessary work … [which] was [brought by] the bureau' (The Standard 2023), and 'The EMB drafted policies without consultation, proper preparation, or resources, ignoring teachers' heavy workload and adjustment struggles' (The Sun 2003).

Since 2000, the Hong Kong public has aggressively pursued democratic political system change to help protect their human rights, freedom and equality. A corollary of this is a strong opposition to the authoritarian governance regime that exists in Hong Kong (Wong 2022). Thus, when education pressure groups, especially HKPTU, characterised the idea of *sung baang* as illegitimate reform, they were able to echo and redeem existing anti-government public sentiment to persuade people to support other policies, such as the teacher wellbeing policy agenda in 2006. In contrast, the HKSAR government were unable to match the success of these communication strategies with the public. The approach of the HKSAR government has been primarily enacted through consultations with educators and discussions during Legislative Council meetings. Furthermore, the HKSAR government did not sufficiently respond to requests from educational pressure groups to reform education in ways that support teacher wellbeing and even went as far as to deny any links between teacher suicide cases and *sung baang* reform initiatives, fostering an impression of authoritarian governance. As a result, the media coverage of these consultations and meetings often presented negative, rather than positive, portrayals of the HKSAR government and its education reforms. This is reflected in a range of news reports at the time, such as 'Reforms fails to '*sung baang*', individual cases seeking help surge, teacher stress greatly reduced classes overflowing' (The Sun 2002); 'Teachers blame bureaur for stress' (The Standard 2023; and 'Education Bureau's 'teacher respect' questioned' (Hong Kong Economic Times 2005). Compared with education pressure groups who exerted considerably *power through ideas* through communicating messages that resonated with and upheld wider public sentiment, the HKSAR government are largely *power-less through ideas* which compromised their ability to develop and implement teacher wellbeing policy from 2006 onward.

Power in ideas

Although the HKSAR government is mostly powerless *through* ideas, it arguably retains power *in* ideas. In contrast to education pressure groups' efforts to frame *sung baang* as anti-reformist, the HKSAR government worked tirelessly and with some success to locate its idea of *sung baang* within a neoliberal framework of decentralisation, thus institutionalising ideas in ways that make them appear natural or given. The findings in this paper capture the extent to which teacher wellbeing policy, despite its origins in education pressure movements to enforce conditions that support teachers, has been successfully aligned with neoliberal values, a key value being that it is the responsibility of schools to exercise financial flexibility and autonomy in ways that support teacher wellbeing, albeit within an accountability framework that values performativity and audit cultures. While the introduction of teacher wellbeing policy in Hong Kong seeks to address the problem of

teacher stress and burnout, it continues to operate within wider regulatory conditions that ensnare schools within performative cultures that inhibit the professional autonomy of school leaders and teachers (Tsang 2019). This raises further questions, namely why increased accountability measures are required in the Hong Kong education system. Echoing this, Arthur Li, the Secretary for Education and Manpower Bureau from 2002 to 2007, made the following reply during the Legislative Council's discussion on the 'Reducing Teacher Workload and Mental Stress' motion:

> In fact, the government has allocated a significant amount of resources to education, with education recurrent expenditure accounting for nearly a quarter of the government's overall expenditure. However, a recent survey revealed that 37% of teachers believed that the Capacity Enhancement Grant, which was intended to create space for teachers, actually increased their workload … What problems have arisen in the utilization of resources? Should we continue to continually allocate resources, or should we examine whether schools are effectively utilizing these resources?. (HKSAR Government Press Release 2006a)

Despite strong opposition from education pressure groups, neoliberal doxa has been successfully institutionalised in Hong Kong's education system, to the extent that is taken-for-granted and experienced by many as a given (Lo and Hung 2022). This might explain why the neoliberal-led teacher wellbeing policy introduced by the HKSAR government in 2006 faced little resistance from education pressure groups. On the contrary, education pressure groups expressed support for the initiative, despite its antithetical relationship to the very structural problems that reproduce inequities in the education system.

As Ming Pao (2006b) observed at the time, different education associations and bodies displayed a strong appreciation to the HKSAR government for their commitments to such actions. For instance,

> The chairperson of Hong Kong Association of the Head of Secondary Schools said: 'The nine-point plan reflects a strong determination and sincerity of the government in addressing the issue'.
>
> The chairperson of HKFEW said: 'This time, EMB regularizes and institutionalizes resources, which can eliminate teachers' concerns about instability in their future and facilitate long-term planning for schools'.
>
> The chairperson of Grant Schools Council said: 'There is a positive response regarding the overall staffing arrangement for teachers'.

In other words, the HKSAR government has been able to retain *power in ideas* through successfully framing teacher wellbeing policy in ways that compliment and uphold wider structural reforms, i.e. *sung baang*. While the introduction of teacher wellbeing policy by the HKSAR government may be considered a victory for education pressure groups, as an indication of the government's cessation or revision of previous actions, the roll-out of teacher wellbeing policy within a neoliberal framework suggests a superficial or partial congruence of stakes and interests, with teacher wellbeing located within wider structural reforms that ultimately risk exacerbating rather than resolving the problem.

Power over ideas

Moreover, the HKSAR government was able to retain greater *power over ideas* compared to the education pressure groups. As Lo and Hung (2022) observe, the political influence of education pressure groups has been weakened by the imposition of national security law in Hong Kong since 2020. The national security law is considered a means to deter protestors and dissidents by authorising the government to purse suspected offenders (Lo 2021). In effect, the people of Hong Kong are uncertain and anxious over whether it is safe for them to express critical views of the government (Kwak 2023). For example, The Standard (2021) reported that several civil and political organisations, which actively engaged in social movements advocating for democratic reforms, decided to cease operation due to the concerns for personal safety in 2021. According to the news report, some of their members received messages indicating potential risks if they continued their activities. Similarly, the HKPTU was set to disband, although no member of the HKPTU

reported receiving such a message. Though no official reason was given, it was widely believed that political pressure played a significant role in the decision.

Moreover, education pressure groups may temper strong views of government's proposals for reform on the grounds they can be excluded from policy processes by the HKSAR government if they are perceived as opposing entities. For instance, before the disbandment of the HKPTU, the Education Bureau announced the cessation of all working relations with the HKPTU. This included ending all meetings and consultations on education-related issues, terminating the appointment of HKPTU representatives on advisory committees and related educational bodies as representatives of the HKPTU, and withdrawing recognition of its teacher training courses. According to HKSAR Government Press Release (2021), this decision was based on the belief that the actions and statements of HKPTU were inconsistent with the expectations of the education profession, effectively aligning it with a political agenda. These findings suggest that the HKSAR government exercises significant control over the meanings ascribed to educational ideas and policies through authoritative measures. This dynamic not only limits the influence of education pressure groups but also consolidates the government's power *over* ideas surrounding education and political expression in Hong Kong.

Concluding remarks

Unlike previous studies on teacher wellbeing policy where the primary focus has been to evaluate the impact of policy initiatives on teacher workload and self-reported levels of mental health (see OECD 2018; The World Bank 2023), this paper builds on Siu's (2008) observation that teacher wellbeing is as much a political as it is a health-related issue since it brings into sharp focus deep questions about the legitimacy of the HKSAR government. In other words, it illuminates a legitimacy deficit among policy actors to govern effectively and in response to public need/demand. As the literature suggests, the HKSAR government has faced the significant problem that it is operating within a legitimacy deficit because it is not elected by its people (Ngok 2011; Wong 2022). Thus, it has initiated a series of public sector reforms, including education reforms, based on neoliberal principles that celebrate performance indicators and measurements as effective models for governing education systems, including teachers themselves, in order to claim performance legitimacy (Scott 2010). In this context, the HKSAR government perceives teacher stress, anxiety and depression as a significant threat to their performance legitimacy. These issues not only highlight the human costs of neoliberal education reforms, but also the risks engendered by such reforms, namely diminished public confidence and trust in the ability of government to govern effectively.

On the other hand, HKPTU and other pressure groups appear to view the issue of teacher wellbeing as not just a concern for teachers but as a wider public concern and mechanism for strengthening democracy. In Hong Kong, education pressure groups, especially HKPTU, represent highly political entities that actively participate in Legislative Council elections, engage in protests advocating for democracy and work to mobilise the public against certain education policies that may threaten human rights, freedom and equality (Hung 2018). By positioning *sung baang* and related policies as anti-reformist, they effectively used teacher wellbeing as a political issue to leverage and strengthen their position as well as mobilise the wider public against anti-democratic trends in government. In this case, education pressures groups like HKPTU and HKFEW, have successfully initiated pressures on the HKSAR government to deaccelerate their reforms and implement instead teacher wellbeing policy measures that in practice improve teachers' work and lives (Lo and Hung 2022). In this sense, teacher wellbeing in Hong Kong has emerged as a lever or tool for education pressure groups to capitalise on their anti-government position and commitment to further strengthening democratic commitments and outcomes. This implies that the substance of teacher wellbeing as a critical issue affecting teachers may not be as important to the education pressure groups as it may appear, at least politically. For instance, some scholars have suggested that since 2010 education pressure groups like the HKPTU have increasingly paid less attention to issues

of teacher wellbeing owing to the rise of other pressing education and political concerns like national education, universal suffrage and national security laws (Wong 2022). As a result of the shift in emphasis towards these other political matters since 2016, there now appears to be minimal pressure on the HKSAR government to review and update its commitment to teacher wellbeing policy.

The recent history of teacher wellbeing policy in post-colonial Hong Kong highlights the limits of education pressure groups to influence policy agendas by power *through* ideas. The government, it seems, still retains majority control over the development and implementation of policy by exercising power *in* and *over* ideas. This asymmetry of ideational power may be reinforced by the 'semi-democratic' governance of Hong Kong through neoliberal ideologies and authoritarian measures of national security law, consolidating the government's dominance in policy process. Through applying the analytic of discursive institutionalism, this paper has examined how and why teacher wellbeing policy in Hong Kong has emerged and developed in the way that it has. The analytic of discursive institutionalism has been useful for locating this emergence and development through the actions and decisions of policy actors in Hong Kong who over time actively negotiate and contest the meaning of teacher wellbeing, thus pointing to its dynamism as a policy and political construct. Discursive institutionalism therefore provides a useful lens for capturing the contingency and dynamics of teacher wellbeing as a political and policy construct that is contested and revised through the (inter)actions of policy actors. This perspective not only enhances our understanding of the discursive process through which meanings of teacher wellbeing are negotiated, revised, installed, and contested, but it also underscores the importance of ideas, discourses and power struggles to the discursive production of meanings of teacher wellbeing.

In this sense, teacher wellbeing is not a static or purely individual issue but deeply wedded to the political dynamics of Hong Kong. It serves as both a reflection of governance challenges and a tool for political advocacy, making it a politically contested issue. Understanding how teacher wellbeing has come to be constructed and struggled over as a political problem in Hong Kong, as we have tried to evidence in this paper, is helpful for thinking critically about the dynamics of teacher wellbeing both as policy history and discourse, as something that contains multiple meanings and outcomes for different stakeholders and pressure groups.

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