



Betty Chan says teacher training is critical.  
Photos: Winson Wong, SCMP

# A class struggle won

Betty Chan's advocacy of allowing children to help guide their own education has had many critics, but the success of her Yew Chung International School speaks for itself

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Open classrooms and playful learning will not work in Hong Kong because the education system focuses on rote learning.

So Betty Chan Po-king was told when she took over her mother's school, Yew Chung, in the 1970s and launched a kindergarten section.

But Chan, the chief executive and supervisor at Yew Chung International School, proved the naysayers wrong by making her kindergarten one of the top preschools in the city. She says her success is partly based on understanding that children need teacher support while learning, not teacher direction.

In 2014, Yew Chung moved into teacher training by starting a two-year higher diploma course. Yew Chung Community College is the first self-financed institution in Hong Kong that only provides teacher training in early childhood education, Chan says.

Yew Chung is waiting for government approval to award bachelor's degrees at the Yew Chung College of Early Childhood Education (YCCECE), which is to start running in the next school year. "It is really through teacher training that we can have the greatest impact on our community," Chan says.

**Having been an educator for four decades, what keeps you going?**

This might sound clichéd, but it's truly our students and alumni. Witnessing their growth and development from infancy to adulthood is deeply rewarding. And, of course, my dedicated colleagues—many of whom have fought

alongside me for decades, sharing the same vision and mission and quite literally devoting their lives to our schools. I will forever be indebted to them.

The unwavering support from my husband and family is incredibly important too, even if they don't fully comprehend my latest "crazy" idea.

**Reflecting on your pioneering work in Hong Kong since the '70s, what are your best memories and worst experiences?**

One of my best memories is convening the first ever international early childhood education conference titled Childhood in the 21st Century, sponsored by [UN children's agency] Unicef

we had no government support. Our next door neighbour was an Education Bureau official, who advised [my mother] to close our kindergarten, as my play-based approach with no homework would never work in Hong Kong. To be fair to her, there were plenty of naysayers back then, even my own relatives, but I just kept going.

**What are your views on rote learning and "tiger parents"? Do you think some parents need to be educated on how to educate?**

There is a place for rote learning. What is harmful is its overuse or misuse. Memorising multiplication tables or quotations from great literary works can be both helpful and fun. Similarly, I think it is important for parents to have high expectations of their children and to set clear boundaries, which in fact children welcome. [But] parents must first establish a strong and secure relationship with their child, so all words and actions, even if disciplinary, are always lovingly interpreted.

In terms of parent education, my experience has been overwhelmingly positive, as parents often crave professional advice at different stages of their child's development. Every child is unique, so what works with your firstborn might not with your second. Furthermore, it takes a village to raise a child. At our kindergartens, we not only run workshops for parents, but for grandparents and domestic helpers.

**What inspired you to establish a college specialising in early childhood education?**

In many ways, the creation of [YCCECE] is a natural progression for us. We have long been known for our early childhood



Yew Chung kindergarten in the late 1970s.

programmes, catering to children as young as six months old. While we could continue expanding our service, it is really through teacher training that we can have the greatest community impact.

Given the impetus to upgrade the profession to degree level, the natural next step is to create a four-year Bachelor of Education (Honours) in early childhood education. But the discipline is not just about teacher training; it is an extensive and interdisciplinary field that embraces the full spectrum of children's holistic development between birth and eight years old, including health and nutrition, and meeting the diverse needs of families and communities. So we decided to establish a specialist tertiary college in early childhood education that will enable us to comprehensively tackle the many facets of this important field.

**How would you describe the Yew Chung approach to early childhood education?**

Strong adult-child relationships have always been at the core of our approach, as it is on this that a warm and secure environment can be created to optimise children's learning and development. The underlying tenets include highly valuing children and their ideas, as we view them as capable and autonomous, in need of teacher support, not direction. Our co-teaching model — one Chinese and one Western teacher — adopts an emergent approach to both curriculum and pedagogy and to bilingualism, where children take the lead in choices of learning experiences and in the language that is used for them.

**Yew Chung is celebrating its 85th anniversary this year — what's your 10-year vision for the foundation and this new college?**

The launching of YCCECE and our first bachelor's degree signifies both a full circle moment for our foundation as well as the beginning of a new and exciting chapter.

Not only do our education provisions span "B to B" [baby to bachelor's], we now also have the opportunity to share our philosophy and pedagogy much more widely through teacher training and continuing professional development, academic and practitioner research and

parent-community education and outreach, particularly to young children and families that are disadvantaged.

We are truly hoping to democratise quality early childhood education, to make a much bigger and lasting impact on society, and for YCCECE to be recognised in Hong Kong, mainland China and the Asia-Pacific region as a centre of excellence in nurturing passionate and innovative early childhood education.

**As president of the Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association, what do you think Hong Kong could learn from our neighbours in the region?**

In recent years, I've been greatly inspired by South Korea, and I believe Hong Kong's Education Bureau has been, too. The Seoul Early Childhood Education and Promotion Centre is a notable example of how the government can comprehensively enhance the quality of early childhood education through research, teacher training and capacity building, curriculum development and community outreach.

In fact, the establishment of such public resource centres is legislated by their Early Childhood Education Law, which is a very powerful move. Singapore is also setting up the National Institute of Early Childhood Development, aiming to enhance the quality of the profession through pre-service training and continuing professional development.

Exciting things are happening across Asia, and as a non-profit in Hong Kong, we hope to work with the government to spearhead such efforts.

**If you could add or subtract one thing in the Hong Kong education system, what would it be?**

Instead of adding or subtracting one thing, I would advocate a more holistic and fundamental

Every child is unique, so what works with your firstborn might not with your second

and hosted in Hong Kong in 1989, soon after the June 4 [Tiananmen] incident. As chairwoman, it was nerve-racking due to the heightened political sensitivities, but it still became a landmark event as we were able to bring together for the first time prominent early childhood education scholars from mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and around the world.

I'm pretty good at blocking out the negative, but this was perhaps a bad memory for my mother. Soon after I succeeded her and opened our kindergarten with two children, expenses were obviously high and as a private school

## RICH EXPERIENCE

**What is your favourite holiday destination?**  
Anywhere with a rich and colourful culture and history, such as India and the Middle East. I don't get to visit as often as I would like, but it's always an eye-opening and deeply enriching experience.



Muslims pray at the Taj Mahal in Agra, India.

**What book are you reading at the moment?**  
*The Brain That Changes Itself: Stories of Personal Triumph from the Frontiers of Brain Science* by psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Norman Doidge. I've always been interested in brain science, especially in the concept of neuroplasticity, and this book is a fascinating and life-affirming read.

**Which educator do you most admire on the world stage?**  
Perhaps because he only passed away last December, the first person who comes to mind is the professor of early childhood education at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Bernard Spodek. I've always been interested in the field of early childhood education, and one of his greatest accomplishments is arguably the establishment of the Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association. I had the honour of knowing him since my doctoral studies, and will always remember his humanity, passion and real heart for Asia.



Early childhood education academic Bernard Spodek

**What is your favourite way to relax?**  
This will sound very mundane, but window shopping and catching a movie with my nieces is relaxing. They will, however, tell you that this is theoretical only, as such occasions do not happen often enough. Truthfully, with my travel schedule, I watch most films on the plane, and I do enjoy in-flight shopping.

[Hong Kong's education system] needs a paradigm shift, not a slight tweak here or there

rethinking of our philosophical and pedagogical approach to education.

If we truly believe that multi-disciplinary and self-directed learning is important, it requires an integrated and community approach to the way we teach — or rather facilitate students' learning and exploration, so that they are equipped with the lifelong skills to learn, unlearn or relearn.

Such objectives must permeate throughout the system, starting with teacher training. It's a paradigm shift, not a slight tweak here or there.



Lunchtime at Yew Chung kindergarten in 1979.