

## Examining Early Childhood Education and Care Programs in China

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### Abstract

This pilot study examined programs for early childhood education and care in three Chinese cities. The samples for this study were one university-based kindergarten, one private kindergarten (rural area), and one public kindergarten (urban area). Six types of instruments were used to assess early childhood education and care services regarding quality matters. Most questions asked were open-ended; consequently, the interview answers by kindergarten directors or teachers (as well as observations made by the researcher) formed the basis for collecting the data. Quality components for each program were determined by a comparison method. The comparison allowed the researcher to understand the range of quality education and care available as well as the variability of existing kindergarten programs in China. The findings of the investigation revealed important information on; (a) demographic information (fees, class hours, total weeks of class, vacation, number of children and staff, class size, and teacher-child ratio) (b) teacher characteristics, (c) health practices, (d) safety practices, (e) work environment, (f) physical settings, (g) play materials, (h) parent involvement, (i) nutrition, (j) daily schedule. Implications within the Chinese context for quality practices and issues to further develop and strengthen early childhood education and care systems are discussed.

### Keywords

China, early childhood education and care, university-based kindergarten, private kindergarten, public kindergarten

Received: April 21, 2016

Revised: May 14, 2016

Accepted: May 16, 2016

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\*This study was supported by the Research Fund, 2015 of The Catholic University of Korea.

## Introduction

China is one of the most rapidly developing economies and societies in the world; however, the provision of early childhood education and care (ECEC) services remains a major challenge. China spends 0.2% of its GOP on early childhood education, even though its education budget was 4.3% of the GOP in 2013 (Educational Statistics of China, 2015). Urban centers in China boast some incredible educational institutes; however, there is estimated to be more than 40 million rural children who receive inadequate care and poor education who are subsequently left behind in the workforce (Zhou, 2011).

As the country with the largest population in the world, 100 million children under the age of six in China stand to benefit from increased access to high quality ECEC. Based on previous studies, early childhood is a crucial time period for the development of a child's mental functions. Development processes (emergence of language, motor skills, psychosocial, cognitive, and learning abilities) are greatly influenced by exogenous factors that include the educational environment that a child is exposed during the early years of life (Bowman, Donovan, & Burns, 2001). A number of studies link ECEC increased school readiness for primary school; consequently, it has been shown that school readiness is an important predictor for early school achievement (Forget-Dubois, Lemelin, Boivin, Dionne, Seguin, Vitaro, & Tremblay, 2007). Early gains in school readiness as a result of early childhood education are shown to have enormous positive economic and social (higher educational attainment, less chance of involvement in criminal activity, higher status employment and higher earnings) that last well into adulthood (Schweinhart 2007; Sparling, Ramey, & Ramey 2007). Heckman (2000) also found that the long-term, economic returns on investment in high-quality ECEC programs is more than 8 to 1.

The government of China has recently made early childhood development a national priority that recognizes social and economic dividends that quality early learning opportunities provide human capital in the long term. The Chinese government has shown recent interest in early childhood education, implementing policies in the form of the Guidance for Kindergarten Education (Trial Version) in 2001 and the National Education Reform and Development of Long-Term Planning Programs (2010–2020) in 2010. The landmark decision by the government of China in 2010 to dramatically expand early childhood education has resulted in a dramatic increase (from just 45% in 2009 to 70.5% by 2014) in the number of children aged 3-6 attending kindergartens. The coverage of the government's early childhood care efforts has increased from 35% in the 2000's to 67.5% in 2013 (China Statistics, 2015). With two-thirds of the country's children in pre-school programs, the Ministry of Education in China has set goals to achieve universal access for one year of preschool before primary school, almost universal access for two years before primary, and a third year (if necessary) to families who can afford it. The details of resource

evaluation and government funding are still being worked out; however, the Ministry of Education hopes to achieve these goals by the year 2020 (Zhao & Hu, 2008).

Equity is another ECEC issue between urban and rural areas in China. Rural kindergartens outnumber urban kindergartens by almost twofold; however, about 57% of rural children have no current access to ECEC (Rao, Sun, Zhou, & Zhang, 2012). Approximately 95% of young children in urban areas attend a pre-school prior to primary school; however, participation in ECEC is only 50% in rural areas. Participation rates are 20 to 25% lower in poor areas of rural China (Educational Statistics Yearbook of China, 2015).

ECEC plays an important role in Chinese society. There are three types of early childhood programs for children under 6 in China: nurseries, kindergarten and pre-primary programs. Nurseries are for children under 3 years old, kindergartens are for children 3-6 years of age, and 'preschool classes' attached to primary schools are for 5-6 years old children. In China, the term "kindergarten" refers to full-day programs serving children from age 3 to age 6. The programs provide child care and educational preparation. An alternative type of early childhood program is the pre-primary classroom, which is a part of the elementary school. It is typically a half-day program serving children the year prior to first grade (Wang, 2006).

In terms of ECEC law in china, the Ministry of Education (MOE) establishes policy for and oversees implementation of pre-primary education, sets standards, provides opinion on the level of fees charged by kindergartens, monitors and evaluates pre-primary education, establishes an inspectorate system, provides pre-service education for kindergarten directors, and certifies teachers. Education departments in local governments operate public kindergartens as well as approve and oversee private kindergartens. China does not have a specific early childhood education law; however, it has developed a comprehensive set of guidelines and regulations for early childhood education. Many of these efforts occurred during the last decade (Dai, 2009; MOE & NBS, 2010).

The challenge for China is to provide ECEC as well as quality education and care that is consistent with and responsive to the cultural and developmental needs of young children and their

families. Pre-school children spend increased amounts of time outside their homes and more time in ECEC programs; therefore, it is imperative to pay attention to quality matters in ECEC. Quality ECEC should be available for all children and their parents. Standards should be established that are relevant and mandatory for public, private non-profit, and private for-profit ECEC institutions. These basic standards should be applied to care for all children, rich or poor, with or without special health problems.

China is a big country with obvious differences between types of programs, rich and poor, and urban and rural areas. Great progress has been made in ECEC in the past three decades; however, there are still many issues and problems facing educators and policy makers in China such as widening gap in quality between rural and urban ECEC programs. This pilot study examined the quality of ECEC systems across different locations and funding sources in China at the microsystem level. This microsystem level analysis will enable researchers to eventually investigate the contributions of Chinese ECEC to child development and policy makers working to improve ECEC services. In order to accomplish the objective of the research the following questions were posed:

What were the conditions of Chinese ECEC regarding:

1. Demographic Information
  - a. Fees
  - b. Class hours
  - c. Total weeks of class
  - d. Vacation
  - e. Number of children and staff
  - f. Class size
  - g. Teacher-child ratio
2. Teacher characteristics
3. Health practices
4. Safety practices
5. Work environment
6. Physical settings
7. Play materials
8. Parent involvement
9. Nutrition
10. Daily schedule

## Methodology

### Sample Selection and Description

ECEC programs in China are operated either by: (1) provincial (or local) governments, (2) corporations and industry, (3) private individuals and organizations, or (4) family-run. Kindergartens are the main form of ECEC services in China; therefore, the sample included one university-based kindergarten, one private kindergarten (rural area), and one public kindergarten (urban area). The three kindergartens were arranged by an acquaintance because it is not permissible for foreigners to visit and observe ECEC programs without official approval in China. The university-based kindergarten is located in Xi'an (the capital of Shaanxi Province) in Northwest China. It is used for student teaching purposes within the Department of Early Childhood Education. The private kindergarten is sponsored by a nearby church. It is located in Yunnan (an indicative medium-sized and relatively poor province) in Southwestern China. The public kindergarten located at ChangChun was built and equipped with running water and electricity, decor, equipment, and materials which are required by the government. ChangChun is a large city in Northeast China where early childhood education is developing fast.

All kindergartens included in the sample were licensed by the government of China. The purpose of the sample selection was to determine differences among university-based kindergartens, public kindergartens, and private kindergartens as well as between rural and urban regarding quality matters in China,

### Description of Instruments

The following instruments were utilized in this study to assess the quality of kindergarten programs and they were content validated by review of two faculty experts for relevance and clarity.

### Observation Tool

In designing this research study, the Guidelines for Observation and Assessment of ECEC by Mattick and Perkins (2005) was based as the assessment instrument to measure various aspects of the program. A questionnaire designed by the researcher obtained other data from directors (or teachers) such as demographic information, teacher characteristics, work environment, parent

involvement, nutrition, and daily schedule.

### Interview Forms I, II, III

The researcher developed an interview form composed of fourteen questions. It was used to examine general information of the program, teacher’s educational background and experience, daily schedule, and health and safety practices. The information gained provided useful data to evaluate child and adult work environments. Most questions were open-ended questions so as to obtain detailed information; however, the type of questions for health and safety practices (as well as work environment) required yes and no answers.

Interview Form II consisted of eight questions that included nutritional practices in ECEC services. Interview Form III investigated parent-staff communication and parent involvement characteristics. All questions required yes and no answers. A comment section was added to obtain additional information.

### Observation Forms A, B, C

An observation of the program’s physical setting was conducted using a checklist developed by the researcher. A second checklist (Observation Form B) explored the spatial structure, and Observation Form C assessed materials observed in the institution. A total of twenty-three questions were included.

### Administration of the Instruments

It was easier to have access to that institution because the directors of the private and public kindergartens were the researcher’s colleagues. The university-based kindergarten required an approval form from a professor who was in charge of the institution and agreement from the staff. This approval took several days (including meeting the group) in order to have access. My role as a participant-observer allowed me to witness the program’s normal functioning over time and gain a deeper understanding of the children through personal interaction.

The researcher participated in conducting the interviews for each program. They included twenty-two questions concerning programs, health and safety practices, nutrition, parent involvement, and work environment with the directors or teachers of the kindergartens. The other twenty-three open-ended questions

about spatial structures and materials were completed from observations made by the researcher, as well as questions about the physical settings. The researcher used observation, interview and checklist in data gathering, done over 4 weeks.

### Data Analysis

A comparative analysis (based on a comparison of ECEC programs) of the data was conducted to examine each program in terms of quality factors. This methodology allowed the researcher to understand program differences and similarities.

## Results

### Demographic Information

Table 1 includes information on fees paid by families for various services, number of hours the institutions are open, duration of the sessions, number of children and staff, class size, and teacher-child ratio.

University-based kindergarten fees were more expensive than others with shorter class hours and total weeks of class. There was only one teacher in the private kindergarten observed without an aide in each classroom; therefore, class sizes and teacher-child ratios were larger (or higher) than the other two programs. However, children were grouped by age at all three kindergartens.

**Table 1.** Demographic Information

	University	Private	Public
Fees (Month)	\$42	\$18.50	\$9
Class hours	10 hours	10 hours	10 hours
Total weeks of class	40 weeks	48 weeks	48 weeks
Vacation for children	4–5 weeks	None	None
Number of children	88	70	90
Number of Staff	1 director 4 teachers, 4 aids 1 cook 1 guard 2 volunteers 1 doctor	1 director 1 manager 2 teachers 1 guard	1 director 4 teachers 1 cook 1 clerk 1 nurse 2 volunteers 1 guard
Class size	24	35	30
Teach-child ratio	1:11	1:35	1:23

**Table 2.** Teacher Characteristics

	University	Private	Public
Number of teachers	4	2	4
Education attainment	bachelor's degree	vocational high school	2-year college graduate
Years of experience as a teacher	4 – 8 years	None – 2 years	2 – 8 years

### Teacher Characteristics

Table 2 shows the various indicators of teacher characteristics. The teacher's educational attainment in a university-based program is higher than teacher's at private and public kindergartens.

The university-based kindergarten employed four teachers who had four years of college. This institution required a bachelor's degree as a qualification for employment. In the observed private kindergarten, all teachers had degrees in child education from vocational high schools. However, the director did not major in early childhood education or child development and tended to administer programs based on Ministry of Education guidelines rather than apply a personal philosophy. The selected public kindergarten employed only two-year college graduates as teachers. The primary reason for the low educational attainment was the low status given to this profession resulting in a poor work environment such as too many working hours, no definite vacation time, and low salaries. People working in areas related to early childhood education and care have low social recognition in China. This could be another factor that discourages four-year college graduate students from working in kindergartens.

### Health and Safety

Table 3 and Table 4 show health and safety practices at the kindergartens. All programs in the sample kept health records. However, each sample provided different health services because there was no definite regulation regarding health services. All children were required to have health examinations. The university-based kindergarten maintained higher quality health practices compared to other kindergartens. It had one doctor on the staff to care for sick or injured children. It also provided other health-related services, such as performing health screenings, providing immunizations and planning nutritious meals.

**Table 3.** Health Practices

	University	Private	Public
Health records	Yes	Yes	Yes
Vaccination	Yes	No	Yes
Encephalitic (Vaccination)	Yes	No	Yes
Dental examination	Twice/Year	No	Once/Year
Anti-Hepatitis (Vaccination)	No	No	Yes
Health examination	Yes	Yes	Yes

**Table 4.** Safety Practices

	University	Private	Public
First aid kit	Yes	Yes	Yes
Exit sign	No	No	No
Fire extinguisher	Yes	Yes	Yes
Practice evacuation for fire	Yes	No	Yes

According to safety regulations, all facilities should have first aid kits and fire extinguishers. The regulations do not indicate that ECEC programs must furnish exit signs beyond each exit; therefore, none of the sample programs furnished exit signs.

Any school setting should be "child-proof" (a place without excessive restrictions), where the child is free to explore and teachers do not have to be constantly concerned about potentially dangerous situations in the facility. However, in the private and public kindergartens, there were many places which were not childproofed such as door locks.

In all three programs observed, there were signs that showed pictures of children washing hands near the sink. But no data was collected regarding how often teachers insisted on handwashing before snacks.

Children played by themselves at private and public kindergartens after 3:30 P.M. without adult supervision. They ran all around the building. The door of the classroom, the door of a bathroom next to the classroom, and even the door of the balcony was kept open. A gate in the yard of the institution was also open. Safety was not a high priority for these programs.

### Work Environment

Table 5 shows the work environment of teachers. Except for the university-based kindergarten, all other programs had no formal vacation for teachers and only a short three to four day break in

**Table 5.** Work Environment

	University	Private	Public
Vacation	3 weeks	None	None
Staff meetings	Once/Week	Once/Month	Once/Week
Attend workshops	Yes	Yes	Yes
Director provides feedback	Yes	Yes	Yes

summer. However, teachers in all three programs had been engaged in some kind of professional development opportunities.

At the private and public programs, teachers did not have a private or separate room. Their desks were in the classroom. In the private program, they immediately started cleaning the classroom at 5:30 P.M. so they could go home as soon as the children left.

### Physical Settings and Play Materials

Table 6 and Table 7 show the physical settings of the environment and the materials present in the classroom. The quality of materials and physical settings of each institution varied significantly. A university-based kindergarten had several classroom buildings surrounding an enclosed courtyard. This courtyard served as the playground and was used extensively between classroom lessons. The playground contained equipment for large motor activities that included slides, merry-go-rounds, climbers and swings. The younger children even had their own playground. Bright colors and dragon or elephant shapes provided added appeal. The ground cover was a sturdy brick or concrete, with no sand, grass or air-cushions to soften falls. The public kindergarten also had excellent outdoor playgrounds with complex play equipment and various types of outdoor play toys. However, in the case of the private program, the size of the outdoor playground was quite small with only a slide, swings, and sand.

Each group of children had its own large classroom with a separate room with beds for afternoon naps at the university-based kindergarten. Several groups of children shared toilet facilities and washrooms. In the public kindergarten, each group had a self-contained space, complete with classroom, sleeping room, toilet and washroom. Space was not organized into special interest areas and equipment was scarce or not easily accessible to children at the private kindergarten. Small tables and chairs for each child occupied much of the room. A large open space was set aside at one end for group activities, such as dancing. Sand and water play,

**Table 6.** Physical Settings

	University	Private	Public
Large areas for movement	Yes	Yes	Yes
Cozy area	Yes	No	Yes
Dress up area	Yes	No	Yes
Block area	Yes	No	Yes
Art area	Yes	No	Yes
Library area	Yes	Yes	Yes
Music	Yes	Yes	Yes
Science area	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sand area (Inside)	No	No	No
Water area (Inside)	No	No	No

**Table 7.** Materials

	University	Private	Public
Sufficient space (Indoors)	Yes	No	Yes
Cubby	Yes	Yes	Yes
Storage	Yes	Yes	Yes
Playground	Yes	Yes	Yes
Easel	Yes	No	Yes
Painting accessories	Yes	Yes	Yes
Live objects	Yes	Yes	Yes
Materials representing multi-ethnic groups	No	No	No
Blocks	Yes	No	Yes
Puzzles	Yes	Yes	Yes
Adult clothes for children's pretend play	Yes	No	Yes
Books	Yes	Yes	Yes
Clay	Yes	Yes	Yes
Crayon/papers	Yes	Yes	Yes
Musical instruments	Yes	Yes	Yes
Games	Yes	Yes	Yes

blocks and woodworking equipment were rare. Art supplies were typically used for teacher-directed activities, rather than child-initiated activities. In all three programs observed, a telephone number was posted at the entrance for parents with complaints, and a big billboard reported on the weekly programs.

Every program had painting accessories for children; however, the number and variety of art materials were distinct. For example, the researcher did not see any easels in the classrooms of the private kindergarten. However, the directors told the researcher that the easel was taken out of storage if needed. All programs



had some kind of living objects such as plants, small pets, or an aquarium. The university-based kindergarten had pretend materials such as clothes, shoes, hats, and bags; however, the private kindergarten had none. In addition, university-based and public kindergartens had an extensive numbers of blocks.

There were no pictures or dolls to represent another races or ethnic groups in the three programs observed. In addition, most books and toys were sex-stereotyped. Some teachers complained that there were no anti-gender bias materials. This indicated that the teachers were sensitive to this issue. Children's work varied greatly and included items such as mobiles, math, crayon drawings and paper folding. Most pictures made by children were posted in the classroom; however, they were displayed higher than the children's eye level. It seemed as though the children's drawings were not for viewing by children, but by parents and adults.

### Parent Involvement

Table 8 shows that parental involvement in the kindergartens. Teachers and parents sought a common goal: to provide high-quality experiences for children. In order to achieve this goal there must be communication between teachers and parents.

All of the observed programs administered an adequate parent communication system through meetings, newsletters, and telephones. Parents attended scheduled and non-scheduled conferences, acted as volunteers as well as attended group

**Table 8.** Parent Involvement Activities

	University	Private	Public
Parent reception area	Yes	No	No
Spring or fall orientation	Yes	Yes	Yes
Handbook for parents	Yes	Yes	Yes
Large group Conferences	Yes	Yes	Yes
Scheduled individual conferences	Yes	Yes	Yes
Non-scheduled individual conferences	Yes	Yes	Yes
Home visits	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parent visitation	Yes	Yes	Yes
Telephone communication	Yes	Yes	Yes
Newsletter	Yes	Yes	Yes
Parents as volunteers	Yes	Yes	Yes

**Table 9.** Child Assessment

	University	Private	Public
Frequency of child assessments (per year)	4 Times	2 Times	2 Times
Method of child assessment	Observation	Observation	Observation
Evaluation methods	IQ Test for 4-year-olds	Teachers fill in formal evaluation form	Teachers fill in formal evaluation form
	Evaluation of children's play plan		

conferences. Teachers provided handbooks for parents, an orientation for new parents, and went on visitations and house visits. In the case of the public kindergarten, the home visit was considered an important procedure for admission in order to verify the qualifications of the parents' socio-economic status. In addition, in private and public kindergartens, parents voluntarily cleaned up facilities on Saturday. Parents came and talked with teachers and directors whenever they had some concerns. The parents had an active role to support the activities of the programs.

Chinese parents are enthusiastic about their child's health and education and often want their children to begin academic work early in the belief that it will provide a head start in the competitive struggle for scholastic success-considered a major route to future opportunities. Therefore, parent involvement activities are important to the Chinese.

### Assessment

Table 9 shows child assessment in the kindergartens. Observation is a prime method to assess each child's growth and development in kindergarten programs. Teachers were reported to observe a child's social, cognitive, language, motor skills, and emotional development through formal and informal ways several times a year. Formal kindergarten assessments were performed and all programs conducted assessments at least two times a year.

### Related Nutritional Activities

Table 10 indicates the nutritional services of kindergartens. The most frequent kinds of snacks were milk, yogurt, fruit, cookies, and bread. University based and public kindergartens provided

**Table 10.** Related Nutritional Activities

	University	Private	Public
Nutritionists	No	No	No
Place for meals	Classroom	Classroom	Classroom
Frequency of snacks	2 times	2 times	2 times
Frequency of meals	2 times (Breakfast, lunch)	1 time (Lunch)	2 Times (Breakfast, lunch)
Identify children's nutrition problem	Yes	Yes	Yes
Calculate calories	Yes	Yes	Yes
Food information in newsletter	Yes	No	Yes
Post menus	Yes	Yes	Yes
Children's cooking experience as an activity	Yes	No	Yes

breakfast (if needed) unlike private kindergartens that provided mid-morning and mid-afternoon lunch and snacks. Each program prepared food in their kitchen facilities for the children.

None of the institutions hired a nutritionist due to financial constrains. However, university-based and public programs asked for nutritional guidance from government agencies. The directors designed the menus for private kindergartens from book suggestions. All seemed to understand the importance of nutrition for young children.

**Table 11.** A Daily Schedule of University-based Kindergarten

7:30 a.m. – 8:20 a.m.	Entering kindergarten, Eat breakfast
8:20 a.m. – 8:50 a.m.	Free activities
8:50 a.m. – 9:20 a.m.	Small group
9:20 a.m. – 9:30 a.m.	Rest, Drink water, Go to toilet
9:30 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.	Learn pinyin
10:00 a.m. – 10:50 a.m.	Outdoor play
11:00 a.m. – 11:50 a.m.	Free choice activities
11:50 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.	Wash hands in preparation for lunch
12:00 a.m. – 13:00 a.m.	Eat lunch; Preparation for nap
13:00 p.m. – 14:30 p.m.	Afternoon nap
14:30 p.m. – 15:00 p.m.	Half of the class was taking lessons on art and dance at extra charge English class for 2/3 of students whose parents pay extra for them
15:00 p.m. – 16:00 p.m.	Sing song, read books, then watch TV while waiting for parents to pick them up.

## The Daily Program

Table 11 shows an example of kindergarten schedules. Daily schedules in the kindergarten programs followed established pre-school traditions of playtimes, snacks, rest, music, stories, and outdoor play with variations. The length of the program reflected the needs of working parents.

Children started the university-based kindergarten at 8 A.M. Class sessions alternated with classroom activities and play time. After eating a healthy lunch, children took a long nap and woke up to a snack and had play time. Families (often grandparents) picked up the children after work at about 4 P.M. Children either walked

**Table 12.** A Daily Schedule of Private Kindergarten

8:30 a.m.	Arrival, greeting
9:00 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.	Large or small group activity
10:00 a.m. – 10:10 a.m.	Clean up
10:10 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.	Snack
10:30 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.	Outdoor play
11:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.	Preparation for lunch
12:00 p.m. – 13:05 p.m.	Having lunch, Brush teeth, Rest
13:05 p.m. – 13:15 p.m.	Preparation for nap
13:15 p.m. – 14:20 p.m.	Nap
14:20 p.m. – 14:30 p.m.	Wake up
14:30 p.m. – 15:30 p.m.	Instruction on numbers and letters
15:30 p.m. – 16:30 p.m.	Indoor and outdoor play
16:30 p.m. – 17:30 p.m.	Free activities
17:30 p.m.	Dismissal

**Table 13.** A Daily Schedule of Public Kindergarten

7:50 a.m.	Opening up
8:00 a.m. – 8:30 a.m.	Breakfast
8:40 a.m. – 9:40 a.m.	Free choice activities
9:40 a.m. – 10:00 a.m.	Snack
10:10 a.m. – 10:30 a.m.	Large group
10:40 a.m. – 11:30 a.m.	Outdoor play
11:30 a.m. – 12:00 p.m.	Rest
12:00 p.m. – 13:00 p.m.	Lunch
13:00 p.m. – 14:30 p.m.	Nap
14:30 p.m. – 15:00 p.m.	Get up, Group activity
15:00 p.m. – 15:20 p.m.	Snack
15:30 p.m. – 16:30 p.m.	Outdoor play
16:30 p.m. – 17:00 p.m.	Free choice activities
17:00 p.m.	Go home



home or rode on the back of the family bike instead of riding home in the family car.

Unlike other programs, a program of the private kindergarten was centered on group work. Children often followed teacher-directed and total group instructions instead of working independently or in small groups on self-selected tasks. All children were expected to do the same thing at the same time. For example, in a typical art lesson, the teacher demonstrated how to fold and twist tissue paper into butterflies. She then gave guidance to those children doing it incorrectly before proceeding to the next step of pasting the butterfly onto paper and drawing the antennae. Drawing lessons consisted of children copying an object drawn by the teacher.

## Discussion and Conclusion

This study only examined a few ECEC programs; however, this pilot study helped to explore the present conditions of Chinese ECEC and will provide essential basic data for future studies of this nature. There are several recommendations based on the data collected and from the researcher's perspective:

### Qualifications

There is no policy or reference made concerning the role or responsibilities of the directors and teachers of ECEC programs. It is important to have qualified staff in terms of educational background and length of experience. A teacher's behavior or interaction with children can be a critical factor for a quality ECEC environment because children spend almost a whole day with a teacher.

This study highlights disparities between urban and rural as well as different types of kindergartens. Teacher qualifications, teacher-child ratio and facilities in rural areas were worse than urban areas. Public kindergartens in urban areas also fared the best of all categories of entry qualification, work environment, access to professional development, higher salaries and other benefits. Teachers serving in rural private kindergartens tend to have the lowest entry qualifications, the least access to professional development (and other career opportunities), and the lowest pay and compensation. There were several reasons that made it

a challenging task to introduce and maintain a qualified teaching force (particularly in rural areas and in private kindergartens) that included insufficient funds, lack of career development, and weak incentives. The adequate provision of qualified ECEC teachers presents the biggest challenge for rural private kindergartens. The findings from this study are consistent with previous studies (Bai, Luo, & Yin 2004; Yao & Xie, 2004) and showed that urban kindergartens are staffed by teachers who have typically completed high school (or college) but teachers in rural areas are less educated and extremely limited in formal and new training opportunities. There is also a significant range in regards to teacher's years of formal education and years of experience. Most kindergarten teachers in rural areas hold degrees in child-education from vocational middle schools and vocational high schools. A considerable number of those who hold college degrees were non-child education majors. Many researchers have consistently reported that public programs tend to produce higher quality services than their private counterparts (Hu & Szente, 2009; Pan, Liu, & Lau, 2010).

The standards for kindergarten teachers need to be reviewed to emphasize more teacher professional and pedagogical competencies with regard to teaching young children. Teachers, directors and other ECE personnel should meet the requirements for minimum training standards and require the implementation of teaching certificates as a condition for employment in rural and private kindergartens. The pre-service teacher training system also needs to be improved to include services and courses provided by universities, colleges and middle level training schools. Innovative in-service teacher training systems need to be explored in order to meet teachers' diverse needs for learning and development as well as improve kindergarten teachers' pedagogical competency for a better awareness of and sensitivity to early childhood development needs.

According to the Child Welfare League of America Standards statement (2015), teachers are clearly important in ECEC settings.

*The teacher should be regarded not as a substitute parent, but as a person of importance to the children under her guidance and supervision. It is through her that the child often makes his first transition from the home. She may be the bridge which transports him from a close family unit to the outside*

world. In a daycare service, her role is amplified beyond its educational purpose. It is one in which special skill, insight and knowledge are blended with the ingredients of maternal and giving qualities that enable her to offer comfort, security and protection.

### Standardization

Chinese policies on ECEC programs indicate minimum standards for managing ECEC programs. It is difficult for the program to interpret the present policies and regulations because standards are broad and ambiguous. For instance, ECEC policies and regulations state “ventilation, lighting, illumination, damp-proof, moth-proof, heating, and air-conditioning should be equipped properly.” Precise indicators such as how bright the light should be or which temperature is ideal for children in the playroom are not addressed. Regulations on the Management of Kindergartens establish principles for the operation of kindergartens. These regulations set comprehensive norms and standards for the utilization of space, class size, hygiene and health, safety, qualification requirements of kindergarten personnel, and relationships among the family, community, and kindergarten (Dai, 2009; MOE & NBS, 2010). In 2012, the Ministry of Education of China issued *Learning and Development Guidelines for 3-6 Year Olds* which described children’s development stages and suggested appropriate education interventions in health, language, society, science, and art. However, efforts are now underway to develop a specific early childhood education law in China. It is apparent that after the achievement of compulsory basic education, the Chinese government is spearheading policy development for ECEC.

To provide quality and more flexible ECEC services, the management for the ECEC program application and licensing system should be strengthened and each province should develop program standards based on central government regulations and diverse social needs. Local governments need to provide guidance, management and monitoring.

The Child Welfare League of America Standards statement (2015) states that:

*Each playroom should have outside windows, the area of which is at least ten percent of the floor area of the room. Artificial lighting should be of at least twenty-five or twenty-*

*five foot candlepower. A temperature of sixty-eight to seventy within feet of the floor should be maintained for children’s playrooms.*

### Facilities

The physical conditions at kindergartens affect the quality of ECEC and it is critical to create a learning environment by arranging all materials properly rather than just to retain them. However, there are no policies regarding arrangement of furnishings and equipment for children and the private kindergarten observed did not meet national standards. A lack of finance and public attention have caused consistent problems for rural kindergartens in China in regards to: shortage of physical space, poor building conditions, inadequate activity space, obsolete teaching equipment, poor facilities, hygienic washrooms, emergency exits, insufficient toys for playing, and limited books for reading. The disparities between urban and rural kindergarten’s physical conditions (including average constructive space per child, average activity space per child, average outdoor space per child and average books per child) remain obvious, but were slowly narrowing. Kindergarten conditions and child learning environments in rural China lag behind urban areas.

The Child Welfare League of America Standards statement (2015) states that:

*Doors and traffic lanes should be kept clear of blocks and other equipment so that children can enter and leave the room easily. Materials on shelves, at easels, workbench etc., should be kept within children’s reach. Well-made tables, chairs, and shelves should be of appropriate size for children’s comfort and reach.*

Overlooked is the importance of equipping storage space inside and outside of the institutions.

The Child Welfare League of America Standards statement (2015) states that:

*Adequate storage space should be available for coats, for extra clothing for emergencies, and for supplies and materials to replace those used. A low waterproof shed is required for storage of outdoor play equipment such as blocks, walking boards, tricycles, or wagons.*

## Safety

Safety is the most important factor in ECEC services. Children's safety needs to be protected and secured. However, safety was not considered at most of the Chinese ECEC programs, especially in rural private kindergartens. There were no visible signs of concern in the researcher's observations. Concerns are raised that many existing ECCE programs will not or cannot provide the support necessary to ensure that all children are able to be cared for and educated on safety.

The Child Welfare League of America Standards statement (2015) states that:

*Materials should be nonpoisonous and not flammable. It is desirable to have fencing at least four feet in height around the outer boundary, to protect children from outside hazards. The supports for climbing and other large equipment should be securely fastened in cement at least eighteen inches underground. There should be no protruding corners or edges of the cement support, which children might fall against. Swings should be separated from the rest of the playground by ropes or natural shrubbery to prevent accidents. For China, we have found relatively little documentation of programs for inclusion of children who are minorities or migrants or who have special needs.*

## Cooperation

In terms of integration of social work, education, and health (which is essential in ECEC programs), none of programs observed worked properly. Many professions should be involved in child care. Social workers are concerned with professional child care as it relates to the needs of children, families, and communities. Health specialists view professional child care positively because teachers ensure that young children have necessary check-ups and immunizations. They also provide leadership planning for health practices which maintain health and minimize illness in ECEC settings. Psychologists, child specialists, and educators contribute to increased knowledge and development, learning, and teaching. Local governments to promote should strengthen the coordination of different educational sectors, creating a more integrated system to promote the development of early childhood education.

The child Welfare League of America Standards statement

(2015) states that:

*A teacher in an ECEC program should be expected to have or be flexible enough to develop skills in working with social workers and the health staff, and should have knowledge of basic public health and casework principles. Standards should be precise as much as possible in order to sustain a quality ECEC environment and regulate it more effectively from the perspective of policy.*

## Special needs

With regard to serving children with special learning needs and/or disabilities within these programs, inconsistencies exist in access to: programs and services provided for children with exceptionalities, educational environments, levels of educational attainment of staff, and training for teachers. The findings of this study are consistent with previous studies (Deng & Harris, 2008; Pang & Richey, 2006) that show that children with disabilities are often ignored in the classroom and may not receive appropriate instruction, because teachers have inadequate time and knowledge to assist. A study by Alur & Rioux (2003) showed that children with disabilities may be turned away from ECCE programs or have participation limited. The inclusion of children with special needs does not seem to happen consistently unless there is an explicit plan with implementation activities and specific indicators and benchmarks (OECD, 2010).

In the transition from a developing country to a developed country, more concern for handicapped children should be acknowledged, followed by plans to implement programs for the care of special needs children.

## Planning ahead

The issues of ECEC services in China have been inconsistent. A long-term plan must be established for successful ECEC services. The development of ECEC should assume a more important position in the nation. ECEC is still the weakest element in the Chinese education system. The government should take the lead to build a public ECEC service system that involves different social sector stakeholders (including private investment) in order to provide convenient, flexible, diverse programs for children and parents. All levels of government should situate ECEC

development as an important national policy and expand ECEC resources in a variety of ways. More government funding should be used to strengthen the public ECEC service provisions. The government may also use a variety of strategies to support private programs.

In conclusion, there is now huge demand for ECEC in China, with up to 60% of Chinese children currently accessing 150,420 kindergartens (Hu, Leong, & Li, 2015). These kindergartens mainly serve affluent families in urban areas, while lower socioeconomic communities receive poorer quality, private services. To improve equity in access, the Chinese government has begun a program to provide children with at least one year of quality ECEC by 2020 (Hu *et al.*, 2015). However, only increasing the quantity of ECEC programs is inadequate and not the best way to resolve the problem. Quality ECEC services and increasing the quantity of ECEC programs should be a priority. Quality ECEC care will provide Chinese children with a proper environment for optimal development. ECEC programs standards in developed countries can be examined to understand previous dilemmas. This can be beneficial to Chinese, especially where ECEC services are a serious social issue. Policies should be implemented to set precise standards to regulate and sustain quality ECEC environments. The evaluation of policies and standardized regulations for Chinese ECEC programs will help to nurture and ensure the optimal development of Chinese children. The government must ensure that ECEC programs are valued the same as other programs. ECEC is a vital public service. The state should give as much attention to ECEC programs and improve supervision and funding to ECEC as it does other educational programs.

This study has several limitations that are important to consider. The purpose was exploratory in nature and was to collect information about the quality of ECEC programs in China. However, due to the smallness of the sample size, the researcher is limited in generalizing the findings. Another primary limitation of the study was the geographic distance required to collect data in a limited time period and difficulty in the translation of Chinese to English which is often encountered in cross cultural studies. It is difficult to observe the ordinary functioning of a typical program in China because officially approved and arranged visits for

foreigners are usually made for “model” programs. Nevertheless, this study provides recommendations for future studies and policy formations to enhance quality ECEC systems in China.

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