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Policies and Practices Of Professional Development in China: What do Early Childhood Teachers Think?

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Abstract: This paper focuses on early childhood teachers' professional development in China. It reports a study which aims to elicit twelve in-service early childhood teachers' perspectives of the values and issues of professional development policies and the learning opportunities they experienced. Two themes arising from the study are addressed, namely the teachers' positive responses to the government aspirations for enhancing teaching in early childhood education, and the complexities of the organizational and role structures of the early childhood community in ChangChun where the study took place. An important aspect of the teachers' perspectives of their professional development, which connects up to the early childhood environment in ChangChun, is the view that professional development was oriented to their own employment continuity. Teachers' learning was perceived as a useful means to offset the insecurity of their careers, but not closely related to children's learning.

Introduction

Since the release of Teacher Law in 1993 (Ministry of Education of China, 1993), professional development of teachers has become a major component of educational reforms in China. The primary goals of the educational authorities have been to develop professional development policies which provide teachers with a set of guides to their learning and development and the frameworks within which teachers gradually improve their pedagogy with children. These reforms brought into prominence a set of policies and practices of teachers' professional development in the early childhood sector.

This paper uncovers the values and issues of professional development of early childhood teachers from the perspectives of a group of early childhood teachers in China. Early childhood education in China refers to kindergartens and preschools, which "generally cater for children aged from three to six years" (Guo & Qu, 2012, p.12). Children younger than three are normally cared for in their homes or in the nurseries which are not seen as educational institutions (Zhu & Zhang, 2008). Despite their educational status, kindergartens and preschools have different structures and systems from the rest of the education system (Zhao & Hu, 2008). In their article, Hsueh, Tobin and Karasawa (2004) discussed that "early childhood education [in China] is still in its adolescence, growing rapidly but unevenly, full of new found strengths and promise, but also at times confused about what will happen next" (p.467). The purpose of the present paper is to offer illustrations of some of the promises and issues inherent in the policies and practices of early childhood teachers' professional

development in ChangChun, a large city in northeast China, where early childhood education has been growing rapidly (Zhang, 2012).

Professional Development in Early Childhood Education: A Brief Global Picture

Continuing interest in raising qualities in early childhood education, particularly in the recent two decades, supports a focus on teachers' professional development (Howes, Hamre & Pianta, 2012). This situation is itself largely the result of the aspirations of educational authorities worldwide for improving children's learning through enhancing teaching. In the words of Sheridan, Edwards, Marvin and Knoche (2009, p.378) "the professional development of practicing early childhood educators is considered critical to the quality of experiences afforded to children".

For many, professional development in early childhood education has been a reform movement premised upon the ideas of teachers as transforming agents, teachers' accountability, and teachers' professionalism (Buysse, Winton & Rous, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010). The goals of professional development of early childhood teachers are therefore couched in terms of teachers' responsibilities for making effective changes in improving their professional work with children.

However, professional development of early childhood teachers is not always effective. Sheridan et al. (2009) argued that teachers' needs for professional development were too diverse to be easily met in several learning opportunities. Opfer and Pedder (2010) also pointed out the gaps between programme provision and teachers' needs for development and perceived them as significant barriers to effective learning of teachers. It has also been recognized that professional development activities can be time consuming, and limited with resources, support and appropriate approach to evaluation (Battey & Frank, 2008). The focus on teaching skills is also an issue in early childhood teachers' professional development (Buysse et al., 2009).

Professional Development in Early Childhood Education in China: A Brief National Picture

The central government of China legislates, regulates and funds education. Local governments are responsible for implementing developments of the local educational systems (New & Cochran, 2007; Rao, Cheng & Narain, 2003).

Teachers became important professionals since the 1980s but early childhood education was given importance only in the latest decade (Hu & Szente, 2009; Wu, Young & Cai, 2012). The initial emphasis of professional development of early childhood teachers was on developing their musical and artistic skills which could distinguish early childhood teachers from those in school sectors and establish early childhood education as a special stage in children's development (New & Cochran, 2007).

Secondary continuing education and continuing higher education are so far the main approaches to early childhood teachers' professional development. Secondary continuing education is offered to early childhood teachers who are not formally trained in early childhood education, while continuing high education upgrades early childhood teachers' existing qualifications or provides education for early childhood teachers "through training classes, teaching-related researches, academic workshops, conferences, or non-degree graduate courses" (New & Cochran, 2007, p.1016).

At the level of the central government, three initiatives that further contribute to the development of early childhood teachers' professional education are the enactment of

Teacher Law in 1993, the establishment of a Parameter for Teacher Education in 2002 (Zeng, 2008), and the ratification of Regulations of Primary and Early Childhood Teachers' Professional Development in 2005 (Peng, 2012). Teacher Law legalizes teaching as a formal profession and set items to protect teachers' rights, ensure appropriate treatment to teachers, and monitor quality of teaching in order to create pedagogical reforms (Zeng, 2008). The Parameter for Teacher Education highlights the importance of lifelong learning and sets specific stages of teacher's professional development (Zeng, 2008). The Regulations of Primary and Early Childhood Teachers' Professional Development provide specific criteria against which local governments regulate the practices of professional development of primary and early childhood teachers (Peng, 2012).

The notion of children's learning is in the centre of the policy frameworks of teacher development in Chinese early childhood education (Wu, Young & Cai, 2012). The Ministry of Education in the People's Republic of China (2001) states clearly that the key learning task of early childhood teachers is to understand and support children's potentials for learning.

One strategy that Chinese governments adopt to achieve quality early childhood teaching is through a contracted employment system of teachers (Zeng, 2008). This system is intended to reinforce the principle of lifelong commitment to learning of teachers, as teachers need to satisfactorily meet regular inspections and regulations to continue to work in the profession. According to Zeng (2008), by moving to a discontinuous employment condition that is legitimized by a continuous learning principle of teachers, it is possible that Chinese governments manage a quality assurance mechanism in teacher education.

Main concerns about educational reforms towards improving early childhood teaching quality are the long-held traditions of teacher evaluation that focus on tests and teaching performances, a lack of classroom input to educational policies, and the gap between the urban and rural areas in terms of teachers' professional development (Liu & Teddlie, 2003; New & Cochran, 2007; Peng, 2012). The concepts of child-centred, practice-focused and democratic approach to teaching have arisen in Chinese early childhood policies (Lau, 2012). Direct teaching, however, remains prevalent in many early childhood classrooms (Li, Wang & Wong, 2011; Guo & Qu, 2012). Pedagogical and curricular discontinuity between early childhood policies and practices has been foregrounded as an issue of concern. Zhu and Zhang (2010) claim that given the current educational situations in China, "new perceptions do not necessarily lead to new ways of behaving" (p.178). Moreover, an emerging focus on early childhood education in rural China has resulted in more concerns for consistence between early childhood policies and practices, as well as between the standard definitions of teaching quality and diverse contexts of early childhood classrooms.

Professional Development of Early Childhood Teachers in China: The Present Study

This study was designed as an enquiry into twelve Chinese in-service early childhood teachers' perspectives on their professional development. Three questions provided direction:

What is early childhood teachers' understanding of current professional development policies?

In what ways has professional development benefited early childhood teachers?

What issues of professional development do early childhood teachers perceive?

It is for the reason of addressing a conspicuous gap in the research of professional development in early childhood education in China that the study aims to explore the above questions. For many years, educational reforms in China prioritized school sectors. Early childhood teaching was only recently brought to the attention of policy makers (Wu, Young & Cai, 2012). The last few years, in particular, have seen a significant growth in support for

professional development of early childhood teachers by the central government and regional authorities. However, these trends are not accompanied by research. Most studies on professional development of teachers in China focus on schools (Paine & Fang, 2007).

The aim of the study was to produce a description of early childhood teachers as learners, and to interpret their learning experiences in the light of the professional development policies and organizational structures of the early childhood environment in ChangChun, China. The reason why the study was based in ChangChun was that ChangChun was a large city in northeast China where early childhood education had been developing fast (Zhang, 2012). It was expected that valuable information would be obtained from a study in ChangChun. A group of teachers from ten kindergartens and preschools were invited. The sample selection was purposeful to try to represent the two main contexts of early childhood education in China, namely kindergartens and preschools. The selection criteria for the teachers were they all had degrees in early childhood education, had experiences in teaching with children aged from three to six, and had been engaged in professional development opportunities.

The twelve participants, with the pseudonyms of DiDi, PingLi, Wei, WuMei, CaiHang, ShiLan, Jie, April, Lin, FangFei, XiaoAn, JingYu participated in the study. They were chosen from a workshop in the National Training (National Training is a policy framework of professional development of early childhood teachers. This framework will be discussed later in the paper) programmes. In view of the ease of finding a group of early childhood teachers in one accessible setting, the participants were located in the workshop. All the participants had a professional rank of 'elite early childhood teacher'. The term 'elite teacher' originated in 1962 in a policy document 'a notice of developing appropriate full day primary and secondary schools'. It refers to the teachers who excel in their working quality, experiences and leadership capacities. Requirements for promotion to elite teachers include school referrals, written tests, oral presentations and open class demonstrations.

The teachers were all females and aged from 30 to 43 years old. Their experiences of teaching in early childhood education ranged from 12 years to 24 years. All the participants were senior teachers in their respective working places.

Data generation methods consisted of semi-structured focus group interviews in three small groups, four teachers each. Each focus group interview was carried out for about an hour and half. The choice of this focus group interview was strategic: the first, every teacher was able to talk in a small group situation; and second, "the diversity of opinion and questioning of participants encourage a greater sense of reflection", and the group context "provides opportunities to clarify responses, to probe opinions and to ask follow-up questions" (Waldegrave, 2003, p.254). Focus group interviews were expected to have teachers individually and collectively talk about and reflect on the experiences of their professional development.

The study adopted a qualitative methodology drawing on the phenomenological perspective. The teachers were guided not only to give opinions. They were also involved in interpreting their opinions and providing reasons for their interpretations. The design of this research was underpinned by the view that the teachers' perspectives of their professional development were "a product of how [they] interpreted the world" (Bryman, 2004, p.14). Bryman reminds us that of particular importance in phenomenological research is researchers' attention to the meanings of the experiences being studied. How the teachers made sense of the policies and practices of professional development was, therefore, given high importance in the present study.

In order to uncover the perspectives and experiences in ways that were meaningful to the participants, an important step in the data analysis was to involve the participants in it. The data was analysed using a content analysis approach. Transcripts were first reviewed by two researchers to identify who said what, why, to what extent and with what effect (Neuendorf, 2002) in order to establish a sense of experiences and perspectives of each

participant. A range of broad topics were created with the support of the actual words of the participants. The topics were passed on to the participants. They were asked to check whether the topics gave meaning to what they talked about and if there were other topics that we should include. Codes were then assigned to the topics that the researchers and participants all wanted to keep. Final step of the data analysis involved comparing codes across all three discussion groups to find consistencies in order to develop categories and identify themes.

Findings

Policies and Their Values to Professional Development

The teachers told me that early childhood teaching was a licensed profession in China. All teachers must obtain their teaching license. However, huge diversities in the professional standards of early childhood teachers called for urgent actions from the central Chinese government to unify teachers' professionalism in order to provide all children with quality education in their early childhood years. According to DiDi:

'Early childhood team in China is a huge and very diverse community. Teachers have different interests and are in different stages of professional development. These differences make significant effects on how we teach'.

Two policy frameworks of professional development were identified and discussed by the teachers: The National Ten Items and National Training Plan. When talking about the National Ten items, the teachers said that the importance of quality early childhood teaching was embedded in this document. The Ten Items was a response of the central government in 2010 to a crucial issue faced by general public that it was expensive and difficult to send children to quality public early childhood centres. PingLi and Wei told us that among the ten items, three were set directly to professional development of early childhood teachers: expanding early childhood educational resources; building stronger early childhood teaching team; increasing the investment in early childhood teaching development. Wei stated that

'These foci are crucial in teachers' learning and development'.

The teachers reached a unanimous agreement that the most important policy framework for professional development of early childhood teachers in ChangChun was the National Training Plan. JingYu explained:

'The Plan was developed in 2011 and it was the collaborative attempt of the Ministry of Education and Ministry of Finance at establishing a teaching quality improvement mechanism through a fundraised structure. The intentions were to provide training opportunities that targeted teachers in the Middle West rural areas, directors in private kindergartens, elite teachers, and those who were new to the early childhood profession to improve their pedagogical knowledge and skills'.

When the study was taking place the participating teachers were attending courses organized by this policy framework for elite teachers. WuMei and DiDi both pointed out that the overall framework of the National Training Plan presented a model that was specific and practical in terms of supporting the target groups. For WuMei:

'The aspiration of the governments was that the trainings were pragmatic in that they were useful for the practices of the target groups'.

Teachers seeking the national training opportunities must meet many requirements and go through a series of tests. In Changchun, once selected, the teachers attended two concentrated training programmes each year for five years. According to the participants, the National Training Plan paid attention to teachers' continuity of learning, which they perceived as valuable to their professional development.

Through their discussions of the National Training Plan, the teachers collectively revealed three features of the Plan. First, it provided a step-by-step approach. Second, it emphasized a differentiated way of development with different learning goals set for teachers

in different professional ranks. Third, it had a cooperative focus that learning was shared between experienced and less experienced teachers.

In the interviews, clear statements emerged in all cases that the teachers perceived the step-by-step, differentiated and cooperative approaches of the National Training Plan as being favoured by the educational authorities because these approaches seemed much less complex than an individualized approach and they were manageable. For them personally, the training plan was well created. PingLi said:

‘The training plan made possible time, support and focused experiences of teachers’.

In light of the needs of professional development of early childhood teachers and in response to the national policies, there were also many learning activities available in the regional level, including online and correspondence classes, onsite workshops and research projects. Early childhood services all developed their professional development programmes for their own teaching staff. CaiHang and Wei came from the same preschool and said that although their preschool did not have a set of policies for staff development, there were lots of professional learning activities. This was followed by other teachers, who provided a similar idea that their work places did not have policies but practices of staff development had been actively taking place.

Values of professional development opportunities

The analysis of data identified five themes that indicated the teachers’ perspectives of the values of professional development.

Forming and Unifying Professional Identities

The perceived importance of professional development in keeping their professional identity was uniform across the groups. Professional development was considered to be valuable for their professionalism.

Shilan and three other teachers expressed a concern about the low social status of early childhood teachers in ChangChun. For them professional development ensured their professionalism and in a long term enhanced their social status:

‘Teaching is a low status career. Early childhood teaching is the worst of all. Only through professional development, we can gradually move out of the marginalized position’.

According to DiDi, professional development, especially an opportunity like the National Training Plan offered early childhood teachers a unified identity. For her:

‘This worked well to engage the often disengaged early childhood teachers, namely teachers in private early childhood services’.

As will be shown later in this article, early childhood teachers in private services in China do not usually receive the same support of learning as those in non-private centres.

DiDi found the national training programmes wonderful experiences. As a teacher in a private childcare centre, she obtained a strengthened perception about the significance of early childhood education.

The importance of breaking the unequal professional status of early childhood teachers was another salient value in many teachers’ views of the National Training Plan. Jie described the organizational structures of early childhood education in ChangChun:

‘Early childhood services in ChangChun are affiliated to three different institutions: educational institutions, government institutions and private institutions. Early childhood centres affiliated to educational institutions are

able to provide teachers with a teaching status in similar ways as those in schools. Only eleven early childhood services in the entire ChangChun city are affiliated to educational institutions. Teachers who work in government institutions are managed by Human Resource Bureau of the local governments. They do not receive the same treatments as teachers but they are supported for professional development. About half of the early childhood teachers in ChangChun work in private services. They do not usually receive the same support for professional development as those in other services’.

April taught in a private preschool. She stated:

‘I feel so privileged that I also got chosen for this training opportunity. Being with colleagues in different centres makes me feel that I’m one of them and I’m one of the teachers’.

Moreover, Shilan thought that professional development changed her attitudes towards teaching and strengthened her identity as an early childhood teacher:

‘When learning together with other teachers, I become more aware and more proud of being an early childhood teacher as we are such a big team’.

Some teachers talked about research as a particular useful approach to enhancing their professional status. Jie stated that she had been engaged in research and she really enjoyed the project she had been doing on child philosophy. This was a 2-3 year project. Seven early childhood services in ChangChun participated in the project and there were lots of reading, sharing, problem solving and presentations. Jie stated:

‘Research as an academic and professional activity provides us with a stronger message than any other professional development activities that we work for an important profession’.

CaiHang was once a very depressed teacher and thought about changing her career many times:

‘However, my involvement in the professional development activities, particularly the National Training Plan changed me and I no longer consider early childhood education as a Cinderella. Although it is still Cinderella for many people, but I regard it as a great profession’.

Based on the teachers’ opinions, it is possible to say that the teachers were positive about the professional development experiences they had encountered. They provided a consistent account that professional development influenced their professional attitudes and identities. Through professional development, the teachers redefined their roles as early childhood teachers, got to know their careers better, and became more passionate about their work.

Continuing and Advancing Teachers’ Careers

In ChangChun, career advancement of early childhood teachers was largely determined by their teaching performance in open class demonstrations and teaching competitions. There was consistent evidence from the teachers that professional development helped them in their pursuit for career advancement. All twelve teachers had gone through many performance tests to become elite teachers. They all believed that professional learning helped them obtain up to date knowledge and develop expertise in operating open classes.

Moving up to higher ranks in teaching was important for the teachers as this secured their jobs. In many early childhood services, there is an authorized quota of teaching staff, which is established by local governments according to the size of the services. This quota does not reflect the real need of many services, therefore, some teachers are in the waiting category while some do not have a category. Once a quota is available, a decision over who may get it usually depends on the performances of applicants in open class demonstrations and tests. Lin said:

‘The authorized quota in the early childhood services bought about a fact that teaching was an insecure profession, so teachers needed to work hard to continue their employment’.

Jie reminded us of the contracted term of employment of early childhood teachers:

‘Even we have got a category, the employment is in a contracted term and it is always possible that you cannot renew it. For employment continuity, we have no choice but enhance our teaching performance. Professional learning helps’.

Under the National Training Plan, elite teachers were able to attend the training if they passed a number of tests. PingLi said that:

‘Teaching in China means constant tests and open class competitions’.

After these competitions, the teachers ‘treasured more the national training opportunity, as this not only acknowledged their current achievements but also paved a way for future progress’ (April, Wei and ShiLan).

Another reason why the teachers had a strong desire for career advancement is that:

‘Only when I became an elite teacher, I got the responsibility to coordinate a class and had a leadership role in programme planning and implementation’ (April).

All the teachers said that they benefited from all sorts of the professional development activities. Their open classes were rated higher and they were more likely to get awards in teaching.

Helping with the Team Work in the Classroom Level

The teachers saw the criteria used in the National Training Plan in selecting participants for professional development as being so harsh that it gave only few teachers the opportunities, therefore it was important that they shared learning with the colleagues who did not get the opportunities. FangFei commented:

‘Since China is so huge, there is no way in which a single programme could help all early childhood teachers, so teachers who have the training need to disseminate their learning to others’.

One of the principles of the national training programme, for example is that ‘senior-helping-junior’ (DiDi). In CaiHang’s words:

‘In the National Training Plan, a goal to us, elite teachers, is to pass on what we learn to other teachers in our centres’.

When asked to what extent they would disseminate their learning from the National Training programmes to their colleagues in the centres, most teachers said that they would not do much as they were not supposed to do anything immediately since it was not their centre that supported them for the training. April explained:

‘Although the policy asks us to do that, my centre director only tells me to summarize my learning and share it in a meeting. I can organize open classes but it is only up to me’.

The teachers agreed with each other that the principle of the National Training Plan that learning was disseminated was not implemented in the centres.

However, the teachers said that they shared something they learned with the colleagues in their own classrooms because the leadership responsibilities for their own classrooms were essential for their career advancement. Lin remarked:

‘In our kindergarten, there are teaching skill competitions each term. Teachers in each classroom need to team up and try for good grades. I usually have to play a very active role in making sure that the other two teachers in my classroom can also work well. What I learned from different professional development activities were shared a lot with them’.

Building an Expert Profile for Working with Parents

The need to influence parents with up-to-date information was a point raised by some teachers. They therefore saw professional development valuable. FangFei discovered that contemporary parents were very demanding and they wanted their children to win at the starting line. She pointed out that central to her role in teaching was the ability to act as an expert to parents:

‘If we do not appear to them as knowledgeable, parents would trouble us’.

It was through their own learning in professional development activities that early childhood teachers gained trust from parents as being competent to teach.

The teachers discussed the difficulties in working with parents. For them, the single child condition of the Chinese society was the trigger of many of these difficulties. Parents set high demands on their only-child’s performances in arts, music, literacy, maths and physical development. Parents’ high expectations of children, their lack of understanding of young children’s learning characteristics and their demands for immediate outcomes of children’s learning posed challenges to teachers. As XiaoAn said:

‘Early childhood teachers have the moral obligation to acquire the necessary knowledge that would enable us to influence parents. Unless we learn and know what is right and we are able to articulate that, parents would not listen and as a result, children suffer from their parents’ high demands. We will be put in trouble too’.

For this reason, the teachers give importance to their own professional learning. They believed that professional development supported them in their pursuit of professional expertise.

Supporting Children's learning in Open Class Demonstrations

The least mentioned point about teachers' professional development was the effect of teachers' learning on the learning of children in their care. When asked to indicate how their learning was used in teaching with children, the participants' responses were again aligned with their own teaching performances and their dealing with parents' demands.

WuMei said that her open classes required children's cooperation and children learned from doing these classes with her:

'Children gained confidence in doing open classes with me. I did not like open classes but through professional development, I learned a lot and enjoyed sharing with others. My children were also excited at these opportunities as they saw many people coming to see us. With new knowledge and experiences, I am able to do well in open classes'.

When guided to consider the contributions of their learning to children's learning, the common theme of 'better open classes' was evident. PingLi saw her improved teaching in open classes as beneficial to children's learning because 'when I plan these classes, I try out many ways of doing things'. According to WuMei:

'The most essential task in open class demonstrations is to find out how to display my teaching strengths to engage children. Children enjoyed open classes with me'.

The teachers agreed that open class demonstrations were different from their day-to-day work with children. While many learned skills were put in use in open classes, they did not have to try out these many skills in their daily work with children.

JingYu explained:

'I need to impress others in open classes that I teach well, so I use new knowledge and practice that I learned in professional development. Our daily work with children is natural. We just do what we are comfortable with. So unless I'm very conscientious, I do not have to think hard of how to teach'.

The teachers all admitted that gaining knowledge did mean becoming more confident in teaching. However, becoming confident in teaching did not necessarily mean becoming better teachers. Upon reflection of their own learning in relation to the learning of children, the teachers felt sad that their professional development did not contribute to their daily teaching practice, as is evident in FangFei's statement:

'Only today I realized that what I was learning was not linked to children's learning. I feel sad about that, given that it's children who we work for. My improvement on teaching has not created me a better teacher'.

Critical Responses to Professional Development

The limitations of professional development were recognized and discussed by the teachers. One issue for them is the relationship between their learning and children's learning. One focus group of teachers had debates about the extent to which their learning should contribute to the learning of children. Some teachers made a point that tests needed to be abandoned in teaching evaluations and replaced by more open class demonstrations, while some said it was just those open class demonstrations which constrained them from focusing on children because the lessons were planned around teachers' own needs to impress their inspectors.

Taking offsite professional development opportunities was not easy for the teachers. In some ways, the problem was that 'release time'. They needed to double the workload to be freed for professional development and this stressed them up. JingYu said:

'I have to do the work that usually two teachers do to get out for professional development'.

For her, this was because the centre did not support her learning:

‘I don’t think that I’m supported for any offsite professional learning. For example, to attend the National Training, I had to make the applications and used my own time to prepare the tests. The centre did not support me. What I learn is for myself only. So, having time out for learning is a huge thing’.

Jie was quick to point out that the in-centre professional learning also took too much of their time and there were too many tests and open class demonstrations involved:

‘Can you imagine that we have meetings for about 12 hours each week on professional learning, to read, research, discuss open class demonstrations or prepare a coming event? Meetings take place after children leave, sometimes to 9pm and if we are busy during the week, we meet on the weekend. There are always lots of things to do after these meetings. We have teaching competitions every term. We also have so much to prepare for events, such as mother’s day or the national day. There is almost at least one event each month, which makes us so busy’.

In comparison, the teachers thought that in-centre learning was more meaningful than offsite trainings. Within their own centres, they could focus on their own needs. In the training classes, the topics came from universities, or from the ministry documents. Only about 20% is about practice. Wei claimed that the practical needs of teachers were not considered in these training courses and learning outcomes were not followed through:

‘We end the course with a presentation, or a test. That’s about it’.

Another response that the teachers made to their professional development is the quality of professional development facilitators. Within their own centres, the centre directors operated staff professional development. In the training programmes, university lecturers or different kindergarten directors provided the courses. The teachers all said that they did not question the credentials of these people but hoped that trainer quality could be improved and learning content met current needs of their teaching practices.

Discussion

The international aspiration for raising qualities in early childhood education through teacher learning was apparent in China, where early childhood teachers were developing professional knowledge and skills by taking on, for example, professional training courses and in-centre and offsite learning opportunities. One thing we can be sure of: Chinese governments had been making serious attempts to improve early childhood teaching (Peng, 2012; Zeng, 2008) and these attempts were considered valuable by the teachers in this study.

The teachers were positive about their professional learning experiences. They were motivated and passionate learners. Part of their motive was a desire for career advancement and employment continuity. It is possible to say that professional development of the participating teachers was a product of two forces: Government’s encouragement and the teachers’ desires for career progression.

Abilities to perform in tests and open class demonstrations constituted effective teaching in the early childhood services where the teachers worked. This should have come from the widespread uptake in early childhood services of the competition regime (Wu, Young & Cai, 2012). There has been evidence that professional development was defined by the teachers in terms of skills or characteristics such as having the ability and confidence to perform teaching in open classes. The teachers did not see the professional development as a way of accomplishing a child-centred inspiration in early childhood education but rather a means to improve their own teaching abilities (Li, Wang & Wong, 2011).

The teachers’ focus on teaching performance restricted the scope of their professional learning. Evidence was apparent that while the teachers perceived a range of values that

professional development provided to them, gaining knowledge and skills for open class demonstrations was a point raised most often in their discussions.

Part of the explanation of the teachers' focus on open class demonstrations was to be found in the wider environments of early childhood education in ChangChun. The differences in teaching categories and the contracted term of employment generated the teachers' feeling of a sense of crisis (Peng, 2012). For the teachers, if they did not do well in open class competitions and tests, which were the predominant evaluation approaches to teaching, they could not continue to work in this profession. It is thus evident that teacher development was influenced to a high degree by the organizational arrangements of early childhood education, that is to say, by its institutional systems and quota and categorical schemes. Ferguson (2006) and Wermke (2012) have both told us that educational environment, in particular the organizational framework, is the key contributor to the processes and outcomes of teachers' professional development.

Chinese governments have a strong interest in the influence of teachers as major reforming agencies in early childhood education (Peng, 2012; Zhang, 2012). However, if these agencies are primarily concerned with their teaching competitions, they cannot promote much change in children's learning. The current study indicates this phenomenon. This finding is also consistent with a point by Timperley, Wilson, Barrar and Fung in New Zealand (2007), that "professional development is usually about changing the knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitudes of teachers without necessarily expecting these changes to have a direct or immediate impact on their students" (p.19). What happened in China, therefore, is not just a case in that particular country but a possible worldwide issue.

In view of the issue emerged in this study between the teachers' learning and the learning of children in their care, it is also useful to further consider two important aspects of teaching practices in early childhood education in ChangChun: teacher evaluation and teachers' work with parents.

A significant factor contributing to the teachers' focus on their own stemmed from the approach to teacher evaluation in the early childhood services in which the teachers worked. Doing well in open class demonstrations was a recurring theme in the teachers' view of professional learning. Given that teacher evaluation in the early childhood services in ChangChun largely focused on teaching performance in tests and competitions, it is understandable that the teachers had a visible preoccupation to raise the standards of their teaching performance and they tied professional development to the improvement of their open class teaching.

A further aspect of the teachers' accounts of their learning, which connected up to their teaching practice, was their relationships with parents. It is clear in this study that a problem existed in the teachers' work that what they did was entangled with the high, if not unreasonable expectations of parents (Guo & Qu, 2012). The necessity of appearing competent to parents was taken up by the teachers in relation to their professional learning.

For the above-mentioned reasons, children's learning did not form the basis of teachers' learning. Up to a point, this was a strategy of the teachers. The importance of employment continuity had to override children's learning. Unless teacher evaluation drew specifically on the influence of teachers' learning on children, and the teachers' working environment gave importance to this aspect of their practice, the teachers understandably chose to subordinate children's needs to their own needs for employment.

The discrepancy between government aspirations and the experiences of the teachers' professional learning thus suggests two major implications for the early childhood education in ChangChun: clearly define what constitutes educational reforms and effective early childhood education; and respond to the views and needs of the teachers both in policies and practices. Zhu and Zhang (2010) as well as Paine and Fang (2007) argued that a standard form of teaching quality in China did not serve education well, in that it failed to recognize the complexities of teachers' working environments.

The present pressure towards a competitive system in teaching evaluation is an example of change (Liu & Teddlie, 2003). The main change should be in a more democratic approach which substitutes the ability to teach for an ability to lead to educational reforms. The passion of the participating teachers for learning holds out promising and exciting prospects. However, if early childhood education is to function to promote learning of young children, it will be necessary for teachers to see the clear links between their learning and children's learning, and that they gain benefits from making these links.

It is possible to argue that what happened in the early childhood education services in this study is the separation of the needs of children from those of their teachers, and the separation of the needs of the teachers from those of the policy makers. It is important that the control over learning and teaching shifts to the teachers themselves. Educational reforms need to stress the responsibility of teachers to promote the learning and development of children (Richter, Kunter, Klusmann, Ludtke, & Baumert, 2011).

Conclusion

Professional development of early childhood teachers in China was concerned with the educational improvements. Findings of the study suggested that policies and opportunities of professional development provided an effective means by which to support professional identities, collegial relationships, and professional responsibilities of the early childhood teachers in this study.

There is also the point that professional development of the early childhood teachers was taken as their responses to insecure employment conditions. Professional status of the teachers was ascribed, achieved and judged by their teaching performance in open class competitions and tests. It was under such conditions that the teachers developed a need to improve teaching skills and knowledge so that they could obtain high grades in their performances, which would help with their career advancement, and consequently their job security.

Unfortunately, this competitive approach to teaching evaluation functioned to legitimize differences between the teachers' learning and the learning of children. It can be suggested, therefore, that a more useful approach to teacher evaluation in the early childhood services in ChangChun, China would be to stress the impact of teachers' learning on children's learning.

The discrepancy between teachers' learning and children's learning is not only an issue within the context of early childhood education in ChangChun. This research raises questions that could be relevant to other places (Villegas-Reimers, 2003). The ways in which teachers advance their professional ranks need to be considered. To add to what has been known, policy makers should try to achieve an alignment between teachers' career advancement and their capacity to make a difference in children's lives. It is necessary that the national and local educational authorities in China explore the possibility of developing an improvement agenda for teachers' professional performances, rooted in a rejection of competitions and a teaching-oriented system.

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