

Education

Issues with the Development of Professional Preschool Teaching Staff in China and Developmental Strategies

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Teaching in preschool institutions is a specialized profession that requires professional expertise and techniques. Currently, certain issues with the professionalization of early childhood education practitioners have negatively impacted the quality of Chinese preschool education. This article analyzed the necessity of professionalizing pre-primary teachers and pinpointed the challenges faced by China's educational community in building professional preschool education staff. Relevant strategies were also proposed for strengthening China's pre-primary teaching force.

Keywords: Preschool Education; Preschool Teachers; Professionalism; China

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AMID socioeconomic advancement, there has been increasing recognition of the importance of the role of teachers. Researchers typically classify child education globally into three levels: pre-primary, primary, and secondary. Underpinning this classification are research findings from developmental theories that demonstrate that children at different ages have distinct developmental characteristics and needs (1). It is important to provide children in specific age groups with unique educational materials, environments, and teaching strategies and approaches (2).

Preschool education development is the product of the increased capacity of society to supply financial and human resources. In China, the focus of preschool education has undergone transitions from day-to-day care to physical healthiness, intellectual development, and holistic development of children (3). The role of preschool teachers varies in different historical contexts. From 1949 to 1988, preschool practitioners assumed

the duties of childcare to support parents' employment. In the years between 1989 and 2000, with the advent of the market economy system and the era of knowledge economy, the role of preschool education in optimizing child physical and mental development was emphasized, and the image of the preschool practitioner changed from "babysitter" to "teacher." Since 2000, society has raised increasingly higher standards for preschool teachers' professionalism, including their professional expertise, competence, and moral commitment (4).

The Necessity of Professionalizing Preschool Teaching Staff

Teaching, as a profession, must meet the general criteria for a specialty. First, a teacher must have received professional education entailing both theoretical knowledge and practical skills. Second, they must conform to a code of ethics related to the teaching profession and be ready to take on relevant social re-

sponsibility. Third, they should hold a license pertinent to their position and be subject to a professional title rating (5). Above all, the professionalism of the teacher should pertain to the developmental level and characteristics of the students they teach. As the onset of basic education, preschool education is of vital significance for the habit formation, intellectual development, and mental and physical growth of young children, necessitating a highly professional teaching force.

Characteristics of the Mental and Physical Development of Young Children

Preschool education differs from later education primarily because its subjects are at a special stage of life, that is, early childhood. Their immaturity and vulnerability do not mean that their education is simple and superficial; rather, it is a complicated and challenging endeavor. Mental and physical characteristics of young children are the main considerations in developing appropriate and effective education for them. Understanding and respecting their developmental level is fundamental to the implementation of preschool education (6).

The quality of education at each individual level depends on how well it pertains to the needs of the targeted group. According to Bloom's research, a human develops 50% of their intellect between the ages of 0 and 4, and 30% more between 4 and 8 (7). Education and direction from professional preschool teachers are invaluable to the lifetime development of the child. To achieve appropriate and effective early childhood education, the teacher must be extraordinarily sensitive to the unique features and needs of the young child (8). A qualified preschool teacher must be exceedingly patient and thoughtful with their students, professionally responsive to their in-school behaviors, and able to coordinate multiple factors to provide them with multifaceted learning experiences so as to optimize their early childhood development (9).

Young Children's Unique Learning Styles

Preschool children are physically vulnerable, with insufficient self-care and protection ability; they are active and full of curiosity, but with a short attention span and high susceptibility to disruptions; action and image thinking predominate in their cognition. That means they have different learning styles than other age groups. Preschool teachers should not simply deliver content knowledge to them by lecturing but rather give them hands-on inquiry opportunities to enable them to learn from direct experiences (10). In implementing early childhood education, they need to adopt an approach to teaching that facilitates young children's perception, experience, and comprehension and suits their developmental level (11). This poses challenging requirements on teachers' competence and professionalism in terms of the organization of day-to-day care and games; kindergarten-based curriculum development; support for children's free exploration; creation of appropriate environments and provision of equipment; and partnerships with parents and communities for maximizing natural and cultural resources (12).

Issues with the Professionalization of Preschool Teaching Staff in China

In 1981, the Ministry of Education of China issued the "Strate-

gies for Kindergarten Education Development," marking the initial top-level effort to professionalize preschool education staff (13). Papers like 1995's "Regulations of Teacher Qualifications" released by the Ministry of Education provided legal recognition of preschool teachers' professional status, elevating their work from an ordinary occupation to a formal profession (14). In 2011, the Ministry of Education launched the "Teacher Education Curriculum Standards (Trial)," giving a new impetus to the building of a professional preschool teaching force (15).

2012's "Professional Standards of Kindergarten Teachers (Trial)" set four principles for the professional development of kindergarten teachers: a child-centered education notion, moral commitment, ample expertise, and lifelong learning. It defines the 14 facets of preschool teacher professionalism, which are grouped into three domains: professional ethics, expertise, and competence. The 14 areas include the understanding of early childhood education, behavior towards young children, attitudes towards early childhood care and education, personal morality and behavior, early childhood development knowledge, early childhood care and education expertise, general knowledge, creation and utilization of preschool environments, day-to-day activity organization, support and guidance for child games, design and implementation of educational activity, incentive and evaluation, communication and collaboration, and reflection and development (16). In addition, the National Training Program for Kindergarten Teachers, the Three-Year Action Plan for Preschool Education, and other programs have been carried out to elevate the professional competence of preschool teachers (17). However, despite all the efforts intended to improve the professional level of this group, complications to the professionalization of preschool teaching staff still exist.

The Current Professional Development Level of Chinese Preschool Teachers

Inadequate Professional Competence

Over time, Chinese preschool teachers have been practicing relatively outdated educational notions and methods, unable to overcome the traditional early childhood education paradigm. This has resulted in their low level of teaching and inadequacy of capability for the development and organization of in-kindergarten activities (18). Some of them lack practical experience, have a poor understanding of the intention of curriculum design, and may adopt a *laissez-faire* approach to managing child activity. Some may deliver monotonous teaching without paying any attention to young children's cognitive peculiarities, leading to the latter feeling listless or being unwilling to attend kindergarten. Particularly in private preschool institutions, the majority of teachers are secondary school graduates with no professional training experience or teacher licenses, thus being unqualified for the job (19).

Low Senses of Professional Ethics

From a nationwide perspective, the expansion of higher education has helped elevate the average education level of Chinese preschool teachers. Nevertheless, the level of moral commitment remains low among a sizeable portion of them. Some of them adopt an apathetic attitude towards their work, with a lack of

care and concern for their young students and seeking to circumvent as many “troubles” as possible (20). Others cannot properly manage their emotions in the face of the willful, mischievous behavior and tantrums of young children, and sometimes they may resort to extreme devices. In some cases, the teacher reportedly abused the child in an unforgivable manner (21).

Challenges in Developing Professional Preschool Education Staff

Traditionally, work in early childhood institutions was seen as a job that did not require professional qualities and competence. As a result, the threshold for entering this profession has been relatively low, and preschool institutions have been staffed with many workers without relevant educational backgrounds or preschool teaching licenses. Despite the state’s establishment of complete standards for preschool teacher education and training as well as the requirement for teaching qualifications, there is still a high proportion of non-licensed preschool teachers due to the shortage of formally trained early childhood teachers. In addition, in the milieu of the marketization of education, numerous public kindergartens have been closed or have experienced a change in ownership, and private preschool institutions have become the main providers of early childhood education services. To curtail costs, the latter tend to employ a high percentage of non-licensed personnel. Factors like these are complications to the development of a professional teaching force for China’s preschool education (22).

Low Social Recognition of the Profession of Preschool Education

The history of preschool teachers as a teaching profession is relatively short. Even though, nowadays, there is division between teachers and caregivers in the kindergarten staff, the division of duties among them remains rough compared with that in their primary and secondary counterparts. In addition, kindergarten teachers spend most of their working hours on day-to-day caring chores as their students are young children with poor self-care capability. The distinction between manual and mental labor has an intense impact on people’s valuation of occupational standing, making it difficult for preschool teachers’ professionalism to be sufficiently recognized. Thus, teaching kindergarten is often seen as an “occupation” rather than a “profession” (23). Public notions about preschool teachers are that they must be caring and patient and that their job responsibilities are mainly about singing, dancing, playing games, and doing handcrafts with young children, which do not entail professional expertise and skills that need specialized training and education. There are low retention rates among preschool teachers due to their undesirable socioeconomic status (24).

In the meantime, public funding for early childhood education is far less than that for nine-year compulsory education and education at other levels. That leads to preschool teacher education institutions having difficulties attracting high-quality sources of students, which has a negative impact on the in-service development of preschool teachers (17).

A Lack of Mature Education Systems for Pre-service Preschool Teachers

Education for prospective preschool teachers in China emerged relatively late, and there has been a dearth of localized early childhood education theories. Several key theoretical and practical questions about preschool teacher education need in-depth research. For instance, what are the primary components of professionalism in early childhood education? What qualities should preschool teachers possess to meet the needs of kindergartens? Should there be a division of specialties in pre-service preschool teacher education? If so, which specialties should be established? What are the specific criteria for preschool teachers at differential education levels? What are the relations between preschool teacher education and early childhood education practice (25)?

Preschool teacher education lacks a scientific and complete system as a consequence of its ambiguous developmental directions. Secondary preschool teacher education institutions focus on pre-service teachers’ skill training, which remains at the rudimentary level of professional development. On the other hand, established preschool teachers’ universities concentrate on cultivating research-oriented talents, emphasizing theoretical studies over practical skill training. The exploration of melding theoretical research with professional skill development in preschool teacher education is still underway (26).

It is noteworthy that rural and ethnic minority areas in China have a more backward preschool education. Graduates of preschool teachers’ colleges and universities tend to seek employment in medium- and large-sized cities; those of rural origins seldom return to their hometowns after graduation. As a result, rural preschool teaching staff are mainly composed of secondary school graduates and primary and secondary teachers made redundant after the school re-deployment who have not received any professional pre-service education (27).

Ineffective Accreditation Systems for Preschool Teacher Qualification

The preschool teacher qualification system is part of the whole teacher qualification framework, comprising pre-service education, employment and staffing, professional title rating, salaries and compensation, in-service training, teacher qualification accreditation, license management, evaluation of teacher educational quality, and more (28). However, in practice, the current accreditation pattern is superficial and ineffective in testing the educational capability of the prospective preschool teacher. It consists of written exams, which entail only basic theoretical knowledge about childcare and instruction, and in-person interviews, in which candidates are examined with some routine operations that can hardly reflect their genuine capacities to carry out care and education and to create and organize child games (29). Such an accreditation system can neither help identify the applicant’s professional level nor meet the real needs of kindergartens (30).

Impeded Professional Development of In-Service Preschool Teachers

Currently, overly heavy workloads are impediments to preschool teachers’ in-service professional development. The class size in Chinese kindergartens is usually large. The teacher is typically responsible for multiple duties at work. Parents tend to place

excessive expectations on the teacher, as they have only one or two precious offspring. It is not easy for overburdened preschool teachers to make time for efforts in professional development (31).

In recent years, many kindergartens have undergone a reform of internal management, including the implementation of responsibility-related evaluation. The evaluation is coupled with the teacher's salary, perks, hiring, and professional title. Random examinations of individual teachers' work are frequent, and some kindergartens even deploy monitoring devices to supervise teachers' performance. Although the responsibility-related evaluation system has significantly improved the efficiency and quality of kindergarten management, it has also increased the job pressures on teachers and reduced their autonomy and creativity in their work. Job burnout and the loss of senses of achievement are pervasive among preschool teachers. When teachers lose internal motivation and take it as external responsibility, the productivity of professional development activity is reduced (32).

Strategies for Developing a Professional Preschool Teaching Force in China

UNESCO's first World Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education emphasized that the government of every nation has the primary responsibility for developing and providing preschool services as well as establishing a comprehensive administration framework to ensure the implementation of the preschool education system (33). The professionalization of Chinese preschool teaching staff also depends heavily on the direction and support of governmental policies. The government and educational authorities should pay attention to the overall planning, top-level formulation of policies, and effective coordination of preschool teacher policies. It is also essential to ascertain key measures to guarantee the smooth implementation of these policies at local levels (34).

Strengthening the Top-level Planning of Preschool Teacher Policies

First, dismantle the discrimination between teachers with and without *Bianzhi* (a system of publicly funded positions in China) memberships. Public kindergartens have a limited number of *Bianzhi* memberships. On the other hand, the seniority, professional title, and education level of teachers with *Bianzhi* memberships have a heavy weight on their portfolio of compensation. Overemphasis on the preschool teacher's *Bianzhi* membership means the teacher evaluation is not focused on their actual educational capabilities. Equal pay and entitlement to social security between staff with and without *Bianzhi* will help increase the retention rates of preschool staff (35).

Second, include pre-primary education in the national

compulsory education system. Currently, preschool education remains the weakest among all levels of education in China. The well-established compulsory education system excludes preschool education, leading to kindergarten teachers not identifying themselves with personnel within the education system. This is not only unfavorable for preschool teachers' professional identification but also a barrier to the balanced distribution of preschool human resources on the part of the education department. Therefore, the state must legislate to ensure that preschool teachers have the same rights and professional status as their primary and secondary counterparts (36).

Third, innovate preschool staff recruitment avenues. Despite the steady increase in preschool teacher supply in recent years, there is still a gap from the actual demand for them. Particularly, rural and ethnic minority areas have stunningly severe shortages of pre-primary teachers due to their insufficient investment in preschool education, low pay for teachers, and dearth of *Bianzhi* memberships. Alternative recruitment methods are necessitated to make up for the gap in underdeveloped areas, such as government procurement of services, hiring through third-party agencies, and temporary employment. In the meantime, it is advisable to improve the overall professional level of preschool teachers by setting up early childhood education groups, running preschool institutions by school districts, and supporting private kindergartens using public education resources (37).

Guaranteeing the Implementation of Preschool Teacher Policies at Local Levels

Local governments should bear primary responsibility for funding early childhood education. Spending on preschool teachers' salaries and perks ought to be incorporated into the educational budgets of local governments. Furthermore, local governments must guarantee investment in preschool teachers' professional development, in-service training, and social security to retain high-quality talents in preschool education (38).

Early childhood education in China has long been weak in pre-service teacher training. The resources of preschool teachers' universities and relevant schools in higher education institutions should be fully utilized to increase the supply of high-quality preschool teachers and build up the talent pool for this area (39). Also, the supervision of the quality of preschool teacher education by social forces and third-party evaluation agencies should be introduced to correct problems in this regard in a timely manner (17).

Furthermore, under the backdrop of digital education, educational technologies such as intelligent campuses and distance education platforms can be deployed to facilitate communication and experience sharing among preschool teachers, allowing them the opportunity to learn at any time and in any place (40). ■

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