Study of Factors Influencing Childcare Quality in Preschools

Hsiu Yueh Chiu¹* Alison Owens²

¹Department of Childhood Education and Nursery, Chia-Nan University of Pharmacy and Science, Tainan, Taiwan 71710, R.O.C.
²CQUniversity Australia

Abstract

In recent years, the quality of childcare in Taiwanese preschools has been affected by falling enrolments, low salaries, poor working conditions, and the prevalence of unregistered preschools in the context of low fertility rates and the implementation of the Child Education and Care Act (CECA) to integrate kindergartens with nursery schools. This research aims to investigate the factors influencing childcare quality in the Taiwanese preschool profession by comparing the perspectives of parents, teachers, and principals. It is anticipated that the results might be used as a reference for designing government policy and managing preschools to enhance the quality of childcare. This research uses a qualitative case study approach in three types of preschools to explore how parents, teachers, and principals view childcare quality in the Taiwanese preschool. Data collection methods for this research consisted of focus group and individual interviews with semi-structured questions. A total of nine interview sessions were held with three principals, three teachers’ focus groups, and three parents’ focus groups in October 2011.

The research found that the parent category considered teacher quality, staff-child ratios, teacher turnover, parent-teacher communication, teaching and caring, and physical environment to be key factors. The teacher category considered that teacher quality, teaching and caring, government policy, staff-child ratios, principals’ leadership, and parent-teacher communication were essential. The principal category considered teacher quality, teacher turnover rates, pay and working environment, teaching and caring, staff-child ratios, physical environment, principals’ leadership, and government policy to be important.

Keywords: childcare, preschool, childcare quality, qualitative study

*Correspondence: Department of Childhood Education and Nursery, Chia-Nan University of Pharmacy and Science, Tainan, Taiwan 71710, R.O.C.
Tel: +886-6-2664911
Fax: +886-6-2667325
E-mail: hyalison@mail.chna.edu.tw

1. Introduction

Quality related to childcare includes process quality and structural quality, quality service, management perception, and consumer satisfaction. Process quality refers to actual experiences, including children’s interactions with caregivers and peers and their participation in different activities. Structural quality refers to the ratios of children to staff, caregivers’ formal education, and caregivers’ training related to children (Marshall, 2004).

In recent years, the quality of childcare in Taiwanese preschool has been affected by falling enrolments, low salaries, poor working conditions, and the prevalence of unregistered preschools (Jang, 2006). This is particularly problematic because research shows that the quality of childcare significantly influences the academic and social development of children (NICHD, 2006). This research therefore aims to investigate the factors influencing childcare quality in the Taiwanese preschool profession by comparing the perspectives...
of parents, teachers, and principals in three types of preschools. To understand the priority factors in different participant groups and different types of school. The results may inform the stakeholders as a reference for designing policy, managing school, teaching, and choosing preschool.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Childcare Quality Issues in Preschool

Most parents expect their children to achieve good learning outcomes in preschools (Hsieh, 2008; Liang, 2001). As a result, most preschools focus on teaching skills and knowledge and neglect children’s physical, emotional, and social development (Hsieh, 2008). Some researchers (Hung, Huang, Lin, & Gau, 2008; Sung 2007) have suggested that Taiwanese childcare workers require in-service training, as many childcare workers do not have adequate knowledge to ensure children’s nutrition and health. It is essential to provide nutritional guidance for children to create a positive attitude towards healthy food (Sung, 2007). This research takes a multiple perspectives to explore the priority of factors on childcare quality with different categories of participants.

Childcare centers also face serious challenges in keeping children safe. Chang (2002) found unacceptable accident rates and safety measures in family centers and nurseries due to a poorly maintained, organised, and planned environment. Many childcare workers do not have enough knowledge to ensure children’s safety and provide a safe and nurturing environment (Chang, 2002; Sung 2007). Despite the importance of safety and nutrition, these topics tend to be neglected in university courses for pre-service preschool teachers and in the yearly in-service training courses for preschool teachers (Chang, 2002; Sung 2007).

Furthermore, preschool teacher turnover is high in Taiwan as a result of heavy workloads, poor working conditions, and low salaries, and many teachers do not consider preschool teaching to be a good career (Jang, 2006). This low estimation of childcare careers results in many unqualified teachers coming into the preschool system, since many qualified teachers no longer want to teach.

2.2 Perspectives on Childcare Quality in Preschool

Katz (1993) proposes four perspectives on quality care: Top-Down (a professional perspective); Inside-Out (staff’s perceptions of childcare quality); Bottom-Up (children’s perceptions of childcare quality), and Outside-In (parents’ perceptions of childcare quality). This research project explored the Top-Down, Inside-Out, and Outside-In perspectives to evaluate the provision of childcare across a small sample of Taiwanese centers and staff to identify issues impacting on quality of childcare from the perspective of key stakeholders in preschools. Children’s perceptions of childcare quality (the Bottom-Up perspective) are not studied in this research as the children are very young; their parents, however, as customers of childcare, are able to contribute their opinions through observation in relation to the care their children have received.

All parents are concerned about quality, and often consider quality issues in choosing a preschool for their children. In addition, teachers in preschools play an essential role in delivering high quality child education. The researcher interviews parents (Outside-In perceptions), and teachers and principals (Inside-Out perceptions) of three preschools to evaluate childcare quality in preschool in Taiwan.

Cryer et al. (1999) propose a conceptual model of factors in childcare quality known as Spheres of Influence on Early Childhood Education (ECE) programs, represented in Figure 1. According to this model, the process quality of ECE is embedded within various spheres of influence: the sphere of classroom, center, region and country. Each sphere includes multiple factors. The closer to the center the sphere is, the greater its impact on process quality. The center sphere is the classroom, which has the most impact on process quality. For example, a lower child-teacher ratio can provide a substantially better classroom service quality. The ‘country’ of service is in the outer sphere and incorporates the effects of factors such as cultural and economic conditions on the quality of childcare service. The influences of the region and country on process quality involve regulations. For example, the Taiwanese central government sets the child-to-adult ratio requirements and local government oversees a voucher policy for low income families.

This research project adopts the Spheres of Influence model to explore the influences on the quality of childcare in preschools in Taiwan, since this model clearly classifies the quality factors in each level, clarifying the relationships between various influences on the quality of preschool services.
3. Methodology of this Research: Qualitative Case Study

This research employs a qualitative approach, since such an approach can deeply explore the views of the stakeholders in childcare to investigate problems. Qualitative research investigates how people make sense of their experience. Qualitative research investigates the why and how of decision-making, usually involving individuals’ interpretation and making sense of people’s behaviors (Yin, 2003; Bryman, 2004).

This research employs a case study framework, a key technique within qualitative research, to organize the investigation. The case study method was chosen rather than a field study or an ethnographic approach, for the latter approaches tend to be very time-consuming. The case study involved conducting research in a variety of public and private preschools using qualitative approaches employing individual interviews and focus group sessions to build detailed and complex data about how parents and teachers view childcare quality in the Taiwanese preschool. In accordance with the case study method, a comparatively small group of research participants was chosen rather than a large scale survey to allow for a more in-depth investigation.

3.1 Data Collection Methods

Data collection methods for this research consisted of focus group and individual interviews with semi-structured questions allowing open-ended answers and facilitating further comment, which can provide participants with guidance and opportunities to freely express their views on a topic (Creswell, 2008). The participants consisted of parents, teachers, and principals from three types of preschools. Parents were chosen since they are the customers, and teachers can have a great influence on childcare quality. Principals know which management techniques and policies can impact on childcare quality.

In order to have a better understanding of what influences childcare quality in Taiwan, this research studies three types of preschools, including one public nursery, one privatized public nursery which was built by government but leased to private management, and one private kindergarten located in the southern part of Taiwan. There is no substantive difference between nurseries and kindergartens, because children are in the same age range, but there has been a tradition of employing childcare staff with higher qualifications in kindergartens. Therefore, the Childhood Education and Care Act proposed by the MOE and implemented in January 2012 is likely to cause transitional challenges for nursery centers. Two focus group sessions were held, a teacher session and a parent session, in each preschool. The teacher’s focus group provided views from preschool professionals, and the parent’s focus group provided the customers’ views. Principals in the individual interviews provided comments from the point of view of management. Parents and teachers were not individually interviewed, since they could sufficiently express their views in focus group discussion and are very busy with work and family.

The researcher interviewed parents (Outside-In perceptions) in focus groups, teachers (Inside-Out perceptions) in focus groups and principals (Inside-Out perceptions) in individual interviews in three preschools to evaluate childcare quality in the preschool profession in Taiwan. Each focus group and interview was tape-recorded in Mandarin, the official language of Taiwan, with the participants’ permission. The interviews were transcribed in Chinese after the completion of the focus group interviews or individual interviews.

All the interviews were recorded electronically, transcribed in Chinese and translated into English by a qualified translator. The resulting text was carefully read to identify themes, and notes were taken that formed the basis of initial codes, which were used to categorize emerging themes.

Regarding validity, this research follows Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggestion with credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability on qualitative research. This research uses peer
debriefing to be more objective for credibility by discussing completely with Doctor Qwens, and the members of Learning Skills Unit of Central Queensland University. For dependability, all audio tape transcript, records, and letters are kept. For confirmability, the interview data come from participants of three different groups, and also from literature review.

4. Findings

The factors influencing quality of childcare include structural elements and process elements (Espinosa, 2002). Responses to the childcare quality-related questions were elicited in interviews with the three participant categories, and the comments elicited from the different participant categories show some common themes. Traditional cultural values can influence participants’ concerns regarding and criteria for childcare quality in preschools. Due to different perspectives and experience, each participant in each category focused on different quality factors. From data analysis, nine themes in total emerged in the responses of all participant categories: teacher quality, teacher turnover rates, pay and working environment, teaching and caring, staff-child ratios, physical environment, principals’ leadership, government policy, and parent-teacher communication.

The principal category considered teacher quality, childcare workers’ pay and working environment, teacher turnover, staff-child ratios, facilities, care and safety, and government policy including government subsidies to be key factors. The key factors for participants in the teacher category were teacher quality, teaching children good behavior in preschool, government policy (in relation to tax justice), staff-child ratios, government subsidies, principals’ aims and leadership, government policy (in relation to curriculum), and educating parents. For participants in the parent category, the key factors were teacher quality, staff-child ratios, teacher turnover, communication between parents and teachers, teaching children good behavior in preschool, the safety and happiness of children, and space.

Some items were not considered by some participant categories to be influential factors in childcare quality. Other factors were considered to have an indirect influence rather than a direct one. For example, pay and working environment could influence teacher quality, and teacher quality could, in turn, influence childcare quality. These factors of childcare quality from the perspectives of participants are illustrated in Table 1.

Principal and teachers suggested that government policy was an essential factor in childcare quality. The participants in these two categories clearly understood that government policy could affect teachers’ work and quality. The fact that parents did not mention this might be due to the fact that they did not directly perceive the effects of government policy. Furthermore, principals and teachers emphasized the importance of principals’ leadership. Members of these two participant categories directly experience how principals’ leadership can affect the management and quality of the school. Principals and parents considered teacher turnover to be a significant problem. Principals and parents of preschools are strongly affected by the problem of teacher turnover, and evaluators are also concerned about this problem. Teachers, however, did not mention this factor in childcare quality, but rather pointed out the lack of career opportunities. Principals and parents identified the physical environment as significant. Parents of private preschools were more concerned about children’s safety, a concern that was not mentioned by parents of children in the public preschools.

In addition, communication between parents and teachers was identified as an important issue by parent and teacher groups. It is apparent that they are quite concerned about this issue; for example, they thought that it would be a good way of reducing friction between parents and teachers over disagreements concerning appropriate teaching and caring styles and children’s diets. Principals indicated that pay and working environment was important. There were no clear disagreements on what constitutes or limits quality of care among the different participant categories; rather, there was a difference in emphasis, with some participant groups focusing more on particular items. The interviewee comments in relation to the factors affecting childcare quality are summarized in Table 2, which provides a list of participants’ comments from the thirteen interview sessions of five participant categories.

All three categories from the preschool sector focused on teacher quality, staff-child ratios, and teaching and caring in childcare quality. It is clear from these comments that these are considered the most important factors in childcare quality by all stakeholders. In particular, parents and teachers personally experienced the critical importance of
staff-child ratios, and many reported that it was difficult for staff to care for so many children. Participants working in public preschool contexts were most concerned about staff-child ratios, perhaps because the less privileged socio-economic backgrounds of the children in these schools made it more difficult for teachers to manage larger classes. This itself reflects a lack of awareness/alignment between the needs of parents/customers and ground-level staff and the management/policy level staff who oversee the industry.

Table 1 Participant’s Perceptions and Key Factors Influencing Childcare Quality

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Categories</th>
<th>Participant’s Perceptions</th>
<th>Factors</th>
<th>Three Participant Categories</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>public nursery principal</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Teacher quality</td>
<td>1. Teacher quality</td>
<td>Principal Category:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Facilties</td>
<td>2. Physical environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Care &amp; Safety measures</td>
<td>3. Teaching &amp; Caring</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Staff-child ratios</td>
<td>4. Staff-child ratios</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Government support &amp; subsidies</td>
<td>5. Government policy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>teacher quality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>teacher turnover rates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>pay and working environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>teaching and caring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>staff-child ratios</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>physical environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>principals’ leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>government policy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ Focus Group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>public nursery</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Teacher quality</td>
<td>1. Teacher quality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Teaching children good behavior in preschool</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Staff-child ratios</td>
<td>4. Staff-child ratios</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ Focus Group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>privatized public nursery</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Teacher quality</td>
<td>1. Teacher quality</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Government support and subsidies</td>
<td>2. Government support</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers’ Focus Group</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>private kindergarten</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1. Principal’s aims and leadership</td>
<td>1. Principal’s aims and leadership</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3. Teachers</td>
<td>3. Teachers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>4. Educating parents</td>
<td>4. Educating parents</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5. Teachers’ working environment</td>
<td>5. Teachers’ working environment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Teacher Category: teacher quality, teaching and caring, government policy, staff-child ratios, principals’ leadership, parent-teacher communication.
For most participants, the most significant factor in the quality of childcare is the teachers, who play an essential role in childcare by caring for and teaching children on a daily basis. This perception aligns with the recognition of the centrality of the teachers’ role in the childcare literature (Jackson, 2012).

Teacher turnover may cause concern for young children and influence the childcare quality because (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2004). To improve childcare quality may need to resolve the issues: low pay and benefits, poor working conditions.

In Taiwan, Confucianism underlies traditional cultural values, which are characterised by collectivism, hierarchy, and respect for education (Hofstede, 1980). Taiwanese values emphasise the importance of group harmony and respect for seniors in the family or society. As a result, Taiwanese culture has specific expectations for children in relation to public behaviour and politeness, and most parents consider helping their children develop good attitudes and polite behavior to be part of the role of teachers (Hofstede, 1980).

From data analysis, five distinct issues related to government policy and interventions in relation to childcare quality were identified: the instability of government policy; government subsidisation of schools and children; social justice objectives; the requirements of remote areas, and effective evaluation.

Research indicates that staff-child ratios can affect teacher effectiveness and care quality (Whitebook, 1995). High staff-child ratios allow teachers have time to make more child interactions for enhancing children’s language and social skills. Most of the participants pointed out the importance of staff-child ratios [1:15 for age 3 to 6 class] in relation to childcare quality.

Research indicates that good leadership by principals can enhance the climate of the school and teachers’ morale (Whitebook, Ryan, Kipnis, & Sakai, 2008; Helburn, 1995). On the other hand, poor leadership might cause low teacher morale and lead to high teacher turnover.

Lawrence-Lightfoot (2004) contends that many teachers do not know how to communicate effectively with parents because they are not trained in communication skills. Caspe (2003) suggests that teacher’s professional development programs should include communication skills to assist teachers to take advantage of varied communication opportunities and develop strategies to facilitate more efficient communication with parents.

The factors of safety, space and facilities were identified as important in childcare quality. These factors can be attributed to the structural elements of the physical environment.
5. Conclusions

In the context of low fertility rates and the implementation of CECA, this research assesses the concerns of childcare quality in the preschool profession in Taiwan. It uses a qualitative case study approach in three types of preschools using in-depth individual interviews and focus group sessions to explore how parents, teachers, and principals view childcare quality in Taiwanese preschools.

The research found that the parent category considered teacher quality, staff-child ratios, teacher turnover, parent-teacher communication, teaching and caring, and physical environment to be key factors for childcare quality. The teacher category considered teacher quality, teaching and caring, government policy, staff-child ratios, principals’ leadership, and parent-teacher communication are important factors. The principal category considered teacher quality, teacher turnover rates, pay and working environment, teaching and caring, staff-child ratios, physical environment, principals’ leadership, and government policy as essential factors. All these three categories commonly considered teacher quality, staff-child ratios, and teaching and caring as essential in childcare quality.

References

影響幼兒園照顧品質因素之研究

邱秀月 1 Alison Owens 2

1嘉南藥理科技大學嬰幼兒保育系
2CQUniversity 澳洲

摘要

臺灣低生育率及幼托整合環境下，幼兒園的品質受到入學人數下降、教師待遇低、不良工作條件及許多非法幼兒園的影響。本研究主要目的為探討比較家長、教師和園長對影響幼兒園品質之因素之看法。本研究使用質性的案例研究方法，以半結構化之個人訪談和焦點團體方式，訪談一個私立幼稚園、一個公立托兒所及一個公辦民營托兒所之三種類型的幼兒園，探討幼兒園家長、教師和園長對幼兒園對幼兒品質的意見。研究發現家長認為教師品質、師生比、教師流失率、家長老師溝通、教學和照顧及園所環境是主要影響品質因素。教師認為教師品質、教學和照顧,政府政策、師生比、園長領導、及家長老師溝通至關重要。園長認為教師品質、教師流動率、薪資、工作環境、教學和照顧、師生比、園所環境、園長領導、及政府政策是重要因素。

關鍵字: 幼兒照顧、幼兒園、幼兒照顧品質、質性案例研究

*通訊作者:嘉南藥理科技大學嬰幼兒保育系
Tel: +886-6-2664911
Fax: +886-6-2667325
E-mail: hyalison@mail.chna.edu.tw