



Early Childhood Development via Child Care Centers under Thai Local

Administrations

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Abstract

Early childhood is considered to be the foundation of education for human resource development in every society. In order to ensure equal access and equal opportunities in education, Thailand's 1999 Education Act (amended in 2002) stipulated that other organizations in society can provide basic education for citizens, in addition to government bodies. The Act allows local administrations like municipalities to provide basic education for children. The preschool center is one type of educational body to develop early childhood education at the level of villages and sub districts. This qualitative research study aimed to investigate the situation of early child care center management in a Northeast Thai city and analyzed what problems and obstacles exist in the management procedures. Qualitative data were obtained from structured interview questionnaires administered to municipality administrators, teachers and parents. Focus group discussions were also conducted with representatives of parents and members of preschool centers' boards. The data were analyzed by utilizing content analysis. The findings reveal that the preschool centers managed their services based on a system model of meeting basic requirements in every aspect. Problems found from the focus group discussion included the efficacy of communication channels, poor local environment, and inadequate personnel development. Suggestions are provided for the better management of the centers.

Keywords: early childhood, child care centers, local administration, Northeast Thailand



Introduction

Regarding current trends in early childhood education, research has shown that early educational experiences make a difference; there exists substantial empirical evidence of the value of high-quality educational programs for children before their kindergarten years (Duncan et al. 2010; Bornstein et al. 2010; Walker et al. 2011). Preschool education can develop a variety of positive outcomes over the long term, including higher academic achievement, lower rates of grade retention and special education placement, and higher grade rates and lower delinquency rates (Stipek, 2005). Research related to early childhood education has also indicated the long term payoff from early childhood education. Mustard (2010) reports research on early brain development and human development found that the early period of development affects the later stage of human development. At the same time, poor early development affects both physical and mental development, as well as learning ability, in later life (McCain Mustard and Shanker 2007)

In the US since the late 1990s, the launch of universal Pre-K has caught the attention of politicians and education leaders in many states. Some studies show that children with solid Pre-K background are more prepared for kindergarten, with larger vocabularies, the ability to recognize some letters, and more sense of how to interact with peers and adults. Other studies have pointed out long-term economic and social benefits. So, public preschool has also been a support unit for parents who search for quality care for their children (Wilson 2008). One crucial aspect of early childhood development is that quality preschool can provide a sustained boost for the children of poor families. They can maybe sustain this through public school and adulthood. While in preschool, the children can learn to play with other children, learn the discipline of classroom routines, and learn to adjust to a structured environment (Fuller 2008).

To ensure equal access and equal opportunities in education, suitable programs should be provided to serve the needs of the individual in a regular classroom. This means that the class is organized as an educational environment suitable for all, no matter what background they are from (i.e., special educational needs, underprivileged, or marginalized children), whatever needs more preparation (Bendová Čecháčková and Šádková 2014). This approach seems to support an inclusive services policy for the public. Moreover, high quality early childhood programs should support and provide access to a wide range of learning opportunities, activities, settings, and environments. Every child should have the opportunity to participate, which refer to supports to take part in play and learning activities with peers and adults. The supports should extend to an infrastructure of systems—level supports. These must be in place to secure the efforts of individuals and organizations in providing inclusive services to children and families (Gruenberg and Miller 2001). So, there must also be positive outcomes when an inclusive classroom is offered to children with special educational needs, and the inclusion of children with disabilities in an early childhood classroom still becomes a primary service option in preschool inclusive education (Odom 2000). In Iran, children with special educational needs attend regular schools based on their rights. The main challenges are facing a diverse level of functioning, the need for special instructional materials and trained teachers, and coping with the negative reactions of parents of



non-disabled children (Samadi and McConkey 2018). Nonetheless, at present, society has a greater awareness of the types of support professionals can provide to create productive learning environments for children with and without disabilities in inclusive settings. Strong support from local leadership, willing parents, and committed teachers can contribute to the benefits of inclusive preschool settings (Odom 2000).

In Thailand, after the Ministry of Education stipulated the National Educational Education Act 1999 (amended 2002), local administrations were entitled to implement basic education management. This mission also includes early childhood education. However, previous research has reported certain weak points in the administrative procedures. The main problems include the quality and standards which may be derived from the quality of the child minder curriculum, the administrative work, a lack of supports, and a weak monitoring system (Bhulpat and Kraisoraphong 2003).

The framework for child care center management in Thailand

The childcare center is a first entry to educational organization for students at the ages of 4-6 years old. The Thai Ministry of Education specified a National Strategic Plan for Early Childhood (First born to first year of primary education) according to the government policy for early childhood (Office of the Education Council 2012) as follows: the learning process for early childhood has to 1) reach all children; 2) provide children with a child-centered approach based on differences in their backgrounds, social status and cultural aspects; 3) emphasize whole body development by providing various activities, through learning by playing; 4) provide an appropriate learning environment and sufficient resting hours for the children; and 5) promote child development knowledge and understanding, while coordinating with other organizations, parents, the community and involved parties. Under Thailand's 12th National Economic and Social Development Plan (2017-2021) (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council n.d.), Strategy I: Competency Enhancing and Development for Human Resources; Indicator I reads "Develop everyone in the society across generations to improve knowledge and ability," with Item I reading, "develop preschool children for their full potential development." Thus, the study of the present situation of preschool centers will present the current situation of the centers and suggest guidelines for better development for the future. In order to enhance the quality of life of citizens', the same National Economic and Social Development Plan also led to announcement of the Master Plan for a Lifelong Agenda for Human Resources Development. This agenda covers 1) maternity though early childhood development, 2) school age and youth development, 3) labor re-skill and capacity development, and 4) ageing capacity development.

The management of child care centers in Thailand

The management of a Thai child care center consists of curriculum management, experience management, and evaluation management Firstly, curriculum planning covers the preparation of lesson plans, learners' preparedness, participation and recognition from society, and



the readiness of the learning institute. The next step is curriculum implementation, which includes teachers' meeting, teaching material development, and time table setting. The last step is curriculum evaluation, which is conducted in order to be certain that the curriculum enhances students' development as specified in the objectives. So, staff members have to be trained systematically and continuously. Secondly, for experience management, there are six main activities. These are (1) free activities, (2) creative activities, (3) co-curriculum activities, (4) kinesthetic and rhythmic activities, (5) outdoor activities, and (6) educational games. Thirdly, for evaluation management. The evaluation framework includes systematic preparation by specifying the objectives, method, and evaluation instruments, as well as preparing the knowledge and understanding of personnel in applying the evaluation instruments. Usually in early childhood, the evaluation employed is authentic assessment. Furthermore, various evaluation approaches are encouraged. Normal practices are evaluation by evaluation form, observation, and interview. The main concern should be on the teacher's ability in managing the evaluation approaches properly. The evaluation instruments should be piloted or evaluated at every step (Department of Local Administration 2016).

Factors contributing to quality of child care center

The main factors contributing to the success and quality of child care centers include quality of teachers and other staff members and community participation (Bhulpat and Kraisoraphong 2003). The factors can be summarized as: 1) Administrator. The administrator has to have knowledge and understanding in educational philosophy, curriculum development and management, learning psychology, science and technology, human relationships, community coordination, and school-based management. In other words, the administrator should have managerial skill, human skills, and technical skills in task management and self-development. 2) Personnel. The teacher or child minder should have knowledge and understanding as well as the ability to deploy techniques in learning management, evaluation, instructional material development, and accessing information technology for child and self-development. 3) Curriculum. The child care has to develop a curriculum to respond to child development in every aspect, i.e., physical, emotional, physiological, social, and intellectual. 4) Resources, the administrator should allocate sufficient resources. The facilities and learning resources should be well-equipped and suitable for child development. 5) Parents. The school should provide opportunities for parents to participate in learning experience planning and supporting the center's activities, as well as offer training and knowledge distribution for parents so that they can support child development and help solve their child's problems (Niemhom Meesonsarn and Thongsawat 2012)

Thailand's 1999 Educational Act also specified the right of parents to receive support from the government for knowledge and understanding in child rearing and education. The child center has to work closely with parents in terms of responsibility sharing for child development. So, participation from parents in activities organized by child care centers is vital to the quality of the children's development and the success of the institute (Tulanon and Horadarn 2012).



In Thailand's 20-Year National Strategic Plan (2017-24) launched by Royal Thai Government in 2017, the government also prioritizes early childhood education as one of the vital issues for human resources development. Thailand's educational decentralization allows local government organizations to operate educational management institutions for populations in their localities. One of the functions is to be fully responsible for an early childhood education. In order to get a better understanding of the management of childcare centers under a Thai municipality, which is a local administration organization, this research chose a mixed methods approach (Creswell 1999; 2014) to answer the following research questions: 1) what is the situation in terms of early childcare center management, and 2) what are the problems and obstacles in the management procedures? Constructive guidelines for the development of quality early childcare centers are subsequently provided.

Methods

To understand the situation of early childcare centers, an investigation was devised based on a systems model, addressing the following issues: 1) the input; teachers' qualities, facilities, learning environment, and instructional materials; 2) the process; activities management, administrative management, and community participation; and 3) output, students' characteristics based on parents' opinions, and community satisfaction rate. The mixed method approach was employed (Cresswell, 19909, 2014). Additionally, to ensure a high ethical standard for this research, all research participants were informed about the specific nature of the project and ensured that their anonymity and confidentiality would be protected. Prior to each interview, permission from each participant was obtained in writing, and the interviewee was notified about the right to refuse to participate, or stop at any given time without penalty, if they wished.

Research context

According to official data, Khon Kaen Municipality (KKM) has a population of approximately 120,143 citizens in 2018. The city is growing due to economic development, so the population of the city is increasing. The community consists of both middle income salaried employees and labourers who migrate from rural areas and nearby provinces. There are, in addition, slum communities. Consequently, the childcare centers serve as the main gateway to the education system for children from underprivileged and low income families.

To begin, an in-depth interview was conducted with the deputy mayor responsible for KKM's Department of Education. The questions in the interview included KKM's vision for the preschool educational policy of the municipality and how he implements it. The deputy mayor analyzed the situation and compared the worldview of the administrative team over the past ten years. He noted, "Ten years ago, the local administration (municipality) provided people with welfare, not education." Over the last three years, KKM's Department of Education has been promoting the importance of education, especially pre-school education. So, preschool centers were established. The policy was to develop children from the perspective of skills, not literacy.



The centers' personnel were trained to use various techniques to enhance intellectual development. Playgrounds and materials for games and play were provided. At the same time, welfare childcare centers were also developed. At the beginning, the teachers were recruited as child minders. More recently, they have been supported to further their studies and attend training workshops. Now, all of them have had their status at the centers made permanent. This was found to be a major factor in terms of motivating teachers to perform their work well.

Sample groups

Multi-stage sampling was employed for data collection. Firstly, purposive sampling was used to collect data from 32 teachers from 11 childcare centers. Secondly, one hundred and one parents were recruited by simple random sampling. Thirdly, purposive sampling was used to recruit ten members of preschool centers' boards, ten parents, and six administrators, for focus group discussions.

Data collection

Initial survey interviews and site visits were conducted with teachers and parents using structured interview questionnaires. The data obtained from the interviews were analyzed by descriptive statistics, namely frequency, percentages, means, and standard deviation. Focus group discussions were conducted afterward with a group of ten parents, ten members of childcare centers' boards, and six of the municipality team who oversee the childcare centers. The data were analyzed by content analysis. The information obtained from site visits enabled the researchers to verify situations through the process of triangulation which is an approach employed to ensure the credibility of the findings (Maxwell 1996).

The results revealed that thirty-one of the thirty-two child-care center personnel (teachers) were female, and 56.3% were 36-50 years old. Of the personnel, 53.1% held bachelor's degrees in preschool or kindergarten education and 31.3% held degrees in other fields. All of the teachers were knowledgeable in related areas such as nutrition for children at the child-care level, and they had been trained in working in inclusive classrooms and in supporting children with learning disabilities.

Of the parents who voluntarily partook in this study, 66.3% were female and 33.7% male. The ages included 41.6% who were 36-50 years old and 31.7% who were 20-35 years old. Most of them (59.4%) were labourers or merchants (primarily push-cart vendors). Thirty-four point seven percent had only received a primary education, whereas 45.5% had received only a secondary education, and only 10.9% had a bachelor's degree. Twenty-nine point seven percent were unemployed, and 61.4% earned less than \$285 (10,000 Thai baht) per month or had no income.



Findings

We begin by considering the situation in early childcare center management. Based on the data obtained from the respondents, both teachers opined that the input for childcare center management were all delivered to a satisfactorily high level (administrative work $\bar{x} = 4.07$, S.D = 0.49, curriculum management $\bar{x} = 4.17$, S.D = 0.49, personnel development $\bar{x} = 4.10$, S.D = 0.62, academic and instructional materials management ($\bar{x} = 4.50$, S.D = 0.65). The process of management was also rated at a high level ($\bar{x} = 4.17$, S.D = 0.49), and community participation was also ranked at a high level ($\bar{x} = 4.50$, S.D = 0.65). The results of the childcare management variable found that the personnel were pleased with the administrative approach at a high level ($\bar{x} = 4.10$, S.D = 0.61). Parents were also satisfied with the administrative system. For personnel, academic and activities management, environment and safety, and community participation, $\bar{x} = 4.54$, S.D = 0.65. When considering the overall situation, it can be concluded that the childcare centers functioned effectively in the overall aspects of input, processes, and outputs. The findings from the focus group discussion of every group were in line with the results from the respondents in the traditional aspects of administrative management.

However, certain points were revealed by the parents in four focus group discussions. These were the minor issues but seemed to be of some significance in the management system. For example, some parents mentioned being interested in acquiring information about raising their children or doing some activities with their children. Some participants confirmed that, “We have never received any training from the municipality concerning how to raise our children or how to support them academically.” In addition, they mentioned a good point was that they felt pleased with the services, they stating, “Our children were regularly provided with dental care from time to time.” When a point concerning participation in the centers’ activities arose, the parents mentioned that the main participation from the community regarded activities were mainly concerning festivals or traditional fairs. Some joined the activities regularly, but some participated only a few times. However, they generally commented that whenever they were invited, they felt welcome and happy.

Another interesting issue was raised in the focus group discussion. One parent made the point that the teacher did not communicate things with us clearly and update us. For instance, in the case of absence or when there was a prevalence of some illnesses in the centers. The parents provided the case of a child who did not attend school regularly. The parents focus group also suggested other ideas that they would like to have more contact with the teachers.

The other issue raised by the focus group of parents was the environmental situation. This issue is the same as this study observed from site visits. The situation like the bad smell gets into the center. The last important observation from the parents was that when they learned that not all teachers in the centers held a degree in early childhood education or preschool education, they commented that this was not a big deal but observed that these teachers seemed not to be very good



with the kids. However, on overall reflection, the parents were grateful with the services provided for them by the municipality and considered them to be an improvement compared with the past.

The members of the childcare centers' board focus group pointed out that the childcare center really takes good care of all the children. However, the problem was that the parents did not take time to collaborate with the center. So when the problem arose, the parents blamed the teachers. As for the issue of personnel who did not have degrees in early childhood education, the board explained that "the municipality has a policy to send these personnel to be trained from time to time. As for the case of absence from the centers, the member of the board explained that when the child did not come to the center, the parents were the ones who did not want to bring their child. The reason is that they did not have time or cannot take time from work.

Some important points were revealed from the focus group discussion. The basic data showed that we have some parents who have bachelor degrees or vocational certificates. A few of these parents mentioned that they were willing to support the centers by lending their knowledge or expertise to teach the children in the centers or to train the teachers in organizing art activities or activities for child development. The well-educated parents usually volunteered their expertise to help lead children's activities or teach the class. But, since the majority of parents are from low-socio-economic backgrounds and are not well-educated, not many parents can help with academic work. However, those who were knowledgeable and had relevant experience were determined to help if the municipality has some support projects.

Findings from the site visit

As mentioned earlier, Khon Kaen is a fast-growing city. Consequently, the city is surrounded by settlements of migrated labourers from rural areas and nearby provinces. The children who attend the childcare centers were mainly (62.4%) from such families. General observation found that the centers have limitations in space. The playgrounds are in very small areas. There were also certain issues concerning environmental health, the smell, and the noise from nearby areas. Not all these issues were mentioned or reported in the interviews; some were raised in the focus group discussions. One interesting environmental problem is the limited space. One center is in the temple established next to the cremation site (about two meters away from the cremation buildings). When there is a cremation, the surroundings will fill with guests for the funeral, where loud music will be played. One teacher said that at the beginning of the term, the children were frightened and cried. However, when time had passed, the children got used to the environment. In the parents' view they think that the center is close to home they do not want to travel very far so the situation is bearable.

The vision of the administrative team

KKM's administrative team verified their vision for early childcare management. They emphasized that the policy was implemented based on the concept of 'playing first then learning'. Thus, the centers do not teach academic subjects to the children. The centers instead provide the



children with activities so the right-side brain is developed. Contemplative education (Shapiro et al. 2015) is also introduced. This approach aims to develop brain function and basic cognitive training for child development in the future. This is one of the strong points of the centers.

Discussion

This study of KKM's child care centers showed the centers have been managed effectively based on basic management criteria in terms of administrative work, process management, and outcomes i.e., children's development in the aspects of social and personal development. KKM's vision asserted a strong point of its management was implementing the policy of playing and learning, not subject instruction. This concept is in the same vein as research by Hoorn, Monighan-Nourot, Scales, and Alward (2014), who explained much of the theory regarding the role of play in the development and learning of young children in terms of how it contributes to the cognitive and social domains. Based on research by Piaget, Vygotsky, Mead, and Ericson, play allows children to develop to their fullest potential intellectually, socially, morally, and physically, as well as emotionally, as they learn to negotiate their development through interaction with their peers and the group. So, play is an investment for the future of the children and for society. However, certain weak points were detected from the focus group discussion. These issues included 1) the requirement for communication channels from teachers to parents, 2) better outreach approaches to provide parents with the necessary knowledge and skills to better raise their children, 3) a constructive strategy to promote other kinds of participation, 4) improvement of the environment in the areas where the centers are situated, and 5) better personnel development.

This, despite the relatively effective management system, certain problems were detected. However, if we look at the background information of the parents, we see that 36.7% of the parents are older than 50 years old. In fact, these are not parents; they are guardians, including grandparents. As mentioned earlier, Khon Kaen is a growing city. There are a number of slum areas. The early child care centers were established partly to serve a population which has migrated from other provinces or rural areas to work. Some parents have migrated to work in Bangkok or other cities and left their children with grand-parents. The overall picture is that KKM's child care centers serve a socio-economically depressed community. For occupation, 29.7% are unemployed (laborers constitute 28.7% and home business and push-cart vendors 30.7%). Regarding income, 59.4% are low income parents. When we look at educational background, 34.7% only possess elementary or primary education, and 45.5% possess secondary education. For socio-economic background, 60.4% (27.7% possess no incomes and 33.7% have incomes less than \$285 (10,000 Thai baht) per month. The baseline for the average income in the Thai population is \$623 (21,818 Thai baht) per month. So most parents who send their children to the centers have below average incomes. Buasai (2015) noted that inequality in Thailand is usually associated with poor quality of education and low economic status. In order to promote equality in Thailand, we have to improve the quality of educational institutions and provide the underprivileged with access to quality education.



To sum up, we consider both the service receivers and the service provider (municipality). The service receivers sending children to the centers see them as a great opportunity for their children. The centers are seen as much better than letting the children stay home and run around doing nothing. In the case of the parents who have to earn a living, placing their child in a center is helping them to manage their lives. With clean classrooms, with qualified teachers and child minders, the children are viewed as fortunate. In general, the parents are satisfied (Abdulai 2018).

However, in order to provide equal opportunity for the children, certain guidelines should be considered to improve the existing education. The old assumption that characterizes the traditional approach to public educational services should be changed. The old approach believes that expertise only resides in educators and professional personnel, not in parents, families, or community members. In the traditional model, the role of parents and community members is to passively receive services or resources as clients or beneficiaries. Ishimaru (2014) studied the changing process of the top-down advocacy strategy, suggesting instead the coalition approach, where the parents are engaged in active learning from one another, and are able to improve their capacity to advocate for themselves and for their children. This seems to be in line with the suggestion from the KKM parents that they want to see a concrete parents' network, where they can learn and share experiences with each other. It also coincides with the proposal of some parents who want to offer their knowledge in terms of organizing learning activities for children and training for teachers, if provided with the opportunity. If KKM develops a project along these lines, a database of the parents' expertise should be established. This database will be useful for KKM to analyse and make use of the knowledge and skills of the parents and other community members. In this approach, participation may not be based only on cultural festivals or routine meetings, as the other types of participation will materialize. Also, as the background information obtained showed that the majority of parents possess only elementary/primary or secondary education, KKM may aim to develop parents and guardians following the concept of lifelong learning, by providing the knowledge that they want to obtain in areas such as how to raise their children and provide a learning environment for the children at home, as well as other strategies to provide learning niches for parents and guardians so that they can develop themselves as competent parents.

As for overall participation, the findings showed that parents typically participated in some activities but did not get involved in certain issues, such as child development. Since KKM is moving towards a smart city paradigm, the services organizations in education should be managed in a distinctive way. The concept of co-creation is a new paradigm of public management. This concept refers to the involvement of the public in initiating or designing public services (Osborne 2017). In other words, co-creation is a process where citizens and public organizations work together to deal with societal problems. Members of the community, or citizens, are regarded as relevant partners who have specific resources and competences, which are valuable for providing public services. The process of co-creation will create interactions and a dynamic relationship (Osborne Radnor and Strokosch 2016). According to this concept, the parents and community members will be included in the management process. The addressing of issues or resolving of



problems will be shared by both the service provider (municipality) and service receivers (parents and community members).

Conclusion

Based on this analysis of the basic requirements for administrative management, the management of preschool centers for early childhood education under the jurisdiction of Khon Kaen Municipality is reasonably effective. This study indicates that the decentralization of education to local administration bodies, such as the municipality, has the potential to develop high quality public services. However, certain issues are worth considering to improve the status quo: 1) parent and community participation should manifest in various forms, not only cultural activities, 2) communication channels between teachers and parents and networking among parents should be improved, 3) environmental development should be undertaken for better sanitation, child health, and aesthetic reasons, 4) better networking should occur between higher educational institutes in the localities and the municipality office, for the better training and continuity of personnel and other aspects of center development, and 5) visions and policy schemes should be shared with parents and the community.

However, KKM would need to develop mechanisms to facilitate and monitor the functions of such a program. KKM should also develop a database concerning parents and community members' expertise and experience for the future deployment of supplementary activities and training programs as well as establish information sharing platform among parents (Lim and Cho 2019). The networking between and among parents via social media should be employed.

KKM appears to be planning to improve the quality of educational institutes under its jurisdiction. Consequently, a network between KKM and higher educational institutes in the areas should help support the personnel development and the evaluation of the outcomes of children. This is because in preschool, measurement and evaluation for child development can be conducted with a whole cohort. Child development should also be studied at the individual level. Involving the expertise of higher education institutes in measurement and evaluation techniques should be one of the key indicators for student development and be a value added aspect for preschool centers. And also there should also be a programme of collaborative research between the centers and higher educational institutes in the areas of instructional quality systems, which requires shared aims, shared assessment tools, shared instructional strategies, active collaboration, routine public inspection of practices, and accountability on the part of all involved parties.

Ethical approval

This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by any of the authors.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.



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