A COMPARISON OF CURRICULAR PRACTICES IN CHINESE KINDERGARTENS: THE INFLUENCE OF CURRICULUM REFORM

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SUMMARY

China launched a top-down curriculum reform in kindergartens in the 1980s. In order to examine the influence of this reform, this study compared the similarities and differences in curricular practices in kindergartens with different sponsoring bodies in Shanxi province. Altogether, 26 principals and 95 teachers in 50 classrooms from 26 kindergartens participated in the study. Principals and teachers completed questionnaires and were interviewed and kindergartens were observed. Results indicated that kindergartens in Shanxi have made great progress in the arrangement of indoor space, arranging the schedule and allocating attention to individual needs. Kindergartens under local education bureaux and work units were significantly better than kindergartens under town governments in these aspects. But kindergartens with different sponsoring bodies still have not attained the reform objectives in terms of teacher-child interactions and the organization of curricular activities. There was a relation between resource availability and curricular practice and the influences of the macro culture and educational institutions on curricular practice are discussed.

RÉSUMÉ

La Chine a lancé une réforme de haut en bas du programme pour les maternelles dans les annés 1980. Visant à examiner l'impact de cette réforme, cette recherche a comparé des similitudes et différences sous l'aspect de la pratique du programme dans des maternelles sous la tutelle des institutions tutrices dans la province de Shanxi. En total, 26 directeurs et 95 enseignants des 50 classes dans 26 maternelles ont été considerés dans la recherche. Les directeurs et enseignants ont répondu une enquête écrite et ils ont participé dans une interview tant que les maternelles ont été observées. Le résultat de la recherche montre que les maternelles en Shanxi ont fait de grands progrès concernant la distribution de l'espace intérieur, le calendrier et l'attention aux besoins individuels des enfants. Les maternelles gérés par des bureaux d´éducation locale et des unités de travail sont supérieurs sensiblement que les maternelles gérés par les bourgs et communes concernant ces aspects. Mais les maternelles sous la tutelle des institutions tutrices différentes sont loin du but de la réforme aux égards de l'interaction avec les enfants et de l'organisation des activités en classe. Il y avait une relation entre les ressources disponibles et la pratique du programme, et les auteurs ont des discussions sur les influences de la macro-culture et les institutions éducationnelles sur la pratique du programme.

RESUMEN

A partir de los finales de los años ochenta del siglo XX, en China se ha iniciado la reforma de arriba abajo para los cursos de kindergarten. Este estudio realizó una comparación de diferencias y semejanzas de las prácticas escolares entre las guarderías infantiles de distintos sistemas en la provincia Shanxi con objeto de evaluar los efectos de dicha reforma. Se hizo la observación y estimación en 50 clases de 26 guarderías infantiles y un

cuestionario para 26 directivos y 95 profesores. Los resultados mostraban que las clases objeto de la investigación habían tenido bastante avance en la construcción ambiental, el arreglo del horario y la atención a las demandas individuales de los ñinos, pero todavía existía distancia a la meta de la reforma en los aspectos como interacción entre profesores e infantes y organización de actividades escolares. Las guarderías infantiles administradas por autoridades educativas y unidades empresariales e institucionales mostraban mayores ventajas que las rurales en varios aspectos escolares y recursos adquisitivos. En el fin, los autores discuten los impactos de la macrocultura y la de la institución en la práctica y reforma escolar de las guarderías infantiles.

KEYWORDS: Kindergarten, Curriculum Reform, Curricular Practice, Funding and Governance

INTRODUCTION

THE CURRICULUM REFORM

In China, the term 'kindergarten' typically refers to full-day programmes serving children ranging in age from 3 to 6 years. These programmes provide child care and prepare children for primary school. Soon after the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the kindergarten curriculum was based on the subject-specific teaching model of the former Soviet Union, which emphasized the systematic transmission of subject matter through teacher-led group instruction. This model was scaled up at a national level in China and was teacher-centred, textbook-focused and classroom-based (Liu, Pan & Sun, 2004; Wang, 2004). Observations conducted in the late 1980s (Li, 1991; Shi, 1992) revealed that in most classrooms, children did the same thing at the same time and there were few small group activities and few opportunities for free play.

After the implementation of the open-door policy, there was an increased awareness of human rights and early childhood education theories and practices from the West were introduced to China. Hence, early childhood educators in China began to consciously and critically reflect on the kindergarten curricular practices in the country (Liu, Pan & Sun, 2004; Shi, 1992; Wei, 1986). Chinese early childhood experts in higher education institutes, in collaboration with practitioners in kindergartens, trialled a new bottom-up curriculum model (Ding, 1987; Zhao & Tang, 1988). The issue of the *Regulations on Kindergarten Education Practice- Trial Version* (National Education Commission, 1989) symbolized the beginning of the top-down curriculum reform led by the central government. To further the reform, the Ministry of Education (renamed from National Education Commission) issued the *Guidelines for Kindergarten Education Practice- Trial Version* as a supplement in 2001. These two policy documents legitimized the educational ideologies and related practices about 'respecting children, 'active learning', 'teaching for individual learning needs', 'play-based teaching and learning', 'teaching through daily life in kindergartens' and quality kindergarten education (Liu & Feng, 2005).

The kindergarten education system in China also experienced significant changes in funding and governance during the curriculum reform. In order to meet the needs of industrialization and urbanization and to overcome the difficulty of

weak financial capacity at the beginning of modernization, the Chinese government established public kindergartens through local educational bureaux as demonstration or model kindergartens to spread best practices. At the same time, the government encouraged work units (including government agencies and government-sponsored enterprises and institutions), non-government organizations and private sector to set up kindergartens. Educational authorities were responsible for policies, laws and regulations, educational plans and contents, and methods for all kindergartens. On the other hand, the sponsors were responsible for issues related to funding, staffing, and facilities of kindergartens (MoE, 1956).

In the mid-1990s, the development of a market economy led to many changes. Government agencies and government-sponsored enterprises and institutions reduced or stopped funding to schools, kindergartens and hospitals and other services. Meanwhile, the central government issued several policies to encourage the social sector to set up educational organizations of different types and at different levels. The MoE began collecting data on privately-funded education in the *Educational Statistics Yearbook of China* in 1994. Further, the *Law of Promoting Private Education* was approved in 2002 and allowed for-profit private educational organizations. As a result of these encouraging policies, the number of private kindergartens has continuously increased since the 1990s, while there has been a decline in the number of kindergartens operated by local educational bureaux and work units. According to the *National Educational Statistics Bulletin 2006* published by the MoE, the number of private kindergartens had grown to over 75.000 and 34.3% young children were enrolled in these kindergartens. However, the situation of private kindergartens varies greatly across provinces and cities because of different economic levels and local policies.

Influence of curriculum reform

Concerns about the reform have centred on the interpretation and dissemination of policy texts and the notion mobilization (Department of Basic Education, 2003; Hu, 1988; Li, 1996; Liu, 1995a, 1996; Zhou, Yang, Lu & Liu, 2003) rather than on its implementation and progress. Three types of research investigations have been undertaken to examine the influence of the curriculum reform.

The first category examined its influence through measuring the quality of current curricular practice. The study conducted by Xiang and her colleagues has been recognised for their methodological rigour and comprehensiveness. Xiang (1995) studied the quality of organization of activities, teachers' behaviour and communication with parents and child development in 407 kindergartens of 6 provinces, and found that about half kindergartens observed had learning centres but the play materials provided were very limited; children spent less than 10% of their time in play and had few free-choice activities: teachers mainly transmitted knowledge and skills.

The second category of studies considered the influence of the reform on practitioners' educational beliefs and behaviours. Zhu and Zhou (2005) found that

kindergarten directors' beliefs are consistent with the principles of the *Global guidelines for early childhood education and care in the 21st century*, but there are still some discrepancies between their beliefs and behaviours. Liu (2007) examined the educational beliefs and behaviours of 195 teachers in 64 classrooms using criteria based on policy documents and found that teachers, scholars and managers agreed on what they thought were the key features of the reform but teachers' interpretations were very different from those of scholars and managers. There was a big gap between teachers' beliefs and behaviours. The findings revealed the misinterpretations and misunderstandings of key concepts of the educational reform by practitioners in the top-down reform.

The third category of studies examined the influence of the reform by studying young children's perceptions of the curriculum. For example, Liu's (1995b, 2005) research analyzed 5- and 6-year-old children's perceptions of play and found that group lessons remained the main reference used by young children to judge the nature and meaning of activities in kindergartens. However, the activity in the learning centres, which has been a main method of organizing children's activities in kindergartens advocated by the top-down reform since 1989, was found to be a new criterion in young children's judgments. These findings implied that the learning centres had become increasingly popular in kindergartens.

The above-mentioned three types of research have shown that kindergartens have made great progress in the provision of physical facilities and that modern educational ideas have been popularized among practitioners. However, there is still a gap between practitioners' ideas and practices.

PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY

Previous research was based on a common assumption that the transformation of teachers' practices was brought about by transformation in their beliefs. When teachers did not show expected behaviours, it was presumed that they did not assimilate advocated ideologies into implicit beliefs. Such logic simplified the relationship between ideas and actions, and neglected the influences of institutional factors on teachers' practice. An institution has a set of rules governing the resources allocation and defines responsibility and rights (Powell & DiMaggio, 1991; Guo & Ma, 2007). Thus, kindergartens of different sectors might provide access to different economic, social and human resources and provide different conditions for curricular practice and reform.

The objective of this study was to compare the quality of curricular practice in kindergartens with different sponsoring bodies. Similarities or differences, between them would provide some information about the factors influencing the curricular practice and reform.

METHOD

SAMPLE

To highlight the variations among kindergartens with different sponsoring bodies, we studied kindergartens within one region-Shanxi province. Economic and educational development in Shanxi is not as advanced as Beijing and Shanghai. However, it is not as underdeveloped as Gansu and Guizhou. In Shanxi, the percentage of private kindergartens rose to 22.63% in 2006 from 15.77% in 2004. We purposively sampled five districts with different levels of economic and educational development in the north, south and central Shanxi.

Random sampling was used to select nine kindergartens sponsored by the local educational bureau (KLEB), nine sponsored by work units (KWU), four kindergartens sponsored by the town government (KTG) and four private kindergartens (PK). The principal of each kindergarten was asked to recommend two classrooms for 4-5-year-olds and 5-6-year-olds. In total, 26 principals and 95 teachers in 50 classrooms in 26 kindergartens participated in the study.

MEASURES

Quality of kindergarten curricular practice

Quality of curricular practice was measured on a 5-point rating scale, which was translated from the ideologies and practice embodied in the *Regulations on Kindergarten Education Practice-Trial Version* (1989) and the *Guidelines for Kindergarten Education Practice-Trial Version* (2001), and consisted of four subscales, 'Creation of physical environment', 'Interaction', 'Daily routine' and 'Curriculum'. The inter-rater reliability of items was acceptable (Kappa = .63-.86, p <.001). Factor analysis showed that three factors of 'interaction and curriculum', 'routine care' and 'physical environment' accounted for 66.23% of the variance (Liu & Pan, 2008).

The observers interviewed teachers and children to gather information to supplement or verify what they observed.

Resources of staff and kindergarten

The kindergarten principals were asked to complete questionnaires on the funding source and structure, the standard of parent fee, their first and highest educational level and age. Teachers completed questionnaires about group size, teacher-child ratio, teachers' first and highest educational level, age and salary.

PROCEDURE

First we familiarized all individuals involved in data collection with the instruments and the procedures. Once their rating of videotaped curricular practice reached a predetermined level of agreement (r = .95), data collection in classrooms took place.

Five observation teams, each team had two postgraduate and doctoral students from Beijing Normal University and two pedagogues from the local educational authority of Shanxi province, did on-site observation ratings and

videotaped the activities simultaneously. The observations in each classroom began with the young children's arrival in the morning and continued until their departure in the afternoon. At night, the team checked and discussed the data collected item by item and came up with an agreed score for each item.

The observation teams distributed questionnaires to the principal and two teachers of classrooms when they arrived and collected the completed questionnaires when they left for the day. Principals' and teachers' response rates were 100% and 91.35%, respectively.

RESULTS

DIFFERENCE OF QUALITY OF CURRICULAR PRACTICE IN KINDERGARTENS

We assumed that a mean total scale score below 3 represented poor quality, scores from 3 to 3.99 reflected minimal quality and scores above 4 represented excellent quality. Using these criteria, 94% classrooms had poor quality, and only about 6% classrooms reached minimal level. The overall quality of kindergartens as a whole was not good. One-way ANOVA implied that KLEB and KWU scored significantly higher than those KTG in creation of physical environment and routine care, but there was no significant difference among kindergartens with different sponsoring bodies in interactions and curriculum.

TABLE 1: Mean Difference in Subscales among Kindergartens of Different Sectors

Subscales	Types of kindergartens (I-J)	Mean Difference (I-J)	Sig.
Physical environment	KLEB- KTG	.705*	.011
	KWU- KTG	.550*	.040
Interactions		No	
Routine care	KLEB- KTG	.531*	.023
	KWU - KTG	.620*	.013
Curriculum		No	

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

Creation of physical environment

One-way ANOVA showed that the KLEB scored significantly higher than KWU and KTG's in play materials. More than half classrooms in the latter two sectors had a small quantity and few kinds of materials, and the tasks prescribed by materials were inappropriate for young children's developmental levels and learning needs. Though KLEB met the basic requirements, classrooms did not replace materials according to children's learning activities and interests in a timely manner.

The KLEB and KWU performed better than those KTG in indoor space. All classrooms of KTG did not have enough indoor space or facilities to adjust temperature, ventilation or lights, but more than 70% classrooms in the former two sectors did.

There was no significant difference among kindergartens with different sponsoring bodies in the arrangement of indoor space, furniture for routine care

and learning, child-related display, and provisions for personal and professional needs of staff. In each sector, more than half the classrooms set at least three fixed and clearly defined interest corners, and the size of space within the corners was relatively appropriate, but the locations of many corners were inappropriate for young children's activities or teachers' class management. For example, the reading corner and drawing corner were not close to windows and had poor natural light. About 30% of whole classrooms did not have any interest corners.

More than half classrooms had visual displays appropriate for young children but the contents of the display were not closely related to the activities within classrooms. Also, they did not provide any clean soft furnishings or materials for children and did not have easily accessible toilet facilities for adults.

Interactions

One-way ANOVA showed that the KLEB and KWU scored significantly higher than KTG in interactions among teachers and between parents and teachers. In more than 60% classrooms of KTG, teachers respected colleagues and parents, but seldom communicated basic information about the children, and parents had little opportunity to participate in classroom activities. In approximately 70% classrooms sponsored by the KLEB, KWU and PK, teachers at least exchanged information with colleagues and parents about children's daily life and health. Some shared information about children's learning and development through multiple ways except for daily dialogue, and made educational plans together at a fixed time of each week.

There was no significant difference between kindergartens with different sponsoring bodies in teacher-children interactions and interactions among children. Seventy percent of teachers allowed and encouraged children's interaction with peers. Half of the teachers could interact with individual children on daily basis, but such interactions were mostly in the form of inspection of their work. About 26% teachers mainly interacted with large groups of children and focused on discipline management.

Routine care

There were no significant differences among kindergartens with different sponsoring bodies in discipline, meals and nap. More than half the teachers in each sector usually established most rules that were to be followed by the children, and asked children to follow them without offering explanations for them. They also dealt with children's behaviour problems by focusing on their emotions. For example, when children shouted aloud within the classroom, teachers did not say 'Do not do that as you will disturb others'. Instead they made comments such as '"Teachers do not like children shouting aloud'. Although kindergartens provided nutritious meals and sleep facilities to meet children's basic physical needs; the atmosphere in half the classrooms during meal time was not very pleasant. For example, teachers often made comments such as 'Do not talk, be quiet and eat' and some even used meal time to criticize those who broke the rules during activity time. In addition, children's individual differences in needs for sleep were not given

enough attention. For example, a child was not allowed to nap even though he/she was feeling sleepy.

In schedule and toileting, KLEB scored significantly better than those in KTG. 41.2% classrooms of KLEB balanced the time for activities of different types, but often let children repeat same play during transition time; and provided toileting facilities encouraging children's independence and protecting children's privacy, for example, each toilet was separated by a partition and had a door. But 57.1% classrooms of KTG couldn't meet these minimal requirements.

Curriculum

One-way ANOVA showed that KLEB scored significantly higher than those of KWU in free play, language and society. More than half the classrooms of KLEB provided a total of at least one hour of free play and the opportunity for autonomous choice. But about 40% teachers didn't know how to facilitate children's free play. They either let children alone, or imposed their own ideas on children. Up to 73.4% classrooms in KWU neither provided enough play time nor appropriate facilitation.

About 40% teachers in KLEB set up a special book corner and provided some books for children to read freely, encouraged children to listen and speak in various activities, and communicated with individual children. However, about 80% teachers in KWU, and 60% in PK and KTG seldom consciously read books, told stories or sang nursery songs together with children. Most teachers talk directed to the group of children and not to individual children.

In items of art and music, 87.5% of classrooms of PK, and 58.8% and 61.1% of classrooms in KLEB and KWU, respectively set up special art and music corners and provided appropriate materials, but teachers did not consciously guide children to experience works of different styles and encourage them to express themselves in their own way. About 71.4% of classrooms in KTG provided few materials and stressed learning basic skills through group instruction. The results of one-way ANOVA implied that PK scored significantly higher than those KTG in this item.

In items of health, science and mathematics, there were no significant differences among kindergartens with different sponsoring bodies. As a whole, 52% of classrooms provided at least one hour of outdoor play and allowed children to use outdoor facilities freely. However, teachers did not typically give attention to children's individual needs in terms of physical development and psychological health. The majority of classrooms provided few materials for children's' scientific and mathematical exploration and teachers taught the planned contents by telling and modelling, even when they were dealing with small groups. About 40% of the classrooms provided some materials for free exploration and added a short period of manipulation into group instruction.

TABLE 2: Mean Difference in Items among Kindergartens of Different Sectors

Items	Sectors (I-J)	Mean difference (I-J)	Sig.
Indoor space	KTG- KLEB	-1.51*	.005
	KTG- KWU	-1.52*	.004
Arrangement of indoor space		No	
Furniture for routine care and learning		No	
Play materials	KLEB- KWU	.62*	.039
	KTG- KLEB	-1.24*	.003
	KTG- KWU	-1.25*	.008
Child-related display		No	
Provisions for personal and professional needs of staff		No	
Interactions among teachers	PK- KLEB	-.66*	.044
	KTG- KLEB	-.92*	.012
	KTG- KWU	-1.00*	.007
	KTG- PK	-1.58*	.000
Teachers-children interactions		No	
Interactions among children		No	
Teachers-parents interactions	KTG- KLEB	-.88*	.011
	KTG- KWU	-.67*	.049
Schedule	KWU- KLEB	-.73*	.011
Discipline		No	
Greeting/ departing	KTG- KLEB	-1.00*	.006
Meals		No	
Nap		No	
Toileting	KTG- KWU	-1.06*	.007
Free play	KLEB- KWU	.68*	.033
Health		No	
Language	KLEB- KWU	.85*	.013
Society	KLEB- KWU	.69*	.048
Science		No	
Mathematics		No	
Art and Music	PK- KTG	1.18*	.020

* The mean difference is significant at the .05 level.

RESOURCES CONTRIBUTING TO THE DIFFERENCE IN QUALITY OF CURRICULAR PRACTICE

We examined the extent to which staff and kindergarten resources contributed significantly to the differences in curricular practices across kindergartens with different sponsoring bodies.

Multivariate stepwise regression showed that (a) among selected resources of staff and kindergarten, teachers' highest educational level was the most critical resource to the quality of curricular practice, which was the first variable entering regression models and the single variable for routine care and curriculum; (b) teacher-child ratio and group size entered the model of the overall quality, physical environment and interactions, but had no influence on the quality of routine care

and curriculum; and (c) parent fee only entered the model for physical environment (see Table 3).

TABLE 3: Summary of Results from Multivariate Stepwise Regression Relating Resources and Quality of Curriculum Practice

Quality	Sequence of factors	R^2	ΔR^2	F change	Sig.	Std. Beta	t	Sig.
Overall quality	Teacher's highest educational level	.351	.351	22.164	.000	.555	4.676	.000
	Children-teacher ratio	.445	.095	6.821	.013	-.310	-2.612	.013
Physical environment	Teachers' highest educational level	.256	.256	14.121	.001	.478	3.827	.000
	Group size	.377	.121	7.791	.008	-.301	-2.465	.018
	Parent fee	.450	.072	5.114	.029	.282	2.262	.029
Interactions	Teachers' highest educational level	.263	.263	14.658	.000	.567	4.588	.000
	Group size	.401	.138	9.199	.004	-.375	-3.033	.004
Routine care	Teachers' highest educational level	.281	.281	16.023	.000	.530	4.003	.000
Curriculum	Teachers' highest educational level	.258	.258	14.269	.001	.508	3.777	.001

DISTRIBUTION OF CRITICAL RESOURCES AMONG KINDERGARTENS

Table 4 shows that the majority of teachers in KLEB and KWU had a two-year college or bachelor degree, most teachers in KTG only had a vocational school diploma. One-way ANOVA revealed that teacher's highest educational level in KLEB and KWU was significantly higher than those of KTG, but there were no significant differences among the other types of kindergartens.

The group size of classrooms observed in Shanxi was generally large, and about 44% of classrooms had more than 35 children and one even had 59 children. In this aspect, KLEB was significantly higher than KTG, and there were no significant differences among the other types of kindergartens.

The teacher-child ratio in 60-75% classrooms in KLEB, KWU and PK was at the level of 1: 13-17, but 1:18 in KTG. The ratio in KTG was significantly higher than other sectors.

Quite a large part of the financial input of KLEB and KWU came directly or indirectly from governmental funding, but KTG only gained little governmental funding, and PK entirely relied on parents' fees.

Parents' fees in KTG observed were less than 90 RMB per month and significantly lower than that of KLEB and KWU. The fees in KWU was significantly higher than PK, but had no significant difference with KLEB.

The results above indicated that the pattern of difference among kindergartens of different sectors in terms of resources reflected those of difference in quality of curricular practice.

TABLE 4. Distribution of Critical Resources among Kindergartens of Different Sectors

	KLEB	KWU	PK	KTG
Teachers' highest educational level				
Vocational school	3.7%	6.7%	58.3%	62.5%
Two-year college	55.6%	63.3%	16.7%	37.5%
Bachelor	40.7%	30.0%	25.0%	0%
Teacher-children ratio during observation*				
Minimum-Maximum	1: 12.00-27.50	1: 8.67-24.50	1: 8.67-20.50	1: 13.00-34.00
1: 8-12	.0%	16.7%	12.5%	.0%
1:13-17	62.5%	72.2%	75.0%	25.0%
1:18-22	37.5%	11.1%	12.5%	37.5%
1: >22	.0%	.0%	.0%	37.5%
Group size during observation*				
Minimum-Maximum	28-55	19-59	26-44	26-42
≤25	.0%	27.8%	.0%	.0%
26-30	12.5%	11.1%	12.5%	50.0%
31-35	31.3%	38.9%	37.5%	37.5%
36-40	18.8%	.0%	12.5%	.0%
>40	37.5%	22.2%	37.5%	12.5%
Source of financial input of kindergartens				
Government funding	53.18%	34.76%	.00%	5.00%
Parents' fee	46.15%	59.00%	100.00%	95.00%
Standard of parents' fee				
Minimum-Maximum	60.00-285.0	65.00-295.00	60.00-130.00	18.00-90.00
≤90	25.0%	11.1%	25.0%	100.0%
91-180	62.5%	33.3%	75.0%	.0%
>180	12.5%	55.6%	.0%	.0%

* The levels were classified according to requirements of Standards for Establishment of Full-Day and Residential Kindergartens-Trial Version (1987) and the real situation of kindergartens in Shan-Xi.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated similarities and differences in educational practice in kindergartens with different sponsoring. The results indicated that kindergartens observed had made much progress, compared with the findings from studies conducted in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Li, 1991; Shi, 1992; Xiang, 1995). As a whole, many classrooms observed included at least three fixed interest corners and allocated about one hour of free play every day. Some teachers paid attention to children's individual interests and needs and gave children opportunities for autonomous exploration during play and group instruction. These results are consistent with those from similar recent studies (Li, 2006; Zhu, 2006).

DIFFERENCES IN QUALITY OF CURRICULAR PRACTICE AND RESOURCES AVAILABLE ACROSS KINDERGARTENS

We found significant differences between kindergartens with different sponsoring bodies. The KLEB performed best on many items, and then KWU, next KP, and the KTG scored the lowest. These differences were mainly in aspects of basic physical provision and the schedule arrangement, and largely between KLEB and KTG. What factors account for the differences in curricular practices among kindergartens with different sponsoring bodies?

According to Resources Dependency Theory, the resources provided by an environment are necessary for the survival and development of organizations (Pfeffer, 1978, 1992). Within the current framework, resources available are different for kindergartens and teachers operating under different sponsoring bodies (Cai et al., 2006; Pan et al, 2008; Zhang, 2000). This research revealed that the pattern of difference in quality of curricular practice was consistent with difference in critical resources available among kindergartens of different sectors.

The KLEB and KWU had relatively stable funding and more teachers with higher educational levels. The local educational bureau is in a position to require these kindergartens to implement curricular practices advocated because of public funding. Though some KWU experienced lack of funding from sponsors during the economic institutional reform, they were able to establish a good relationship with the local educational bureau, free property rental, a good reputation and physical provision good enough for attracting high parents' fees. However, KTG mostly depended on parents' fees, because the town government, at the lowest level within the administrative system, had no financial capacity. The economic and social ecology of KTG also reduced their possibilities of charging high fees and thereby attracting more highly qualified teachers. Therefore, the KTG performed the lowest on many items.

The PK functioned according to the market and totally relied on parents' fees, and the local educational bureau had no rights to supervise them to administer curricular advocated in policy texts, because there is no public funding and thereby no financial accountability to the government (Wen, 2008). The PK usually provided educational services according to benefits, not quality. But the benefits of kindergarten education were implicit with long-term effects and difficult for parents to grasp. Therefore, it was unusual to find these kindergartens providing academic curriculum or special training classes, such as dancing, drawing, mathematics and Chinese Pin-Yin, in order to attract parents. Teachers in PK did not enjoy the same status, welfare benefits, and opportunities for promotion to a technical post as those formally registered in KLEB and KWU (Pang et al, 2002). The PK could charge relatively high parents' fees and provide good physical provisions, but had no stable teachers with high-qualification.

The lower economic development in Shanxi influenced the amount of government funding and level of parents' fees and kindergartens in different

sectors generally increased the enrollment to increase funding. Thus, kindergartens in all sectors in this research had large group sizes.

In order to improve the quality of curricular practice of kindergartens with different sponsoring bodies, the government should consider: its role in the allocation of limited resources efficiently and fairly among kindergartens; how to define and measure accountability in public kindergartens; the regulation of the cost and quality of private kindergartens; and the creation of an efficient and fair kindergarten management systems.

COMMON PROBLEMS ACROSS KINDERGARTENS

The actual practice lagged behind what was advocated by the reform, especially on aspects of teacher-children interactions and curriculum as well as other items closely related to curriculum. Kindergartens demonstrated no significant differences in these aspects. A large number of classrooms retained the paddy-field configuration, and group instruction and group activities predominated. The episodes of teacher-child interactions were more directed to the collective group and focused on discipline management. Even in those classrooms with better scores, many teachers often encouraged children to choose activities on their own at the start, but tended to tell children what and how to do during the process of activities. Even if the teacher-child ratio is reduced, teachers of different educational levels were still inclined to organize the activities by following group instructions. This illustrated why the group size and teachers-child ratio did not greatly influence the quality of routine care and curriculum in this study.

Why do problems remain in teachers' interactions with children and organization of activities even after two decades of reform? Why do these problems exist among teachers of different educational levels and kindergartens with different sponsoring bodies? To find realistic answers, the macro cultural context should be taken into account despite the limitations of the top-down reform model and teachers' transformation of teaching beliefs and improvement of teaching skills.

Culture is a complexity of shared norms and values, and various scholars have described different characteristics of Chinese culture (Zhang & Cheng, 1990). Liang (1987), a famous philosopher and social activist in 20th century China, maintained that Chinese culture was an ethics based culture, in which identity of an individual was not developed by his/her rights, but by his/her responsibilities and obligations for others in the social structure and interactions. His/her rights were not claimed by him-/herself, but imbued by others. Some scholars asserted ming-fen was the essential of Chinese traditional culture, in which the positions and roles in the social structure determined an individual's obligations and rights (Liang, 1986; Qu, 1981). Therefore, individuality was oppressed and compliance to power and authority was promoted.

This approach to social interaction has influenced education and teaching. When teachers were students, their parents and teachers did not treat them as

individuals with subjectivity. When they worked as teachers, the dominant elites including scholars and managers, even in the process of dissemination of educational ideologies, attached much importance to enlightening them through written documents, journal articles reports, speeches and meetings etc., and focused more on their transformation of teaching beliefs and skills, and less on empowerment. Liu and Pan (2008) found that when questioned about their practice, teachers could negotiate confidently with and persuade parents or colleagues to accept their ideas and practice, but would accept the managers' and experts' suggestions and adjust their practice accordingly. Within the hierarchical social structure, managers and scholars, the representatives of power and authority treated kindergarten teachers as lacking knowledge and capacity. In turn, faced with dependent and naive young children, teachers behave as representatives of power and knowledge authority within classrooms. Clearly, the interactions between teachers and young children reflect the social interactions occurring within the macro society.

This does not mean that the concept of quality kindergarten education legitimized and normalized by the curriculum reform is not appropriate for the situation of China, but reveals the complexity of culture and related implications regarding shifts between traditional and modern educational ideas and practices.

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