

Challenges of Preschool Education Development in Chinese Poverty Counties: Stakeholders' Perspective

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Abstract

Due to the historical roots and current political system, preschool education development in China is extremely uneven. At the bottom of preschool education development pyramid, there are 592 national poverty-stricken counties, all of which are in remote and rural areas. From the perspective of stakeholders, based on the interviews with 114 participants from county F which focused on “the challenge for the development of preschool education”, it is concluded that the main challenges for poverty counties in developing preschool education consists of serious shortage of funds, low qualified teachers, unclear functions of government and the crisis of educational quality. It is believed that the central government's active intervention, the service functions of local government, the communication between kindergarten and family and teachers' self-development should be the right way to better development in the future.

Key words: Preschool education development; Challenge; Stakeholders; Poverty areas

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INTRODUCTION

In July 2010, Chinese government promulgated “Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)”,

specifically focused on developing preschool education and set the overall goals as “to universalize one year preschool education, basically universalize two years preschool education, and regionally universalize three years preschool education by 2020” (China's ministry of education, 2010). In November 2010, Chinese government promulgated “The Several Advices for Current Preschool Education Development”, which proposed ten specific initiatives, aiming at promoting the rapid development of preschool education nationwide. But due to historical roots and the current political system, China's local economic development is extremely unbalanced. This unbalance is also fully reflected in pre-school education. In 2009, the enrollment rate for three years preschool education in economically developed cities is above two times than in backward rural areas (Jiang, 2013). There are 592 national poverty-stricken counties in China. All of them are in remote and backward rural areas. Those counties are at the bottom of the pyramid of the national preschool education development. Within the last three years, preschool education has experienced astonishing development in those counties, the enrollment rate and number of teachers increased significantly.

Some scholars expressed deep concern about sacrificing quality for rapid growth. For example, Liuyan's research showed that in some rural kindergartens, one class accommodates more than 90 children, the quality of preschool education was low, and showed a tendency of treating children as primary school pupils (Cheng, 2014). Some researchers thought that in the disadvantaged areas, the plight of the preschool education development included the contempt of local government, low quality of teachers, and poor physical conditions of kindergarten (Li, 2011; Ma, 2012). Analyzing education development with stakeholder's perspective is effective to find problems exposed during the development in a more comprehensive way, so as to service the education decision in the future. Some example studies included research on key

elements of universalistic preschool education (Ashley, 2009), study about present situation of kindergarten execution (William, 2006; Irvine et al., 2013; Grisham & Hallam, 2004), study of stakeholders' awareness and understanding of education (Sevimli-Celik et al., 2011; Vitale, 2011). In general, the studies of challenges for rapid growth of preschool education in poverty areas in China are far from enough. Among the limited studies, the majority is theoretical analysis; there is almost no field-based investigation. So, in this study, we try to use stakeholders' perspective to find out "the challenges for the development of preschool education", in doing so, to establish an empirical foundation for future research in this field and provide reasonable suggestions for policy arrangement.

1. METHODS

1.1 Sample Selection

Adopting the method of case study, taking one poverty county as example and using interview to collect data, this study aimed at current difficulties and problems in

preschool education in the poverty-stricken counties. The sampling work was divided into two steps:

Firstly, adopting purposive sampling technique, county F was chosen as the sample area. County F is a national poverty-stricken county in western China with 4,087 square kilometers and a population of nearly 1.06 million. Within this county, there are 340 kindergartens with 23,533 children (6 public kindergartens, 243 public affiliated kindergartens, and 91 private kindergartens) and the total number of staff is 1,395. The enrollment rate increased by 8% per year within the last three years, and the current enrollment rate for three years is close to 80%.

Secondly, stakeholders are divided into four categories: government preschool education administration management personnel (including policy makers); kindergarten managers (including other responsible person, such as the private kindergarten owner); kindergarten teachers; parents (including grandparents). Using stratified random sampling method, 114 people were invited as samples, including 6 government management staff, 24 kindergarten managers; 36 teachers and 48 parents.

Table 1
Sample Information

Category	Numbers	Distribution	Code
Government personnel	6	2 leaders, 2 staff, 2 policy makers	A ₁ -A ₆
Kindergarten managers	24	3 from public independent kindergartens, 12 from public affiliated kindergartens, 9 from private kindergartens	L ₁ -L ₂₄
Kindergarten teachers	36	4 from public independent kindergartens, 18 from public affiliated kindergartens, 14 from private kindergartens	T ₁ -T ₃₆
Parents	48	6 from public independent kindergartens, 24 from public affiliated kindergartens, 18 from private kindergartens	P ₁ -P ₄₈

1.2 Data Collection and Analysis

Interview is the main method to collect data, and grounded theory method was used to analyze data. First, focusing on "the challenge of kindergarten education development", unstructured interview was carried out by face-to-face, telephone and QQ (a popular chatting software in China). Second, convert all the recordings to write text, and build database according to the participant number respectively. Third, code and analyze data in the way of grounded theory from initial "individual concept category" to "public concept category" then to the "key concept category".

2. RESULT ANALYSES

2.1 Government Management Personnel's Perspectives

Government management personnel mentioned 9 problems in preschool education development in poverty-stricken counties (as shown in Table 2). All the

Table 2
Government Management Personnel's Perspectives

Problems	Percent	N(total=6)
Shortage of fiscal funds	100%	6
Shortage of qualified teachers	83.3%	5
Teachers' salary is low	83.3%	5
Unreasonable expenditures	66.7%	4
Too big class size	66.7%	4
Ineffective cooperation between government agencies	50%	3
Government management personnel is not professional in ECE	50%	3
Development gap among different kindergarten is too big	50%	3
It is difficult to receive social donates	33.3%	2

participants ($n=6$) mention fiscal funds shortage. About 83.3 percent of participants ($n = 5$) have a deep concern for teachers, believing that qualified teachers are in short supply, and teachers' salary is totally low. As for expense expenditures, 66.7 percent of participants think the current condition is unreasonable. Other participants

express concern about class size (66.7%), management organization (50%), managerial personnel (50%), the development gap among different kindergarten (50%), etc..

In general, the government management personnel's perspectives can be classified into four aspects: funds, teachers, kindergarten and management. Funds include both the under-investment and the unreasonable expense. Teachers include both insufficient qualified human resources and teachers with low pay. The management problem consists of ineffective cooperation among government agencies and the management personnel's lack of professional knowledge about preschool education. Kindergarten problem includes oversize of class and imbalanced development.

2.2 Kindergarten Managers' Perspectives

Compared with government management staff, the viewpoint of kindergarten managers is more dispersed and complex. They propose the disadvantages including 16 problems, as shown in Table 3. Among these problems, more than half of the participants mention the difficulty of six aspects: shortage of funds (75%), shortage of teachers (75%), oversized class (66.7%), no autonomy in funds of public kindergarten (controlled by government) (62.5%),

Table 3
Kindergarten Managers' Perspectives

Problems	Percent	N(total=24)
Shortage of funds	75%	18
Shortage of teachers	75%	18
Oversized class	66.7%	16
No autonomy in funds of public kindergarten	62.5%	15
Low qualifications of teachers overall	54.1%	13
Frequent fluxion of teachers	50%	12
Big gap between different kindergartens in receiving government funding	45.8%	11
Teachers with low pay	41.7%	10
Enforceability of teacher training opportunity decision	41.7%	10
Potential safety hazard in kindergartens	37.5%	9
Child safety accident disputes	33.3%	8
No market-oriented pricing mechanism in private kindergarten fees (government dominant)	33.3%	8
Unreasonable teacher training schedule	33.3%	8
Un-objective and unfair kindergarten evaluation	29.2%	7
No guarantee in the legitimate rights and interests of private kindergarten teachers	25%	6
Kindergarten leaders should not be appointed by government	20.8%	5

the low qualifications of teachers overall (54.1%), and the frequent fluxion of teachers (50%).

In general, kindergarten managers' perspective also could be classified into four aspects: funds, teachers, government and management. Funds problems involve funding shortage, service price, and expense authority and so on. The problem about teachers is complicated, including teachers resources shortage, low qualification of teachers, frequent fluxion, low pay and unreasonable training arrangement, etc.. The government problem mainly involves the control of funds, price regulation and justice of management, etc.. The management problem mainly involves the class size and child safety problems.

2.3 Preschool Teachers' Perspectives

As for preschool education development in Poverty County, preschool teachers think the main problems include 15 aspects, as shown in Table 4. Over half of interviewed teachers think that there are 4 difficulties: low paid for teacher (80.6%), lack of teaching material (66.7%), oversized class (58.3%), teacher training fails to consider the differences among teachers (50%). It deserves to pay attention that high percentage of the subjects (80.6%) thinks that their wage is too low, namely, labor has not been paid in line with the expected return on revenue.

Table 4
Kindergarten Teachers' Perspectives

Problems	Percent	N(total=36)
Low paid for teacher	80.6%	29
Lack of teaching material	66.7%	24
Oversized class	58.3%	21
Teacher training fails to consider the differences among teachers	50%	18
Poor living conditions in kindergarten	47.2%	17
Teaching primary school curriculum in kindergarten	41.7%	15
Teacher training curriculum is too theoretical and far away from practice	38.9%	14
Teachers' salaries are unfair in different organizations	36.1%	13
Difficulty in communicate with parents	36.1%	13
Lack of operational evaluation criteria in educational activities	33.3%	12
The legitimate rights and interests of private kindergarten teachers cannot be protected	33.3%	12
Child safety incidents dispute	30.6%	11
Parents don't pick up their children on time	27.8%	10
Special children's needs cannot be meet	22.2%	8
Lack of training opportunities for new teachers	19.4%	7

Kindergarten teachers' views can be inducted to 4 parts: teacher, parent, training and curriculum. Problems linked with teachers are low payment, unfair payment, poor living condition, no protection of right and child safety incidents dispute, etc.. Problems linked with parents are communicative barriers; parents don't pick up their children on time. Problems linked with training are failing to consider the differences among teachers, lack of operational evaluation criteria educational activities and new teacher can't get trainee opportunist. Problems in curriculum are lacking in martial, to large scale of one class, lack of assessment standard, unmeet special children's demands.

2.4 Parents' Perspectives

As for the difficulties in preschool education development in poverty counties, interviewed parents believed there are 12 aspects, as shown in Table 5. The issue ranked first is the oversized class (47.9%). The second issue is that there is no school bus (43.8%). The third one is poor communication between teachers and parents (41.7%).

Table 5
Parents' Perspectives

Problems	Percent	N(total=48)
Oversized class	47.9%	23
No school bus	43.8%	21
Teachers rarely initiative communication with parents	41.7%	20
No lunch break room	39.6%	19
No teaching in reading , writing and calculation	39.6%	19
Outdoor activity space is small	35.4%	17
High fees	33.3%	16
The teacher's frequent changing	31.3%	15
Distance is too far	29.2%	14
No homework	25%	12
Other extra charge	18.8%	8
Teacher scold or corporal punish children	18.8%	8

On the issue of the challenges in developing preschool education in poverty counties, the views of parents fall into three categories: fees; environment and teachers. In terms of fees, the main problem is too high, asking for extra fees, etc.. In terms of environment, the size of class is too large, no available school bus, no room for taking a nap, too small outdoor playground, too far away from home, etc. As for the problem of teachers, the teachers rarely communicate actively with children's parents, they don't fulfill their duty of teaching how to read and calculate, and don't leave any homework for children, and they even often scold or punish kids physically.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 Funds: The Primary Problem in Developing Preschool Education in Poverty Counties

Funds are the basic guarantee of preschool education development. However, in poverty-stricken counties, the local economy has long been lower than the national average level, so the counties' financial income is not optimistic, which directly affects the government's public funding of kindergartens. Moreover, limited public funds mainly attribute to public kindergarten, private kindergartens can only obtain symbolic of a small amount of subsidy. It is also the main reason that many kindergarten managers (45.8%) said large differences to receive government funding for different kindergartens. Most government personnel (66.7%) consistent with this point of view, think the government public financial appropriation expenditure is not reasonable.

Because of the insufficient government finances, as well as the hardly social donations, most kindergarten managers (75%) said the budget of kindergartens is difficult. It is triggering a series of problems as different stakeholders mentioned, such as teachers' lower salary, insufficient number of teachers, poor teacher's qualifications, and higher parents costs. At the same time, the kindergarten is very difficult to have liquidity to improve school conditions, kindergarten classes size is too big, no school bus, no lunch break room, outdoor activities areas are too small, lack of teaching materials, exist safe troubles in kindergarten and so on are closely related to the lack of funding.

3.2 Teachers: The Key Factor of Developing Preschool Education in Poverty Counties

Teacher is the core resource for the development of preschool education. But kindergartens in poverty-stricken counties are obviously insufficient to have enough qualified teachers; as many as 75% kindergarten managers said they are in a shortage of teachers. The teachers shortage is also one of the reasons lead to the oversized class. In addition, the managers and parents also concerned the frequent teacher flow. Shortage of teachers directly restrict teacher-child interactive activities, and the frequent flows of teachers are easy to damage young children's emotional development.

It is worried that the whole preschool teachers' quality is lower in poverty-stricken counties. 83.3% of government regulators mentioned the shortage of qualified preschool teachers. Furthermore, teachers and parents have bigger problems in communication and cooperation, 41.7% of parents said teachers rarely initiate communication with them, and 36.1% of teachers think that there are communication barriers with parents. In addition, there are 18.8% of parents believe that it is existed the phenomenon of teachers scolding and punishment children, even though the ratio is not

high, it also should cause enough attention. Because of quality problems with the teacher, national and local governments have launched various kinds of preschool teachers training plan. But still teacher training has exposed many problems: such as unreasonable training schedule, training opportunities distribution inequality, deviating from the practice of training courses, training plan did not take into account the differences between the teachers and so on.

3.3 Government: The “Double-Edged Sword” for Developing Preschool Education in Poverty Counties

Government is the main responsible body in the development of preschool education. As a “double-edged sword”, government can effectively promote the development of preschool education, also can delay or prevent it. As for kindergarten education development in poverty-stricken counties in China, government’s role leads to more questions. Government regulators themselves reflected two aspects: coordination between different administrative departments is not effectively, and the staff lack of preschool education professional knowledge.

Government’s role in the developing preschool education should be strike a balance between “for” and “not for”, namely to delimit the border of their functions and responsibilities. For example, government should raise funds in many ways, improve the conditions of kindergarten in poverty-stricken counties and provide support for the well operation of kindergarten. However, the controlling of public kindergarten’s budget, private kindergarten’s fee charge, and appointment of kindergarten leader revealed the “strong government and weak society” managerial logic, all of which should not be advocated. In addition, there are stakeholders challenged the impartiality of the government, 29.2% of the managers mention the government oriented kindergarten level evaluation is not objective and unfair.

3.4 Quality: The Real Crisis in Preschool Education Development in Poverty Counties

Quality is the baseline of preschool education development. Poor quality may hurt children’s physical and mental health instead of supporting children’s growing up. Analysis framework of preschool education quality generally includes structural quality and process quality. Structure quality usually contains the kindergarten environment, class size and the ratio of teachers and children, etc. In poverty-stricken counties, oversized class is the universal fact; there are 66.7% of government regulators, 66.7% kindergarten managers, 58.3% of the teachers and 58.3% of parents mentioned about that. At the same time, 35.4% of parents think that the outdoor activities space in kindergarten is insufficient, 39.6% of parents think the kindergarten does not have children’s lunch room.

Process quality is mainly reflected in teachers-children interaction, curriculum and teaching, play and activities, etc. In poverty-stricken counties, class size is too large to have effective teachers-children interaction. Because of the lack of teaching and play materials, and the lack of activities evaluation standard, “what to teach and what should not be taught” is just decided randomly by teachers. Some teachers let the children play freely, failed to provide meaningful educational experience to support children’s development. Many teachers (41.7%) confess that curriculum content inappropriately includes some content from primary school. Therefore, there is a very serious crisis in developing preschool education in poverty-stricken counties.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Different stakeholders expressed deep worries on the current situation of preschool education in poverty-stricken counties from different angles, and they also gave their answers for those challenges. Although these answers are inconsistent, they also can be seen that we must try our best to solve four important issues in order to improve preschool education in poverty counties, such as the serious shortage of funds, the low qualification of teachers, too much government control and the crisis of educational quality. Based on these challenges, four measures must be taken: First of all, the central government should set up a special fund for the development of preschool education in poverty-stricken counties, which may resolve the financial crisis of county governments. Second, local county government should accurately locate their own functions; enhance their awareness of serving for the development of preschool education, reducing unnecessary intervention of kindergarten and placing emphasis on enhancing teachers’ incomes and improving environmental conditions in kindergarten. Third, kindergarten should take full advantage of various ways to strengthen the connection between families and kindergarten, promote two-way communication and improve understanding and consensus between teachers and parents. Fourth, teachers should pay attention to self-improvement. They’d better constantly update professional knowledge structure and improve educational abilities and skills through in-service training and reflective practice.

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