

Professional Development of Preschool Teachers in Taiwan: Insights from the Perspectives of Young Children and Educators

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Abstract: Taiwan's *Early Childhood Education & Care Curriculum Framework*, which was formally implemented in 2017, claims that preschool teachers must promote their professional development to improve young children's learning. In early childhood education, the main participants—young children and educators—play a vital role in educational activities. Therefore, discussions on preschool teachers' professional development must consider both young children and educators for effectively enhancing the quality of preschool education, and enrich young children's learning experiences, and promote their well-being among them.

Keywords: Early Childhood Education & Care Curriculum Framework, educators, learning experiences, young children

1. Introduction

The implementation of education affects the development and promotion of the country, and a key factor of effective implementation is the cultivation of high-quality teachers. Successful education often depends on teacher quality. This is because teacher professional development is often closely linked with teaching effectiveness as well as the success or failure of student learning. Furthermore, in the discussion of education reform, the quality of teachers is the foundation for the achievement of students and the key to the success of education innovation. In 2012, the Ministry of Education in Taiwan published the *White Paper on Teacher Education*. The White Paper promotes teachers' ethics, responsibility, conscientiousness, and sustainability as core values to cultivate teachers with a love for education, professionalism, and effective execution in the new era. In addition, Taiwan's *Early Childhood Education & Care Curriculum Framework*, which was formally implemented in 2017, claims that preschool teachers must promote their professional development to improve young children's learning. Furthermore, anchored in the educational philosophy of "benevolence," the Taiwan's *Early Childhood Education & Care Curriculum Framework* establishes nine learning goals and emphasizes the cultivation of six core competencies in young children. Recognizing that young children have potential for development, imagination, and creativity, the framework encourages young learners to engage with their surroundings, exhibit curiosity, and explore through play. The curriculum framework highlights the multifaceted roles of teachers, including their roles in shaping class culture and learning environments, partnering in the lives and learning journeys of young children, guiding in their educational development, and collaborating with families. In early childhood education, the main participants—young children and educators—play a vital role in educational activities. Therefore, discussions on preschool teachers' professional development must consider both young children and educators for effectively enhancing the quality of preschool education, and enrich young children's learning experiences, and promote their well-being among them (Freire, 1993; Ministry of Education, 2012, 2017; Shih, 2024; Shih, Chen & Ye, 2020; Wang & Shih, 2022; Ye & Shih, 2020).

2. Preschool Teachers' Professional Development from the Perspective of Young Children

Early childhood is a critical period in human development, laying the foundation for physical, mental, social, and personality growth. Young children are the seedlings of a nation, the pillars of its future. Early childhood education serves as an effective means of nurturing these seedlings and cultivating future national leaders. From a developmental perspective, the earlier a stage in human growth, the more crucial education becomes. Preschool-aged children are at the most malleable stage of their lives, requiring appropriate cultural stimulation and the most suitable education to guide their holistic and healthy development. Thus, early childhood education is the foundation of all education and plays a vital role in the broader educational landscape. However, the success of early childhood education is directly linked to the quality of its teachers. The competence of early childhood educators is not only assessed based on their temperament, spirit, and character but also on their professional knowledge, skills, and attitudes. The effectiveness of early childhood education hinges on the quality of teaching provided by educators, as the quality of instruction determines the overall standard of early childhood education. Only by enhancing the professional quality of early childhood educators can early childhood education be effectively developed. Yet, becoming an expert teacher is not an overnight process; professional growth is a gradual transformation. In other words, early childhood educators must engage in continuous professional development, making conscious choices to participate in various learning activities and experiences. The formation of professional knowledge and skills is an ongoing process of interaction between teachers and their educational environments. Throughout this process, it is crucial to focus on young children's physical, mental, and spiritual well-being, their learning interests, and their unique developmental needs. As stated in Taiwan's *Early Childhood Education & Care Curriculum Framework*, preschool educators come from diverse professional backgrounds. Each institution has developed a variety of curriculum approaches based on its educational philosophy. A long-standing challenge in early childhood education has been how to develop appropriate curricula centered on young children. Historically, Taiwan's early childhood education has gradually shifted from a knowledge-transmission model to one emphasizing free play and guided learning. The image of young children's learning has also evolved from "listening attentively" to embodying characteristics such as confidence, initiative, cooperation, environmental awareness, problem-solving courage, and the ability to address challenges. Given the complexities of an ever-changing society, it is essential to cultivate young children with diverse abilities. Early childhood curriculum planning must not only consider the unique needs of young children but also ensure smooth transitions across different learning stages to support their future education. By utilizing curriculum guidelines as a platform for communication, early childhood education can be structured to provide meaningful learning directions for young children while helping preschools develop distinctive and well-rounded curricula (Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Wu, 2022, 2023).

3. Preschool Teachers' Professional Development from the Perspective of Educators

Early childhood education is influenced by societal changes, and teachers should not overlook the potential impact of these transformations on early childhood education. Instead, they must remain vigilant, continuously pursue professional development, and enhance their expertise to meet these evolving challenges, thereby realizing the ideals of early childhood education (Ministry of Education, 2017). Key considerations for preschool teachers' professional development from the educator's perspective:

3.1 Enhancing Teachers' Knowledge Management Skills

Over the past half-century, societal structures have shifted from traditional agricultural societies to modern industrial societies and, more recently, to postmodern information-based service economies. Politically, systems have evolved from authoritarian and closed structures to democratic and open frameworks. Similarly, human values have transitioned from singular perspectives to more diverse, multidimensional viewpoints. Economically, the focus has moved from labor-intensive industries to capital- and technology-intensive industries, eventually leading to today's knowledge-based economy, where intellectual capability is the driving force behind economic growth (OECD, 1996). Wang (2006) defined knowledge management as the systematic collection, evaluation, monitoring, planning, acquisition, learning, dissemination, integration, protection, and innovation of knowledge. Knowledge should be regarded as an asset, and any activity that effectively enhances the value of knowledge assets falls within the domain of knowledge management. To avoid becoming obsolete in the rapidly evolving educational landscape, preschool teachers must adopt knowledge management strategies to systematize and innovate their personal knowledge. By treating their professional expertise as an asset and managing it accordingly, preschool educators can enhance their teaching and administrative skills. This approach allows them to stay in sync with the progression of knowledge and societal transformations, positioning themselves as knowledge professionals and valuable human capital in Taiwan's early childhood education.

3.2 Strengthening Teachers' Capabilities on Action Research Capabilities

For preschools to advance as organizations, preschool teachers must actively contribute to knowledge creation within the early childhood education. This practice not only fosters the growth of preschool institutions but also serves as the cornerstone for enhancing the broader early childhood education sector. To continuously generate knowledge and support preschool development, educators must cultivate action research skills, aligning with the concept of "teachers as researchers." When preschool teachers construct contextually relevant teaching theories, they not only improve their instructional capabilities but also enhance the overall efficiency of preschool organizations, ultimately contributing to the advancement of early childhood education. Therefore, early childhood educators must possess action research skills to generate knowledge grounded in real classroom experiences. By positioning themselves as knowledge creators, they can strengthen their professional development while simultaneously fostering the growth of preschool institutions (Banks, Leach & Moon, 2005; Davis & Botkin, 1998; Zeichner, 1995). This perspective aligns well with the idea that early childhood educators should be reflective practitioners who actively engage in knowledge creation. Action research provides a systematic approach for teachers to investigate their own teaching practices, identify challenges, and develop solutions that are contextually relevant. How can preschools support teachers in developing action research skills? For instance, professional learning communities, mentorship programs, or institutional support structures could play a key role in fostering a research-oriented culture among early childhood educators (Johannesson, 2020).

4. Reflections and Conclusions

The professional development of preschool teachers plays a crucial role in ensuring high-quality early childhood education. In Taiwan, ongoing efforts have been made to enhance teachers' competencies through teacher education, policy initiatives, and pedagogical innovations. This paper explores the professional development of preschool teachers in Taiwan by incorporating perspectives from both young children and educators. By understanding the interplay between preschool teachers' growth and young children's learning experiences, this study aims to provide a holistic view of professional development in early childhood education. In addition, Taiwan's preschool education system has undergone significant transformations, with increased government support and policy interventions aimed at improving teacher quality. The Ministry of Education (MOE) has introduced various initiatives, such as in-service training programs, competency-based assessments, and curriculum reforms, to strengthen preschool teachers' professional skills. However, challenges such as workload pressure, curriculum adaptation, and maintaining child-centered approaches persist (Ministry of Education, 2012, 2017). Finally, understanding professional development from the perspective of young children provides unique insights into the effectiveness of teaching practices. Young children's interactions with teachers, classroom experiences, and learning engagement offer valuable reflections on teacher competencies. Preschool educators in Taiwan often emphasize the importance of continuous learning and reflective practice in their professional journey. Indeed, this is an insightful perspective! Understanding professional development from young children's viewpoints highlights how teaching practices directly impact learning experiences. Their reactions, engagement levels, and interactions with teachers serve as meaningful indicators of effective pedagogy. In Taiwan, where preschool educators prioritize continuous learning and reflective practice, how do they typically gather feedback from young children? Are there specific strategies used to understand young learners' perspectives on teaching effectiveness?

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