



Structural and process predictors of Chinese parental satisfaction toward early childhood education services

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Early childhood education service
Parental satisfaction
Structural quality
Process quality
Chinese parents

ABSTRACT

This study examined structural and process predictors of Chinese parental satisfaction toward early childhood education (ECE) services in the Chinese sociocultural context. The two-level hierarchical linear model was used to investigate the structural and process predictors of parents' satisfaction toward ECE services among 532 parents coming from 48 kindergarten classrooms in a southern China province. Findings indicated that educational level and annual income on parent-level were positively related to their satisfaction. Although classroom-level variables altogether explained a large percentage of parental satisfaction, only the structural quality predictors of teachers' teaching experiences and class size, as well as the process quality predictor of the emotional support, were identified to be significant predictors of parental satisfaction toward multiple dimensions of ECE services. Implications for ECE service providers, policymakers, and professionals are discussed.

1. Introduction

Recent statistics suggest that more than 44 million parents in China have chosen to send their children to preschools (normally for children at the age of 3–6 years old) for formal early childhood education (ECE; National Bureau of Statistics of the People's Republic of China, 2017). Parents, as the consumers, tend to choose preschools that meet their satisfaction about specific factors within early learning environments, such as educational quality, convenience, or cost (Chaudry, Henly, & Meyers, 2010). Based on consumers' choices, the Chinese ECE market has become market-driven, with increasing numbers of private schools relying on fees to fund themselves (Hu, Zhou, & Li, 2017). A decade ago, a common goal of the majority Chinese parents was for their children to “be able to enter a preschool.” In recent years, more parents have raised their standards regarding the education of their children and intentionally choose “accessing a high-quality preschool” for the children (Liu, 2015). Because of the demand for high-quality programs, many preschools have begun seeking more information about parents' their needs, preferences, and satisfaction with different aspects of the program.

In addition to the market-driven nature of Chinese ECE market,

another major reason for investigating satisfaction is because parental satisfaction actually reflects how they value ECE services in light of optimizing children's development (Jinnah & Walter, 2008). Therefore, in many studies researchers have examined the association between parental satisfaction and child outcomes to evaluate the effectiveness of preschool programs (McNaughton, 1994). They believe that parents, as stakeholders and important participants of ECE services, could provide professionals with valuable information regarding what parents view as important with respect to their child's experiences within programs (Emlen, Koren, & Schultze, 2000; Jang, Moore, & Lin, 2014; Jinnah & Walter, 2008). Preschools could use such information in modifying their services to more directly meet the needs of families. Several studies have focused on giving Chinese parents formal and informal opportunities (e.g., parent survey, parent committees, open day, parent-teacher meeting) to participate in ECE program quality evaluation (Li, 2007; Liu, 2011). Findings suggested that the information provided by the parents about children's interests, developmental needs, and learning outcomes were taken into consideration by preschools when revising the curriculum (Yu, 2006).

Some researchers have indicated the issue of positive response bias in which parents tend to overrate ECE quality (Cryer & Burchinal, 1997;

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Hu, Zhou, et al., 2017). Many factors are believed to contribute to the positive bias, such as parents' access to limited, but positive, information about preschools (Mocan, 2007; Yuan, 2011), the limited selection of affordable programs (Riley & Glass, 2002), or their lack of involvement in ECE (Fantuzzo, Perry, & Childs, 2006; Jinnah & Walter, 2008). Considering the possible causation of parents' positive response bias, the investigation of factors influencing parental satisfaction is needed to provide more insights on the issue of positive response bias.

Having a greater understanding about parental satisfaction with ECE can help professionals determine what parents perceive as most important in terms of quality in comparison to the latest research regarding high-quality service for young children. In turn, ECE professionals could help parents become more informed consumers. It is possible that parental satisfaction toward ECE services is less influenced by the process quality of the program (e.g., children's classroom experiences, interactions with teachers/peers), but rather by other more structural factors, such group size (Forry, Isner, Daneri, & Tout, 2014; Mocan, 2007), cost, location, or convenience (Chaudry et al., 2011; Erdwins, Caspar, & Buffardi, 1998; Peyton, Jacobs, O'Brien, & Roy, 2001). Considering the unique characteristics of ECE services in China, such as a larger class size and higher child-to-teacher ratio in the classroom as well as teachers' prevalent use of group teaching instead of free play (Li, Hu, Pan, Qin, & Fan, 2014; Liu & Pan, 2013), the current study is designed to investigate the structural (i.e., teaching year, teachers' education level, certification, class sizes, child-to teacher ratio, and per-child expenditure) and process characteristics (the three domains of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System: emotional support, classroom organization and instructional support) (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008) of ECE services that could predict parental satisfaction toward services, after controlling for parent-level variables (e.g., educational level, income, and job type), in the Chinese sociocultural context.

2. Previous research on parental satisfaction of ECE services

Parental satisfaction reflects judgments parents make as a result of comparing their experiences and feelings with their expectations for ECE services. Previous studies on parental satisfaction have examined parents' overall satisfaction with their experiences of ECE services and reported high levels of satisfaction (e.g., Nyland, Pan, Cooper, Nyland, & Zeng, 2016; Scopelliti & Musatti, 2013). However, these studies have provided limited information about parental satisfaction with ECE services because little is known about parents' needs of specific components in ECE services (Emmen et al., 2000). More recently, researchers have expanded their understanding of the multiple dimensions of ECE services (e.g., program features and parents' educational experiences) that might be related to parental satisfaction with services. For example, guided by the research findings of parental involvement in ECE services, researchers have examined parental satisfaction with educational experiences (e.g., Fantuzzo et al., 2006; Leong, 2014; McWayne, Campos, & Owsianik, 2008). Guided by the program standards and accreditation criteria of the National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC), Jinnah and Walter (2008) adapted a parental satisfaction survey to evaluate parents' satisfaction toward multiple components of ECE programs, including relationships, curriculum, teaching, assessment of children's progress, health, teachers, families, community relationships, physical environment, leadership, and management. Similarly, Jang et al. (2014) examined Taiwan parents' satisfaction across eight dimensions of ECE services, including program characteristics, teacher characteristics, interactions, curriculum, safety and health, physical environment, and evaluation, which was also guided by NAEYC's standards. Parents were able to express their perspectives on different aspects of ECE services. However, they tended to report high levels of satisfaction with all of the components overall.

Finally, what stands out is a questionnaire developed by Hong (2004) to examine Taiwan parents' needs and their satisfaction across

three dimensions of ECE services: (1) views about administration, mainly focused on the practical issues of ECE services, such as cost, hours of service, and responsiveness to parents' needs; (2) the quality of learning environments specifically related to safety and health, and materials provided by preschools; and (3) factors related to teaching and learning within the program, such as teaching qualifications, child-appropriate learning, and valuing school-family partnerships. Compared to other questionnaires mentioned, Hong's (2004) survey is more comprehensive because it addressed parents' satisfaction toward the structural and process quality of ECE services. Moreover, since Hong's survey was developed in Chinese-speaking cultural contexts, it addresses the practical issues concerning Chinese parents in preschools.

Overall, dimensions, such as program structure and interactions have been rated as being particularly important to both parents and ECE professionals (Cryer & Burchinal, 1997; Hu, Yang, & Jeong, 2016). Both the Quality Rating and Improving System in the U.S. (Tout et al., 2010) and the globally well-known quality assessment tools such as the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale-Revised* (ECERS-R; Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2005), have all included these components as indicators of quality ECE. Such an understanding of parental satisfaction with these components of quality ECE services could serve as essential references for preschools' provision of better ECE services to satisfy their customers (e.g., Bailey, Scarborough, & Hebbeler, 2003; Lanners & Mombaerts, 2000; McNaughton, 1994). The alignment between parents' and programs' perceptions of quality could facilitate the conversation on how to better define and assess quality from an outside-inside perspective (Katz, 1994).

Previous research highlights the importance of evaluating and improving parental satisfaction through multiple dimensions, including structural and process quality features. Although parents overall tend to report high levels of satisfaction with ECE services (Bassok, Player, & Zagardo, 2016; Zhang, Wang, Liu, & Guo, 2009), their views on different dimensions of their perceived services may be slightly different from one other (Nyland et al., 2016; Zhang et al., 2009). The particular dimension with lower levels of satisfaction could alarm the ECE institutions on which components can be emphasized and improved (Zhang et al., 2009).

2.1. The association between parental satisfaction and program quality

In past research, parents have consistently reported a high level of satisfaction toward various dimensions of ECE services (e.g., program features and educational experiences); however, researchers have repeatedly reported a lack of association between satisfaction with and quality of ECE. The quality of ECE, measured through empirically-validated tools (e.g., ECERS-R), tends to be mediocre or low level across countries (Yoshikawa et al., 2013). Moreover, the process aspect of quality (e.g., teacher-child interactions and how teachers form relationships with children in support of learning and development) tends to be much lower than physical features of ECE quality such as the furnishings and materials provided for learning (Li et al., 2014).

One explanation for the discrepancy between parents' high levels of satisfaction toward ECE services and measured quality is that parents tend to overestimate ECE program quality. To better understand the differences between parental satisfaction and actual program quality, researchers have compared parents' ratings of ECE quality with ratings on program quality measures (Cryer & Burchinal, 1997; Cryer, Tietze, & Wessels, 2002; Mocan, 2007). Findings indicate that while parents understand the importance of the quality within ECE programs, they tend to overrate all of the quality dimensions. For instance, in a recent study conducted by the author and colleagues (Hu, Zhou, et al., 2017), parents were asked to rate the importance of all of the items on the *Chinese Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale* (CECERS; Li et al., 2014), which was revised from the widely-used quality rating scale – the ECERS-R. The results indicated that > 90% of parents believed that all of the items on the scale were “somewhat important” or “very

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