

Exploring Effective Teacher Professional Development Programs in Private Kindergartens: A Case Study in Shanxi, China

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Abstract

This qualitative study examines effective teacher professional development programs in private kindergartens, focusing on a case study in Shanxi, China. Utilizing data from interviews and observations, the research explores the characteristics and determinants of these programs. Findings highlight key elements contributing to program efficacy, including curriculum design, implementation strategies, and teacher perspectives. Despite their significance, challenges such as resource constraints and institutional support are also identified. The study underscores the importance of tailored professional development initiatives in enhancing educational outcomes within private kindergarten settings.

Keywords: Private Kindergarten, Teacher Professional Development, Efficacy.

Introduction

In the landscape of modern education, early childhood education plays a pivotal role in shaping the cognitive, social, and emotional development of young learners. Among the critical determinants of delivering high-quality early childhood education are the teachers themselves.

The proliferation of private kindergartens across China over the past five years has drawn considerable attention from educators, policymakers, and researchers, as it has brought forth numerous challenges. Foremost among these challenges is the issue of teacher quality and professional development. The profound impact of teachers on early childhood education is undeniable, influencing children's cognitive, emotional, and social development during their formative years. Therefore, ensuring that teachers possess the necessary competencies and pedagogical approaches has emerged as a paramount concern.

Private kindergarten principals face a multifaceted landscape: they must not only meet the growing demands for quality education but also navigate the complexities of teacher recruitment, training, and retention. Teacher Professional Development (TPD) stands out as pivotal in enhancing teaching quality, student outcomes, and overall institutional development across diverse educational contexts. Within the realm of early childhood education in China, studies have highlighted the various challenges encountered by educators in both public and private kindergarten settings.

However, within the burgeoning private kindergarten sector, distinct challenges arise due to differences in resource allocation, organizational structures, and curricular frameworks. The ability of private kindergarten principals in Shanxi, China, to develop and implement effective TPD programs for their staff is increasingly recognized as crucial for providing a comprehensive early education experience. Despite some attention to TPD within early childhood education, a comprehensive investigation into the unique challenges faced by private kindergarten principals in Shanxi and their strategies remains underexplored.

This study is motivated by the need to address these gaps by examining the effectiveness of teacher professional development programs within private kindergartens in Shanxi. By exploring how these programs are implemented, perceived, and evaluated, the research aims to provide insights into the specific challenges and successes experienced in this context. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing more effective and contextually relevant professional development initiatives that can support teachers in delivering high-quality early childhood education.

This research not only addresses a significant gap in the literature but also provides practical insights and recommendations that can contribute to the advancement of early childhood education in private kindergartens. By highlighting the effectiveness of professional development programs, the study aims to support the ongoing improvement of teaching practices and educational outcomes for young learners.

Problem Statemen

The current body of literature offers valuable insights into the challenges faced in Teacher Professional Development (TPD) within broader educational settings. However, there needs to be more understanding regarding the characteristics of an effective teacher PD program, specifically within private kindergartens. There is a significant increase in private kindergartens in Shanxi, China. However, more research is needed that thoroughly investigates the specific features and efficacy of Teacher Professional Development (TPD) programs designed to meet their distinct requirements.

Within the private kindergarten sector, there are several key obstacles to overcome. These include budgetary limitations, restricted availability of professional development resources, and the necessity to integrate teacher professional development with the specific developmental requirements of young learners. Furthermore, negotiating regulatory frameworks and ensuring program quality uniformity pose extra challenges for principals and instructors.

It is crucial to address these areas of limited understanding to develop and execute focused TPD (Teacher et al.) initiatives that enhance the quality of teaching and, eventually, better educational results for young children in private kindergartens. This study seeks to investigate and assess the elements of successful Teacher Professional Development (TPD) programs in private kindergartens in Shanxi, China. It intends to offer valuable insights into effective techniques and practical suggestions for educators, administrators, and policymakers involved in early childhood education.

This continuation expands upon the first remark and delineates particular obstacles and intricacies within the private kindergarten setting in Shanxi, China. This statement establishes the context for the research topic and emphasizes the significance of studying efficient Teacher Professional Development (TPD) programs specifically designed for this educational environment.

Research questions

What factors determine the effectiveness of professional development programs in private kindergartens in China?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Global Perspectives on Teacher Professional Development

The concept of "teacher professional development" was initially introduced in the American academic community. Eric Hoyle (2012), defines TPD as the process by which educators acquire essential knowledge and skills to enhance their professional practice throughout their careers (Cadero-Smith, 2020). Global scholars have presented diverse critical interpretations of teacher professional development, emphasizing its lifelong nature involving continual interaction with the environment to foster teacher competence and enhance student learning (Barenthien et al., 2019).

In recent decades, the definition of TPD has evolved with the concept of lifelong learning, emphasizing teachers' self-directed and autonomous learning. Chinese scholar Lan (2017), highlights that teachers' professional growth is an ongoing process marked by continuous renewal, evolution, and internal development of their professional framework. She emphasizes the importance of teachers conscientiously approaching teaching as a means of holistic human development to cultivate excellence (Yang & Rao, 2021).

Synthesizing viewpoints from Chinese and Western experts, this study defines teacher professional development as active engagement in various organized programs, including national training initiatives, structured workshops, and mentoring provided by educational institutions. Informal avenues such as classroom observation and professional literature reading are also embraced, tailored to individual needs for advancing skills and knowledge.

Numerous studies have extensively explored the benefits of teacher PD activities on educator behavior, student performance, and school culture promotion (Keller-Schneider et al., 2020). However, the effectiveness of well-designed professional development programs in enhancing student outcomes relies on teachers' effective engagement and integration of acquired knowledge into their teaching practices (Mukan et al., 2019).

TPD transcends isolation; it directly influences both student performance and teacher quality, thereby indirectly shaping school systems into communities of learners. Conversely, a supportive learning environment reciprocally fosters effective TP (Qiu & Fu, 2019). Embedded within a particular educational institution's culture, TPD profoundly impacts teacher growth and significantly influences student outcomes. The potential effects of TPD interventions on teachers' careers are shaped by two sets of contextual factors: individual attributes and school-based conditions (Urbani, 2020). Consequently, this discussion explores the determinants of effective teacher professional development, supported by relevant theoretical frameworks for the professional growth of private preschool teachers.

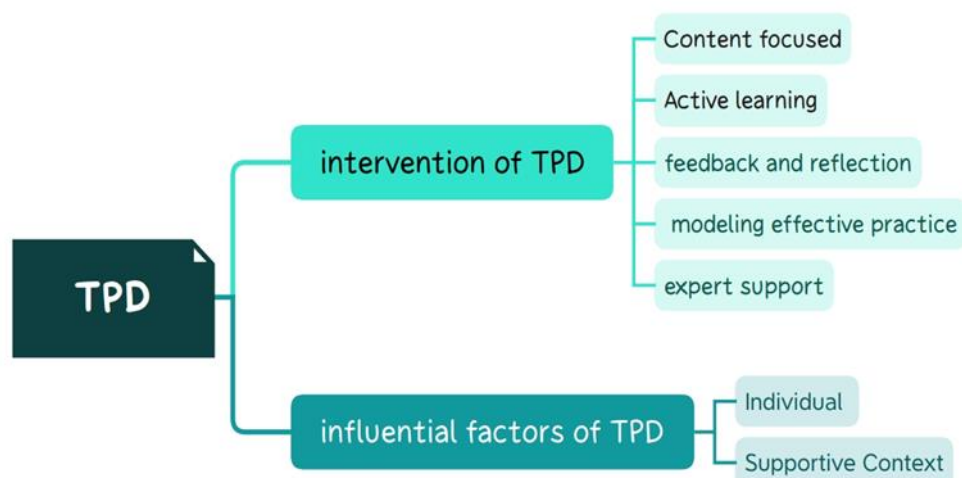
Interventions of Effective TPD

Within this examination, effective teacher professional development (TPD) is characterized as structured professional learning that yields changes in educators' knowledge and practices, leading to enhancements in student learning outcomes (Guskey, 2003). Commencing from 1995, scholars across the globe initiated studies to discern the components integrated into teacher professional development that effectively bolster student achievement (Sims et al., n.d.). Regrettably, scant evidence exists regarding whether distinct pedagogical approaches or facets of teacher professional development correlate with advancements in teaching practices or discernible student results (Sims & Fletcher-Wood, 2020).

More recently, several influential literature reviews have meticulously examined methodologically robust studies to pinpoint the attributes of effective professional development. For instance, Darling-Hammond (2017), meticulously analyzed 35 studies with experimental or comparison group designs and those analyzing student outcomes. This effort yielded the identification of seven widely embraced interventions for effective professional development, forming the basis for a consensus that has permeated on a global scale. These principles have been adopted as guidelines or policies by various countries (Darling-Hammond, 2020). The principles are as follows: 1. Focused on content; 2. Emphasizing active learning; 3. Promoting collaboration; 4. Incorporating models and effective practice modeling; 5. Providing coaching and expert support; 6. Facilitating feedback and reflection; 7. Sustained in duration (Darling-Hammond, 2017).

However, certain literature reviews have critically scrutinized these interventions, questioning them due to methodological shortcomings or improper inclusion criteria, leading to flawed inferences. For instance, the effectiveness of collaborative and sustainable aspects has been strongly debated due to a lack of supporting evidence. Nonetheless, these debates haven't dissuaded policymakers or educational institutions from adopting them as quality benchmarks for teacher training (Sims et al., 2021). Nonetheless, even the most impeccably designed professional development programs might falter in achieving anticipated outcomes if not implemented correctly (Bayly et al., 2022). Hence, an additional requirement for effective TPD has been proposed, emphasizing the significance of a supportive context. This context entails an educational institution fostering a robust learning environment and a supportive administrative system. Studies have shown that school administrators' learning leadership and teachers' instructional behaviors positively correlate with effective TPD (Brunsek et al., 2020). This theoretical foundation underpins the present study's focus on exploring the kindergarten principal's role as the primary research subject.

Table 1

Visualization of Conception of TPD

The Role of the Principals

The degree of centralization or decentralization of the system exerts the most significant impact on the functioning of principals. Principals in centralized systems encountered three primary obstacles, as indicated by the findings: bureaucracy, political orders, and an autocratic perspective on the educational system(Aksaray University & Yıldırım, 2021). Kindergarten principals are required to address the diverse external oversight requirements imposed by education authorities and parents, alongside the internal imperative of ensuring teachers' effectiveness in facilitating student learning and maintaining a consistent emphasis on school improvement objectives(Cockpim & Somprach, 2019).

Teague (2012), argued that school principals are important internal stakeholders who support forming a professional learning community. Cockpit (2019), confirmed that school administrators' leadership or teaching behaviors are positively associated with teacher PD up to a significant level. School principals are the chief executive officers (CEOs) in school management and play unique and multifaceted roles in the school setting(He & Ho, 2017a).

In a private kindergarten, the principal is the first leader whose views and opinions are of practical significance for overcoming the practical difficulties in the PD of private kindergarten teachers requiring access to practical PD training for delivering impactful instruction(Gündoğdu, 2022). The principal has an essential influence on the cohesion of teachers, their working status, and even the development of children; they directly determine the operation and survival of private kindergartens(Nevşehir Hacı Bektaş Veli University & Özcan, 2020). Therefore, the principal of a private kindergarten plays a decisive and critical role in the functioning of a private kindergarten (Karacabey, 2021).

In China, particularly within kindergartens, the Principal Responsibility System is enforced, underscoring the pivotal role of principals in managing kindergartens (Xue & Li, 2021). Principals are crucial figures in facilitating kindergarten development and empowering

teachers. The role of principals in fostering teacher Professional Development (PD) is multifaceted:

Firstly, principals should scrutinize the teacher PD plan to ensure alignment with policy directives and the specific needs of the preschool(He & Ho, 2017b). Secondly, they ought to provide tangible support by furnishing teachers with resources such as curriculum materials, learning equipment, and access to libraries, thereby bolstering their professional development.

Moreover, principals are tasked with orchestrating training activities for teachers, encompassing both internal and external programs. This includes the engagement of professional trainers to enhance teachers' competencies and skill sets (Xie & Li, 2020). Additionally, principals play a pivotal role in fostering a collaborative environment among teachers, encouraging the exchange of pedagogical insights and collective efforts to enhance educational quality.

Regular provision of feedback and guidance by principals is paramount for teachers' ongoing development (Hong & Chen, 2017). Principals should offer constructive feedback aimed at identifying strengths and areas for improvement, fostering a culture of continuous growth. Furthermore, establishing a robust assessment mechanism is essential to incentivize teacher participation in professional development activities and track progress effectively.

Supervision and evaluation of teacher PD initiatives fall under the purview of kindergarten principals, ensuring alignment with policy mandates and the preschool's developmental needs. By overseeing and evaluating teacher development comprehensively, principals contribute to the continuous enhancement of early childhood education quality and standards.

In summary, kindergarten principals wield significant influence in implementing teacher professional development policies. Through reviewing PD plans, providing resources, organizing training activities, promoting collaboration, offering feedback, establishing assessment mechanisms, and supervising teacher development, they facilitate a conducive environment for teachers' continuous improvement, ultimately enhancing the quality of early childhood education.

Methodology

Research Methodology

This study investigates the elements that impact the efficiency of professional development programs in private kindergartens in China. The study lacks specific variables, and the researcher is pivotal in gathering and analyzing the data. The data collected via participant interviews is a valuable source of information, as the participants' perspectives are highly pertinent. The investigation's data is analyzed from a seasoned viewpoint. This indicates that the researcher adopts an objective perspective without introducing any bias. The study is grounded in real-life scenarios and centers on pragmatic issues within private kindergartens.

The study aims to identify the determinants of the efficacy of professional development programs in private kindergartens in China. Case studies are well-suited for thoroughly

examining a single phenomenon within its genuine real-world context. Teacher professional development is a multifaceted process influenced by several factors, including local circumstances, individuals interested in the process, and the organizational framework. Using a case study method enables researchers to thoroughly examine and understand the complexities of a scenario, including the individual's perception of the situation and the interactions of other components.

Sampling

The concept of saturation is commonly considered the primary criterion for determining the sample size in qualitative research (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). This refers to attaining a significant degree of topic saturation. The study does not require a large sample size, as it aims to gather thorough data on private kindergarten administrators' difficulties in enhancing teacher professional development. To guarantee the research's precision and dependability, the study employs a triangulation approach by involving instructors from each private kindergarten, which embodies the core concepts of the study. The researchers use an intentional sampling technique to discover and choose administrators and instructors matching the specified inclusion criteria. Their compliance with particular criteria determines the selection of target kindergartens. For instance, the number of children and instructors and the dimensions of the campus are similar. Simultaneously, the target number of participants is reached when no new information is given. Principals must have at least five years of professional experience as a principal in a private kindergarten. Prior experience as a private kindergarten teacher is essential. Prior expertise in executing TPD (Tobacco et al.) programs is necessary. The instructors employed at the chosen kindergarten must have at least three years of experience working in a private kindergarten. 2. Having actively engaged in the professional development programme. The study's saturation level consists of three principals and teachers.

Table 2

The Demographic Background of the Participants

Participants	Gender	Age	Qualification	Work Year	Work Place
Principle 1	Male	45	Master	6	Kindergarten A
Principle 2	Female	52	College degree	14	Kindergarten B
Principle 3	Female	42	Bachelor degree	8	Kindergarten C
Teacher 1	Female	33	bachelor	5	Kindergarten A
Teacher 2	Female	28	bachelor	4	Kindergarten B
Teacher3	Female	30	bachelor	4	Kindergarten C

Data Collection

The data collection for this qualitative case study mainly consisted of conducting semi-structured interviews with the principals of the chosen private kindergartens. The interviews were performed in person at places convenient for both parties, enabling a thorough

examination of the issues and methods associated with TPD. The focus group interview was used to gather teachers' comprehension of triangulation. Each interview was anticipated to last around 60-90 minutes and was recorded in audio format with the participants' agreement. Furthermore, additional data was gathered by analyzing documents and conducting interviews with principals. We examined pertinent documents like school policies, professional development plans, and teacher training materials to get further insight and validate the interview findings

In addition, the video and photos collected by the researchers through direct observation of the PD programs on-site are converted into text for analysis. Observation can obtain rich details and background information, which can be used as triangulation to the interview of participants.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis will involve thematic analysis of the interview transcripts. According to Maguire and Delahunt (2017), thematic analysis includes a six-stage coding process. A two-cycle coding method has been implemented to guarantee the validity. This method is a recurrent process of identifying patterns that begins with identifying codes and concludes with classifying codes into themes that they have in common.

The transcripts will be coded using a combination of deductive and inductive approaches, with initial codes derived from the research questions and supplemented by emergent themes. Codes will be organized into overarching themes, and patterns across interviews will be identified to conclude the challenges and strategies related to TPD in private kindergartens. Document analysis will complement the interview data by providing additional insights into institutional practices and policies related to TPD. Relevant information will be extracted from documents and analyzed thematically to triangulate interview findings.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers will ensure that all aspects of the research, including participant recruitment, data collection, and data storage, comply with the guidelines set forth by UPM's Ethics Committee. Informed consent will be obtained from all participants, and measures will be taken to maintain confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process. Participants will be informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time without facing any consequences. Furthermore, the researchers will strictly adhere to the approved research protocol and ensure that all data is securely stored and accessed only by authorized researchers. Any potential risks to participants will be identified and mitigated to the best of the researchers' abilities, in line with UPM's research ethics policy. By conducting the study according to UPM's ethical guidelines and obtaining approval from the Ethics Committee, the researchers aim to uphold the integrity of the research process and contribute valuable insights to the field of early childhood education in China.

Findings and Discussion

Ensuring effective training for kindergarten teachers is crucial for improving the quality of private preschool education. Principals' perception of effective teacher PD training directly relates to the teacher's professional training contents and models. Through the analysis of

the observed status of teachers participating in training, as well as the interview records of principals and teachers, the coding analysis was carried out from which the themes emerged: Active engagement, practice-based content, and Peer Collaboration. Active engagement is the most decisive internal component of effective PD according to the agreement of the three principals.

Table 3
The Themes of Findings to the Questions

Question	Themes
The determination of effective PD	A. Active engagement B. Practical-based content C. Effective training

Active Engagement

When it comes to effective professional development activities, Principal 1 considers the needs of teachers to be the primary determining factor. If professional development activities do not consider the needs of teachers, it may lead to the lack of enthusiasm and investment of teachers in these activities, and ultimately affect the teaching effect. Principal 3 reported like this:

Some teachers refused to participate in the online training activities organized by the government, saying that they could not understand it because it was too theoretical and too high. Some courses are too simple, and some old teachers complain that they are not as good as their level. Therefore, the design of teacher professional development should consider what teachers lack in their growth so that teachers can actively participate in it. The training is ineffective without the participation of the teacher—a waste of time, waste of money. (Source: Interview with the principal 1 of Kindergarten A)

Principal 3 stressed the importance of comprehending the everyday challenges faced by kindergarten teachers and gaining expertise in the unique requirements of various professional groups to successfully match skilled teachers with appropriate opportunities for professional development. Here is an illustrative instance.

Given the disparities in expertise and teaching background among different generations, it is necessary to develop innovative approaches for training experienced instructors. Upon their return from their study sessions, both professors have contrasting perspectives: one perceives it as extremely enlightening for their benefit, while the other regards it as little advantageous. What is the reason behind this problem? (Source: Interview with the principal 3 of Kindergarten C)

The three private kindergarten principals have collectively agreed that teachers' lack of motivation for professional development can be attributed to various factors, including the demanding nature of their daily responsibilities, the lack of social recognition they receive, and the limited opportunities for career advancement.

Practical-Based Content

Despite a dearth of supporting data, the literature review persistently maintains that a content-focused approach is essential to effective professional development (PD). However, the participants in this study failed to indicate the subject matter. Conversely, they often brought out the fact that kindergarten teachers, regardless of their subject area, are now required to incorporate case illustrations into their lessons.

Because we are kindergarten teachers, we are not required to be very professional in all fields, but we need to understand and even operate. For example, I think the fire safety training, first aid training, and some picture book reading training that we participated in are all quite good. Experts have listed a large number of cases in the training, and I can apply them according to my actual situation (Source: Interview with the principal 2 of Kindergarten B)

Furthermore, Principals 1 and 3 put out a comparable reasoning. It is important to note that kindergarten teachers can swiftly grasp and implement case-based teaching methods in their everyday work owing to their practical nature.

By the same token, teachers responded that theory must be linked to practice. At present, the experts invited to train teachers are mainly two types of people, one is the relevant professional professors in universities, or the principals or teachers of some excellent kindergartens, according to the investigation, university professors are mostly theoretical, indeed novel, improve cognition, but can not be implemented into practice.

That is, our training in China is now divided into two extremes: talking about the bottom of the bottom or talking about the height being too high, which everyone cannot grasp. In truth, what do I prefer? When I talk about this, I'm going to offer you some conceptual material on a macro level, but I'm also going to give you some micro-level instances based on this conceptual stuff, correct? (Source: Interview with the principal 1 of Kindergarten A)

All three principals agreed that even though they were extremely eminent professors, they conversed extensively. Upon concluding the discussion, all participants had the impression that an ideation session had begun, but it was challenging to put into practice the ideas that were generated. Therefore, Practice must be integrated into theory as a key determinant of effective PD.

Peer Collaboration

Furthermore, the teachers who were interviewed expressed several concerns that were not adequately addressed by the administrators. These concerns encompassed the significance of acquiring knowledge from teachers within the same age cohort through methods such as class observation and small-group research. It is widely agreed that the knowledge acquired in this way is quite useful and practical. This is where the peer collaboration mentioned in the literature review fits in.

I think a lecture competition every semester where the same age group of teachers can observe their class is better. So I can relate it to my class better. We frequently have too much work in our class to go to another class and study how our peers handle their own. This provides me with fresh teaching ideas that I can immediately implement in my class because

we share the same age group and teacher condition. (Source: Interview with the teachers in FGD)

Regarding the viewpoint of Teacher 2, it is worth noting that Teacher 1 at the same kindergarten had similar perspectives. The school organizes the teacher's lecture contest every year, and the leaders listen to my classes and give me feedback, making me progress faster." (Teacher1 FGD1). Teacher 4 from kindergarten B had a comparable encounter in her kindergarten, which proved to be an efficacious method for enhancing her professional competencies, such as classroom management and the ability to design and coordinate activities. Her words are listed as follows:

I usually have no time to listen to the class of my peers, and the lecture competition gives me a good opportunity. Every teacher has his or her brilliance, so I will think about whether I can bring her skills to my class (Teacher 4 FGD 1). The teachers mentioned above stressed the importance of fostering a sense of community and cultivating an atmosphere that promotes collaborative learning in their kindergarten classrooms.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore several key elements that significantly impact the efficacy of training programs for private kindergarten teachers in China. Active learning, practice-based content, and peer collaboration emerged as crucial factors in enhancing PD outcomes. These findings are particularly noteworthy as they challenge traditional assumptions derived from research focused on educators working with older students. Kindergarten teachers, due to their unique role in nurturing children at a critical stage of physical and mental development, benefit immensely from tailored training strategies that emphasize hands-on learning experiences, real-world case studies, continuous practice, and collaborative learning environments.

The distinct standards for professional excellence in early childhood education necessitate a re-evaluation of existing frameworks and a shift towards methodologies that cater specifically to the needs of kindergarten teachers. This study's findings suggest that effective PD programs for private kindergarten teachers should prioritize these elements to foster holistic growth and skill development among teachers, thereby positively influencing their teaching practices and ultimately benefiting young learners.

In conclusion, by embracing these innovative approaches and adapting them to the context of private kindergartens in China, stakeholders can promote a culture of continuous improvement and excellence in early childhood education. This not only aligns with global trends in educational research but also responds directly to the unique challenges and opportunities within the private kindergarten sector in Shanxi and beyond.

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