

Investigating The Challenges Encountered by Private Kindergarten Principals in Enhancing Teacher Professional Development: A Case Study in Shanxi, China

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the challenges private kindergarten principals face in China in enhancing the quality of teacher professional development. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes in this case study, which involved three kindergarten principals and their teachers as informants. The study reveals several challenges principals encounter as they strive to enhance teacher professional development in private kindergarten settings. Significant challenges such as inadequate training budgets, a lack of teacher motivation, and unequal policy implementation were identified as themes. This study emphasizes the critical role of leadership and teamwork in addressing the challenges. The findings significantly contribute to establishing effective strategies to strengthen teacher professional development in private kindergartens in the educational system of China.

Keywords: Teacher Professional Development, Private Kindergarten Principals, Challenges

Introduction

Early childhood education prepares children for academic and personal achievement, which boosts individual growth and a nation's economy. In China, private kindergartens have significantly contributed to alleviating the government's shortage of investment in preschool education funds, enriching preschool education resources, and meeting the growing needs of the people in the past ten years. According to the latest statistics released by the Ministry of Education for 2021, the number of private kindergartens nationwide reached 166,700, more than half of the total kindergartens in China. The number of inclusive kindergartens (public and private) in China reached 245,000, accounting for 83% of the total kindergartens. Among them, 117,000 were private, inclusive kindergartens. Private, inclusive kindergartens could not be negligible in the field of preschool education in China.

According to data released by the Ministry of Education in August 2021, there were 3,221,800 kindergarten principals and full-time teachers in China, a 1.3-fold increase from 2011. The pupil-teacher ratio dropped from 26 to 1 in 2011 to 15 to 1 in 2021, effectively addressing the shortage of teachers. The educational structure has been further optimized. In 2021, the number of principals and full-time teachers with college degrees or above will reach 87.8%, an increase of 24 percentage points over 2011. Although the number and quality of preschool teachers have significantly improved, building excellent teachers now is a great challenge for the Chinese government.

In China, the Principal responsibility system is implemented in kindergarten. (Xin Fan et al., 2022). In private kindergartens, the principal is both a manager and operator. School principals are significant internal stakeholders who play a supportive role in developing professional learning communities. The kindergarten principal, in particular, has unique insights into policy interpretation and execution since she is both a participant and implementer. As chief executive officers (CEOs), kindergarten principals play an essential role in resolving practical challenges in the professional development of teachers, who require access to effective professional development to provide meaningful instruction. (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Forner, 2016; Cadero-Smith, 2020)

Educational academics have shown a growing interest in conducting systematic reviews of works examining school leaders' challenges (Tamadoni et al., 2024). However, across various educational contexts, the responsibilities of school leaders have been significantly modified due to the intricate school environment to meet the demands of many stakeholders. The increasing need for self-governance and accountability has posed challenges in effectively overseeing the diverse array of teacher professional development tasks delegated to principals, resulting in many challenges (Chu & Cravens, 2012).

Studies have explored the multifaceted challenges kindergarten principals face in the context of early childhood education in China. However, distinct challenges arise within the expanding private kindergarten sector due to varying resource allocations, organizational structures, and curricular frameworks. The ability of private kindergarten principals to cultivate and facilitate effective TPD for their teaching staff is increasingly recognized as a critical factor in providing a holistic early education experience. Despite some attention to TPD within the realm of early childhood education, a comprehensive investigation into the unique challenges private kindergarten principals face in China still needs to be explored.

Furthermore, the insights gained from this study will have practical implications for educators, administrators, policymakers, and stakeholders in the early childhood education domain. The findings are expected to inform the development of targeted interventions, strategies, and policies that address the specific needs of private kindergarten principals and teachers, ultimately enriching the quality of early education provided in this crucial stage of a child's learning journey.

Problem Statement

This study did a comprehensive literature review, emphasizing 63 publications on the current state of professional development for private kindergarten teachers in China. The research site encompasses the well-developed southern region of Guazhuang, Zhejiang, and

Wuhan Province, the northern areas of small cities, and the rural region of Henna, Shandong Province. Nevertheless, Shanxi Province, situated in the central region of China, has yet to be subjected to research. Overall, the findings are consistent. The results of the findings are as follows: Private kindergarten instructors have a lesser professional status than their counterparts in public kindergartens. The current state of the private kindergarten TPD could be more favorable. There is a need for improvement in their professional idea. They need a better degree of professional expertise. Their proficiency in professional development needs to be more evenly distributed between economically developed and developing regions. Their professional development route could be more seamless. Their lack of professional competence hindered their ability to meet the criteria of teaching activities. They had limited chances for additional education, and their professional training activities needed to be more relevant. Additionally, the kindergarten they worked in needed to provide more effective assistance. (Guan Ailing, 2019; Song Huini, 2013)

The literature also revealed that private preschool TPD issues are due to deficiencies in training models, training organization, and training content (Yi et al., 2020). Many empirical studies in different regions of China have revealed that PD training needs to be targeted more. (Yi Yang et al., 2020; Xudi, 2019; Wang Mo et al., 2015). However, as implementers of teacher professional development programs, the research on the role of kindergarten principals needs to be more extensive and only a theoretical discussion. Among these, the existing literature review does not target private kindergarten principals.

More research is needed about the specific challenges private kindergarten principals face in China. These challenges may range from financial constraints to limited access to training resources, from aligning TPD with the unique needs of early learners to navigating the intricacies of regulatory frameworks. Addressing this research gap is pivotal in comprehending the nuances of private kindergarten TPD challenges and formulating targeted strategies to address them.

The present study aims to bridge this research gap by exploring the challenges private kindergarten principals face in China when endeavoring to enhance TPD for their teaching staff. Through a focused case study approach, this research seeks to delve into the intricacies of these challenges. By doing so, the study contributes to the existing knowledge on teacher professional development. It provides a nuanced understanding of the unique dynamics of the private kindergarten sector in China.

Research Questions

The focus of this study is to explore the Challenges faced by private kindergarten principals in China, and the research question is What are the primary challenges encountered by private kindergarten principals in China when attempting to improve TPD?

Literature Review

Global Perspectives on Teacher Professional Development

The term "teacher professional development" was initially introduced within the American academic community. Eric Hoyle (2012) defines TPD as the process through which educators acquire essential knowledge and skills for proficient professional practice across various stages of their careers (L. et al., 2020).

This study amalgamates their shared aspects after global scholars presented diverse critical interpretations of teacher professional development. It is a lifelong journey involving continual interaction with the environment, fostering teacher competence, and enhancing student learning (Barenthien et al., 2019).

With the emergence of lifelong learning in recent decades, the definition of TPD has emphasized teachers' self-directed and autonomous learning. Chinese scholar Ye LAN (2017) accentuates that teachers' professional growth is an ongoing process marked by constant renewal, evolution, and the internal development of their professional framework. She underscores the need for teachers to conscientiously and consistently approach teaching as a means of holistic human development, thereby cultivating excellence (Yang & Rao, 2021). By synthesizing viewpoints from both Chinese and Western experts, this study delineates teacher professional development as active engagement in a range of organized programs offered by educational institutions, such as national training initiatives, structured workshops, and mentoring. Additionally, informal avenues like classroom observation and reading professional literature are embraced, aligning with individual needs to advance skills and knowledge.

Numerous studies have extensively explored the benefits of teacher PD activities on educator behaviour, student performance, and even school culture promotion (Keller-Schneider et al., 2020). However, the efficacy of well-designed professional development programs in enhancing student outcomes relies on teachers' effective engagement and subsequent integration of acquired knowledge into their teaching practices (Mukan et al., 2019). TPD transcends isolation; it directly influences student performance and teacher quality and indirectly shapes a school system into a community of learners. Conversely, a supportive learning environment reciprocally fosters effective TP (Qiu & Fu, 2019).

Embedded within a particular educational institution's culture, TPD holds an intangible yet profound connection with teacher growth, significantly impacting students. The potential effects of TPD interventions on teachers' careers are modeled by two sets of contextual factors: individual attributes and school-based conditions (Urbani, 2020). Consequently, this discussion delves into the determinants of effective teacher professional development and the relevant theoretical underpinnings for the professional growth of private preschool teachers.

The Role of the Principals

The degree of centralization or decentralization of the system exerts the most significant impact on the functioning of principals. The findings indicated that principals in centralized systems encountered three primary obstacles: bureaucracy, political orders, and an autocratic perspective on the educational system (Aksaray University & Yildirim, 2021). Kindergarten principals must 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 behaviours 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 et al. 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 should provide tangible support by furnishing teachers with curriculum materials, learning equipment, and library access, bolstering their professional development.

Moreover, principals are tasked with orchestrating teacher training activities, encompassing internal and external programs. This includes engaging 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.

Principal feedback and guidance are paramount for teachers' development (Hong & Chen, 2017). Principals should offer constructive feedback to identify 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.

Supervising and evaluating teacher PD initiatives fall under the purview of kindergarten principals, ensuring alignment with policy mandates and the preschool's developmental needs. Principals contribute to continuously enhancing early childhood education quality and standards by overseeing and evaluating teacher development comprehensively.

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 empirical study aims to look at the challenges private kindergarten principals have in improving teacher professional development in Shanxi, China. Notably, the study needs more specific variables, and the researcher plays a vital role in data collection and analysis. The insights gained from participant interviews are a vital data source, with the participants' viewpoints being critical.

The investigation's data is analyzed from an experience perspective. This suggests that the researcher takes an outsider's perspective without prejudice. The study is founded on reality and focuses on practical difficulties in the private kindergarten setting. The study questions aim to give insight into the problems that private kindergarten leaders encounter.

Qualitative investigations are ideal for diving extensively into a particular phenomenon in its real-world setting. A case study, in particular, allows us to properly analyze the subtleties, complexities, and intricacies of this challenging process that private kindergarten administrators in China encounter. Local settings, stakeholders, and institutional structures can all impact teacher professional development. A case study technique allows researchers to capture these intricacies, examine their interactions, and solve the issues.

Sampling

The concept of saturation is frequently used as the primary criterion for determining sample size in qualitative research (Hennink & Kaiser, 2022). This refers to reaching a high degree of topic saturation. The study does not require a large sample size because its goal is to gather complete data on the problems that private kindergarten managers confront in increasing teacher professional development. To ensure the research's correctness and dependability, the study employs a triangulation approach that includes teachers from every private kindergarten who embody the study's fundamental ideas. The researchers use a purposive sample technique to discover and choose administrators and instructors who match the inclusion requirements.

Target kindergartens are chosen depending on how well they meet particular requirements. The number of kids and teachers, as well as the campus size, are comparable. Simultaneously, the target number of participants is reached when no new information is presented. Participants were the principals of three private kindergartens and three teachers from their respective kindergartens, for an overall total of six informants.

Participants must satisfy specific conditions. The principals must have at least five years of experience as principals of private kindergartens. Previous teaching experience in a private kindergarten setting is necessary. 3. Prior experience running TPD initiatives is required. Teachers at the selected kindergarten must have: 1. At least three years of experience working in a private kindergarten. 2. Participated in a professional development course. The study's saturation point is three principals and teachers.

Table 1
The Demographic Background of the Participants

Work Place	Participants	Gender	Age	Qualification	Work Year
Kindergarten A	Principle 1	Male	45	Master	6
	Teacher 1	Female	30	College degree	6
Kindergarten B	Principle 2	Female	42	Bachelor degree	8
	Teacher 2	Female	32	bachelor	5
Kindergarten C	Principle 3	Female	44	bachelor	10
	Teacher3	Female	33	bachelor	6

Data Collection

This qualitative case study's primary data collection method consisted of conducting semi-structured interviews with the individuals who had participated in the chosen private kindergartens. To provide an in-depth investigation of the difficulties and approaches associated with TPD, the interviews were carried out in person at mutually convenient places for both parties. Interviews with teachers were conducted to get information on their knowledge of triangulation. Each interview was anticipated to be somewhere between sixty and ninety minutes, and the interviews were recorded with the participants' permission.

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 its 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

The subsequent sections provide a comprehensive account of the findings and discussion of our research questions:

Table 3

The coding of Challenges faced by principals

Theme	Categories	Sub-categories
Challenges	Lack of financial	The policy restricts high tuition The cost of teacher training is high.
	Teachers' Lack of will, motivation	No change in salary No career promotion Heavy workload
	Lack of support from the government	Lack of the same opportunities as the public sector Lack of professional title evaluation opportunities

Lack of Financial Support

Fang Jianhua and Deng Heping (2014) thoroughly investigated the leaders of nine private kindergartens in Xinjiang. They discovered that the primary sources of finance for operating a private kindergarten are the owners' capital input and tuition fees received due to insufficient capital investment, public welfare education funding, and social donations. The funding for operating a private kindergarten garden derives chiefly from the owners' money and tuition fees. The money is mainly used to maintain the kindergarten, including paying teachers' salaries, benefits, and training costs. Teachers and kindergartens want to develop but need more incentives, resulting in a stagnant condition that impedes their future advancement. Even though the national legislation gives private kindergartens some advantages when building kindergartens and selecting locations. However, their primary source of income is building rentals. Once the lease time expires or the rent increases, variations in housing prices cause an imbalance between the kindergarten's revenue and costs. As a result, the kindergarten must hunt for a new location, causing instability in its facilities.

I feel that the government's policies, particularly those affecting private kindergartens, are flawed, with the only beneficial features being land concessions and incentives for inclusive private kindergartens. However, Yuncheng City Finance has limited funds, and for many years, only two grants have been awarded for inclusive private kindergartens, which are not completely utilized. Because the funding is dependent on the number of registered children, children under the age of three do not attend school. On the other hand, when the government cracks down on the phenomenon of high tuition fees in private kindergartens, the funds that private kindergartens may raise are severely limited.

Parents are inclined to enroll their children in "low fee, good quality" public kindergartens due to the absence of standardized practices and norms. The high cost of private kindergartens hinders individuals from affording them, while the untrustworthy low fees cause children to feel uneasy. Consequently, private kindergartens are influenced by this parental inclination. (Principal 3)

Private kindergartens often have tight budgets, which could make it hard for them to pay for teachers to get better at their jobs. Costs for professional development programs can be high. These costs can include salaries for teachers or trainers, the cost of setting up workshops or seminars, and the cost of tools and resources. The high costs of planning these events could strain the kindergarten's budget, making it hard for directors to give their teachers a wide range of high-quality training opportunities.

Three private kindergarten principals have asserted that tuition fees are the sole funding source for teacher training, with no further government assistance. In contrast, high tuition fees are constrained by the government due to its inclusive education policy. Moreover, according to Principal 2, certain activities demand that teachers cover their training expenses.

Teachers' Lack of Will, Motivation

According to Zhao Aiyun and Han Huifei (2017), the professional level of principals and teachers in private kindergartens in Shanxi Province is low. In the data obtained from the survey, principals with secondary school education or above in private kindergartens in Shanxi Province are lower than the national level, and principals without assessed professional titles are higher than the national level. The proportion of principals with pre-school education and education-related professional backgrounds is also lower than that of Guizhou Province. The professional ability of principals is not enough, the training intensity and effect need to be up to standard, the proportion of new first-line teachers is large, and the teaching experience needs to be rich. Like the private kindergarten teachers in other provinces, the salary of private kindergarten teachers in Shanxi Province is low, and even more than half of the teachers do not enjoy any social welfare benefits.

Kindergartens that private organizations run often use varied teaching staff from various educational backgrounds, experiences, and skill levels. It is the responsibility of principals to implement professional development programs that take into account these disparities. To accomplish this, it is necessary to determine each teacher's individual requirements and provide training that fills in any knowledge and skill gaps that may exist. Developing a training program capable of adequately accommodating experienced teachers and those just beginning their careers in education is a challenging endeavour that calls for individualized methods.

With the active involvement of teachers, the efficacy of a training program is significantly improved, notwithstanding its impeccable design from beginning to assessment. Teachers may be preoccupied with work, schedule constraints, and even the subject matter of training. Principle 1 stated the following:

I send various individuals out, and they have varied reactions. For example, I have a teacher; I sent him to Shanghai to study, he attended an excellent kindergarten, and when he returned,

he told me that it was not as good as ours; that is one phrase. I never see what I desire in him. People, I sent another teacher to Beijing to study, and after coming back, he expressed the value of this PD program. even though you have told us about these things, at this time I reflect, that I did not listen carefully, and I did not seriously implement, this is what we have to do next, you see these are two completely different extremes, therefore, sometimes it is more about influencing everyone to have a positive attitude towards learning.

Private kindergarten teachers encounter a variety of challenges daily. Private kindergarten teachers, as opposed to public kindergarten teachers, require time and effort to provide direct accountability to parents. Private teachers must have a thorough grasp of their kids to handle any issues expressed by parents successfully. Furthermore, the complex and insignificant character of the work, along with constant compensation, may restrict the enthusiasm and availability of private kindergarten teachers with familial obligations to participate actively in the relearning process. Furthermore, participating in different professional development courses does not result in quick income progression or promotion to professional designations. The reasons mentioned earlier have greatly reduced private kindergarten teachers' enthusiasm to participate in professional development activities. Based on the preceding, other teachers interviewed added:

Our education bureau organizes annual evaluations for excellent teachers, including class teachers and organization awards. However, these honors are not widely recognized in the community and do not lead to salary or career advancement. So doing some professional training or anything, and the sole motive is to be kind to the kids.

Lack the Support from the Government

Compared to their counterparts in public institutions, private kindergarten principals often contend with limited access to government funding, resources, and subsidies. This lack of support hampers their ability to maintain high-quality facilities, offer competitive salaries to staff, and invest in educational programs and materials.

Principal One thoughtfully stated, "In Yuncheng, our private kindergarten teachers are not qualified to participate in evaluating professional titles. We have nothing to do with national teacher training or teacher excellence programs. We were not given a place to participate." The interviews with teachers and other principals revealed comparable attitudes to the same subject matter but to varying degrees. In addition, principal 3 said:

Yuncheng Education Bureau encourages Angie games. Public and private outdoor events must include Anji games. We had to acquire equipment and prepare the place. Our private kindergartens carry this duty alone, while the government just promotes the device's function and how to manage it to develop children without expert direction. Public kindergartens don't have such issues; anyone may ask for financing, and specialists teach. Private kindergartens can't survive. The government manages but does not fund private kindergartens.

This observation suggests that the government's disregard for expanding private preschool education is evident since private kindergartens are presently experiencing a state of decline compared to their public counterparts. Private kindergarten teachers are not included in the "national training" and "provincial training" programs, and there are few

opportunities to improve training and exchange learning. The low welfare benefits of teachers in private kindergartens, as well as a lack of social security and staffing, lead to teacher team instability, which severely impacts kindergarten management quality and children's healthy growth.

Conclusion and Recommendations

According to the study's results, active learning, case integration, theory linked with practice, and peer collaboration are the elements that impact the efficacy of training for private kindergarten teachers in China. Since kindergarten teachers deal with children at a unique stage of physical and mental development, and since the standards for professional excellence in the field are distinct from those of teachers working with students of older ages, this finding runs counter to the research on the topic. When it comes to managing professional development for teachers, administrators face a complex variety of challenges. The concerns include a wide range of topics, including meeting legal requirements, managing funds effectively, meeting the needs of individual teachers, and inspiring teachers. The term "motivation" comes up frequently.

This study reveals that private kindergartens in China have undergone a process of evaluation and selection through market forces over the previous decade. The leaders in private kindergartens no longer face the hurdle of needing more hardware infrastructure, which used to be a concern in the academic community. The development of private kindergartens has shifted from a phase of fast growth to focusing on high-quality development. As a result, tiny private kindergartens that need to meet the necessary criteria are being phased out. At present, Principals perceive teacher motivation as the most challenging issue. They believe significant efforts are required to incentivize and support teachers in advancing their careers. This is because the government needs to provide equal treatment to private and public kindergartens, which hinders the future growth of private kindergartens. To successfully address the issue of teacher motivation in private kindergartens with limited funding, administrators are seeking government backing to provide the opportunity to evaluate professional titles. This would create opportunities for teachers to advance in their careers.

Additionally, the absence of governmental backing may contribute to a perception among parents and society that private kindergartens are inherently inferior to public ones. Consequently, private kindergarten principals in China must grapple with the stigma and discrimination associated with private education and confront significant hurdles in securing the necessary support to thrive and succeed in their educational endeavours. Therefore, policymakers should be responsible for supporting policies that establish regulations for teachers' professional development and promote their participation in proven professional development programs that improve teaching practices. This, in turn, benefits both the children and the overall kindergarten culture.

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