



RESEARCH REPORT

Understanding Assessment in Early Childhood Education in China

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1. ABSTRACT

This review aimed to synthesise existing studies on assessment in early childhood education (ECE) in China. In order to expand our understanding of assessment in ECE in China and compare with the findings from Western studies, the review only focused on studies conducted in the Chinese context and published in simplified Chinese in the past 10 years. The studies included in this review can be divided into two categories: (1) studies focusing on the concepts and aspects of assessment in ECE, (2) studies focusing on the specific elements of the assessment process in ECE, including participants, standards, and instruments. Given the studies reviewed in this article, we pointed out directions for future research and practice that the concepts and aspects of assessment need to be defined and identified more clearly. Furthermore, particular attention needs to be paid to the diversity of participants, the unification of standards, and the localisation of instruments.

Keywords: early childhood education (ECE); assessment; quality; China

2. RESEARCH INTRODUCTION

The quality of early childhood education (ECE) is highly important to children's early development and learning, which contributes to their school readiness and lifetime wellbeing (Xu, 2011; Hou, 2012; Shi & Ye, 2016). Parents, educational practitioners, researchers, and policy-makers worldwide have paid significant attention to the assessment of ECE providers since 1970s (Su & Xu, 2010). The importance of assessing the quality of ECE has been identified in China, leading to an increasing number of studies and practices since the 1980s (Han & Yuan, 2012). After 1997, the aim of assessment in ECE changed, gradually shifting from educational results to the quality and development of ECE providers (Han & Yuan, 2012). However, assessment in ECE still has some problems related to assessment criteria and process (Li & Hu, 2012).

In order to synthesise research on assessment in ECE in the Chinese speaking literature, expand our understanding of this field, and provide directions for future research, the review attempted to address the following questions:

- (1) How can we understand assessment in ECE in China?
- (2) How can we assess ECE providers in China?

3. LITERATURE SEARCH METHOD

As mentioned above, this review focused on studies regarding assessment in ECE, published in simplified Chinese from 2009 to 2019. The literature search was conducted using the CNKI database, which is the largest and most widely used academic database in China. A set of terms such as "assessment in early childhood education" and "assessment in early years centres" were searched in the database, which resulted in 91 articles. Among the articles, 32 articles were selected for the review. The studies can be divided into two categories to answer the two questions mentioned above:

- (1) Studies focusing on the concept and aspects of assessment in ECE;
- (2) Studies focusing on the specific elements involved in the assessment process in ECE, including participants, standards, and instruments.

4. CONCEPTS AND ASPECTS OF ASSESSMENT IN ECE IN CHINA

4.1 Concepts of assessment in ECE

Prior to discussing the assessment in ECE, it is essential to clearly define it in the Chinese context. ECE providers mainly include public and private kindergartens, nurseries, and early-years centres, which aim to provide preschool children with high-quality childcare and education, thereby supporting children's development and learning (Li, 2016). Assessing the quality of ECE providers is to assess their provision of care and education. In other words, assessing the quality of ECE refers to the inspection of the degree to which the ECE providers satisfy the stakeholders' needs, which is considerably determined by whether the providers successfully promote young children's mental and physical development and wellbeing in general (Li & Hu, 2012).

Chinese researchers have realised that, when considering the concept of assessment in ECE, the views of different interest groups need to be taken into account and respected (Su & Xu, 2010). How to define and understand the assessment in ECE should be clear and must link to child development closely. Promoting the optimal development of young children is the ultimate goal of assessment in ECE.

4.2 Aspects of assessment in ECE

Researchers have pointed out two fundamental aspects of ECE quality, i.e. structural quality and process quality, which are closely linked to each other and have crucial influences on child development (Huang, Li, & Zhong, 2018). Structural quality includes factors such as hardware facilities, physical resources, teacher qualifications, and teacher-child ratio (Huang et al., 2018). These factors are relatively stable and therefore can be observed and assessed directly (Huang & Song, 2013). Process quality focuses on teacher-child interaction, teacher-parent communication, teaching skills, leadership, the overall climate of kindergartens, etc. (Zhou, 2012; Huang et al., 2018; Huang & Song, 2013). The factors of process quality are important to children's daily experience in the kindergarten, but are often demonstrated in a dynamic rather than a static situation. The assessment of process quality is therefore complex (Huang & Song, 2013). Similarly, Yang and He (2017) summarised three aspects of ECE, i.e. structural quality, process quality, and result quality. In addition to structural quality and process quality as

mentioned before, the outcome quality focuses on child mental and physical development outcomes, such as fine and gross motor skills, language and communication, social and emotional abilities, etc.

With regard to the importance of each aspect of assessment in ECE, Yang and Peng (2017) argued that assessment in ECE in China has paid excessive attention to structural quality. Process quality is considered as the core of assessment in ECE, due to the reason that it can predict the development of ECE providers more effectively than structural quality. Moreover, whether outcome quality should be an assessment indicator remains debatable in the Chinese speaking literature. Additional research is therefore needed to examine the relative role of each aspect in assessment in ECE.

5. ELEMENTS OF ASSESSMENT IN ECE IN CHINA

5.1 Participants

The Guidance for Kindergarten Education (2001) issued by the Ministry of Education (MOE) of the People's Republic of China emphasises that policymakers, managers, teachers, researchers, children, and parents are all “participants” in assessment in ECE. Different participants may have a wide range of needs, which shape their understanding of “high-quality ECE providers”. Some Chinese researchers conducted comparative research on the perspectives of different participants of assessment in ECE. For example, Zhang (2012) found that there are significant differences in the understanding of “good kindergarten” standards among four groups of participants, including experts, teachers, parents, and children. Li and Hu (2012) suggested that involving inspectors from different backgrounds such as researchers and educational practitioners in the process of assessment of ECE would help improve the effectiveness of assessment.

5.2 Standards

It is expected that assessment standards can reflect the mainstream values of ECE in China. Kang and Liu (2011) claimed that the assessment standards should focus on the quality of facilities, teaching, curriculum, and child development. He and Yan (2014) emphasised that the

standard should ensure the safety of children and meet the needs of parents and children. Whether child development can be supported is the most crucial thing to be taken into account when setting up assessment standards. However, no unified set of assessment standards is available for ECE providers across different areas in China (Kang & Liu, 2011). There is an ongoing debate on whether to include the indicators of “parental satisfaction” in assessment standards (Yang & Li, 2016). Examples showing assessment standards in Beijing, Shanghai, and Jiangsu are provided below.

The quality of kindergartens in Beijing is assessed using the Beijing Kindergarten Rank and Category Rating Standards (R&C Standards) developed by the Beijing Municipal Commission of Education and the Beijing Municipal Health Bureau in 1989 and later revised in 1994 and 2000 (Pan, Liu, & Lau, 2010). Rank concerns the quality of the value orientation, physical condition, staff, and management of the kindergarten, while category concerns the quality of care and teaching, hygiene and health care, and the support of child development provided by the kindergarten. The rank and category of the kindergarten are rated respectively from level 1 to 3, and the combination of the level of rank and category (e.g. R1C1) is used as the result showing the overall quality of the kindergarten. Based on R&C Standards, top kindergartens are selected among R1C1 kindergartens and classified as demonstration kindergartens.

The Grade Standards for Kindergartens in Shanghai (trial) (2003) divides kindergartens into three levels by assessing with basic standards and developmental requirements, accounting for 85% and 15% respectively. Basic standards consist of child development outcomes, resources, management, education and care. Developmental requirements consist of team building, curriculum, and culture.

The Evaluation Standards and Rules of Quality Kindergartens in Jiangsu (Ye, 2007) stated that assessments are conducted by means of different methods such as observation, interview, questionnaire, and documents analysis. The assessment is carried out in terms of five aspects, including team building, conditions, safety and health, children development, and management.

5.3 Instruments

In China, the instruments for assessing the quality of ECE programs are greatly influenced by assessment tools developed in Western countries, especially CLASS, ECERS-R, and the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Standards, and Accreditation Criteria (Yang & Li, 2016). In addition, taking the cultural background and current situations of Chinese ECE providers into

account, researchers have adapted or developed assessment tools which are suitable for assessing ECE in China. For instance, a scale named “Quality Rating Scale for Early Childhood Programs in China (trial version)” was developed to assess eight aspects of ECE, i.e. space and facilities, early childhood care, group activities, play-based materials and activities, interaction, day activities, parents’ and teachers’ support, and supportive environment for children with special needs. The scale has been proven to be valid and effective (Chen, 2009). Liu & Pan (2008) developed an instrument named the Kindergarten Education Rating Scale (KERS), which had twenty-five items rated in a five-point scale. KERS includes four dimensions, i.e., the physical environment, interactions, routine care, and curriculum. Hu and Li (2012) highlighted the need to assess the quality of early childhood education for children with special needs and put forward a conceptual framework on high-quality inclusive education.

Some researchers have conducted comparative studies on assessment standards for kindergartens in various areas in China. For example, Dai and Liu (2003) analysed the quality assessment tools of kindergartens in five provinces and cities, suggesting that the assessment tools focused more on the management of kindergarten, development of children and staff, physical resources, but relatively neglected the quality of educational activities. Liu (2003) examined ECE quality assessment in four provinces and municipalities in China and indicated that the assessment tended to be result-oriented, which is consistent with the findings of Liu (2006). It is also found that the assessment contents and standards are flawed, and the reliability and validity of the assessment tool were not examined rigorously.

Overall, there are some scales which can be widely and effectively used for assessment in ECE in China. However, most of the current instruments are adapted from Western countries. It is hoped that additional standardised instruments with desirable psychometric properties can be developed to meet the needs of assessment in ECE in China.

6. CONCLUSION

The studies reviewed in this article have revealed some problems and challenges that need to be addressed in order to improve the effectiveness of assessment in ECE in China. There are two problems related to the concepts and aspects of assessment in ECE. First, assessment in ECE has been defined similarly in the Chinese speaking literature. However, the concept tends to be unspecific. It would be useful if assessment in ECE could be defined more clearly and consistently in future research and practice, particularly in terms of the relationship between the quality of ECE and child development. Second, more research is needed to understand the key aspects of assessment and their relative roles in assessment. It is known that process quality is valuable, yet the role of structural quality and outcome quality remains a disputed issue.

With regard to the elements of assessment in ECE, there remain three challenges. First, due to the diversity of participants who are involved in the process of assessment, such as policymakers, managers, teachers, researchers, children, and parents, different opinions need to be recognised and respected. Inspectors with different perspectives such as researchers and educational practitioners would make joint efforts to improve the effectiveness of assessment. Second, there is no unified set of assessment standards of ECE providers across different cities and provinces in China. Whether it is realistic and reliable to develop a set of assessment standards to be adopted in ECE in China has to be explored in the future. Third, highly reliable and valid assessment instruments are in great need. Although some tools have been adapted from standardised English measures, it is necessary to develop reliable, valid, and culturally and linguistically appropriate assessment tools that can be easily accessed and used in different ECE settings in the Chinese context. Furthermore, most existing assessment instruments are designed for kindergartens mainly with 3-6-year-olds. Very few assessment tools, if any, are available to examine nurseries with 0-3-year-olds or other types of ECE providers. It is hoped that this review can serve as a starting point for further research and practice aiming at improving the assessment in ECE in China.

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