Early practitioners’ reactions and suggestions to professional development in Taiwan

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Purpose of the presentation

“Professional development” has been one of the most important missions for early practitioners in Taiwan. However the research done on this topic in Taiwan was very little. It must be valuable to see the picture of how early practitioners react to their professional growth experiences, because it is one important and effective way to improve the quality of professional development system and to enhance the quality of early care and education. This study involved various methods and participants in order to find out the hidden voice in early practitioners’ heart toward professional development. This study was done in a small but modern society. The findings strongly implied that early practitioners in Taiwan belonged to a weak vocational group that strongly needed law reform to care for their welfare and rights. Such findings may be similar to other countries. It must be interesting and valuable to share Taiwan’s experiences and stories of professional development of early practitioners, and receive feedback from people all over the world.
Rationale of the study

The most important thing in deciding the quality of early childhood care and education is early practitioners’ professional performance including professional knowledge, skills and attitudes. Therefore ongoing professional growth is very important for early practitioners in order to enhance their own profession and the quality of early childhood care and education. However too little research has been done in Taiwan to examine the effect of programs offered to early practitioners in terms of professional development. The main purpose of this study was to understand early practitioners’ reactions to and suggestions for the professional development programs that they attended. It was hoped to offer some significant suggestions for organizations and institutions that offer such professional development programs.

Research questions

Therefore this study was aimed to answer the following questions: 1. What was the attitude of early practitioners for professional development? 2. How did early practitioners evaluate their professional development experiences? 3. What were early practitioners’ needs and difficulties in terms of professional development? 4. What were early practitioners’ suggestions for their future professional development? 5. What were the relationships between early practitioners’ age, positions, years they have worked in this field, educational background and their needs as well as difficulties in terms of professional development? 6.
What were the differences among early practitioners’ age, positions, years they have worked in this field, and educational background in terms of their needs and difficulties toward professional development.

It was hoped to gather authentic information from research subjects and to enhance the quality of varied opportunities for early practitioners’ professional development.

Important concepts

This section primarily presents some important concepts about professional development mentioned by significant organizations and professionals in the field of early childhood education. Although the following literatures were all provided 10 years ago, they are still very useful now as 10 years later.

The common elements define what all early childhood professionals must know and be able to do, including (NAEYC, 1994):

- demonstrate an understanding of child development and apply this knowledge in practice.
- observe and assess children’s behavior in planning and individualizing teaching practices and curriculum;
- establish and maintain a safe and healthy environment for children;
- plan and implement developmentally appropriate curriculum that advances all areas of children’s learning and development, including social, emotional, intellectual, and physical competence;
- establish supportive relationships with children and implement
developmentally appropriate techniques of guidance and group management;

- establish and maintain positive and productive relationships with families;

- support the development and learning of individual children, recognizing that children are best understood in the context of family, culture, and society; and

- demonstrate an understanding of the early childhood profession and make a commitment to professionalism.

In order to fulfill above professional competencies, ongoing growth is very important to all early childhood professionals. NAEYC (1994) then also pointed out the principles of effective professional development.

1. Professional development is an ongoing process.

2. Professional development experiences are most effective when grounded in a sound theoretical and philosophical base and structured as a coherent and systematic program.

3. Professional development experiences are most successful when they respond to individuals’ background, experiences, and the current context of their role.

4. Effective professional development opportunities are structured to promote clear linkages between theory and practice.

5. Providers of effective professional development experiences have an appropriate knowledge and experience base.

6. Effective professional development experiences use an active, hands-on approach and stress an interactive approach that
encourages students to learn from one another.

7. Effective professional development experiences contribute to positive self-esteem by acknowledging the skills and resources brought to the training process as opposed to creating feelings of self-doubt or inadequacy by immediately calling into question an individual’s current practices.

8. Effective professional development experiences provide opportunities for application and reflection and allow for individuals to be observed and receive feedback upon what has been learned.

9. Students and professionals should be involved in the planning and design of their professional development program.

Those who provide continuing education for early practitioners have the same purpose—to help others with their teaching. Therefore Katz (1994) provided some principles and techniques that is important for teacher educators.

Principles for the selection of focus:

1. Focus on teachers’ understandings of situations
2. Focus on strengthening desirable dispositions
3. Focus on maintaining competencies already acquired
4. Focus on build long-term relationships
5. Focus on providing moderate amounts of inspiration

General techniques for working with teachers
1. Maintain an optimum distance
2. Cultivate the habit of suspending judgment
3. Phrase suggestions in experimental form
4. Avoid the temptation to stop pattern behavior
5. Help teachers define their job so that its objectives are achievable
6. Serve as a neutralizer of conflicts
7. Use demonstrations of skills.
8. Share your understanding of how a teachers sees you
9. Resist the temptation to use teachers

Above information formed the base of the present research, especially was obviously applied in the questionnaire and interview questions.

Methods

The study applied both quantitative and qualitative methods to gather data. First of all, a questionnaire designed by the researcher was used to survey early practitioners’ experiences, needs, and difficulties for professional development. Two professors and two directors of day care centers all agreed the content of the questionnaire. Also the reliability of the questionnaire was approved by Chronbech’s Alpha (r=0.8054, n of cases=162, n of items=41). There was one open question included by the end of the questionnaire for answerers to offer suggestions for professional development system. Also the answerers were asked to leave their e-mail addresses for future contact if they were willing to. Second of all, the researcher e-mailed them for more deep inside questions, such as what were the real difficulties of their professional
development, and how they conquered them. Third, the researcher made a focus group interview with 10 people who were bosses or directors of early childhood care and education centers. The purpose of the interview was to understand how they help teachers in their centers enhance professional performance and what were their suggestions to early practitioners’ professional development system. In order to analyze the quantitative data, descriptive statistics, Spearman’s correlation analysis, and one-way ANOVA were all applied. And the qualitative and quantitative data were analyzed through triangulate examinations.

Results

1. In conferences, listening to lectures was the style most frequently presented as a learning way, but in early practitioners’ evaluations, its help was the least. On the other hand, observing expertise teachers’ teaching was the least type in terms of professional development approach. However, adding observing teaching to listening to lectures was evaluated as the most helpful training way for early practitioners.

2. Practitioners at 31-40 years old had family bound that limited their opportunities for growth.

3. The needs of practitioners who had worked in this field long were more intrinsic controlled, and the ways they enjoyed for learning were more reflection oriented. On the other hand, the younger ones expected for incentives from attending professional
development programs.

4. Practitioners who didn’t major in early childhood education and care related programs needed direct instruction from directors and training on curriculum design more than those who majored in early childhood education.

5. The motivation of early practitioners to professional development was strong, but from heart they refused some non-significant activities held only for spending the ground by some institutions.

6. Practitioners need more learning activities that merge theories and practice rather than theory or practice only. They hoped to try what they learned immediately.

7. Practitioners’ main frustration on the way to growth came from their directors and children’s parents who didn’t agree with their concepts and values about child care and education.

Implications

In Taiwan, generally early practitioners highly valued professional development. The government and academic institutions also offer many opportunities for practitioners to growth. However, many learning programs needed to be modified by listening to participants’ real needs and difficulties. This study implied it was the most important thing to reform the law related to child care and education in order to construct the regulations of whole early childhood care and education system, including practitioners’ welfare and promotion. It is also the appropriate way
to enhance the quality of early childhood care and education.

References
