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Cooperative Preschool Education in Ethnic China: Ulanqab Case Study

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Abstract

The integrated education of family, kindergarten, and community is crucial for children's development. However, in China's ethnic regions, preschool education faces significant shortcomings, with limited community involvement and consideration of ethnic characteristics. This study aims to address these gaps by proposing a conceptual framework tailored for ethnic areas, focusing on the Ulanqab region. Drawing on domestic and international research, we develop a model comprising family, preschool, and community inputs, emphasising the importance of community participation. The model includes educational inputs, educational processes, and target outcomes, with the goal of improving preschool education quality. Through this research, we seek to understand the effectiveness of preschool education in ethnic areas and provide insights for creating a high-quality education system benefiting all children.

1.0   Introduction

According to Heckman (2011), differences in adult skills, such as economic and cognitive skills, can be traced back to early childhood experiences. Research by McCoy and Wolf (2018) and Vandell, Burchinal, and Pierce (2016) confirms the positive impact of high-quality preschool on child development. Investing in early childhood education is thus crucial, not only for individual development but also for contributing to the nation's labor pool and economic growth (Delalibera & Ferreira, 2018).

Urban et al. (2020) note a global agreement to increase community-based planning for early childhood development, emphasising the importance of engaging everyone in early childhood education programs to reduce inequality and promote social unity. Early intervention and support are essential for optimal development.

China's education modernisation is progressing steadily, with policies promoting home and community cooperative education in preschools. Recognising the vital roles of families, kindergartens, and communities in child development, the Ministry of Education and nine other departments issued an opinion in 2016 to advance community education. This opinion stressed the comprehensive integration of community education systems and the utilisation of community resources to expand educational opportunities. In 2021, the Law of the People's Republic of China on the Promotion of Family Education reiterated the responsibilities of families, preschools, and communities in early childhood education, emphasising coordination among these bodies to promote education modernisation and create a high-quality preschool education system.

Despite improvements in systematic preschool education planning, the delayed initiation of community preschool education in China compared to other countries has resulted in a relative deficiency in research and practical experience (Li, Liu & Guo, 2019). Moreover, uneven development among regions remains a prominent issue. Ethnic preschool education, especially in remote farming and pastoral areas, lags behind national educational standards (Long & Yuan, 2021). Addressing these issues is crucial for building a high-quality preschool education system in China.

Existing research on family-preschool-community cooperation in preschool education highlights the lack of fully suitable models for China's localised characteristics. While some foreign theoretical models offer valuable insights, current domestic models show regional differences and lack universal cooperation experience (Wang, Zhang & Gong, 2021). Moreover, there are few cooperative frameworks addressing preschool education in ethnic areas, posing a challenge in addressing the unique circumstances of these regions. To meet the developmental needs of quality preschool education, there is a necessity to establish a family-preschool-community cooperative education framework suitable for ethnic areas. This study aims to construct such a framework and explore the effectiveness of the family-preschool-community cooperative model in preschool education in ethnic minority areas in Ulanqab City, providing a favourable paradigm for preschool education development in ethnic areas in China.

2.0   Literature Review

2.1   Community Preschool

The German sociologist Tonnies first introduced the concept of "community" in the 19th century (Tonnies & Loomis, 1999). Although sociologists today offer more than 140 definitions of community, the consensus is that a community is a "community of people living within a certain geographical area" (Brint, 2001). Nowadays, there is a consensus that all people are involved in education, and education is no longer just a matter for schools but extends to the whole society and communities. Human, physical and environmental resources in the community are lively learning materials, community participation in education can reorganise, transform, and redistribute existing educational resources (Liu, 2006). This synergistic approach makes it possible to fully utilise all public and private resources (Holme et al., 2022). Community preschool education, as an important part of community education, is of great significance in expanding preschool education resources, promoting the development of preschool children and improving the level of community services (Juhadira, Puspitasari & Nasir, 2024). Chen (2005) charted the relationship between community preschool education and young

children's family education and kindergarten education (Figure 1) and defined the relationship as "parallel to each other, with a slight intersection," with community preschool education being an effective complement to family education and kindergarten education, helping young children to have a more coherent learning experience (Jacobson, 2018).
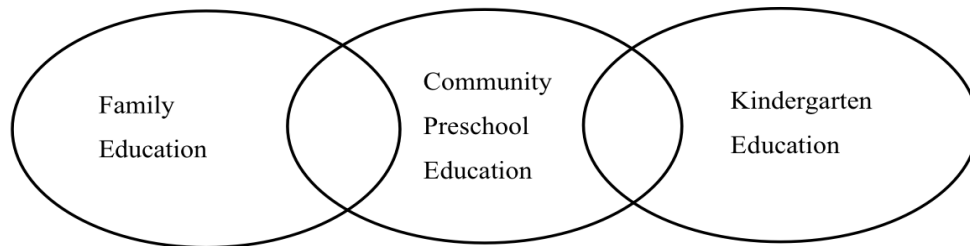
Family Education   Community Preschool Education   Kindergarten Education

Figure 1: Relationship between family education, kindergarten education and community preschool education (Chen, 2005)

2.2   Family- Preschool- Community Cooperative Preschool Education

Developmental psychology theories highlight the crucial role of social interactions in shaping the abilities of young children. To improve educational outcomes, partnerships between schools, families, and communities are considered essential (Thomas, Rowe, & Harris, 2010). According to Bronfenbrenner's theory of the ecology, the quality of the interactive environment, whether it be at home, kindergarten, or community setting, has a significant impact on a child's growth and development (Tudge, Merçon-Vargas, Liang & Payir, 2016). Meremikwu, Ekwueme and Enukoha (2014) asserted that engaging parents and the community in teaching and learning could be a critical aspect of students' success in school. Numerous studies have shown that preschool programs do not work in isolation and that partnerships between schools, families, and communities can contribute to increase student achievement and improve student behaviour (Firmanto, Sumarsono, & Nur, 2020; Sheldon, 2007). There is an old proverb that it does take a village to raise a child (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). High-quality education for children can only be achieved if kindergartens strengthen their links with families and communities and make full use of all these available educational resources.

In terms of research on family-preschool-community collaboration models, American educator Epstein (Epstein et al., 2018) proposed the theory of overlapping influences of schools, families, and communities and suggested six model types of family, preschool, and community collaboration. Frederico and Whiteside (2016) established a family-preschool-community collaboration framework system at the theoretical level, aiming to provide social workers with an opportunity to intervene in cross-sectoral partnerships in early childhood education.

There are still many barriers to successful partnerships in the family- preschool-community (McCrystal & Godfrey, 2001). This requires different partners to come to a shared belief about their respective roles in promoting education (Sanders, 2008). According to Wang (2014), there is not enough awareness about collaborative education among families, communities, and kindergartens in China. Li et al. (2019) noted that the current family-preschool-community cooperative education lacks a monitoring and evaluation mechanism, and the three-party collaborative education is superficial.

2.3   Ethnic Preschool Education

Education must be able to create high values or national character. Therefore, such indoctrination must begin at an early age (Krisnawati, 2024). Ethnic preschool education includes both formal kindergarten initiation education and non-formal education, such as family and community education (Ha, 2010). Evaluation of preschool education in ethnic areas should not be based on the mainstream urban model, and ethnic characteristics should be fully affirmed (Tian, 2009). The curriculum should be designed in such a way that it can only pass on the culture but also adapt to the mainstream, strengthen the involvement of traditional culture and folk culture content, and enhance the sense of cultural identity of young children (Yu et al., 2023).

3.0   Hypotheses Development and Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework was designed based on three theoretical underpinnings: the ecological theory of education, the synergistic theory, and the "input-process-output" theory of inclusive education. The ecological theory proposed by Bronfenbrenner in 1979 states that the connections and influences between people and their environments are inextricably linked, and highlights the importance of the early childhood education environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Henderson, Schmus, McDonald & Irving, 2020). Educational ecology is the application of ecology to education and aims to show that educational institutions do not exist in isolation and that the educational resources of the family and the community should be fully utilised as material for the education of young children's lives. The famous German physicist Hermann Hacken proposed the theory of synergy in the 1970s, which aims to emphasise the cooperative links between systems, and Lv et al. (2020) consider the synergy of the educational system as the synergy of integrating personalities and then working towards a common goal. In 1994, the World Conference on Special Needs Education put forward the idea of "inclusive education", which is now out of the category of "special education" and has been generally recognised by countries all over the world. Inclusive education is now recognised worldwide. Inclusive education aims to emphasise the need for education to be open to all children, to take into account disadvantaged groups such as children from disadvantaged families and remote areas, and to create an inclusive educational environment that promotes the social development of young children (Van Mieghem, Verschueren, Petry & Struyf, 2020). The Input-Process-Outcome (IPO) model was developed by Kyriazopoulou and Weber (2009) to evaluate the outcomes of inclusive education. It measures participation in educational activities at the macro (national, regional), meso (school, local community), and micro (individual) levels (Loreman et al., 2014; Watkins & Ebersold, 2016). Surur et al. (2020) stated that the achievement of educational goals can be seen in the learning outcomes (educational outputs). A high-quality input system can certainly produce high quality output. The design of the conceptual framework in this study derives from this model support. It aims to assess the adaptability of the conceptual model in the diverse discursive environment of Ulanqab.

3.1   Education Quality

The quantity and quality of education are competing for policy attention and resources as never before (UNESCO, 2004). According to Leo Tolstoy, the quality of knowledge is far more important than quantity. Currently, with the expansion of education, countries are moving from "universal education" to "quality education" (Leu, 2005). However, quality is considered to be a relative concept, for which there is currently no unanimous academic definition (Doherty, 2012). Quality is usually defined as effectiveness, i.e. the extent to which goals or expectation defined as the proven ability to produce results (Leu, 2005). Ekpenyong, Owan, Mbon and Undie (2023) indicated that the output of quality of education can be in the form of cognitive, affective and psychomotor in addition to academic achievement.

3.2   Family Input

According to Faoag, Chaudhry, Shatrg, and Berham (2011), parents have been considered the main motivators of education and the main agents of children's participation in socialisation. In Chinese society, parental involvement in school-related activities is associated with the quality of early childhood education. The more active parents are in early childhood education activities, the better the children perform in kindergarten (Yang, 2021). Lau, Li, and Rao (2011) found in a study of Hong Kong and Shenzhen districts that homework supervision, provision of language and cognitive activities, and family involvement can predict children's school readiness. Numerous studies have been conducted to show that educated parents can provide the most appropriate environment for their children's education and that their attitudes, as well as their behaviours and activities toward their children's education, are critical to young children's achievement, cognitive and affective development, and early childhood engagement (Amato & Rivera, 1999; Anthony & Walshaw, 2007). According to Epstein (2010), the types of parental involvement include six categories: basic parenting, facilitating learning at home, communicating and working with the school, volunteering at school, participating in decision-making about school activities, and working with the community. A comprehensive review of the literature summarises the family input

factors of parents' occupation, socio-economic status, family size and type, cultural capital, family expectations, and educational participation. (Ntitika, 2014; Chowa, Masa & Tucker, 2013). Therefore, the hypothesis is proposed:

H1: There is a significant positive effect of family inputs on the educational process

H2: There is a significant positive effect of family inputs on the quality of preschool education

3.3   Preschool Input

Preschool input, which can also be understood as the structural elements of education, includes teachers, premises, equipment, materials, etc. (Ogunsola, Osuolale & Ojo, 2015; Yang, 2016). A quality kindergarten program aligns with primary and secondary education, provides children with fun learning experiences, and in turn builds a strong foundation for sustainable learning and growth (Firmanto, Sumarsono, & Nur, 2020). Early childhood teachers, as the implementers of preschool education, are the driving force behind the development of preschool education, and Ashraf & Ahmed (2022) state that teachers are the key to students' success in life. Wiliam's (2013) research shows that good teachers benefit their students for at least two more years after they stop teaching. UNESCO's 2004 report also repeatedly emphasised that teachers have the strongest influence on learning and various other quality factors in schools (UNESCO, 2005). The OECD's (2012) stated that highly qualified teachers have a significant positive impact on student performance and can reduce the achievement gap between students. The professional quality of early childhood teachers includes a wide range of aspects such as teachers' professional teaching ability, their own moral and ethical level, behaviour, and mental health (Zhang, 2017).

The success of an educational institution is not only supported by the quality of teachers provided, but the infrastructure also has a great impact (Krisnawati, 2024). Sun (2016) pointed out that the infrastructure in preschool institutions is a material and technical guarantee for the realisation of the tasks of preservation and education.

Improvement of infrastructure can strongly contribute to the improvement of the quality of education (Leu, 2005). To this end, the following hypotheses were formulated:

H3: There is a significant positive effect of preschool school inputs on the process of preschool education

H4: There is a significant positive effect of preschool inputs on the quality of preschool education

3.4   Community Input

Programs to improve the quality of education cannot be achieved without strong government oversight and efficient community participation (Leu, 2005). Smith and Barrett (2010) noted that the utilisation of community resources is an important determinant of educational outcomes, especially for learners with low socio-economic status abilities. Community-based educational resource inputs are very beneficial to the teaching and learning process where schools can get useful things to use in the teaching and learning process (Ekpo, 2001). Community educational resource inputs have a significant impact on student learning by providing learners with a clearer understanding of the course content, helping to take the learning content out of abstract concepts, increasing learner engagement, and improving educational efficiency and early childhood competencies (Nwabuike, 2017; Oyeniyi, 2010). Community participation facilitates the building of a collaborative education management system where community members have the responsibility of member participation in policy development, improvement implementation and quality assessment (Hopkins et al., 2014).

Sha (2022) stated that community preschool education cannot be carried out without the support of policies and regulations, which is an important basis for carrying out community preschool education practice activities and quality assessment. In addition, community preschool education must be carried out with adequate educational funding to maintain and update teaching and recreational facilities needed for community education activities on time (Ye, 2014). Therefore, we hypothesise:

H5: There is a significant positive effect of community inputs on educational process

H6: There is a significant positive effect of community inputs on the quality of preschool education

3.5   Education Process

Human, financial, and material resources invested in the educational process will produce results based on the characteristics of students (Tikly, 2011). It is widely recognised that teachers and classroom processes are now at the front and centre and are key to the quality of education (Leu, 2005). A large body of evidence suggests that there is a positive correlation between quality teaching and learning processes and the quality of education. The educational process is the method of delivering content, i.e., the teacher's method of teaching (Salam, 2015). Howes et al (2008) argued that process factors are decisive for the quality of preschool education, which clearly reflects the quality of the process of preschool education and the professionalism of teachers. The quality of the teacher as the main participant in the classroom, the teacher's quality, the teacher's professional attitudes, energy, and motivation combined with teaching skills that can facilitate the learning process in the classroom is essential to create the quality of learning (Wittek &Habib, 2013; Araujo et al, 2016; Mincu, 2015).

Good communication can facilitate conversations about teaching and learning, and agreement on common goals (Fullan, 2010; Díez, Villa, López & Iraurgi, 2020). Teachers need to connect teaching and learning to the outside of the school community (Ajibola, 2018). There is a need to take students out of the classroom for field trips to bridge the gap between theory and practice (Oyewale, 2022). Schools should also guide parents and build partnerships (Marzano, 2003). Therefore, it can be hypothesised:

H7: Educational process has a positive and significant effect on the quality of preschool education

Figure 2 presents the conceptual model, which includes a total of seven hypotheses aimed at assessing the effectiveness of family-preschool-community cooperation in the ethnic areas of Ulanqab.
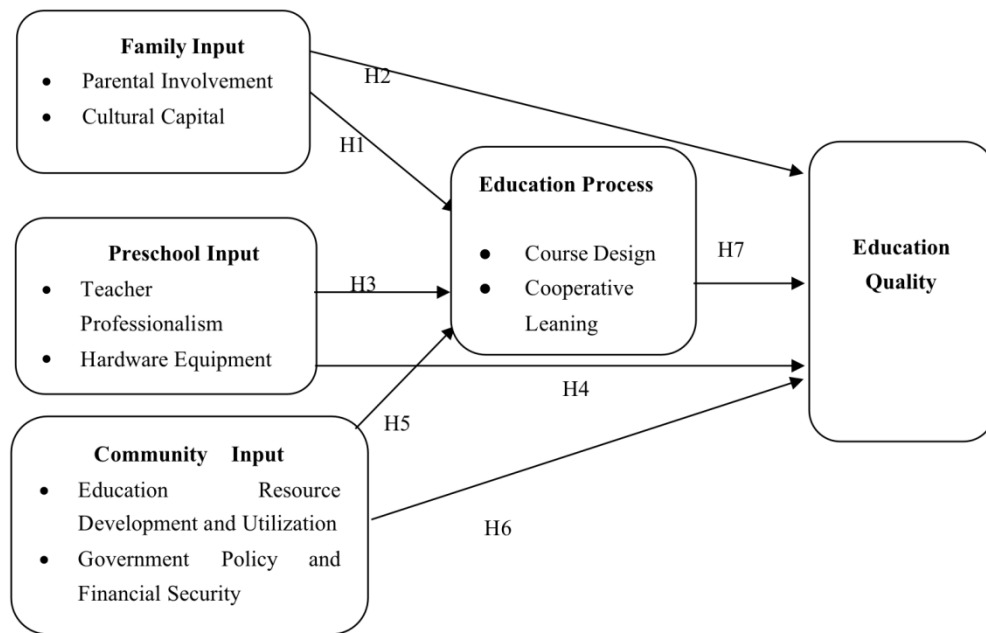

Figure 2: Family-preschool-community conceptual model for Ulanqab

4.0   Conclusion and Recommendation

Families, kindergartens, and communities serve as the primary environments where young children live, learn, and develop. These micro-environments have the most significant and direct impact on children's development and are where they are first exposed to social and cultural influences. Each of these three entities—families, kindergartens, and communities—plays a unique and irreplaceable role, and when they establish a harmonious partnership, they can maximise the overall function of education, providing a high-quality learning environment for young children.

In assessing the current state of cooperation between homes and communities in ethnic areas, it's essential to consider the influence of ethnic specialities and cultures. This includes whether teachers have incorporated traditional ethnic stories, handicrafts, ethnic music, and games into the curriculum design. This aspect will be evaluated in the "Educational Process" survey.

The research framework developed in this study aims to offer a valuable tool for designing preschool education experiences suitable for young children in Ulanqab. By identifying current issues in family-preschool-community cooperative education in Ulanqab, it can help standardise cooperative education systems and provide reasonable suggestions for improving preschool education quality. Additionally, it contributes to enriching the theory related to family-preschool-community cooperative education and provides a reference for implementing tripartite cooperation in other ethnic areas.

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