

Young Chinese Parents Should Be More Productively Involved in the Preschool Educations of Children Aged 3-6 Years Old

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Abstract: As the Chinese economy and society rapidly develop, the development of preschool education in China has attracted much attention. How to better implement preschool education for the children's development has become a topic of concern. This paper will argue that young Chinese parents should be more productively involved in their children's early childhood education and discusses this from three main aspects, the impact of a lack of constructive participation on the children, the strategies for parental involvement in children's education, and the benefits of productive participation to the development of children. Moreover, the lack of support from literature or studies needs to be recognized while the issue of young parents balancing their work duties and participation in children's education also needs to be further explored in future research.

1. Introduction and Context

Education has always been an enduring topic of interest among human beings. In China, as a part of basic education, preschool education has attracted much attention than ever before with the development of the Chinese education system, where economic growth for the past two decades has been rapid (Zhu and Wang, 2005; Zhu and Zhang, 2008). At the same time, preschool education still has some controversies in China. For example, whether the children should learn as much as possible (Lau et al., 2012); which is more important for children, school education or family education (Guo and Kilderry, 2018); how parents should participate in their children's preschool education (Zhang et al., 2014) and other topics. This paper will focus on the necessity of young parents being more constructively involved in their children's preschool education in China.

At present, in China, the younger generation of parents have become busier and are facing greater pressure due to the rapid development of Chinese society and economy, resulting in a social situation in which many young parents send their children to kindergartens early or leave their children with grandparents who help them to educate the children (Zhu and Wang, 2005; Zhang, 2011). More importantly, a dominant opinion in Chinese society is that good early childhood education consists of a good kindergarten and a variety of skill training classes (Zhu and Wang, 2005; Lau et al., 2011; Zhang, 2011). These series of phenomena have caused a problem in which education for preschool children lacks reasonable and productive participation by their parents (Luo et al., 2013; Lau et al., 2012).

When it comes to the concept of "preschool education", as a central terminology in this paper, different countries have different divisions for the age of education. For instance, in the United States, both private and public kindergartens are available for children aged between three and five years old (Blair, 2014); in the UK, some local governments provide funding for children from the ages of two to four years old to attend nurseries or schools (Rogers et al., 2009); in China, preschool education refers to an education for children ranging from three to six years old (Zhu and Wang, 2005). Since this paper discusses the preschool education situation in China, it will focus on children aged between three to six years old. Despite the differences in the ages of the education groups, there are still common features. Preschool education is generally anticipated to cultivate the self-sufficiency of children, such as eating, dressing, and life skills, like toilet training are the same (Zhang, 2011; Rogers et al., 2009; Blair, 2014).

This paper is divided into five sections. The next section argues the adverse effects of inadequate and ineffective parental involvement in children's development of preschool education. The third part provides a few specific referential strategies and methods to enhance the value of parental participation. The fourth part of the paper discusses the beneficial impacts that could be gained by children from meaningful parental involvement and the last section provides an overview of this paper and a summary of the claims presented as well as recommendations for future research.

2. Claim 1: Parental Mistaken Childrearing Practices and Absences from Participation Have Caused Some Adverse Effects on the Growth and Development of Children

Preschool education, as the cornerstone of people's life education, is necessary for everyone. At present, in China, about thirty children need to be simultaneously looked after by one or two teachers in kindergartens due to the large population and limited resources (Luo et al., 2013). Moreover, in order to make it easier to take care of all children, the teacher-centred pattern is normally applied in the daily activities of the class, which means the class is instructed by the teachers and it is hard for the children to receive an adequate and appropriate level of attention from their teachers (Guo and Kilderry, 2018; Luo et al., 2013). Thanks to this, parents need to more productively participate in their children's preschool education. On the contrary, the absence and the mistaken childrearing practices of parental involvement will also have negative impacts on children, such as lack of self-sufficiency; lack of creativity and independent thinking ability and lack of courage or confidence (Zhang et al., 2014; Luo et al., 2013; Lau et al., 2012; Zhu and Zhang, 2008; Harris and Goodall, 2008).

Some of the childrearing methods used by many Chinese parents have caused their children to lack self-sufficiency (Lau et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2014). In China, under the influence of the "One Child Policy", parents, especially grandparents, do almost everything for the children in their lives, even dressing, feeding or toileting (Zhang, 2011; Zhang et al., 2014). One explanation is that parents or grandparents try to give their love to their children or grandchildren by helping them to do everything (Zhang, 2011). Another reason is that they insist that their children are too small to do these things, or they may screw things up, so they deprive the children of the opportunity to try (Zhang et al., 2014). Over time, the children lose their ability to take care of themselves because everything is done by others (Zhang, 2011). Furthermore, "Research on Education Issues Concerned by Chinese Families in 2016", a survey report of 6,529 families in different regions, mentioned that compared with learning, what worries Chinese parents is that their children do not have self-sufficiency (Zhu and Zhang, 2008).

Furthermore, the lack of creativity and independent thinking is related to the children's rare chance to choose for themselves and parents making alternative choices for their children (Berthelsen and Walker, 2008; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Anderson and Minke, 2007). In kindergarten, most of the activities are guided by the teachers, so there are fewer opportunities for the children to choose and little time given to them to free play due to the impact of the social context (Guo and Kilderry, 2018; Luo et al., 2013). Moreover, in the family, many parents impose their own thinking on their children, which ignores and disrespects the children's sense of self-awareness in order to prevent them from making mistakes (Guo and Kilderry, 2018; Anderson and Minke, 2007). Furthermore, Lau et al. (2012) conducted a survey of parents from six kindergartens via questionnaires in the Changchun City of China. More than half of the parents said they made decisions for their children so as to make their children take fewer detours in life and avoid mistakes as much as they can help (Lau et al., 2012). Nevertheless, some experts in the field of Chinese preschool education have stated that these kinds of parents need to be clear that the choices or decisions they have made for their children are not conducive to building their children's creativity and independent thinking to a certain extent (Zhang et al., 2014; Luo et al., 2013).

Finally, the excessive protection of children by their parents causes them to lack the confidence and courage to face challenges (Lau et al., 2012; Zhang, 2011). Currently, much more children live

in a '4-2-1' model home environment in China, which means there are four grandparents and two parents all paying attention to one child (Zhu and Wang, 2005). Obviously, this kind of environment causes the children to be overly sheltered and protected (Zhu and Wang, 2005). Many scholars have raised this concern that these children rarely encounter difficulties or challenges (Zhu and Wang, 2005; Zhu and Zhang, 2008; Zhang, 2011). Even if they meet such obstacles, there are family elders who will come forward to help them solve the problem, leading to a lack of confidence and courage when they face their own difficulties in life (Zhu and Wang, 2005; Zhu and Zhang, 2008; Zhang, 2011).

3. Claim 2: Productive Guidance and Valuable Companionship Can Improve the Levels of Parental Engagement

In view of the impact of the mistaken childrearing practices and the absence of parents from their children's preschool education as indicated earlier, this impact can basically be improved after the children are given constructive guidance and valuable companionship by their parents, which also increase the level of parental engagement (Lau et al., 2011; Daniel, 2015; Luo et al., 2013; Bakker and Denessen, 2007; Honig, 2009). For example, guiding the children's cognitive and behavioural development, taking care of their physical and emotional needs, as well as developing their social skills.

Parental participation in preschool education can be greatly enhanced through their productive guidance of the development of their children's cognitive behaviours and physical emotions (Bakker and Denessen, 2007; Harris and Goodall, 2008; Daniel, 2015). First of all, children should be guided to do their own things in their daily lives, which is good for cultivating their self-sufficiency and sense of discipline from an early age (Honig, 2009). For instance, informing them to return toys after playing, putting things back in order, dressing themselves, and others (Harris and Goodall, 2008). Then, regarding their emotional development, children should be allowed to make mistakes, more significantly, allowing them to admit to and correct their mistakes and learning how to avoid similar mistakes next time (Daniel, 2015). Meanwhile, parents could relieve their children's negative emotions and give them a sense of security by encouraging them to face their problems rather than blindly scolding them (Berthelsen and Walker, 2008; Honig, 2009). Both Bakker and Denessen (2007) and Luo et al. (2013) mentioned a similar point of view in that the guidance of parents in the education of their children is important to making children aware that they are loved. However, this does not mean that they can get help from everyone or be exempt from any circumstances (Bakker and Denessen, 2007; Luo et al., 2013). Moreover, children should be taught to be held accountable for their own affairs and be aware of their own obligations (Daniel, 2015).

Forming habits and providing enrichment experiences are two meaningful aspects of the valuable companionship parents give to their children (Lau et al., 2011; Hornby and Lafaele, 2011; Green and Hoover-Dempsey, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler, 2007). To form good habits at home, parents should create an environment for their children to think and focus (Lau et al., 2011). In other words, do not try to correct or interrupt children when they are concentrating on doing something, whether it is solving jigsaw puzzles, painting, or playing games. Focus and independent thinking can be obtained through training at an early educational stage as pointed out by Green and Hoover-Dempsey (2007) and Hoover-Dempsey and Sandler (2007). When it comes to enrichment experience, this normally refers to the daily activities carried out by parents, which provides a rich social experience for children and makes them learn from real experience (Guo and Kilderry, 2018). According to the studies by Honig (2009), Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005), Guo and Kilderry (2018) and Green and Hoover-Dempsey (2007), good qualities such as courage, independence, cooperation and awareness of sharing could be developed by taking children out on travels or participating in various group activities with their parents, which plays a key role in early social interactions.

4. Claim 3: The Personal Development and Academic Attainment of Children Can Be Promoted Through Adequate Parental Involvement

Young parents should be more constructively involved in their children's early education precisely because they can produce positive outcomes for their children's development (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Green et al., 2007; Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005; Galindo and Sheldon, 2012; Harris and Goodall, 2007; Pomerantz et al., 2007). As discussed in the previous section, parents who participate in their children's early childhood education through productive guidance and valuable companionship can create potential positive effects for their children in the following two aspects; personal development and academic attainment.

Productive parental engagement in their children's preschool education can not only create a healthy and positive environment for the physical or mental development of their children, but also encourages better lives and social interactions (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Galindo and Sheldon, 2012; Pomerantz et al., 2007). At first, productive guidance from parents can cultivate the independence of children, which help them to improve their problem-solving ability and develop a responsible or independent attitude towards learning and life (Gonzalez-Dehass et al., 2005; Pomerantz et al., 2007). Meanwhile, parental companionship and encouragement also gives confidence and sense of security to children to face and solve challenges, which positively contributes to the psychological development of children (Rogers et al., 2009). This view has also been supported by the research by Galindo and Sheldon (2012) in that the home learning environment is significantly positively correlated with the child's emotional functionality. Furthermore, what is most worth mentioning is the children's interpersonal skills. Parents who are better involved in their children's preschool education by providing productive guidance in their children's interpersonal interactions make their children more aware of how to get along with their friends (Harris and Goodall, 2007; Pomerantz et al., 2007). Harris and Goodall (2007) tracked 2,857 children aged around 3 years in 141 early education centres of 'Effective Preschool and Primary Education (EPPE)' in the UK, confirming the independent role the home learning environment plays in the development of social interaction skills in children and adolescents. Similarly, this conclusion was also proven by the study from Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2005). A sample of 297 children aged 3-6 years was used to explore the role parental involvement plays in the children's social abilities (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005). And this study also concluded that parental engagement in family education greatly and positively contributes to the development of children's social capabilities (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Moreover, the idea that productive parental involvement is crucial to early childhood academic attainment in preschool education has been widely recognized (Rogers et al., 2009; Pomerantz et al., 2007; Desforges and Abouchaar 2003; Gonzalez-DeHass et al., 2005). As a participant in some kindergartens and elementary schools in Xi'an City of China, Zhang (2011) conducted a three-year observational study and found that after training parents in the strategies for constructively participating in their children's preschool education, the children's academic attainment was not obvious in the kindergartens. However, the effect was more positively improved when the children entered elementary schools (Zhang, 2011). Additionally, a study conducted in the UK reached a roughly consistent conclusion regarding parental involvement in promoting academic attainment for children, but gave different interpretations on the method and age of participation. Rogers et al. (2009) applied a qualitative case study method to carry out a 12-month research project involving 314 respondents from 20 British schools, exploring the relationship between parental participation and student attainment. The results of the study show that compared with school education, parental involvement in their children's education has the greatest influence on academic outcomes (Rogers et al., 2009).

5. Discussion and conclusions

In general, based on the current social situation and level of public awareness in China, many young parents do not more constructively participate in their children's education, which have negative impacts on the growth and development of children. Through productive guidance and valuable companionship, parental engagement in children's education can be enhanced, which will also promote the children's personal development and academic achievements. Therefore, this paper proposed that young Chinese parents should become more productively involved in the preschool education of their children aged between three to six years old.

Nevertheless, it needs to be acknowledged that this paper also has limitations. There is little literature on topic of parental involvement in preschool education and few studies on the influences of parental involvement on children. All these factors reduce the universality of this paper to some extent. On the other hand, this paper only suggested that young Chinese parents should constructively participate in their children's early childhood education by presenting arguments and some evidence. However, a reasonable solution to help young Chinese parents to achieve work-life balance and participate in their children's education was not given in this paper, perhaps this can serve as a future research direction.

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