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Quality Improvements in Preschool: From Research to Practice

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ABSTRACT

Background: This paper is part of a larger study with a focus on management within a preschool. The principal was interviewed and three teachers at the preschool responded to a questionnaire, using a case study methodology. There have been few studies in Malaysia that examined the management aspects of principal's work especially in preschool. The study adopted the Social Systems Model to support the notion that preschools cannot strive on its own without sharing and exchanging information between the principal and the teachers. The Australia Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) was used in gauging the level of quality practices at the school. Objective: The aim of this study was to gauge the level of seven quality practices in a preschool. In addition it attempts to uncover the principal's role as manager and in the effort to improve the services at the school, teachers' feedback were needed to determine to what extent the principal's effort were internalised in the daily operation of the preschool. Results: The findings revealed that the teachers rated the overall quality areas in the kindergarten as being average. Three quality areas were rated high whereas four others were average. According to the interview with the principal, she had emphasised the importance of the seven quality areas to the teachers. However, the principal's efforts in ensuring quality practices were not reflected in the level of the quality areas reported by the teachers. There seemed to be an inconsistency in the findings from the teachers and principal. Conclusion: The Social Systems Model explained that in order for information to be disseminated and perceived correctly there need to be a clear understanding on sharing and exchanging of the information between the principal and the teachers. Factors such as participatory management style, employee involvement in decision-making and teachers' autonomy need to be taken into consideration when trying to implement changes in the school.

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INTRODUCTION

Most preschools in Malaysia follow a common curriculum, the Preschool Curriculum Standard (NPCS) 2010 as instructed by the Ministry of Education. However, the private preschool centres are allowed to use programs of their own choice provided it covers all the areas stipulated in the NPCS. As such, the principals and teachers of the preschools have a say in the running of their centres; the day-to-day operations and services rendered to the children rests with them. While the government operated preschools abide closely to what the ministry requires the private preschools on the other hand operate with relative independence. Thus, private preschool principals tend to shoulder a heavy responsibility in terms of managing their schools; looking into staff and children welfare as well as interest of the parents. Studies show that generally the preschool principal's job description and functions are similar in nature as they have to plan, organize, implement and evaluate staff and program, all within the centres' procedures and processes (Nupponen, 2005; Bloom, 1991; Seplocha, 1998; Rodd, 1998). In other words, principals are leaders as well as managers. They need to ensure their schools provide quality services to the children under their care.

As mentioned earlier principals have the responsibility of managing their school and this requires quality management practices if they hope to create a coherent and collegial working environment that requires planning of routines and tasks that will meet the organizational vision and mission (Nupponen, 2006). In addition, due to the current demands by parents and the ministry, principals need to ensure there is a continual progress and improvements in their school so as to thrive and sustain in the industry. Therefore, job descriptions

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set by the principal are seen as shaping the teachers' attitude towards their work and how they feel towards the children.

The quality of management practices can only be created provided there exist a coherent and collegial working environment. Principal and teachers need to have similar interest, passion and objective so that they can together plan the routines and tasks to ensure the school aims and objectives are achieved. Quality childcare service is seen as an important contributing factor to children's academic and social development (Shonkoff & Phillipes, 2000) as these early years will pave for better future school performance especially for children from low-income families and those at risk for low educational performance (Barnett, 1995; Bellm, Burton, Whitebook, Broatch, & Young, 2002; Helburn, 1995; Howes, Phillips, & Whitebook, 1992a; Peisner-Feinberg et al., 1999). Other studies have also highlighted the benefits of quality childcare centres; positive influence on children's brain development, cognitive and language skills (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000), enhance non-cognitive skills such as perseverance and motivation (Heckman, 2006), and less likely to be enrol in special education classes or engage in criminal or at risk activities (Committee for Economic Development, 2006).

In terms of ensuring quality school several studies have pointed to the importance of teachers' qualification as the determining factor (Howes, Phillips, & Whitebook, 1992b; Phillipsen, Burchinal, Howes, & Cryer, 1997). However, later studies have shown no relationship exists between teachers' qualification and school quality (Early et al., 2006, 2007). As most private preschools in Malaysia are operated independently, the principal, usually the one who may have better knowledge of childcare and more years of teaching and administrative experience would closely supervise and monitor the teachers' daily work in the school. Since the schools are operated by two or three adults – a principal and teachers, the daily tasks are shared and collaboration between them is necessary to ensure a smooth running of the school curriculum. Thus, the principal is required to execute duties, roles and job description in a rather informal manner to fit to the teachers' preferences and competencies. In such a situation, there is a need to ensure the teachers engage in similar work processes, interact, and communicate and information and knowledge are shared.

Thus, with this view in mind, this study aims to investigate the current principal and teachers' practices in one preschool. The objective is to gauge to what extent, what is being taught by the principal to the teachers is fully understood and implemented in the daily operations at the school. In other words, what would the QIAS quantitative measures tell us about the quality level of the principal's management skill? While the interview with the principal would enlighten us on what has been disseminated to the teachers and how much was internalised. This triangulation approach would help the principal to identify the weaknesses and strength of her management skills and this would be a guide for her in determining the in-house training that needs to be conducted to ensure that the school provides quality services to the children.

Method:

Participants: The preschool centre was situated in an urban area, run by a principal and three teachers. The minimum qualification of the teachers was high school certificate. Their qualification varies from high school to diploma holders. On the whole the school provides services to 41 children, aged 4 – 6 years old.

Procedure: Written permission was received from the principal to proceed with the interview and data collection. The principal was interviewed first then followed by the teachers who responded to the questionnaire. The interview session was recorded to ensure everything that was said would be captured. The interview was then transcribed according to the questions that were posed. Verbatim transcriptions, written interpretations and reports were made available to the principal for comment and feedback.

Data Analysis:

This is a case study of a preschool centre. This study combines both quantitative and qualitative methods. Analysis quantitative data using Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) version 16 was used to obtain the mean value for each level of quality management practices in the preschool under study. Interview further supported the findings of the quantitative data. We adopted the mixed methods approach as we believed that investigating into the quality of the teachers' practices using both methods would provide a clearer and in-depth findings of what the principal has implemented and how much has been internalised and practiced by the teachers. Thus, the findings from both methods rather than one alone, offer a stronger platform to inform the principal on the strength and weakness of the current practices at the school. The mean for each quality area was then supported by the principal's verbatim transcriptions. This crisscross checking would reveal whether there is congruence in the information received from both participants.

Measures: The Australia Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) were used as the study tool. QIAS is the instrument used to gauge childcare centres in Australia and it has been reported that the Australia Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) has a higher standard of quality in formal childcare services than those used in US and UK (Harrison, 2008).

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The Quality Improvement and Accreditation System (QIAS) instrument was used to assess the quality process of the children's experiences during their stay at the school as perceived by the teachers. The QIAS items were adapted to fit into the Malaysian context. The items covered the following quality areas:

- Quality Area 1: staff relationships with children and peers (10 items)
- Quality Area 2: partnerships with families (4 items)
- Quality Area 3: programming and evaluation (4 items)
- Quality Area 4: children's experiences and learning (10 items)
- Quality Area 5: protective care and safety (6 items)
- Quality Area 6: health, nutrition and well-being (8 items) and
- Quality Area 7: managing to support quality (5 items)

QIAS ratings for each quality area ranged from a score of 1= unsatisfactory, 2 = satisfactory, 3 = good quality, 4 = high quality. However, for this study the scale was adjusted to: 1 = unsatisfactory, 2 = least satisfactory, 3 = satisfactory, 4 = highly satisfactory, to enable the teachers a more comprehensible understanding of the scale. Quality area scores were combined to form an average QIAS score for each quality area. The overall quality area ranged from average to high: 1.00-2.50 = low, 2.51-3.50 = average and 3.51-4.00 = high. The instrument reliability was high, ranging from 0.84 – 0.94.

Findings and Discussions:

Table 1: Ranking of Quality Areas.

Quality Area	No. of Item	Mean Value
Quality Area 1 : Staff Relationships with Children and Peers	10	3.70
Quality Area 3 : Programming and Evaluation	4	3.58
Quality Area 6 : Health, Nutrition and Wellbeing	7	3.57
Quality Area 4 : Children's Experiences and Learning	10	3.46
Quality Area 7 : Managing to Support Quality	5	3.47
Quality Area 5 : Protective Care and Safety	6	3.33
Quality Area 2 : Partnerships with Families	4	2.92
Level of quality practices		3.43
Quality Area	No. of Item	Mean Value
Staff Relationships with Children	7	3.71
Staff Relationships with Peers	3	3.67

Ranking scale: 1.00-2.50 = low, 2.15-3.50 = average, 3.51-4.00 = high

Table 1 presents the Quality Areas according to mean value. It was reported that the overall quality areas in the kindergarten was rated as average as the mean was 3.43. Quality Areas 1, 3 and 6 were rated high while Quality Areas 4, 7, 5, and 2 were average. For Quality Area 1 we separated the quality area into two: Staff Relationships with Children and Staff Relationships with Peers. This gives a clearer understanding of the practices between the two different relationships. For the purpose of this presentation, the discussion will focus only on the quality areas that were rated as average as these are the areas that needed improvement.

Quality Area 4: Children's Experiences and Learning:

Based on the result in Table 1, Quality Area 4 was rated average as the mean was 3.46. There were 10 items to gauge this quality area, 2 items were high whereas the other 8 items were rated average. According to the teachers they believed that they promote each child's language and literacy abilities as well as promote each child's problem solving skills. However, they were less confident that they had encouraged each child to make their own choices during activities**,** did not encourage enough for each child to participate during activities, did not fully encourage each child to develop healthy relationship with peers, and did not fully encourage each child to maintain healthy relationship with peers,

During the interview, the principal expressed her concern on the children's experiences and learning. According to her the children were allowed to choose the activities they wanted only during the free choice activities and not during the activities that were planned and structured. Another occasion where the child would be allowed to have the freedom to choose the activity would be when the teacher realised that the child was bored.

Similarly, when asked about encouraging each child to participate during activities the principal explained that it was done through assisting the children; doing it together and ensuring the child was involved. Thus, all activities at the centre required everybody to be involved. This was emphasised to the teachers when they wrote their objective(s) in their lesson plan; they need to know the type of relationship that would be build during the activity and its outcome. Otherwise the teachers would not be aware and would be doing it without understanding.

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Relationship among staff was also encouraged. The principal believed that they should have close relationship, cooperate, and work together in the activities with the children. These would make them understand each other better.

In terms of whether the teachers encouraged each child to develop healthy relationship with peers, the principal stressed this by ensuring the teachers include this aspect as one of the objectives in the teachers' lesson plan. For example, during a game several developmental aspects are happenings such as the children are required to listen to instructions which are to discipline them, then, there is literacy as they may have to read the instructions, and next will be discussion among themselves. All these lead to creating relationships among the children.

Thus, the principal ensured that the teachers were aware of all these developmental aspects and not just rely on reading and listening alone. According to the principal if teachers are not aware then it would be a waste as a lot could be instilled during play. Since the school had adopted the Montessori approach to learning therefore the play must have many objectives as possible and teachers must be aware of this.

Quality Area 5: Protective Care and Safety:

Overall rating for Quality Area 5 was 3.33, second lowest in the ranking among the 7 quality areas. This could be due to 5 out of 6 items were rated average. Teachers believed that they acted to protect each child. However, they also believed that they were less concern on other protective care and safety matters such as less supervision of each child at all times, did not fully ensure that potentially dangerous equipment, plants and objects are inaccessible to children, did not fully ensure that the building is safe, did not fully ensure all equipment are safe, and there is less promotion on staff occupational health and safety procedures.

In terms of care and safety of the children at the school, the principal admits that there is no written document on the procedure on the care and safety of the children should there occur any unwanted incident. However, there is a verbal agreement between the school and the parents on the actions that would be taken should there be any kind of accident. Should there be a serious accident then the school would call the child's parents to ask permission to take the child to the doctor. Otherwise, it would be handled at the school where the child would be attended to by the teacher in-charge. This would then be informed to the child's parents when they come to fetch the child home.

Even though there were no written procedures on care and safety but the school have rules on various tasks. For example, how to carry the chair and avoid hurting or knocking others, no sharp edges, no broken things lying around, etc and these were repeatedly reminded to the children. Similarly, there are steps in the school and children were told not to run while inside the school and the children abide these verbal warning. Fire drill is an annual affair where the firemen demonstrate the use of the fire extinguisher in case the need arises.

Around the school there is no fence. The children need to know their limits. According to the principal putting fence around the school would not train the children to reframe themselves from going out of the school's premise. The gate and doors too are not locked after the children arrived. The distance between the gate and the entrance to the school makes it quite impossible to hear someone who drops in. Parents were told to make a call before dropping in at the school. Strangers were not allowed in unless accompanied by parents' permission.

Thus, the objective of not having written procedures is to disciple the children when they are in the school and hopefully this culture is transferred to their homes. All these are consistently reminded during circle-time, whenever the need arise and during the registration. However, all the teachers have yet to attend any course on safety at the school and the principal intends to plan for it in the future.

Quality Area 7: Managing to Support Quality:

This area was rated average with a mean of 3.47. Quality Area 7 had 5 items to gauge whether the principal managed to support quality in the school. Only 2 items were rated high whereas the other 3 were rated average. The teachers reported high for these practices: facilitate easier continuity of care for each child and provides professional development opportunities for all teachers. On the other hand, the teachers felt that these practise were only done on average scale as there was less written information about the school's management available to parents, less written information about the school's management available to the teachers and there was not much policies to facilitate easier continuity of care for each child.

When asked whether there were rules and written documents on management of the school, the principal responded that there were as the teachers need to know what the safety measures they need to abide with. Then there is the SOP which the principal has yet to do. She is aware that there should be policies on parents, staff and visitors and these should be in the SOP. In terms of management procedures, parents were informed on it during the registration of their children. These include the dos and don'ts for the children and teachers.

Lastly, the teachers were given in-house training and this was conducted by the principal. For example, how to use certain apparatus, safety measures that should be followed during colouring sessions, cooking sessions, etc.

Quality Area 2: Partnerships with Families:

This quality area was rated average (mean=2.92) and the lowest among the 7 quality areas. All the 4 items in the questionnaire were rated average. Among the reasons found were that teachers overlooked these vital practices: teachers and parents communicate less effectively to exchange information about the child, teachers and parents communicate less effectively to exchange information about the school. Teachers did not fully encourage parents' participation and involvement in the school, and teachers in the school did not have a good orientation process for children and parents.

During the interview with the principle these were her responses to the questions asked. She believed that the school should create strong partnership with parents. When the relationship is good then information on the child would be easily accessible. For example, parents could inform the teacher on the behaviour of their child and this would greatly help the teacher to understand the child's behaviour. In order to create this partnership the school has invited parents to get involved with the school's activities and program. For example, parents were asked to help out as coach for the football team, come in for reading sessions, and even cooking demonstrations with the children.

Conclusion:

The findings in this study indicate that the principal had tried to address all the quality areas in her school. This is evident from the descriptions and examples she has given during the interview. However, her efforts in ensuring quality practices seemed not to reflect in the level of the quality areas reported by her teachers. Based on the ranking of the quality areas in the study, quality areas concerning staff relationships with children and peers, programming and evaluation, and health, nutrition and wellbeing were reported to be high in the school. Thus, this could mean that the teachers understand the importance of these areas and are able to implement them well in the school. The principal would have stressed these areas and teachers on their part were able to gasp the knowledge and internalised it. However, quality areas on children's experiences and learning, managing to support quality, protective care and safety and partnerships with families were reported to be average in the school. This would indicate that the teachers perceived these areas as being implemented at an average level. Based on the principal's description on the implementation of these four quality areas it does not seemed to correlate with the response from the teachers. There could be various reasons to explain these mismatch findings. Even though the principal may have initiated all the four quality areas (average) in the school but this does not mean that the teachers want to play an active role in the implementation of it. Change is unlikely to occur if the teachers were not fully involved in the decision-making process to implement these quality areas in the school (Sagie & Koslowsky, 1994) and if they feel that they have little ownership in the ideas especially when it is imposed by the principal (Rodd, 1994). Thus, this would indicate that the principal need to understand the teachers' protocol from top-down and bottom-up so as to create a balance between effective management and teachers' autonomy (Doyle, 2011). The principal needs to understand that factors such as participatory management style, employee involvement in decision-making and procedures for self-assessment may present as influential factors in convincing change in the school (Jorde-Bloom, 1995; Stephens & Wilkinson, 1995). In addition, the teachers may perceive the school to discourage their participation in management decisions and has low management support of them.

Thus, it is recommended that the principal has to ensure the teachers support the idea of implementing these quality areas as a requirement in the school system. In order to gain this support, the principal need to explain what entails in the implementation of the quality areas. Informing the teachers of the need to ensure the school has high level in the seven quality areas without the teachers having a strong understanding of the importance, content, and practices of these areas will lead to more confusion and distraction (Walinga, 2008). A clear understanding of these quality areas and its importance on the children's development as well as the services in the school would lead to the teachers' readiness to internalise and implement them in their practices.

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