

Research on the challenges faced by one novice director in an affiliated kindergarten of a public elementary school

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Abstract

Numerous studies have long confirmed the importance of the director in a kindergarten. However, the role of the director has always been ambiguous in affiliated kindergartens of public elementary schools in Taiwan.

The objectives of this study were:

1. To investigate the roles a novice director plays in her first-year administrative work.
2. To explore the challenges faced by this novice director.

Data were collected from interviews with the director, former director, co-teacher, and principal of the elementary school, as well as documentation, including minutes of school administrative meetings and calendars. Observations and videotaping also were conducted.

The research found that the novice director played multiple roles, such as decision maker, consultant, curriculum designer, communicator, and administrative leader. The challenges faced by her included an imbalance between administrative work and teaching responsibilities, interpersonal relationship with the staff, and administrative management. The most difficult challenge was the imbalance between administrative work and teaching responsibilities.

Key words: *novice director, kindergarten, affiliated kindergarten*

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Introduction

The quality and effectiveness of kindergarten education are determined by the professional capacity, knowledge, and capability of kindergarten directors. Numerous studies have confirmed the importance of the director in the kindergarten (Bloom, 1992, 1997; Hsue, 2001; Kagan & Bowman, 1997; Lee, 2004; Lee, 2005a, 2005b; Liaw, 2002; Lin, Kao & Wang, 2002; Su, 2002; Wang, 2006). The teaching perspective and leadership of directors affects the kindergarten's curriculum, teachers' professional development, and children's development. However, the role of the director has always been ambiguous in affiliated kindergartens of public elementary schools in Taiwan. The kindergarten directors in public elementary schools are in charge of both teaching and administrative work concurrently. According to recent research (Cheng, 2001), almost 70% of directors in Taipei City have experienced changes in employment status between 1996 and 2000, which means that many directors are newly appointed. Why do they change positions so frequently? Should novice directors receive systematic and professional training before they take on the position of director? What challenges do they encounter? Should the relevant authorities provide timely assistance? These questions need to be explored further.

In the past, most studies have focused on directors in private kindergartens, rather than in public kindergartens. Since 1985, the number of public kindergartens in Taiwan has increased. While 99% of public kindergartens are affiliated with public elementary school, little research has focused on these directors. Kindergarten directors in an affiliated kindergarten in public elementary schools not only teach in their own classrooms, but also have responsibility for the administrative work of kindergarten. They need to simultaneously play both teaching and administrative roles. Every director faces many challenges, yet little is known about what these challenges are, and how the director executes her roles. This study attempts to explore these questions.

The objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To investigate the roles a novice director plays in her first-year administrative

work.

2. To explore the challenges faced by this novice director.

According to the Ministry of Education (2006), as shown in Table 1, there are 35.41% public kindergartens and 64.05% private kindergartens in Taipei City, 98.5% of public kindergartens are affiliated kindergartens in public elementary schools.

Table 1. *Types of Kindergartens in Taipei City*

Types	Total	Public kindergarten		Private kindergartens
		Affiliated kindergartens in public elementary schools	City kindergartens	
Numbers	370	131(98.50%)	2(1.50%)	237
Percentage	100%	35.41%	0.54%	64.05%

Note. From “Education Statistics in Republic of China.” by Ministry of Education, 2006, Ministry of Education.

Each kindergarten in Taipei city has a director who is in charge of the kindergarten’s administrative work and teaching, while the principals of public elementary schools in other cities also serve as the kindergarten directors. Compared with kindergartens outside Taipei City, kindergartens here are more open and progressive. Many kindergarten teachers view kindergarten in Taipei City as a model. Research exploring and understanding how the kindergarten directors in Taipei City play leading roles in enhancing kindergarten education quality is needed.

In the past two decades, there have been few studies that focus on directors in early childhood institutions, but this situation has changed in recent years, especially since 2002. In that year, the quantity of research on kindergarten directors increased. The role of director is considered important in promoting the quality and effectiveness of the kindergarten. The themes of the research have been: the role of director, the directors leadership, and the professional development and professional competence of director’s, but there is little research focusing on the challenges of the novice directors. In addition, most of studies have been done by questionnaire, not in-depth interview and participant observation.

According to research (Cheng, 2002; Hsue, 2002), kindergarten directors in affiliated kindergarten are chosen mostly by rotation. Thus, there are many novice directors in Taipei City every year. In general, kindergarten teachers take turns serving as kindergarten directors and they serve for just for one or two years. Some kindergarten directors are assigned by the elementary school principals, but most of kindergarten teachers take turns to be the directors in the affiliated kindergartens. Because of the short term of service, directors do not have sufficient time to implement appropriate designs for kindergarten (Hsue, 2004). Some survey studies found that the challenged faced by affiliated kindergarten directors included the incompetence of administrative work, unclear role, and leader succession (Cheng, 2001, 2002; Hsue, 2002, 2004). However, little is known in detail about how novice directors encounter their new administrative work, what challenges they face, how they adjust to the new role, and how they equally emphasize teaching and administrative work. This suggests a need to investigate how kindergarten directors interact with teachers, children and other staff, and how they adjust to the role of director.

In kindergarten, the director plays an important role in guiding the kindergarten's curriculum and teaching direction. According to research (Cheng, 2001, 2002; Hsue, 2002, 2004), the kindergarten directors play multiple roles, such as designers of kindergarten's development, supervisors of administrative work, coordinators and negotiators, decision-makers, teachers' supporters, counselors, and facilitators. They also are expected to demonstrate teaching leadership. In Taiwan, the directors in the affiliated kindergarten still need to teach in their classroom. They and their co-teachers are required to take responsibility of teaching work. In a word, they play both classroom teachers, and kindergarten directors.

According to Bloom (1997), there are three stages in the professional development of kindergarten directors: the survival stage (the beginning director), the competent stage (the competent director), and the mature stage (the master director). Beginning directors have a lot of passion and commitment, they are actively engaged, and they expect to make a meaningful contribution to early childhood education. Although excited, they are also worried about administrative work, communication, support systems, parent needs, and so on. They need to deal with a variety of issues

and face many pressures. They are concerned with how to manage and organize the kindergarten and expect to be accepted by staff and parents. Liaw (2002) indicated that novice directors are concerned with personnel management, student recruitment, survival, human relationships, and administrative system establishment. They also lack confidence. Novice directors, need support from others, and they are concerned about their practical management skills, and self-survival, rather than in designing a school vision (Liaw, 2002).

Both Bloom's and Liaw's research focused on full-time kindergarten directors, rather than part-time directors. Since the part-time role of director has become popular in Taiwan, we need to explore how part-time directors balance administrative and teaching work, and investigate how they deal with all challenges.

There is no formal system for a former director to hand over administrative work to a new director. The new director must spend time learning the parameters of being a director (Shiaw, 2001). In addition, a high rate of turn over effects the stable development of kindergartens. Hargreaves' (2005) paper, which relates to this leadership succession, indicated that novice directors need time to establish and adjust to their leadership role and become familiar with the administrative culture, but the term of service is not sufficient for them to accomplish school reform. The situation in Taiwan is the same. The novice directors engage in trial and error behaviors, and learn from self-exploration. Educators suggest that support from experienced directors, principals and other administrators would help novice teachers overcome the challenges (Hsue, 2002; Liaw, 2002). Although early childhood researchers start to pay attention the director role in the kindergarten, but still few focus on the novice directors in the affiliated kindergarten. In addition, most research used a questionnaire, rather than in-depth interviews and observations.

Method

In order to investigate one novice director's roles in her first-year administrative work, and explore the challenges faced by this novice director, the qualitative research method of the naturalistic inquiry was adopted. The naturalistic inquiry

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985) emphasizes the on-site data collection that allows the researcher to fully understand complex human experiences as well as the context where the experiences take place. Qualitative research will reveal the significance of the experience or phenomenon as well as to analyze individual throughout the process in order to understand the complex experiences of human beings (Bogdan & Bikeln, 1998).

Participant

One novice director (referred to henceforth as 'Butterfly') participated in this study. Butterfly graduated from the department of early childhood education at a teachers' college. She has taught kindergarten for six years in the same school. During these six years, she received a master degree of early childhood education in one National University. There are four children in Butterfly's family, and she is the oldest. This was the first time she has been a kindergarten director. She was assigned to be the director by the principal of the elementary school. She was the youngest teacher in kindergarten.

The research site was located in the southern Taipei City. There were five classes in this affiliated kindergarten, which serve children between the ages of four to six. Most of children participated whole day program. Each class has two teachers and there were six student teachers doing their internship during the year. Thematic teaching was conducted in this kindergarten. Because this kindergarten has been evaluated as a superior kindergarten, it was open for observation and visits by early childhood practitioners and prospective teachers once every two weeks. A kindergarten meeting was conducted once a month to discuss important activities, such as the parent education program, educational tours, and physical games.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researcher observed the behavior and conduct of the research participant in a natural setting for one year. Data were collected from interviews, classroom observations, videotaping, documentation, and a personal journal. The participant was interviewed eleven times over a period of one year. A former director, a co-teacher, a

student teacher and the principal of the elementary school were also interviewed one or two times. The goal of interviews was to understand and explore Butterfly's experiences in her work. In the very beginning, the researcher conducted semi-structured interview, then non-structured questions were adopted instead in the follow-up interviews. The researcher developed interview questions according to the answers and reflection of the Butterfly in order to further explore her thoughts and feelings. Each interview was approximately two hours. All interviews were audio taped and later transcribed for analysis. Interview protocols included what she was doing in the class, what her ideas about teaching, how and what she changed in administrative decision, what and how she interacted with children, parents, colleagues, and principal, what and how she felt about her role, and what problems she faced.

Observations were conducted nine times in order to get first-hand information about what Butterfly interacted with other teachers, and how she acted in her own class. Documentations, including minutes of school administrative meetings, calendars, activity records, and the teacher's teaching journals, were also collected.

Data for this study included observations, interviews, documentations and personal journals. Analysis for data was conducted in the following steps: First, the researcher independently reviewed and examined all the data carefully. During the review, some tentative categories emerged. For example, her vision and expectation of kindergarten, her teaching experience, her relationship with teachers, principal, other colleagues, her problems in teaching or in administrative work, working environment, and school culture. In this step, the researcher tried to categorize all data as much and detail as possible. Second, the researcher combined categories into broader categories, such as the roles Butterfly played, her plans for kindergarten, her challenges as director, and her relationship with colleagues. There were no classification schemes determined beforehand; the researcher developed the categories from the study. Finally, three main themes were identified in terms of research objectives: the novice director's plans and implementation, the roles she played, and the challenges she encountered in this paper. Because of the length limit, some data, which were not related to these categories, was not used.

Results

In this section, the researcher first described Butterfly's plan and implementation, the roles Butterfly played and the challenges she faced.

The Novice Director's Plans and Implementation

There were two important plans which the novice director expected to accomplish in her first-year administrative work: enhancing the kindergarten environment and teachers' teaching. Referring to the environment, she hoped to establish a healthy and stimulating environment for children. She reconstructed each classroom and basement playground, which are divided into three areas-car area, block center and rhythm classroom. She did implement these plans.

Referring to teachers' teaching, she hoped to modify children's learning evaluations, carry out teachers' thematic teaching, establish teachers' teaching portfolios, and demonstrate teaching leadership.

Not all her plans were implemented at the end of her first-year administrative work. The factors, which most affected the accomplishment of the plans, were sufficient funding of the school, the principal's support and school policy, such as the environment's reconstruction, teachers' teaching portfolios, and children's evaluations. Some of the plans were not implemented because of the uncertainty of her administrative power and her teaching experiences, such as teaching leadership. This novice director needed to not only teach in her own classroom, but also manage administrative work in kindergarten, so she did not have enough time to observe teachers' teaching and provide any teaching advice. She hopes to promote teachers' professional development in the coming year.

The Multiple Roles the Novice Director Played

In Taiwan, the director in the affiliated kindergarten needed to take responsibility for both administrative work and teaching duties. The multiple roles this novice director played were decision maker, consultant, communicator, administrative leader and teaching (curriculum) leader. She became conscious of the power of making

decisions. She also found that although she had power, she still could not force teachers to change their classroom teaching and daily activities, so she thought that she didn't do an effective job in the area of teaching leadership during the first year.

This novice director thought that she did a great job as a decision maker, communicator, consultant, and administrative leader, but was not effective as a teaching leader. According to a related regulation in Taiwan, as a kindergarten director, she needed to not only take responsibility for administrative work, but also lead teachers' classroom instruction. But as the director in an affiliated kindergarten of a public elementary school, she still needed to teach in her own classroom. She found that she didn't have extra energy to provide teaching leadership. Hsue's (2004) research had similar findings.

At the end of her first year, the novice director gradually changed her focus of concern from teaching in her own classroom to the teaching and administrative work of the entire kindergarten. Before she served as director, she only focused on her classroom teaching; after becoming the director, she was also concerned about the instruction in other classrooms, teachers' cooperation and collaboration, children's safety, teachers' professional development, the kindergarten environment, and teaching leadership. She reconstructed the kindergarten's environment and planned to invite teacher educators to help staff professional development.

Challenges the Novice Director Encountered

The challenges faced by this novice director included an imbalance between administrative and teaching responsibilities, interpersonal relationships with the staff, lack of competence in administrative work, and teaching leadership. The most difficult challenge was the imbalance between administrative and teaching responsibilities. The research participant would have liked to have more time to be with the children, but because of her administrative work, she didn't have time to take responsibility for teaching in her classroom. Her co-teacher conducted most of the classroom teaching. According to the observation data, the novice director generally spent less than half an hour in the classroom teaching. Sometimes parents, other teachers, administrators and factory owners came by to discuss some issues. But she

was fortunate that her co-teacher was considerate and helpful, decreasing her concern.

The interpersonal relationships included her interactions with the former director, the kindergarten teachers and the staff in the elementary school. Because she didn't receive systematic and professional administrative training before she took on the position of director, she spent a lot of time learning how to do administrative work. The former director didn't share her administrative experiences or provide assistance to this novice director.

Referring to the interpersonal relationship with staff, the novice director faced the challenge of building interpersonal relationships with the former director, other kindergarten teachers and staff in the elementary school. The former director not only did not provide assistance to the novice director, but also caused problems, such as designing unsuitable menus for children, giving inappropriate grades to student teachers, and not following purchasing procedures. The novice director had differing opinions with other teachers about school-day activity for parents and turning off the hot water fountain in the class. Although teachers finally accepted her opinions, they didn't feel comfortable.

Although the kindergarten director and other administrators in the elementary school are on an equal level of administrative position, the power of the kindergarten's director is less, because the kindergarten is affiliated and the principal focuses more attention on the elementary school. Sometimes the novice director needed to change the kindergarten's schedule because of an activity conflict with the elementary school. The only way she could avoid a conflict was to compromise.

Discussion

Based on the results, the following conclusions could be drawn:

The Director Needed to Emphasize Administrative and Teaching Work, but Her Teaching Leadership Was Weak

The director in the affiliated kindergarten needed to take responsibility for both administrative work and teaching duties. In fact, she couldn't balance both roles; she

needed to sacrifice one of them. The kindergarten director played an important role in guiding school teaching; she was expected to provide teaching leadership. In fact, as a part-time director, she was not effective in this role. Because she was still required to teach in her own class, she didn't have time to observe other teachers' or have the power to ask them to change their classroom teaching. Her teaching leadership was very weak. How to empower an affiliated kindergarten's director and provide her with practical authority needs to be explored.

The Novice Director Needed to Receive Administrative Training and Support

This director faced many challenges, as was also found in Hsue's (2004) and Liaw's (2002) studies. These included much administrative work, inadequate authority, and insufficient competence in providing teaching leadership. This novice director was very committed and actively engaged, needed to deal with a variety of issues and faced many pressures; findings similar to Bloom's (1997). In addition, challenges in interpersonal relationships with colleagues also concerned the novice director. She needed support and immediate assistance from the principal. She sometimes felt lonely and isolated. According to related studies, since affiliated kindergarten directors do not receive support from their school, few volunteer to be directors. A support system for novice directors is needed in order to help them work out administrative responsibilities smoothly and effectively.

There Is the Uncertainty of the Director's Position

One of challenges the director faced was the unequal position of power of kindergarten directors with other administrators in the elementary school. The novice director sometimes needed to change the kindergarten's activities or schedule to meet the needs of the elementary school. As mentioned before, most of the kindergarten's directorship is assigned by rotation. Although the novice director was appointed by the principal, she still didn't receive power equal to other administrators in the elementary school. The principal always considered the elementary school as the first priority, with kindergarten the second. How to increase the authority of the affiliated kindergartens' directors needs to be considered.

The Leadership Discontinuity Affected the Development of the Affiliated Kindergarten.

Many novice directors are appointed every new academic year in Taiwan. They need to learn how to handle both administrative work and teaching duties. Directors do not consider becoming a kindergarten's director as an honor; most see it as a waste of time. Not all directors actively commit to it, let alone consider a vision for kindergarten. Each novice director needs to spend time becoming familiar with the administrative work and adjusting to the additional role. When this novice director took over the position, the former director didn't transmit and share her knowledge of administrative work. The novice director spent a lot of time, searching for new directions for kindergarten development by trial and error. If there were better initiation and administrative management systems, it would help novice directors attend to kindergarten reform and improve the quality of teaching, rather than just engage in self-survival behaviors. How to establish an appropriate transitional and installation system needs to be explored.

The Novice Director Was Mostly Concerned with Becoming Familiar with Her Work and with Her Survival, not the Educational Vision of Kindergarten

As mentioned before, the novice director changed the focus of concern from her own teaching in her own classroom to the teaching and administrative work of the entire kindergarten. She was mainly concerned with how to be familiar with and successfully accomplish administrative work. She tried very hard to become a competent director, but she still felt that she couldn't design long-term plans for the kindergarten, because she wasn't sure how long she would be the kindergarten director. A stable administrative system will improve the quality of early childhood education, so building a suitable system is needed.

Conclusion

This study investigated the roles a novice director played in her first-year administrative work and the challenges this novice director encountered. Because

there are more affiliated kindergartens in elementary schools than ever before in Taiwan, and directors can play an important role in promoting the quality of kindergarten education, more research is needed in this area.

As a result of this research, we recommend that an appropriate mechanism be established to appoint novice directors and provide professional development programs to give them training and assistance. The tenure and employment of directors of affiliated kindergartens of public elementary schools should also be improved. In order to actually help novice directors, an intervention program to promote their administrative competence is needed. This research only focused on the roles and challenges of a first-year novice director, but did not explore the director's professional development. Future research should consider investigating the director's professional development and her teaching leadership over a number of years. In addition, a longitudinal study can also explore how directors play a leading role in enhancing education quality in kindergarten.

This research can serve as a reference for people who are prepared to take on the position of kindergarten director and for education authorities in their policy making process. This interpretive study is also meant to serve as a start for an interest in and recognition of the importance of research in this area and its application to early childhood education.

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