

Early Childhood Education in China

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Contributor: Sylvia Liu, Barry Reynolds, Xuan Ha

Early childhood education (ECE) in China has become complex and multi-dimensional. Chinese parents/caregivers are actively involved in ECE.

Keywords: early childhood education ; early childhood family education ; caregiver ; transdisciplinary ; early childhood education professionals ; parents

1. Introduction

In China, the number of caregivers who are willing to become involved in the early childhood education (ECE) of their young children has been growing rapidly over the past several years since the introduction of the two-child policy in 2016 by the Chinese Government ^[1]. As a result, the impact of this policy is gradually being felt throughout China, and its overt effects can be seen in contemporary ECE ^{[1][2][3][4]}. In May 2021, the Chinese Government's two-child policy was replaced with the three-child policy with further emphasis on ECE issues and child-rearing changes ^[5]. With increased child numbers, Chinese young children and their parents have faced more complicated risks, including lower early childhood educational capabilities, increased poverty per family member, and greater stresses ^[6]. To minimize the aforementioned risks, more Chinese caregivers than ever before are in agreement that education should begin in the earliest years of infancy ^[7]. Hence, new approaches and methods of parent involvement in their children's education have been foregrounded since the two beforementioned policies have been implemented ^[8].

Young children acquire a broad range of human abilities during the early childhood phase ^{[9][10]}, which is very much influenced by their home environments, such as parenting style, toys, familial interaction, and sociocultural values ^[11]. A human ability refers "to the constitutional conditions of individuals for performing in some specified manner" ^[12], for example, a child's abilities to learn and succeed in ECE-related programs. Thus, there is a strong need for ECE research to extend its focus to caregiver efficacy in nurturing young children by examining current caregiver training programs associated with early childhood family education (ECFE) outcomes (i.e., to provide the best learning and developmental opportunities for young children in their homes).

In other words, parents as the primary caregivers "provide their children's first and most significant learning environment and parents themselves are their children's first and most enduring teachers" ^[13]. The idea of such a parenting education and support program has been termed as early childhood family education (ECFE) ^[14]. It supports parents as caregivers and also helps to empower families ^[15]. The goal of ECFE is "to enhance the ability of all parents and other family members to provide the best possible environments for their children's learning and development" ^[13].

2. Professionals as Collaborative Mentors in Early Childhood Family Education

2.1. Professional Transdisciplinary Work

The important role played by primary caregivers in addressing the diverse developmental and learning needs of their young children is increasingly recognized in the field of ECFE ^[16]. This is certainly applicable in China because most contemporary primary caregivers have constant concern over whether they are providing adequate support to help their very young children grow; their children go to various early childhood intervention classes, such as music classes, physical activity classes, and early English classes ^[17]. As a result, the call for ECE educators, caregivers (especially parents), as well as other related professionals to work together has also taken off in China ^[18]. Such a collaborative effort requires endeavours from all involved professionals across varied disciplinary backgrounds, such as the arts, sports and health sciences, family education, and ECE ^{[19][20]}. According to Early Years Connect ^[21], there are four major characteristics of professional transdisciplinary work, and these characteristics are pooled expertise, clients (i.e., young children and caregivers) as team members, free flowing communication, and working on the clients' goal together.

2.2. Challenges in Implementing a Transdisciplinary ECFE Approach

The transdisciplinary approach aims to reach greater integration of services and collaboration among professionals from different disciplines. In ECFE, the transdisciplinary approach is significant as “it involves the ‘client’ (the child and their family) as a member of the transdisciplinary team, acting as a key contributor in developing goals and implementing plans” [21]. The related literature reports that when transdisciplinary professionals work collaboratively among themselves, as well as with the caregivers to support young children at risk for developmental delay or those who have special needs, several key benefits have been identified, including promoting young children’s developmental skills, accelerating the developmental process, and nurturing productive learning styles [22][23][24]. Reaping these benefits, however, requires various strategies to provide effective transdisciplinary intervention practices. For example, Nolan et al. [24] have argued for the need to focus on the various challenges posed to significant individuals (especially caregivers) who influence young children’s lives during their earlier developmental phases. Nolan et al. [24] also stressed that transdisciplinary team members face the challenge to change these significant individuals’ take-it-for-granted practices by respecting others whilst also being respected for one’s own knowledge, regardless of the professional qualifications. Woodruff and McGonigel [25] have suggested that the challenges preventing effective collaboration may have effects on both ECE professionals and the primary caregivers of young children.

In the local Chinese context, for example, in 2009, the official newspaper on Education in China (*China Education Daily*) highlighted the sparse transdisciplinary collaboration among professionals of different fields relevant to ECE, as well as between professionals and caregivers of young children. In addition, the current ECE literature published in China lacks research on the normal development of young children who have been involved in a transdisciplinary ECFE program [26]. Likewise, little attention has been given to the current stance of ECFE within transdisciplinary ECE teams involving parents as important caregivers, despite parents’ centrality to child-centred and/or family-centred approaches [8][27].

2.3. Transdisciplinary Approach

In the contemporary ECE literature, three main teamwork approaches among members from different professional disciplines have emerged, namely, multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinary disciplines [18][28][29]. Multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary teamwork can be arranged on a continuum of collaboration within various domains, with the transdisciplinary teamwork approach being most collaborative and the multidisciplinary teamwork approach being the least collaborative [24]. The interdisciplinary teamwork approach is sandwiched in between the two approaches. An interdisciplinary teamwork approach should result in “increased professional communication, cooperation and cohesion”, while a transdisciplinary teamwork approach should result in “free flow communication” [21]. In fact, “multi-disciplinary teams are unable to develop a cohesive care plan as each team member uses his/her own expertise to develop individual care goals. In contrast, each team member in an interdisciplinary team builds on each other’s expertise to achieve common, shared goals” [30]. Hence, it is worth noting that the main difference between a multidisciplinary approach and an interdisciplinary approach is that the members of a multidisciplinary team work independently in providing services, whereas members of an interdisciplinary team work together.

The key feature of these three teamwork approaches used in educational services “is the pooling and exchange of inter-professional knowledge and skills across the disciplinary boundaries to maximize communication, interaction and cooperation among the members” [31]. Lesnik-Oberstein [32] has suggested the benefits of integrating professionals with various kinds of expertise, including the co-construction of new knowledge, understanding the different ways of collaboration, and the provision of more holistic, coherent, high-quality learning experiences for young children. Furthermore, according to the general theoretical perspective postulated by Burger [19], the transdisciplinary approach is situated into a circular process by forming various academic disciplines as the components of novel ECE hypotheses and theories, which can further inform ECE policymaking.

Moreover, a number of factors have also been reported as the possible contributing elements to building up transdisciplinary teamwork at three different levels [33][34]. First, the administrative-level factors consist of explicit and coherent ECE policies [34] and training workshops that prepare team members to work together effectively [35]. Next, at the practical level, important aspects include a shared ECE theoretical framework, as well as a clear mind-map of what it means to practice in a transdisciplinary team, strong leadership, and good school structures supporting collaboration and shared understandings within the team. Finally, at the staff training level, it is important that team members are motivated to learn about their own as well as others’ disciplines, with the ability to clearly understand the underlying implications, the capacity to become reflective, and the willingness to establish and keep a strong collaborative teamwork spirit within the transdisciplinary team [36].

In this way, the effects of transdisciplinary programs in mainstream ECE classrooms and special needs intervention settings can be studied and evaluated by identifying the following challenges: (1) unclear and inconsistent policies regarding how an ECE or ECFE program is to be run; (2) the unclear boundaries among team members during daily practice; and (3) limited collaboration due to a lack of training for members to have a shared understanding of other team members' foundation knowledge from respective academic disciplines [37]. One such concept of collaboration is family-centeredness, which has been promoted as a valuable medium for ECE [38]. Moreover, transdisciplinary team members have been challenged in terms of their transdisciplinarity in different professional disciplines [39]. Furthermore, these professional work transfers "may be in the areas of family- and child-centred planning and evaluation" [39].

2.4. Discussion

The current education literature suggests that the efficacy in transdisciplinary teams is facilitated by having unambiguous, pooled knowledge of the educational professionals, its collaboration purpose, and its sound philosophical framework [40]. The same holds true, especially for transdisciplinary ECFE programs, where relevant knowledge and skills are apparently integrated and applied by everyone in a program. However, our findings suggest that, even when all three participants shared a growing understanding of the holistic goal of their respective classes, which underlies their own disciplines' guiding philosophical principles, especially in the areas of child-centeredness and caregivers-as-educators, they still lacked some common understandings of the key concepts of community ergonomics and educational ergonomics underlying each other's practices [41].

In the case of the transdisciplinary ECFE program that was the focus of the current study, co-workers' peer-to-peer learning was found to be the anchor for the daily classroom practices of how to better carry out transdisciplinary caregiver training in its social contexts. The findings suggest that ECFE classes could take many forms. For example, there was a different status attributed to caregiver training in the ECFE program depending on who was attending the sessions. The caregiver training class could pair caregivers in one-on-one sessions, create groups learning together about real ECE problems, or involve young children in weekly enrichment classes in which co-workers share and reflect on the newest skills and knowledge they have learnt with or from others. Our results support a meta-analysis on ECFE conducted by Joo et al. [42] that found fully developed caregiver programs can be conducive to a wide range of young children's development and learning.

Based on the current study's findings, the following recommendations regarding some hands-on practices are suggested to make ECFE classes fully developed. Firstly, there is a need to choose proper co-workers to join the team. Although the structure of collaboration is horizontal instead of hierarchical, co-workers for the team should be based on young children's individual learning and development needs. These co-workers, ideally professionals in their areas, should write lesson plans, keep everyone on track by inviting other professionals and/or caregivers as facilitators, and motivate everyone to learn, apply, and reflect. Secondly, it is necessary to maintain a respectful atmosphere in staff meetings. Transdisciplinary team meetings only work when everyone feels comfortable enough to question each other. Co-workers must be open and honest enough to receive knowledge from other experts. They also need to have enough courage to give constructive feedback. This feedback must be received with gratitude. Thirdly, a transdisciplinary approach should be integrated into ECFE practices. Co-workers will feel confident and competent in applying new knowledge if they learn it by observing others' classes (i.e., real-world situations). As a result, the co-workers will more likely integrate the new knowledge into practice. Finally, everyone should be involved [21]. Caregiver involvement helps to set a social context around ECE. With a well-developed ECFE transdisciplinary program in place as an alternative to a traditional ECFE program, young children and their caregivers will construct knowledge and build attachments that will support them in creating a context that fosters learning [43]. In a traditional ECFE program, either caregivers are not involved enough in their young children's education, or caregivers feel there were no comprehensive explanations or descriptions gained from the program about how to become actively involved in their children's education. These previously unrecognized differences which relate to knowledge sharing and family-centred aspects of ECFE are significant, as they support constructive and successful caregiver training. As a result, caregivers who receive adequate support from their co-workers in transdisciplinary ECFE classes will play a major role in addressing their young children's diverse developmental and learning needs. Therefore, it is important that attention should be paid to the caregiver training by focusing on ECFE professionals and caregivers' cooperation because cooperation is the key dimension of ECFE's pedagogical quality [44].

Recognizing others' disciplines in terms of their knowledge and skills as shared information has been perceived as a crucial characteristic of peer-to-peer learning [45]. This perception has enabled the expertise of transdisciplinary co-workers to be shared with others as an important contributing factor of community ergonomics and broadens the expertise and collections of skills of all co-workers, which is the contributing effect to educational ergonomics [35]. Wong argued "to avoid becoming a jack-of-all-trades and master of none"; being a transdisciplinary co-worker does not necessarily mean

that the co-worker must master others' disciplines. However, Wong's statement points to the advantage of effectively integrating others' expertise. It highlights that transdisciplinary collaboration is not about moving towards some form of traditional ECFE practice; instead, it is about developing the skills to work collaboratively with others who can offer their related or allied expertise (e.g., childcare manager, social worker, counsellor, and psychologist).

In the current study, while the three participants seemed to have knowledge of the concept of a transdisciplinary team effort, they also expressed difficulty applying the knowledge and skills they have learnt from other professionals into their daily ECFE classroom practices. To give an example, while the participants felt that "it is quite straightforward to share a lesson plan with other co-workers", it was much more difficult for Lian to apply Rui's lesson plan directly. The "flexible application" relies not only on the general information or background knowledge of sharing lesson plans, but it is also based on hands-on experiences of when ECFE educational tactics would be most effective in its application within a given social context (i.e., the home) of each child and his/her caregivers. Empirical studies that have examined the benefits of ECFE caregiver programs have shown some promising results. One example is Parent Corps, an American ECFE program where ECE teachers and mental health professionals worked together by using various ECFE educational strategies in a timely manner to help caregivers to facilitate their young children's learning across domains ^[46]. According to the results of Joo et al.'s meta-analysis ^[42], "fully developed parenting programs to ECE" improved young children's various development and learning (i.e., pre-academic skills, social-emotional skills, behaviours, and health)." Therefore, for the three participants in the current study to realize the extensive benefits of transdisciplinary peer-to-peer learning, a range of alternatives must be provided for them to choose and advance a deeper understanding of these complex aspects of co-workers' distinctive disciplinary practices and tactics and not only the basic knowledge and skills of each other's disciplines. As a result, the implications for transdisciplinary ECFE training is to adopt a transdisciplinary loop, which is rooted in disciplinary paradigms, and the need to assess the value of these paradigms with respect to creating a new domain of knowledge or providing a solution to a practical problem in both community ergonomics ^{[42][47]}.

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