

Conceptualization and Assessment of Key Competencies for Children in Preschools: A Case Study in Southwest China

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Abstract : This study explores the conceptualization of key competencies that children are expected to develop in three year preschools (age 3-6) and the assessment practices of such key competencies in China. Assessment of children development has been put into the central place of early childhood education quality evaluation system in China. In the context of students key competencies development centered education reform in China, defining and selecting key competencies of children in preschools are of great significance in that they would lay a solid foundation for children's lifelong learning path, and they would lead to curriculum and instruction reform, teacher development reform as well as quality evaluation reform in the early childhood education area. Based on sense making theory and framework, this study adopted multiple stakeholders' (early childhood educators, parents, evaluation administrators, scholars in the early childhood education field) perspectives and grass root voices to conceptualize and operationalize key competencies for children in preschools in Southwest China. On the ground of children development theories, Chinese and international literature related to children development and key competencies, and key competencies frameworks by UNESCO, OECD and other nations, the authors designed a two-phase sequential mixed method study to address three main questions: (a) How is early childhood key competency defined or labeled from literature and from different stakeholders' views? (b) Based on the definitions explicated in the literature and the surveys on different stakeholders, what domains and components are regarded to constitute the key competency framework of children in three-year preschools in China? (c) How have early childhood key competencies been assessed and measured, and how such assessment and measurement contribute to enhancing early childhood development quality? On the first phase, a series of focus group surveys were conducted among different types of stakeholders around the research questions. Moreover, on the second phase, based on the coding of the participants' answers, together with literature synthesis findings, a questionnaire survey was designed and conducted to select most commonly expected components of preschool children's key competencies. Semi-structured open questions were also included in the questionnaire for the participants to add on competencies beyond the checklist. Rudimentary findings show agreeable concerns on the significance and necessity of conceptualization and assessment of key competencies for children in preschools, and a key competencies framework composed of 7 domains and 25 indicators was constructed. Meanwhile, the findings also show issues in the current assessment practices of children's competencies, such as lack of effective assessment tools, lack of teacher capacity in applying the tools to evaluating children and advancing children development accordingly. Finally, the authors put forth suggestions and implications for China and international communities in terms of restructuring early childhood key competencies framework, and promoting child development centered reform in early childhood education quality evaluation and development.

Keywords : assessment, conceptualization, early childhood education quality in China, key competencies

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