

Leadership building for directors: strategies for improving the performance of early childhood teachers

Wenya Hu*, Yening Wang

Department of Preschool, Changchun Normal University, Changchun, China

*Corresponding author

Abstract: *The improvement of kindergarten teachers' performance is an urgent necessity in contemporary times, which profoundly benefits every family and plays a pivotal role in the holistic development of young children. Whether in theory or practice, the leadership of the director constitutes one of the fundamental elements that significantly influences teacher performance. To effectively harness the impact of the Kindergarten Directors' leadership on teacher performance, several measures need to be implemented: fostering a shared value consensus, leading by exemplary behavior, cultivating a relationship built on trust, establishing an equitable system for rewards and consequences, and instituting a feedback mechanism.*

Keywords: *director of kindergarden; leadership; performance; early childhood teachers*

1. Introduction

As a result of rapid socio-economic changes, the increase in the number of working couples and the diversification of various family types, there has been a growing interest in social care and education for children. The responsibility for the upbringing of infants and young children is no longer left to the family alone, but has shifted to the State and society. More and more children are being raised in society. As of June 2023, the enrolment rate of infant and toddler education in South Korea is 94 per cent, and China's gross enrolment rate for the first three years of preschool in 2023 is 86 per cent. Along with the increase in enrolment of young children in kindergartens, society's interest in and expectation of the quality of early childhood education is growing rapidly. In response, all countries have introduced a series of measures to emphasise the development of high-quality early childhood education. In China, for example, the National Medium- and Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020), the State Council's Opinions on the Current Development of Preschool Education, the Professional Standards for Kindergarten Teachers (for Trial Implementation), the Guidelines for the Learning and Development of Children 3-6 Years of Age, and the National Economic and Social Development Plan of the People's Republic of China (2010-2020) have all been adopted. The need to develop preschool education and improve the quality of preschool education has been emphasised in government documents such as the Outline of the Fourteenth Five-Year Plan and the Vision 2035 of the People's Republic of China. However, as far as the existing studies are concerned, it is found that there are still many problems with the quality of early childhood education in China, such as the unbalanced development of preschool education[1], the unsystematic construction of early childhood teachers[2], the lack of attention to scientific childcare, the poor implementation of teaching and learning, the weakness of teachers, unscientific design of regional activities, and play activities that are merely a formality[3].

Improving the quality of early childhood education will ultimately focus on improving the job performance of early childhood teachers[4]. Early childhood teachers' job performance plays an important role in developing early childhood education and improving the quality of early childhood education. Early childhood teacher job performance refers to the unity of early childhood teacher behaviours and outcomes related to the achievement of kindergarten goals [5]. Specifically, early childhood teachers' job performance mainly includes task performance, work dedication and interpersonal facilitation[6]. Among them, task performance is the result of ECE teachers' work that is closely related to the goals set by the kindergarten; work dedication is the key to ECE teachers' self-discipline behaviour, such as obeying the rules of the kindergarten, working hard, and taking the initiative in solving the problems encountered in the work of early childhood education, etc.; and

interpersonal facilitation is the behaviour of ECE teachers that maintains the harmonious interpersonal relationships in the kindergarten, such as helping colleagues and assisting parents. The job performance of early childhood teachers is an important factor in determining the quality of early childhood education activities, the ability to recognise the various roles and responsibilities required of them as teachers and to have the appropriate qualities to effectively perform the job they hold, thus contributing to the effectiveness of the kindergarten as an organisation. Low teacher job performance has a detrimental effect on the professional development of teachers in terms of teaching skills, after-school activities, and research level. If teachers are in a state of low job performance for a long period of time, they will not only develop job inertia, lose enthusiasm and motivation for their work, but also suffer from the problem of passivity, which in the long run will have a negative impact on the career of the employees, and then affect the whole organisation's high-quality development. It can be seen that in order to develop early childhood education and improve the quality of early childhood education, efforts should be made to improve the work performance of early childhood teachers. In this regard, it is necessary to explore the factors affecting the performance of early childhood teachers in order to ensure the high-quality development of early childhood education.

2. The impact of director's leadership on teachers' job performance

Most of the previous studies on the impact of teachers' job performance can be categorized into two main factors: individual teacher factors and environmental factors. Specifically, among the individual teacher factors, workload, professionalism, work pressure, organizational commitment, and self-resilience have a significant impact on job performance. Environmental factors such as leadership style of the director, organizational climate, work-family cooperation, and family conflict also play a crucial role in determining teacher performance. Among these various factors, the influence of the director on teacher performance is considered to be the most critical. The reasons for this are as follows: Firstly, kindergartens in China are relatively small organizations with typically 3-12 classes per kindergarten. In such an organization where directors and teachers have close contact and frequent communication with each other, the leader's influence becomes even more critical. Therefore, effective leadership from directors directly affects kindergarten teachers' performance. Secondly, in China, kindergartens implement a director's responsibility system where directors are responsible for overall management including personnel affairs, operation, teaching, and safety supervision within kindergartens. Directors have significant influence over teachers' professional development, salary motivation, and work vision which ultimately affect their job performance. Moreover, the flat organizational structure in kindergartens allows for direct communication between teachers and directors. This provides teachers with greater autonomy decision-making power, and opportunities to develop creativity and professional abilities compared to other organizations. Thus, the influence of directors on teachers is particularly crucial in kindergartens.

Revised sentence: "The influence of the director on teachers primarily revolves around their leadership abilities, which can be defined in various ways and subject to differing opinions among scholars. However, these definitions all emphasize the influencers themselves and how they exert their influence, encompassing aspects such as identifying who the influencers are, understanding the purpose behind their influence, and examining the methods through which influence is exerted. The director's leadership as an influential factor impacts both the work behavior and attitude of staff members by leveraging their own professional knowledge and experience. This not only shapes teachers' work objectives but also fosters an effective team dynamic among educators while motivating them to continuously progress and engage in ongoing learning activities. Teachers' performance is a reflection of their educational endeavors, encompassing tasks completed with quality and quantity as well as collaboration with colleagues. Additionally, it encompasses dedication to professionalism within teaching work that influences overall work commitment. Therefore, there exists theoretical support for the impact of a director's leadership on teachers' performance rooted in theories such as Social Identity Theory, Social Learning Theory, Social Capital Theory, and Equity Preference Theory."

The common feature of these theories lies in the fact that the Kindergarten Director serves as a role model for teachers to emulate, thereby influencing their dedication and effort in kindergarten work. In this regard, it can be argued that high job performance among early childhood teachers necessitates exemplary leadership behavior from the director, highlighting the importance of optimizing kindergarten management to enhance preschool education quality. Notably, the Kindergarten Directors' leadership plays a critical role in shaping teacher performance. Leadership encompasses various dimensions and factors including transformational leadership, sincere leadership, servant leadership,

spiritual leadership, moral leadership, and ethical leadership. Research indicates that inclusive leadership significantly and positively contributes to teacher performance; conversely, abusive management inhibits employee performance while CPM (Cognitive Process Management) leadership behaviors have a significant positive impact on performance. Empirical research supports the notion that directorial leadership is pivotal in determining teachers' job performance.

3. Strategies for the Directors' of Leadership to Enhance Teachers' Work Performance

3.1 Building consensus on values

Revised sentence: According to social identity theory, an individual's self-concept is influenced not only by their intrinsic traits but also by the social group they belong to. Individuals tend to engage in social comparison with their respective groups and derive a sense of identity from this process. Therefore, fostering shared values and beliefs within a group can enhance social identity among its members and promote team cohesion as well as collaboration. Moreover, establishing shared values enables organizations to cultivate a positive social norm that encourages adherence to common codes and behavioral norms. In the context of kindergartens, achieving organizational identity and commitment among kindergarten teachers requires the director to clearly define the institution's core values which should be embraced collectively by all teachers. To accomplish this goal effectively, it is recommended that the director communicates these core values through various channels such as staff meetings, parent meetings, and student assemblies. Additionally, these values should be reflected in school documents, promotional materials, and communication platforms like the website. By embodying these established values and ethical standards in their behavior and decision-making processes, directors inspire a sense of belongingness and commitment towards the organization among early childhood teachers which ultimately enhances performance.

3.2 Leading by example

The theory of imitation learning posits that individuals acquire knowledge and skills through the process of observing and replicating behaviors demonstrated by others. As the representative and leader of the educational institution, the director's conduct and communication directly influence early childhood educators' sense of dedication to and identification with the organization. If the director exemplifies honesty, integrity, and responsible behavior, it will foster a stronger commitment among early childhood teachers towards the institution while also enhancing organizational cohesion. The director's actions serve as a role model for staff members and significantly impact their work attitude and decision-making process. Furthermore, according to cognitive consistency theory, individuals strive for congruence between their words/actions and personal values. By leading through example and embodying core values in their own behavior, directors can inspire organizational commitment among teachers while motivating them to embrace school values thereby improving job performance. In light of this perspective, it is recommended that directors lead by example by demonstrating qualities such as honesty, integrity, fairness, and adherence to core values through verbal communication, actions, and behaviors. Fostering mutual trust, respect, and rapport with teachers is crucial in promoting their organizational commitment, resulting in enhanced job performance.

3.3 Building trusting relationships

Social capital theory underscores the significance of social connections in fostering cooperation, communication, and trust establishment within organizations [7]. In the context of kindergartens, trustworthy relationships between teachers and the director can be viewed as a manifestation of social capital that facilitates information sharing, teamwork, and the attainment of shared objectives. Strong interpersonal bonds within organizations serve as the bedrock for effective collaboration and productivity while inspiring employee loyalty and commitment [8]. Therefore, it is advisable for directors to prioritize building trusting relationships with teachers through ethical leadership management practices. Specifically, this entails acknowledging teachers' shortcomings and individual differences while respecting their unique qualities and perspectives. Demonstrating tolerance and inclusivity is also crucial. Moreover, providing multiple communication channels such as face-to-face interactions, email, and phone calls fosters open dialogue that promotes understanding and knowledge exchange. Furthermore, the director should lead by example by exhibiting high levels of integrity, transparency, and supportiveness towards teachers during challenging times. When educators perceive

their director as a reliable leader, it increases their willingness to shoulder greater responsibilities, paving way for organizational success while simultaneously motivating them to enhance their own performance.

3.4 Developing fair reward and punishment mechanisms

Revised sentence: The theory of fairness preference suggests that individuals prioritize equitable and just distribution over purely economic interests[9]. Establishing fair reward and punishment mechanisms is crucial for demonstrating organizational justice and ethical conduct[10]. Within these mechanisms, employees expect to receive fair and reasonable recognition for their contributions. Perceiving unfair treatment of their efforts may result in reduced commitment and performance within the organization[11]. Developing equitable reward and punishment systems can enhance employee satisfaction and motivation. Moreover, such systems can promote employees' social identity while strengthening their sense of belongingness and dedication to the organization. In light of this perspective, it is recommended that directors establish fair reward and punishment mechanisms in kindergarten management processes. Specifically, it is advised to first establish clear rules and behavioral standards consistent with the values and goals of the kindergarten. Secondly, ensure that the principles of fairness, impartiality, and objectivity guide the implementation of these mechanisms. The director should ensure equal treatment for all individuals involved without displaying favoritism towards any party. Additionally, transparency and predictability should be maintained within the reward-punishment framework by ensuring teachers, parents etc., have a comprehensive understanding of the rules governing rewards or punishments. Lastly but importantly in terms of punishments within this system: emphasize education rather than solely focusing on penalties or retribution. Punishment measures should primarily serve as educational tools aimed at correcting misbehavior rather than simply imposing sanctions or penalties. Directors can achieve this by engaging in open communication with all parties involved while helping them comprehend the consequences.

3.5 Establishing feedback mechanisms

Behavioural learning theory highlights the significance of shaping and modifying individual behavior through feedback[12]. The theory emphasizes that people's behavior is influenced by the external environment and that feedback from the external environment can either reinforce or weaken specific behaviors [13]. By establishing a feedback mechanism, organizations can provide timely information to help employees comprehend their own behaviors and performances, thereby motivating them to adjust and enhance their behaviors for improved job performance. Moreover, social cognitive theory also asserts that feedback mechanisms not only offer individuals opportunities for self-reflection but also foster individual learning and growth through others' feedback and evaluation [14]. Within organizations, implementing effective feedback mechanisms can encourage communication and collaboration among employees, promote knowledge sharing and team learning, ultimately enhancing organizational performance and fostering innovation[15]. In this regard, it is recommended that the director regularly gather feedback from teachers, parents, and children to assess whether the organization's core values are shared and agreed upon. This will aid in understanding teachers' actual needs as well as psychological changes while grasping parents' attitudes towards and satisfaction with the organization. Through positive feedback and constructive guidance measures taken by the director based on this input data analysis process will enable adjustments to optimize values according to teachers' requirements thus enhancing their organizational commitment leading to improved work performance resulting in high-quality kindergarten development.

The concept of the Kindergarten Directors' leadership is a multidimensional and dynamic one, encompassing various dimensions such as charismatic influence, strategic foresight and discernment, exceptional communication skills, continuous innovation, and ongoing expansion. The impact of the Kindergarten Directors' teacher leadership on teacher performance involves a complex process that warrants further exploration to understand how it occurs and whether other variables play a role in this process. Future research should aim to analyze the mechanisms through which the Kindergarten Directors' teacher leadership positively or negatively affects teacher performance.

4. Conclusion

The relationship between the ethical leadership of directors, the organizational commitment of

teachers, and job performance constitutes a significant and meaningful research topic. From a theoretical perspective, this study can contribute to the existing body of knowledge on leadership by addressing the current gap in research primarily focused on enterprises, health organizations, and hotels. Moreover, within the field of education, previous studies have predominantly concentrated on teachers in schools and universities while neglecting kindergarten teachers. Therefore, this research aims to fill this theoretical void. From a practical standpoint, early childhood education organizations face substantial challenges. To effectively achieve educational objectives, it is imperative to enhance teachers' organizational commitment and improve their job performance through enhanced directorial leadership. This will ultimately facilitate the development of young children and elevate the overall quality of kindergarten education.

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