

# New Effective Way of Delivering Educational Services for Early Childhood

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The lack of communication between parents, teachers, and the boards of childcare centres, as well as the lack of funding were found to be the problems causing the inefficacy of education services for early childhood education. Through the use of the mixed method approach, this study intended to examine the situation of early child care centres in the Khon Kaen Municipality of North-eastern Thailand in order to propose alternative guidelines for effective management – that is, to ‘co-create’ education services. By allowing stakeholders to communally design education services for their children, it was found that co-creation of delivering educational services for early childhood can help involved parties to realise their roles, enhance equal and reciprocal relationship as well as boost citizens’ trust in the government, which will eventually lead to a better management of the services.

**Key words:** *Early childhood, childcare centres, local administration, trust, co-creation.*

## Introduction

Research reflecting the current trends in early childhood education has shown that early educational experiences make a difference. There exists substantial empirical evidence of the value of high-quality educational programs for children in their early childhood years (Duncan et al. 2010; Bornstein et al. 2010; Walker et al. 2011). That said, early childhood education can develop a variety of positive outcomes over the long term, including higher academic achievement and lower delinquency rates (Stipek 2005). Research related to early childhood education has also indicated the long-term payoff from early childhood education. Mustard’s (2010) research on early brain development and human development found that the early period of development affects the later stage of human development. At the same time, poor early childhood development affects both physical and mental development, as well as learning ability, in later life (McCain Mustard and Shanker 2007). Mustard (2010) also presented

research from an abecedarian study in North Carolina children, who were randomly allocated to a program or no specific program. When the children entered the school system, children from a special three-year program showed some signs of high development in the reading and numeracy functions. The children who attended the early childhood program and three-year education program showed greater development, and it was sustained. The countries that provide quality universal early childhood development programs for families with young children tend to out-perform countries in which early childhood development programs are not well-organised. This conclusion is supported by the case of Cuba. In the mid-1970s, a polyclinic approach for prenatal and post-natal care to provide health care for Cubans was established. This program may be the reason why Cuba out-performs other countries in Latin America, based on UNESCO studies of language and literacy and numeracy in grades 3 and 6. Since the late 1990s, the launch of universal Pre-K caught the attention of politicians and education leaders in many U.S. states as some studies show that children with solid Pre-K background are more prepared for kindergarten, with larger vocabularies, the ability to recognise some letters, and more sense of how to interact with peers and adults. Other studies have pointed out long-term economic and social benefits. Public childcare centres are also a support unit for parents who need quality care for their children (Wilson 2008). We may be able to conclude that the quality of child development at the early stage of school entry is critical to the overall performance of children (Lloyd and Hertzman 2009).

In Thailand, the Ministry of Education introduced the National Educational Education Act 1999 (amended 2002) to allow local governments, via their locally run child care centres, to provide basic education for children, in addition to government bodies such as those run by Office of the Basic Education Commission (OBEC). However, previous research has reported some weak points in the administrative procedures of childcare centres run by local governments, i.e., inadequate personnel development, lack of funding, discontinuity of support policy due to political instability, etc. These problems have tremendous impact on the quality and standards of the locally own childcare centres (Bhulpat and Kraisoraphong 2003). In the 20-Year National Strategic Plan (2017-24) launched by the Royal Thai Government in 2017, the government also prioritises early childhood education as one of the vital issues for human resources development. Thailand's educational decentralisation allows local government organisations to operate educational management institutions for populations in their localities (Bhulpat and Kraisoraphong 2003). To ensure equal access and opportunities in education for all Thai children, suitable programs should be in place, i.e., the class organisation and environment must be suitable for students, no matter what background they are from (e.g. special educational needs, underprivileged, marginalised children, rural or urban), and proper preparation of necessary supportive mechanisms are required such as training systems for educational personnel, extracurricular activities for students and parents, etc. (Bendová Čecháčková and Šádková 2014). Moreover, the support commonly provided in urban areas,

where high quality early childhood development system is typically in place, should extend to an infrastructure of systems as a whole (Gruenberg and Miller 2001).

The aforementioned support can be identified as an endeavour to ‘*co-create*’ strong support from local leadership based on the willingness and collaboration of all stakeholders to take key roles in driving the policy, as well as the operation in delivering educational services for early childhood children, which can contribute to the benefits of appropriate early childhood settings (Odom 2000). This is believed to be a framework to better support the operation of the locally run childcare centres, which will yield positive learning outcomes to the students while simultaneously not putting more burdens to the nation. Henceforth, the ‘*co-creation*’ framework that will be introduced in this article shall include all key stakeholders, namely, parents, teachers, school board members, and the government to co-create more prominent educational services for early childhood children as a way to prepare Thailand’s human resources to be ready for the presently very challenging and disruptive world (Odom 2000).

### **The Framework for Early Childhood Development in Thailand**

The framework for early childhood development in Thailand is based on the Thai Ministry of Education’s National Economic and Social Development Plan. The Ministry specified its National Strategic Plan for Early Childhood according to the government policy for early childhood (Office of the Education Council 2012) as follows: the learning process for early childhood has to 1) reach all children; 2) provide children with a child-centred approach based on differences in their backgrounds, social status and cultural aspects; 3) emphasise whole body development by providing various activities through learning by playing; 4) provide an appropriate learning environment and sufficient resting hours for the children; and 5) promote child development knowledge and understanding, while coordinating with other organisations, parents, the community, and involved parties.

It can be summarised that within the framework of early childhood development in Thailand, a childcare centre is considered the first entry to educational organisations for early childhood students (at the ages of 4-6 years old). Thus, there is a strong need to study the present situation of childcare centres, which will present the current situation of the centres and suggest guidelines for better development for the future. In order to get a better understanding of the management of child care centres in Thailand, this research took a mixed method approach (Creswell 1999; 2014) to answer the following research questions: 1) what is the situation of early child care centre management, and 2) what are the problems and obstacles in the management procedures. Constructive guidelines for the development of quality early childcare centres are subsequently provided. The results as well as recommendations from this study are possible to be generalised to other countries with comparable demographic segmentation, economic size, and culture (Fauziha and Sari 2019).

## Issues Concerning the Quality of Child Care Centres in Thailand

Issues concerning the success and quality of childcare centres in Thailand can be summarised as: 1) Administrator: The administrator must have knowledge and understanding in educational philosophy, curriculum development and management, learning psychology, science and technology, human relationships, community coordination, and school-based management; 2) Personnel: The teacher or child minder should have knowledge and understanding as well as the ability to deploy techniques in learning management, evaluation, instructional material development, and accessing information technology for child and self-development. Thus, staff members must be trained systematically and continuously. For experience management, there are six main activities including: (1) free activities, (2) creative activities, (3) co-curriculum activities, (4) kinaesthetic and rhythmic activities, (5) outdoor activities, and (6) educational games; 3) Curriculum: the curriculum used by childcare centres must be developed to respond to child development in every aspect; 4) Resources: the administrator should allocate sufficient resources. The facilities and learning resources should be well-equipped and suitable for child development; 5) Parents: the school should provide opportunities for parents to participate in learning experience planning and supporting the centre's activities, as well as offer training and knowledge distribution for parents so that they can support child development and help solve their child's problems (Niemhom, Meesonsarn and Thongsawat 2012; Department of Local Administration 2016). Hence, the childcare centres must work closely with parents in terms of responsibility sharing for child development. So, participation from parents in activities organised by childcare centres is vital to the quality of the children's development and the success of the institute (Tulanond and Horadarn 2012). Based on public service theory, public services like education have multiple users and stakeholders. Therefore, when the customers participate to create activities, it can lead to the establishment of sustainability and profitable for now and in the future. So, co-creation may be a better alternative approach.

## Elements of the Co-Creation of Value

The value co-creation is a crucial approach for Public Service Organisations (PSOs). It starts from the service user as a basic unit of analysis and then explores how public services and PSOs should be designed to facilitate the co-creation of value by service users not by service providers (Osborne Radnor and Strokosch 2016). The term '*co-creation*' refers to a set of activities carried out by economic and social actors in the form of networks. Dialog in the activity of co-creation indicates interactions, deep engagement, ability and willingness to act on both sides. The major aspects of interaction are based on equity, mutual understanding, openness, non-command relations, knowledge sharing, empowerment, trust, competence, and full participation. These are key ingredients for co-creation leading to the joint creation of value (Ranjan and Read 2016). With no differences in the value of early childhood development co-creation, in which customers can be referred to as stakeholders and providers can be referred

to as governments, value is formed in an identical manner - one for customers and one for providers. For customers, value creation occurs when value happens in the customer's life, i.e., superior quality of education for their early childhood children. For service providers, value creation occurs separately through the provider's processes, i.e., gaining administrative legitimacy via collaboration and compliance in the service providing process. However, these two processes are simultaneous and connected (Grönroos Strandvik Heinonen 2015).

### **Research Methods**

To understand the situation of early childcare centres in Thailand and to come up with idea for co-creation development, an investigation was devised based on a systems model (Easton 1965), addressing the following issues; 1) the inputs - teachers' qualities, facilities, learning environment, and instructional materials; 2) the process - activities management, administrative management, and community participation; and 3) the outputs - students' characteristics based on parents' opinions, and community satisfaction rate. A multi-case study was conducted among 11 childcare centres, using a mixed method approach. The in-depth interviews, structured-interview questionnaires, and focus group discussions were employed. The samples were drawn by multi-stage sampling. Firstly, purposive sampling was used to collect data from 32 teachers. Secondly, one hundred and one parents were recruited by simple random sampling. Thirdly, purposive sampling was used to recruit ten childcare centres' board members, ten parents, and six administrators for focus group discussions. The data obtained from the interviews were analysed by descriptive statistics, namely, frequency, percentages, means, and standard deviation. Focus group discussions were conducted afterward with a group of ten parents, ten board members of the centres, and six of the municipality team who oversee the childcare centres. Data was analysed by content analysis. The information obtained from site visits enabled the researchers to verify situations through the process of triangulation which is an approach employed to ensure the credibility of the findings (Maxwell 1996).

### **Research Context**

According to the official data, KKM has a population of approximately 120,143 citizens in 2018. The city is growing so the population of the city is increasing due to economic development. The community consists of both middle-income employees and laborers who migrate from rural areas and nearby provinces as well as slum communities. Consequently, childcare centres serve as the main gateway to the education system for children from underprivileged and low-income families.

## Findings

The results revealed that 31 of 32 child-care centre personnel (teachers) were female and 56.3% were 36-50 years old. Of the personnel, 53.1% held bachelor's degrees in early childhood or kindergarten education and 31.3% held degrees in other fields. All of them were knowledgeable in related areas such as nutrition for children at the child-care level, and they had been trained to work in inclusive classrooms and in supporting children with learning disabilities.

Of the parents who voluntarily participated in this study, 66.3% were female and 33.7% were male. 41.6% were 36-50 years old and 31.7% were 20-35 years old. Most of them (59.4%) were laborers or merchants (primarily push-cart vendors). 34.7% had only received a primary education, whereas 45.5% had received only a secondary education, and only 10.9% had a bachelor's degree. 29.7% were unemployed, and 61.4% earned less than \$285 (10,000 Thai baht) per month or had no income.

For the overall situation of the childcare centres, based on the data obtained from the respondents, both teachers opined that the input for child care centre management was all delivered to a satisfactorily high level (administrative work  $\bar{x} = 4.07$ , S.D = 0.49, curriculum management  $\bar{x} = 4.17$ , S.D = 0.49, personnel development  $\bar{x} = 4.10$ , S.D = 0.62, academic and instructional materials management ( $\bar{x} = 4.50$ , S.D = 0.65). The process of management was also rated at a high level ( $\bar{x} = 4.17$ , S.D = 0.49), and community participation was also ranked at a high level ( $\bar{x} = 4.50$ , S.D = 0.65). The results of the childcare management variable found that the personnel were pleased with the administrative approach at a high level ( $\bar{x} = 4.10$ , S.D = 0.61). Parents were also satisfied with the administrative system. When considering the overall situation, it can be concluded that the childcare centres functioned effectively in the overall aspects of input, processes, and outputs. The findings from the focus group discussions of every group were in line with the results from the respondents in the traditional aspects of administrative management.

However, certain points were revealed by the parents in four focus group discussions. These were minor issues but seemed to be of some significance in the management system. For example, some parents mentioned being interested in acquiring information about raising their children or doing some activities with their children. Some participants confirmed that, "We have never received any training from the municipality concerning how to raise our children or how to support them academically." It is worth pointing out that some parents felt pleased with the services as they mentioned that, "Our children were regularly provided with dental care." Concerning their participation in the centres' activities, the parents mentioned that the main participation from the community regarded activities were mainly relating to festivals or traditional fairs. Some joined the activities regularly, but some participated only a few times.

However, they generally commented that whenever they were invited, they felt welcome and happy.

Another interesting issue was raised in the focus group discussions. One parent made the point that, “The teacher did not communicate things with us clearly and update us such as in the case of absence or a prevalence of some illnesses in the centres.” The parents presented the case of a child who did not attend school regularly. One said, “The teacher never traced what problem the child had, and why he/she did not come to class. Or in the case of the kids who were ill with communicable diseases, the teacher did not take the matter seriously. Some diseases may spread to other classmates. The other situation is when a child in the class had a behavioural problem, the teacher hardly reported anything. Yet, we dared not say anything.” The parents’ focus group also suggested other ideas: “We would like to have more contact with the teachers” and, “We want to see a concrete project for online parent networking so that we can share knowledge and experiences.”

Another issue raised by the parents’ focus group was the environmental situation. This issue is the same as this study observed from site visits. The parents’ stated, for example: “The environment in some centres is not very good; it may harm the children’s health, such as a smelly neighbourhood. The bad smell gets into the centre”; “We would like the municipality’s sanitary health department to check the schools/centres’ environment regularly.” The last important observation from the parents was that when they learned that not all teachers in the centres held a degree in early childhood education, they commented that this was not a big deal but they observed that these teachers seemed not to be very good with the kids. They suggested: “If the municipality has a good network with higher educational institutes, the personnel may have opportunities to get training on a regular basis.”

However, overall, the parents were grateful with the services provided by the municipality and considered them to be an improvement compared with the past. “We cannot afford a private early childcare centre, the centre is close to home, and is a better place for our child than staying at home.” “We do not know what to teach them, and we would be very tired if there were no centres to help.”

The focus group of the board members pointed out that, “The childcare centre really takes good care of all the children. However, the problem was that the parents did not take time to collaborate with the centre. So when the problem arose, the parents blamed the teachers.” As for the issue of personnel who did not have degrees in early childhood education, the board explained that “the municipality has a policy to send these personnel to be trained from time to time.” As for the case of absence from the centres, the member of the board explained that “when the child did not come to the centre, the parents were the ones who did not want to bring their child to the centre.” They further elaborated that “when we invited them to come to the

meeting, some of them said that they did not have time or could not take time off from their work.”

Some important points were revealed from the focus group discussions. The basic data showed that some parents had bachelor’s degrees or vocational certificates. A few of these parents mentioned that they were willing to support the centres by lending their knowledge or expertise to teach the children in the centres or to train the teachers in organising art activities or activities for child development. The well-educated parents usually volunteered their expertise to help lead children’s activities or teach the class. But, since the majority of parents are from low-socio-economic backgrounds and are not well-educated, not many parents can help with academic work. However, those who were knowledgeable and had relevant experience were willing to help if the municipality had some support projects.

## **Discussion**

This study showed that the childcare centres run by the local government have been managed effectively based on basic management criteria in terms of administrative work, process management, and outcomes. The local government’s vision stressed its strong management. However, certain weak points were detected from the focus group discussions that still prevent the proper functioning of the co-creation framework. This included: 1) the requirement for communication channels from teachers to parents, 2) better outreach approaches to provide parents with the necessary knowledge and skills to better raise their children, 3) a constructive strategy to promote other kinds of participation, 4) improvement of the environment in the areas where the centres are situated, and 5) better personnel development. Furthermore, if we look at the background information of the parents, we see that potential obstacles to full compliance of the co-creation framework may derive from the fact that 36.7% of the parents are older than 50 years old. In fact, these are not parents; they are guardians, including grandparents. It was evident that the early childcare centres in the growing city were established partly to serve a population which has migrated from other provinces or rural areas to work. Some parents have migrated to work in Bangkok or other cities and left their children with grandparents. The overall picture is that childcare centres serve a socio-economically depressed community. Regarding occupation, 29.7% are unemployed (28.7% of laborers and 30.7% of home business and push-cart vendors). Regarding income, 59.4% are low income parents. When we look at educational background, 34.7% only possess elementary or primary education, and 45.5% possess secondary education. Regarding socio-economic background, 27.7% possess no income and 33.7% have incomes less than \$285 (10,000 Thai baht) per month. The baseline for the average income in the Thai population is \$623 (21,818 Thai baht) per month. So, most parents who send their children to the centres have below average incomes.



To sum up, despite certain problems as discussed earlier, the overall management under the concept of co-creation remains relatively effective for Thai early childhood educational service delivery. The service receivers (parents) sending children to the centres (the service providers) see them as a great opportunity for their children. The centres are seen as much better than letting the children stay home and run around doing nothing. In the case of the parents who have to earn a living, placing their child in a centre is helping them to manage their lives. With clean classrooms, with qualified teachers and child minders, the children are viewed as fortunate. In general, the parents are satisfied (Abdulai 2018). Accordingly, in order to provide equal opportunity for the children, co-creation in educational service delivery should be considered to be guidelines to improve the existing condition of education in Thailand. The old assumption that characterises the traditional approach to public educational services should be changed. The old approach suggests that expertise only resides in educators and professional personnel, not in parents, families, or community members. In the traditional model, the role of parents and community members is to passively receive services or resources as clients or beneficiaries. Changing the process from the top-down advocacy strategy toward the coalition approach, where the parents are engaged in active learning from one another, is the key to improve their capacity to advocate for themselves and for their children (Ishimaru 2014). This seems to be in line with the suggestion from the KKM parents that they want to see a concrete parents' network, where they can learn and share experiences with each other. It also coincides with the proposal from some parents who want to offer their knowledge in terms of organising learning activities for children and training for teachers, if provided with the opportunity. If KKM develops a project along these lines, a database of the parents' expertise should be established. The findings from this study will be useful for other societies with comparable demographic segmentation, economic size and culture to analyse and make use of the knowledge and skills uncovered from this study. Also, as the background information obtained showed that the majority of parents possess only elementary/primary or secondary education, another primary goal for a government that wishes to sustain the co-creation framework for children improvement may be to develop parents and guardians following the concept of lifelong learning by providing the knowledge that they want to obtain, such as how to raise their children and set a learning environment for the children at home, as well as other strategies to provide learning niches for parents and guardians so that they can develop themselves as parents. Since many cities, including KKM, are now moving towards a smart city paradigm, the service organisations in education can also be managed through the use of new digital infrastructures and services in a way that is more distinctive and personalised to embrace more participation from the service receivers as well (Lombardi et al. 2012).

## **Conclusion**

In order to ensure equal access and equal opportunities in education, Thailand's 1999 Education Act (amended in 2002) allows local governments to run childcare centres – one type

of educational body to develop early childhood education at the level of villages and sub-districts – to provide basic education for children. However, one problem encountered is the lack of communication and participation between all involved parties throughout the entire education service production process – from design to delivery. This appears to be very troublesome and causes inefficacy in childcare centres' overall management. One effective solution that could essentially help improve this pitfall is by allowing stakeholders to co-create governmentally run early childhood development programs. Co-creation in delivering educational services will not only help involved parties to realise their roles, enhance equal and reciprocal relationship as well as boost citizens' trust in the government, it may eventually lead to better learning outcomes for all the students – which are by-products of a more efficient process.

For future studies, one point that could be focused is the issue of low participation from the community and parents. The focal point may be to study how government administrators should reduce administrative red tape or provide the alternative regulatory choice that allows free flow of participation from the stakeholders because the underlying principle of co-creation is to create interactions and a dynamic relationship among stakeholders (Osborne Radnor and Strokosch 2016). According to this concept, the parents and community members will be included in the management process. The task of addressing issues or resolving problems will be shared by both the service providers (local governments) and service receivers (parents and community members). Certain issues are worth considering to improve the participation: 1) parent and community participation should manifest in various forms, not only in cultural activities; 2) communication channels between teachers and parents and networking among parents should be improved; 3) environmental development should be undertaken for better sanitation, child health, and aesthetic reasons; 4) better networking should occur between higher educational institutes in the localities and the municipality office, for the better training and continuity of personnel and other aspects of centre development; and 5) visions and policy schemes should be shared with parents and the community. The practice should lead to co-creation, which will create an interactive and systematic relationship where values are created at the connections of the interactions (Ranjan and Read 2016; Voorberg et al. 2017). An advocacy strategy should be devised by the top management, such as Department of Education, to develop bottom-up ways of management by providing opportunities for interactions and engagement among the involved parties, by introducing collaborative management (Waldron and McLeskey 2010).

As for networking between teachers and among parents, social media could be deployed. However, the government would need to develop mechanisms to facilitate and monitor the functions of such program. The government should also develop a database concerning parents and community members' expertise and experience for the future deployment of



supplementary activities and training programs as well as to establish an information sharing platform among parents (Lim and Cho 2019).

Lastly, there should be a network between local governments and higher educational institutes in areas to help support personnel development and the evaluation of children's outcomes by using collaborative research between the centres and higher educational institutes in the areas of instructional quality systems.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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