

Child-centered approach: How is it perceived by preschool educators in Mongolia?

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Abstract: This study is an attempt to grasp Mongolian preschool educators' perceptions on child-centered approach (CCA). CCA was externally introduced to Mongolia about 10 years ago as a diametrically different education from that of the socialist period. The study also aims to examine the differences that may exist among teachers in different types of kindergarten. A total of 262 surveys were completed by preschool educators of typical kindergartens and externally-supported Step by Step program kindergartens. These kindergartens are symbolically referred to ordinary kindergarten (OK) and special kindergarten (SK). Descriptive analysis and Pearson Chi-square test were conducted. The results show that preschool educators in general have interests in CCA, hold some notions similar to that of the Western society, and apply CCA in their interactions with children, at least in terms of discourse. However, their understandings are one-sided and complicated. While preschool educators tend to place importance on children's individuality, they appear to be less concerned about teachers and their roles. SK teachers tend to think that CCA is very appropriate for today's kindergarten life. In contrast, OK teachers appear to perceive CCA as not so appropriate; teachers tend to disvalue CCA for being time-consuming, requiring teachers to spend much time organizing appropriate environment. Interestingly, SK teachers tend to think that CCA is undesirable for discipline and moral of a class, and for collectivity. OK teachers tend to put more emphasis on knowledge construction, and knowledge provision or acquisition. The author concludes with some suggestions for policy-makers and those interested in research on educational export and import.

Key words: Mongolia; child-centered approach; teachers' perception; preschool education

1. Introduction

During the 1990s, under the influence of international agencies, Mongolian policy-makers enthusiastically introduced an educational practice called the child- or student-centered approach¹ at all educational levels, including preschool education², expecting potential benefits not only for the society but also for individual children. In a broader sense, child-centered approach was introduced to Mongolia in order to promote children's future competencies in the globalized world. In a narrow sense, it aimed to transform conventional education to a

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¹ In Mongolia, the term "child-centered" is recognized as "child-centered instruction, method, learning or new teaching technology". In this article, the author refers mainly to "child-centered approach" that covers both method and activity.

² Preschool education in Mongolia is designed primarily for children between 2 and 6 years old to "support young children's physical, intellectual and social development and prepare them for school" (Government of Mongolia, 2008). Recently, with the global recognition of importance of early years, the new term "Early Childhood Development (ESD)" has begun to appear in policies and related documents. ESD refers to a holistic approach that focuses on a range of children's issues: health, nutrition, cognitive, social and emotional development. For this article, the author refers to preschool education with an emphasis on education provision rather than nutrition or care.

new one. Conventional teaching here refers to knowledge or a content-oriented and teacher-structured practice that has been dominated ever since the socialist era. On the other hand, the new child-centered approach fosters children's initiative, self-esteem, independence and creative thinking.

Nowadays, it seems that the value of child-centered approach has been widely accepted among educational institutions and practitioners. Researchers, both inside and outside of Mongolia, have discovered that "teachers gradually began to understand the development of the high quality and sincerity of the student's exploration on the basis of their own spontaneity" (Asanuma, et al., 2009, p. 3). Other researchers (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006; Hohoo, 1999) also noted that most teachers have endorsed this new method into their own practices.

However, the notion of child- or student-centered approach in Mongolia seems to differ from what has been understood globally. Literature and other sources such as well-known daily and teachers' newspapers³ indicate these perplexing circumstances.

As Steiner-Khamsi and Stolpe (2006) argued, typical characteristics of student-centered approach are not individual courses and instructions, but group orientation led by the monitor of class⁴. According to the them, "presentations, discussions and other activities remained teacher-led At no time during the lesson was there room for student- or group-initiatives, or student-led activities" (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006, p. 119).

Furthermore, traditional childrearing and education in the socialist Mongolia had cherished the following values: collective identity and solidarity, respect for teachers and elderly, efforts and academic achievements (Balkhaakav, 2002; Penn, 2006). Therefore, the idea of child-centered approach (new teaching technologies), which values individual benefits, interests and self-choices, was something new in Mongolia (Lkhagvajav, 1999; Doyod & Nergui, 1999).

These claims, however, mainly refers to child- or more precisely student-centered approach in formal schooling. Much less is known about the status of child-centered approach in kindergartens⁵. Today, we lack understanding on how this approach is perceived by preschool educators or to what extent they have accepted this new approach.

In this article, the author examines the child-centered approach (hereafter CCA) in Mongolian preschool education. The author explores how preschool educators in Mongolia understand this new approach, and furthermore, examines the differences that may exist among teachers in different types of kindergarten.

Examining kindergarten teachers' perceptions and attitudes is necessary as it becomes the basis in the author's broader research theme that explores dynamics and tendencies of learning processes from externals. Without knowing how teachers perceive CCA which was externally introduced and internally different from their past practices, it cannot fully explore whether their "pedagogy of command" has been transformed into the "pedagogy of co-operation"⁶, and if so, how. This study will hopefully contribute to current lack of research on

³ In well-known daily newspapers "Zuuny Medee" (2007, No. 264), "Unoodur" (2007, Aug. 9) and popular teacher newspaper "Bagsh" (2007, No. 1), it is argued that after a decade, nothing has changed; teachers still dominate in classrooms while students passively accept what they are told by teachers.

⁴ Steiner-Khamsi (2006, p. 114) argued that the Mongolian practice of schooling reflects a pyramidal hierarchy. Class monitor is on "top" of the pyramid. Below the monitor, in the "middle" of the pyramid, are line monitors. This is followed by regular students who are on the "bottom" of the pyramid. Because of the wide gap between the status of a teacher and a student, class monitor acts as an assistant teacher, an organizer of events, and a discipliner of peers.

⁵ Kindergarten in Mongolia is not compulsory but the only institution that provides preschool education. Unlike, for example the United States, it precedes the beginning of formal schooling. In Mongolia, about 87% out of current 742 kindergartens are state-owned.

⁶ Terms lent from Alexander (2001).

adoption of new practices in Mongolia.

The article begins by reviewing relevant literature to the research question of this study: those on definition and explanation of CCA in Western society, and those on application of this approach from one culture to another. Literature review on CCA in Mongolian context will then be presented. The following section will focus on questionnaire survey, first concerning data and method and then the main results and discussions. The article concludes with implications of major findings of this study.

2. Literature review

2.1 Definition of CCA in literature written in English

Although, definitions of CCA vary extensively, nevertheless, there are some central themes in CCA that have been discussed and understood as important for adoption.

First of all, child is seen as the “ultimately the agent of his own education” (Entwistle, 1970, p. 16), while teachers as “counselor, guide” (Darling, 1994). This is the umbrella notion which seems to have consolidated around the global recognition of CCA. The other following concepts are directly linked to this notion.

The next concept claims that CCA (education) is a “respector” of differences among individual children. As Moyer (1987) argued, every young child is different from each other not only in terms of his/her physical, emotional and intellectual growth and development, but also in terms of socio- or cultural-backgrounds. Therefore, it is important for teachers to recognize and understand, observe and listen thoughtfully to each child as a whole person with unique needs and skills. Knowing and understanding each child’s individuality and nature in turn helps teachers better organize educational process for each child.

Furthermore, critics of teacher-dominated practice⁷ stress that children are “natural doer, maker and creator” (Darling, 1994). Thus the task of educators is not to instruct or permit passive learning dominated by teachers’ talk while children listen and do rote drilling that is limited to pencil-and-paper work, but to encourage self-initiative, spontaneity and freedom. Therefore, large block of times, flexible structure of daily activities, different styles of instruction (individual activity, small group and large group) and diverse experiences are the driving guides of this approach. By doing so, child-centered education provides far richer and more stimulating opportunity that maximizes children’s potential than teacher-centered education (Rugg & Shumaker, 1928; Moyer, 1987).

Another claim is associated with children’s instinct to play. Play is defined as the principal source for holistic development and healthy growth in early childhood. It enables children to test and develop ideas, to learn to communicate with others, to develop motor skills, and to feel and control their own emotions. Therefore, for child-centered educators, a wide range of games (role-play, construction, playing with sands and waters, sport games, etc.) and materials are the main sources for fostering their development (Moyer, 1987).

The next notion that appears frequently is the idea of integrated learning. Unlike traditional schools where children are adjusted to the curriculum, in child-centered classrooms, curriculum and activities are made to fit to

⁷ During the processes of literature review on CCA in Western society, the author became aware that CCA is not the paramount in Western society, even in the area of early childhood where CCA is preferred to be understood as the main approach of teachers. Inconsistency between belief (endorsed CCA) and personal teaching style (teacher-directed) was found in the classroom of one of preschool in the Midwest central urban community of the United States (Cummins, 1998). Generally, it seems that there are many opponents and critics who disagree with CCA stressing “too much freedom”, “malaise” that follows “neglect of teacher’s role”, “degradation and decline of students’ academic performances” in educational processes (Grossen, 1998; Margonis, 1992). Although the arguments are interesting, because the purpose of this paper is to explore the idea of CCA, the author relays on defenders’ definition, formulation and explanation of this approach.

children and to respond to their nature. Therefore, separated subjects and unrelated topics should be made interrelated and integrated under particular themes and topics that are based on children's direct experiences and interests (Dodgington & Hilton, 2007; Rugg & Shumaker, 1928; Moyer, 1987).

The core principles that consist of child-centered education in the Western society have been defined as discussed above. One can note that all these concepts does not merely relate to children, in addition to the notion of children, notions on teachers and their roles, as well tools and methods recur in CCA literature. This trend has been commonly shared among writers of different periods.

2.2 CCA transferred from one cultural context into another

A number of literature related to the topic indicate challenges and problems that are confined to non-Western cultures. Some researchers (Nguen Phuong-Mai, et al., 2005) argued that child- or student-centered approach (cooperative learning) is not appropriate in case of Vietnam where culture of collectivism has been a heritage for a long period of time since the days of Confucian.

Another research (Roxane de la Sablonnière, et al., 2009) noted the difficulty to change the pedagogy that focused predominantly on teacher-centered approach. For example, although majority of teachers in post-soviet Kyrgyzstan agreed to CCA, most teachers still seemed to adhere to reproductive knowledge and memorization.

One study (Nagayama & Gillard, 2005) found that in Japan, teachers insisted group instructions in order to promote community and regard for others, while instruction and curriculum based on individual approach was commonly adopted in the United States.

Similar findings were identified by Holloway (1999), she found that Japanese teachers of Buddhist preschools organized activities in a teacher-oriented manner encouraging children's virtue, intellect and physical well-being, whereas Christian preschool teachers preferred play-oriented styles attempting to encourage children's creativity and their ability to formulate thoughts and to express them to others.

Young-Ihm (2002a; 2002b; 2003) compared English and Korean teachers' perceptions and daily practices based on her observation and questionnaire survey. She found more child-centered styles of education in England where there is a long tradition that emphasizes individual's rights and autonomy. In contrast, despite of Korean government policy on CCA and the influence of the Western early childhood philosophy (originally brought by American missionaries and Japanese educators), preschool education in Korea reflects values of Confucianism. "Teachers' practices were mainly teacher-directed; children were not encouraged to explore their own personal interests" (Young-Ihm, 2003, p. 490). She suggested, while adopting new models and practices from another culture, we have to refer to cultural and social contexts as well as physical conditions (Young-Ihm, 2002a; 2003).

All of these previous studies are in the same vein as they touch upon similar issues. They clearly tell us that CCA has to be understood as Western-rooted and that there are some constraints at least in non-Western countries where the idea of "I" consciousness is less emphasized than the "we" consciousness. Research by Young-Ihm particularly suggested that similar analyses should be conducted in Mongolia, while the government has paid much attention to CCA adoption, extremely little research has been done on CCA in preschool educators' perceptions and attitudes.

2.3 CCA presented in Mongolian literature

While it is tempting to start any discussion of CCA in Mongolia with the democratization movement of 1990s (as a completely new and diametrically different education from that of the socialist period), current notions must be understood in a broader pedagogical context. Literature indicates that similar notions such as "every child has its own needs and potentiality" and "teachers do not only teach the subjects, but they also have to tactfully

interact with every pupil”, were already defined by researchers and practitioners of the socialist time (Delgerjav, 2006; Vanchigsuren, 2002; Tumendelger, 1988; Bor, 1962). For example, Tumendelger (1988) insisted and defined the necessary elements of tactful teachers as follows:

- (1) Assist students with the belief that each of them is unique;
- (2) Listen to every pupil and his/her inner voice;
- (3) Know every child’s individual aim and will;
- (4) Communicate according to his/her developmental stage. (Tumendelger, 1988, p. 73)

Literature published during the socialist era also highlights that play is an essential tool for intellectual, emotional, social and physical development during early childhood (Sanjjav, 2002). Moreover, play was set up in the curriculum and in daily schedule of kindergartens of socialist time as one of the main activities for young children (Byambadorj, et al., 2002).

From the above arguments, it can be said that, although CCA is one of the Western culture’s product, some notions of CCA were common in the pedagogy of socialist Mongolia.

With regard to research on CCA in Mongolia, a few recent publications provide some insights into CCA in the Mongolian contexts. Some of the notions are also emphasized by Mongolian researchers and educationists. One researcher (Vanchigsuren, 1996) stressed that teachers should first and foremost know every student: body, heart and intellectual power, as well as inherent talent. Knowing this in turn will form students’ independent thinking and lead to active communication between teachers and students.

Another study (Ichinkhorloo, 2004) argued that learning process with a clear purpose while undertaking students’ age and needs, is child-centered. Learning should be based on students’ self-thinking and creative activity, and should be open and flexible.

Höhöö (1999) identified CCA in terms of its practical application. He suggested several methods for teachers in organizing lessons including project-based learning, practical action method, play-based method, discussion-debate method and problem-solving method. In addition, he provided practical checking list for teachers on how to plan, monitor and evaluate lessons that reflect child-centered idea.

These previous studies on CCA in Mongolia are about student-centered approach in formal schooling. As the author mentioned earlier, CCA in preschool education receives extremely little attention in the literature. Only one study, a Master’s thesis (Oyungerel, 1999) focused on CCA in kindergartens. As a head of an experimental kindergarten of Ulaanbaatar where CCA was implemented as a pilot project, Oyungerel reported the main differences between kindergartens that applied CCA and those that did not. Her findings revealed that teachers, parents and children of experimental kindergarten were generally satisfied with CCA as it provided more creative learning than before:

- (1) Opportunity for children to play at various learning corners (activity centers);
- (2) Making a choice;
- (3) Working independently;
- (4) Sharing ideas with friends and teachers;
- (5) Efforts to find out answers by themselves. (Oyungerel, 1991, p. 76)

In contrast, in non-experimental kindergarten, it seems that children had little opportunity in learning and even in playing since teachers mostly decided where and with whom they can play or what kind of materials they can choose from. These differences seem to stem from the presence of various activity centers in classes of pilot kindergarten: In non-experimental kindergarten, centers were non-touchable and limited in number. She suggested

adopting CCA by establishing variety of activity centers. However, it is a great concern that although play was a keyword in the questionnaire to teachers and children, Oyungerel paid little attention to play and possible use of play in the new activity centers. In her conclusion, she urged to develop new curriculum and learning contents, integrated approach, cross-curricular teaching and thematic topic.

In light of both Western and Mongolian literature on CCA's definition and application, the author was interested in exploring how CCA was defined and understood by Mongolian preschool educators. The author was also interested in examining differences, if any, in their perceptions of CCA. Would preschool educators be involved in projects of particular donors reflect CCA? Would preschool educators of typical kindergartens stress individual choices and independence or would they emphasize teacher-directed approach?

This research addresses the following three questions:

(1) What is preschool educators' overall understanding on the concepts of CCA?

(2) What are their attitudes toward application of CCA?

(3) Do perceptions of preschool educators in kindergartens where CCA has been intentionally introduced and supported by donor agencies differ from those kindergartens without such support?

3. Method

3.1 Participants

The sample consists of teachers, methodologists⁸, head teachers and assistant teachers⁹ of two different types of kindergartens. The author symbolically refers to these kindergartens as ordinary and special. In fact, there are no such kindergartens understood as ordinary or special in Mongolia. By special kindergartens, the author refers to those kindergartens where CCA was intentionally introduced through a special program called Step by Step of Mongolian Foundation for Open Society (MFOS)¹⁰. While ordinary kindergartens refer to the rest of the kindergartens.

Two types of kindergarten were identified in order to compare perceptions and attitudes. Both in ordinary (OK) and special (SK) kindergartens, teachers were encouraged to apply CCA. However, in OK, teachers were offered CCA in 2000. As described in the new curriculum called the Preschool Education Core Curriculum, CCA were to be applied as the main method of instruction instead of traditional teacher-oriented method (Ministry of Enlightenment, 2000).

In SK, CCA were applied as a necessary element of teaching a bit earlier, in 1998. It was introduced not to all kindergartens, instead it was selectively limited to kindergartens and classes that were located in different parts of Mongolia. Step by Step program of MFOS has sought to establish a few but excellent quality model classes/kindergartens in which CCA were to be adopted in complete sense. Models were then to be dissimilated to other classes and kindergartens of Mongolia (Enkhtuya, 2008). Therefore, total population of SK teachers is not

⁸ Methodologist is a person who is responsible for supporting teachers in teaching, planning and evaluation, and in curriculum development.

⁹ Assistance teacher is a person whose role is to assist the teacher and to keep the classroom in clean and tight condition (Government of Mongolia, 2008).

¹⁰ Step by Step program is an international program for early childhood development that is originally supported by the Soros Foundation. The purpose is to promote open and democratic society in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. The name of the branch of Soros Foundation in Mongolia is Mongolian Foundation for Open Society (MFOS). Since 2004, with its staff and programs of former MFOS, the new NGO called the Mongolian Education Alliance was established to continue the initiatives of Soros Foundation.

large. According to the data provided by Step by Step program country office, 126 classrooms in 52 kindergartens (about 7.0% of all 742 kindergartens of Mongolia) currently apply CCA in Mongolia.

A total of 273 surveys (140 from OK and 133 from SK) were implemented. Eleven surveys (1 from OK and 10 from SK) were excluded in the data analysis due to inaccurate answers. In the sample, 99.6% of the respondents were female. Note that at the national level, 99.8% of the teachers are female (MOECS, 2007). Of the 262 useable surveys, 243 were completed by teachers. Respondents' age ranges from 23 to 59, with the average age of 38 (SD=8.1). Overall, the survey represents 4.5% of the total population (3,267) of kindergarten teachers in Mongolia (MOECS, 2007).

3.2 Procedure and instrument

Questionnaires were mailed to those responsible for preschool education in districts or organizations. For example, questionnaires for SK educators were sent directly to Step by Step country director, with a letter explaining the study and requesting educators' participation. This person in turn distributed and administered the questionnaire to SK teachers, and then mailed them back to the researcher. In the case of OK teachers, the director of Preschool Education School and several district preschool specialists provided support and asked all kindergartens/teachers¹¹ in their responsible areas to respond to the questionnaires.

In the piloting process, 54 questionnaires with 15 items were distributed to preschool teachers and some teacher students of Preschool Education School¹². Piloting resulted in rechecking meanings and terms of the questions which led to modification and additions for this study. The questionnaire consists of 20 semi-closed-ended questions and 5 demographic questions on respondents' ages, job classifications, and years of experience. The author decided to provide three open-ended questions in order to explore options from teachers' responses within their contextual messages based on their teaching experiences. Because there is little research on CCA in preschool education, and because of researcher's inexperience in the field of CCA application. In the closed-ended questions, scales were made simple (yes or no, or choices from 3 to 8 statements) so that teachers can easily understand.

Within the scope of this article, the author will only use the data that emerged from questions that sought to access teachers' perceptions on CCA. Therefore, the author does not use all 20 items for this paper. Excluded items will be analyzed in future discussion.

The author measured the variables using categorical scores. Descriptive analyses were used to describe general trend in understanding CCA as well as advantages and disadvantages of CCA. Data were summarized by category and were presented as percentages. Pearson Chi-square test was used to determine whether significant differences exist between OK and SK teachers.

4. Results

4.1 How CCA is understood

4.1.1 Teachers' definitions of CCA

¹¹ In selecting typical kindergartens (OK), the author was aware of the fact that all kindergartens of Mongolia have experienced or at least have acknowledged CCA in one way or the other. The only one consideration in the author's selection process was to select those OKs where no piloting or donor's projects on CCA were implemented.

¹² Preschool Education School is the only institution in Mongolia that provides pre-service trainings for future preschool educators as a bachelor degree (four years) and a diploma (two years).

What do you think about child-centered instruction¹³? This was the first open-ended question of the questionnaire. As the author expected, responses ranged from a very simple one such as: “CCA is an educational instruction that fits to children” to a long and rich expressions like: “I think CCA is when there is good environment for children’s self-learning that meets children’s age and body (physical development) and encourages his/her intellectual development through playing”. 21.0% of preschool educators did not respond to this question.

The author categorized the total of 89 codes into the 10 categories. Total responses for this question are shown in Table 1. Here the author presents the most and least preferred categories (notions) in its orders of preference.

Table 1 Description of CCA

Category	OK(N=139)		SK(N=123)		Total (N=262)	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Agent	132	95.0	108	87.8	240	91.4
Facilitator	42	30.2	41	33.3	83	31.8
Holistic development	28	20.1	22	17.9	50	19.0
Academic orientation	32	23.0	8	6.5	40	14.8
Environment	0	0.0	6	4.9	6	2.5
General expressions	3	2.2	2	1.6	5	1.9
Experience	1	0.7	1	0.8	2	0.8
Play	0	0.0	1	0.8	1	0.4
NA	39	28.1	17	13.8	56	21.0
Unrelated responses	0	0.0	8	6.5	8	3.3

Notes: n: number of cases; %: percentage of samples.

(1) Notion 1: Child is the center of educational instruction

The results show that a great majority of both respondents of OK and SK hold the idea of CCA that positively considers children’s position and places importance on his/her individuality. This category indicated 91.4% of all responses: with 95.0% and 87.8% respectively. Answers of this category specifically focused on children being able to “think by him/herself”, “freely ask questions”, “creatively think”, “explore new things by him/herself”, “express own ideas”, “try to do by own ways”, “take an initiative”, “engage actively in learning activities”, “make choice”, “learn how to do things”, etc.

(2) Notion 2: Teacher is a facilitator for children

Answers of this category focused on teacher’s role in being able to: support a child, provide an opportunity, meet children’s needs and interests, and respect children. However, as Table 1 indicates, both educators of OK (30.2%) and SK (33.3%) put less emphasis on teacher’s role than on children.

(3) Notion 3: Academic orientation

Results of the findings revealed a clear distinction between the patterns of OK and SK educators’ perceptions on CCA. OK teachers place more emphasis on academic orientation than SK teachers. As shown in the Table 1, whereas 23.0% of all OK educators’ responses focused on this category only 6.5% of responses from SK teachers were related to this category. Phrases such as to base on child’s already obtained knowledge, and to create, provide or obtain knowledge are most frequently used by OK teachers rather than SK teachers.

¹³ In the questionnaire the author used word “child-centered instruction” in order to be understandable for teachers.

(4) The least preferred notions

On the other hand, notions that relate to experimental activities and child-initiated play were almost non-existent in teachers' descriptions on CCA. Only one teacher expressed that CCA is based on play (0.4%), but this was only expressed by SK teacher. This was followed by the last two notions general expressions such as CCA is open, real, efficient (1.9%) and experience (0.8%).

4.1.2 Advantages of CCA

By providing two open-ended questions on advantages and disadvantages of CCA, the author was interested in identifying what preschool educators actually value or disvalue on CCA, and how their values differ between OK and SK educators. 11.8% of preschool educators did not respond to this question. A total of 71 codes were categorized into the 10 categories. Table 2 shows the percentage of the responses by categories.

Table 2 Advantages of CCA

Category	OK		SK		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Agent	107	77.0	89	72.4	196	74.7
Facilitator	47	33.8	70	56.9	117	45.4
Holistic development	35	25.2	31	25.2	66	25.2
Academic orientation	48	34.5	17	13.8	65	24.2
General expressions	9	6.5	12	9.8	21	8.2
Environment	4	2.9	6	4.9	10	3.9
Experience	2	1.4	7	5.7	9	3.6
Play	1	0.7	1	0.8	2	0.8
Unrelated responses	5	3.6	7	5.7	12	4.65
NA	17	12.2	14	11.4	31	11.8

Notes: n: number of cases; %: percentage of samples.

Overall, the author found a strong resemblance between results of this question and the question on definition of CCA. Among the categories identified as advantages of CCA, appropriate environment, experience and play were considered to have the least advantage.

Here again, OK teachers tended to value CCA for its knowledge creation, improving learning results, and better exchange or possibility of later use of knowledge. Whereas 34.5% of all OK educators' responses focused on this category, only 13.8% of responses from SK teachers were related to this category.

It is interesting to note that more than half of both OK and SK teachers (74.7%) identified CCA as valuable in terms of advantage for children instead of teachers: with 77.0% and 72.4% respectively. Underlying dimensions of advantage of CCA for children includes those answers that directly relate to benefits for children (for example, self-decision, independence, self-choice) and those responses that describe CCA as helping to open a child, involving child in learning processes, etc.

4.1.3 Disadvantages of CCA

The author found that there were answers such like "I don't know", "I can't say anything at this time" and "I haven't realized yet". A very few but strong and positive responses were given: teachers said, "There are no disadvantages in CCA". More than one third (31.4%) of the teachers did not respond at all to this question.

A total of 57 codes were categorized into 5 categories, excluding 2 categories that were related not to disadvantages of CCA (rather constraints or issues that teachers face in practice). Table 3 summarizes the responses.

Table 3 Disadvantages of CCA

Category	OK		SK	
	n	%	n	%
Negative effect on child	16	11.5	49	39.8
Time consuming	50	36.0	15	12.2
Not applicable in for all children and for all situations	21	15.1	9	7.3
No disadvantage	2	1.4	9	7.3
Do not know	4	2.9	0	0.0
NA	32	23.0	49	39.8

Notes: n: number of cases; %: percentage of samples.

25.7% of all responses disvalued CCA as that is appears to have negative effects on children. They said children “become too excited, don’t listen others, too much emphases on own ‘I’, don’t show interest to others, lose respect for others, etc.”. Preschool educators tended to think that “chaos, too much freedom, decrease of teacher reputation, and no discipline” as of disadvantages of CCA. Interestingly, however, these answers were mostly from SK teachers (39.8%) than from OK teachers (11.5%).

Teachers tend to disvalue CCA for being time-consuming, requiring teachers to spend much time for planning, organizing an appropriate environment, and preparing a range of learning and other materials. 36.0% of responses from OK teachers were related to this category, compared to 12.2% of SK responses.

Teachers also tend to think that CCA is not applicable for all children and for all situations. This category indicates 15.1% for OK teachers’ responses whereas only 7.3% for SK.

4.2 Preschool educators’ attitudes toward CCA

(1) Interests toward CCA

Generally, a great majority of both OK and SK educators proportionally gave positive responses, with 95.0% and 98.4% respectively.

(2) Appropriateness of CCA

Table 4 shows that considerable number of teachers tends to think that CCA is very appropriate to apply. However, more teachers of SK (83.7%) than those of OK (69.1%) tend to agree with appropriateness of CCA in present life of preschools. Statistically significant difference ($p=0.01$) was found between OK and SK teachers.

Table 4 Percentage of teachers’ responses on appropriateness/inappropriateness of CCA

Category	OK		SK		Total	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Very appropriate	96	69.1	103	83.7	199	76.4
Not so appropriate	40	28.8	16	13.0	56	20.9
Not appropriate	0	0.0	1	0.8	1	0.4
NA	3	2.2	3	2.4	6	2.3
Total	139	100.0	123	100.0	262	100.0

Notes: n: number of cases; %: percentage of samples.

(3) Application of CCA

In relation to the question on whether preschool educators apply CCA in their daily practices, a majority of both OK (81.3%) and SK teachers (82.9%) responded that they utilize this method in everyday practices.

(4) Preference of CCA application in the various activities

In both kindergartens educators preferred to apply CCA in all daily activities rather than in single and multiple activities. All activities here include four main daily activities: play, labor (clean-up), lesson and developmental activities (drama, story, singing, etc.). Single activity means a selection of just only lesson or play, labor or developmental activity. Multiple refers to the selection of more than one but less than all four activities. However, as Table 5 shows, it identifies 35.3% in OK and 45.5% in SK teachers' responses. A weak but statistically significant difference ($p=0.03$) were found between OK and SK teachers.

Table 5 Percentage of preferred activity for CCA application

Category	OK		SK	
	n	%	n	%
Single	19	13.7	23	18.7
Multiple	37	26.6	16	13.0
All	49	35.3	56	45.5
NA	34	24.5	28	22.8
Total	139	100.0	123	100.0

Notes: n: number of cases; %: percentage of samples.

5. Discussions

5.1 Common understandings and attitudes

The findings of this study clearly show that perceptions of typical and program-related kindergarten teachers were mostly common.

First of all, regardless of kindergarten types, preschool educators tended to understand CCA as an educational activity that involves children to act not as the subject, but rather as an agent of educational process. Teachers were not just to teach and instruct children, but to listen to and support them. Moreover, teachers' expressions were similar to notions in the Western literature. In this sense, it can be suggested that Mongolian teachers share the same notion of child-centered education at least in terms of discourse.

A high proportion of both OK and SK teachers' interest in CCA is another important common finding. This might be explained by the increasing demands from schools, parents, authorities and the society and could be an indication of promising commitment to the value of society. All these results strongly support the claim that child-centered practice has been exposed to and accepted by many preschool educators (Young-Ihm, 2002, 2003; Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006).

On the other hand, teachers' emphasis is less on teachers and their roles. This was common in both OK and SK teachers' views on CCA, but did not specifically refer to CCA notions of the Western world. This was perhaps because while teachers were mostly attacked in their arid and narrow instructional matters until recently, children are now the main actors in the educational process (Ministry of Enlightenment, 2000; MOECS, 2003; MOECS & UNESCO, 2005). Although this is well taken, it also suggests that teachers are insufficiently informed and assisted about the role of child-centered teachers.

Another common finding was almost no description on play and experimental and exploratory activities in contrast to what have been emphasized in the previous literature. Only one teacher responded that "CCA is an educational activity based on children's play". This result can be interpreted differently, for example, by referring to an existing tradition from socialism where play was considered to be the key element of daily activities in kindergartens. Thus, teachers may think that there is no need to accept play as one of the elements newly

introduced CCA. Another reason behind this may be related heavily to the recent government's tendency to emphasize a raise of standards, learning outcomes and competencies. To understand more clearly the situation on play, we need to investigate further.

5.2 Differences between OK and SK teachers

The study indicated a few but statistically significant differences between OK and SK educators' perceptions and attitudes.

Results regarding OK teachers show that they tend to think that CCA is not appropriate for today's kindergarten life: Too many children in one classroom, lack of resources are the main constraints that were identified in OK teachers' responses (21.6%). This suggests that what teachers find interesting is not necessarily accepted as suitable for adoption.

The emphasis on "construction, provision and acquisition of knowledge" was another distinctive indication of OK teachers' perception. The above tendency may mean that teachers in OK still put emphasis on lessons or instructions in order to "provide knowledge" literally. In school as well as in kindergarten "providing or obtaining knowledge" in the past meant a large-group teacher-structured instruction/lesson with very limited place for exploratory activities and playing of children (Jamts, 2002). This makes the context of CCA in Mongolia as something different from the globally shared meaning. One possible explanation for this may be the increasing demand on teachers to meet the learning goals and outcomes (to which children are expected to reach) that are emphasized in recent standards and curriculum recommendations combined with lack of experience and appropriate materials on practical application of CCA, a long-standing teaching practice, "to be knowledgeable", may be another reason for the tendency of OK teachers to emphasize knowledge (Steiner-Khamsi & Stolpe, 2006).

On the other hand, compared to the results of SK teachers, less OK teachers were concerned with chaos in the classroom, misbehavior of children. Why is this so? One possible explanation may be that although teachers recognize the importance of CCA and do apply the approach in their daily practices, they may not be experienced in CCA because unlike SK teachers, it is not compulsory. CCA was introduced in 2000, but since then, the policy tends to move towards raising standards with much emphasis on learning outcomes, measurement and evaluation. This has been noted as the tendency of recent changes in Western child-centered education (Young-Ihm, 2002, 2003; Darling, 1994; Doddington & Hilton, 2007). On the other hand, preschool educators may experience a contradiction between their own wills and expectations in trying to adopt CCA in an environment where experts see as merely suited for young children—too many children in the classroom. In addition, as the author mentioned earlier, OK teachers' emphasis on "academic orientation" or "knowledge" matches with this suggestion. Therefore, the notion of "children as an agent" is probably just a discourse that has not yet been practiced.

Regarding SK teachers' perception and attitude, they tended to think that CCA is very appropriate for today's life. Compare to OK teachers, they tend to less think that CCA is time-consuming. This difference might be related to the environment in which the teachers are located. The fact that SK teachers were given practical trainings on variety of methodological materials, organized and provided by the Step by Step program, may strongly strengthen the findings of this study. Therefore, SK teachers appreciate more of CCA. In addition, SK teachers may feel stronger in facing policy demand on standardization and learning outcomes, because they have been familiarized with the know-how on CCA concerns and practical use. In this sense, it can strongly agree what Asanuma (2009) and other researchers pointed out: Teachers began to recognize the importance of development of children, but partly except OK teachers.

Further, the data indicated that nearly half of SK teachers tended to prefer applying CCA not selectively, but in all daily activities.

Analysis also showed that strikingly, more preschool educators of SK (39.8%) than OK (11.5%) disvalued CCA, because it affected disciplines in the classroom. This was quite unexpected because the findings of both responses to questions on “descriptions” and “advantages” of CCA showed that SK teachers were accepting CCA as it seemed appropriate for child development. However, their responses were twofold: CCA seems “good” for children’s self-esteem, self-value, independence and him/herself, but not desirable for discipline and morale, class and collective. This finding suggests two things. First, more SK teachers than OK teachers, perhaps, have been trying to organize daily activities in a child-centered way. Because of the trainings Step by Step curriculum and guidebooks developed and provided, and the learning environment strengthened by funds from donor agencies, they recognize the potential of CCA in developing individual children (MFOS, 1999). However, since the number of children per teacher in Mongolian classes is much bigger than that of Western countries, application of CCA may be problematic in Mongolia. According to data provided by UNECSO, in the USA, for example, child-teacher ratio is low (16), while in Mongolia it is about 29. Put differently, CCA is not applicable when there is a big gap between the number of children and teachers in the classroom. This is the second suggestion which emerges from the study by Young-Ihm (2002a; 2003). While this is just a suggestion, it makes sense to think about as an old phrase that says, “Those who tried must say something”.

6. Conclusion and implication

In examining how preschool educators in Mongolia perceive and view the “new” educational approach, this study conducted a survey among teachers in typical kindergartens and Step by Step program kindergartens.

A thorough and meticulous analysis goes beyond the scope of this paper. However, this study is the first attempt by anyone inside of Mongolia to grasp the broad picture of “learning from others” and provide insights on this issue. In a narrow sense, data from this pioneering study may be useful for policy-makers and those who are interested in research on educational export and import.

The data indicated that teachers’ understandings and attitudes toward CCA application in Mongolia are complicated and one-sided. They are one-sided because teachers have misunderstandings or superficial explanations of CCA, much emphasis was found on children, but less on teachers and almost none on play as well as experimental and exploratory activities. They are complicated because while preschool educators’ core notions generally resonate with some notions (importance of young children’s autonomy and self-directed skills) of the Western societies, their notions differ among teachers depending on types of kindergartens. In the case of OK, teachers placed much emphasis on knowledge provision, as well as acquisition and construction—Those that have been warned as negative changes in the Western child-centered practices. In contrast, in a case of SK, teachers’ responses reflected a traditional Mongolian view that disvalues CCA for its inconsistency for discipline, regimentation, consideration of teacher and collectivity, as well as self-control.

In times when paradigms change rapidly, it may not be negative twofold: mix the “old” (“We” consciousness) and the “new” (“I” consciousness). However, we cannot run to an extreme, adopting new practices without deep and clear understandings of the issue in trying to march with the global changes. Unclear explanations or superficial understandings on CCA at the grassroots will not guarantee a success in the long run. Moreover, dissonance or a lack of consensus among teachers may bring different results of educational practices just because

they refer to different types of kindergartens. If we neglect such perplexing situation in adopting best practices from others, differences in quality of education would affect children's future life differently, expanding a gap within country.

Policy-makers should consider the understandings and attitudes of teachers as they are the ones who are directly involved in the situation. Teachers are also the ones who can change the situation.

Secondly, rigorously deeper consideration should be given for adopting new practices and models that come from with different contexts of the world: Are the conditions that lead a society to change their educational practices? And why do they do so?

At the same time, clear and sympathetic view is required for both policy-makers and researchers on "old-fashioned" tradition of socialism that has been neglected during the past decade. If we look deeper, the new term might be found in the "old" term, but in a quite different expression. "Learning outcome" or "knowledge provision" might be found in parallel to the notion of "play". "Holistic development" of CCA may somewhat resonate with the "holistic development" of the communist morale, given exclusion of ideological discourses. Differences in vocabulary then would not be of much importance, more important is its contents. As Alexander (2001) clearly pointed out that, while there is a tendency to account for and critique pedagogy of socialism as "old fashioned", it "is the product of traditions which go back to a broader European tradition" (Alexander, 2001, p. 75).

Knowing about teachers' attitudes toward child-centered learning is helpful in making predictions about the future of their CCA practices (in Mongolia). However, within allocated time and resources, this survey was limited to "ordinary" kindergartens located only in Ulaanbaatar. One could imagine that rural kindergarten teachers' understandings and reflections may be different from those of teachers in cities. Compared to Ulaanbaatar, rural kindergartens face problematic issues of access and quality. These issues stem from distance as well as insufficient infrastructure and information distribution. Therefore, the question of rural teachers' perceptions may be striking for further research. Given the situation, more studies are needed to fully explore the local understandings and attitudes of child-centered education. Practical application of CCA, particularly the interactions between teachers (as the main supporters for individual children) and children (as agents of his/her own development) is another research question to be sought.

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