

GOVERNMENT POLICY, LAW, AND REGULATION: A PERSPECTIVE ON EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT IN ASIA

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Abstract

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Early childhood is essential for cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2022). This study aims to explain government policy, law, and regulation, as well as social community participation, for early childhood development in Asia. The qualitative approach was adopted. In-depth interviews were conducted with 10 key informants, employing purposive sampling. Content analysis was performed on the data. The findings revealed that governments have put policies in place to help families with children and to increase access to childcare services. Childcare policies differ by country and are influenced by cultural, economic, and political factors. The government policies law and rules in China, Japan, South Korea, and Thailand aid families with children and provide access to childcare services. However, the level of government support, the availability of childcare facilities, and the extent to which employers are encouraged to provide support for working parents vary. Furthermore, social community participation in childcare services is important and can take various forms, including volunteer work, advocacy, financial support, use of services, and community engagement. By participating in these ways, communities can help to ensure that all children have access to the high-quality care that they need to thrive.

Keywords: Government, Policy, Law, Regulation, Social Community Participation, Early Childhood Development

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1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood, encompassing the period from birth to eight years of age, plays a crucial role in the comprehensive development of children, including their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical aspects. This developmental phase is characterised by the remarkable plasticity and adaptability of the developing brain, wherein billions of interconnected neural circuits are shaped by

a complex interplay of genetic factors, environmental influences, and individual experiences. Optimal brain development necessitates a stimulating environment, adequate nutrition, and meaningful social interactions with attentive caregivers (Ardoin & Bowers, 2020; United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund [UNICEF], 2022). Child development refers to the psychological and biological transformations that occur as children progress from dependent infants to autonomous

adolescents. It encompasses various domains, such as language development, cognitive skills (e.g., symbolic thought, memory, logic), social-emotional skills (e.g., self-awareness, empathy, social interaction), and motor skills (e.g., sitting, running, complex movements). It is widely acknowledged that development is influenced not only by innate predispositions (nature) but also by external influences and experiences (nurture). Throughout the developmental process, changes arise from the intricate and bidirectional interactions between biological factors (e.g., genes, brain growth, neuromuscular maturation) and environmental influences (e.g., parent-child relationships, community characteristics, and cultural norms) that unfold over time. These interactions lead to the reorganisation of various internal systems, enabling the emergence of new developmental capacities. For instance, the acquisition of locomotor skills is the result of the simultaneous and interconnected workings of physiological systems (e.g., muscle strength, balance ability), social-emotional changes (e.g., motivation for independent movement), and experiential factors (e.g., ample opportunities to practise the emerging skill). The dynamic interplay of biological and environmental factors underscores the malleability of development, indicating that interventions targeting the child, the environment, or both, can facilitate positive developmental outcomes (Fernald et al., 2009; Fraser-Thill, 2021; Mercer, 2021).

The government assumes a crucial role in the realm of early childhood development (Vargas-Barón, 2005). Recognized as a pivotal component of young children's education and care, quality early childhood education and care services, also known as early childhood development services, serve as a comprehensive framework encompassing regular monitoring of children's health and nutrition during a critical period of growth. Extensive research demonstrates that these services facilitate children's readiness for primary school and help mitigate educational inequalities by fostering a common foundation of necessary competencies. The government possesses the necessary legal authority, financial resources, human capital, and infrastructure to effectively fulfil this role. However, the utilisation of these resources to support families and caregivers in harnessing the benefits of high-quality early childhood development services exhibits substantial variation across countries (UNICEF, 2012). Moreover, community participation yields benefits across various facets of life. Its impact reverberates not only in workplaces and organisational cultures but also in educational institutions, localities, and small businesses worldwide. When contemplating the advantages of community involvement in early childhood, we encounter one of the most profound and inspiring illustrations of its societal effects. Children's emotional, intellectual, and physical development is profoundly influenced by their relationships and engagement with the community, whether it is within the school, home, playground, or neighbourhood. Active community involvement and engagement yield long-term benefits for children, fostering a sense of belonging and playing a vital role in shaping their identity (Children's Bureau, 2018).

The recognition of the substantial implications necessitates a comprehensive comprehension of the significance attributed to government policies and social community participation in the realm of early childhood development within the Asian context. Extensive research endeavours have been undertaken within the field of early childhood development, yet a limited number of studies have effectively expounded upon the intricacies surrounding government policy formulation and the engagement of social communities specifically pertaining to early childhood development in Asia. Consequently, the primary objective of this study is to explicate the government policy framework and social community involvement in early childhood development within the Asian context, aiming to bridge the existing research gap and provide an in-depth understanding of these crucial dimensions.

The research is divided into six major sections. Section 1 is an introduction to the study. The theoretical context for the study is provided in Section 2. Section 3 presents the research methodology and Section 4 contains the results. Section 5 presents the study's discussions. In Section 6, the study's conclusion is presented.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Early childhood represents a valuable human resource that holds the potential to drive progress and contribute to the well-being of a nation and its state. The developmental trajectory of children during their early years is characterised by rapid growth, making it a critical period for them to attain their maximum potential. Importantly, early childhood development significantly influences an individual's long-term development and outcomes in life (Black et al., 2017; Harefa et al., 2022; Watson et al., 2022).

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) is widely regarded as an important avenue for assisting children in reaching their full potential (Kawarazaki, 2022). ECEC in shaping a child's developmental years has been widely recognized by scholars such as Rahmatullah et al. (2021). As the foundation of our educational system, it is crucial to prioritise the establishment of high-quality ECEC programmes that cater to the needs of all children. To achieve this, it is essential for all stakeholders, including government agencies and institutions, to take decisive actions in ensuring universal access to ECEC, irrespective of a child's background or socio-economic status. Additionally, ongoing monitoring and support should be provided to nurseries and preschools to ensure the delivery of exceptional services in both public and private early years institutions. By prioritising quality services, we can ensure that each child receives the best care and education possible. ECEC plays a fundamental role in creating a nurturing environment that fosters positive development in the young generation, contributing to a more harmonious society in the future. Furthermore, when socioeconomic factors limit the time children spend with family members, nurseries, and preschools play a significant role in facilitating their developmental processes.

Huston (2008) presents policy recommendations aimed at enhancing the quality of childcare and early education programmes catering to children ranging from infancy to school age. Quality, in this context, encompasses both structural characteristics and process indicators. Structural characteristics include aspects such as group composition, caregiver qualifications, and adherence to health and safety practices. Process indicators, on the other hand, encompass sensitive, responsive, and stimulating activities and interactions. It is observed that both structural and process indicators significantly contribute to children's development. Among the structural indicators, the author highlights that specialised training in early education consistently emerges as a strong predictor of children's development. Additionally, small child-to-caregiver ratios and group sizes, especially for infants and toddlers, are also deemed important factors. In the United States, early care and education policies play a crucial role in determining the quality of programmes through two primary mechanisms: funding provision and regulation or establishment of standards. Direct funding from government agencies allows for the enforcement of quality standards pertaining to both structural and process aspects. Regulations and standards governing teacher qualifications, child-to-adult ratios, and group sizes have a substantial impact on programme quality. Furthermore, integrating childcare and early education into a unified early education and care system is highlighted as a means to enhance the overall quality of programmes for young children. Such integration ensures a cohesive approach to early childhood services, promoting consistency and coherence across various programmes.

To promote the utilisation of formal childcare services, a range of demand-side or supply-side instruments can be employed. In response to budgetary constraints witnessed over the past two decades, certain countries have undergone changes in their childcare policies, resulting in a shift towards the implementation of demand-side instruments rather than supply-side measures. In Belgium, a noteworthy transformation occurred with the introduction of demand-side subsidies aimed at incentivizing the usage of formal childcare services. This marked a departure from the previous practice of directly granting subsidies to childcare service providers as a means of reducing their operational costs. Farfan-Portet et al. (2011) conducted a study to examine the impact of both demand-side and supply-side subsidies on the utilisation of formal childcare services by low-income families. It is important to recognize that the chosen policy instruments have implications for access to formal childcare services across families with different income levels. The accessibility outcomes are not neutral. While an increased supply of childcare facilities enhances the likelihood of access for low-income families, the impact of tax deductions on access to childcare services can yield mixed results.

Park et al. (2020) describe the initial responses to COVID-19 pandemic control in each national context (Australia, China, Japan, Korea, and Thailand) and identify socio-political factors that allow for a broad understanding of national responses. Responses in the early childhood education and care (ECEC) sector are discussed in

terms of cultural differences, economic concerns, educational and professional concerns, and educator well-being. While important government actions have rightly focused on virus suppression, it is also critical to maintain focus on children's rights to ensure that the health crisis does not become a child rights crisis and that adequate attention is paid to children's safety and well-being.

Rao et al. (2019) investigate the relationships between early childhood education (ECE) participation, intensity (hours per week), duration (months attended), and total dosage (total hours attended) and children's cognitive, language, and socio-emotional development in Cambodia, China, Mongolia, and Vanuatu. ECE benefits children's early development, but many children in the region are unable to reap these benefits due to access barriers. Participation in ECE is associated with improved cognitive, language, and socio-emotional development. As children grow older, the development gap between ECE participants and non-participants widens. In Mongolia and Cambodia, higher ECE intensity is associated with better language development but lower socio-emotional scores in Cambodia and China.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative approach as a research strategy. In-depth interviews were conducted. To achieve the primary data results, the researchers used the documentary method to review secondary data for appropriate key survey questions. According to Taherdoost (2021), the utilisation of a qualitative research method proves valuable in capturing participants' emotions, attitudes, and experiences, thereby facilitating a deeper comprehension of the human experience within specific contexts. This approach strives to elucidate the underlying reasons behind a particular phenomenon by examining the various circumstances that influence individuals or groups in their decision-making processes and behaviours. By focusing on the intricate details and subjective aspects of the research subject, qualitative research offers insights into the complexities and nuances of human behaviour and decision-making processes. Additionally, communication in both directions facilitates the collection of additional data throughout the interview (Limna, Siripipatthanakul et al., 2023; Sarkorn et al., 2022). In-depth interviews provide detailed answers on a specific topic, obtaining accurate information to meet the research objectives (Limsakul & Kraiwanit, 2020; Sonsuphap, 2022). Purposive sampling was used as a sampling method in this study. Commonly used in qualitative research, purposive sampling is a technique in which researchers use their expertise to select the most useful sample. The goal is to comprehend everything there is to know about a particular phenomenon or population (Namraksa & Kraiwanit, 2023; Siripipatthanakul et al., 2022). The study's respondents were 10 early childhood development experts and academics. They were all Thais who lived in Thailand and were over the age of 18. Participants were informed of the study's goals before participating in interviews or any other research activity to obtain their informed consent and adhere to ethical research practices, as recommended by Limna, Kraiwanit et al. (2023).

Documentary analysis was used, which is a useful qualitative research method that involves the systematic examination of documents in order to extract meaning and gain insight into a specific phenomenon (Jangjarat et al., 2023). In this study, the documentary study involved reviewing and analysing documents and literature relating to the concepts, theories, contexts, and issues surrounding government policy, law, and regulation, as well as social community participation, for early childhood development in Asia. Content analysis is a qualitative method for systematically and objectively describing and quantifying specific phenomena through valid inferences derived from verbal, visual, or written data (Limna et al., 2022; Viphanphong et al., 2023). Therefore, content analysis was used to examine the qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Government policy for early childhood development in Asia

Governments have implemented policies to assist families with children and to increase access to childcare services. Moreover, childcare policies vary among countries and are shaped by cultural, economic, and political factors.

- The Chinese government subsidises families with children and has established a national network of public childcare centres. Families that use private childcare services can also benefit from tax breaks. Moreover, in recent years, employers have been pushed to provide more support for working parents, such as flexible work arrangements and extended parental leave.

- The Japanese government operates a comprehensive childcare system, with a large proportion of public childcare facilities and family subsidies. There are tax breaks for businesses that assist working parents, such as extended leave and flexible work arrangements. The government also emphasises fathers' roles in childcare, encouraging them to take time off work to care for their children.

- The South Korean government provides subsidies to families with children and has established a network of public childcare facilities. The government also provides tax breaks and incentives to businesses that support working parents. In recent years, there has been a push for employers to offer more flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting and part-time work, to support working parents.

- The Thai government offers subsidies to low-income families and has established public childcare centres in the country. However, the country's demand for childcare services continues to outstrip the supply, and many families rely on informal arrangements, such as care provided by grandparents or domestic helpers. The Thai government is working to increase the number and quality of childcare facilities, but this remains a challenge in a country with limited resources.

Government policies in China, Japan, South Korea, and Thailand support families with children and provide access to childcare services. However, the level of government support, the availability of

childcare facilities, and the extent to which employers are encouraged to provide support for working parents vary.

4.2. Law and rule early childhood development in China

China has implemented various laws and regulations aimed at promoting early childhood development in the country.

- Law of the People's Republic of China on the Protection of Minors: This law was enacted in 1991 and provides a legal framework for the protection of children in China. It includes provisions on the protection of children's physical and mental health, education, and welfare.

- National Programme for Child Development (2011-2020): This programme was launched by the Chinese government in 2011 with the aim of promoting the overall development of children in the country. The programme covers various areas such as health, nutrition, education, and social welfare.

- Regulations on the Management of Kindergartens: These regulations were issued in 2018 and provide guidelines for the management of kindergartens. The regulations cover areas such as teacher qualifications, curriculum development, and safety requirements.

- National Early Childhood Education Curriculum Standards: These standards were developed by the Ministry of Education in 2011 and provide guidelines for early childhood education in China. The standards cover areas such as language development, social skills, and physical development.

- Guidelines for the Development of Preschool Education: These guidelines were issued by the State Council in 2010 and provide a comprehensive framework for the development of preschool education in China. The guidelines cover areas such as curriculum development, teacher training, and quality control.

Overall, China has made significant efforts to promote early childhood development in the country through the implementation of laws and regulations, as well as various programmes and initiatives aimed at improving the well-being of children.

4.3. Law and rule early childhood development in Korea

South Korea has implemented various laws and regulations aimed at promoting early childhood development in the country.

- Early Childhood Education Act: This act was enacted in 2007 and provides a legal framework for early childhood education in South Korea. It includes provisions on the establishment and operation of early childhood education institutions, teacher qualifications, curriculum development, and assessment.

- Child Welfare Act: This act was enacted in 1948 and revised in 2019 to strengthen child protection measures. It includes provisions on child abuse prevention and response, support for children's health and welfare, and the establishment of child protection centres.

- **National Curriculum for Early Childhood Education:** This curriculum was developed by the Ministry of Education in 2015 and provides guidelines for early childhood education in South Korea. The curriculum covers areas such as language development, cognitive development, social-emotional development, and physical development.

- **Guidelines for the Development of Early Childhood Education:** These guidelines were developed by the Ministry of Education in 2010 and provide a comprehensive framework for the development of early childhood education in South Korea. The guidelines cover areas such as curriculum development, teacher training, and quality control.

- **Act on the Promotion of Early Childhood Education and Care:** This act was enacted in 2019 and aims to expand access to early childhood education and care services in South Korea. It includes provisions on the establishment of public and private early childhood education and care centres, financial support for parents, and the development of a national database on early childhood education and care.

Overall, South Korea has made significant efforts to promote early childhood development in the country through the implementation of laws and regulations, as well as various programmes and initiatives aimed at improving the well-being of children.

4.4. Law and rule early childhood development in Japan

Japan has implemented various laws and regulations aimed at promoting early childhood development in the country.

- **Child Welfare Act:** This act was enacted in 1947 and revised in 2016 to strengthen child protection measures. It includes provisions on the protection of children's rights, prevention of child abuse, support for children's welfare, and establishment of child guidance centers.

- **Basic Act on Education:** This act was enacted in 1947 and revised in 2006 to promote the overall development of individuals. It includes provisions on the development of comprehensive educational programmes, improvement of educational quality, and promotion of international understanding.

- **Act on Promotion of Early Childhood Education and Care:** This act was enacted in 2007 and revised in 2019 to promote the provision of high-quality early childhood education and care services. It includes provisions on the establishment and operation of early childhood education and care facilities, support for parents, and improvement of the qualifications and training of early childhood educators.

- **Guidelines for Kindergarten Education:** These guidelines were developed by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology in 2008 and revised in 2018 to promote the development of comprehensive and balanced education for children. The guidelines cover areas such as language development, social skills, moral education, and physical education.

- **Guidelines for Childcare:** These guidelines were developed by the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare in 2003 and revised in 2017 to promote

the provision of high-quality childcare services. The guidelines cover areas such as safety management, child guidance, nutrition management, and health management.

Overall, Japan has made significant efforts to promote early childhood development in the country through the implementation of laws and regulations, as well as various programmes and initiatives aimed at improving the well-being of children.

4.5. Law and rule early childhood development in Thailand

Thailand has implemented various laws and regulations aimed at promoting early childhood development in the country.

- **Child Protection Act:** This act was enacted in 2003 and revised in 2019 to strengthen child protection measures. It includes provisions on child abuse prevention and response, protection of children's rights, and establishment of child protection centres.

- **Early Childhood Act:** This act was enacted in 2015 and aims to promote the development and well-being of children from birth to 5 years old. It includes provisions on the establishment and operation of early childhood education and care centres, quality standards for early childhood services, and support for parents.

- **National Education Act:** This act was enacted in 1999 and revised in 2017 to promote educational reform in Thailand. It includes provisions on the development of educational standards, improvement of educational quality, and promotion of equal educational opportunities.

- **Early Childhood Education Curriculum:** This curriculum was developed by the Office of the Basic Education Commission in 2013 and revised in 2017 to provide guidelines for early childhood education in Thailand. The curriculum covers areas such as language development, cognitive development, social-emotional development, and physical development.

- **Child Development Center Standards:** These standards were developed by the Department of Children and Youth in 2012 and revised in 2019 to ensure the quality of early childhood education and care centres in Thailand. The standards cover areas such as teacher qualifications, curriculum development, and safety requirements.

Overall, Thailand has made significant efforts to promote early childhood development in the country through the implementation of laws and regulations, as well as various programmes and initiatives aimed at improving the well-being of children.

4.6. Social community participation in early childhood development in Asia

Social community participation in childcare services is essential and can take various forms. First, community members can donate money to local childcare providers to help cover costs and ensure that high-quality childcare is accessible to all families, regardless of their financial situation. They can also volunteer their time and resources to support local childcare providers, for instance by helping with administration, fundraising,

maintenance, and other tasks. Community members can advocate for improved childcare policies and resources at the local, state, and national levels. In addition, encouraging families in the community to use local childcare services can help to strengthen the childcare sector and ensure its sustainability. Engaging with local childcare providers, families, and other stakeholders can also aid in building a stronger, more supportive community and raising awareness of the importance of high-quality childcare. By participating in these ways, communities can help to ensure that all children have access to the high-quality care that they require.

5. DISCUSSION

This study aimed to explain government policy for and social community participation in early childhood development in Asia. The findings indicated that the government has implemented policies to assist families with children and increase access to childcare services. Country-specific childcare policies are influenced by cultural, economic, and political factors. China, Japan, South Korea, and Thailand have policies that support families with children and provide access to childcare services, on the one hand. The level of government support, the availability of childcare facilities, and the extent to which employers are encouraged to provide support for working parents, on the other hand, vary. Furthermore, social community participation in childcare services is important and can take many different forms, such as volunteer work, advocacy, financial support, service use, and community engagement. Communities can help to ensure that all children have access to the high-quality care that they need to thrive by participating in these ways. Rhee (2007) concluded that Korea's childcare policies are shifting from a conservative to a more progressive approach. Despite the diversity of opinion on these issues within Korean society, as evidenced by the current debates, national welfare, and related policies are expected to continue to move towards a more progressive perspective. This is because general financial support has been significantly increased on an annual basis, and this has occurred against the backdrop of a national consensus that has witnessed a broadening of governmental support for childcare as a result of the crisis of an ever-decreasing fertility rate. Vargas-Barón (2005) stated that ministries or governmental offices will participate in early childhood development policy planning in fields such as finance, planning, justice, education, healthcare, and so on. As claimed by Hu (2014), the Chinese government's policy on childcare is aimed at supporting families with children and providing access to affordable and high-quality childcare services. According to Chen et al. (2023), there are numerous reasons to consider formal childcare, including parental employment, child development, fertility options, elderly health, generational relationships, and so on. Because urban women face more severe work-child conflicts than rural mothers, they are more willing to pay the higher monetary cost of centre-based childcare. Individual and household income disparities between cities and rural areas contribute to

affordability disparities. Mothers in eastern China have a greater need than their counterparts in central and western China to enrol their infants or toddlers in nurseries before the age of three owing to a lack of grandparental and paternal childcare support and an expectation of higher-quality programmes.

6. CONCLUSION

This study shed light on the government policies, laws, and regulations, as well as social community participation, pertaining to early childhood development in Asia. The findings of this study revealed that governments in Asia have implemented policies to support families with children and enhance access to childcare services. However, these childcare policies vary across countries and are influenced by cultural, economic, and political factors. Specifically, the governments of China, Japan, South Korea, and Thailand have established policies, laws, and regulations to assist families with children and facilitate access to childcare services. Nonetheless, the level of government support, availability of childcare facilities, and encouragement for employers to provide support to working parents differ among these countries. Furthermore, social community participation plays a significant role in supporting childcare services. Such participation can manifest in various forms, including volunteer work, advocacy, financial contributions, utilisation of services, and active engagement within the community. By actively participating in these ways, communities contribute to ensuring that all children have access to high-quality care that promotes their overall development and well-being. Overall, this study contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the government policies, laws, and regulations surrounding early childhood development in Asia, while highlighting the pivotal role of social community involvement. The findings underscore the need for continued research, collaboration, and collective efforts to further improve policies and community engagement for the holistic development of young children in the region. By enhancing our understanding of these dimensions, this study contributes to the ongoing efforts aimed at optimising early childhood development outcomes in Asia.

The results of this study have several implications for early childhood development in Asia. Firstly, it highlights the importance of government policies in supporting families with children and increasing access to childcare services. The findings reveal that different countries have distinct policies influenced by cultural, economic, and political factors. Understanding these variations can inform policymakers in designing effective strategies tailored to each country's specific context. Secondly, the study emphasises the significance of government support, availability of childcare facilities, and employer encouragement for working parents. Disparities in these areas may impact the accessibility and quality of childcare services. Recognizing these differences can guide policymakers in addressing gaps and promoting more equitable access to high-quality childcare. Moreover, the research underscores the crucial role

of social community participation in early childhood development. Community involvement can manifest in various forms such as volunteer work, advocacy, financial support, service utilisation, and engagement. This highlights the need for collaborative efforts between governments, communities, and other stakeholders to ensure that all children receive the necessary care for their holistic development.

However, the study also has limitations that should be considered. Firstly, the qualitative approach and small sample size of 10 key informants may limit the generalizability of the findings. Further research with larger and more diverse samples could provide a broader understanding of early childhood development policies in Asia. Additionally, the study primarily focuses on government policies, laws, and social community participation, while other factors such as parental attitudes, cultural norms, and socioeconomic disparities could also impact early childhood development. Future research could

explore these factors in greater depth to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the topic. In terms of future research perspectives, comparative studies could be conducted to examine early childhood development policies across a wider range of Asian countries. This would allow for a more comprehensive analysis of the variations, similarities, and effectiveness of different policy approaches. Longitudinal studies could also be valuable in assessing the long-term outcomes of early childhood development policies and interventions, providing insights into their sustainability and impact on children's development over time. Furthermore, investigating the perspectives and experiences of parents, caregivers, and early childhood professionals would enrich the understanding of the challenges and opportunities in implementing early childhood development policies. Such research could inform the development of evidence-based interventions and strategies to support the diverse needs of children and families in Asia.

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