

Social Capital Utilization for Promoting Learning Experiences of Early Childhood: A Case Study of an Early Childhood Development Center

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ABSTRACT---- *This research aimed to explore the utilization of social capitals for promoting learning experiences of early childhood in an early childhood development center (ECDC). The sample comprised one ECDC under a sub-district municipality, southern, Thailand. A total of 31 key informants comprising 16 teachers, 7 parents and 8 community leaders and scholars was purposively selected. Data were collected using focus group interview along with in-depth interview. Content analysis was used to analyze the information gained.*

The findings revealed that several social capitals were utilized including: 1) human capital (e.g., community leaders and scholars, teachers, and health care personnel); 2) institutional capital (e.g., a sub-district municipality, an elderly club, and a parenting association); 3) local wisdom capital (e.g., shadow play, lullaby, and local materials); 4) cultural capital (e.g., Thai traditional uniform, traditional and Buddhist rituals); and 5) natural resource capital (rice fields and para-rubber fields). Several strategies were applied to utilize the social capital consisting of policy support, teacher advocating, parenting involvement, community participation, and scholarly volunteers.

The findings could be applied by other ECDCs to promote learning experiences for early childhood. However, social capital utilization should take into consideration the characteristics and community context of each ECDC.

Keywords--- social capital, learning experience, early childhood development center, case study

1. INTRODUCTION

Early childhood (2 - 5 years) is a significant period for physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development. Children could be raised in a way to promote and stimulate to fully capability of their potential development. Learning experience is a key factor that has an impact on growth and development of children, particularly brain development [1]. Child rearing and the environment provided should take into consideration the need to promote learning experience. In particular, the Early Childhood Development Center (ECDC) is an appropriate setting to provide learning experience for early childhood.

The Early Childhood Development Center (ECDC) of this study is under responsibility of sub-district municipality, located in sub-urban area. The ECDC provides a curriculum of early childhood education based on the Office of the Basic Education Commission, Thailand, consisting of four essential learning experiences and six principal activities [2]. In addition, the ECDC is located in community that is full of local wisdom and national resources. The major occupation

of the community is agriculture, such as rice and para-rubber. Their way of life also adheres to Thai culture and tradition, as well as the Buddhist way [3, 4]. Furthermore, residents adopt local wisdom in their daily life [5].

A review of the literature on social capital indicated that social capital is related to school success [3][6] [7] [8] [9] [10]. Many studies found that communities with high level of social capital could contribute positive academic outcome of the children. Tennent, Farrell, and Tayler (2005) provided evidences that strong social networks, and community participation could afford children support, information, resource, and role model leading to education success.

In addition to the high level of social capital, community participation is the key to success in providing learning experience for early childhood through the utilization of available community resources, (e.g., community scholars, local wisdom, culture, and natural resources). However, there has been limited study focusing on the utilization of social capital for learning experience in early childhood. Therefore, a study of social capital utilization would be crucial. Information gained can be used to further promote learning experience in early childhood.

Objective This research aimed

1. To explore social capital of an early childhood development center
2. To explain utilization of social capitals for promoting learning experiences of early childhood

Conceptual Framework

Two concepts were selected to provide the guiding theoretical framework for this study, mainly the Thai social capital concept [11] and the curriculum for Thai early childhood education (Office of the Basic Education Commission) [2]. These two concepts were applied to explore existing social capitals and explain the utilization of social capitals to promote learning experience through four essential learning experiences and six principal activities [2].

According to the Thai social capital concept, there are five categories of social capital: 1) Human capital refers to those capable persons who apply their knowledge for community development. They also work for community as a volunteer. The human capital includes community leaders, community scholars, teachers, monks, health care personnel, and volunteers; 2) Institutional capital refers to those groups of people with faith, confidence and the aim to develop society and strengthen the community. They are the local authority organization, schools, elderly clubs, occupational clubs, community hospitals, police stations, parenting associations, etc.; 3) Local wisdom capital refers to the local tacit knowledge and the local wisdom that emerges from community scholars' knowledge, such as Thai wisdom (e.g., folk music and performance), local wisdom (e.g., handicraft weaving); 4) Cultural capital refers to tradition and culture that are transferred and followed from generation to generation. It helps people live together with love, harmony and sharing and behave based on ethical and moral principles. They are Thai culture, Thai traditional rituals, and historic sites; and 5) Natural resource capital refers to those resources that are available in the community and from which the community gets mutual benefit. They are rice and para-rubber fields, mountains, waterfalls, canals, and so on [11].

The curriculum for early childhood education based on the Office of the Basic Education Commission, Thailand [2], comprises four essential learning experiences and six principal activities at an age-appropriate level. The four essential learning experiences' content include; 1) self - begins with nickname, names of body parts, 2) people and places - names of parents, relatives, and family members, interaction with families and community; 3) natural environment - names of living things and non-living thing around the children, characteristics of the things children see in daily life; and 4) things around children - names of objects, tools, and toys around the children. Six principal activities refer to (1) movement and rhythm activities – moving to music, reciting rhymes, and singing songs, (2) creative performance - drawing or telling stories, (3) independent study - opportunities to explore and experiment in real situation, everyday activities, (4) outdoor activity - playing in the playground and outdoors, (5) circle activities - playing activity, and (6) educational game - questions and inquiries) [2]. Those activities are provided to foster children's interests and potential.

2. METHOD

This study was a descriptive qualitative study.

Study Setting and Key Informants

The ECDC and key informants in this study were purposively selected. One ECDC under the responsibility of the sub-district municipality and a total of 31 key informants comprising 16 ECDC teachers (14 ECDC teachers, and 2 elementary school teachers), 7 parents (7 parent or parenting community scholar), 8 community leaders and scholars (one Mayer, four officers, a head of the elderly club, an elderly members, one a local traditional medicine attendant) were recruited. Participants were recruited from five communities, one sub-district municipality and one ECDC by the coordinating ECDE teacher/leader. The coordinating teacher informally contacted these participants and briefly informed these about the study and invited them to participate in the study.

Instrument

Several instruments were used to collect data in this study including audio and VDO tape recorders, social capital record form, and semi-structured and structured interview guide which was developed based on related review literature.

A social capital record form was completed by the head of the ECDC. The social capital record form consisted of four social capital categories: 1) human capital (name, address, scholarly, utilization of early childhood), 2) institution capitals (name, address, scholarly, utilization of early childhood), 3) local wisdom capital, and 4) national resource capital. The semi-structured and structured interview guide was used to conduct the interviews with audio and VDO tape recorders.

Data Collection

Data were collected mainly through focus group along with in-depth interview by the researchers. The interviews were conducted at the selected ECDC in a private room/area. The date of interviews was set based on the available time of the participants. The interviews lasted between 1 to 2 hours. Both individual and group interviews were used to collect data.

Initially three group interviews were conducted including 1) ECDC administrative group, 2) community leader and community scholar group, and 3) ECDC teacher group. Each group consisted of 6-10 persons. Both semi-structured and structured interview guides were used to conduct the focus group interview. All interviews were initiated with an open question moving from general to specific questions. Examples of questions asked were “Can you tell me about the existing social capital in the community?” “Where are they?” “What is his/her expertise?” “How do you adopt it to promote learning experience for children in the ECDC?”

When all group interviews were completed, three individual interviews were conducted in order to further illuminate and generate a deeper information of the social capital utilization. The participants were asked to give an example from their experience or their daily work about social capital utilization. Also, clarification questions were asked such as “What do you mean by that?” “How was that for you?” “Can you tell me more about that?”

Ethical Considerations

The research was approved by IRB of Faculty of Nursing, Prince of Songkla University (PSU. 606.1/028). All key informants participated voluntarily in this project. They were given verbal information about the study. Before the group or individual interviews started the participants were informed that the interview would be audio and VDO tape recorded. They were also given additional verbal information about their right to withdraw from the interview at any time. The data obtained were kept confidential and were presented only in form of academic aspect. Verbal permission was obtained from all participants before collecting data.

Data Analysis

Data analyzing was conducted during and after the interviews using content analysis. The steps of analysis were as follows: 1) The researcher team initially read each transcript several times to gain a sense of the whole content; 2) significant statements/phrases related to social capital and their utilization were then extracted and meanings were formulated; 3) the formulated meanings were then sorted into categories or themes and were written in the form of description of phenomena under study; and 4) the findings were validated using member checking technique. This was undertaken by returning the research findings to the participants and discussing the results with them. All participants showed their satisfaction toward these results that entirely reflected their available social capital and their utilization.

3. FINDINGS

Social Capitals of the Early Childhood Development Center (ECDC)

There are five social capitals which are available for the ECDC including human capital, institutional capital, local wisdom capital, cultural capital, human capital, and natural resource capital.

First, human capital of the ECDC included community leaders (a mayor, district officials of a sub-district municipality), community scholars (local traditional medicine attendants, and the elderly), teachers (a director and teachers of a primary school), monks, health care personnel (dental personnel and registered nurses), and volunteers (health volunteers, parents volunteers, educational volunteers and caregivers volunteers).

Second, institutional capital of the ECDC included a sub-district municipality (a mayor and a district office), primary schools (a director and teachers of a primary school), a non-formal and informal education office, temples, a community hospital (dental personnel and registered nurses), a police station, an elderly club, a parenting association, and occupational groups.

Third, local wisdom capital of the ECDC included Thai wisdom and local wisdom. Thai wisdom consisting of folk performance (e.g., Manora dancing, and shadow play), and folk music (e.g., lullaby and Angklung). Local wisdom included shadow puppet, Thai bamboo handicraft (Rattan and bamboo wickerwork) and Black Khontee dessert.

Forth, cultural capital consisted of Thai culture, Thai traditional rituals and historic sites. Thai culture included Thai custom (Thai traditional dress), and Thai official holidays (Loy-kratong festival, Children’s Day, Father’s Day, and Mother’s Day), Thai traditional rituals were religious traditional rituals (e.g., Buddhist holy day, the Buddhist Lent Day, the End of Buddhist Lent Day, the merit-making at the end of the tenth lunar month, and the Chak Phra Festival). Historic sites are historic temples (places of worship).

Finally, natural resource capital that usual benefit of ECDC included rice and para-rubber fields, Kho-Chaison mountain, canals, a hot spring, and floating market. Those natural resources are located near the ECDC.

Social Capital Utilization

A variety of social capitals was utilized to promote learning experiences of early childhood through four essential learning experiences (self, people and places around children, natural environment, and things around children) and six principal activities (movement and rhythm activities, circle activities, creative performance, independent study, outdoor activity, and educational games). In addition, several strategies were applied to utilize social capitals.

The findings of social capital utilization revealed that several social capitals were utilized including:

First, human capital is capable persons who apply their knowledge to develop the ECDC through administrative officials' support and wisdom transfer. The official support of the ECDC comprises: 1) Community leaders, the mayor encouraged and support teachers' activities to be improve the ECDC to promote children's learning experience through the policy of the ECDC; 2) Teachers: the director of a primary school was appointed to a member of the administrative ECDC team and an expert person for suggesting and approving an early childhood curriculum appropriate to the developmental age of the child and corresponding to standard criteria learning experience of the child. For example, the director of the primary school provided advice an lesson plan, teaching of creative learning materials, monitoring and evaluating in-class teaching; 3) Health care personnel: the dental personnel taught children how to brush their teeth and promoted dental care in the classroom once a semester and also taught parents and teachers to promote dental care of children; and 4) community scholar: in addition to wisdom transfer generation to offspring, a local traditional medicine attendant used local material handcrafts to make learning materials for the children, such as wooden teeth model, and he also composed folk songs about dental care, and taught the children to sing folk songs.

Second, institutional capital of the ECDC included; 1) a sub-district municipality (a mayoral and a district office): a sub-district municipality indirectly supported learning experiences of early childhood for ECDC through financial support (e.g. increased learning experiences area and playground equipment, renovated risk areas, and provided a parents pavilion), enhanced the teacher work here (e.g. allocated teacher ratios to meet standard criteria, and encouraged teachers to develop their learning experience competency via staff meeting, training, conference, and site visit); 2) an elderly club (the elderly and scholars): the elderly played a key role with teachers to promote learning experience of early childhood through local wisdom and culture. The elderly transferred local wisdom and culture to children via innovation. For example, the elderly and teachers developed activities to incorporate local wisdom and culture in learning units: dream occupation and wonderful rice. It is entitled "Elderly care offspring, activity base". The activities include people and places around children (rice farmers, rice fields), the natural environment (coconut shell), things around children (shadow play and puppet, lullaby). These included by telling stories, playing folk music and dancing, and playing outdoors by which the children could develop fine and gross motor skill, social skills, and language skills, enhanced emotion, imagination and creative thinking. 3) parenting association affording a good relationship between teachers and parents. The parenting association played a key role in implementing the ECDC activities, such as cooperating with teachers' learning experience, and fund raising for a parent station. For example, parents provided the local materials, including banana leaves, bamboo and rubber seeds/leaves for teaching how to make handcrafts and for encouraging independent and creative activities. The parents also participated in activities with their child growing some vegetable at the ECDC.

"... policymaker and support budget, as well as cooperation of ECDC,...promoting child education...a sub-district municipality has a lot of projects that have good cooperation of all seniors who provide strong support...The project of care for children by elderly club was starting..... The results found that children who did not know about local dessert and shadow puppet. Now, they know all from activities based on the elderly here..."

(a Mayor)

"... we convey folk wisdom through activities. In particular, one important activity was folk play, such as ball whiz it called "LUNG WEE" and walking with coconut shell. It called "DUNG KALA" to promote fine motors and gross motor skill..."

(the head of an elderly club)

"...now, there is an elderly club that is involved in recreation with children. Recently, it seems grandmothers and aunts to tell stories, sing songs, and make folk toys and Thai dessert. The children really love it..."

(a teacher)

"...children like to grow vegetables.....parents participating...children like to water and grow vegetables... Then, mainly,...an example, the project "campaign for children to eat vegetables" ...inviting parents to dig soil for trenching vegetables, and children water them...."

(an elder)

Third, local wisdom capital from community scholars included Thai wisdom and local wisdom. Thai wisdom consisted of; 1) folk performance, including shadow play, which could promote emotional, physical and cognitive development of children. Some community scholars illustrated shadow play at the ECDC for teaching moral principles

and Thai culture. The content of shadow play also explained about ethics and history; 2) folk music, including lullabies, could improve physical, emotional, social, and cognitive development of children. The lullaby content concerned preventive and curative teeth and encouraged the children's learning experience about their self and attending to their hygiene. Moreover, teachers turned on the lullaby during daily sleeping time.

*"I think it comes out, and it is seen as an innovation of teeth.....Since early childhood, I used to practise last year. The children began to sing.....the song was about maintaining health mouth.....
(start singing)
brush, brush, brush, when see my sister, try to smile, when see mother smiling, AhHeu AhHeu....
Traditional song (lullaby) for brushing, in this series was 6-7 songs. I could sing another song..."
(a local traditional medicine attendant)*

*"Lullaby ka, this lullaby was composed by Uncle, it was taken to teach children how to brush their teeth....and the kids love to brush their teeth"
(a teacher)*

In addition to local wisdom, there are shadow puppet and Black Khontee (Thai dessert). Community scholars, parents and the elderly provide local materials, such as shadow puppet, rubber seed, Sangyod rice, or rice stubble, and Black Khontee to produce teaching material. For example, teachers make a pop-up book using shadow puppet and tell folk tales which promote discipline and morals of the children. For Black Khontee (Thai dessert), the elderly provide Black Khontee, and made khontee dessert with children's participation. Teachers explain to the children how to recognize the unique local Thai dessert.

*"...as not enough material for teaching, and teachers made teaching materials using local material...."
(a community leader)*

*"...the experience plan by providing local wisdom of plans in some units, we experience a plan that the community mainly does rubber plantation. We took this rubber occupation to be integrated in the learning experience plan in the occupation unit. In particular, Black Khontee tree was made powder for Black Khontee dessert that it is very rare tree and the community still make itAt the moment, we integrate this activity in the lesson plan, and Sangyod rice was need to make "Khowmod"..."
(a teacher)*

Fourth, Cultural capital of the ECDC included Thai culture, Thai traditional rituals, and historic sites. Thai culture consisting of Thai style dressing, such as Thai traditional dress of children, and Thai official holidays (e.g., Loy-kratong festival, Children's Day). For instance, teachers and the young children wore Thai traditional Thai dress on Thursday to promote the learning and recognition of Thai culture. In addition, during Loy-kratong festival, the elderly were invited to teach children to make kratongs in order to promote creative performance, and the children with their parent participated in the Loy-kratong festival. Teachers cooperated with community scholars and parents to promote children's participation in Thai official holidays to promote social, emotional, and cognitive development.

*".....every Thursday, teachers and students wore Thai costume, and in the morning in front of the Thai Flag, the teacher does Thai dancing before going to the class room."
(a teacher)*

Moreover, Thai traditional rituals consisted of 2 parts. 1) Religious traditional rituals (e.g., Buddhist holy day, the merit-making at the end of the tenth lunar month). For example, on Buddhist holy day, teachers brought the children to the temple and prepared food and the ten month dessert for monks and taught Buddhist doctrine to the children. In addition, on Buddhist merit-making at the end of the tenth lunar month day, children with their families went to the temple for making merit and to express their gratitude to their ancestors. Those activities of religious traditional rituals enhanced parent-child relationship and promoted experiences of people and place. 2) Historic sites, such as historic temples as a place of worship. Teachers took their children to site visit at historic temples and told the history of the temple. Teachers also encouraged parents to promote children's participation in traditional rituals at the temples to learn more about historical stories.

"...the community gathered and the community was supported by the municipality. The municipality provide financial support to make a decorated combination set of Thai food and dessert "SUMRUB" and parade carrying "SUMRUB" around community area to temples.....The municipality and the community council perform a parade of "SUMRUB" on "SART Day" (Buddhist merit-making at the end of the tenth lunar month day).....the people in community also teach children to make Thai dessert...."

(a head of an elderly club)

Finally, the natural resource capital of the ECDC included rice and para-rubber fields, a hot spring, and the floating market. Teachers provided opportunity for children to gain direct experience at these natural resources, e.g. visiting rice fields and para-rubber fields. Teachers provided outdoor study visit by taking their children to rice and para-rubber and a hot spring for learning experience of the natural environment and things around children.

The ECDC had a variety of social capital, such as human, institute, local wisdom, culture, and natural resource, which are available. The teachers of ECDC cooperated with human and institute social capital to promote learning experience of the children through tacit knowledge transfer in the process of many activities. The main aspects were applied to utilize the social capital consisting of; policy support, teacher advocating, parenting involvement, community participation, and scholarly volunteers. Therefore, the social capital could be applied in the ECDC to improve physical, emotional, social and cognitive development in early childhood.

4. DISCUSSION

Several social capital of the ECDC, such as human, institute, local wisdom, culture, and natural resource, are available. The teachers advocated human capital and institutional capital to promote learning experience of the children in the ECDC. There is a high level of local wisdom, culture capital and natural resources to prompt children's experience through participating with community scholars. However, the ECDC utilized some social capitals. There are some social capitals that are available for utilization for children.

Several strategies were applied to utilize the social capital. The municipality set a policy to support the ECDC, and the ECDC teachers advocated parents and community scholars to volunteer to promote learning experience of children. The success is utilizing social capital could be explained based on three reasons.

The policy of the municipality and ECDC focuses on social capital utilization, such as an elderly club, local wisdom, culture and natural resources. The sub-district municipality policy is to enhance the elderly club, including community scholars, promoting child development and education through local wisdom and culture [12]. It also continues to transfer tacit knowledge and enhance the sense of loving the hometown in the children [4].

Consideration, parental involvement, teachers utilizing social capital through parents by transfer of tacit knowledge contribute to promoting child development. In addition, the ECDC had a good relationship with parents and community, and worked with these as a partnership. Therefore, the teachers could easily connect with parents and community scholars to participate in the learning experience in the classroom, and they could convince the family and community to be volunteers. Specially, family social capital (e.g., parenting involvement) and resource capital (e.g., learning activities outside school) were related to children's academic achievement [9]. Moreover, teachers adopt social capital to promote learning experience. Similarly, Epstein (1995) stated that successful education of children requires family and community involvement. It is clear that success of learning experience of children related to the conjunction of parents, communities and teachers [13].

In addition to community participation and volunteer, the municipality and ECDC teachers convinced community council to collaborate in traditional or Buddhist rituals to promote learning experience children, allocated traditional or Buddhist rituals' days. Parents, children, and teachers participated in a variety of activities that children could gain more development [14]. Those were parts of social capital utilization to predict positive academic outcome of children. Similarly, Tennent, Farrell, & Tayler (2005) found that community participation could contribute to positive academic outcome.

Finally, there are abundance of social capitals in the community. The teachers have an almost unlimited choice to select appropriate social capitals. A lot of social capital that are available for utilization for children, were not utilized, and these were not fully utilized. This may be due the lack of a social capital database or plan for social capital unitization. The social capital database and utilization plan are a means to effectively and efficiently utilize social capital.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The ECDC has successfully utilized some social capitals to promote learning experiences in early childhood. The findings could be applied by other ECDCs to promote learning experience early childhood. However, social capital utilization should take into consideration the characteristics and community context of each ECDC.

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