Parents’ Perceptions on Quality of Early Childhood Education Using the Analytic Hierarchy Process

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to clarify the key factors which influence parents’ school choice for their children. This study explored three things: (1) What components of quality in early childhood education parents identify as key factors and indicators of a good program, (2) how parents prioritize these factors and indicators, and (3) whether there is any difference between parents’ perception and actual school choice. To identify the components of quality in early childhood education and to evaluate the relative importance among the components, the analytic hierarchy process (AHP) survey was conducted with 57 parents. The findings of this study indicate that the components of structural quality influence parents’ school choice for their children more significantly than the components of process quality. Among structural quality factors, parents placed group size (student:teacher ratio), physical environment, curriculum, and teacher quality in the order of relative priority. Among process quality factors, parents weighed children’s experiences more than teacher’s behaviors. The findings also show that there is a discrepancy between parents’ perception and actual school choice. Limitations of the study and suggestions for future study are discussed.

[key words] parents’ school choice for their children, key factors of a good program, structure quality, process quality, analytic hierarchy process (AHP)

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INTRODUCTION

Although there are many types, the importance of early childhood education has long been emphasized. Case in point, many of the countries that realize the importance of early childhood education try to lower the entrance age of educational institutions. Some of these countries introduce early childhood education as compulsory and free. The importance of early childhood education has encouraged policy makers and scholars to perform a number of studies, and as a result of their efforts, researchers have reached an agreement on which factors affect the quality of early childhood education. Although they have identified several components including student per teacher ratio and curriculum, most previous studies have underestimated the interrelationship between factors that contribute to the high quality of early childhood education. Multi-faceted viewpoints on quality in early childhood education are necessary for better understanding.

We conducted this study about the relationship between quality factors from the new perspective of market theory. In the primary and secondary school system, the most talked-about education reform for the last two decades has been how to apply market principles (e.g., competition and choice) to education. According to market theory, because parents prefer educational institutions of better quality, competition between institutions will improve the overall quality of education. Namely, competition by choice will only save the most excellent educational institutions. However, these market principles are not a brand new approach to early childhood education. Choice and competition have always been the basic mechanisms operating in markets for early childhood education. One interesting thing is that even though early childhood education has thrived in markets, we have no background about these markets for early childhood education. Thus, this study attempted to incorporate market theory into the field of early childhood education.

We take market theory into account because the dynamics of the comprising factors in the quality of early childhood education can vary either by the demand or the supply within the markets. Traditionally, parents as a main agent of the markets are expected to select educational institutions based on the rational judgment of the relative importance of various components. However, a parent’s choice is not always rational. Recent research about school choice demonstrates that parental decision of educational institution does not depend solely on academic performance (Hoxby, 2001). Several studies (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2011; Garcia, 2008; Gill, Timpane, Ross, Brewer, & Booker, 2001) noted that parents’ irrational choice even results in segregation by race and socioeconomic status (DeJarnatt, 2008). Parents’ preference and their corresponding choice determine the structure and quality of markets for early childhood. In other words, parents’ perspectives