Exploring Appreciative Inquiry as a Useful Evaluation Approach for Improving Early Childhood Program Quality\textsuperscript{1)}

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Abstract

This study explored possibilities of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) in evaluating and improving quality of early childhood education and care in South Korea. An AI-based evaluation approach was developed and implemented in four child care centers and two kindergartens in an attempt to increase the utility of program evaluation and make meaningful changes in stakeholders’ active participation and ownership of evaluation. The 4-I cycle—Inquire, Imagine, Innovate, Implement—of the evaluation approach was perceived by participating teachers as vitalizing and illuminating opportunities to share visions and make changes based on institutional strengths. Components for successful AI-based evaluations are suggested in pursuit of teachers’ agency, reflection, collaboration, and promoting a constructive culture.

Keywords: appreciative inquiry, program evaluation, early childhood education, child care

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Introduction

In many sectors around the world, the increasing prevalence and power of program evaluation can be observed, as representative trends in an era of accountability and quality control. These relatively new aspirations to better understand and improve program quality through program evaluation have been, however, often perceived in the real world as fault-finding power trips by outside evaluators, and another bureaucratic ordeal required of practitioners for their survival (De Grauwe & Vaghese, 2000; Lee & Walsh, 2004). More seriously, those evaluations with “proven” criteria and indicators are limiting innovative educational practices and diminishing program providers’ autonomy as they have no choice other than complying with the given definitions of good programs or practices, and the field of early childhood education and care (ECEC, hereafter) is no exception to this phenomenon (Lee & Walsh, 2004; Lee & Stake, 2015; Stake & Lee, 2014).

ECEC programs have answered social demands for clear and evidence-based answers for more effective programming with the development of program quality criteria and standards, and quick adoption of accreditation and other similar expertise-oriented approaches to program evaluation. The accreditation approach has been most influential and widely used in endeavors to evaluate and improve quality of ECEC programs since the 1980s with the initiative of the National Association of Education for Young Children (NAEYC, hereafter) in the United States. As noted by Spodek and Saracho (1997), the NAEYC accreditation criteria and their embedded concept of “developmentally appropriate practices” have shaped how both researchers and practitioners in the field define what is a good program for young children not only in the United States, but also in many other parts of the world. South Korea adopted this accreditation approach for evaluation and quality improvement of child care centers in the mid-2000s.

Meanwhile, deep concerns over universalization of early education and care through standards-based evaluations have accumulated. Lee and Stake (2015) warn that well-intended attempts to improve program quality through accountability-driven, standards-based evaluation practices, such as the accreditation approach, may simplify or even de-professionalize the complex and diverse nature of ECEC programs. When ECEC teachers do not buy into the external standards for what constitutes quality care and early schooling, they may simply comply with the standards to be accredited or pass similar evaluations. Efforts for reform may focus on only physical aspects of the program that are easy to change for a good score, without undertaking meaningful changes with regard to their pedagogical beliefs and teaching practices. Some ECEC programs may even return back to their usual practices once the evaluation visit is over. The evaluations are not perceived useful or meaningful to those involved in the evaluation.