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**PUBLIC OR PRIVATE: HOW CHINESE PARENTS MAKE CHILDCARE DECISIONS
FOR THEIR CHILDREN?**

A Thesis in

Education Theory and Policy

by

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Abstract

This qualitative study explored parental childcare decision-making process from the perspectives of middle-class families living in metropolitan areas in China. Findings based on interviews with 10 Chinese mothers whose children were of preschool-age demonstrated that the selection process is a series of decisions encountered in three or four phases. After considering familial practical constraints, parents narrowed down their options and compared the quality among selected preschools. Further, parents of eligible children also participate in the public preschool lottery system, although most have a back-up plan in case they lose the lottery. The results not only provided support for the existing conceptual frameworks of childcare decision-making by presenting the dynamic and complex process, but also revealed one prominent barrier—the lack of informational intervention—during the whole selection process.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Unlike other market-oriented provision countries with various formal childcare types for children aged 3-6 in the early childhood education (ECE) market, the situation in China seems much more straightforward. The common choice for urban Chinese parents is preschool, either a public or a private one. With the help of both national and local governments, universal ECE has been provided in the last decade. The gross enrollment rate for children aged 3-6 has reached 85.2% in 2020 (Ministry of Education, 2021). However, little research, neither quantitatively nor qualitatively, has been conducted about how Chinese parents choose a preschool or what aspects of preschool they value when making their choice. Understanding such knowledge is essential for reducing the asymmetrical information between suppliers and consumers: both policymakers and educators need to examine whether their policy goals and education goals have been achieved, and, in turn, parents will be more informed and then more likely to choose the preschool meeting their needs. Therefore, by using in-depth interviews with ten urban mothers of preschool-aged children, this thesis explores what factors playing decisive roles and how different factors influencing parents' childcare decisions during the selection process. The data illuminate the complex decision-making process interacting with cultural and social norms. Meyers and Jordan's (2006) 'accommodation model' is used to analyze this research from a cultural scope. This framework, incorporating frameworks of both consumer choice and social network, emphasizes the complexity, multiple determinants, and fluidity of childcare decisions.

This thesis is divided into five sections. First, information of ECE in the Chinese context and pertinent policy trends is described. Second, extant research and conceptual framework on what factors influence parental choice is reviewed to shed light on what might affect Chinese

parents' childcare selection. The third section introduces methodology this study employed, and the fourth section presents main characteristics and phases of families' decision-making process. Finally, discussion and conclusion are presented.

Chapter 2

Background

Policy Trends and ECE in Chinese Context

Receiving non-parental childcare and formal early education for a child has been a norm in recent decades. A large body of research has shown the essential and beneficial role that formal childcare plays in children's development (Melhuish et al., 2015; Cornelissen et al., 2018). Increasing the access to non-parental childcare centers and the investment in universal early childhood education (ECE) programs are on the agenda of national policymakers and international organizations (Barnett, 2010; Mahon, 2016). In addition to the improvement of formal center-based childcare, the increase of employed mothers has been another pivotal factor that calls for the prevalence of non-parental childcare. The rising ideology of gender-egalitarianism and the transformation of the traditional family structure away from patriarchal culture has led to the inclusion of women as an integral part of the workforce in most countries (DiPrete et al., 2013). In this regard, the demand for non-maternal childcare services has increased, and the prevalent childcare, which used to be provided mostly by mothers and extended family members, has gradually shifted to the type which is formal, non-parental, and center-based, though all these types of childcares coexist in the ECE market.

Early childhood education (ECE) in China, including education and care, comprises two levels for young children aged 0 to 6 years. Nurseries and daycares serve children aged 0-3 and preschools serve children aged 3-6 (Hong & Chen, 2017). In urban areas of China, early childhood education for children aged around three and above is usually provided by one type of program – preschool (You Er Yuan). The preschool, usually stand-alone, provides three years of full-day care and education services for children aged 3 to 6, in age-segregated classes,

prior to children's attendance in elementary schools. According to the *Preschool Working Regulation* (2016), a preschool is composed of three grades, which are junior grade (aged 3-4), middle grade (aged 4-5), and senior grade (aged 5-6). These three grades are equivalent to preschool, pre-kindergarten, and kindergarten in the U.S context. The number of children in each class varies from grade to grade. A class size of junior grade is limited to 25 children, no more than 30 of middle grade, and no more than 35 of senior grade. Usually, each class has at least one teacher, one associate teacher, and a caregiver to instruct and assist children's daily practice, and the child-staff ratio should be limited in 1:15. The *Preschool Working Regulation* (2016) also pointed out that the play-based curriculum should be employed, and academic push-down courses, which means forcing academics onto preschoolers, are forbidden. Preschool operates from 9:00 am until 4:30 or 5:00 pm, five days a week, for ten months of the year. Three meals and two snacks are provided in most urban preschools. Most preschools provide the extension hour to alleviate the conflict between the care and parents' work schedules. The extension hour usually comprises various activities, outsourcing to off-campus organizations and charging an additional fee.

The demand for formal childcare in China increased rapidly after the "Open-Door" policy¹ and "Market-Economy" reform² in the late 1980s. However, because ECE as a publicly funded system could not keep up with the rapidly expanding needs, the public sector was forced to become commercialized and privatized. Preschools owned by the private sector and NGOs have expanded explosively, while the public sector has been driven out of the market. In 2011, the

¹ This policy was established in the late 20th century in China, aiming to open up China to foreign business and allow foreign capital to invest in Mainland China.

² It refers to the 'Chinese economic reform' happened right after the publishment of 'Open-Door' policy. The reform decentralized the structure of Chinese economy from state-owned and central-planned to privatized and market-oriented form.

percentage of public preschools decreased from 86% in 1997 to 30%, whereas that of private counterparts increased to nearly 70% (Ministry of Education 2010, 2015a). In this market-driven nature of the Chinese ECE market, it is assumed that parents are to rationalize the complex preferences and constraints to pursue suitable childcare. However, due to the dysfunction of the early childhood formal care market and the lack of pertinent laws and regulations of ECE, young Chinese children and their caregivers gradually had to face three major problems (“3A” problems): (1) accessibility: there were not enough preschools to accommodate Chinese children; (2) affordability: some private preschools charged such high tuition that they were more expensive than universities; and (3) accountability: most private preschools had low quality without the necessary accountability (Li, Yang, & Chen, 2016).

Not until 2010 did the Chinese government make universal early childhood education a national priority and realize that the investment in ECE is an essential strategy to also invest in human capital. Accompanied by expanded public funding, the Chinese national government issued two crucial policy documents: (1) *Outline of China’s National Plan for Medium- and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)* (hereinafter referred to as ‘the Plan’) and (2) *Several Views on the Current Development of Preschool Education by the State Council* (hereinafter referred to as ‘Several Views’). These policies empowered the role of the government in universalizing the ECE to address issues of affordability and accountability caused by the previous privatized market. Accordingly, ECE was to be funded, planned, and managed by the government, even though ECE is non-compulsory education. What is more, to shoulder part of the financial burden, the local governments were then required to jointly fund ECE for achieving universal preschool education, especially by prioritizing the needs in rural and poor areas.

Besides financial aid, the Plan commanded the establishment of pu-hui preschools, a new type of preschool program, across the whole country as a national strategy to achieve the goal of universal ECE by alleviating the “3A” problems through sharing the financial responsibility among the government, non-government sponsors, and parents. The pu-hui preschool is jointly funded by both public and private systems to provide affordable but quality formal education, following the regulations and policies of the public ECE system and with less autonomy the preschool itself. Pu-hui programs are usually established through two ways. One is that the government encourages existing private preschools to transform into the pu-hui type by accepting public subsidies. Another is that the government cooperates with local providers to establish a new campus. Thus, with such efforts, the structure of the Chinese ECE market has changed due to governmental intervention. Public preschools, including pu-hui preschools, have gradually dominated preschool education. As the guidance and implementation of the Plan and Several Views for ten years, Chinese government has made great progress on preschool attendance. Educational statistical data of 2020 showed that between 2010 and 2020, the total number of enrolled preschoolers from 56.6% increased to 85.2% (Ministry of Education, 2010; Ministry of Education, 2021).

Chapter 3

Literature review

Conceptual Framework

Meyers and Jordan (2006) proposed an accommodation framework of childcare selection which argues that childcare selection is a complex and dynamic process influenced by individual, family, and community factors. Parents as individual consumers are constrained in multiple ways including things such as information and budgets. Meanwhile, they also need to reconcile childcare arrangements with familial and social norms such as time allocation and employment status. Influenced by individual consumption and social structure aspects, childcare decisions are more like accommodations to market, family, and social realities rather than choices (Meyers & Jordan, 2006). Based on Meyers and Jordan's work, Coley et al. (2014) adds insights to the accommodation model from perspectives of economics and sociology by categorizing four types of factors influencing parental childcare selection: family needs, family resources, cultural norms and preferences, and contextual opportunities and constraints.

According to Meyers and Jordan (2006), family characteristics could be categorized into family needs and resources. Family needs are affected mainly by maternal employment and family structure, while family resources are affected by income and education level. Family characteristics might influence the need for and access to non-parental childcare. Personal preferences are informed and shaped by the cultural and social norms they are embedded within. Such cultural factors, including family race and ethnic background, social networks, and geographic location, influenced the availability and accessibility of childcare options. Finally, because families are embedded within communities, factors including the neighborhoods and the supply of non-parental childcare might influence parents' selection of childcare. In this

analysis, I merged the family needs and family resources into family characteristic as a single type of factors that influencing parental choices. It is worth noting that these three types of factors are not separately independent from each other but correlated and hard to tease apart when analyzing ECE decisions.

Factors Influencing Parents' Choice

Family Characteristics

Families differ in ECE needs based on their family characteristics, especially the employment status and family structure.

Maternal Employment

Given that mothers are usually assigned primary responsibilities for rearing children in families, maternal employment is a prominent and direct factor influencing non-parental childcare needs. Because mothers who are full-time employed have a standard work schedule, they are more likely than their unemployed counterparts to select formal childcare arrangements. This can be explained, as the accommodation framework indicated, by working mothers' schedule needs and motivations to use non-parental childcare to free their time and invest in child development (Hansen et al., 2006; Kuhlthau & Manson, 1996). Among employed mothers, non-parental childcare differed by work hours and schedules. Lyonette et al. (2011) compared working hours of employed mothers in dual-earner families in the U.S. and Britain to find out the relationship between work status and decisions of health and childcare. The results showed that while most employed women in the U.S. were full-time workers, British women preferred part-time work to seek work-family balance. This norm revealed how American full-employed (work more than 40 hours per week) mothers needed more formal, center-based, and non-parental childcare than most British mothers.

For those parents with nontraditional work shifts, care from relatives and family members might be prioritized (Han, 2004). By studying 3,653 parents employed in the retail and foodservice sectors across the United States, Harknett et al. (2018) found that just-in-time scheduling practices have relied on informal care arrangements and on the use of siblings to provide care, sometimes without adult supervision. Though this research indicated that such irregular work schedules might have some unexpected disadvantages to young children, non-standard work schedules may solve some practical care problems, like time allocation, for some families by combining formal and informal childcare. Craig and Powell (2012), using data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics Time Use Survey, demonstrated that in Australian dual-earner families, working mothers usually voluntarily adjust to balance work and family. To have high-quality parental activity time, these mothers shifted their regular paid work to non-standard work schedules and changed jobs. This result is in line with the previously mentioned norm that many British mothers chose part-time work as a couples' employment strategy to reconcile work and family (Lyonette et al., 2011).

Family Structure

Family structure is another factor that may influence the need for ECE services. As women entered the labor market and became an indispensable part of it, the rising divorce rate made single parents have less time for household work and increased the need for childcare (Conroy, 2019; Corsaro, 2017; Schweizer & V.J., 2020). Compared with married mothers, single mothers were more likely to use formal childcare and the mixed formal and informal childcare package from infancy through preschool (Brady, 2018). But single mothers who are less highly educated and work fewer hours may have more limited resources, so they have to rely on informal options, mostly relative care. Even in some high welfare states which provide universal

early childhood education and care starting from age 1, the situation for single parents does not get much better. For instance, Roman (2017) interviewed 39 working-class, low-income, single mothers to explore how their working conditions and economic resources influence their valued practice, finding that the opening hours of preschools usually did not match the mothers' work schedules. Their preferred mothering practices were notably restricted by the lack of financial resources and the low control over their work condition.

Research has also found that the number of children in a family and the number of non-parent adults living in the home may influence parents' selection of childcare. Having a more significant number of children in a family is associated with a higher possibility of parent care and fewer outsourcing options. Also, the presence of a kin member or non-parent adult would lower the use of formal and center-based childcare (Fuller et al., 1996). In a report on license-exempt childcare in Illinois (2005), researchers found that while families with one child were more likely to use licensed childcare, those with more than one child preferred a license-exempt one. This indicated that families with more than one child might encounter difficulties in finding a position in the same licensed setting or reconciling each child's schedule.

Family Resources

Besides factors that affected the choice of non-parental childcare from the perspective of family needs, families' economic, educational, and social resources are pivotal in the decision of ECE service, as they may influence parents' preferences and their ability to achieve their preferences and further impact children's development. A number of studies have indicated that high-quality non-parental early childhood education positively affects disadvantaged children with fewer resources (Engle et al., 2007; Magnuson et al., 2005; Magnuson et al., 2006). "Fewer resources" in this context refers to low household income, low level of maternal education,

single parenthood, or, sometimes, immigration background. Income is strongly related to parental ECE selection, especially in the neoliberalism ECE market, as higher-income families are more likely to choose formal and center-based childcare than low-income families. Likewise, parents' education level also presents a significant influence during the selection given that [highly educated parents might prefer their children receive high-quality formal ECE with educational and developmental foci and well-trained and experienced staff. For example, Schober and Stahl (2014) presented the childcare trends in Germany by using data from the Socio-Economic Panel (SOEP) study. They found that, in both West and East Germany, the rate of single mothers and mothers with a higher level of education using daycare centers had undergone a significant increase over the past 20 years, while children whose parents are less educated are at risk of poverty, or where both parents have immigrant backgrounds, the increase was less pronounced.

Chinese Context

In the Chinese context, the situation does not differ too much. The female labor force has reached a high level due to the remarkable economic transformation over the past decades. However, studies showed that middle-aged, married women who had young school-aged children were thrown into a dilemma between family commitments and income earners. This situation was exacerbated by a series of social facts like population aging, the lack of childcare support provided by the government, and the growing emphasis on Confucian values and family responsibilities (Hu, 2010). Such tension between family and work gendered a great demand of childcare needs. Still, the dysfunctional, privatized, and commercialized ECE market caused an unregulated price of childcare services that not only restricted the occupational choice of women who disadvantaged backgrounds—especially with limited financial resources—but also

prevented their children from accessing quality childcare (Cook & Dong, 2011). Parents with fewer resources therefore choose more informal childcare, including relative care and intergenerational care, than affluent parents. In 2010, the Chinese national government recognized the critical relationship between quality early childhood education and care and the outcomes of human capital and started to provide universal ECE (Li et al., 2016). Though an increasing number of affordable preschools have been established to relieve parental pressure and ensure children get formal ECE care, family-friendly policies in China, including welfare and support in both paid maternal leave and paternal leave, are rare (Yoo & Liu, 2020).

The lack of pertinent supportive policies has thus intensified the important role of grandparental care in a household. Unlike some countries such as the U.S and U.K where the responsibility of childcare usually is left with parents, it is common that grandparents co-reside with the family and shoulder some or all of the duties of child-rearing in the Chinese context, especially for young parents, regardless of the family's socioeconomic status. Hence, parents with disadvantaged backgrounds would rely on informal intergenerational childcare, while higher-income families would choose formal preschool and utilize grandparental care as an informal complement (Ta et al., 2019).

Another characteristic of family structure in the Chinese context is that the number of children in a household might not be as prominent as in other countries in terms of parental childcare choice. Since the "one-child" policy was strictly implemented, most urban families had only one child, and not until in 2016 had the "two-child" policy launched. However, the latter policy has not worked as policymakers intended and the growth of the newborn population has not risen as expected because the growing gender inequalities in the labor market and the insufficient welfare policies negatively affect females' fertility autonomy (Liu J & Liu T, 2018;

Qian & Jin,2018). What is more, the prerequisite of having more children for many Chinese parents is that there must be some extended family members, especially their retired parents or parents-in-law, to offer care (Chen, 2014; Ta et al., 2019). For example, a large-scale study in China showed that parents who had the intention of a second birth were greater if women had parental help with intergenerational childcare compared to if they did not (Bao et al., 2017). In conclusion, the presence of nonparental adult (usually grandparents) co-residence in the home is predictive of the higher use of informal childcare. Still, there's limited research indicating what role grandparents play when parents start to navigate childcare.

Cultural Norms and Preferences

Parents' preferences and decisions are primarily affected by social and cultural norms. When parents make childcare decisions, they seek to satisfy at least some preferences, such as the cost, location, and flexible hours. According to the accommodation model, parents' preferences are regarded as dynamic and context-dependent and intertwine with the negotiations between work and family (Chaudry et al., 2010). Their propensities are informed by their past experience and cultural traditions and norms.

Ethnicity

Many studies have identified the different community contexts in shaping parents' preference in ECE options for diverse population groups. Using nationally representative data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort (ECLS-B), Ackert et al. (2018) found that children of Mexican-origin and Black parents in the U.S. context were assigned more informal care over formal ECE options than White families. Maternal employment did not moderate this tendency, which counters previous research that employed mothers were more likely to use non-parental childcare. In another qualitative study, Navarro-Cruz (2020)

interviewed 42 Latina mothers from South California to understand Latina mothers' childcare choices. The study showed that Latina mothers prefer to stay home and care for their infants, and they prefer the mixed childcare package for their pre-school-aged children. Their choices are highly influenced by the *Confianza* (trust), as well as mothers' upbringings and value in their child's education and socialization, which are closely intertwined with cultural and social norms.

Immigration Background

The immigration background and status may also play a key role in childcare selection. One study in the Netherlands (2007) found that cultural differences were evident in terms of general individualistic and collectivistic beliefs among parents of each Dutch, Caribbean-Dutch, and Mediterranean-Dutch group, influencing their choices on which type of center-based childcare services to enroll their children in. In the U.S context, many studies suggest that parents with immigration backgrounds may limit their childcare options to informal care due to contextual barriers like language and accessibility of information (Magnuson et al., 2006; Miller et al., 2013; Sandstorm et al., 2012).

Other studies indicated that though cultural and contextual factors had impacted parents' decision-making, they were longing for utilizing formal childcare options because they were aware the attendance to preschools would benefit children in many ways (van Huizen & Plantenga, 2018; Weiland & Yoshikawa, 2013). Ansari et al. (2018) collected information about what aspects of preschool Latino low-income immigrant parents valued. Though the responses were specific to their experiences as low-income families or immigrant parents, they suggested that immigrant Latino families may be no different from their non-Latino counterparts in their desire for ECE both academically and emotionally. In Canada, Zhu (2020) examined Chinese

immigrant mothers' perspectives on motherhood and parenting. She found that mothers with nontraditional attitudes toward childrearing and a strong will to integrate into the local community in the host country were more likely to use formal, center-based, and non-parental childcare than those with more traditional views.

Parental Beliefs

Besides the influence of cultural backgrounds, parental beliefs and children's characteristics may also be factors reflecting cultural norms that are influential to the childcare decision-making process. In general, children are usually regarded as passive recipients of childcare selection. However, this idea has changed as children's rights and social status have been of the same importance as adults (Correia et al., 2019; Corsaro, 2017). Therefore, parental beliefs and preferences have varied to a different extent for the sake of "good parenting." Hays (1996) introduced the concept of intensive mothering, which is "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive," to present what a *good* mother should be under social norms. This means a mother is expected to deprioritize her own personal and career goals to achieve family commitments. Bittman et al. (2004) in Australia found that parents, especially mothers, were likely to draw on informal care first and use formal non-parental care only beyond some threshold, because good parents valued spending time on developmental activities with their children and thought non-parental care could only replace the low-intensity activities in mothering. In an empirical study, Budds et al. (2016) found that for British mothers, non-parental childcare for young children might interrupt the intensive model. They would seek the *right* nursery and daycare, which mirror the style of childrearing they were keen to adopt when they needed to go back to work and had to choose a non-parental childcare service.

Child Characteristics

Child characteristics may be necessary to their parents when facing different types of childcares. First, a child's age is usually associated with whether parents choose to use childcare or not and what type of service parents need (Leibowitz et al., 1998; NICHD, 2004). In general, infants and toddlers usually get parental and home-based care, sometimes relative care. As the child ages, parents gradually shift to non-parental care, including formal daycare and informal care; center-based formal care typically becomes dominant in the child's third year (Han, 2004). The second characteristic is the child's temperament, but findings are mixed. While one study (Jaffee et al., 2011) claimed that children with difficult temperaments experience non-parental care less than those who were not by age 3, another study (Burghardt, 2018) suggested that children who have difficult temperaments are given an early entry to formal childcare with expectations from parents that such early intervention would benefit the children's development. Overall, research about child characteristics to childcare selection is limited. Though existing findings suggest the importance of children's developmental difference in ECE selection across early childhood, child characteristics play a minor role, while parents' preference and expectations play a crucial role in childcare selection (Coley, 2014; Burghardt, 2018).

Chinese Context

Although there are many ethnic minorities in China, research is rare in terms of childcare selection for young children among these groups. Extant research mainly focuses on socioeconomic status, gender division of domestic labor, female labor in rural and off-farm employment, and educational attainment (mainly adolescent) of ethnic groups living in rural and poor areas with disadvantaged backgrounds (Ding et al., 2018; Shun, 2019). The social structural force has made people from ethnic groups face much greater inequalities in accessing

opportunities of having socio-economic and cultural resources (Zhao & Li, 2017). Children with such backgrounds usually receive parental or intergenerational care because the lack of availability and the cost of formal care mean there are not many options for parents. Thus, it is unclear whether cultural groups' characteristics play a role in parenting choices or to what extent it plays in the absence of parental behavior.

Another demographic characteristic of Chinese population is interprovincial migration. Because of the economic development started in late 1980s, a sizeable workforce from rural areas has surged to urban cities. According to census data of 2010's population, among 260 million Chinese people who were living away from the home to which they were formally registered, 220 million were rural migrants living and working in urban areas (Peng, 2011). Children of migrant parents under compulsory schooling age (6 years old) are usually left in the hometown and brought up by grandparents or relatives. For example, Qiao et al. (2015) found that preschool-aged children were not the determinate factor of their parents' decisions to migrate, and migrant mothers would not return to their children until they were of formal-schooling age. Possible explanations for children being left behind at a young age could be: First, migrant parents are too busy to provide care because the main task is earning money, and most of them choose to work long hours (60 hours or more per week) to make more money (Fritjers et al., 2009); Second, because of the *hukou* (household registration) system, migrant people are not eligible to benefit from any public resources like public health care and public education. Therefore, children who follow their parents migrating to a city can only enter private school, which their parents usually cannot afford.

While many migrant families face many constraints, some families may have made economic improvements and integrated into the community after generations of endeavor.

However, some research disclosed that parenting practices of migrant families had not changed too much from the traditional patriarchal parenting style, which is expressed by either migrant mothers giving up occupational opportunities for childcare or the greater involvement of migrant grandmother in providing childcare before school-age (Peng, 2020). Peng's study (2020) also indicated the severe tension between migrant mothers and their mothers-in-law on parenting beliefs and styles. While migrant mothers preferred a more advanced way of childrearing, their mothers or mother-in-law preferred the traditional way.

Being influenced by the Confucian doctrine, Chinese children were viewed by adults as subordinate to their parents. Parents had the responsibility to take care of them in all regards. In turn, to follow the 'filial piety,' children should be obedient and reverence to parents (Chao, 1994). Thus, traditional Chinese parenting beliefs and style are usually regarded as authoritarian and controlling. Currently, young parents are willing to accept new approaches, most from Western countries, to rear a child more scientifically while still maintaining some Chinese traditional virtues. Using data from China Family Panel Study in 2014, Gu (2020) found that Chinese parents valued much on children's emotional development, as well as their educational achievement. And this is highly associated with the adoption of intensive parenting practices, characterized by deliberate cultivation and training to raise academic achievement. From this regard, parents prefer to use formal childcare for the emotional and cognitive development of their children. It is worth noting that preschool in China has changed from the old model, which was teacher-centered and academic-oriented, to child-centered and play-based classrooms. Children have gradually gained more attention to their personalities and non-cognitive characteristics and they are no longer viewed as total subordinates to adults.

Contextual Opportunities and Constraints

Finally, parental childcare selection might be influenced by contextual forces like the supply of institutions, cost, and childcare policy. In Switzerland, Abrassart and Bonoli (2015) found that it was the cost of childcare services that played a greater role in determining the access bias, which refers to how low-income families are less likely to use childcare services than the availability of center-based childcare, and this means that children from affluent families are more likely to receive nonparental and formal childcare than those who with disadvantaged backgrounds. This finding contradicted previous research in Switzerland in which availability was more important than cost. One explanation might be that there is more variation in the cost instead of the supply of institutions.

Childcare policy is another crucial contextual force that influences parents' selection from the very beginning of navigating available programs. In a comparative analysis of childcare policies in 6 countries (Yerkes & Javornik, 2019), researchers found that in public provision countries (Sweden, Iceland, and Slovenia), nearly all children aged 3 to compulsory school age attend formal full-time (30 hours per week) care, while in market-oriented provision countries two of the three counties (Australia and the U.K), the enrollment rate was under 70%, and most children were in part-time formal childcare (the Netherlands reached 90.7%).

In China, the ECE provision has been less market-driven because of the national intervention since 2010, which mainly improved the accessibility, availability, and affordability by lowering tuition fees, subsidizing private preschools, and establishing more preschools. A study (Su et al., 2020) showed that early education policy has effectively improved preschool attendance by reducing the regional disparities in availability and narrowing the gaps in accessibility between children of more educated mothers and those whose mothers are less educated. However, from a financial perspective (Zhou et al., 2017), the universal ECE was still

underfunded because the increased funding for ECE became more of an extension of the existing formula instead of a component in solving structural issues, such as teacher compensation. Zhou et al. (2020) found that though the promotion of pu-hui preschool, a new type of preschool that receives both public and private funding, alleviated problems of accountability and affordability; however, the accessibility problem has remained a challenge. This is because the pu-hui preschool was usually built in urban areas with fewer established in rural and poor areas.

In summary, the childcare decision-making process is dynamic and complex depending on the unique characteristics of children, families, and contextual communities. Extant research within the Chinese context, though extensive, is fragmented and mainly focused on the relationship between childcare (e.g., who offer care) and female labor force participation, as well as childcare and parental beliefs. Little research focuses on the selection process, reflecting contextual features and the social processes that shape parents' preferences. What is more, little is known about how parents with different ethnic backgrounds select childcare. Many studies only mentioned who in the family offers care, which might put children of the ethnic minorities in a more adverse situation given the lack of knowledge about their needs and cultural norms.

Chapter 4

Method

The current study aims to fill the gap that the lack of integrated analysis of Chinese parental decision-making process. The research question motivating this investigation concerns how urban Chinese parents make their childcare choices. Qualitative data is utilized to delineate how their choices are influenced by the intertwining family characteristics, cultural norms and parents' preferences, and contextual limitations and opportunities.

Design

This research utilized two steps to collect in-depth qualitative data. First, an online questionnaire was created to gather demographic information of participants. Second, semi-structured qualitative interviews were employed to explore the participants' experiences of choosing preschools and their parental beliefs behind such process.

Participants and Recruitment

Parents of young children living in the Chengdu metropolitan area, which consisted of 7 districts, and attending preschools, were recruited between February and April 2020. The combination of convenience and purposive sampling strategy (Ritchie et al., 2013) was utilized to recruit mothers of preschool children of various ages from 3 to 6.

There is no unified definition of middle-class families in China. For this study, though the income is not a good way to define the Chinese middle class, the income standard of Chinese middle-class family proposed by McKinsey & Company (Magni & Poh, 2013) was employed as a reference: household incomes between 106,000 and 229,000 renminbi (\$16,000 to \$34,000) a year. Lu (2002) argues that people in the middle class are those who “chiefly rely on mental

labor, support themselves from wages and salaries, can obtain professional employment with relatively high incomes and relatively good working environments and the corresponding level of family consumption and leisure life, and have some degree of discretion in their jobs, along with a sense of themselves as citizens with a sense of public virtue.”

Therefore, the subjects were selected from families whose annual household income was above \$16,000 and whose earner(s), who had a good working environment, relied on mental labor. After receiving a study information sheet and consenting to participate, ten females from middle-class families who were highly educated were recruited through the researcher’s social networks without any payment. Table 1 shows information about participants’ backgrounds³.

TABLE 1: Participants’ background information

Name	Age	Marital status	Education	Partner’s Education	Occupation	Partner’s Occupation	Income
Amy	34	Married	Master Degree	Master Degree	Teacher	Project Manager	\$123,600
Bonnie	38	Married	Bachelor Degree	Doctorate Degree	HR Supervisor	University’s Professor	\$108,100
Claire	32	Married	Bachelor Degree	Bachelor Degree	Counselor	Operator of E-commerce	\$61,800
Dana	33	Married	Bachelor Degree	Master Degree	Counselor	Engineer	\$77,252
Ella	32	Married	Bachelor Degree	Bachelor Degree	Teacher	Engineer	\$92,700
Fay	41	Married	Associate Degree	Master Degree	Stay at home	Senior Engineer	\$154,500
Gemma	36	Married	Bachelor Degree	Bachelor Degree	Teacher	Soilder	\$50,000
Hedy	31	Married	Master Degree	Master Degree	Technician	Technician	\$47,000
Iris	35	Married	Master Degree	Bachelor Degree	Counselor	Civil Servant	\$62,000
Jane	33	Married	Bachelor Degree	Master Degree	Counselor	Financial Analyst	\$69,000

Middle-class families were recruited for two reasons. First, compared with low-income and rural groups, urban middle-class mothers have a less structural restriction regarding availability and accessibility. Many preschools are built in the city to accommodate citizens’ needs. Second, instead of preschools, urban middle-class mothers have more pre-K options because they can afford and use other commercialized care services (e.g., hiring a nanny). Thus, it may help us further understand mothers’ values, concerns, and struggles in childrearing when

³ The sample size of only ten interviewees is tiny and possibly not representative of all middle-class families in Chengdu. However, it appears to be acceptable given that this research served as an exploratory investigation on parenting beliefs and styles in the Chengdu context. Little research (if any) has investigated parents’ perspectives on the enrollment of preschools in non-western contexts, making this small scope study provide new insights.

costs are removed as barriers to ECE access.

Procedure and Data Analysis

After consenting to participate in this study, interviewees clicked the link in the online study information sheet to complete the demographic questionnaire. Some who could not open the link due to Internet issues were willing to offer such information directly during the following interviews. Parents were then contacted to arrange a convenient time and venue for the interview. The interview took place by video call and was recorded after the interviewee's consent. The average length of an interview was 45 minutes. Guided by the 'accommodation model' and previous literature (Meyers & Jordan, 2006; Chaudry et al., 2010; Coley et al., 2014), interview questions focused on reasons, primarily contextual factors, for choosing a preschool that influenced their choices.

All the interviews were conducted and transcribed verbatim in Mandarin Chinese. The researcher read through all the transcripts and highlighted and coded the themes, patterns, and insights. An open coding approach was used. Memos were also written after each interview to help the researcher record counter-intuitive parts which might work against themes.

Chapter 5

Findings

Overall, the findings of this study indicated four main phases of the childcare selection process, including practical constraints, quality comparison, participation in the public preschool lottery, and the return to backup plan. What is more, different concerns and expectations presented in these four main phases confirmed that the selection process is dynamic and complex, even with limited options, and intertwines with contextual factors and family characteristics.

Phase I: Practical Constraints

Parents started their navigation based on their individual preferences, family characteristics, and contextual limitations. Four evident factors have emerged as participants most frequently mentioned, and the results are summarized in the Table 2.

Table 2: Descriptive data of responses on parental childcare considerations

Items	Number of parents
<i>Types of preschool</i>	
Public	N=6
Private	N=4
<i>Geographic location</i>	
Near the residence	N=8
Near the workplace	N=2
<i>Intergenerational care</i>	
Have	N=8
Do not have	N=2
<i>Eligibility</i>	
Have	N=6
Do not have (N=4)	
Age	N=2
Hukou	N=2
<i>Access to information</i>	
‘Wechat’	N=10
Other online resources	N=4
Flyers	N=3
Word of mouth	N=7
Friends and colleagues	N=2

Geographic Location: ‘I only looking for preschools near my home within 1 mile’

With no exception, participants began the process by navigating the nearest preschools surrounding their home. The principle of “enrollment near the residence,” which was repeatedly mentioned by mothers, has become the conventional rule for choosing a preschool. Some parents indicated that their first criterion for preschool was that the distance should be ‘no more than five-minutes’ walk’ or ‘no more than one-mile walk.’ Jane (33), a mother of two children, reported that one reason she gave up another great preschool was ‘it needs 5-minutes’ walk, while the current one my child has enrolled in only needs 2 minutes.’

Parents follow this pattern not only for their own convenience, but also for a consideration based on the child’s developmental characteristics. For example, Dana (33), whose daughter is three years old and enrolled in a private preschool, thought this is a way parents can protect their children’s health and explained,

A kid has antibodies after he/she was giving birth, but they will inactivate as the kid ages up. Starting from 2 or 3, the kid is easily getting sick because of the lack of protection of antibodies. Hence, I won’t consider those private preschools far from my home, even though they provide school buses. I won’t risk exposing my daughter to a complicated environment, like taking the school bus, which has a large potential of getting sick by cross-infection. If my kid is sick, though the teacher will call me immediately, it will take more time to send her to a hospital if the preschool is far from my home, which may worsen the situation. Many young children get pneumonia from slight fever and cough is because they don’t get treatment on time! And you could never imagine the terrible situation when the kid is getting sick...As a mother, all I can do is reducing the risks of what I can control, like choosing a nearby preschool.

Except for Bonnie (38) and Ella (32), all other mothers chose preschools less than a 10-minutes’ walk. Ella has two sons and the older one in a preschool near her workplace while the younger one received care at home from the grandmother. When asked whether she would choose the same preschool for her small son in the future, Ella replied with no hesitation, ‘No, definitely not. I would never do this again, though this preschool has high quality.’ The short

distance to preschool also helps parents socialize children to some degree. Jane pointed out that the close location enabled her children to be sent to preschool on every open day, no matter in bad or good weather, except if they were ill. She said, 'I just want them to know, they need to show up in school once they started to go to school. It's the rule. Distance and weather could not be excuses for absence.'

However, when taking a closer look, a prerequisite is required for this criterion. There must be a non-parental adult who exists as a caregiver to take the primary responsibility of walking the kid to school and back home because most parents' work schedules did not perfectly match the opening hours of preschool. Moreover, this leads to the second constraint: the presence of grandparents.

The presence of intergenerational care -- Chinese parenting norms

My research showed that eight families are co-resident with their parents to take care of children jointly while the remaining two mothers, Bonnie and Fay (41), did not. While Fay is a stay-at-home mother and does not need extra help, Bonnie reported that no one could assist in the childrearing because both she and her husband's parents had passed away a few years ago, and she did not trust any nannies in the market. Thus, only Bonnie in this study mentioned whether the opening hours of preschool match her husband's work schedule when searching for preschool. Though the preschool of Ella's elder boy is near to her workplace, it is the grandfather's duty to take the kid to school by 40-minutes' bus because Ella, who is a high school teacher, needed to work at 7 a.m. and the preschool usually opened after 8. Other mothers take the presence of their co-residence parents or parents-in-law for granted in their daily parenting and did not think the opening hours might be a conflict with their work schedules when selecting preschools.

As previous literature discussed, an intergenerational child-rearing arrangement has become a family strategy that maximizes resources for meeting family needs. The elder sacrifices their retirement time to support the family (without payment), especially the labor force participation of young women, which is a tradition in the Chinese context. Timetables of co-residential grandparents usually match their grandchildren's care needs and sometimes meet their children's employment demands. Grandparents also played an essential role in collecting information to assist parents in navigating qualified preschool in an early stage of the parental decision-making process. Like Amy (34) described,

We are too busy to take enough time collecting information. So, my parents-in-law helped us a lot in gathering information about surrounding preschools. For example, they would chat with other grandparents of preschool-aged grandchildren in the same neighborhood; they would observe the preschool through fences when going for a walk after dinner, and they would check the bulletin board at the preschool's gate on their way to grocery stores every day.

Few mothers considered hiring nannies to replace the grandparents' position in households because it is hard to find a reliable nanny; but still, even some mothers have to do so. They need grandparents to be at home and monitor the nanny's care work. However, though intergenerational care is of much importance for a family, the extent of acceptance of such care is limited. Learning parenting knowledge from books, friends and colleagues, and online communities, parents in this study suggested that they had different parenting beliefs from the way they were raised, and it is hard to reconcile intergenerational conflicts in living habits and parenting styles, which made mothers have some complaints against their co-residential parents or parents-in-law. Like Jane mentioned, 'I do appreciate what my mother did for my children and me, but I really wish she could only focus on the basic care work as I said, instead of instilling her thoughts of parenting to my children.'

The Eligibility: 'I have no choice because my son's *hukou* is not in this district.'

Once parents had narrowed down the scope that only nearby preschools would be included, the next thing that needs to be considered is the child's eligibility to enroll. In China, the preschool serves children ages 3-6. The cutoff date of eligible children's birth date to enroll in the preschool is August 31 because the first semester of a new academic year usually starts on September 1. While the public preschool is required to follow this regulation strictly, the private preschool is more flexible that it could lower the age threshold to 2 years old and cater to more children who have ECE needs. This means that if a child turns three years old after August 31, either he/she could choose a private one to attend in the same year, or he/she is supposed to wait till the next academic year to enroll in a public preschool.

Another requirement for the public preschool is that the kid's *hukou* (a China-specific household registration system) status must be consistent with the location of the public preschool. For example, if a three-year-old kid's *hukou* status is in District A, Chengdu, he/she can only attend public preschool in District A by the lottery system. If parents of this same kid wanted him/her to enroll in other preschools in District B, this kid would not be entitled to enroll in public preschool in District B, and parents can only search among private preschools. Different districts have different local policies. In some districts, the eligible child's *hukou* status should be aligned with the school district. For instance, if a three-year-old kid's *hukou* is in school district A, District A, then he/she could only attend public preschool in school district A by the lottery system, instead of other school districts in the same District.

In this study, four mothers enrolled their children in a private preschool. Three (Dana, Hedy, and Jane) chose the private option because the birth date of their kids was later than August 31 in the year they were three years old. However, all these three mothers told me that they would try for public preschool this year because it is their children's right to attend the

lottery system, and a public preschool is a cost-effective option that, in general, is of excellent quality. The remaining one, Fay, mentioned that the major reason for giving up the public preschool was the unmatched *hukou* status of her child, which confined her choices at the very beginning of the selection process. Hence, the eligibility of enrolling in a preschool, especially a public one, is a contextual limitation for parents making a choice.

The Access to Information

My investigation showed that the informal information, specifically the word-of-mouth, weighed heavily with parents when trying to know the quality of preschools, compared with formal information. With one exception, participants start to collect information by reaching their personal networks. Mainly through two ways, they usually sought referrals from a trusted source, typically a caregiver who was a neighbor. First is the random face-to-face chat occurring in daily life. For example, in addition to the ways Amy's parents-in-law employed, parents also spent time socializing with other caregivers, whose children have attended preschools, on weekends in the nearby parks or shopping malls to gather scattered information about targeted preschools. Most parents thought this word-of-mouth information was very useful; sometimes it could become the decisive factor influencing parents' final decision. As Dana explained,

Parents could evaluate many extrinsic factors with some objective and published information before enrolling our kids into preschools, like the facilities and the child-staff ratio. But no information from children's perspective reflecting their feelings in the daily classroom because they are too young to articulate their thoughts. And parents must understand and know their kids' situations accurately. That's why we keep asking other parents of in-preschool children what their straightforward feelings are to their children when they come back from school... Are their kids happy? Are their kids upset? And if so, why?

Second, another primary source comes in the form of an online group chat via 'Wechat', a social media application on the mobile phone. Comparing with the scattered and informal kind, this one assisted navigation by garnering formal and more relatively systematic information.

Every mother in this study gave credits to this type of resource—such group chats usually were established with the help of personnel of property management of the neighborhood. In general, mothers of same-aged children in the neighborhood are in the same Wechat group, and share series of information about education, including early childhood education and parenting. The process usually happens as Hedy described,

...I first filter useful messages through a clutter of information from mother group chat because different mom has different preferences. Then, I would go to the Internet to verify the authenticity and reliability of these messages and further snowball with more related information. But my first-hand information usually comes from the group chat. I would say this is my major source of helpful information, and it has helped me a lot so far. Even now, I will check useful messages about the (public preschool) lottery system from this group every day. I think maybe I will keep using it for a long time till my kid finish all his education in this district.

However, such close social networks in which parents share many of the same experiences are likely to provide a restricted range of information about childcare opportunities (Chaudry et al., 2010). Parents might not have a full-scale perspective to compare childcare options and make rational choices. Nevertheless, when participants were asked if they would worry that the information they had attained is a bit limited, most of them replied similarly to Claire,

No, I don't think information is limited. Since our targeted preschools are ones nearby, all the information we want is exactly about those in our neighborhood. We don't need more childcare options to make the selection process more difficult.

Therefore, for Chinese parents, the diverse amount of information about the childcare market might not be as important as the constrained networks which could help parents with direct action, like childcare referral, in the community.

My findings indicated that parents heavily rely on these shortcuts and informal information because of the lack of access to the formal and designated information. All participants in this study mentioned that preschools, no matter public or private, had little helpful

information on their homepage of websites, and many public preschools didn't even have a website. What is more, information on the local department of education, ranging from early childhood education to post-secondary education, is too much to navigate, which made parents rely on the help of shortcuts, like the group chat of mothers. Parents like Claire complained,

...without the help of those group chats, I think maybe I'm still like the headless chicken running around and don't know where to start...those homepages of preschools even do not have any 'enroll' or 'register' buttons to click. Contents of the whole website only include some slides with pictures and contact information. No matter what actions you want to take, you need to call them first at their working hours, which I'm also at work and sometimes not convenient to sneeze out giving them a call. Can you imagine this would happen in the 21st century that contacting somebody in such an original way? I mean, I cannot even email them or leave a message on the website because there's no such place to allow me to do these...

Only Gemma (36), who is both an administrator and a teacher in a local public high school, mapped available choices logically with the help of all kinds of formal and published information from the website of the local department of education and daily push of the followed school district social media account on 'Wechat'. Based on her experience dealing with online paperwork for years, she effectively sorted out useful information and policies. Then, she interpreted them accurately and set her benchmarks of preschool's quality on account of her and her husband's preferences and parenting beliefs. She mentioned that the whole decision-making process was less influenced by others or word-of-mouth information.

For those mothers without such professional skill, though they complained about the lack of access to formal information when searching through browsers on their ends, they then pointed out that, with the reminder of other parents from the group chat, they finally found such messages on the 'Wechat,' which was used as a carrier to accommodate many official accounts of preschools and local government to inform caregivers once they followed them. 'Wechat' was the most frequently mentioned word during the information gathering process. This suggests that

by making use of the convenience of this ‘Wechat’ application, the government and preschools offered informational intervention in simplifying the access to information of enrollment and quality. But such information was mixed because dozens of official accounts post hundreds of articles every day, and therefore parents still chose shortcuts like only reading the forwarded articles from their mothers’ group chat.

Phase II: Quality Comparison

After parents become aware of their needs, resources, and constraints, as well as collected basic information, they would move to the next step of comparing the quality among selected preschools. According to all the participants, quality is the factor they considered one of the most important, which can be ranked in their top three, in making their decisions.

Parents had different strategies to compare quality when facing different types of preschools. They would visit private preschools to acquire more information on quality but rely more on neighbors’ feedback and suggestions when facing public ones. This is because only private preschools accept on-site visit and distribute leaflets to actively invite parents to learn about the quality of education and service, while the access to the information of public preschools’ quality is limited. For public preschool, parents could only know the quality by word of mouth and official quality rating reports. However, only one mother, Gemma, took full advantage of the latter approach, while other participants knew little about the content of a rating system and what each ranking represented. On-site visits to public preschools would only occur when the child was entitled to the preschool through the lottery system. At that time, parents could walk into it while signing up for registration.

Upon analysis, the environment and teachers’ quality are most important. Further, parents were more selective about private preschools’ curriculum instruction and physical environment

than public ones, while all participants showed an inherent sense of trust towards public preschool.

Quality Comparison Among Private Preschools: On-site visits

Except Gemma and Iris (35), other participants in this study considered both public and private preschools prior to enrollment. Through on-site visits to different private preschools, parents focused on child safety and on the staff of the preschool when related to the environment. Mothers reported that safety, including physical safety and psychological safety, was the first thing they would look for when visiting a preschool. Safety was specifically reflected in the preschool physical location, the security of front gate, the qualification of the facilities and buildings, the space of the classrooms and playground, the daily health check, the security of food, and attentiveness of the preschool staff.

Mothers preferred a preschool located in a nearby place that was quiet and had less traffic. With this premise, they took action to compare the extrinsic factors during visits including checking the quality inspection report of facilities (Bonnie), observing the classroom and outdoor space (Dana and Hedy), and comparing the color (bright or faint) and age of buildings (Claire, Dana, Fay, and Hedy). However, 'quality of these extrinsic conditions that parents could tell is differing only on small points because of the high tuition fee,' as Fay mentioned, 'what really matters is the staff's quality.' Staff referred to the preschool's principal, teachers, school nurses, security guards of front gate, and any other personnel children might daily and regularly encounter. Parents paid particularly attention to the warmth and patience when evaluating the staff's quality. And this might also influence their decision-making from an emotional aspect. Like Hedy said,

The reason why I gave up another preschool is that the quality of staff there, I think, was a little low. When I was observing the playground, I found one staff had a little bit runny

nose but didn't wear a mask on. It happened under such severe pandemic circumstance, which was unacceptable for me and at that time this preschool had lost my trust.

Likewise, Fay mentioned the reason why she chose the preschool her son currently attended was,

...at the time I was stepping into the preschool, I encountered a group of children led by teachers passed in front of me. As teachers' indication, they stopped and shook their small hands and greeted to me with happy faces. At that moment, I was touched by the friendly, welcoming, and loving atmosphere. I thought staff here might be friendly and attentive, and I wanted my child to grow up in such environment.

In terms of teachers' quality, educational level was not as important as teachers' attributes. Mothers in this study were well aware that the general educational level of preschool teachers was low as the teachers usually graduated from vocational school or junior college. Thus, parents were not seeking skilled teachers with higher education. They evaluated a 'good' teacher often based on aspects of their children's characteristics. They usually phrased their rationale like 'because my child is a boy and is a little naughty' or 'my daughter is quiet and not attention-getting among a group of children,' then pointed out their standard for 'good' teachers as being patient and receptive, as well as full of love, when staying with children.

But this does not mean parents have weak expectations. Mothers who considered private preschools reported that they were looking for something special when visiting the school. The opinions of Amy and Fay illustrate the point. Amy explained,

The tuition fee of private preschool is usually 4-11 times higher than that of public one. With such high price tag, there must be something special about the preschool. Those qualified buildings and various facilities are the minimum requirements, because even public preschools can meet the same standards, private ones have no advantages in terms of physical environment. Thus, the principal needs to prove us what the unique internal feature is, which deserving the high price, as well as attracting parents.

Usually, a private preschool would diversify its activities and curriculums to highlight their distinctiveness. For example, among four private preschools in this study, Dana mentioned every half-day attendance of foreign teachers and traditional Chinese etiquette class twice a week; Fay

mentioned the low child-staff ratio (1:4) and English-immersion education, as well as many high-class activities such as golf and piano classes. Hedy referred to the large outdoor space and various outdoor activities, and Jane pointed out the low child-staff ratio and the bilingual curriculum. It is easy to find that bilingual learning environment is a competitive factor which attracted parents. But when asked whether this preference of curriculum instruction indicated their academic expectation for their children, all of them denied this point and reported their expectations were only focusing on children's emotional well-being and physical health. Fay explained,

...now don't get me wrong, the reason why I preferred the immersion education is because I want him to grow up and develop in a diversity environment, and bilingual preschool is a way within my reach. If I really want him to learn some academic skills on English, I will send him to the preschool which foreign teacher only show up once a day, or even less, because this unusual pattern will remind children of 'it's time for us to learn something once this people in our classroom.' I don't want my child to learn any academic skills at this early age. Instead, I expect he can learn how to feel his emotion and express it properly. Besides that, all I hope is he could enjoy his childhood with his friends happily.

Therefore, when parents compare the intrinsic quality of preschools, they value more how teachers and the school help socialize children rather than teachers' ability to impart school-readiness knowledge.

Quality Comparison Among the Public Preschool: The generalized trust in the public education system.

Six mothers in this study enrolled their children into public preschools. However, as mentioned previously, they had no opportunity to examine and compare the quality by visiting preschools prior to enrollment. Most information, parents reported, come from neighbors whose children have already attended in. Amy said,

A mother, who is living downstairs, described the circumstances of one targeted public preschool of mine. She said everything is good, but the curriculums were less academic-

oriented, which made her a little unsatisfied. But that's exactly what I like and for me this is an ideal preschool, because I don't think academic skills are important at my boy's age, and he's not being expected to learn such things too early.

Although parents mentioned the lack of formal information in terms of the quality, there did exist a quality rating system to evaluate public preschools, which is conducted every year by the local government. The results are published on the website of the local department of education, as well as the indicators of assessment. Except Gemma, however, none of participants in this study knew the published quality report. Some reported that they 'never heard of it before,' and others mentioned that they only knew some ranks but did not know details of each rank represented. The lack of technical skills for searching information has become the major barrier for parents to collect information about public programs. This might hamper their final decision because parents are allowed to register only one ideal preschool for the public preschool lottery system. In the absence of sufficient information, it is hard for consumers to trust the service and make a rational choice. But counter-intuitively, when selecting among public preschools, parents in this study were fine with the insufficient information, though they indicated that the more detailed information they received coincided with less worries at the same time, and acquiesced with the non-disclosure behavior (no on-site visit). And displayed a high level of trust in the public education system. Mothers like Bonnie reported,

It's true that we have no chance to visit the campus, but I don't really think there's any necessity to do so. It's very natural to me, or people around me, that not questioning the quality of public preschool when making a choice. We have a pre-conceived idea that everything in a public preschool is qualified and with medium-to-great quality.

There might be two reasons for parents to accredit public preschools as high-quality.

First, the unconditional trust is probably because the intense distrust of the private sector, which might be the legacy inherited from the privatized ECE time. Parents believe that public programs have better quality and stable teacher force because they are strictly monitored and well-funded

by the government. Most private preschools in China are for-profit because they received no funding and financial support from the government. They tend to charge higher tuition fees from parents and at the same time are understaffing and underpaying teachers to meet operating expenses and make a profit (Li, 2014). Consequently, the quality of teachers and programs has become unstable and, usually, low. What is more, as mentioned before, the private preschools have gone out of their way to attract parents by adding features in curriculums, especially by teaching English, math, and literacy skills to 3-year-old children, which is detrimental to children's development in the long run (Roberts-Holmes & Bradbury, 2016). Therefore, private preschools are often regarded as low-quality programs with high tuition fee and push-down curriculums. Worse, the government employed a laissez-faire policy to the private sector and barely had any regulations and policies to monitor and fund it. Parents' worries have accumulated as the increasing coverages of private preschools' expired food, misbehaved teachers (corporal punishment and sexual harassment), and arbitrary charges. In sharp comparison, parents trusted public-funded preschools much more. Though the situation has improved after 2010 and the government has interfered with the pricing process and curriculum design, parents are still skeptical of the quality of private preschools.

The second reason could be attributed to the high level of public trust in institutions. Most participants in this study were born in 1980s and were probably the first-generation college students in their families after Cultural Revolution (because the college entrance exam system was suspended for ten years during this time and was resumed on 1977). They benefited from their educational level in the job market and achieved upward mobility through the educational tunnel. Thus, they acknowledged the quality of public education and praised the educational sieving mechanism of talents or promising students. For instance, Bonnie, with a bachelor's

degree, is a senior HR of a foreign enterprise in the China branch. Her husband, with a doctorate degree, is a professor in the local famous university. She had considered enrolling her child into an international prekindergarten with German's mixed-age classrooms because many of her German colleagues recommended the preschool. But finally, she enrolled her daughter in a public preschool affiliated with her husband's working university. She explained,

My colleagues did have much influence on me. But the childcare decision should be considered from a family perspective. So, I sat down and talked to my husband. Both of us had agreement on the good quality of public education system and believed it could develop a competitive and promising person, because we experienced the whole system, from the elementary to the post-secondary, and benefited from it, though it does have some flaws. Then we decided to let my daughter receive the public education from preschool.

What is more, urban parents with higher educational levels might have more trust in institutions compared to others (Yang & Tang, 2010). Though education itself encourages independent and critical thinking and decreases the trust in institutions, in an authoritarian government like China, political education is part of the education program at every educational stage because education is state controlled. The higher educational people achieve, the more political education they have to accept. And therefore, such inculcation might have increased people's institutional trust. In this study, when asked how they ensure quality of a public preschool, parents employed some terms describing public institutions, which are inherited from the planned economy period (1953 - 1992), to prove how qualified and reliable a public preschool is, as well as presented full trust in the state government. For example, as Bonnie described,

...I can count on teachers in that preschool because most teachers there are with '*bian-zhi*' (the establishment), which means they are qualified and professional staff...

Bian-zhi is a special status of working in public institutions or state-owned enterprises. Because of the high salaries and welfare of the *bian-zhi* system, people need to compete, through a series

of high-standard assessments, to gain such status (Brødsgaard, 2002). Thus, teachers with *bian-zhi* status are assumed to either have more education or have excellent performance in the field. As people displaying a high level of public trust in the country, they trust in the quality of staff in the *bian-zhi* system, which is endorsed by the state, though the establishment has been phased out in last two decades. Another frequently mentioned term is ‘*ji-guan* preschool’, which refers to the preschool affiliated with the political institution and only serves children of civil servants, soldiers, and cadres. Iris reported that during the whole decision-making process, she only considered one public preschool because it used to be a *ji-guan* preschool.

Mixed Feelings towards Pu-hui Preschool

As noted, a pu-hui preschool is co-funded by the government and local private ECE providers, aiming to offer quality services with a lower price. The tuition is fixed, as each child will be charged 600 yuan (93 dollars) per month, which encourages parents to choose pu-hui preschool programs. What is more, both the city government and the county governments will subsidize 200 yuan (31 dollars) for the child, aging 3-5, who has attended the pu-hui preschool each month. It is supervised by the local department of education and required to reach the same quality standard as the public preschool. In this study, concerning this new type of preschool, while some parents praised this choice with good quality but low price, other mothers held a suspicious attitude towards the quality both of the preschool and parents who enroll their children in this type of school. Mothers who accredited to this type, like Amy, mentioned,

I know what the pu-hui program is. The preschool my son has attended is pu-hui. I would say quality of it is pretty high. It’s co-operated by a famous public prekindergarten in our district and a Taiwanese Educational Group. It would invite foreign teachers from Denmark and England, where ECE is more advanced, to teach children every year. This service is only available to those children who pay four times more tuition and attend private programs!

However, other mothers like Jane, replied reluctantly,

Well...I don't really know what it is. Some mothers mentioned this when we were talking about enrollment. I think this type of preschool might only borrow the title of public preschool but has low quality...you know...quality of those cheap private prekindergarten is usually low. Also, I'm worried about the quality of parents whose children attend such program. I've heard that most of them from low-income families with low educational level...Anyway, I won't consider those preschools with this type.

The divergence of perceptions on the pu-hui preschool among mothers might be due to the different educational resources in varied districts where they live. The district where Amy lives has many high-quality educational resources, including local public and private ECE programs. Therefore, the emergence of pu-hui prekindergarten, as the combination of public and private options, allows parents to benefit from the same or higher quality services at a lower price. What is more, with the strong push of local government, as Amy reported, almost all local public programs are becoming pu-hui type now. Parents trust this new type as much as they trust the public program. When it comes to Jane, the district where she lives is a bit old, and its demographic composition is more complicated, which results in an uneven distribution of educational resources within. Local providers might not satisfy parents' expectations on the quality.

Hence, due to the high-level public trust in the state, Chinese parents do not question the quality of public preschool and do little comparison among public preschool before enrollment. The lack of opportunities of on-site visits and access to the information of quality can be compensated by features with national-certified flavor, like the *bian-zhi* system and *ji-guan* preschool.

Phase III: Participation of Public Preschool Lottery

Given that ECE is not included in compulsory education, opportunities to attend a public preschool are limited. The main access to a public program is through the lottery system. For those kids, with local hukou and at least reach three years old before August 31, who are eligible

to enroll in public preschool, parents are required to take a few steps to ensure their kids are in the lottery system. Figure 1 demonstrates how parents participate in the public preschool lottery system.

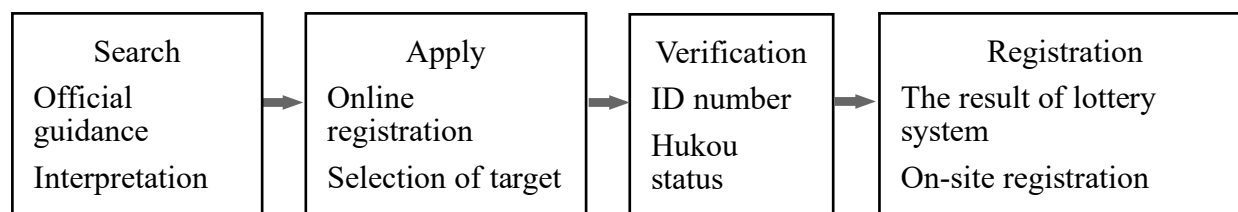


Figure 1. Participation of public educational lottery system

First, parents need to search for relevant information and make note of the time of registration and submission of documentation. Based on the local policies, the official guidance of enrollment for public preschools will be issued in May, three months prior to the opening date (September 1) of the new academic year. The guidance lists all the public preschools, which have an admission plan in the following academic year, in every district. Also attached is each preschool's address, contact information, admission policy, and the number of recruitments. Such information will be published on the website of the local department of education, as well as on the official accounts on the 'Wechat.' Parents will do the preliminary screening based on children's hukou status because children are only allowed to participate in the lottery system within a particular range of several streets to his/her hukou. Regularly, parents would choose the nearest preschools as their targets among several options, and then information from various sources will be garnered to assist parents to determine the targeted one among those options.

Second, parents need to register an online account for their child at the specified time. Usually, in early June, the online access to the public preschool lottery system will open, and parents could start the registration step. This step also required parents to fill out the information

about the child and guardian(s) for further verification. Meanwhile, parents need to and are only allowed to apply to one preschool as the target one. They could also see how many children have applied to the preschool and how many children the preschool will recruit on the application interface, estimating the probability of winning and making a rational choice. The registration step usually last for five working days, and the information of registration is uploaded during this period and will be further verified.

Hence, the third step, verification, will start as the information has been uploaded, including ID numbers, the current living address, the hukou status, and the candidate preschool. The system will verify the authenticity and accuracy by cross-checking the data filed in the online local population information archives, and this process will take a few working days. If the number of qualified children does not exceed the proposed number of admissions of a preschool, then all children who applied to this preschool would be accepted without participating in the lottery.

After all the information has been successfully reviewed and approved, the child's account will be assigned automatically and randomly to end the lottery system. Parents only need to wait for the results at the end of June. If a child loses the lottery, he/she might have one more chance to join the additional lottery round if there are vacancies in other preschools. However, if the child keeps losing, he/she could only attend a private one. Therefore, parents have to navigate both private and public programs at the same time in case this happens. Finally, parents of children who are lucky enough to get a position would go to the preschool with physical documentation to complete the full registration and visit the campus.

Findings of parents' opinions towards such a system are mixed because each district has different educational resources and varied educational quality. Parents like Iris and Gemma

described the process as ‘smooth’ and ‘going well.’ At the same time, Amy, Claire, and Ella felt ‘nervous,’ ‘disappointed,’ and ‘anxiety.’ Take Amy as an example; the district she lived in accommodates many high technology companies that have attracted many people with a high educational level. Therefore, parents are aware of the importance of education and prefer the concerted cultivation⁴ by being involved in children’s school life. The overall educational quality in this district is relatively great because of the high-standard demand; but meanwhile, the competition for the limited resources is fierce. With bad luck, Amy’s son failed the lottery system twice. She mentioned how disappointed the whole family was when they learned the final result, though she had a back-up plan and could enroll her son in a private program.

This failure may also be due to contextual constraints. The year her son was born, 2016, was the year the state government initiated the ‘second child’ policy. Hence, there was a little baby boom in that year and three years later it brought too much pressure to local public preschools to accommodate so many children. But this availability issue has improved in the past two years. Two mothers, Ella and Jane, who each had their second child, reported with a relieved tone that the issue of lacking suitable preschools they had encountered when choosing a school for their first child has now been solved. Currently, there are more preschools nearby to choose from when making a choice for the second child.

The ‘smooth’ process of participating in the lottery system did not mean parents pay less. Though Iris did not do much navigation and only attended the lottery system during the whole selection process, she started considering her child’s future education when she was pregnant and bought and moved to a new apartment in a district with many quality educational resources. Thus, her child was given a hukou in this district at birth and was entitled to access all public

⁴ A parenting style proposed by Annette Lareau in her book *Unequal Childhoods: Class, race, and family life*.

resources in this district. Iris did not think it is reckless behavior in only choosing and learning about one public preschool when there was a high risk of losing the lottery. She explained,

... I've heard many people say this preschool is very good, so I was thinking 'why not give a shot?' I didn't even think about I need to find other preschools as my back-up plan at the same time. It's ok if my child lost the lottery because there's additional round. And it doesn't matter even he lost the additional round, because I can just find a private preschool nearby. Because of the enough educational resources with great quality in our entire district, I'm not worried about the issue of availability or quality at all.

Residential mobility for quality education is a common strategy that exists in many other big cities worldwide. It might be more evident in China because, first, structurally, the access to public school is tightly connected with a child's hukou status; second, contextually, parents have more faith in the quality of education in public schools than that of private ones; and third, culturally, influenced by the traditional Chinese value, parents strongly believe education crucially determines children's future. The combination of these three reasons makes Chinese parents more willing to make sacrifices for their children's education. This finding is in line with the result of a case study in Beijing (Yang et al., 2019) that it was children's education, instead of parents' employment, that has been the new and critical driving force of residential mobility.

Another prominent finding among parents who experienced the lottery system is the lack of effective informational interventions. Searching all information and policies through official websites and accounts, like what Gemma did, is not the common pattern for most parents during the navigation. They, without sufficient technological skills, preferred shortcuts such as articles about the interpretation of policies on the 'Wechat' and direct notification about the key timing of the lottery system pushed on the mobile phone. However, there were too many online interpretations for parents to tell the accurate information, and it also has few straightforward and clear notifications about the timing because the policy of enrollment varies every year. For

instance, Claire had difficulty accessing information during the thorough process. As she described,

The whole process made me nervous and frustrated! First, I had no idea when the registration would start. I read many articles on ‘Wechat’ but there was no unified saying about the time. So, I kept going to my phone and checking with the mothers’ group chat...I was so afraid missing the registration date. Fortunately, I did pretty well in each step and wait for the result of the lottery with nervousness. I was nervous not only because of the result, but also because I didn’t the exact date of announcing the results of the lottery. I was worried that what if I missed the published date or I could not get the final result as soon as possible, you know, then I might miss the date of on-site registration. I’m worried because the government would only publish it on its website or print it out and post on the bulletin at the gate of each preschool. They won’t call you, text you, or email you. So I had to refresh the website repeatedly and asked my mother-in-law to do me a favor that seeing if the preschool put the results out...

In sum, when a child is eligible to enroll in a public program, the family would start to search relevant information, then apply within the given timeframe and wait for verification of eligibility. Once the child wins the lottery and receives a placement, parents must then complete the on-site registration by submitting physical paperwork. Due to the limited public educational resources, the lottery system is seemingly fair and transparent. However, under the conditions of uneven distributed educational resources, this system might give children with more educational resources more possibility to receive preschool education compared to those with fewer resources. This lottery system also lacks effective informational intervention, which has hindered parents of entitled children in completing the thorough process efficiently.

Phase IV: Return to Back-up Plan

The risk of losing the lottery made most participants in this study prepare a back-up plan. Among parents (N=6) who participated in the lottery system, the children of Amy and Ella both failed the main round and the additional round. So, they had to go back to other plans. While Amy was reluctant in selecting the private school, because she preferred education in the public system, she has already paid the enrollment deposit when the public high school she worked for

helped her find a position in a public preschool near her home. She took this opportunity with gratitude and registered as soon as possible. Ella went back to her private preschool choice, but she finally decided not to go because she was still not satisfied with the private program and unwilling to make a compromise. She said, 'I'd rather homeschooling my kid than sending him to the low-quality private preschool.' However, also with the help of a public school she worked for, her child finally enrolled in public prekindergarten near to her workplace, but far away from home. Among 10 participants in this study, all mothers, except Iris, navigated more than one preschool during the decision-making process to ensure they had a back-up plan in preparation for an unexpected situation.

In conclusion, for those eligible children, there are mainly three phases to preschool choosing, which include practical constraints, quality comparison, and participation in the lottery system. When children lost the lottery, then some parents had to go back to their backup plans. For children who were not entitled, there are mainly two phases which refer to practical constraints and quality comparison.

Chapter 6

Discussion and Conclusion

By interviewing ten mothers from Chengdu, a southwestern city of China, this thesis investigated the process of preschool selection of Chinese urban parents and focused on how different factors influence parents' decisions based on characteristics of family, child, and context. Overall, the findings demonstrate that parental choices are (re)shaped by a series of decisions, or compromises, in a process of three or four phases.

As shown in Figure 2, starting with the first phase of considering their familial needs and resources and children's eligibility within a certain geographical area, parents narrow down the scope and roughly select their preferred preschools. Then they move to the second phase of evaluating the quality of service. During this second phase of quality assessment of preschools prior to enrollment, parents employ different strategies to evaluate both public and private programs. For private programs, parents usually take on-site and in-person visits to observe and compare external (e.g., buildings and facilities) and internal (e.g., curriculum and teachers) characteristics. For public programs, parents rely more on word-of-mouth information and specific terms describing the qualified institutions. After gathering more information about the quality of programs, the third phase involves parents preparing their children to participate the public preschool lottery system. Due to the high-quality and low-price of public programs, competition for a placement is intense and parents may face risk of failure—no placement offer—in this system. Therefore, in case of failure to place in phase III, parents usually have a back-up plan which is preemptively prepared in the first phase. And they might return to the alternative plan in the fourth phase. The fourth phase then becomes necessary in the event of a

failed placement in phase III as parents return to and initiate the alternative plan they began thinking about in phase I.

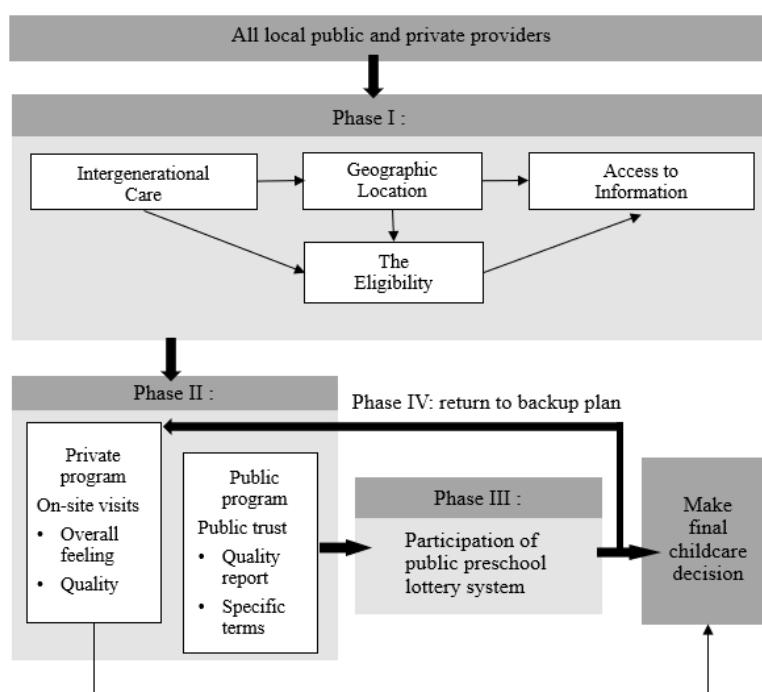


Figure 2: Urban Chinese parents' preschool selection phases

Findings of this research provide strong support in strengthening and enriching the existing conceptual frameworks of childcare decision-making. First, my findings shown that the current accommodation model could take more the influence of contextual limitations and opportunities into consideration. Chaudry et al. (2010) proposed that Meyers and Jordan's 'accommodation model' might be better integrated with the 'life course model' by incorporating the latter's core tenets. The 'life course model' stresses the influence of the broad social, economic, and environment factors towards human agency and gives weight to the structural forces, social interactional contexts, and normative influences in making familial decisions (Moen & Wethington, 1992).

My results indicated the pivotal role of contextual force playing during the process of parental childcare selection in the Chinese sociocultural context. Chinese urban mothers in the

current study perceived clearly how macro-level structural factors constantly impact their micro-level decision-making process. For example, geographic location—or ‘enrollment near residence’—is so important to a family not merely because of children and families’ characteristics, like children’s physical health and parents’ convenience, but more because of the *hukou* system and traditional values of the Chinese. In China, the *hukou* status compels a child to enroll in a public preschool within a range of several streets close to home and to enroll in a public elementary school within a specific district. Thus, parents’ choices are limited by the system and this pattern of enrollment has lasted for decades, becoming a norm that parents take for granted when preparing their children for education. At the same time, due to the importance of filial piety in the Chinese context which prescribes how adult children should shoulder the responsibility of taking care of their elderly parents, middle-aged adults are usually co-residents with their parents. This living pattern, in turn, provides the basis for intergenerational co-parenting and therefore makes it possible for parents to enroll their children into preschools close to home, without considering work schedules and other practical issues.

Hence, in China, parents’ individual preference, to a large extent, might be subject to the intertwined contextual limitations (structural factors) and cultural norms. As one mother (Ella), whose child failed the lottery twice, helplessly said, ‘the decision of preschool education has nothing to do with our preferences that we could change, but has more with the policies and other structural factors that we parents cannot change.’

Second, as the accommodation model (Jordan & Meyers, 2006) of ECE selection argues, childcare decisions are influenced by parenting beliefs and individual preferences. These beliefs and preferences are dynamic and shaped through many personal and contextual factors, like parents’ past experiences and the changing values with the times. As discussed in the second

phase (quality comparison), due to the bad impression toward the private preschool and the conviction of authority, parents took a closer look at private programs, while demonstrating an unconditional trust to the public program. Though they had divergent standards, participants in this study had a uniform expectation of children's achievement in preschool and corresponding requirement in terms of the curriculum. They did not prioritize the importance of academic skills but instead emphasized children's socialization and emotional well-being; thus, a crucial criterion of judging the quality of a pre-K program is that it provides play-based curriculum instead of an academic-oriented type. This practice, reflecting on parenting beliefs, is in line with previous Chinese research that urban middle-class parents focused more on the socio-emotional and behavioral development of their preschool-aged children (Hu et al., 2017; Ren & Edwards, 2017).

These findings echo the development of ECE in China. The pedagogy of ECE changed from 'teacher-centered' and 'academic-oriented' to 'child-centered' and 'play-based (Tobin et al., 2009), and the authoritarian parenting style has changed to authoritative way that children have more democratic participation in the family (Li & Xie, 2017). These shifts in parenting styles and ECE pedagogical improvement demonstrate how the western progressive ideology of rearing a child has been widely accepted by most Chinese educators and parents; such developments challenge the stereotype of East Asian intensive parenting like 'Tiger mother,' at least at the preschool level. But it is critical to note how accepting advanced western parenting beliefs does not mean abandoning Chinese traditional values, and as this study shows, parents are trying to find pathways to balance the two. This research found that mothers were fond of the public preschool because the relatively higher child-staff ratio immersed children in a collectivism environment where they could learn the rules of group life. The ways in which

mothers in this study balanced Chinese traditions and Western-influenced ECE pedagogical developments suggest that local ECE providers might attract and satisfy more families if curriculum is revised to better reflect the balance of tradition and progressive ECE parents are looking for. Therefore, understanding parenting beliefs behind childcare decisions is essential for local ECE providers so that they can revise their curriculum and improve quality to attract and satisfy consumers.

Findings of this research only presented childcare decisions of ten middle-class families. Accordingly, it could be deduced that families with less financial and social resources might encounter more constrained situations. Inequalities in access are still prominent for children with disadvantaged backgrounds; therefore, future research needs to focus on low-income families' and under-represented groups' decision-making process. What is more, this research only took place in a southwestern city, and it could not represent all Chinese parental childcare selection behavior in other areas of China. Hence, similar qualitative research could be conducted in other regions based on local cultural contexts.

Of particular note in this study are the findings of the lack of effective informational intervention in each phase of the whole decision-making process. Informational interventions would be effective only when there are programs with different quality that are accessible to parents (Bassok et al., 2018). Such intervention could ease the inconvenience of quality comparison and help parents make more rational decisions when they have no chance or no time to research or visit ECE options. Mothers in this study who did not work at school had less systematic and effective access to information of enrollment. Though these mothers with high educational level were actively exploring, learning, and collecting information, they all presented a sense of confusion and struggle when describing how to access and filter useful information.

Hence, small nudges like directly informing parents with the start point of navigation and how to access the report of quality of public program might be helpful and crucial.

What is more, interventions to assist parents participate the educational lottery might make this system more equitable, because low-SES families might have less knowledge about how to access the lottery system and have potential to fail the lottery due to the informational issues like the incomplete information submission. For the private sector, the informational intervention is more important because there is no reliable institutions or associations for ensuring the quality of private programs while public preschools have state endorsement for their quality. Evaluations driven by the ECE market are needed to inform stakeholders, as well as develop a healthy competition among private providers. However, according to this study, formal information about quality does not play as much of a role as informal information, especially word-of-mouth messages, during the whole decision-making process. This finding is consistent with the results of other research in other contexts, like America (Moran, 2019) and England (Chen & Bradley, 2020), which have mature ECE markets, reliable evaluation systems, and easy-to-access and transparent formal information. One recommendation is that designated online platform to discuss quality and enrollment could be established on the ‘Wechat’ with the help of local government.

More, policies should be made with a significant tendency to solve availability and eligibility constraints for those disadvantaged children, like migrant children, whose *hukou* are not in the local area, and children living in poor and rural area where lack the high-quality programs. Further, findings of this study provided evidence that parents’ education is crucial for children’s social and emotional development and might shape their parenting beliefs then further influence their childcare decisions. Thus, interventions like regularly parents’ education held in

poor and rural areas could help parents learn the importance of the ECE and enroll their children in high-quality preschool.

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