

Workforce diversity and quality improvement in East Asia: The state of the policy field

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This paper reports from Phase 1 of an ongoing study of the relationship between workforce diversity, professional learning, and quality improvement in early childhood education in East Asia. This combination of analytic foci is at a critical juncture in the region, given the growing international shortage of early childhood professionals and the globally mobile nature of the early childhood education workforce. In Australia, for example, around 35% of early childhood educators were born overseas, with maritime South East Asia now the major contributor to the inward migration of educators.

In Phase 1, quality improvement policies from three countries – South Korea, Singapore, and Australia – were systematically selected and subjected to word-level content analysis for key terms related to culture, diversity, migration, and multiculturalism. Following completion of the content analysis, the in-country teams developed analytic memos in relation to how culturally diverse educators were conceptualized and/or positioned in these key documents.

The paper outlines the background to the wider project, the rationale for commencing with policy analysis, and the methodological approach taken in Phase 1 of the project. We then describe our findings from South Korea, Singapore, and Australia, respectively.

Despite the significant cultural and historical differences between early childhood systems across the three countries, major themes derived from the content analysis and analytic memos were remarkably similar: (1) inadequate attempts to define ‘culture’, (2) a normative stance in relation to dominant cultural groups, and (3) systemic omission of aspects of culture and diversity for all professionals, not just migrant educators. We speculate on the reasons for these shortcomings, make recommendations for future policy development, and briefly describe the next Phase of the study, including some of the ethical challenges contextualizing this work.