

Kindergarten Teachers' Perceptions of Performance Appraisal and its Impact on Job Performance in Hong Kong

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Abstract

In Hong Kong's competitive kindergarten sector, performance appraisal (PA) is widespread. While designed to improve teaching quality, its effectiveness depends entirely on teachers' perceptions of the system. If teachers view the PA process as unfair or unhelpful, its intended benefits for professional growth are unlikely to be realized. The study investigates the perceptions of kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong towards the prevailing performance appraisal (PA) systems and explores the complex, multifaceted relationship these perceptions have with their job performance. Using a mixed-method approach with 359 survey respondents, it finds that while teachers acknowledge PA's potential for professional development, this is overwhelmingly negated by perceptions of unfairness. Teachers reported a lack of transparency, appraiser bias, and an overemphasis on quantifiable outcomes linked to school marketing. This perceived injustice correlates with increased stress, strategic compliance, and a narrowing of teaching practices. The research concludes that PA often acts as a mechanism of performative control rather than a tool for authentic growth. It recommends shifting towards more equitable, dialogic, and growth-oriented appraisal models that align with early childhood education's holistic ethos to genuinely support teacher efficacy and performance.

Keywords

Early Childhood Education, Job Performance, Kindergarten Teachers, Performance Appraisal, Teacher Perceptions

1. Introduction

The kindergarten sector in Hong Kong operates within a unique and intensely competitive socio-educational context. Since the implementation of the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme (PEVS) in 2007, which introduced a quasi-market mechanism into the early childhood landscape, kindergartens have been under increased pressure to demonstrate quality and accountability to parent-consumers. In this environment, performance management systems, particularly formalized performance appraisal (PA), have been widely adopted as tools to ostensibly assure and enhance educational quality. Driven by global trends of school-based management [1], which emphasize efficiency, measurable outputs, and accountability, these systems have been transposed onto a sector whose foundational philosophy is rooted in child-centered, play-based, and holistic development.

The theoretical premise of performance appraisal [2] is that it provides a structured framework for setting goals, providing feedback, identifying development needs, and, ultimately, improving employee performance. In an ideal scenario, PA is a symbiotic process where organizational objectives align with individual professional growth, leading to enhanced teaching practices and improved student outcomes. However, the literature is replete with evidence that the success of any appraisal system is not determined by its design alone, but critically by the perceptions of those being appraised. When teachers perceive the PA process as fair, transparent, and focused on development (a formative purpose), it can lead to increased motivation, commitment, and a stronger sense of self-efficacy. Conversely, when it is perceived as unfair, punitive, or solely tied to high-stakes decisions like promotion or contract renewal (a summative purpose), it can trigger anxiety, demotivation, surface-level compliance, and even lead to the attrition of talented educators.

In Hong Kong, while there has been considerable research on PA in primary and secondary schools [3,4], the kindergarten sector remains relatively under-examined. This gap is critical for several reasons. First, kindergarten teachers face distinct challenges, including the historical perception of their role as child-minding rather than professional teaching, lower status and pay compared to their counterparts in compulsory education, and the pedagogical tension between academic preparation and developmental appropriateness. Second, the diverse ownership of Hong Kong kindergartens (ranging from non-profit organizations to private, for-profit entities) means that PA systems are highly localized and variable, lacking the standardized frameworks found in the public school system. Third, the intense competition for student enrollment often leads to PA criteria being implicitly or explicitly linked to outcomes that appeal to parents, such as children's academic performance in literacy and numeracy, their performance in external competitions, or the school's visibility in the community, potentially at the expense of broader developmental goals.

This study, therefore, seeks to address this research gap by posing the following questions:

- (a) What are the perceptions of kindergarten teachers toward performance appraisal and job performance at their workplace?
- (b) What are the differences in perceptions of kindergarten teachers toward performance appraisal and job performance regarding the rank, gender, teaching experience, marital status, education level, size of kindergarten, family monthly income, type of kindergarten, and frequency of appraisal?
- (c) What are the challenges and problems of teacher performance appraisal in kindergarten?
- (d) How to improve teacher performance appraisal?

By answering these questions, this research aims to contribute a nuanced understanding of the realities of performance management [5] in Hong Kong's early childhood sector. The findings have significant implications for kindergarten principals, policymakers, and teacher educators in designing and implementing appraisal systems that truly support, rather than stifle, the professional growth of kindergarten teachers and the quality of education for young children.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Purposes and Paradoxes of Teacher Performance Appraisal

Performance appraisal is a structured system for measuring and evaluating employee work behaviours to assess effectiveness and identify areas for future improvement. It serves organizational and employee interests by informing key decisions on promotions, transfers, training, and career development, while also supporting strategic goals. The process involves observation, judgment, feedback, and measurement, and is inherently complex, with no single standard model. Ensuring fairness is challenging, as the system is influenced by organizational culture and interpersonal dynamics. To be effective, organizations must carefully select and implement appraisal tools that fit their specific context. When conducted as a fair and objective evaluation over a specific period, performance appraisal can significantly impact employee interests (including salary, bonuses, and promotions) and help build shared organizational values.

Performance appraisal in education [6] is inherently multi-purpose and often fraught with tension. The primary dichotomy lies between its formative (developmental) and summative (judgmental or evaluative) functions. The formative purpose focuses on professional growth, identifying strengths and areas for improvement, and informing professional development (PD) needs. It is characterized by a collaborative, forward-looking, and low-stakes approach. The summative purpose, in contrast, is used for administrative decisions regarding tenure, promotion, pay increments, and termination. It is inherently judgmental, backward-looking, and high stakes.

Extensive research indicates that attempting to combine these two purposes within a single system is problematic. When appraisal carries high-stakes consequences, teachers are less likely to be open about their weaknesses, and appraisers may be reluctant to provide critical, honest feedback, thereby undermining the developmental potential of the process. This performance management paradox is a central challenge in the field.

2.2 Teacher Perceptions of Appraisal Efficacy

The perceived fairness of a performance appraisal (PA) system, often conceptualized through the framework of organizational justice [7], is a critical determinant of its effectiveness and legitimacy. This concept is typically divided into three dimensions: distributive justice (the perceived fairness of the outcomes, such as ratings or rewards), procedural justice (the fairness of the processes used, including consistency, transparency, and the ability to appeal), and interactional justice (the quality of interpersonal treatment during the appraisal, such as respect, empathy, and adequate explanations from the appraiser). When teachers perceive high levels of these justice dimensions, they are more likely to trust the system's integrity, accept critical feedback as constructive rather than punitive, and feel intrinsically motivated to engage in genuine improvement efforts. This trust transforms appraisal from a compliance exercise into a collaborative process for growth. Conversely, perceptions of injustice (whether from biased outcomes, opaque procedures, or disrespectful communication) trigger a cascade of negative consequences. These include professional anger, cynicism towards institutional goals, a significant reduction in organizational commitment, and the emergence of counterproductive work behaviours, such as minimal compliance, reluctance to collaborate, or even attrition.

Another key perceptual factor is the perceived utility of the appraisal, the extent to which teachers believe it is genuinely useful for their professional growth and tangibly improves their teaching practice. This goes beyond mere satisfaction and speaks of the appraisal's instrumental value. When teachers see the PA as a meaningful professional learning experience that provides actionable insights, relevant feedback, and clear pathways for development, its positive impact on job performance is significantly amplified. They are more likely to experiment with new pedagogical strategies, reflect deeply on their practice, and invest energy in their own continuous development. In essence, if the appraisal is viewed not as a bureaucratic hurdle or a simplistic ranking tool, but as a dedicated forum for professional dialogue and support, it ceases to be an external imposition and becomes an internalized driver of excellence. Ultimately, the synergy between organizational justice and perceived utility creates a virtuous cycle: a fair process fosters openness

to feedback, which in turn allows the practical utility of the appraisal to be fully realized, leading to sustainable improvements in teaching quality and professional fulfillment.

2.3 Performance Appraisal in the Hong Kong Context

The educational culture in Hong Kong has been characterized as hierarchical, with a tradition of high-power distance [8], where superiors are expected to make decisions and subordinates are expected to comply. This cultural context can shape PA practices, potentially casting the principal as the authoritative judge and the teacher as the passive recipient of feedback, which can inhibit genuine professional dialogue.

Previous studies in Hong Kong's primary and secondary schools have highlighted teacher concerns over a lack of transparency in appraisal criteria, subjectivity in judgments, and an over-reliance on classroom observations that may not capture the full spectrum of a teacher's work. With the rise of school-based management, the responsibility for appraisal has devolved to individual schools, leading to significant variation in system quality and implementation.

In the kindergarten sector, the pressures are amplified. The PEVS system ties funding to parental choice, making school reputation paramount. Consequently, teacher PA can become implicitly tied to contributing to this marketability. Criteria may unduly weigh visible outcomes like children's performance in standardized assessments (even at the kindergarten level), the aesthetic appeal of classroom displays for open days, or the teacher's role in organizing high-profile school events. This can create a misalignment between the official curriculum, which advocates play-based learning [9], and the performed curriculum that is valued in appraisal, leading to ethical dilemmas and role conflict for teachers.

2.4 Linking Perceptions of Performance Appraisal to Job Performance

Job performance in teaching is a multi-dimensional construct, encompassing not only core instructional tasks but also contextual elements like collaboration and organizational citizenship. The link between performance appraisal (PA) perceptions and these performance dimensions is not direct but is critically mediated by the psychological states they provoke. According to social cognitive theory, an individual's perceptions directly influence their self-efficacy and motivation [10]. A fair, transparent, and developmentally focused PA can significantly enhance a teacher's sense of competence and professional self-efficacy. This bolstered belief in their own abilities, in turn, fuels greater effort, persistence, and a willingness to innovate across all aspects of their role, from lesson planning to supporting colleagues.

Conversely, a PA perceived as unfair, biased, or punitive triggers a fundamentally different psychological response. It induces stress, anxiety, and a state of defensive vigilance. This emotional burden narrows cognitive focus, stifles the creativity required for dynamic lesson design, and promotes a culture of strategic compliance. In this environment, teachers may feel compelled to prioritize only the easily quantifiable aspects of their work that are explicitly measured (teaching to the test or performing for the appraisal). This is particularly detrimental in kindergarten settings, where the most crucial outcomes (such as nurturing secure attachments, fostering social-emotional skills, and engaging in responsive, child-led teaching) are inherently complex and difficult to reduce to simple metrics. A punitive appraisal system thus risks sidelining these essential, yet unmeasured, duties in favor of more easily scored, but less meaningful, performative tasks.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a mixed-method research design, primarily utilizing a quantitative survey to understand kindergarten teachers' perceptions of performance appraisal and job performance in Hong Kong. This approach is supplemented by a qualitative question to provide deeper, interpretive insights. Combining both methods allows the researcher to leverage their respective strengths and mitigate their weaknesses. The survey gathers broad data on teacher perceptions, while the qualitative component explores their personal experiences, thoughts, and concrete suggestions for improvement in greater depth. This integrated strategy enables a comprehensive analysis, leading to a richer understanding of the issue and facilitating the development of well-informed strategies to enhance the performance appraisal system in Hong Kong kindergartens.

3.2 Participants and Sampling

This study employs a quantitative research approach, utilizing a survey to investigate kindergarten teachers' perceptions of performance appraisal and job performance in Hong Kong. To ensure breadth and statistical validity, the research adopts a probability-based random sampling method. The target participants are kindergarten teachers aged 20 to 60 who are proficient in Chinese.

A sample size of 359 was determined, a figure calculated based on established sampling formulas to achieve a 95% confidence level, though slightly below the ideal target of 378 due to resource constraints. This method helps limit potential bias and allows the findings to be generalized to the wider population of kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong. Participation is entirely voluntary and unpaid, with respondents contacted randomly via phone or email. Ethical safeguards are in place, allowing participants to skip questions or withdraw from the survey at any time without penalty.

3.3 Data Collection Instruments and Procedures

This study collected data through a self-administered online questionnaire completed by 359 kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong, all of whom were proficient in traditional Chinese. Participants were selected via random sampling and participated voluntarily without payment. To ensure ethical standards, their privacy was protected with anonymous codes, and they could skip questions or withdraw at any time. The questionnaire utilized a six-point Likert scale to measure attitudes and opinions. The even number of response choices was intentionally selected to force a clear positive or negative direction, aiming for finer discrimination and higher reliability. The research acknowledges that the choice between odd or even scales depend on the study's purpose, as odd-numbered scales allow for a neutral midpoint.

3.4 Data Analysis

This study employed a mixed-methods approach to analyze kindergarten teachers' perceptions of performance appraisal and job performance in Hong Kong. Quantitative data from 359 survey respondents were analyzed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) and inferential tests (t-tests, ANOVA) were used to examine differences based on demographic variables like rank, gender, experience, and kindergarten type. Qualitative data from open-ended questions were analyzed through thematic analysis to identify key challenges and improvement strategies for the appraisal system. This involved coding responses and identifying recurring themes through researcher interpretation, supported by direct quotations and paraphrasing.

The research aims to contribute to the literature by explaining teacher dissatisfaction with current appraisal systems and proposing practical strategies for enhancement. The combination of statistical analysis and thematic inquiry provides both breadth and depth in understanding this complex issue in Hong Kong's early childhood education context.

4. Findings

Figure 1 shows the histogram of overall performance appraisal scores for 359 participants. The overall mean, standard deviation, mode, and median overall performance scores were 4.15, 0.803, 5.00, and 4.23 respectively. It was negatively skewed (-0.384) and approximated normally distributed.

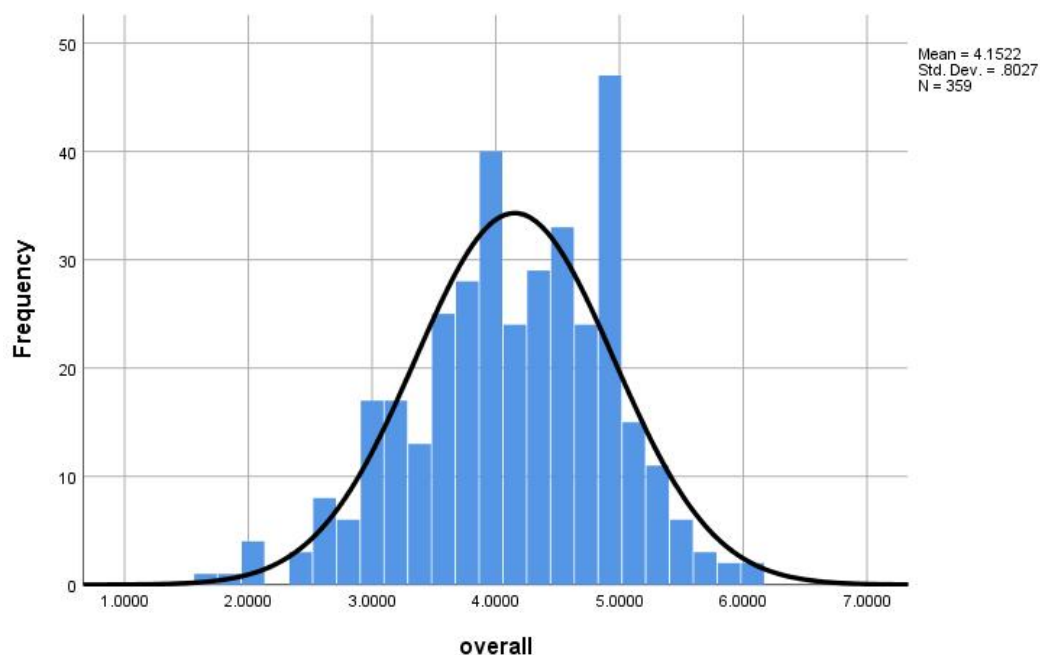


Figure 1. Histogram of overall performance appraisal scores.

Among the subscales, understand measures achieved the highest mean score is 4.472, whereas the impact on collegiality achieved the lowest mean score is 3.978. The correlations between the performance appraisal subscales were highly significant. The Cronbach's alpha of eight performance appraisal subscales is 0.956. This study found that perceptions of teacher appraisal systems differ significantly across various demographics. Vice-principals/officers and teachers, as well as teachers of different ages, tenure lengths, and qualifications, held contrasting views on factors like fairness, credibility, and impact. Marital status also influenced perceptions of understanding measures, teaching impact, and the system's overall benefit. The most pronounced differences were observed between roles, age groups, and especially between teachers with moderate (4-10 years) versus long (21+ years) tenure.

Figure 2 shows the histogram of the perceptions of kindergarten teachers toward job performance scores for 359 participants. The overall mean, standard deviation, mode, and median overall performance scores were 4.45, 0.628, 5.00, and 4.50 respectively. It was negatively skewed (-0.299) and approximated normally distributed.

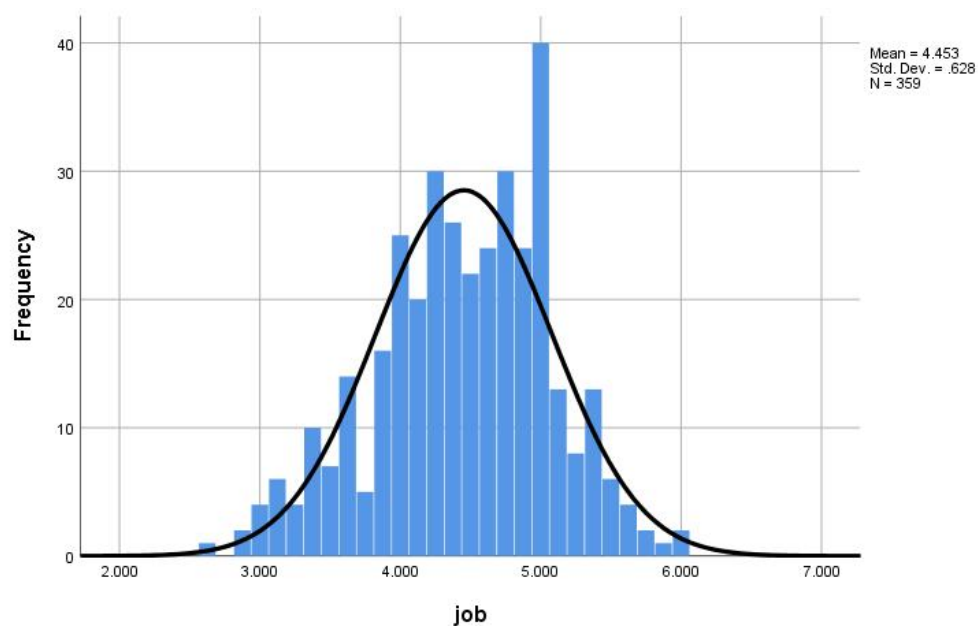


Figure 2. Histogram of job performance scores.

All the performance appraisal subscales were not significantly different between 11 to 30 teachers in their kindergarten and 51 or more teachers in their kindergarten. A study found significant differences in performance appraisal and job performance perceptions based on teacher demographics. Differences existed between vice-principals/officers and teachers, different age groups, marital status, tenure lengths (4-10 vs 21+ years), and income levels. However, no significant differences were found between local kindergarten types (PEVS/Non-PEVS) or between conducting appraisals once or twice a year. Teacher qualifications and kindergarten size also showed no significant effect on these perceptions.

Most respondents (74.4%) reported that they were met or exceeded the expectation of job performance. Only 8.1% of the respondents needed improvement. The major purposes of performance appraisal in kindergartens were performance management and professional development and accounted for 75.8% of the respondents.

Table 1 was the thematic analysis of kindergarten teachers' perception of improving performance appraisal by an open-ended question in the questionnaire. Four themes were developed from the qualitative data by thematic analysis [11].

Table 1. Thematic analysis of teachers' perception for improving appraisal.

Codes	Theme
✧Clearly organization goals or expectations ✧Clearly identify the performance criteria ✧Multiple appraisers ✧Establish specific performance standards ✧Review the appraisal system regularly ✧Define organization goals clearly ✧Clearly explanations about the appraisal	Clear appraisal system
✧Positive attitude towards appraisees ✧Two-way discussion of performance appraisal ✧Frequency give feedback ✧Fair appraiser ✧Train appraisers to maximize the appraisal process ✧Use data and documents for comments	Fair appraisal process
✧Use a variety of methods to rate and evaluate ✧Collect information in advance ✧Peer appraisers ✧Mutual communication ✧Clear criteria for assessment ✧Choosing the best performance appraisal method ✧Appraiser have sufficient knowledge and skills	Appropriate appraisal method
✧Spot training and development needs ✧Set ongoing goals ✧Provide constructive feedback ✧Feedback reflects appraisees' performance ✧Provide timely feedback and suggestions ✧Feedback from parents ✧Discuss and agree to a performance improvement plan ✧Be specific when addressing areas for improvement	Useful appraisal feedback

An effective kindergarten performance appraisal system should align individual and organizational goals, ensuring fairness, transparency, and principal support. Appraisers must be unbiased and trained to provide constructive, evidence-based feedback through a two-way dialogue, focusing on strengths and development. This process boosts morale, job satisfaction, and reduces turnover. The chosen appraisal method must be reliable, well-communicated, and can incorporate valuable peer feedback. Regular system reviews and supportive leadership are essential to help teachers achieve professional growth and improve overall school performance.

5. Discussion

This study confirms that the implementation of performance appraisal in Hong Kong kindergartens is at a critical juncture. The overwhelmingly negative perceptions of fairness and utility, as revealed in both the quantitative and qualitative data, indicate that for many teachers, the current systems are failing to achieve their stated developmental purpose. Instead, they are often experienced as a mechanism of managerial control that serves the summative, market-driven needs of the institution at the expense of teacher professionalism and well-being [12].

The findings strongly support the literature on the perils of combining formative and summative purposes [13]. The high-stakes environment, driven by competition for students and resources, corrupts the developmental potential of appraisal. The performance that is appraised becomes a curated spectacle, divorced from the complex, relational, and often messy reality of high-quality early childhood education. This creates a form of performance, where teachers are compelled to prioritize the display of good practice over the practice itself.

The strong correlation between interactional justice and contextual or adaptive performance is particularly significant. It suggests that the way feedback is delivered is as important as the feedback itself. A respectful, dialogic approach from the appraiser can foster psychological safety [14], making teachers more receptive to feedback and more willing to engage in the extra-role behaviors and adaptive practices that are vital for a healthy school culture but difficult to mandate. Conversely, a punitive, top-down approach triggers defensiveness and narrows professional engagement.

Furthermore, the emphasis on visible, quantifiable outcomes in appraisal criteria creates a fundamental misalignment with the holistic goals of early childhood education. By valuing academic outputs and competition wins, these systems inadvertently encourage a schoolification of kindergarten [15], pushing teachers toward didactic, teacher-directed methods at the expense of play-based, child-centered learning. This places teachers in a state of ethical conflict, caught between their professional judgment of what is best for young children and the institutional demands for marketable results.

The high self-reported job performance scores in the context of low appraisal perception scores present an interesting paradox. This could be interpreted through the lens of professional pride and commitment to children. Despite their dissatisfaction with the system, teachers maintain high performance standards for themselves due to their intrinsic motivation and dedication to their students. However, the qualitative data suggests that this performance may be increasingly focused on a narrow set of appraised tasks, potentially at the cost of the unmeasured, yet equally important, aspects of their role, such as spontaneous nurturing and creative curriculum development.

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study on Hong Kong kindergarten teachers' perceptions revealed significant demographic variations in satisfaction with performance appraisal systems and job performance. Vice-principals reported higher satisfaction than classroom teachers. Similarly, teachers aged 30 or below, those who were married, and those with higher family income (HK\$60,001-90,000) were more satisfied than their older, single, and lower-income ($\leq$ HK\$30,000) counterparts. Tenure also influenced satisfaction, with teachers employed for 21 years or more being more content than those with 4-10 years of service. However, job performance ratings themselves showed no significant difference based on teachers' qualifications, kindergarten size, or type.

A key finding was that 66.8% of respondents believed the appraisal system requires improvement, suggesting a need for refinement in its process, methods, and feedback mechanisms. Despite this, a strong majority (74.4%) felt they met or exceeded job performance expectations. The primary purposes of appraisal were identified as performance management and professional development, underscoring its dual role. The research validated eight subscales for measuring perceptions and established a positive correlation between appraisal perceptions and job performance. A consistent trend across all demographics was that teachers held a better perception of their own job performance than of the appraisal system itself, highlighting a critical area for systemic enhancement involving government, employers, and educators.

The future of Hong Kong's kindergarten sector depends on its ability to attract, retain, and empower high-quality teachers. This requires building a culture of trust and professional growth. Reforming performance appraisal from a tool of surveillance into a catalyst for genuine professional learning is not just a technical task; it is a moral imperative for the well-being of teachers and the children they serve.

The following are recommendations for principals to enhance the effectiveness of the performance appraisal system.

(a) Principals should adequately promote the importance of performance management to all staff. They need to effectively communicate the importance of the performance management system to all staff to implement the performance management effectively.

(b) Principals should set organizational goals clearly with all staff. It may help to apply the action plans successfully. They may effectively link with the organization's goals and teachers' personal goals to maximize the quality of teaching and learning.

(c) Principals should set reasonable and measurable performance standards for all staff. Otherwise, the effectiveness of their work cannot be measured specifically and effectively.

(d) Principals should improve the channels for mutual communication within the kindergarten. The key to the successful implementation of the performance appraisal system is the mutual communication between appraisers and appraisees. If the kindergarten does not have a mutual communication channel, it will lead to poor communication among staff. Appraisees cannot obtain positive and constructive feedback and necessary support for improving their performance effectively.

(e) Principals should ensure the performance appraisal can measure teachers' performance accurately to enhance their job satisfaction. They should monitor and review the performance appraisal system regularly and make the necessary improvements if necessary.

(f) Principals should use performance appraisal to identify teachers' strengths and weaknesses and for promotion to enhance teachers' motivation.

(g) Principals should adopt self-assessment and peer appraisal as part of the performance appraisal to enhance its reliability and validity.

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