

“Polish One’s Jade with Stones from Another Mountain”: Examining the Case of a New Zealand-Inspired Early Childhood Education Centre in China

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Abstract

This article reports on a case study that investigated the implementation of New Zealand early childhood education (ECE) beliefs in a kindergarten in China and its implications. The study used a process of document analysis and individual interviews with teachers and parents to collect data. The incorporation of “Western” education approaches is not a new phenomenon in China. This paper uses empirical findings to highlight new concerns regarding this ongoing practice. It analyses the tensions emerging when a foreign curriculum and pedagogy are imported into a local setting without consideration of social and cultural contextual factors. It further scrutinises how imported and global beliefs and practices are responsive to, and sustain, valuable local knowledge that has been embraced and enacted for generations.

Keywords: China, early childhood education, New Zealand, social and cultural contexts

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There is an old Chinese saying, “他山之石可以攻玉”, from the *Book of Songs* (1100–600 B.C.). It translates literally as “to polish one’s jade with stones from another mountain.” This saying is still commonly used in China today to encourage people to be open-minded by learning from, and drawing on, experiences and practices of other people and/or countries in order to improve one’s achievements (Chinese Thought, 2020). This saying reflects an ongoing phenomenon in China—that of incorporating and implementing foreign curricula and pedagogies in its education settings.

Early childhood education (ECE) in China has a history of adopting pedagogical approaches and curriculum models from other countries such as Russia, Japan, the United States of America, and many more (Zhu & Wang, 2005; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). Key policy documents in China, for example the *Regulations for Kindergarten Work* (hereinafter the *Regulations*; People’s Republic of China Ministry of Education [PRC MoE], 2016) and the *Guidelines for 3–6-Year-Old Children’s Learning and Development* (hereinafter the *Guidelines*; PRC MoE, 2012), suggest that ECE in China is transforming and seems to reflect both historical and recent practices. The traditional teacher-oriented approach that focuses on structured and rote learning is currently no longer elevated and promoted; instead “Western”¹ pedagogical and curriculum approaches which emphasise child-initiated experiences, learning through play, and teachers working in partnerships with parents, are promoted in current policy documents. Researchers in China have pointed out that some kindergartens have adopted Western pedagogical approaches without considering their suitability for the local context of China, and the application of these approaches in China and the social and cultural factors that have constrained their application have been researched extensively (see for instance Li & Chen, 2017; Rao et al., 2010; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). Ingrained, Confucian-influenced teaching and learning beliefs and practices, a culture of competition with an emphasis on individual achievement, and structural constraints, such as high teacher–children ratios, low teaching qualifications, and a lack of professional development support have thus far limited teachers’ ability to implement these imported ECE pedagogies in China (Li et al., 2017; Li et al., 2012; Zhu & Zhang, 2008).

¹ The problematic nature of this simplistic and binarised term is recognised.

Kindergartens in China that claim to be implementing a Reggio Emilia, Montessori, High Scope, Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) approach and others are becoming increasingly popular amongst both parents and teachers. The Little Stars Kindergarten² is a privately owned kindergarten located in a medium-sized city in the south of China, and it claims to implement New Zealand ECE beliefs, such as the notions of learning through play and child-centred learning, notions that are promoted in the New Zealand early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki*³ (NZ MoE, 1996, 2017). Since its inception, *Te Whāriki* has been acknowledged positively by national and international researchers (Moss et al., 2016). Unlike some of the Western approaches applied in China, *Te Whāriki* is a non-prescriptive sociocultural curriculum framework that encourages each ECE setting to construct a local curriculum that is responsive to the local community of the setting (NZ MoE, 2017). Our project selected the Little Stars Kindergarten as a case study to examine how certain New Zealand ECE beliefs promoted in *Te Whāriki* might have been localised and implemented in the kindergarten, and how social and cultural factors are considered and responded to locally. Because *Te Whāriki* considers families and teachers to be equal partners (Chan & Richie, 2016; NZ MoE, 1996, 2017) and the voices of parents/families were missing from previous similar studies (for example, Hu & Szente, 2009; Li et al., 2011; Zhou & Hedges, 2020), we decided to give equal attention to both partners. This paper presents findings from interviews with the kindergarten's parents and teachers to examine their perceptions, understandings, beliefs and experiences of the implementation of New Zealand ECE beliefs. It also analyses the factors that influenced their perceptions and experiences, and, as such, aims to explore how to enact the old Chinese saying "polish one's jade with stones from another mountain" genuinely to improve ECE practices in China, whilst also upholding and sustaining precious local knowledge and heritage.

A Western curriculum and pedagogy in Confucian-influenced ECE settings

Confucianism has influenced education in China and many East Asian countries such as

² We have used pseudonyms for all names and participants.

³ The research started in 2017 and the original *Te Whāriki* (NZ MoE, 1996) was revised and published in the same year. This article refers to both versions of the document.

Japan, Korea and Singapore (Biggs, 1996; Wu & Singh, 2004). Confucian values continue to shape current education practices in China, and these values are important to understanding and explaining contemporary Chinese ways of thinking and being, including parenting, teaching and learning practices (Chan, 2009; Luo et al., 2013). 教书^{jiāo shū} is the Chinese terminology used to describe teaching. It literally means to teach texts, which suggests that teachers are expected to pass on knowledge to students via books, implying that students are expected to learn from books.

Confucianism emphasises social order through the maintenance of a hierarchy in human relationships and conformity to prescribed social norms (Wei & Li, 2013), and the role of Chinese teachers, therefore, is to assume authoritative positions in teacher–student relationships, and to transmit expert knowledge to submissive and diligent students (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006). To provide opportunities for students to learn how to conform, Chinese teachers would usually place more emphasis on group learning, which tends to work well in a high teacher–children ratio environment. Some researchers, however, argue that a hybrid pedagogy that promotes a mix of structured and adult-directed activities, and child-directed and play-based learning experiences is becoming increasingly common in ECE settings in China (Rao et al., 2010).

Play-based and child-oriented pedagogy

Learning through play is a key notion promoted in New Zealand ECE. *Te Whāriki* (NZ MoE, 1996, 2017) expects teachers to create a play-rich environment and provide a range of play-based opportunities for children to explore, communicate and make sense of their experiences. It promotes voluntary, spontaneous and child-directed play and learning. Western notions of play present challenges “for cultures with non-European heritages” (Grieshaber, 2016, p. 8), and the idea of letting children direct their learning through play further sits in contrast with Confucian-influenced pedagogy which emphasises conformity, discipline, and academic achievements (Rao et al., 2010).

Most teachers in China have limited training in, and understanding of, the application of a play-based pedagogy, and there is little guidance about how to incorporate ideas such as seeing children as active participants in their learning and offering play and individualised

assessments in their teaching practices (Zhu & Zhang, 2008). A lack of support from the majority of practising teachers who are used to a didactic and structured mode of teaching, and demands from Chinese parents who want an early academic start for their children also made enacting a child-centred approach challenging, and hence teacher-led and skill-based activities are still commonly practised in ECE settings in China (Rao & Li, 2009).

Despite teachers being greatly influenced by Confucianism and facing the earlier mentioned challenges, research has pointed out that, with the introduction of the *Guidelines*, ECE pedagogy in China has begun to change (Song, 2016). Song found that teachers in China now focus on identifying how to meet the needs of an individual child and on developing a child's potential in all areas, rather than solely on intellectual capacity such as reading, writing and numeracy, as was historically the case. Learning experiences that promote creativity, independence, and uninterrupted free play can now be found in some ECE settings in China (Hu & Li, 2012).

A complex relationship between teachers and parents/families

"Family and Community" is one of the principles of *Te Whāriki* and it is stated that "the wider world of family and community is an integral part of the early childhood curriculum" (NZ MoE, 1996, p. 14), and it expects teachers to work "in collaboration with children, parents, whānau [extended family] and community to create a local curriculum for their setting" (NZ MoE, 2017, p. 10). It emphasises the importance of parental participation in children's learning, in the planning, assessment and evaluation of learning programmes, and encourages teachers to work in partnerships with families and communities (NZ MoE, 1996, 2017). Partnerships involve the establishment of reciprocal and collaborative relationships in which both parties work together with equal status and, it is argued that relationships between parents and teachers are more sustainable when they have a shared interest in children's learning (Chan & Ritchie, 2016). Parents' knowledge of their children is essential for teachers to understand children's out-of-kindergarten learning experiences. Teachers should undertake intentional, purposeful, and thoughtful actions to interact with parents and encourage them to be involved in their children's ECE settings by engaging in planning and the implementation of learning experiences (Chan & Ritchie, 2016; Duncan et al., 2012).

Recent research points out that traditional Chinese values are often missing from literature that examines parent engagement in ECE in China (Li & Vandenberg, 2020), and the relationship between parents and teachers in contemporary China is complex and multi-layered (Tesar et al., 2019). Confucianism promotes hierarchical human relationships and social harmony. Chinese parents who embrace Confucian values, therefore, tend to consider teachers as authority figures; they usually show respect to teachers and avoid disagreements and confrontations with them (Chan, 2006, 2009; Wu & Singh, 2004). They consider the concept of working in partnership with teachers to be inappropriate (Chan & Ritchie, 2016). However, in today's market-driven culture, parents are also *consumers* of ECE, and research claims that parents in China are becoming more assertive and, at times, argumentative with teachers when advocating for their child and demanding for services from teachers (Zhu & Wang, 2005).

When parents are *clients*, the building of relationships is more difficult (Tobin et al., 2009). Parents not only expect teachers to care for their children, they also believe that it is the teachers' role to prepare their children well academically because parents commonly consider success in kindergarten to be the first step to achieving future academic and career success (Luo & Arndt, 2010). For example, one common expectation from parents in China nowadays is for their children to learn good English in ECE settings. Due to China's open-door policy, its role in the world economy, and the career opportunities that English provides for an individual, the number of English language learners has escalated in China (Jin & Cortazzi, 2006), and English language has become a compulsory subject at schools and is increasingly taught in kindergartens (Cheng, 2012).

Social and cultural considerations

Sociocultural theories underpin *Te Whāriki* which focuses on responsive and reciprocal “relationships with people, places and things” and recognises that “learning is mediated by participation in valued social and cultural activities” (NZ MoE, 2017, p. 61). A socioculturally framed teaching and learning environment can be conceived of as a shared space that invites children to participate in the process of negotiation and co-construction of knowledge (Daniels, 2005) and, in New Zealand, “play is an important means by which children try out new roles and identities as they interact with others” (NZ MoE, 2017, p.

61). The importance of the social and cultural context within which children are cared for, and where learning takes place, is one of the foundation stones of *Te Whāriki* (NZ MoE, 1996, 2017). ECE teachers in New Zealand are expected "to understand the importance, for young children's learning, of materials, artefacts and tools and the signs and symbols of societies and cultures" (NZ MoE, 2017, p. 61).

In Confucian culture, the emphasis on academic learning and the use of competitive examinations means that Chinese learners are socially and culturally expected to pursue academic achievements from a very early age. To promote academic success, teacher-led, structured and skill-based activities are valued traditional social and cultural activities that are still prevalent in some ECE settings in China (Rao & Li, 2009). To adopt and apply a play-based and child-led curriculum and pedagogy that sits in contrast with the local ECE knowledge and practice of China has the potential to create challenges for teachers. As such, this paper focuses on examining the ECE beliefs and practices of both New Zealand and China, two different contexts, in light of social and cultural considerations, that is, how social values and cultural practices influence teachers' and parents' understanding and practices in the Little Stars Kindergarten, and to analyse the challenges and implications of adopting teaching and learning practices from a foreign context.

A case study: The Little Stars Kindergarten

The Little Stars Kindergarten enrolled children according to three different age groups: 3–4, 4–5, and 5–6 years old. Two sources of data, documents and interviews with six teachers and six parents, were collected from the kindergarten and form this case study⁴ (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2006). With the consent of the kindergarten's manager, the third author placed a recruitment advertisement on the kindergarten's bulletin board. Expression of interest was low, so the recruitment process was halted after two teachers and two parents from each age group volunteered. These participants catered for potential age-related specific concerns. This study purposely included the voices of parents because they were missing from previous similar studies (Hu & Szente, 2009; Li et al., 2011; Zhou &

⁴ This study was approved by the human ethics committee of the authors' institution.

Hedges, 2020) and *Te Whāriki* promotes an equal partnership between parents and teachers (NZ MoE, 1996, 2017).

Two phases of individual interviews were conducted in Mandarin, the home language of the participants and the third author, who then transcribed and translated the data. Macro policies of China and New Zealand, micro documents from the kindergarten, and data collected from the interviews were analysed together using a thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Three main topics emerged from the data: play and exploration, English language competency, and parent–teacher partnership. These topics were mentioned most often by the participants, and they also appeared frequently in the macro and micro documents reviewed. They form the themes of the findings reported in this paper. Interview and document data were analysed holistically in light of literature, Chinese social and cultural values and beliefs, and key ideas from *Te Whāriki* because the Little Stars Kindergarten claimed, on its website, that it used the beliefs and practices of New Zealand ECE in its curriculum and pedagogy. Being researchers from New Zealand, it was this claim that drew our attention and influenced our decision to select this kindergarten to investigate. Below is the vision and philosophy of the kindergarten, which states that teachers:

1. Respect children and their differences, and provide a child-centred learning environment in which children learn through play and explore at their own pace.
2. Nurture children’s learning abilities, such as the ability to live independently, think logically, express confidently using language, and observe and explore.
3. Design education and teaching activities that are age-appropriate for children. Children’s learning in their early years is about fostering good living and learning habits which lay a solid foundation for their lifelong sustainable development.
4. Work in partnership with families to better understand children’s learning at home and parents’ aspirations for their children.
5. Offer an English-learning programme as part of the curriculum. Native-English speaking teachers will teach English lessons regularly.

The above statements seem to be informed by the *Guidelines* (PRC MoE, 2012) and *Regulations* (PRC MoE, 2016) of China. Most of them also reflect the principles and strands of *Te Whāriki* (NZ MoE, 1996, 2017), such as the principle of family and

community and the strands of exploration and communication.

Documents review

Macro policy documents that shape the practices of the Little Stars Kindergarten were analysed. They include the *Guidelines*, *Regulations*, *Te Whāriki 1996* and *2017*, and the *New Zealand Education (Early Childhood Services) Regulations*. Table 1 provides an overview of the key ideas that create a holistic underpinning of this case study.

Table 1. *Ideas Promoted in Macro Documents*

Key ideas	China (originally written in Chinese)	New Zealand
Curriculum overview	Five learning areas: arts, language and early literacy, sciences, health, and social development, are highlighted in the <i>Guidelines</i> . Children's holistic development in these five domains is addressed (PRC MoE, 2012).	The broad principles and strands of <i>Te Whāriki</i> are open for teachers to interpret and weave into their practices (NZ MoE, 1996, 2017).
Language acquisition	Language development is a learning area in the <i>Guidelines</i> (PRC MoE, 2012)	Communication is one of the strands in <i>Te Whāriki</i> , in which children are encouraged to express themselves in different literacy modes (NZ MoE, 1996, 2017).
Exploration	The <i>Guidelines</i> (PRC MoE, 2012) expects teachers to support young children's thinking while they are exploring and to encourage them to make simple reasoning and analysis to discover obvious relationships among things.	Exploration is one of the strands in <i>Te Whāriki</i> , which states that children learn through exploration and interactions with people, places and things (NZ MoE, 1996, 2017).
Partnership	Both the <i>Guidelines</i> (PRC MoE, 2012) and the <i>Regulations</i> (PRC MoE, 2016) emphasise the importance of partnership among the family, kindergartens and community,	Family and community is one of the principles of <i>Te Whāriki</i> , which highlights the importance of family and community in supporting the learning and development of each child. It states that

advocating collaborative relationships.		teachers have a responsibility to weave their own programme to support partnerships with parents and family through culturally responsive and respectful interactions (NZ MoE, 1996, 2017). The sharing of knowledge and information between teachers and families helps extend the child’s learning and development in and outside of centres (NZ MoE, 1996, 2017).
Class sizes & Teachers–children ratios	The <i>Regulations</i> shows that kindergartens in China have large class sizes: 25 for 3-year-olds; 30 for 4-year-olds; 35 for 5-year-olds with 2 to 3 teachers (PRC MoE, 2016).	Minimum three adults to 21–30 children in all-day ECE services (NZ Government, 2008).

Play and exploration

In line with the macro documents, the Little Stars Kindergarten’s philosophy statement highlights the notions of learning through play and exploration. Interviewees recognised the importance of these two notions for the learning and development of young children; however, their understandings were different from the ideas promoted in *Te Whāriki*, those that are usually enacted in New Zealand ECE settings. While the teachers categorised play into experiences that are child-directed, teacher-directed, or mutually directed by both teachers and children, it is evident that they used mainly teacher-directed play because of their perception of a teacher’s role.

Katie⁵ (teacher of 4-5-year-olds): When we take children outside, sometimes we let them play on their own or with their friends. But we are teachers. It is our job to set up the outside area and set up activities that will interest children, so there is a lot for them to explore and to learn, and they will not aimlessly run around. I always plan activities that let children play together in a big group.

⁵ The use of English in teaching is highlighted as a special character of the Little Stars Kindergarten. It is common for children, parents and teachers in this kindergarten to have English names in addition to their Chinese names given at birth. Most participants opted for pseudonyms in English.

Teacher participants emphasised that it was their role and responsibility to create activities that engaged children and promoted learning. These activities are termed “teacher-designed ‘learning through play’ activit[ies]” by Choy (2017, p. 43) and “Eduplay”, a play-based education, by Rao and Li (2009). Nonetheless, the interview data show that some teacher participants simply followed the ^{zhǔ tí huó dòng zhǐ dǎo}主题活动指导/ *A Guide for Themed Activities* (Zhu et al., 2012), a guidebook that provides details on how a lesson should be planned for and carried out, without taking into consideration children’s interests; some researchers share the same concern elsewhere (Song, 2016). Teacher participants’ perception of play differed from ideas embraced by ECE in New Zealand where teachers are expected to assess and respond to children’s interests and strengths, and provide them with learning experiences accordingly (Arndt & Tesar, 2015). Their perception of play also contrasted with *Te Whāriki*, which states that learning through play should be an exploratory experience that is led by children (NZ MoE, 1996, 2017). This finding suggests that teachers might not have a good understanding of the child-led and play-based pedagogy. It is consistent with the findings from previous studies conducted in China which examined the adoption of Multiple Intelligences (MI) theory (Zhou & Hedges, 2020) and the DAP approach (Hu & Szente, 2009) in kindergartens, and found that teachers lacked in-depth knowledge of the theory and approach in which to ground their practices.

Although the *Guidelines* (PRC MoE, 2012), *Regulations* (PRC MoE, 2016), and the kindergarten’s philosophy promote a play-based curriculum, teacher participants highlighted pressure from parents.

Selina (teacher of 3-4-year-olds): We understand that outdoor activities provide children with opportunities to learn and explore on their own, but sometimes it is hard for us to explain to parents, especially grandparents [what their children are learning]. Parents who participated in this research agreed that children could learn, through play, how to interact with others. Yet, when their children were reaching primary school age, parents believed that it was the role of the teachers to organise and facilitate children’s learning, and play was only one of the possible pathways.

Max (parent of a 4-year-old): Children play for fun at home too. But when they go to kindergarten and play like at home, then what’s the point of going to kindergarten? I understand children at this age are all about play, but I believe that teachers’ job is to plan a lot of activities for children to

participate.

Jim (parent of a 5-year-old): Teachers need to use play to help children engage in class, learn and get ready for school. At home, we use board games to introduce my child to Chinese characters, numbers and English words. The kindergarten has more resources and trained teachers ... Children will learn more if teachers teach them how to play ... Teachers could organise activities to do with children, so children have goals to achieve instead of wandering around or running wild.

While teacher participants agreed that play was an important pedagogical tool in facilitating learning, parents preferred children to be engaged in play activities with clear learning outcomes, such as learning language, Chinese phonetics and numeracy to prepare for primary school. Han Yu, a Tang Dynasty poet, states that y è jīng y ú qín huāng y ú x ī 业精于勤荒于嬉, which can be translated as “learning is mastered by hard work, and it becomes uncultivated when one indulge[s] in play.” This statement captures an emphasis on diligence and conscientiousness if one wants to be successful academically. It has become something akin to an ancient Chinese belief and continues to influence the practices and beliefs of teachers and parents in China. Teacher and parent participants were more concerned about children’s learning than play. Parenting and teaching and learning beliefs and practices are socially and culturally constructed (Hu, 2002; Powell & David, 2010), and research (Li & Chen, 2017; Rao et al., 2010; Zhu & Zhang, 2008) has examined how social, cultural and historical factors have restricted the implementation of a play-based pedagogy in China. These factors have similarly constrained the implementation of New Zealand ECE beliefs in the Little Stars Kindergarten. Findings presented in this section have highlighted policy–practice and belief–practice gaps which are also reported in Li et al. (2011), a study that investigated the application of the DAP approach in five kindergartens in Shenzhen, a special economic zone in China.

English language competency

One of the unexpected, but important, findings which emerged from the data is that all teacher and parent participants assumed that the English language was a key learning area in New Zealand ECE. The Little Stars Kindergarten’s website emphasises the integration of

New Zealand's ECE beliefs and practices in its programme, and all the parent participants believed that this kindergarten would have a strong focus on the teaching and learning of the English language. Such a belief led parents to enrol their children in this kindergarten in the first place.

The importance of the English language was mentioned often by all the participants who believed that it is an essential learning area, and its competency is critical for their children's futures.

Eva (parent of a 6-year-old): English language skill is an essential skill in today's world, like driving and computer skills. I have never thought of sending my child to a kindergarten that does not have an English programme.

Selina (teacher of 3-4-year-olds): Learning English is a given. You don't have a choice. You just have to do it.

Due to a competitive learning culture and environment, many parents felt that their children had to learn English because other children are doing the same.

Eva (parent of a 6-year-old): I think children should focus on their home language first. English language might be overemphasised. But everyone is doing it, I feel anxious that my child might fall behind if I do not let her start learning it.

Teacher participants shared similar responses but linked to their professional expertise. They believed that New Zealand, as an English-speaking country, has rich teaching and learning resources to support effective teaching and learning of the English language, and it is possible to utilise these resources to improve their teaching. Although they said they understood parents' aspirations for their child's English language acquisition, they identified the pressure from parents as a challenge.

Cathy (teacher of 3-4-year-olds): I am sure half an hour each day for [children to learn] English is not enough. Parents usually asked me why their child is not using English, not even [words like] "Hello" or "See you."

English is considered to be an international language, and research has shown that it has become a powerful tool because of globalisation and the increasing demand for professionals with English language ability in a competitive job market (Nunan, 2003; Pan & Block, 2011). Parent participants agreed that proficiency in English language would provide more opportunities for children to secure a decent job in the future. Learning the

English language has become increasingly important in China (Wang, 2007). Although English as a foreign language is a subject from primary school onwards (PRC MoE, 2001), in order to meet the demand from parents to get their children ready for school, an increasing number of private kindergartens in China offer English programmes or claim to be bilingual kindergartens (Bolton & Graddol, 2012).

None of the macro documents, such as *Te Whāriki* and the *Guidelines*, emphasise English language learning. The *Guidelines* state that young children's linguistic competence is developed in the process of communication, social interactions with others, and support from others (PRC MoE, 2012), and the *Regulations* reminds that teaching and learning in kindergarten should avoid being ^{xiao xue hua}小学化, which contextually means teaching and learning in a primary school-oriented and subject-based manner. Similar to the *Guidelines*, *Te Whāriki* does not encourage formal teaching of any language because it considers learning to be holistic and not restricted through isolated subjects (NZ MoE, 1996, 2017). The Communication Strand in *Te Whāriki* suggests that children's language is acquired through verbal and non-verbal communication and interaction with adults and peers around them. The curriculum also expects teachers to provide children with play opportunities to communicate and express themselves in various modes, such as using music and creative arts to express their views and feelings (NZ MoE, 1996, 2017). Nonetheless, both parent and teacher participants agreed that structured English language learning, such as alphabets and vocabularies, in the kindergarten is paramount in preparing children for future study.

Parent–teacher partnership

The importance of two-way communication and working in partnership between parents and teachers to share knowledge of children's learning at home and ECE settings, and to provide a continuity of learning experiences for children is emphasised in the New Zealand ECE literature (Chan & Ritchie, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2006), as well as in the curriculum documents of both New Zealand (NZ MoE, 1996, 2017) and China (PRC MoE, 2012, 2016). All participants recognised the importance of parent–teacher communication and

building trustful relationships.

Teacher participants considered mutual trust as a starting point to establish the relationship as parents trust the teachers to look after their child and cater to their child's needs. They agreed with the importance of respecting parents' aspirations and establishing a trustful partnership with parents.

Selina (teacher of 3-4-year-olds): We communicate and compromise and meet parents' needs. For different age groups, parents have different expectations ... Once parents feel they are listened to, and their aspirations are respected, they tend to trust us more ... We should be willing to listen to and give each other feedback.

Cathy (teacher of 3-4-year-olds): A good partnership with parents eases our job, especially at this age, 3-year-old children, their parents are more sensitive, they worry about their child's eating, drinking and sleeping, whether their child cries ... It needs mutual trust between teachers and parents to help the child settle down. Otherwise, it's challenging to get parents involved.

Research has consistently identified partnership as a collaborative relationship which includes decision making shared by both teachers and parents, mutual respect and trust, as well as open communication (Chan & Ritchie, 2016; Tesar et al., 2017). Teacher participants emphasised that communication with parents should be bi-directional and the building of trust should be mutual. Verbal communication, such as conversations during pick-ups and drop-offs, was considered to be the primary method of constructing a partnership between teachers and parents. The teachers also utilised diverse types of written communication to deliver information to parents. They used regular newsletters, for example, to inform parents about what their children were currently learning, upcoming events, and also to encourage them to participate in the kindergarten.

Daisy (teacher of 4-5-year-olds): Communication lets parents know what we are doing and lets us know what parents are thinking. It is all about communication. Parents and teachers get to know each other through communication.

Despite teachers' intention and effort to strengthen the partnership between ECE setting and families, interview data shows that parents' involvement in the kindergarten was limited and that not all experiences of the parent participants were positive. Some parents mentioned that they disagreed with certain practices at the Little Stars Kindergarten. For

example, they were asked to come into the kindergarten to support teachers with the routines or to set up the environment according to teachers' instructions, but they did not see the value of their contributions when the teachers made all the decisions. Due to social and cultural norms, the parent participants were not keen to share their discontent with teachers. They said they would not challenge the teachers' decisions because they needed to respect teachers and also did not want to be the ones who complained. These beliefs reflect Confucian values which emphasise social harmony and the authority of teachers (Chan, 2006; Yu, 2008).

Eva (parent of a 6-year-old): All the parents seem to do it without complaining, so I need to do the same thing... We need to show our support for teachers.

Eva also did not agree with how teachers focused mainly on the weaknesses of children and areas they need to work on improving, which she said was a traditional Chinese way to look at children's learning. She believed teachers should instead focus on positive recognition of children's current achievements. After attending a few parenting courses, she reckoned that it was time for adults to change their images of children, and she said:

I believe teachers want the best for children too, but I think we need to focus on the children's strengths rather than criticising them to make them improve their performance and achievement.

Some researchers argue that parenting styles in China are transforming because parents have access to Western parenting and children's socialisation ideas, such as the emphasis on respecting children's rights and focusing on children's strengths (Tobin et al., 2009). Yet, it is uncommon for Chinese parents to disagree with teachers (Chan, 2006). As Eva explained, "we know what is going on ... Teachers do what they have to do in the kindergarten, and we will do what we have to do as parents." Xiaoyun (parent of a 3-year-old) shared a similar sentiment and said, "as long as my child is looked after and happy, I will not be too fussy." Both parents kept their opinions to themselves, an act that aligns with Confucianism which emphasises hierarchical human relationships and social harmony (Chan, 2006; Yu, 2008).

WeChat: A new way to connect

Communication is key to effective parent-teacher partnership but, as much as parent and teacher participants wanted to communicate, they found it challenging to carry out

meaningful conversations during the day, particularly during drop-off and pick-up times, because everyone was busy. Higgins (2015) suggested that using an online service can alleviate this challenge. Parent and teacher participants commented positively about an online WeChat group set up by the kindergarten. They considered it a useful and sometimes even better alternative to face-to-face communication, easing the stress in finding opportunities during drop-off and pick-up times to discuss the children or other issues. Some teacher participants further explained that, by using WeChat on their smartphones, they could share information about children's experiences during the day and send reminders to parents at any time without delay.

With the widespread use of smartphones, various applications have emerged as tools for social connection, and WeChat is one of them. WeChat is a communication application which includes features such as text messaging, voice messaging, group messaging, and video calls. The teachers in this study described how WeChat communication supported them to communicate with parents. The kindergarten created an account on WeChat and asked all parents of the kindergarten to sign up. The teacher of each "class" then set up a chat group for parents from her class to "chat" with each other.

Before using WeChat, the teacher participants used an online platform to communicate with parents. They uploaded documentation of children's learning to the platform each day using a kindergarten computer, and parents usually would not respond until the next day. They now used their smartphones to take photos of children's learning moments, captioned them with a few words, and sent them to parents via WeChat. Teachers said they often used WeChat to make announcements and to forward parenting ideas from online sources. They commented that WeChat was practical, convenient and efficient, and that parents would respond to the photos and messages within minutes. Both teacher and parent participants agreed that WeChat enhanced parent-teacher communication, provided them with information regarding children's learning at home and in the kindergarten, thereby supporting children's continuity of learning. Grandparents, aunts and uncles of the child, and other caregivers, could also join the chat group upon the request of parents.

Although the effectiveness of WeChat communication was mentioned positively by both teacher and parent participants, some teacher participants expressed their concern at "bringing work home." They said some parents expected an immediate response after

messaging them and did not consider that teachers might not be available to reply.

Cathy (teacher of 3-4-year-olds): It is my job to work with parents during my working hours but not after work. I have to mute the group chat after work because the messages keep coming in. Some parents will privately message me if I do not reply in the group chat. WeChat adds more work for me and takes up my time after work.

Kindergartens in China are becoming market-driven (Tobin et al., 2009), producing a sense of entitlement in parents, as evidenced when they highlighted their role as paying customers.

Ken (parent of a 3-year-old): The kindergarten will ask its staff to think of parents and children first because we pay a lot of money and deserve better service. I know my opinions matter.

In their study, Li et al. (2011) claim that “private kindergartens rely on parents’ tuition” (p. 15) and tend to respond to their needs more sensitively. This kind of entitlement has the potential to become a dominant narrative and to erode the Confucian beliefs which value social harmony and considers teachers to be worthy of respect. Findings presented in this section illustrate the complex relationship between upholding traditional and historical values and embracing new knowledge of pedagogy, such as the application of WeChat, and highlight the importance of social, cultural and contextual considerations and adaptations when applying foreign pedagogical approaches.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore the integration of foreign education philosophies and pedagogies in ECE in China. It used a case study approach to examine in depth how this idea played out in a privately owned kindergarten which claimed to apply New Zealand ECE beliefs in its curriculum, and the wider implications – in what ways the “stones” (ECE beliefs) from New Zealand could be used to polish the “jade” (ECE practices) of China, as the old Chinese saying in the title of this paper goes. Through a process of document analysis and individual interviews with parent and teacher participants, three themes emerged from the data: play and exploration, English language competency, and parent–teacher partnership. Findings of this study suggest that China’s national policies have begun to align the nation’s ECE practices with most Western countries’ ECE pedagogies

and that the Little Stars Kindergarten aspired to pedagogies embraced in New Zealand. However, historical, social, and cultural factors, such as Confucian values, competitive and market-driven education cultures, and teachers' lack of understanding of the imported curriculum and pedagogy, have highlighted tensions and misalignments when New Zealand ECE beliefs were applied in the Little Stars Kindergarten.

Previous research on implementing foreign curriculum approaches in Chinese ECE contexts has suggested that education beliefs and practices from one culture, introduced into another, have to be modified before being integrated into the existing social and cultural values within the new environment (Li & Chen, 2017; Rao et al., 2010; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). Such modification, integration and transformation processes are highly complex and require consultations with, and agreements from, multiple stakeholders and professional development before practices will become authentic to avoid policy–practice and belief–practice gaps as identified in this study. These processes should also ensure that traditional, historical, and local knowledge is sustained and is not pushed aside by globalisation forces such as an (over)emphasis on information technology and English language skills. While some previous studies reviewed in this paper (such as Hu & Szente, 2009; Li et al., 2011; Zhou & Hedges, 2020) highlighted the importance of social, cultural and contextual considerations when adopting and adapting foreign philosophies in kindergartens in China, they did not examine the phenomena introduced by these two forces.

There are significant social and cultural factors that have shaped parenting and teaching beliefs and practices in China, such as the pursuit of academic achievements and starting English language learning early for later academic success. This paper argues that other contextual factors, such as the availability of resources, the existing education systems and teacher training approaches, and the role of local knowledge and traditional parenting, learning and teaching practices in sustaining heritage must be considered, and responded to, before adopting and adapting foreign education beliefs. The “stones” from New Zealand need to be used with these considerations in mind when polishing the “jade” of China.

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