

■ Peer reviewed

From a Chinese kindergarten

A personal journey

Karen Guo with YingHui Qu

How do Chinese kindergarten teachers understand their teaching practices? How are these influenced by cultural, political and economic forces? What do their classrooms look like from the perspective of a Chinese New Zealander?

This paper is based on interviews with Chinese kindergarten teachers in ChangChun City following two days of classroom observation in June 2011. With the guidance of YingHui Qu, an early childhood education (e.c.e.) professional development facilitator, it is written from the perspective of a Chinese émigré, Karen Guo, whose professional knowledge about e.c.e. has been largely constructed in New Zealand over the past ten years as a mother, teacher, postgraduate student and lecturer. YingHui Qu's input included setting up the visit and interviews, providing information about Chinese e.c.e. context, as well as planning the paper and reviewing the text.

Early childhood education in China

Early childhood education in China generally caters for children aged from three to six years; preparation for school is a key purpose (Pan & Liu, 2008). Children younger than three are normally cared for in homes or in the nurseries which are not seen as educational institutions (Zhu & Zhang, 2008).

Cultural influences are diverse. Early childhood education in China is shaped by at least four sometimes conflicting cultural influences: Chinese, Communist, Western and Global cultures (Pan & Liu, 2008; Zhu & Zhang, 2008).

The influence of traditional Chinese culture on e.c.e. has been to direct attention towards the ideal of self-perfection as the key element in children's learning and development (Xu et al., 2005). This ideal focuses on the development of proper behaviours such as self-restraint, emotional regulation, harmonious relationships, and trying hard to pursue knowledge to the best of one's ability (Guo, 2010).

One of the main insights of the Communist culture has been "the systematic transmission of subject matter through teacher-led group instruction of a teacher centred, textbook-focused and classroom based model" (Pan & Liu, 2008, p.36). The contributions of this culture are chiefly in providing general approaches to teaching.

In the past 30 years, the introduction of Western culture has encouraged a new conceptual and practical model for understanding and reflecting on the kindergarten curricular practices in China. In 1989, the Chinese government issued trial guidelines and regulations for kindergarten education which legitimized educational ideologies and related practices about respecting children, active learning, teaching for individual learning needs including play-based teaching and learning.

Since the 1990s globalization has extended interest in e.c.e. (Scholte, 2008; Power, 2006). Central Chinese government issued policies that have led to the formation of a large number of private early childhood educational settings (Pan & Liu, 2008). Between 1990 and 2005, the Chinese government issued more than 30 new legal and regulatory documents on kindergarten and preschool education (Husueh, Tobin & Karasawa, 2004). Among them, the *National Kindergarten Education Guidelines* was the most important because all provincial education bureaus were required to create local kindergarten guidelines in line with the national guidelines. The national guidelines signify a commitment to the rights of children, and the valuing of childhood as an important phase for developing the children's potential for learning and development (Ministry of Education in the People's Republic of China, 2001).

A kindergarten in Changchun

We visited three classrooms in a kindergarten affiliated to a large automobile factory in ChangChun which caters for the children of the workers. The kindergarten consists of 190 children in eight classes, each with about 25 children. Altogether there are 117 staff (including teachers, managers and administrators).

Parents can choose whether to enroll their children in classrooms run by native speakers of English (which costs more) or by Chinese. They can also choose classrooms that are differentiated by the special interests of the teachers. I visited kindergartens that taught in Chinese and which had a special emphasis on art.

Classes were arranged into three levels: senior classes (four to five year olds), and middle classes (three to four year olds) each have two teachers plus a caregiver, while in the junior

classes (2 ½ – three years old), there were two teachers and two caregivers. Teachers were responsible for the learning programmes while the caregiver was responsible for meals, children's hygiene and classroom physical conditions. 80% teachers were university graduates. Some were trained directly in universities and some upgraded their diplomas to degrees. The ages of the teachers ranged from 19 to 45.

At the discretion of their parents, and for an extra fee, during free play times of the normal classes and after the kindergarten operational hours, children could enroll in specialty classes, such as dancing, art, performance, music or literacy.

We used pen and paper to document what we saw in the three classrooms over those two consecutive days. The vignette (see sidebar) was recorded in a classroom and we believe it is a typical scenario of teaching and learning in the kindergarten. It was an example of formal teacher-children interactions. Teacher instructions seemed to be valuable to children and children's cooperative responses were important to the teacher.

The kindergarten was organised around three types of daily routines so three and four year old children were involved in:

- *Structured learning* (such as in the vignette) where teacher instructions guided children in techniques of goal setting, cooperation and competition by showing children how and what to think, how to work in groups, and the processes of working towards goals.
- *Area learning* in which teachers, on the basis of their assessment of children's interests and needs, assign small groups of children to specific curriculum areas, such as art, writing, or dramatic play; and
- *Free play* in which children had choices about what they did, and characterised by games and free exploration.

Structured learning took about half the day, while area learning and free play each took a about quarter.

Observations in the kindergarten classrooms showed many ways of teaching, such as demonstrating, describing, instructing, encouraging, feedback, listening, singing, or suggesting (MacNaughton & Williams, 2009).

From the teachers' perspective

Individual interviews with five teachers were conducted between the authors and each teacher. We spoke in Mandarin. The interviews took place for 30 minutes each and were recorded in paper and pen and transcribed afterwards. We asked the teachers what they thought about the programmes and their practices, and their concerns and expectations.

The teachers told us that development of the learning programmes in the kindergarten drew on four dimensions: Curriculum Guideline of the JiLin province; the kindergarten's own specialty in arts; the ideas of teachers; and the needs of parents.

In the JiLin Curriculum Guideline, learning programmes were thematic and while derived from the National Kindergarten Education Guidelines issued by Ministry



On a display board in the kindergarten is artwork by 4- and 5-year-olds. The upper painting is titled 'Beautiful Home Town'. The one on the left is entitled 'Singing Frogs' with the one next to it called 'Firing Fox'. The bottom picture is called 'Blood Sisters'.

of Education in China, encapsulated the understandings about early childhood curriculum by a group of regional early childhood academics. In JinLin province all children in the same year level are required to have the same learning experiences and equal opportunities for learning. The themes were organized on a monthly basis and reflected these academics' shared vision for children's learning and development at a particular age within their current living contexts. In October, for example, the theme is 'My country' because it is the month of the National Day in China.

For each theme detailed teaching plans were provided including worksheets, teacher instructions, games, art work, and peer cooperation were typical ways of learning. Of particular importance in these programmes was the idea that learning was a holistic concept, therefore all attempts should be made to integrate experiences across domains. For example,

under the theme of 'My country', children explore 'My country' through songs, books, stories, movies, as well as through dance, writing, drawing, reciting poetry, and even talking to parents and then reporting back to class.

Programmes that followed teachers' ideas reflected the benefits of what teachers learned from individual children and were justified by teachers because this enabled children's learning programmes to incorporate meaningful learning opportunities for children.

Involvement of parents in the kindergarten programmes was a strong feature of the teaching practice. Specifically, in each class, there was: 1) a committee of four to five parents who met once or twice a term to discuss issues, concerns and intentions of the parent groups; 2) an interactive blog which teachers shared with parents their weekly teaching plan, children's learning experience and parents provided suggestions and comments; 3) daily mobile phone messaging to each parent informing them of their child's activities; 4) face-to-face talks everyday between teachers and parents during the arrival and departure times; 5) once-a-term home visit of teachers to each child; 6) grouping parents together in a network for a closer sharing of ideas and opinions; 7) two times a year parent-school outing; 8) bi-monthly parenting class on child learning and development, current early childhood issues or parenting strategies.

Underpinning all these strategies was a belief that in today's educational market, it was the relationship between teachers and parents that constituted the success of children's learning and the prosperity of an early childhood business.

The teachers said explicitly that the key of their work was to serve children. "All we do should be for children". An appropriate approach to e.c.e. needed to benefit children. All the teachers told us that they valued both a teacher-directed pedagogy and child-centred learning style. While they believed that it was important that e.c.e. had the component of direct teaching and learning, they also thought that children needed to have enough free play opportunities. One teacher said:

I really feel that early childhood education should have a unique function of both

A vignette

25 three-year-old children sit on chairs in four rows. A teacher sits in the front facing them. Another teacher sits at the back in the children's group. The teacher in the front takes off her shoes and holds one up.

Teacher: *I want all of you to take off your shoes and leave them beside you.*

Children *(all do as the teacher told).*

Teacher: *Who knows how to tie shoelaces?*

(Six children put their hands up.)

Teacher: *So the others still cannot do it and have your mum, dad or maybe grandma does it for you, right?*

Children: *(silent but watching the teacher).*

Teacher: *The teacher teaches you to do it now. Watch how I do it. (The teacher puts on a shoe). Now, everyone puts one shoe on.*

Children: *(do as the teacher was demonstrated).*

Teacher: *Now watch. (The teacher puts a foot up high against the wall and demonstrates tying her shoelace. She verbalises each action).*

Children: *(watching attentively).*

Teacher: *Did you get it? Now try yours.*

Children: *(all try to tie their shoelaces).*

Teacher: *those who know how to do it stand up and help out.*

(Six children leave their seats and go to help the peers who are learning to tie shoelaces. The other teacher joins them too.)

The teacher *(front): All done that?*

Children *(shouting loudly): Yes!*

Teacher: *Now, the children sitting on the first and third row turn to the friends behind you. You tie the shoelaces for each other and see who is faster.*

Children *(do as the teacher told. They laugh and talk).*

The two teachers move around the children.

Teacher *(front): Now move back to your seats and sit down nicely. I want you to tell me in words the steps of tying shoelace. The first is...*

Children: *(some shout 'make a knot like number 10' because 10 in Chinese is a cross. Some use their hands to indicate. Some laugh. This continues on to the second, third and fourth step.)*

Teacher *(front): Good. Can we do it the last time? Now untie your shoelaces and tie them back up again. I will see who is the fastest.*

Children: *(do what they are told to do).*

Teacher *(front calls out names of four children): I want you to go to the family area later to practise it. We have things for you to use¹. Tomorrow morning, you tie the shoelaces yourself. Don't have mum do it anymore. I will check. If you still haven't learned it, try again later on. Come to me if you forget. Now, we'll do...*

The class moves on to something else.

Note: Children were told the day before to come to the kindergarten in shoes which had laces.

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These are cardboards with drilled holes and shoelaces.

...serving children's playful desires and preparing them for future. I hope that we can do more about this.

There were a number of difficulties involved in making a balance between teaching and free play. The teachers expressed a number of reasons why early childhood programmes in this kindergarten had to be structured, academically driven and teacher directed. These included:

- (1) challenges of the single child family conditions;
- (2) populist demands on early childhood services to prepare children for school;
- (3) the guiding nature of National and Provisional Kindergarten guidelines;
- (4) Chinese tradition that emphasizes the importance of teaching and shaping children's behaviors;
- (5) contemporary social, cultural and economic influences.

Teachers referred to the single child condition of the Chinese society as the 'trigger' of many issues that they encountered in teaching. They described difficulties in accommodating the enthusiasm of Chinese parents who set high demands on their only-child's academic performances and performances in arts, music or physical development. One teacher described Chinese parents as wanting a clear conscience so that they provided children with all learning experiences that were possible. Teachers agreed that although theoretically it was children they served, parents paid for the services so in reality it was parents who they had to serve. Parents' high expectations of children, their lack of understanding of young children's learning characteristics, and their demands for immediate outcomes of children's learning were challenges to teachers in e.c. services. Teachers found themselves constantly struggling with the idea of how to provide the support needed by children within the high expectations of their parents.

As one teacher said:

Early childhood education has been struggling desperately with the expectation of teaching children in a pre-school way. We do not seem to have an independent status in terms of how to operate our programmes but have to make all the considerations of whether what we do fits what happens in schools.

The competition is fierce. If we don't do it in that way, we lose children. To run the business, there is no choice.

The Chinese tradition that emphasised the importance of teaching in learning and of the 'ideal' behaviours of young children also undervalued a child-centred and play-oriented programme. Having been reared in a country that traced its roots to adult power over children, many parents and teachers alike could not help but believe that children's passive learning from teachers was the route to success. Teaching practice, for



This is the entrance to the kindergarten. On the side of the stairway there is space for weekly schedules that parents can view as they enter. Exemplary photos of children's learning are also displayed.

this reason, had a strong teacher-directed feature. The teachers assumed that the cultural make-up of China added particular complexity to education reforms in early childhood sectors.

This is at variance with the National Kindergarten Guidelines which placed strong emphasis on a play-oriented and child-centred approach to education. Given that the kindergarten was operated in the form of a business, parents' ideas had to be given more weight than what was stated in the guidelines.

In addition, media and commercial promotions of training opportunities for young children have foregrounded children's acquisition early knowledge and skills. Visualising children as in a race towards success, parents are encouraged: "Do not let young children lose on the starting line". Teachers saw this pressure for early academic achieve as stymieing their own efforts.

Reflections and conclusions

Education in this kindergarten sits within a wider economic, sociocultural and educational context for preparing children to become competitive citizens, aligned with parent's aspirations, western educational orientation, national and regional policies, contested professional status of teachers, and a need to operate the kindergarten business.

Having experienced the educational system in China themselves, both authors could tell the reason why learning programmes in this kindergarten had more structures. For a society such as China that values academic success and teacher knowledge, there is of course a powerful argument for running e.c.e. in a way that is academically focused and teacher directed.

However, what surprised Karen was that given the vigorous growth in child-centred education in China, and that teachers valued this pedagogical approach, children in the kindergarten experienced a small portion of child-centred programmes. Apparently, there was a tension between the educational values of teachers and their teaching practices. The authors

understood that the privileging of business operation over other considerations resulted in a strong preoccupation of the teachers with meeting the populist demands on preparing children for school. For this reason, learning experiences of the children in this kindergarten had for the most part abandoned the needs of the children in favour of the ideas of their parents.

What nicely impressed Karen was the active involvement of parents in the programmes of the kindergarten as Chinese tradition set a clear boundary between home teaching and school education. The general relationship between teachers and parents in Chinese culture is that parents educated children in their families and they left education in schools with teachers to organize. In line with the Chinese culture, Karen expected parents to be quiet and reticent in the kindergarten environment. Therefore, the active participation of parents was a remarkable discovery. What the authors found is that the many opportunities that teachers provided to parents were important forces that motivated parents to participate. In addition, in the current situation in which most families have only one child, helping their only-child to win on the 'starting line' has become a parental priority. Parental expectation for an early acquisition of knowledge and the importance for teachers to meet parental expectations in order to run the kindergarten business explain why teachers could not incorporate many play activities in the programmes.

From a comparative education perspective, the authors would like to make the following point: there are influences from a number of contexts in Chinese society in the accounts presented in this paper of how a kindergarten in China provided children with early childhood experiences, and this is the same as in New Zealand where early childhood education is similarly influenced by multiple contexts of the society. Therefore, it is important that teachers in New Zealand work out the implications of the experiences in this Chinese kindergarten for their teaching practice and programmes.

It is impossible that what we have described in this kindergarten could be immediately applicable to the early childhood context in New Zealand. For this reason, it is also not appropriate to make judgments about the e.c.e. in another context.

The experience of looking into a Chinese kindergarten through Karen's New Zealand experiences has had the effect on bringing into the open an important cross-national finding: the key issue that should come up in educational conversations is diversity. There are values in any educational approach. For example, the ways that teachers used to involve parents in this Chinese kindergarten could help teachers in New Zealand with their relationships with parents.

This study thus leads us to think that e.c.e. could be more effective if there is more sharing of information and teaching practices from across the world.

One note of caution is that the information presented in this paper comes only from one kindergarten in China. Given the vast variability in China in many dimensions, such as people's ideologies, or contextually specific practices,

this paper only reports one single case in a particular early childhood educational context. It is beyond the scope of the paper to present detailed and integrated discussions of early childhood education in China.

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