

**A cross-national comparative study of 'learning through play' in Mainland China,
Hong Kong and Singapore kindergartens**

A thesis submitted to the University of Manchester for the degree of PhD in the School
for Education, Environment and Development

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2021

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Abstract

This study is a comparative case study across Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore in four settings using the three social theories of learning (Bakhtin, Foucault, Bourdieu) as the main analytical framework. This study addressed four research questions: 1. How are educational policies on ‘learning through play’ similar and different in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore? 2. How do teachers working in four early educational settings enact educational policies on ‘learning through play’? 3. How do teachers explain the meaning of ‘learning through play’? 4. How do teachers account for their role in teaching ‘learning through play’?

Research methods included interviews, observations and analysis of national and regional and site-specific policy documents in the context of the four early childhood education settings. A case study approach was used, together with an interpretive paradigm informing the analysis, drawing on Foucauldian, Bakhtinian and Bourdieusian ideas. Analysis generated from this study indicated that practitioners’ understandings and implementations of ‘learning through play’ in each unique sociocultural-historical context are complex and multifaceted. Discussion of this is taken up in terms of wider challenges to binary thinking about West versus East as discussed by Chen (2010) in Asia as method in relation to pedagogical ideas and practices, and how this has the potential to advance alternative and multiple forms of pedagogical models and concepts in other early childhood education settings.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis has been completed by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, in any previous application for a degree. Except where stated otherwise by reference or acknowledgment, the work presented is entirely my own.

Part of this thesis will be published in the following book chapter:

Zhou, L., Burman, E., & Miles, S. (2021). A study of 'learning through play' in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore kindergartens using Asia as method. In M. S. Perez, M. Tesar, N. Yelland, N. Fairchild, & L. Peters (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Global Childhoods*.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my appreciation to my first supervisor Professor Erica Burman, who has been very supportive during my PhD journey, providing me with advice and critical feedback which are really useful. She has been a brilliant educator, guiding me and encouraging me to complete my thesis. I also wish to thank my second supervisor Dr Susie Miles who gives me her guidance and kindness, support, encouragement.

I would like to extend my gratitude to all the teachers and children who took part in my study. Special thanks to Dr Yuwei for offering his help in establishing the connection to the kindergarten in Singapore and my colleague James Whitehouse who taught me a lot about academic writing. I also would like to thank my mother (Xiaofen Zhang), my sister (Shuni Zhang) and, my dear boyfriend (Chao Yin) who has taken good care of me, for all the support and encouragement that they gave in my PhD journey.

Abbreviations

ECE	Early Childhood Education
MOE	Ministry of Education
NEL	Nurturing Early Learners
QEE	Questioning-Exploration-Experience
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter situates the topic and focus of this study by discussing practitioners' understanding and implementation of 'learning through play' in early childhood education settings. This study is a particular version of cross-national case study looking at the four different cases. Specifically, I discuss the contexts of Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore.

1.2 Background to this research

Recently, in the context of globalisation, and influenced by the introduction of Western theories, 'learning through play' has been emphasised as one of the most important teaching approaches in these three territories. For example, Mainland China since 2012, Hong Kong since 2017 and Singapore since 2013 all have strongly advocated 'learning through play' in official curricula and key national and regional policy documents as a critical principle to guide early childhood education (Li & Li, 2003; Rao, et al., 2017; Zhu, 2009).

It is probably fair to say that in adopting and adapting the pedagogical approach of 'learning through play', Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore encountered both inconsistent theories and practices, and cultural resistance. For instance, the three territories share a similar educational culture, including such features as: a highly examination-centred educational system, a privileging of teacher authority and parents' high academic expectations of children (Rao, et al., 2017). There are also significant legacies of Confucianism taken up in these contexts in different ways. While Western countries focus more on individualism, democracy and Christianreligious culture, Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore concentrate on the values of unity, the design of efficient and effective education systems and economicgrowth (Rao et al., 2017).

'Learning through play' is largely recognised as having originated in the mid- eighteenth

century onwards from Western countries, specifically continental Europe, whose cultural-political assumptions and origins function differently from Asian contexts (Taylor, 2013). The current study explores, and is guided by, the question of how the cultural-political assumptions and origins ‘function differently’.

This particular version of cross-national case study interrogates the existing pedagogical philosophy and practice regarding learning through play in the three territories and the application, adaptation or transformation of the Western notion of ‘learning through play’. The rationale for doing this is that this provides inspiration for - and a greater understanding of - how the educational model of ‘learning through play’ is practised in Asian childhood education and beyond. Also, the study is about how taking a postcolonial perspective seriously (mediating the relationships between ‘Asia’ and ‘the West’, as well as between ‘Asian’ countries), helps challenge the binary thinking about ‘East’ and ‘West’.

1.3 Motivations for undertaking this research

This research is motivated by my personal experience as someone whose family runs a private school providing elementary and secondary education for students from 7 to 18 years old in a county of Zhejiang province, Mainland China. In my case, my family has been the key factor influencing my career choice. Influenced by my family’s business, I have always been passionate about teaching, as getting students interested and even excited about what they are learning is something I value greatly.

Thus, I chose to be a teacher. I have trained as a high school Chinese language and literature teacher as an undergraduate, and I worked as an intern in a public school for one year, mainly in charge of planning, teaching, assessing and preparing students for the university entrance examination. The interaction I had with the students was a great experience, but I was under huge pressure in the examination-centred educational system. After one year working as a high school Chinese language and literature teacher, I, therefore, decided to develop myself personally by undertaking a Master’s course in leadership and management at a university in the UK – which was my parents’ suggestion. This learning experience expanded my knowledge and understanding of

pedagogies, but I also felt insecure as I had a negative feeling about lacking teaching experience. After completing my Master's degree in the UK, I worked in my parents' school. Meanwhile, I was given the opportunity to visit a variety of private schools (ranging from preschools to secondary schools) in Mainland China, which brought me to the starting point of my interest in early childhood education.

At that time, I faced new challenges. I could not easily apply my educational ideas in the examination-centred educational system, and I started to question 'what makes a school successful?' and 'what is good education?'. Hence, I decided to continue my studies in the UK, and this time the experience helped me find my strong interest in early childhood education. Also, my family had developed intentions to expand the business into the area of early childhood education, so they are supportive of my decision to do a PhD in this field. The decision to focus on the topic of learning through play has been taken for several reasons, one of which is my own joyful childhood experience that makes me deeply convinced of the benefits of play in improving children's development. As I mentioned before, I visited a variety of kindergartens in Mainland China, and many of them still appeared to adopt what I think of as the teacher-centred teaching approach, but call it 'learning through play' simply by adding some outdoor activities. I hope to help change this situation; I also wish to develop my own kindergarten in the future where children are allowed to enjoy play.

1.4 Research aims and questions

The main aim of this study is to explore how teachers understand and implement 'learning through play' in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore. Drawing on some social theories that include Foucauldian, Bakhtinian and Bourdieusian ideas, this research focuses on addressing four research questions:

1. How are key educational policies on 'learning through play' similar and different in the three related territories?
2. How do teachers working in four early educational settings enact educational policies on 'learning through play'?
3. How do teachers explain the meaning of 'learning through play'?

4. How do teachers account for their roles in teaching ‘learning through play’?

The four research questions were developed through reviews of literature relevant to this study (Chapters 2 & 3). The first question aims to understand the similarities and differences of key educational policies regarding ‘learning through play’ in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore which share similar Chinese cultural values but have unique social, cultural, economic and political contexts. The second question attempts to explore how teachers integrate play in children’s learning across those different social, cultural and political contexts. The third question attempts to probe teachers’ perspectives about the value and importance of play in children’s learning. The fourth question aims to explore teachers’ roles in children’s play and how teachers understand their role in children’s play. As I take up in the discussion chapter, with possible connection to Chen’s (2010) idea of ‘Asia as method’, and based on the analysis of the four research questions, I rearticulate the Western and Eastern notions of ‘learning through play’ and challenge the binary thinking about West versus East in pedagogical ideas and practices. In doing so, this research has the potential to advance alternative and multiple forms of pedagogical models and concepts in other early childhood education settings.

1.5 Contributions to research gaps and research significance

One of the gaps this study addresses is the existence of very few studies on learning through play in early childhood education in Singapore and Mainland China. Substantial research has explored the topic of learning through play in early childhood settings in Western countries (e.g. Bergen, 2014; Rogers, 2010, 2013; Rogers & Evans, 2008; Wood, 2014). There are also many studies focusing on this issue in Hong Kong (e.g. Lau, 2019; Lau & Cheng, 2010; Wu, 2014;). However, there are very few studies which have focused on Singapore (Chen, 2011) and Mainland China (Rao & Li, 2009).

Moreover, by cross-culturally comparing how teachers investigate learning through play, this study offers opportunities for practitioners to reflect on their regular practices. The cross-national case study also facilitates mutual understanding of cultural differences and similarities among nations and encourages rethinking of pedagogical concepts and

practices in other early childhood education settings. In particular, this study uses a range of social theories such as Foucauldian, Bakhtinian and Bourdieusian ideas to interrogate the practice of applying Western theoretical frameworks in childhood and educational studies in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore.

Furthermore, this research helps early childhood educators to rethink the notion of 'learning through play' and to reflect on their practices, as well as to identify teachers' needs for training programmes regarding 'learning through play'. Secondly, I would hope this study might inform policy makers to consider the practice of applying the relevant national and regional policies for teachers to implement play in classroom practice. Thirdly, this study not only enriches understanding of 'learning through play' but can also be shared with other East Asian countries as a reference point and possibly provides some alternatives to what have been perceived as Western pedagogical ideas and practices. Maybe one day, the 'glocalised' practice of Asian early childhood practice can provide inspiration for the 'globalised' world (Rao et al., 2017). Fourthly, as I discussed in Chapter 10, with possible connections, I suggest that this study challenges the binary thinking between Western and Eastern in educational philosophy and practice, acknowledging a system of 'multiple reference points' that has possible implications for the study of other early childhood education settings.

1.6 Definitions of terms

In this section, I provide brief definitions of some key terms used in this study to assist the reader in understanding the work.

Asia as method: this concept is popularised by a Taiwanese critical cultural studies scholar, Chen Kuan-Hsing. According to Chen (2010), the core meaning of Asia as method is 'an imaginary anchoring point, where societies in Asia can become each other's points of reference, so the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt' (p. 212). In this thesis, I conduct a particular version of cross-national case study looking at the four different cases with possible connection to Asia as method, to interrogate the practice of applying the Western notion of 'learning through play' in the context of early childhood settings in Mainland China, Hong Kong

and Singapore.

Inter-referencing: this term arises from Chen's (2010) work of Asia as method, suggesting societies in Asia and beyond learn from each other and by promoting inter-regional collaboration rather than looking to the West as the sole reference. This postcolonial strategy acknowledges a system of 'multiple reference points' (Chen, 2010, p. 212).

Critical syncretism: a cultural strategy which is used to understand how cultural elements, in their specific practice, combine to become others (Chen, 2010).

Anji Play: this term is adopted to refer to kindergartens using the Anji approach. Specifically, Anji Play indicates a type of free play (mainly based on outdoor activities), from which children are encouraged to self-determine when, where, how and with whom to play. Also, Anji Play and Anji approach are used interchangeably to describe the main teaching approach employed in Anji kindergartens.

Confucianism: this term is used to refer to the source of values and behaviours of the Chinese developed from the teachings of Confucius (551 BC–479 BC, Chinese philosopher) in ancient China. Confucius emphasised social rituals (li) and humaneness (ren), personal and public morality, kindness and justice.

Kindergarten: in this study, kindergarten is used to describe the main type of early childhood education centre for children aged from 3 to 6 years old. It is adopted to refer to preschool in Mainland China, the learning centre in Hong Kong and Singapore; thus, it is used to refer to all the early childhood settings in the three territories considered in this study.

Practitioner: this term is used to refer to kindergarten principals, vice-principals, curriculum deputies and kindergarten teachers in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore.

1.7 Structure of the thesis

This thesis consists of 11 chapters. Chapter 2 is the background, introducing policy and contextual information about early childhood education in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore. Chapter 3 focuses on a review of literature relevant to this study, and Chapter 4 concentrates on cross-cultural comparative case study employed in this research. Chapter 5 provides a detailed justification of the methodological issues. Chapters 6, 7, 8 and 9 comprise the analysis chapters arising from the empirical research conducted for this thesis, and chapter 10 focuses on presenting explicit answers to the research questions. Finally, Chapter 11 draws the thesis to a conclusion, highlighting its knowledge contributions, as well as implications, limitations and recommendations. I now move to provide a summary of each chapter below.

Chapter 2 presents an overview of early childhood education in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore while highlighting some of the current and key policies and reforms regarding ‘learning through play’.

Chapter 3 reviews academic literature relevant to play. Guided by four research questions, this chapter will review the literature and theoretical base pertaining to the five key elements in this study. Firstly, it starts by introducing the different ways play has been defined. Next, it critiques the idea that play has been valued as natural and universal, highlighting the importance of considering elements such as social status, gender, race and age, as well as culture and history. The next section discusses different ways of integrating play in pedagogy. Finally, teachers’ understanding of play and the role of teachers in children’s play across different social and cultural contexts are reviewed.

Chapter 4 presents the study as a comparative case study across the three territories and four settings using the three social theories of learning (Bakhtin, Foucault, Bourdieu) as the main analytical framework. Firstly, it introduces several reasons why Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore were chosen as sites of comparison. Secondly, A justification for using the key concepts of double voicing, power and discipline, cultural capital, is provided in this study. I argued that the social theories of Bakhtin, Foucault,

Bourdieu could be helpful for understanding how teachers understand and implement ‘learning through play’ in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore.

Chapter 5 provides a detailed justification of the methodological orientation of my study. It discusses the research design which consists of an explanation for the choice of a qualitative research methodology and the rationale for the selection of a descriptive case study design. The main research methods used in this study are discussed, including interviews, observations and regional and site-specific key policy documents in the context of four early childhood education settings – two in Mainland China, and one in Hong Kong and one in Singapore. It provides a description of the sampling size and recruitment of participants, the methods and the procedures for analysis, as well as the quality of the research and ethical considerations. Finally, this chapter elaborates on my personal reflections on the research.

Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9 are the analysis chapters, providing a discourse analysis of the participants’ interviews, observations and policy documents drawing on Foucauldian, Bakhtinian and Bourdieusian ideas. The analysis in each chapter focuses on one setting. In chapter 6, my analysis concentrates on how participant-teachers at Anji Jiguan Kindergarten understand and implement ‘learning through play’. This chapter draws on Bakhtin’s (1981) double-voicing theory and a culture-specific reference to Confucian culture to understand the main characteristics of the Anji approach, as well as using Foucault’s (1995) ‘docile bodies’ theory to explicitly indicate how teachers play the role of an observer. To illustrate this, I analyse in detail a slogan ‘close your mouth, control your hands, open your eyes and prick up your ears’ - mobilised by the teachers there. By doing so, my analysis implies that the practice of the Anji approach by the participant-teachers (at Anji Jiguan Kindergarten) appears to work as a contextualisation pedagogy integrating local cultures and histories to its pedagogical ideas and practice, as well as coexisting with Western theories.

While Anji Play may be a singular example of early educational provision in Mainland China which centres on the notion of child-centredness and ‘learning through play’, the situation elsewhere in Mainland China has historically been rather different. In chapter 7, my analysis focuses on another setting (that I call here Spring Kindergarten) in Mainland

China. Drawing on Foucault's (1995) discussion of disciplinary power as enacted through several techniques such as examination, surveillance, assessment, and ranking, along with Davies and Harré's (1990) positioning theory, this chapter explores how participant practitioners exercise power and how they take specific positions to address how they account for their practices of 'learning through play'. Through analysis of the accounts of the participants, Spring Kindergarten appears to be in the process of making the change from moving from teacher-centred pedagogy towards child-centred pedagogy. My analysis suggests a view of learning as indicated by measurable results while play appears to be considered as relaxing children's minds or reinforcing knowledge.

Chapter 8 moves to the setting (here called Happy Lemon Kindergarten) in Hong Kong. This chapter attempts to explore how participant practitioners employ a child-centred approach as a scaffolding technique to facilitate children's learning. By using Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital, it discusses how participant practitioners account for and mobilise school-family-community collaboration to facilitate children's learning. Also, I analyse teachers' accounts of how they translate the Western notion of child-centred pedagogy into the Hong Kong context.

Chapter 9 adds the final case (Singapore, here called Green Apple Centre) to the analysis. Based on Foucault's (1995) discussion of power, this chapter aims to explore how power operates when employing 'purposeful play', particularly in the process of children's school transition from kindergarten to Primary One. Analysis of participants' accounts appears to indicate that 'purposeful play' functions as a perceived medium to achieve intended learning outcomes.

Chapter 10 brings together the main analysis presented in Chapters 6, 7, 8, and 9 with regard to the cross-national comparison of learning through play across three territories, and made the case for how this cross-national comparative case study would benefit from being interpreted through the analytic lens of Chen's (2010) Asia as method. This cross-national analysis extends the traditional comparative methodology, allowing societies in and beyond Asia to learn from each other rather than looking at the western theories as the dominant reference point.

Chapter 11, the conclusion chapter, summarises the key points arising from the analysis of the four research questions, and then discusses the contributions to knowledge that this thesis puts forward. The discussion in this chapter draws on empirical research generated from these three different, but crucially related, Asian contexts - Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore - to contribute to an enriched understanding of the theories and practices of what 'learning through play' can mean in these Asian contexts, which may have consequences and relationships for the study of other early childhood education settings. This chapter also provides an account of how the analysis adds to the existing literature of education and childhood studies. It then moves to describe the implications and limitations of the research.

Chapter 2: Situating learning through play in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore: policy and context

2.1 Chapter introduction

The overall purpose of this chapter is to explore relevant literature on the landscape of ‘learning through play’ in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore. Since this study aims to explore how kindergarten teachers understand and implement ‘learning through play’, it is necessary to provide historical background and recent developments about the context of early childhood education in the above-mentioned three territories.

2.2 ECE in Mainland China

Mainland China, officially known as the People’s Republic of China, is located in East Asia. As the most populated country in the world, having a population of over 1.37 billion (China Statistical Yearbook, 2020), Mainland China has experienced substantial social, economic and educational changes in the decades since the 1980s (Yang & Li, 2019). Under the influence of the ‘reform and opening-up’ policy initiated in 1978, early childhood education (ECE) has also undergone rapid transformations, shifting its operation from solely governmental bodies to private groups or individuals (Yang & Li, 2019). In Mainland China, services for early childhood education (0 to 6 years) are provided by nurseries catering to children ages 0–6, but are gradually being replaced for older children by commercial services and subsidised kindergartens (full-day) serving children between 3 and 6 years of age (Hong & Chen, 2017). There are three main types of kindergarten: public, funded by the government; private, set up by individuals; and international, found in major urban cities catering for the children of international workers or upper-middle-class families (Feng, 2017).

2.2.1 The historical context of early childhood education

Early childhood education (ECE) in Mainland China emerged when the first kindergarten was set up in 1903 in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei Province (Li & Chen, 2017; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). In the initial years, the ECE curriculum and instruction were

strongly influenced by Japanese culture because China considered Japan as a successful model to learn and follow and directly imported kindergarten teachers from Japan or provided training by Japanese educators (Li et al., 2016). During the same period, large numbers of church kindergartens were established by Western missionaries, using the religious curriculum and bringing about a Western perspective (Li & Chen, 2017). These early kindergartens primarily provided for rich families, and it was later that the preschool service was available to children from working-class families (Li & Chen, 2017). Moreover, the 'May Fourth Movement' or 'New Culture movement' reform in 1919 called for the rejection of traditional Chinese culture and adoption of Western theories of 'Mr Science' and 'Mr Democracy', transitioning from preschool education catering for the wealthy to serving working-class families (Feng, 2017). Therefore, during the 1920s to 1930s, under the impact of the 'New Culture Movement', China imported curriculum models from many countries including Japan, the US (Dewey), Germany (Froebel) and Italy (Montessori) (Zhu, 2009). For example, pioneers such as Zhang Zong-lin and Chen He-qin set up the Gulou Kindergarten in 1923 in Nanjing, developing a culturally appropriate curriculum (focusing on children's learning experiences, daily life and activities) within the Chinese context, which was strongly based on Dewey's democratic model of a child-centred, play-centred and life-centred learning experience educational philosophy (Zhu, 2009). Following the initial period, ECE provision changed with developments in Chinese society.

After the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, a rapid expansion of kindergartens was established to provide childcare services for working parents (Feng, 2017). During the 1950s-1960s, the new socialist government abandoned all of the other curricula, including Dewey's educational theories that were criticised for only serving capitalist political ideas not suitable for socialist countries, Montessori curriculum, and unit-based integrated curriculum that was created by pioneers Chen and Zhang who were also considered as inappropriate for the new government (Li & Chen, 2017). Then, the government adopted a subject-based curriculum that was deemed as the 'only politically correct curriculum in the world', with an emphasis on subject learning, knowledge and skills acquisition and classroom teaching, imported from its socialist partner as well as role model, the Soviet Union (Li, 2009). A tumultuous period – the Cultural Revolution - between 1966 and 1976 is regarded as the 'dark age' of ECE in

China (Li & Chen, 2017). Kindergartens were closed down and children were sent home with no opportunities for early education, and qualified teachers were sent to rural or remote areas for re-education through labour (Li, 2009). Following this period, the conditions for ECE improved.

Since the introduction of the 'reform and opening-up' policy in 1978, the provision of early childhood education, which had suffered during the Cultural Revolution, was also recovering and entered a new historical period (Hong & Chen, 2017). From the 1980s, a series of educational theories such as those of Dewey, Froebel, Montessori, Bronfenbrenner, Bruner, Piaget and Vygotsky and curriculum approaches such as thematic approach, High-Scope curriculum, Reggio Emilia and the project approach began to resurface and spread widely in China (Zhu & Zhang, 2008). At the same time, a considerable number of recommendations, regulations, and guidelines were issued to better support the development of ECE in China. For example, in 1982, the Ministry of Education released Guidelines on Kindergarten Education, encouraging kindergarten teachers to adopt the subject-based curriculum using a teacher-directed approach (Zhu & Zhang, 2008). However, ECE in China has been influenced by Western culture since it implemented the 'reform and opening-up' policy, which resulted in the inappropriateness of subject-based curriculum model in the context of the rapid development of Chinese society (Li & Chen, 2017).

The 1990s marked a turning point in the development of ECE in China. The most influential policies included *Regulations on Kindergarten Education Practice [Trial Version]* in 1989 which was revised in 1996 and *Guidelines for Kindergarten Education Practice [Trial Version]* in 2001; both of these were issued by the National Education Committee (Hu & Li, 2012). According to Zhu (2009), these regulations serve as crucial milestones to inspire early childhood education to face the world, the future and modernisation. Liu and Feng (2005) point out that, this wave of ECE reform in Mainland China has brought about three main changes: (1) respecting children, (2) active learning and (3) play-based teaching and learning. Unfortunately, these changes are not compatible with traditional Chinese values which emphasise conformity, respecting the authority and child discipline (Li et al., 2011). For instance, traditional Chinese teaching and learning focus on training, knowledge acquisition through

memorisation, the children's efforts and academic achievements which are contrary to the goals of the regulations (Education Bureau, 1989, 1996, 2001) that focus on children's individual interest and their freedom, as well as child-initiated and process-oriented activities (Sun & Rao, 2017).

There were problems in the implementation of these regulations. The new regulations lacked information on practical guidelines and systematic teacher training, which resulted in kindergarten teachers becoming confused about when they were required to respect children as these teachers were deeply influenced by the supposed embedded characteristic of Chinese society, that of obeying authority (Li et al., 2011). Also, during the period of 1990s, many public kindergartens which were sponsored by the Chinese government transformed into market-driven and self-funded private kindergartens under the influence of a government push for privatisation and marketisation which led to a lack of education budget in the context of a market economy system (Li, et.al., 2016). Consequently, public kindergartens were placed in a very disadvantaged situation (Li & Wang, 2008; Zhu & Wang 2005).

2.2.2 ECE policy and practice in current Mainland China

Since 2010, the Chinese government realised the importance of keeping a balance between the public and private kindergartens in ECE (Li et al., 2016). In July 2010, the Chinese government launched a landmark policy, *National Medium- and Long- Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010–2020)* (Ministry of Education, 2010) to improve ECE provision. The plan aims to achieve one year of universal ECE in all regions, and most children having better access to two years of universal ECE and three years of ECE being accessible for children in developed areas by 2020 (Zhou et al., 2017). It particularly focuses on the development of rural regions, and to facilitate the government to be responsible for ECE development with associated increased funding for ECE (Zhou et al., 2017). In order to implement the national plans, the China State Council (2010) launched *Issues Regarding Current Development of Early Childhood Education*, with an emphasis on expanding multiple channels to invest in ECE and suggesting four major strategies (1) raising the governmental financial budget; (2) building a funding system; (3) sponsoring preschool services for children from

disadvantaged facilities, and (4) paying particular attention to the development of ECE in rural and western areas (Li et al., 2016).

Although progress has been made by implementing the two important policies in the twenty-first century, commentators suggest that there are still many challenges and problems. These include issues related to children's enrolment in kindergartens such as affordability, accessibility, and accountability of early childhood education (Li & Wang, 2017), a lack of funding mechanisms and scientific monitoring system, urban-rural inequality in the provision of preschool service, the cultural appropriateness and localisation of imported curriculum and some influential policy changes such as the new two-child policy and its influence on ECE (Li et al., 2016). For example, in terms of the cultural appropriateness issue, scholars have argued that Chinese ECE did not take 'Chinese cultural context' into full consideration when borrowing the curriculum from the West (Zhu, 2009; Zhu & Zhang 2008). Their argument is in line with Tobin et al.'s (2009) claim that the Chinese ECE quality standards borrowed from the West, as well as having been constructed by Western culture, are questionable.

Chinese kindergarten teachers' beliefs about the imported curriculum and observed practices in implementation have been investigated to be remarkably in conflict with each other (Li et al., 2011; Li et al, 2012). For instance, Li et al. (2011) examine how curricula and pedagogies based on Western ideas are embedded in three Chinese cities, Shenzhen, Hong Kong, and Singapore, and they find that whole classes are dominated by teacher-directed instruction, and teacher-centred and knowledge-oriented instruction are still observed to be the prevalent teaching approach in many kindergartens (Li et al., 2011; Tan & Rao, 2017). Researchers have identified six factors causing the difficulties in implementing Western educational programmes: unfavourable teacher-child ratio, low teacher quality, limited school resources, parents' high academic expectations, examination-centred educational philosophy, and Confucian traditional culture of respect for authority and teachers (Zhu & Zhang, 2008). There are thus tensions in Chinese contexts with importing Western models.

As discussed earlier, in the past century, the early childhood curriculum in China has been learning from leading countries such as Japan, the Soviet Union, the United States,

and other Western countries. Accordingly, Chinese scholars have tried to tailor these imported curricula to suit China's own early childhood educational needs rather than keeping the original version due to the contradictory ideologies and values between Western and Chinese curricula that resulted in tensions when introducing the imported programme to Chinese context (Li et al., 2012; Li & Wang, 2017).

Regarding implementing curricula borrowed from other national contexts, localisation refers to overcoming the aforementioned six barriers. To be more specific, firstly, there is a low teacher-child ratio in Chinese kindergartens. Zhang and Liu (2017) point out that the teacher-child ratios range from 1:16 to 1:19 in urban cities while the ratio in rural areas is 1:51, which would affect the quality of teacher-child interactions. Secondly, there is a disconnect between teachers' needs and the contents of training provided, such as teachers' professional training not being closely related with their understandings of the teacher-directed approach and children's learning characteristics (Wang et al., 2008). Thirdly, limited resources are provided to implement overseas curricula such as the Project Approach and Reggio Emilia pedagogy. Yang and Li (2019) propose to use local resources or create the curriculum materials as a way of implementing these overseas approaches by replacing required considerable educational resources. Fourthly and fifthly, due to the academic pressure passed down from formal schooling to kindergarten education, parents may have high expectations for their children's academic achievements and would ask for academic teaching in their early years, which directly leads to teachers' tendency to focus on knowledge and skills acquisition through direct instruction (Liu & Elicker, 2005; Rao & Li, 2009). Lastly, in relation to parental high academic expectations and the academic-centred educational system, there is the influence of the cultural norms that children should be well-behaved and their learning should be attached to discipline (Li et al., 2011).

In order to overcome all these barriers, based on the empirical findings from a series of in-depth case studies, Yang and Li (2019) come up with a four-step cycle of imitation, absorption, integration, and evaluation (questioning the original practice, understanding the new model, implementing the new model, and adjusting the new model within an expansive learning cycle) to localise curricula imported from other countries in a Chinese context. This experience of Chinese ECE may provide alternative forms of

pedagogical models for other countries who are also struggling with the integration of Western ideas and engaging in local cultural elements. I now move to describe two Chinese successful models of curricula which both have a culturally-embedded nature.

From global trends to local practices, Chinese early childhood educators not only tend to develop culturally appropriate curricula but also rely on their existing experience to create China's own unique curricula. For example, Anji Play originates from Anji County, China, with over 14,000 children aged from 3 to 6 years old in 130 public kindergartens in Anji County, and it is the internationally-recognised philosophy and approach that encourages children to play with love, risk, joy, engagement and reflection and the participation of their families and communities in an open-ended environment with carefully designed materials (Anji Play, 2020). Anji play advocates 'true play'¹ that considers play as the child's primary experience of learning, and the role of the teacher is to provide materials and environment for children to freely explore and reflect on their experiences, as well as to step back and observe with curiosity and critical reflective thinking in relation to the children's development (Anji Play, 2020). In addition to play, symbolic drawing and storytelling are used as the supplementary path to the development of children's learning and inquiry (Coffino & Bailey, 2019).

A second culturally adapted or culturally localised version can be seen in the Lijin game, which emerges from Lijin County, China, consisting of joyful outdoor play and traditional play integrated with Chinese folk culture that is designed based on children's age appropriateness and interest, such as the dragon dance, walking on stilts, and the bamboo trap dance (Lijin County Council, 2018). In the Lijin game, children are encouraged to both engage in structured play with the teachers' guidance and unstructured play directed by themselves (Lijin County Council, 2018). Different from Anji play, the role of the teacher in Lijin is more like a playmate, they initiate the play by introducing the rule of the game and ways of using the materials and then let children direct the activity (Lijin County Council, 2018). These local early childhood curricula begin to explore ways of meeting the developmental needs of Chinese children. Such pedagogical models indicate the ways traditional Chinese cultures integrate into the

¹ True play is deeply engaged in the activity of one's own choice; true play is most frequently characterised by observable experiences of risk, joy and deep engagement (AnjiPlay, 2020).

pedagogical ideas and practices, which has the potential to advance alternative and multiple forms of pedagogical models and concepts in other early childhood education settings.

2.3 Overview of ECE in Hong Kong

Hong Kong is a special administrative region in the southeast of China with over 7.4 million citizens comprising 92% Chinese and a large number of Filipinos and Indonesians in the remaining 8% population; it is one of the most densely populated places in the world, with 6,300 people per square kilometre (Census and Statistics Department, 2020). In Hong Kong, early childhood education relates to the education of children from birth to 6 years old, and the term ‘kindergarten education’ is used to refer to services for children aged from 3 to 6 years old. These services may be provided by kindergartens normally offering half-day programmes, child-care centres and kindergarten-cum-child-care centres normally offering full-day programmes (Ng et al., 2017). There are three levels of kindergarten class: nursery (K1, 3–4 years old), lower kindergarten (K2, 4–5 years old) and upper kindergarten (K3, 5–6 years old) (Education Bureau, 2020). Unlike Mainland China, all these kindergartens are privately run by individuals, private enterprises or non-governmental organisations (Li et al., 2010). They are classified into charitable or non-profit-making kindergartens (NPMKs) and profitable private independent kindergartens (PIKs) (Yang et al., 2017). The majority of kindergartens are NPMKs which are permitted to have less than 5% net profit and this should be used for future development, and PIKs, which make up about 20% – 30% of all kindergartens, are allowed to make 10% net profit which could be paid out to investors (Yang et al., 2017).

2.3.1 Development of ECE in Hong Kong

Early childhood education in Hong Kong emerged in the early twentieth century when there were very limited ECE services provided by private or religious organisations to middle-class families, and then expanded after the Second World War due to the influx of a large number of refugees from the Mainland in the 1940s and 1950s (Opper, 1993). The government took a laissez-faire attitude toward early childhood education, limiting

the scope of support and reflecting a non-interventionist approach (Pearson & Rao, 2006), and thus neglected its development. Hong Kong has been governed by the British Government for 150 years until the handover to China in 1997, the city retaining its original political-societal system under the ‘one country, two systems’ principle. In response to rapid changes and new challenges, the Hong Kong government moved from its laissez-faire approach to an interventionist approach in early childhood policy (Pearson & Rao, 2006).

Since the 1980s, the Hong Kong government has publicly taken responsibility for early childhood education, which can be seen in several reports. For example, ‘learning through play’ was first introduced to the early childhood education of Hong Kong through the Visiting panel of Llewellyn² in 1982. The government’s Education Commission report in 1986 adopted play as a central learning and teaching pedagogy for ECE (Faas, et al., 2017). In the 1980s, the early childhood curriculum was a blend of Eastern and Western cultures, incorporating Euro-American pedagogy such as the thematic approach and the project approach, which are the dominant approaches in many kindergartens until recently (Faas et al., 2017). However, in practice, themes are commonly selected by kindergartens or teachers, and not based on children’s interests and experiences. For example, Rao (2002) finds that the project approach is used in a teacher-centred rather than child-centred way when she investigates how this approach is applied in the Hong Kong context, and this is echoed by Ho (2015) when she explores four Hong Kong kindergarten teachers’ perspectives and practices concerning using the thematic and the project approach and finds that kindergarten teachers focus on classroom discipline and children’s learning of academic skills rather than children’s emerging interest when adopting these two approaches. Thus, even under the influence of Western culture, early childhood education in Hong Kong still emphasises traditional didactic approaches to teaching and learning. In response to the perceived need to change the problem of direct academic teaching in many kindergartens, the government published a list of ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’ to encourage a child-centred approach in 1999 (Yang & Li, 2019). Specifically, the list requires teachers to ‘adopt different teaching approaches and organise various child-centred learning activities’ (Education Bureau,

² The Visiting Panel of Llewellyn is an education report which indicates that many kindergartens still adopted teacher-centred pedagogy using rote learning and advocates a new form of teaching - learning through play.

2019). Among the ‘don’ts’, it instructed teachers not to adopt a unidirectional lecturing form of teaching and not to ask children to do mechanical copying exercises (Education Bureau, 2019). These ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’ reflect concerns about inappropriate curriculum and pedagogies for teaching young children.

A child-centred approach was advocated in the first version of the *Guide to the Pre-Primary Curriculum* (Curriculum Development Council, 1996) in response to global educational developments. The 2006 version of the Guide to the Pre-Primary Curriculum also referred to Western ideas, putting more emphasis on a child-centred approach, particularly the change of teachers’ didactic teaching role to various other roles such as observers, providers and facilitators (Curriculum Development Council, 2006). The most up-to-date version, which was issued in 2017, further emphasised child-centredness, highlighting joyful learning through play (Curriculum Development Council, 2017). Although the educational policies of 1982, 1986, 1996, 2006 and 2017 have advocated a ‘learning through play’ approach, there has been a discrepancy between policy and practice (Faas et al., 2017). Moreover, the government’s Quality Assurance Inspection Annual Reports from 2000 to 2007 pointed out that rote learning, drill and practice³ Chinese and English words were often performed in the classroom (Lau & Cheng, 2010).

2.3.2 The challenges of applying ‘learning through play’ into practice

As presented previously, ECE in Hong Kong has experienced three phases including importing and adopting American-European curricula and approaches (1997–2006), adapting imported pedagogies (2006–2017), and promoting and developing the integrated curricula (2017 to the present) (Li, 2006). Western pedagogies such as the Montessori Method, the Project Approach, Reggio Emilia and High Scope are based on ideas like democracy and freedom which are widely introduced, adopted, and transplanted in local contexts without much consideration of questions of sociocultural appropriateness (Yang & Li, 2019). For example, traditional Chinese culture has not connected play with learning. The Chinese proverb ‘a good command of knowledge

³ The term - drill and practice - is an instructional strategy characterised by systematic repetition of concepts and examples to learn or become proficient.

comes from diligence but ends with playing around' is deeply embedded in Chinese education (Wu & Rao, 2011). Hence, the implementation of 'learning through play' is extremely difficult due to Confucian values emphasising academic achievement and diligence in academic learning. In these values, hard work was valued and play was considered as worthless.

Research on the implementation of Western approaches which have an emphasis on child-centredness and 'learning through play' consistently shows there is a tension between policy and practice. This has been attributed to difficulties in teachers' understandings of 'learning through play', as well as factors like parental expectations, school transition, individual school philosophy, market forces and Eastern and Western cultural conflicts (Li, 2010; Ng et al., 2017; Rao et al., 2013). In such a market-driven society, kindergartens in Hong Kong need to meet parents' expectations of academic preparation for Primary One (Wong & Rao, 2015). For example, Yuen and Grieshaber (2009) find that Hong Kong parents, despite their income and educational backgrounds, want their children to have a happy learning experience, but they also struggle to accept a less academic-oriented curriculum for their children. Moreover, Yuen and Grieshaber (2009) also point out that parents expect their children to start learning English, a language of 'superiority, power, and success' (Tse et al. 2007, p. 135) and Mandarin, a language that grows increasingly important because Singapore is a Chinese-dominated society (70% of its population identified as Chinese) (Li & Rao, 2000). In order to cater for parental expectations, kindergartens feel the need to prepare children's transition to primary school, sometimes even delivering a watered-down version of the primary school curriculum; thus, children are commonly assigned to completing exercises in copying Chinese characters and English letters, and counting (Fung, 2009). In addition, Li (2003) finds that, under the influence of global trends, preschool teachers acknowledge the ideas of 'learning through play' and the importance of children's learning experience, but they could not put them into practice. Therefore, even though kindergarten teachers may realise the importance of play, they still struggle to implement 'learning through play' into practice because they need to consider parents' needs (Wu, 2014).

2.3.3 Innovations of early childhood curriculum

Researchers have pointed out that the problems facing ECE in Hong Kong include exclusion from the main education system, inadequate subsidies, low teacher qualifications, lack of attention to the transition from preschool to primary school (Chun, 2003; Ebbeck & Chan, 2011; Yim, 2018). To address these issues, the Hong Kong government has taken a very active role in enhancing the quality of ECE, such as issuing curriculum guidance based on a scientific quality assurance mechanism and investing heavily in kindergarten teachers' professional development to overcome the challenges (Lau & Rao, 2018). Moreover, in 2015, the government released a policy instituting free kindergarten education (Education Bureau, 2015). This policy makes concrete recommendations regarding the vision, mission, objectives and scope of early childhood education, enhancement of the quality of kindergarten and teachers, and funding for a certain type of kindergartens (Ng et al., 2017). The increased official attention and investment break down the 'one-sided power game between kindergartens and parents' as proposed by Fung and Lam (2008, p. 163) because the government is now becoming a new player and trying to find a balance between educational policy and market forces (Wong & Rao, 2015).

Hong Kong is a distinctive blend of East and West. Western educational ideas were introduced under British colonisation, while it also has a Confucian cultural heritage with more than 90% of its residents being Chinese. 'Learning through play' is suggested as the model for teaching and learning while the traditional Chinese values highlighting drill and practice are prominent in early childhood settings (Wong & Li, 2010). In addition, as I discussed before, the Hong Kong government has been searching for ways to incorporate the Western pedagogies into local practices since the release of education reform in 2000. Against this background, Ng et al. (2017) put forward the idea that developing culturally relevant practices is a way to successfully adopt western early childhood teaching approaches. In order to teach effectively under the influence of Western ideas, Li (2004) suggests that teachers should deal with conflicts in their beliefs about early childhood education, Chinese culture and local constraints. This is also echoed by Lee and Tsang (2005) when they document how the Reggio Emilia approach is adopted in Hong Kong to fit the local needs and they recommend that kindergartens

should provide teachers with specific training and enough resources. In addition, Rao and Li (2009) term a Chinese-style play-based education as ‘Eduplay’ (play-based education with an academic purpose) that explains the relationship between play and learning in Chinese kindergartens, which could be used to capture the emphasis on Chinese teachers’ pedagogical practices.

A Story Approach to Integrated Learning (SAIL) is created in the Hong Kong context and serves as a culturally appropriate curriculum for its local kindergartens (Yang & Li, 2019). SAIL is a teaching approach which uses stories as a platform for developing a series of learning areas such as music and drama, language and literacy, mathematics and science, and social and emotional subjects; this approach helps children smoothen the transition from kindergarten to primary education (Li & Chau, 2010). Regarding using SAIL as the curriculum approach, there are four steps including storytelling, theme exploration, extension activities and portfolio assessment with the shared story reading and children’s hands-on experiences being valued (Li, 2007). Yang and Li (2019) conclude that SAIL is a curriculum which takes Chinese culture into consideration and balances the relationship between teacher-directedness and child-centredness. The literature indicates that although the Western notion of ‘learning through play’ is adopted in Hong Kong early childhood education, there are barriers (local tensions and constraints) in implementing this approach. To overcome these barriers, Hong Kong engages in understanding how its indigenous culture combines with Western pedagogical ideas and practices to create possible pedagogical models.

2.4 ECE Provision in Singapore

Singapore is located in Southeast Asia and has a population of over 5.7 million, the majority of which is Chinese (76.2 %), and also comprises minorities: 15 % Malay, 7.4% Indian, and the remaining 1.4% being other ethnic groups (Department of Statistics, 2019). Singapore has always been regarded as a stable, cosmopolitan, multicultural and multilingual society since its independence in 1965 (Jing, 2017). Without any natural resources other than its people, the Singaporean government depends on an educated and skilled workforce to drive a rapidly expanding economy (Lim & Lim, 2017). With the national priority viewing education as an economic strategy, the government aims to

provide a high-quality ECE. In Singapore, the child-care centres that cater for children aged between 18 months and 6 years and kindergartens that offer half-day programmes for 3-to-6-year-olds make up the preschool education, and child-care centres and kindergartens are operated by both private and public entities ranging from business organizations, social organizations, community foundations, religious bodies to the government (Ang, 2006, 2014; Jing, 2017). In addition, both child-care centres and kindergartens provide a 3-year preschool education programme for different age groups with nursery classes for 4-year-old children, kindergarten one classes for 5-year-olds and kindergarten two classes for six-year-olds (Ang, 2014; Jing, 2017).

2.4.1 Development of ECE in Singapore

In the context of globalisation in the new millennium, with increasing challenges and competition driving the provision of children with high quality of ECE, the Singapore government is actively engaged in this globally prevailing trend in various initiatives which focus on defining desired outcomes, developing a curriculum framework, setting up new standards for ECE teachers, establishing teacher training programmes and enhancing school readiness for disadvantaged children (Lim & Lim, 2017). In 2000, the Education Ministry advocated a list of Desired Outcomes of Pre-school Education to ensure a smooth transition from preschool education into early primary school years, such as knowing what is right and what is wrong, being willing to share and taking turns with others and loving their family, friends, teachers (MOE, 2000). According to Ting (2007), these Desired Outcomes not only emphasise basic competencies in reading and writing but also stress children's social and emotional competence, while Lim and Lim (2017) point out that the list of Desired Outcomes is partially affected by Confucian philosophy, in which the core value is to cultivate the person, regulate the family, govern the state, and create peace in the World' (Ke, 2015). From the Confucian perspective, the purpose of becoming a morally ideal person is to conduct self-cultivation, investing things, extending knowledge, developing sincere thoughts and loving one's fellow beings (Ke, 2015). In 2003, the MOE issued a curriculum framework, 'Nurturing Early Learners: A Framework for Kindergarten Curriculum in Singapore,' and encouraged its use as a national recommendation rather than a standardised curriculum for preschools (Choo, 2010; Lim & Lim, 2017). This curriculum framework is based on the theory that

children are active learners who learn through play, and that the role of the teacher is to facilitate their learning through play (Ebbeck & Chan, 2011). It advocates a holistic and play-based approach to children's development and learning, as well as highlights six core early childhood education principles (MOE, 2003) which include holistic development and learning, integrated learning, active learning, supported learning, learning through interactions, and learning through play. Furthermore, the principles are accompanied by a set of six practices to empower practitioners to provide age-appropriate learning activities and encourage a positive learning climate, which is supposed to equip early years practitioners with pedagogical knowledge and skills to implement and work towards the principles (Tan, 2017).

From 2005 to 2010, the MOE published a set of supplementary resources to complement the Nurturing Early Learners (NEL) framework. For example, these documents encourage preschools to design a play-based curriculum with an emphasis on child-centredness, and at the same time, the ambiguity of these resources let preschools retain their previous curricula that either is more focused on a play-based approach or on academic work in order to meet parents' expectations as the existence of private preschools largely depend on enrolment numbers (Lim & Lim, 2017; Tan, 2017). In 2012, the MOE launched a revised Nurturing Early Learners: A Curriculum Framework for Kindergartens in Singapore, catering for children aged 4 to 6 years, maintaining its broad guidelines for a holistic and integrated play-based approach to ECE with clear statements about beliefs of how children learn and the learning outcomes (Tan, 2017). Specifically, the refreshed version of the NEL Framework is underpinned by the core belief that children are curious, active and competent learners; it provides more details on the role of the teacher in facilitating a purposeful play pedagogy and extending six learning areas including aesthetics and creative expression, environmental awareness, language and literacy, motor skills development, numeracy, and self and social awareness to outline a list of learning goals which children are expected to achieve in each area (Gupta, 2017; Tan, 2017). The 2012 NEL framework is also accompanied by seven volumes that make up an educators' guide, elaborating on the pedagogical principles and practices recommended in the revised NEL Framework (Gupta, 2017).

2.4.2 Issues related to the development of ECE

Like Mainland China and Hong Kong whose governments have imported and adopted Western curriculum approaches and pedagogical practices, issues have been raised regarding the cultural conflicts arising from educational ideologies and cultural norms embedded in Western and Eastern traditions (Ebbeck & Gokhale, 2004; Lee & Tseng, 2008; Li et al. 2011). Singapore faces these challenges when adopting the play-based and child-centred approaches recommended in the NEL framework (Li et al., 2011). It is reported that preschool teachers find it difficult to apply these pedagogical approaches and curriculum guidelines into practice, while parents seem still driven by the examination-orientated culture (Ang, 2006, 2017; Lim, 2017). For example, Ng (2011) conducts observations and interviews with five Singaporean kindergarten teachers, and her study indicates that instead of using the play-based approach, the majority of the activities are still organised by a direct instruction teaching approach with a rigid and structured timetable emphasising on children's academic achievements. Similarly, Li et al (2012) find that a teacher-directed approach is still predominant in Singaporean preschools when teaching Chinese literacy.

Due to Singapore's high stakes-examination system in compulsory education, both preschool teachers and parents focus on academic skills during preschool years (Lim-Ratnam, 2013). This is also echoed by Choy and Karuppiah (2016) whose research on the transition from preschool to primary school finds that both preschool teachers and primary school teachers rank academic skills as the most important thing for children starting formal school. That is to say, Singaporean parents view the major goal of preschool education is to prepare their children to succeed in a bilingual and academically rigorous school system (Sharpe, 2000), and at the same time, many families expect preschools to prepare their children for primary school and are willing to pay high fees for a preschool programme focused on readiness for formal schooling (Ng, 2014).

In contrast to the majority, there is a group of parents demanding creative and innovative approaches rather than traditional worksheets of academic learning. In particular, they want their children to have the freedom to play rather than engage in academically

rigorous programmes, so these parents will choose international kindergartens such as Montessori, Froebel, Waldorf-Steiner, and Reggio Emilia (Lim & Lim, 2017). This phenomenon has also occurred in Mainland China and Hong Kong, where advantaged families, who can afford expensive fees, choose to send their children to international kindergartens which use Western curriculum focusing on child-centredness and ‘learning through play’; usually the children graduating from international kindergartens attend primary schools and secondary schools which have less academically rigorous programmes (Ng et al., 2017).

In terms of dealing with cultural conflicts, the Singapore government has released an educational policy which covers key areas of ECE consisting of curriculum, pedagogy, teacher qualification, and accessibility, affordability, accountability, sustainability (Jing, 2017). Lim and Lim (2017) find that the government believes ECE provision serves a competitive and meritocratic system in Singapore, and it aims to provide preschool service that is accessible to all families, particularly those in the lower-income families. For example, the government has heavily invested in education, spending about 3.5 % of the annual GDP in the last decade (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2019), and issued a universal childcare subsidy for all families and especially the additional Centre-based Financial Assistance Scheme for Childcare (CFAC) that is particularly for low-income facilities (Lim & Lim, 2017).

Under such strong education investment, Singapore has consistently been ranked top or is among the top-ranking countries in international assessments for academic achievements such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Jing, 2017). In sum, early childhood education in Singapore is a hybrid of Western and Eastern cultures, which encounters resistance inherent in traditions and requires dealing with local constraints.

2.5 Chapter summary

Chapter 2 discussed the context and relevant policy informing early years education and play in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore, while highlighting some of the

current and key reforms and policies regarding ‘learning through play’. In addition, the chapter indicated how the three territories share a similar educational culture. However, in term of adopting and adapting the pedagogical approach of ‘learning through play’, Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore have significant yet different legacies of Confucianism. These differences offer a unique and interesting context for me to carry out a cross-national study in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore. In the next chapter, I move on to review and evaluate the literature on play and the relationship between play and early childhood education to better understand the focus of the current study - teachers’ understanding and implementation of ‘learning through play’ in early childhood education settings.

Chapter 3: Understanding learning through play

3.1 Chapter introduction

Chapter 2 introduced the three contexts that form the cross-national case comparisons for this study. In this chapter, I provide a theoretical summary of the literature review on play and relevant empirical studies in the field of early childhood education to inform specific research questions guiding this study.

As explained in Chapter 1, the main aim of this study is to explore how teachers understand and implement ‘learning through play’ in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore, in all three Asian contexts which have shared very different histories. To address the aims of the study, four research questions are formulated to investigate kindergarten teachers’ perspectives and practice on play in three territories. They are:

1. How are key educational policies on ‘learning through play’ similar and different in the three related territories?
2. How do teachers working in four early educational settings enact educational policies on ‘learning through play’?
3. How do teachers explain the meaning of ‘learning through play’?
4. How do teachers account for their roles in teaching ‘learning through play’?

Guided by these research questions, Chapter 3 will review the literature and theoretical basis pertaining to the five key elements in this study. They are:

- 3.2 Definition of play (informed RQ1)
- 3.3 The problems with play (informed RQ1)
- 3.4 Play and pedagogy (informed RQ2)
- 3.5 Teachers’ perspectives on play (informed RQ3)
- 3.6 The role of the teacher in play (informed RQ2 & RQ4)

Sections 3.2 Definition of play and section 3.3 The problems with play present much of the research about how the notion of play has been framed in European cultural heritage,

without taking other elements into consideration such as, socioeconomic status, race, gender, age. In addition, Chapter 2 introduced how policies on learning through play in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore is developing within a hybrid cultural context, and shaped by traditional culture, communist culture and Western culture. The three territories share aspects of a similar traditional culture (Confucianism), however, there are still many differences in the status of economic, social and political development. Under such circumstances, it is necessary to look at how key educational policies on ‘learning through play’ similar and different in the three related territories (RQ1), which may result in different ways in which play is interpreted and implemented by teachers. This will help in outlining the rationale for the rest RQs, as I will then go on to present in the rest of the chapter (Sections 3.4, 3.5, 3.6).

3.2 Definition of play

The definition of play has been ambiguous because of its complexity and diversity in terms of behaviour and context (Fleer, 2009; Wood & Attfield, 2005). For example, Smith and Vollstedt (1985) suggest using a variety of characteristics of a play activity rather than just one single standard as the criterion to define play, because multiple characteristics can help to appropriately recognise play behaviour. A similar view is proposed by Saracho (1991), who suggests that the widest range of criteria should be used to identify children’s play behaviours and that adopting broad categories can also help teachers to better understand the relationship between play and education and implement play-based pedagogy. In addition, Rubin et al. (1983) define play as being based on the dispositions that those playing bring to activities: (1) play is a self-motivated activity based on children’s interests and is not determined by basic needs or social demands; (2) play activities are spontaneous and voluntary rather than undertaken with goals imposed from others; (3) play takes place with familiarity or the exploration of unfamiliarity, while players self-support the understanding of the activity; (4) play episodes can be non-literal (‘as if’ situations/pretend play); (5) players are free to follow the rules introduced from outside and able to modify the existing rules; and (6) players are required to actively engage in the activities. A similar definition is given by Garvey (1990), who states that there are five characteristics which form the basis of children’s play: pleasure and enjoyment, a lack of extrinsic goals, being spontaneous and

voluntary, active engagement, and knowing what is not play. Correspondingly, Fromberg (1999) points out that play happens when the activities have the characteristics of being symbolic, meaningful, active, pleasurable, voluntary, rule-governed and episodic. Furthermore, Smith (2010) recognises the characteristics of play comprise five dimensions, namely: flexibility, positive affect, non-literality, intrinsic motivation and preference of performance over outcomes. Moreover, Burghardt (2011) conceptualises play as having the following characteristics:

- (1) Play is incompletely functional in the context in which it appears; functional actions in play do not by themselves contradict play, but in play these actions are typically combined with actions that do not contribute to the achievement of a goal;
- (2) Play is spontaneous, pleasurable, rewarding or voluntary;
- (3) Play differs from more serious behaviours in the form (e.g. exaggerated), or timing (appears before it is actually needed for survival);
- (4) Play is often repeated, but not in stereotypical forms; and
- (5) Play is initiated in the absence of acute or chronic stress (p. 17).

Gray (2013) also provides a list of characteristics to describe play, some of which overlap with those identified by previous researchers, suggesting that play is chosen by children, imaginative, non-stressful and focuses on the process rather than external goals. Weisberg et al. (2013b) put forward four unifying criteria that emerge from the multiple and varied definitions of play: (1) play should be without a specific purpose; (2) play should be child-centred, not adult-directed; (3) play should require both joyful and voluntary participation; and (4) play is different from how things normally work and is often exaggerated.

It is problematic, however, to use specific criteria to define play, due to the question of whether an activity needs to meet all the criteria to qualify as 'play'. In this case, some scholars suggest defining play across a continuum of activities. For example, Pellegrini (2013) points out that: play can be categorised as 'more or less play', not dichotomously as 'play or not play'. Behaviours meeting all criteria might be categorised as 'pure play', whereas behaviours with fewer components are 'less purely play' (p. 215).

Also, researchers and philosophers have struggled with defining play by describing its characteristics due to the complexity of the concept. More recent research changes the previous lens through which we conceptualise play, proposing a new way to define play by viewing play as a spectrum.

More recently, researchers suggest considering play as a spectrum that ranges from free play, guided play, games, co-opted play and playful instruction to direct instruction. They argue that one can add more specificity and nuance to the definition of play by imagining free play as one end of a spectrum which enables people to better recognise that play has different forms and serves to differentiate functions, especially understanding the relationship between play and learning (Zosh et al., 2018). Furthermore, based on these characteristics, play has also been put into categories such as role play, pretend/imaginary play, make-believe play, dramatic play, outdoor play, risky play, rough and tumble play, construction play, symbolic play and arts play (Burghardt, 2011; Fler & Van, 2017; Rogers, 2010).

The above-mentioned definitions of play have been structured within a European heritage cultural context, while Chinese culture defines play differently by using different words: youxi (游戏, games, structured or guided play) and wan (free play) (Lin et al., 2018). Chapter 2 provided a comprehensive account of learning through play in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore, which indicates that the challenge of defining play also exists in the Asian countries influenced by Chinese culture, as there is no consensus over the definition of play.

3.3 The problems with play

Play has long been regarded as an important part of children's early year life, and this was reflected in the work of some pioneers, such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Froebel, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Maria Montessori, and John Dewey (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010; Taylor, 2013). For example, Rousseau finds the origin of ideas like play as being a natural thing for children, the need for children to have the freedom to play, and play and work being the same thing, which becomes the initial basis for the development of child-centred pedagogy (Canestrari & Foster, 2018; Taylor, 2013).

Froebel, however, directly links play to children's learning and development, and he develops initial kindergartens with a series of recommended songs and games and designs materials and craft activities (known as the 'Gifts' and 'Occupations') for use with children (Prochner & Nawrotzki, 2019). Maria Montessori sees children as constructors of themselves, developing from their original energy and unique attitudes, and she also values the importance of specifically designed classroom environments with child-sized furniture and open shelving for accessibility of attractive materials to meet the individual needs of the child (Barbieri, 2018). From Froebel's perspective, play is the manipulation of the Gifts and the Occupations in specific ways, whereas, in Montessori's view, play is integrated with the manipulation of specifically prepared materials to gain sensory experiences and the conduct of practical life exercises (Barbieri, 2018; Prochner & Nawrotzki, 2019). Differing from the earlier views of play, John Dewey emphasises the importance of lived experience in the real world surrounding children, and he thinks play would help children construct and reconstruct meaningful knowledge (Canestrari & Foster, 2018). In the Progressive Education Movement of the early 1900s, children's play activities were considered as educationally significant, especially dramatic/pretend play (Saracho & Spodek, 1995). Based on the work of early pioneers, and especially the developmental theories, play has been regarded as an essential part of learning and development and it is constructed as a natural, normal, innocent, fun and universal right for children.

Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) challenge the taken-for-granted understandings of play in early childhood education and argue that play is not always innocent, fun, and natural, and they assert it often involves social injustices. Specifically, they question the idea of play as constituting children's natural way of learning, and consider how this idea might result in teachers reducing their role to a facilitator. They also ponder how children, whose cultural and family values may not fit with how the teacher constitutes children's natural way of learning, are considered as being deficient (Grieshaber & McArdle, 2010). Furthermore, this view does not take into consideration children's personal background such as race, gender, social, age, economic, and cultural capital (Sutton-Smith, 2009; Taylor, 2013; Walkerdine, 1981). Also, Grieshaber and McArdle (2010) argue that play is not necessarily innocent and fun and play can involve racist, sexist or classist features and even bullying. These views are also supported by Sutton-Smith's (2009) claim that

play is not always fun as children use play as a space to engage in bullying and social aggression, showing ‘the dark side of play’. In addition, Taylor (2013) critiques Rousseau as not applying his idea of play being a natural thing for children into practice, placing his own two children in a state foundling home. She also discusses how different perceptions of nature have shaped different approaches to ‘natural’ early childhood education, from Froebel to Steiner (Waldorf) and Montessori, and examines how these pioneers’ ideas are taken up as well as challenged in pedagogical approaches (Taylor, 2013).

According to Cannella (1998), the belief of play being normal and universal is problematic, as such a view is a Western cultural construct which does not consider people from different cultural backgrounds. Similarly, Roopnarine et al. (1994) argue that ‘Euro-American mainstream ideas about play and early childhood do not thoroughly consider the cultural imperatives and social agendas in the discussion of the implications of play in early childhood in other societies’ (p. 10). Additionally, this basis of the cultural construction of play relies upon the dichotomised conception of play and work, and this has led to the misunderstanding of ‘learning through play’. For example, under the influence of this binary logic thinking of play and formal education, at one end is pure play that consists of pleasure, no rules, no purpose or discipline, and entirely self-motivated, while at the other end is pure formal education that is characterised as no pleasure, totally rule regulated, totally instrumental, and totally externally imposed (Goodman, 1994). On one hand, when teachers emphasise play without formal education, they might adopt the *laissez-faire* approach, letting children have fun and play, and consider this as learning. On the other hand, some teachers might consider the other end of this spectrum, so they give direct instruction, and children are assigned academic work for formal schooling. Between these two extremes, some teachers struggle to find a balance to allocate time between play and formal education (Grieshaber & Mcardle, 2010).

Goodman (1994) argues that the struggling of teachers to find a balance between formal education and play aims to find a midpoint where play and work are jointed together which characterises the best type of teaching. He further considers that this midpoint is where children make their own decisions and direct their own play as this activity

motivates children's interests and attracts their curiosity, and gives them pleasure; At the same time, he suggests the teacher finds this midpoint allows them to provide information and materials that can help children's learning and development (Goodman, 1994).

The above discussions highlighted critiques of play in early childhood education for the lack of consideration to culture, socioeconomic status, race, gender, age. In addition to this, section 3.2 pointed out that most definitions of play have been structured within a European heritage cultural context, while Chinese culture defines play differently. This is also consistent with my argument that it is necessary to look at 'learning through play' in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore as there are still many differences in the status of economic, social and political development. Thus, both section 3.2 and 3.3 informed the necessity of Research Question 1: to compare the similarities and differences of key educational policies on 'learning through play' in the three related territories.

The following section serves to discuss the relationship between play and pedagogy in early childhood education.

3.4 Play and pedagogy

While there is growing evidence of the importance of play to children's learning and development, there remain significant challenges in integrating play into kindergarten pedagogy (Rogers, 2010, 2013; Rogers & Evans, 2008; Wood, 2009; Wood & Attfield, 2005). As Rogers (2010) argues, linking play and pedagogy in early childhood education settings is problematic for several reasons. Firstly, play has been traditionally perceived as in opposition to its counterpart, work, and this play-work dichotomy may avoid integrating play into teaching approaches in many early childhood education classrooms. Secondly, pedagogy of play has meant that play is viewed as the vehicle for learning adult competencies, and such value results in play being judged in particular ways such as bad play or good play, without considering children's perspectives. Thirdly, research has reported that the national policy for early childhood education significantly affects how play is understood and implemented within different curricular models (Hedges et

al., 2011; Leung, 2011). In policy-driven play, play activities are planned to meet learning outcomes and curriculum goals, so this kind of play needs to be understood in specific cultural contexts due to the different ways of situating play in policy (Wood, 2014).

Turning our attention to the concept of 'play' and 'pedagogy', each has diverse and distinct meanings. In terms of the concept of play in early childhood, play is child-directed, spontaneous, and intrinsically motivated. In contrast, pedagogy is described as the role of the adult relating to supporting the process of teaching and learning. It could be noted that there is a tension between the concept of play and pedagogy. Here emerges the question: how can we reconcile play and pedagogy in early childhood settings?

Different ways of integrating play into pedagogy have been identified in the literature. For example, Wood (2004) has described a pedagogy of play which refers to 'the ways in which early childhood professionals make provision for playful and play-based activities, how they design play or learning environments, and all the pedagogical techniques and strategies they use to support or enhance learning through play' (p. 19). Rogers and Evans (2008) argue that this description only pays attention to what an adult does, and it does not provide explicit information on how children participate in the process of teaching and learning. Cannella and Viruru (2004) criticise Wood's (2004) way of viewing the pedagogy of play for lacking an explanation of the way in which pedagogy is linked to the power relations between teachers and children.

Wood (2014) later identifies three different kinds of approaches of play-based pedagogy, namely child-initiated, adult-guided and policy-driven, proposing taking some elements such as the goals of the pedagogy, the practitioners' beliefs about learning, play and the child, the purpose of the play and the interaction, and the assessed outcomes of the pedagogical interaction for the child and the practitioner into consideration, for the purpose of understanding the relationship between play and pedagogy. Wood (2014) specifies what the three approaches of child-initiated, adult-guided and policy-driven play involve. Child-initiated play allows children to freely choose play materials, activities partners and within, a structured environment, the goal for pedagogy emerges from children's interest and needs, of which children's activities are more or less

constrained by the practitioners' open-ended provision of resources and the curriculum plan. Adult-guided play values children's free and spontaneous activities prior to formal teacher-directed activities, and the goal for the pedagogy is related to curriculum goals but is responsive to the child who has some agency in the direction and pace of their learning. Policy-driven play is a vehicle for promoting specific ways of learning and achieving learning outcomes defined by curriculum policy, and the goal for the pedagogy is more instrumental than child-initiated play and adult-guided play. From a pedagogic perspective, Hedges (2011) argues that the boundary between child-initiated play and adult-directed play is obscure, particularly in terms of children's content learning. Furthermore, Saracho (2013) claims that adult-guided play can be used in different ways and for different purposes, indicating the complexities of integrating children's and practitioners' plans.

Empirical research has demonstrated how teachers integrate play into pedagogy across different social and cultural contexts. The literature suggests that there are different ways of integrating play into pedagogy in European cultural settings. For example, Pyle and Bigelow (2015) examine Ontario teachers' understandings of play-based learning and how their perspectives affect their implementation in kindergarten classrooms. Three distinct implementation approaches are identified: play implemented separately from learning, play implemented for social development and play implemented for both social and academic development. Teachers who describe implementing play separately from learning point out academic curriculum expectations as a barrier to their implementation, while teachers in the social learning through play group report parents and administration as a big challenge for them and teachers in the holistic learning through play group note play environment (e.g. class size, materials and space) as challenges (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015). According to Cutter-Mackenzie and Edwards' (2013) study of Australian preschool teachers' views about children's play-based activity, there are three ways of combining play into pedagogy. Open-ended play is where the teacher provides children with materials, minimal engagement and interaction. Modelled play involves the teachers illustrating and explaining the use of materials, coupled with minimal adult interaction as the basis for learning about materials. Purposefully framed play means teachers provide children with materials for open-ended play and modelled play, and there is significant teacher-child interaction. The studies described above are in

Canadian and Australian contexts, yet the research in Asian settings suggests differences in integrating play into pedagogy.

Compared to the ways used in Western countries, different strategies are presented in the Chinese context. For instance, Cheng and Stimpson (2004), in their exploration of Hong Kong kindergarten teachers' knowledge of play-based learning, find three pedagogy orientations: the technical that regards learning as a transmissive process and play as a tool to capture children's interest; the fluctuating that continually shifts between accepting the value of play-based learning and rejecting it; and the inquiry that focuses on seeking innovative pedagogy modes to promote children's active learning, which is the basis of teachers' making sense of their pedagogical shift towards play-based learning. In addition, Rao and Li (2009) identify four different categories of play-based learning through analyses of videotaped observations and interviews with teachers and parents. These categories include situations where: the teacher leads and participates in the activity; the teacher supports the activities; the child engages in the activities chosen by the teacher; the child engages in free play, reflecting the degree of teachers' involvement in play (Rao & Li, 2009). As they find that teachers are actively involved in the majority of children's play experiences by either directing or supporting them, hence, they use the term 'eduplay' to describe the relationship between play and learning in Chinese preschools, showing play-based education with 'Chinese characteristics' (Rao & Li, 2009). Having identified different ways of integrating play into pedagogy in both Western and Eastern contexts and research outlining its importance in children's learning, this has informed RQ2 - How do teachers working in four early educational settings enact educational policies on 'learning through play'.

3.5 Teachers' perspectives on play

The previous section indicates there is an on-going debate regarding the degree of teachers' involvement in children's play, and these different ideas come from a variety of pedagogical understandings of children's learning, education and the role of play (Fleer, 2015). Teachers who have different cultural backgrounds tend to view play differently. For example, Wu and Rao (2011) examine Hong Kong and German kindergarten teachers' conceptions of play and learning and identify significant

distinctions in the teachers' conceptions of play. They find that German teachers emphasise the importance of free play and use it as the main kindergarten pedagogy while Hong Kong teachers view play and learning as separate elements, but use play as a strategy to encourage children to focus on academic activities. In another study, Izumi-Taylor et al. (2010) analyse survey data collected from educators in Japan, the United States, and Sweden; they find that teachers in those nations regard play as a learning process (comprising fun activities and creativity) and identify that playfulness involves and promotes positive feelings. Similarly, Palaiologou (2016) examines teachers' attitudes towards digital devices in five countries (England, Luxemburg, Malta, Greece and Kuwait) and finds that, although teachers have fully integrated digital devices into their personal lives, there is a tension between the nature of play-based pedagogy and the potential uses of digital devices in practice. In addition, early childhood teachers are often aware of the value and importance of play in children's learning. In the USA, the study of Vu et al. (2015) identifies that play is relevant to both social and cognitive skill development. In Sweden, Sandberg and Heden (2011) find that the teachers acknowledge the contribution of play to learning academic skills. In the UK, McInnes et al. (2011) find that the teachers regard play as a learning process and are aware of the value of play. In Canada, Pyle et al. (2018) find that teachers believe play is important for children's literacy learning and articulate a range of strategies for integration. Across these studies, play has been found to be understood differently in various countries.

The empirical research about teachers' perspectives on play suggests that play has been understood differently within different social and cultural contexts. Teachers' perspectives of play appear to be culturally situated; thus, it is suggested that the understanding of play needs to take the specific social and cultural contexts into consideration (Fleer, 2009). Therefore, this motivates the current study to situate play into the cultural contexts in which it occurs, namely Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore, to understand the meaning of play from the perspectives of kindergarten teachers. This informs RQ3 - How do teachers explain the meaning of 'learning through play'.

3.6 The role of the teacher in play

The previous section shows how teachers have reported different beliefs about play which may influence the implementation of play. Both in research and practice, the roles of teachers in children's play are classified differently. Vygotsky (1978) stresses the importance of the role of adults in the process of children's learning and play. He views the child's actual development and what the child practices to accomplish as a Zone of Proximal Development, and this zone could be attained with the guidance and support of adults (Vygotsky, 1978). His view of early childhood education suggests that it is necessary for preschool teachers to balance offering support to the child and allowing room to explore on the child's own behalf in children's play.

Influenced by Vygotsky's (1978) 'Zone of Proximal Development' theory, some scholars argue that it is essential for teachers to intervene in children's play to maximise the influence of play on their development. For instance, research demonstrates that play can contribute to the acquisition of academic skills when teacher involvement is encouraged (Weisberg et al., 2013a; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013). Weisberg et al. (2013a) argue that guided play during which adults support child-initiated learning is considered a good strategy for developing language skills as in such settings children's interests are inspired by the active engagement of attentive and sensitive adult partners. A similar study conducted by Weisberg et al. (2013b) points out that preschool children benefit from teachers' participation in children's play, which leads not only to achievements of content knowledge and school readiness skills, but also to gains in the development of social and emotional skills.

Accordingly, Berk and Meyers (2013) emphasise the value of teachers actively supporting the development of children's play as this has been shown to significantly improve children's self-regulation skills. In addition, Van Oers and Duijkers (2013) find that when teachers actively play with students, extending students' play experience, guiding students' attention to certain objects and contributing to the conversation leads to positive development in vocabulary learning. Hakkarainen et al. (2013) have demonstrated how teachers in play worlds create imaginary situations with children; they report that the adult should emotionally participate in the imaginary play such as

anticipation, playing a role of a character in the storyline, introducing events and critical incidents to support the development of the ongoing play. Another study explores how teachers physically position themselves in close or distant proximity to two- and three-year-old children in Dutch childcare centres, noting how teacher proximity has a great influence on the level of play engagement in infants and toddlers (Singer et al., 2014). They find that young children show good play engagement when the teacher and peers are nearby in contrast to teachers' and peers' in-and-out behaviours in the child's surroundings. In contrast to the intervention role of teachers, many other researchers suggest that play is the activity which is selected and controlled by children themselves regarding time, materials and space, and teachers are expected not to intervene in children's play (Bennett et al., 1997).

The idea of non-intervention is based on play being characterised as a spontaneous, voluntary and intrinsically motivated activity which is directed and initiated by the child rather than the teacher (Rogers, 2010). For example, Fleer (2015) uses video observations to explore teachers' interactions with children during free play time in five Australian childcare centres, and she identifies that most teachers position themselves out of children's play. As Wardle (2003) points out, some teachers' ways of engaging themselves in play to teach academic skills can disrupt children's play and even cause them to stop playing. Instead of interrupting children's play, free play is about children's choices and ownership and not to be interfered with by adults (Pramling et al., 2006). According to Kontos (1999), in free play, teachers play two major roles as play managers to provide the play environment and as playmates to join in children's play by following the flow of play. Santer et al. (2007) argue that teachers should act as non-participants in free play, actively observing and noting what children are doing.

The role of the teacher is a complex issue, and teachers perform several roles in play: stage manager and facilitator, co-player, play leader, director, observer and recorder (Enz & Christie, 1993; Jones & Reynolds, 1992). Teachers need to take a variety of roles when they interact with children in play. As a stage manager and facilitator, the teacher takes the role to stay outside the children's play, providing play materials, designing the play set, scheduling time for play and deciding activities which constitute play. As a co-player, the teacher is expected to be a participant in children's play upon

their invitation by taking on the role at a gentle level and mainly follow the flow of play under children's direction. Being a play leader, the teacher needs to actively participate in play when children have difficulty to continue ongoing play sessions. Being a director requires the teacher to make the decision in terms of material, time, space and theme of play. Teachers who have the role of being an observer and recorder stay close to the play set, observing the child and helping children initiate and extend children's play (Enz & Christie, 1993; Jones & Reynolds, 1992).

Wood and Attfield (2005) propose that practitioners have eight important roles in supporting children's learning and development through play, particularly as play is likely considered to be the leading form of activity. They suggest that one of the main roles that the teacher is expected to play is to be 'a flexible planner' who designs a pedagogy of play based on child-initiated or adult-initiated activities according to the flow of classroom activities, and the range of children's age and abilities. Secondly, the teacher should play the role of a skilled observer who enables practitioners to understand the meaning of play from children's perspectives and identify learning processes and outcomes, being sensitive and knowing when to step back and when to allow the play to flow. To be more specific, through careful observations, teachers are able to identify possible dangers and ensure safety, be alert to problems, new patterns and themes in play, identify ways to support and extend play, identify opportunities for challenge, learn about children's interaction, interest, dispositions, meaning and intentions, and inform later planning for individuals and groups. Thirdly, teachers are expected to be good listeners who show respect and curiosity towards the activities from the child's point of view and pay attention to children's different ways of communication. Fourthly, teachers need to be good communicators who are able to communicate with children in many different ways, such as using gesture, body language and facial expressions, responding to children's ideas, asking open-ended questions and pretending not to know. Fifthly, teachers are expected to infect children with enthusiasm. Sixthly, teachers should supervise children's safety, access, equal opportunities, and well-being in play in terms of the physical, social and emotional environment. Seventhly, teachers should be sensitive co-players who help children to become master players, and they need to balance providing a laissez-faire environment from which children may ignore teachers' guidance and an over-structured environment from which children may not learn to be

creative in play. Eighthly, teachers are expected to be researchers who are attentive to the complexities of children's learning and adopt an enquiry-based approach to improve the quality of their provision and engagement (Wood & Attfield, 2005).

These different classifications of teacher roles are consistent with Gronlund (2012) who argues that teachers should step in and out of children's play, allowing children to take ownership of the role of play. He also identifies five characteristics of teachers' roles in play: 'enthusiastic cheerleaders, questioning, challenging, or provoking, mediators or equipment suppliers, a quiet presence nearby, observing, listening, ready to step in when children invite them or need them.' (Gronlund, 2012, p. 110). Each of the roles mentioned above can be considered to have both positive and negative effects on children's growth and development (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016). Moving from these general roles, there is researching on teachers' roles in specific activities.

Researchers have explored the role of the teacher in specific kinds of play activities. For instance, in terms of outdoor play, Little et al. (2011) find that teachers spend most of their time supervising children's play activities, and they further point out that teachers prefer to step back rather than become engaged. This is consistent with the study of Dodge et al. (2010) who state that teachers think about the outdoor environment mainly in terms of safety and supervision. Regarding teacher involvement in children's dramatic play, Logue and Detour (2011) identify teachers' behaviours during children's dramatic play as taking roles, allowing children to lead the scenario and improvising as the play flows. In another study, Liozou et al. (2019) observe that teachers adopt different levels of guidance during dramatic play with the most frequent being indirect involvement such as being co-players in the role, inquiring with children about their understandings of the scenario, clarifying the use of materials, suggesting new play elements and providing children with opportunities to voice what they are interested in during their play.

From the research literature, teachers endorse diverse roles during children's play. The different roles that teachers undertake reflect their values and beliefs that are influenced by social and cultural contexts. This raises the question of integrating play into classroom environments across cultures. For teachers, they not only need to decide the type of play to foster children's learning, but also to determine the degree of involvement in

children's activities. Thus, it is necessary for the current study to explore what roles teachers undertake in children's play (RQ4 - How do teachers account for their roles in teaching 'learning through play?'), and how they perform these roles in each setting (RQ2 - How do teachers working in four early educational settings enact educational policies on 'learning through play?').

3.7 Chapter summary

The above review of literature has highlighted several key elements that have been used to understand the complexity of the relationship between learning and play. Each element has informed the certain research questions. It opened by considering the difficulties associated with defining play. Following this, problems of play have been presented, highlighting aspects such as different social and cultural contexts, gender, race and age that should be taken into consideration. Then studies on different ways of integrating play into pedagogy were reviewed. Finally, this literature review discussed teachers' understanding of play and their role in children's play, suggesting 'learning through play' was perceived differently across different contexts. Thus, I argue it is important to understand the social and cultural contexts when interpreting and implementing a 'learning through play' policy.

Chapter 4: A comparative case study across Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore

4.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter will introduce the current study which can be described as being comparative and cross-cultural. The purpose of comparisons is to provide alternative and multiple forms of pedagogical models and concepts in terms of learning through play in other early childhood education settings. A justification for using the key concepts of double voicing, power and discipline, cultural capital, is provided in this study. I argue that the social theories of Bakhtin, Foucault, Bourdieu are helpful for understanding how teachers understand and implement ‘learning through play’ in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore. The relevance and application of these three key concepts are discussed in this chapter.

4.2 Cross-cultural comparative case study

This research can be considered as a comparative and cross-cultural case study in early childhood education with specific regard to learning through play. In addition to developing our understanding of phenomena and gaining new perspectives, the purpose of the comparison is to use the knowledge researched from cross-national studies to contribute to policy or practice (Bryman, 2016). Esser and Vliegthart (2017) claim that comparative study provides access to a wide range of alternative options and possibilities of educational phenomena, and would help shed light on them. Tobin’s (1989, 2009, 2018) studies look across different countries in the area of early childhood education and these indicated that the impact of culture on early childhood education could be better gained through cross-cultural comparisons.

In this study, Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore were chosen as sites of comparison for several reasons. As I have explained in the introduction chapter, there remain some gaps of understanding in relation to learning through play in early childhood education in the Asian context; whereas comparisons between cultures have become a popular way to study this issue in many western countries (Izumi-Taylor et al.,

2010; Palaiologou, 2016). Moreover, although there are many single-country studies on this topic conducted in countries such as Canada, United States, England, Australia, and Nordic countries (McInnes et al., 2011; Pyle et al., 2018; Sandberg & Heden, 2011; Vu et al., 2015), the countries of Mainland China and Singapore are among those where this topic has seen less investigation (Chen, 2011; Rao & Li, 2009).

Apart from academic reasons to compare learning through play in the three above-mentioned territories, I am also aware of the potential similarities and differences among them based on my reading and some personal experience. My first discovery was the ways in which the meanings of learning through play have emerged and developed in relation to educational policy in the three territories. According to Baistow's (2000) analysis, in order for the comparison to be meaningful, countries need to share certain features of equivalence such as having certain dimensions in common, even though they may differ within them. For example, as I mentioned earlier, the three territories share a similar educational culture, including such features as: a highly examination-centred educational system, a privileging of teacher authority and parents' high academic expectations of children (Rao, et al., 2017). Moreover, it is necessary to recognise how the educational policy of learning through play and implementation of this policy differ within regional and national boundaries. For example, both Hong Kong and Singapore are culturally dominated by Chinese people but each is far from being homogeneous. While Mainland China is cited as adhering to Confucianism (Chan & Elliott, 2004), Hong Kong and Singapore are strongly influenced by western ideals such as individualism and liberty, using English as the language of administration because they also share a history of British colonization (Onn, 2013). Different from Singapore, due to its historical and political specialities as a former colony to the UK and a current Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China, Hong Kong is a hybrid of British culture and Chinese culture. By comparing between and among those three territories, this study hopes to shed light on how local culture is integrated into pedagogical concepts and practices and how a hybrid of Western and Eastern notions of 'learning through play' work in practice.

Four cities, including Singapore and Hong Kong, Anji and Hangzhou in Mainland China, were eventually identified as the places where this research would be carried out.

Baistow (2000) has emphasised that local and regional differences within national boundaries are typical in cross-national research. So, it is very important for a researcher to be aware of the problem in assuming national homogeneity and generalising within a country's borders. Despite the fact that the three territories fit into the characteristic of equivalence, this study rigorously limited sampling to individual cities so that complexities caused by regional differences could at least be limited in some ways. In addition, while the cities I selected may not be representative or generalisable to the whole country, the focus is beyond the situations themselves; that is to find out how learning through play is interpreted by the accounts of kindergarten practitioners. To be more specific, I chose Hangzhou (the capital city of Zhejiang province) and Anji (birthplace of Anji play, which is a town in Zhejiang Province) as the samples from Mainland China because both cities are in my hometown, so I was confident about recruiting enough participants there. Additionally, Anji was identified as one of the research settings as Anji play become national and international well-known due to its innovative curriculum. All settings recruited in this research across the three territories are regarded as comparable in their functional nature, meanwhile, any structural differences within and across borders relating to the researched topics will be considered and analysed.

I have so far provided the justification for choosing the three territories and cities in this study. A fuller description of how specific settings differ from each other and how the differences are relevant to the issue of learning through play will be provided in Chapter 5. Here I discuss further considerations on how comparisons between the three territories could extend the understanding of the traditional comparative study. According to Esser and Vliegthart (2017), one of the main purposes of cross-national comparative research is to integrate educational traditions of different nationalities. However, the current development of cross-cultural comparative research has shown a clear preference for Western-centric theoretical frameworks and methodological approaches (Silova et al., 2017; Silova, 2019). The modern comparative education project has implicitly, if not explicitly, aimed for universality for Western knowledge and scientific rationality (as with the conventional research protocol with the research question, methodology and theoretical framework measured by Western standards) (Silova, 2019). This Western-centrism stance has caused many problems such as reproducing the hegemonic

discourses of ‘development’ and ‘benchmarking’ that reinforce the unequal and the disparities in international knowledge systems, contributing to the ignorance of alternative interpretations and epistemic differences (Connell, 2007; Takayama et al., 2016; Tikly & Bond, 2013).

Such criticisms invite a nuancing of interpretation of cross-national comparative studies. In relation to this, the current study was also inspired by Chen’s (2010) *Asia as method*, which helped me confront the problem of ‘West as method’, where the subjectivities of Asia are formed through comparisons to western theories. In Chapter 10, I return to explore this approach further as a (supplementary or alternative) framework. Here in this chapter, however, it is relevant to note that instead of only using the West as a single reference point for understanding learning through play, and following such critical theoretical and postcolonial perspectives, I am more interested in initiating the current research from the position of ‘Other’. According to Silova et al. (2017), to speak from the voice of ‘Other’ works to reference untold socio-cultural and historical structures. Thus, this study aims to interrupt the dominant developmental narratives that interpret teachers’ understanding and practice of learning through play, paying attention to pursuing new possibilities beyond the familiar Western horizon. By comparing one case in relation to another, this study also attempted to avoid simply identifying transferable ‘best practices’ that work globally, or judging any case with its particular cultural and material context as superior or inferior to any other, and instead focused on an explanation of historical transformations in each territory as constitutive of the forms of those educational practices.

4.3 Introducing analytical framework

In my study, each of the four different settings across three different territories has a particular context (see Chapter 5 for details). Based on the characteristics of each early childhood setting selected for the study, I then decide to use the appropriate theory for analysis. The relevance and application of the three social theories of learning (Bakhtin, Foucault, Bourdieu) are discussed as the main analytical framework in each case.

4.3.1 Bakhtinian double voicing

Double voice is related to the works of the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin (1895-1975), who used the phrase ‘double-voiced discourse’ when studying drama and fiction, and in particular to the novels of Dostoevsky. Double voice discourse refers to two distinct utterances that may appear in dialogic interaction. According to Bakhtin (1984), double voice discourse directed both toward “the referential object . . . , and toward another’s discourse, toward someone else’s speech” (p. 185). Bakhtin (1984) argues that the use of double voice discourse brings together two (or more) independent utterances to serve their own purposes: “in one discourse, two semantic intentions appear, two voices” (p. 189). To Bakhtin, the meaning of words depends on the specific conditions under which they are produced. In other words, the words we use have always been used by others before, so they carry with them meaning ascribed to them by others. This is explained by Bakhtin as:

Any word exists for the speaker in three aspects: as a neutral word in language, belonging to nobody; as an other’s word, which belongs to another person and is filled with echoes of the other’s utterance; and finally, as my word, for, since I am dealing with it in a particular situation, with a particular speech plan, it is already imbued with my expression (Bakhtin 1986, p. 88).

Bakhtin’s understanding of the utterance indicates that each utterance is related to the utterances offered by other speakers involved in the same dialogue. Guided by the aims of this research, in order to explore teachers’ roles in children’s play and how teachers understand their roles in children’s play in this thesis, the utterances I have selected for analysis are the utterances occurring through the voices of two teachers. Teacher A, representing the voice of a visiting senior high school physics teacher as a way to explain and justify her ideas and beliefs relating to Anji play (Chapter 6) and Teacher G, recruiting two different parents’ voices (including a worried voice and a contented voice) to support her views of early Chinese language learning. (Chapter 9).

Double voicing is another person’s speech in another person’s language, refracting authorial intentions (Bakhtin, 1981). There are two types of double voicing: passive or

active. Bakhtin (1984) classifies passive double-voiced discourse as unidirectional and vari-directional. With unidirectional double voice discourse, the speaker recruits someone else's discourse "in the direction of its own particular aspirations." (p. 193). On the contrary, vari-directional double voicing, the author again speaks in someone else's discourse, but... "introduces into that discourse a semantic intention directly opposed to the original one" (p. 193). In terms of this study, unidirectional double voice discourse was adopted to show the character who is speaking and the author who is in a dialogically interrelated environment are aligned. For example, in Chapter 6 (Anji case), Teacher A draws on the visiting teacher's words to illustrate her understanding, beliefs and attitudes about Anji play.

In addition, Bakhtin's terms 'authoritative discourse' and 'internally persuasive discourse' were used in Chapter 6 to explore how Teacher A develops her own understandings and beliefs about Anji play. Bakhtin (1981) defines authoritative discourse as the word of ancestors that comes from the past and stands unchallenged, and he considers authoritative discourse as a privileged language that has huge power. According to Bakhtin's (1981), persuasive discourse is the type of discourse that is open to different viewpoints. The main difference between authoritative discourse and internally persuasive is the former is not negotiable and the latter is negotiable (Wells, 2007). In Chapter 6, I drew on authoritative discourses to analyse how Teacher A appears to consider 'senior high school' and 'physics teacher' as a high indicator of professionalism in science; also, internally persuasive discourse was used to explore how Teacher A populates her own utterance with the visiting teacher's words in agreement with her values and experiences to convince me of the positive influences of Anji Play.

In Chapter 6, Bakhtin's (1981) double-voicing theory was exemplified to analyse the main characteristics of the Anji approach: creating the conditions of true play which emerge from children's uninterrupted and unguided play experiences. In Chapter 9, Teacher G recruits the happy parents' voice seemingly to justify that her way of teaching Chinese characters is good as parents think that it helps children have a smooth transition to Primary One.

4.3.2 Power and discipline

While Bakhtin's (1981) double-voicing theory is important for this study in understanding the main characteristics of the educational policy learning through play in each context, Foucault's (1995) notion of disciplinary power is significant for exploring how participants operate power in terms of implementing this policy. Foucault (1995) states that power must be analysed as something that:

Circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localised here or there, never in anybody's hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. (p. 36).

A Foucauldian perspective perceives power, not in terms of domination but as managed through a 'net-like' organisation. He further argues that power is exercised instead of being possessed (Foucault, 1981). According to Gandhi (1998), Foucault's view of power is everywhere that people always exercise/negotiate power explicitly or implicitly in a given social space. Referring to Green Apple Centre (Chapter 9), I am using the concept from Foucault's (1995) discussion of power to explore how teachers and the kindergarten principal account for 'purposeful play' and apply it in practice. A classroom is a place in which teachers exercise their power over students. For instance, I analyse how power operates in the K2 classroom when Teacher G employs youxi (games, 游戏) as the teaching approach and what she thinks is 'purposeful play'.

Foucault (1980) also claims "how things work at the level of ongoing subjugation, at the level of those continuous and uninterrupted processes which subject our bodies, govern our gestures, dictate our behaviours" (p. 97). This specific form of power is managed and exercised through mechanisms that allow for the control of the body. It is a type of power called disciplinary power that operates on the level of the body.

By using Foucault's concepts of power and discipline, we can see how a 'docile' body is produced. Foucault's interest in how power illustrates the functioning of certain mechanisms promotes this notion of 'docility'. By adopting a Foucauldian analysis of power, it is possible to understand how the body is subjected and manipulated.

In Chapter 6 (Anji Jiguan case), Foucault's (1995) 'docile bodies' theory was adopted to explicitly indicate how teachers step back and take the role of an observer. Cheng's slogan (Close your mouth, control your hands, open your eyes and prick up your ears) refers to disciplinary techniques in traditional education to control children's sensory activities, that of mouth, hands, eyes and ears, to facilitate children's learning.

Disciplinary power contains techniques of surveillance, normalisation, assessment and ranking, which contribute toward the production of self-discipline and 'docility' (Foucault, 1995). In Chapter 7, I draw on Foucault's (1995) discussion of disciplinary power as enacted through several techniques to explore how participant practitioners exercise power and how they take specific positions to address how they account for their practices of 'learning through play'. Being at the core of the disciplinary practice, monitoring requires an effective instrument (Foucault, 1995). Referring to Spring Kindergarten (Chapter 7), *the Early learning and development guidelines: age 3 - 6* can be read as a disciplinary mechanism related to 'a field of surveillance' or 'hierarchical observation' (Foucault, 1995, p. 170) to monitor and improve teachers' performance as it would be constantly observed.

Furthermore, according to Foucault (1995), ranking is used not only to determine a kindergarten's worth but also as a disciplinary technique that gets individuals 'to be subjected, used, transformed and improved' (p. 136). That is to say, the education ranking system used by Spring Kindergarten is to normalise the kindergartens as having preferred forms of behaviours.

4.3.3 Cultural Capital

Foucault's and Bakhtin's theories are helpful for understanding the power relations and how participants account for their roles in learning through play, but it is Bourdieu who provides us with a sophisticated tool to analyse participants' narratives from the socio-cultural aspects in early years provision. Bourdieu's cultural capital concept is particularly suited to the elite kindergarten in Hong Kong selected for study in my research (Happy Lemon Kindergarten). In the Hong Kong case, I am interested in understanding how kindergarten staff understand and mobilise school-family-

community collaboration to facilitate children's learning. As introduced in Chapter 5, Happy Lemon Kindergarten is a university-based kindergarten with highly qualified teachers and upper-middle-class parents. Bourdieu's cultural capital theory implied students from prestigious status cultures enjoyed better communication with their teachers, leading to better educational achievement than their less privileged counterparts, in a phenomenon deemed cultural reproduction. For instance, parents as university professors at Happy Lemon Kindergarten can be read as an example of preserving and reproducing their knowledge, skills, attitudes and other cultural resources by using their own resources to cultivate children (Chapter 8). Here, I argue that Bourdieu's culture capital theory is useful for explaining parents' choice-making and cultural reproduction at Happy Lemon Kindergarten.

Bourdieu is one of the most important influencers in the sociology of education and his work has made a significant contribution to the conceptualisation of education in social theories (Lingard et al., 2005). Many research has employed Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital to analyse social inequalities among children coming from different social classes and to understand parental influence in education. The work on 'cultural capital' produced by Bourdieu and Passeron was first published in French in 1970, and later in English in 1977 as 'Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture', which caused great interest among educational scholars. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1990), the education system is conducive to elite and middle-class students and then reproduce and strengthen the existing social stratification system in society. They explain how middle-class students' behaviours are affected by their parents' social backgrounds and how it is consistent with the educational system: *the disposition which middle-class students or middle-rank teachers, and a fortiori, students whose fathers are middle rank teachers, manifest toward education – e.g. cultural willingness or esteem for hard work – cannot be understood unless the system of scholastic values is brought into relation with the middle class ethos, the principle of the value the middle classes set of scholastic values* (Bourdieu and Passeron, p.193).

Bourdieu (1986) divides cultural capital into three major forms: embodied, objectified and institutionalised. Embodied capital includes knowledge consciously acquired and passively inherited through the socialisation of culture and tradition. It is accepted that

embodied cultural capital is the attitudes, beliefs, and abilities that appear to come naturally to the holder. These attitudes, beliefs, and abilities are articulated and revealed very early in life and are internalised from the actions of parents or guardians.

Objectified capital exists in material objects or cultural goods such as writings, paintings, arts, monuments and scientific instruments and it can be transmitted for economic profit through embodied capital. Institutionalised capital is a form of capital that is made available through forms such as academic credentials, professional qualifications, honours and recognition (Bourdieu, 1986). In general, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital refers to a range of attributes including language skills, lifestyles, preferences (tastes, posture, clothing), manners, choices, educational qualifications, status and attitudes.

Apart from cultural capital, there are economic capital (that refers to material assets such as stock and income) and social capital (that is related to social networks) (Bourdieu, 1986). These two kinds of capital are not the focus of my study, so I will not describe them in details. Unlike economic capital, which can be converted into currency immediately, cultural capital is not transmissible (Bourdieu, 1986). But the capital accumulated internally over time as embodied assets (a person's character and way of thinking) can be converted later into other forms of capital. According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital can be transformed into economic capital:

It can immediately be seen that the link between economic and cultural capital is established through the mediation of the time needed for acquisition (p.247).

Here, Bourdieu believes that different forms of capital are related because economic capital can promote the accumulation of cultural capital, and vice versa. For example, Bourdieu (1986) mainly regards education as a form of cultural capital, which can be transformed into profit or success in the later stages of life, especially in the institutionalised form of educational qualifications. In other words, the achievement of a particular qualification in education is a resource of cultural value (cultural capital) which can then be exchanged for economic capital in the employment market over time. The key point is that capital enables one to grow capital (capital growth) through a series of exchange relations that occur through practice in a given field, thus always

reproducing a dominant position with prestige, power and more capital. More importantly, cultural capital cannot be understood separately from other forms of capital in understanding the advantage or disadvantage of specific individuals or social groups in society (Reay et al., 2005). In my study, Bourdieu's cultural capital theory offers insights into how the upper-middle-class parents (prestigious groups) reproduce and maximise their resources and capital at Happy Lemon Kindergarten.

4.3.4 Summary of the theoretical framework

I discussed in detail all the three key concepts: double voicing, power and discipline, cultural capital, which are going to be used for the analysis of this study. Throughout the analysis, I highlighted the intersection of these concepts and how they could be applied in each context. I argued that Bakhtin's (1981) double-voicing theory is useful for understanding the ways in which different social voices can exist within the same utterance in a dialogue. By using this theory, I have selected the utterances occurring through the voices of two teachers in order to explore teachers' roles in children's play and how teachers understand their role in children's play in this thesis.

I also argued that Foucault's concepts of power and discipline are significant for exploring how participants operate power in terms of implementing learning through play. For example, Foucault's power theory is particularly useful in indicating how teachers exercise their power to control children and how children are gradually compelled to regulate their behaviours toward becoming prepared for Primary One (Chapter 9). Finally, I also demonstrated the need for studying Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital in order to understand participants' narratives from the socio-cultural aspects in early years provision. I argued that Bourdieu's concepts are useful in the context of Hong Kong (Happy Lemon Kindergarten) for seeing how cultural capital influences children's learning experiences, parent's choice-making and cultural reproduction.

4.4 Chapter summary

This chapter has presented my thesis as a comparative and cross-cultural case study in

early childhood education with specific regard to learning through play. By comparing between and among Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore, this study hopes to shed light on how local cultures and histories enter into pedagogical philosophy and practices and demonstrates how Eastern and Western pedagogical frameworks work together. I provided a justification for using the work of three social theories of learning (Bakhtin, Foucault, Bourdieu) as the main analytical framework to explore how teachers understand and implement 'learning through play'. In the next chapter, I present the justification for using the qualitative research design employed in this study.

Chapter 5: Methodology

5.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter provides a detailed justification of the methodological orientation of my study. It starts with the rationale for the research design, in which an explanation for the choice of a qualitative research methodology, the selection of a descriptive case study design, and a rationale for the ontological and epistemological assumptions that informed the study are provided. The use of specific research methods, including interviews, observations and analysis of policy documents are justified. Then, the chapter moves to the introduction of the research process. This includes the pilot study, the main study which contains the description of sampling and participant information and a description of the languages used in materials collection. Further, I discuss the appropriateness of using discourse analysis and the procedure for analysis. I then present a discussion of the quality of the research and ethical issues. Finally, a reflection on the role of the researcher, and other relevant issues emerging from the research process, which may or may not influence the research results will be discussed.

5.2 Research design

This section discusses the approach taken in the research design of the study. An explanation for employing qualitative research, the ontological and epistemological perspectives which inform the study and the rationale for using the case study method are provided.

5.2.1 Rationale for qualitative research

The main aim of my study is to explore how teachers understand and implement ‘learning through play’ in practice in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore kindergartens. Originating from the research aims, the following research questions were developed to guide the research design:

1. How are educational policies on learning through play similar and different in

the three related territories?

2. How do teachers working in four early educational settings enact educational policies on ‘learning through play’?
3. How do teachers explain the meaning of ‘learning through play’?
4. How do teachers account for their roles in teaching ‘learning through play’?

According to Creswell (2009), the research design starts with ‘philosophical ideas’, also called paradigms (Lincoln & Guba, 2007; Mertens, 1998); ontologies and epistemologies (Crotty, 1998); or broadly understood as research methodologies (Neuman, 2009). There are two main philosophical ideas (paradigms): positivism and anti-positivism, informing and guiding social research (Cohen et al., 2007). The discrepancies between them lie in how social reality can be understood and how knowledge can be generated (Cohen et al., 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). These paradigm assumptions guide researchers’ actions when conducting the research.

My research is anti-positivist, since it subscribes to the idea that knowledge is socially and culturally constructed; moreover, it is based on the premise that individuals construct their own meaning through interactions with the world (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). To understand and explore teachers’ perceptions and practices of ‘learning through play’ in three territories, this research draws upon the interpretive paradigm that is concerned with understanding the world from individuals’ subjective experiences (Cohen et al., 2007). Specifically, kindergarten teachers’ understanding of ‘learning through play’ is socially and culturally constructed, and can be shaped by different cultural contexts. Additionally, the meaning of ‘learning through play’ can be better understood through my interactions as a researcher with the kindergarten teachers.

Based on the interpretive paradigm, this research adopted a qualitative approach for the purpose of exploring understandings, experiences, perceptions and practices in depth and detail. It has been widely acknowledged that quantitative methods and qualitative methods are the two main research approaches in social sciences.

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2011), generally speaking, the quantitative approach is more related to positivism and the normative paradigm, while the qualitative approach

is more often based on the anti-positivism and interpretative paradigm. Additionally, Creswell (2009) states that the quantitative approach is most often used to test a theory, measure variables and examine the relationship among variables. The qualitative approach, however, is usually adopted to seek an in-depth understanding of human experience and behaviour, connecting context with the explanation. This allows events, perceptions and actions to be adequately understood in context. Since my research questions are related to exploring and gaining an in-depth understanding of teachers' perspectives and practices with regard to 'learning through play' and connecting teachers' explanations with Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore contexts, a qualitative approach is considered appropriate.

5.2.2 Rationale for case study

Within the context of an interpretive paradigm, this research employed a descriptive case study research method to explore teachers' understandings and practices concerning the use of 'learning through play' in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore kindergartens. A case study approach is preferred to understand a complex issue as it illustrates 'what it is like' in a particular context and connects participants' experiences and feelings in the setting through 'thick description' (Geertz, 2008). I chose one kindergarten as a 'case' in both Hong Kong and Singapore, and two kindergartens in Mainland China. At the same time, such a research method could be said to have limitations, in particular, because it is not suitable for claims of representativeness and generalisation. However, my research is neither about representativeness nor generalisation. I intended to focus on the kindergarten teachers' understandings and practices of 'learning through play' itself, rather than what it may or may not represent. In other words, the situation observed in my study may not be representative or generalisable to the whole country, but the focus is beyond the situations themselves, that is to find out how these situations were interpreted by the accounts of kindergarten practitioners. Also, there are a small number of participants and settings, so this study does not claim to be 'representative'.

Specifically, how kindergarten teachers view and implement 'learning through play' is a core aim of my research, hence I decided to seek in-depth 'processes rather than

outcomes, in context rather in specific variables, in discovery rather than confirmation' (Merriam, 1998, p. 19). Similarly, Eysenck (1976) claimed 'sometimes we simply have to keep our eyes open and look carefully at individual cases--not in the hope of proving anything, but rather in the hope of learning something!' (p. 9). That is to say, the purpose of this study is to describe and analyse the features of 'learning through play' in specific contexts, rather than to produce general conclusions.

Moreover, the famous paper 'Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research' strongly rebuts the belief that 'one cannot generalise on the basis of a single case' by likening the strategic choice of cases to finding 'Black Swans' (Flyvbjerg, 2006, p. 12). Flyvbjerg (2006) corrected this misunderstanding by stating 'one can often generalise on the basis of a single case, and the case study may be central to scientific development via generalisation as supplement or alternative to other methods.' (p. 12). Inspired by this essay, along with possible connection to 'Asia as method' (Chen, 2010), the case studies presented in this research can be used as supplementary references or resources for multiplying curriculum and pedagogy frames of reference in other contexts.

5.2.3 Ontology and epistemology

Ontology deals with what constitutes reality and whether reality can be learned from a subjective or objective view (Bryman, 2016). In other words, ontology is about what people see as reality and how they interpret things. Cohen et al. (2007) also state that ontology is related to people's belief systems and how people's beliefs affect the way they explain what they see. I adopted a subjective view, since, the kindergarten practitioners in this study, social reality is constructed differently by their personal values and experiences of 'learning through play'.

At the same time, my subjective ontology influenced my epistemological position. Epistemology is the nature of knowledge (Walliman, 2006) or the theory of knowledge (Creswell, 2009; Williams, 2006). Denzin and Lincoln (2011) explain that 'epistemology asks how do I know the world? What is the relationship between the inquirer and the known?' (2011, p.91). As I have mentioned earlier, my research is based on the interpretive paradigm; I believe kindergarten practitioners' perceptions of

reality – as well as my own - are based on their understandings and experiences in different societal contexts, rather than on a single unitary reality.

5.3 Research method

Informed by employing a qualitative research approach linked with thick description, three main methods were used to collect materials in this research, semi-structured interviews, observations and analysis of policy documents, which will be discussed sequentially.

5.3.1 Interviews with kindergarten practitioners

An interview approach was selected for this study to explore how ‘learning through play’ is perceived by kindergarten practitioners as it enables researchers to document participants’ perspectives, that is, their accounts of their feelings, thoughts and experiences in depth (Cohen et al., 2007). An interview enables interviewers and interviewees to discuss their interpretations of the world and to express how they regard situations from their own understanding of the phenomenon (Cohen et al., 2007). In addition, interviewing is a powerful tool as it provides for greater depth than other methods of data collection.

Based on the objectives of my study and the characteristics of different types of interviews, I decided to use two types of interviews including semi-structured interviews and informal conversations. In order to gather sufficient depth of information, a semi-structured interview was used to encourage kindergarten practitioners to be more flexible and expansive in expanding their views and reactions. The semi-structured interview was carried out with each kindergarten practitioner to explore their understandings and experience of ‘learning through play’ as well as their accounts of how they implement ‘learning through play’ in each setting. A set of interview questions was prepared beforehand to guide the interview process (see Appendix I). Each interview lasted approximately between half and one hour in offices or classrooms for convenience. At the same time, some informal conversations took place when it is convenient for the kindergarten practitioners to supplement the information gained from

semi-structured interviews. All interviews were recorded using audio recording equipment with the consent of kindergarten practitioners.

5.3.2 Observations

The second method I planned to use was observation because it was not enough merely to interview the participants' perspectives of 'learning through play' because I also intended to find out how 'learning through play' was implemented in each setting, how the teachers interact with the children and the teacher's role in terms of 'learning through play'. According to Marshall and Rossman (2014), observation is a powerful tool for qualitative research as it enables researchers to collect richly detailed data and provides opportunities for viewing or participating in a wide range of activities. In addition, Cohen et al. (2007) explain that the most outstanding characteristics of observation are that it allows investigators to collect 'live' data from natural situations, at the same time, it enables researchers to observe directly what is taking place rather than basing on second-hand accounts. Similarly, as Robson (2002) points out, what people do may differ from what they say about what they have done, so, observation provides a reality check on materials collected from observations of teachers' practices in the classroom and what the teachers say in interviews.

The observations were more or less unstructured, informed by the research aims. At the beginning of the observation in each setting, I used the first day to get myself familiarised with the physical environment, the daily routines, the pedagogy and curriculum, and the practitioners and children. Then in the following days of observations, I played the role of participant-observer by appropriately participating in their activities as I attempted to gather first-hand accounts of teachers' perspectives and behaviours of 'learning through play'. Sometimes, a voice recorder was used as it was difficult to take notes during activities. The observation materials were recorded mainly by using Bogdan and Biklen's (2006) description of field notes consisting of the setting, people, actions and conversations as observed and further supplemented by daily fieldwork diaries which I wrote at the end of each fieldwork day.

According to Cohen et al. (2007), there are two main types of observation: participant

observation and non-participant observation. The former means researchers take on an inside role in the group activities they set out to observe and the latter means researchers stand aside from the group activities and their investigation and function are without participating (Cohen et al., 2007). Specifically, during the first few days, I mainly played the role of a non-participant, keeping a distance from the group activities without interacting with the participants (Cohen et al., 2007) as I wanted to minimise the potential impact and interruption I might bring to the regular activities. Within a few days, my role as a non-participant observer gradually changed to a participant-observer since I had become more familiar with the setting and had built a relationship with the participants. I became aware of when, what and how I could help the teachers and children and participate in their activities. At the same time, in order to minimise the potential impacts and interruption of my involvement in each setting, I paid particular attention not to affect how the teachers intervened with children.

5.3.3 Policy documents

In order to comprehensively understand my research questions, I also used relevant policy, curriculum plans and kindergarten education guidelines and regulations to contextualise my study. According to Bowen (2009), documentary analysis is a useful and beneficial method to contextualise most research as documents provide background information. Therefore, a number of documents including national curriculum guidelines, policy statements and kindergarten curriculum plans were analysed to inform the political and educational contexts of three territories. The analysis of policy documents is also an important part of triangulation, which Bowen (2009) describes as a means of providing a confluence of evidence that breeds credibility. These three different sources and methods, interviews, observations and analysis of policy documents were used.

5.4 Research process

This section outlines the research process and particular procedures, including the pilot study and the main study (gaining permission from the participants, details of sampling and gathering research materials).

5.4.1 Pilot study

The research process comprised a pilot study as well as the main study. According to Van Teijlingen and Hundley (2002), a pilot study is a preliminary small-scale study carried out to prepare for the main study. I conducted the pilot study before the main study with the purpose of practising my research skills and testing the appropriateness of the research design and methods for collecting materials in practice.

The pilot study lasting one week was conducted in September 2017 in a public kindergarten in Finland. The kindergarten was selected as it emphasised play in its curriculum and it was accessible to me when I attended the summer school in that city. During the pilot study, semi-structured interviews were carried out with three kindergarten practitioners including the kindergarten principal and two classroom teachers, and the observations were conducted from the beginning to the end of the school day, with particular attention to play. Each interview was conducted in English and lasted about half an hour, which was a second (or more) language for both me and the participants. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and then analysed together with observation field notes. The interview questions and observations were tested in the pilot study.

The pilot study provided ideas for the development of my main study. I revised my interview questions and adjusted the material collection techniques. Specifically, I changed the way of formulating interview questions from the formal written style to a conversational style in order to help the interviewees better understand the topic. I also added informal conversations to supplement the information gained from the formal interviews as I sometimes gathered more detailed and rich materials by casually talking with kindergarten practitioners. In terms of observations, I found it was really helpful if I participated in activities such as dancing together, playing an allocated role in the game, and helping prepare the food for children. So, I decided to gradually change my role from a non-participant observer to a participant observer.

5.4.2 Main study

The main study was undertaken between November 2017 and January 2018 in Hong Kong, Mainland China and Singapore. I present the sampling process and the four settings in which the research was conducted below.

5.4.2.1 Sampling

Purposive sampling is widely used in qualitative research to select information-rich samples according to research approach, questions and aims (Patton, 2002). As the aim of this study is to understand teachers' perspectives of 'learning through play' and how teachers implement it into their practice, purposive sampling was used to facilitate in-depth understandings. I sought assistance from my supervisor and friends who work in the field of early childhood education to find suitable kindergartens for my research. Access to the purposive sample was gained through a mixture of personal and academic contacts. For example, the setting selected in Hong Kong was through academic works, introduced by my supervisor's contact working at the Modern University (pseudonym). The other three settings were arranged through my personal network. To be more specific, the Anji Jiguan and the Spring Kindergarten settings were introduced by my friend who works as a researcher in Chinese early childhood education, and the Singaporean setting was contacted through an associate who works as a research fellow in the field of early childhood education at a university in the UK.

I used several criteria for purposive sampling. Firstly, I wanted to find settings where the curriculum was related to play. For example, in Mainland China, the Anji Jiguan Kindergarten was chosen as it has a well-known reputation for play-based curriculum while the Hangzhou setting was selected for its provincial award for its fairy-tale curriculum. The Hong Kong case focuses on balancing purposeful play and free play. However, typical sampling was used for recruitment of the Singapore setting whose curriculum might be considered as involving a lack of play. I had identified that this kindergarten could be considered as a standard one after I visited five kindergartens in Singapore. I had also been told by my contact who owns the above-mentioned five kindergartens that the majority of kindergartens in Singapore were very similar to the

one I chose.

Secondly, the setting needed to function as an education centre for children before primary school. The sample kindergartens needed to provide a regular class schedule from Monday to Friday. In this sense, the day-care centres in Singapore that look after children aged from 0 to 2 years old and after school clubs in Hong Kong and Mainland China are not considered in my study.

Thirdly, as the potential participants were expected to work as full-time staff, part-time or subject kindergarten practitioners were not considered. The age of the children was expected to be 5-6 years old as they were considered to be preparing for primary school. I explored how 'learning through play' was implemented for these children. However, I expanded the age range to include 3-4- year-old in children in Singapore due to limitations in finding play sessions at the kindergarten.

5.4.2.2 Settings and participants

In the tables and paragraphs below, I introduce the key settings and some information about participants. Names of the settings and the practitioners were anonymised by using pseudonyms where necessary, to protect the anonymity and confidentiality of the informants and kindergartens. However, Anji Jiguan Kindergarten is an exception, as it retains its own name rather than being replaced with a pseudonym, since Anji Play is becoming a well-known international brand and the kindergarten wanted to be named.

Anji Jiguan Kindergarten

Anji Jiguan Kindergarten is a well-known government-owned kindergarten located in Anji Country, Zhejiang Province, China. It was built in 1983. It won provincial and national level awards for creating Anji Play approach. This approach emphasises teacher observation, carefully designed play materials and an open-ended environment, and school-family collaboration. Currently, there are over 15,124 children aged from 3 to 6 years old in 130 public kindergartens in Anji County where this approach is employed (Coffino & Bailey, 2019). Anji Jiguan Kindergarten is the largest one, serving over 700

children (3-6 years old) coming from different social and economic backgrounds.

At Anji Jiguan Kindergarten, children are normally allocated into three classes according to their age: stage one (3-4 years old), stage two (4-5 years old) and stage three (5-6 years old). One class of stage three (5-6 years old) was selected to carry out observations in this study. There are about 30 children with two classroom teachers (Teacher A and Teacher B) in this class. I interviewed both of them, each for nearly one hour. Teacher A has worked in Anji Jiguan Kindergarten for nearly 15 years since she graduated from college while Teacher B has worked in the current kindergarten for almost 3 years. What is more, Teacher A currently plays the role of the vice-principal, in charge of the curriculum for the whole kindergarten. As a result, her interview was widely used in the analysis due to her rich experience in the Anji curriculum.

In addition, I was informed by the principal that a novice teacher usually works with an experienced teacher in a class, which was treated as part of the novice teacher' training. The same phenomenon was found in the setting of Hangzhou and Hong Kong as well. Through analysis, it has been found that the novice teachers' experience appeared to be more or less affected by the experienced teachers. At the same time, I also got the chance to have some informal conversations with the principal and the founder of Anji Play. I have included the field notes of these informal conversations in the analysis of this research for a more diversified picture of 'learning through play'.

Spring Kindergarten

Spring Kindergarten is a government-owned kindergarten located in Gongshu district in Hangzhou established in 2012. The kindergarten has 13 classes divided into three age stages (3-4-year-old stage one, 4-5-year-old stage two, 5-6-year-old stage three). Each class has 32 children, in total 416 children aged 3-6 years old are at the kindergarten. The kindergarten comprises 12 play centres, along with 12 different fairy tales (see Appendix VII) to promote children's emotion, attitude, ability, knowledge, and skills development based on their interests and different age stages.

A class of children (5-6 years old) in stage three was selected as the arena in which to

conduct my research. As mentioned earlier, one experienced teacher and one novice teacher work together in this class. Teacher C had 21 years' work experience as a kindergarten teacher, and holds a bachelor's degree. Teacher D had been a kindergarten teacher for nearly 3 years and he has worked in Spring kindergarten since he graduated from university. In addition, Teacher D was the only male kindergarten teacher involved in my study. The discourse of gender issues in early childhood education was identified through the analysis of his account. Additionally, I interviewed the kindergarten principal who has been the principal of Spring Kindergarten for five years, and had ten years' work experience as a kindergarten principal in total.

Happy Lemon Kindergarten

Happy Lemon Kindergarten is a self-funding and university-based kindergarten, registered with the Department of Early Childhood Education at the Modern University (pseudonym) in Hong Kong. It is a half-day and full-day kindergarten, providing education for about 180 children aged from one to six years old. The centre provides a Questioning-Exploration-Experience orientated curriculum, developing collaboration between family, school and community.

The class in which I carried out my research had 16 children (of 5-6 years old), with two classroom teachers (Teacher E and Teacher F). Differing from other kindergartens participating in my research, it was a half-day kindergarten starting from 8:30 am and finishing at 12:00 am. The kindergarten assigns teachers to 16 children in the morning and another 16 children in the afternoon.

Four participants were interviewed, namely Principal B, Deputy C, Teacher E (an experienced teacher) and Teacher F (a novice teacher). Principal B was a senior early childhood educator, with nearly thirty years' work experience in early childhood education. Deputy C had twelve years' work experience at the kindergarten, and holds a Master's degree. Teacher E had eight years' work experience as a kindergarten teacher. She had a Master's degree and had worked at Happy Lemon Kindergarten after she graduated from the Modern University of Hong Kong. Teacher F had been a kindergarten teacher for nearly two years and had worked at Happy Lemon Kindergarten

since she graduated from the Modern University of Hong Kong, the same university as Teacher E. Compared with the other three settings, the way the teachers spoke here was more academic. This was evident and can be seen in the interview transcriptions.

Green Apple Centre

Green Apple Centre is a privately-run kindergarten located in the northern part of Singapore. The kindergarten has 4 classes: Nursery 1 (N1, aged from 2-3), Nursery 2 (N2, aged from 3-4), Kindergarten 1 (K1, aged from 4-5) and Kindergarten 2 (K2, aged from 5-6). The centre is a full-day kindergarten, providing education for about 45 children.

There were approximately 10 children (5-6 years old) and two classroom teachers in the class that I mainly observed. Teacher G was in charge of the subject of Chinese, and she had been working at the current kindergarten for almost 20 years while Teacher H had been teaching the subject of English for 5 years. As a result, Teacher G's interviews were widely used in the analysis due to her rich experience in the Green Apple Centre. It could be seen that the curriculum for children (5-6 years old) was closely connected to Primary One. In addition, I also observed the other three classes in the current centre for the purpose of gathering more activities referred to as play with the encouragement of Principal C. She had been the principal of the current kindergarten for 2 years, and has 7 years' work experience as a kindergarten principal in total.

Table 1 Participants' background information

Setting	Participants	Position	Work experience	Qualifications
Anji Jiguan Kindergarten	Teacher A	Vice-principal	15 yrs	Bachelor
	Teacher B	Assistant practitioner	3 yrs	Bachelor
Spring Kindergarten	Teacher C	Leading practitioner	21 yrs	Bachelor
	Teacher D	Assistant practitioner	3 yrs	Bachelor
	Principal A	Principal	10 yrs	Master
Happy Lemon Kindergarten	Teacher E	Leading practitioner	8 yrs	Master
	Teacher F	Assistant practitioner	2 yrs	Bachelor
	Deputy C	Curriculum director	12 yrs	Master
	Principal B	Principal	30 yrs	Master
Green Apple Centre	Teacher G	Leading practitioner	20 yrs	Bachelor
	Teacher H	Assistant practitioner	5 yrs	Bachelor
	Principal C	Principal	7yrs	Master

Table 2 Information about the setting

Territory	Mainland China		Hong Kong	Singapore
Kindergartens	Anji Jiguan Kindergarten	Spring Kindergarten	Happy Lemon Kindergarten	Green Apple centre
Type	Public	Public	Private	Private
Number of children	720	416	180	45
Classes	Lower-level Class: 3-4 yrs; Middle-level Class: 4-5 yrs; Upper-level Class: 5-6 yrs;	Lower-level Class: 3-4 yrs; Middle-level Class: 4-5 yrs; Upper-level Class: 5-6 yrs;	K1 (Nursery): 3-4 yrs; K2 (Lower Class): 4-5 yrs; K3 (Upper Class): 5-6 yrs;	N2 (Nursery): 3-4 yrs; K1 (Lower Class): 4-5 yrs; K2 (Upper-level Class): 5-6 yrs;
Class size and teacher-child ratio	There are about 30 children with 2 teachers.	There are about 30-40 children with two teachers and one 'care' practitioner.	There are about 15 children with 2 teachers.	There are about 15 children with 1 teacher.
Language(s) of instruction	Mandarin	Mandarin	Cantonese English	English
Note	Anji Paly is an outdoor play-based pedagogy, through which children freely choose unique materials (blocks, planks, ladders, barrels and climbing cubes, tyres... designed by Anji educators) to play with in an open-ended environment. Children interpret their experiences and discoveries during a daily reflective sharing session.	Spring Kindergarten adopts the fairy tale-based activities programme, which emphasizes children's exploring experience and freedom, and respects children's psychological and physical development. The kindergarten has 12 play centres, along with 12 different fairy tales to promote children's emotion, attitude, ability, knowledge, and skills development based on their interests and different age stages.	The Happy Lemon Kindergarten provides a Questioning- Exploration- Experience orientated curriculum, developing collaboration between family, school and community.	Green Apple Centre is an academic focused learning centre, emphasising children for a smooth transition to primary school.

5.4.3 Language for materials collection

The interview materials were collected in Mandarin, except for one interview in English in Singapore with Principal C. There are three teaching languages at the kindergartens involved in this research: Mandarin in Mainland China, Cantonese in Hong Kong and English in Singapore. I tried to minimise the cross-language impact on this research since I am not familiar with Cantonese and English is my second language. In this sense, Mandarin was chosen as the communication language for collecting materials in the Hong Kong setting; moreover, I seized any opportunity to informally talk with the two classroom teachers in the Hong Kong setting to gain an in-depth and accurate understanding of the setting. Although I believe that my familiarity with English was able to minimise the cross-language impact on this research, careful attention was paid to the translation and analysis.

5.4.4 Transcription and translation

In the beginning, I transcribed all of Teacher A' interviews and translated half of the transcriptions as I wanted to examine the application of discourse analysis to know which kind of information is needed to construct the analysis. I found out that the task of translating was demanding, and I realised that it was not necessary to translate all the interview transcription just the parts that could answer my research questions. For the remaining participant-practitioner interviews, I listened to the audio recording of each interview extensively (all in Mandarin, except one in English) and then transcribed them all into Mandarin, but only translated some particular parts into English for analysis which corresponded in some way to the idea of cross-national comparative study or were significant to the research questions for analysis.

The interview materials were transcribed in Chinese initially and then translated into English. Culturally and linguistically, English and Chinese are two very different languages and thus translating the participants' interviews from Chinese into English presented a significant challenge. Hennink (2008) argues that translating qualitative data across languages is a significant challenge that requires competency in both languages. In addition, Temple and Young (2004) point out that it is difficult for researchers to fully

understand the meaning of any language. Moreover, challenges may occur when equivalent meaning in the source language cannot be found in the target languages (Esposito, 2001). The conceptual equivalence of words between Chinese and English is a key concern in the current research. As a native Chinese-speaking student who has studied in the UK for six years and who speaks Mandarin fluently, I was able to translate the participants' interviews from Chinese into English competently. During the translation process, I found that it was impossible to maintain the word-by-word translation of the quotes, as this kind of literal meaning sometimes did not make sense in English and it was necessary instead to translate what I interpreted to be the essence of the meaning. Thus, rather than doing a word-by-word translation, I translated the Chinese interviews into English by using meaning-based translation (Esposito, 2001).

Bearing this in mind, in terms of translating the equivalent terms and words from Chinese into English, I constantly took the social-cultural context embodied in the use of language into consideration. In addition, I felt like my role as the interviewer enabled me to gain some access into how participants chose the words based on their own contexts, which also helped me when translating their interviews. In order to make sure the translated materials were as accurate as possible; I asked a Chinese professional translator about my translations of specific concepts that I had in the interview materials to validate their accuracy. This person confirmed my translations were accurate representations of the Chinese interview materials. Also, I discussed with a native British English speaker their understanding of options for rendering key terms into English when there were multiple terms and I used this to inform my choice of terms in English to most accurately convey their meanings.

5.5 Analysis

The aim of this study is to explore early childhood practitioners' understandings and implementations of 'learning through play' in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore, and focus on the discourses that are significant in the materials (policy texts, interview transcripts and observations). The literature review (see Chapter 2) has described how the issue of educational policy and practices of 'learning through play' has come to be constructed as a social problem. In addition, the research questions

indicate that the emphasis is on the way that these particular issues are represented in written and spoken texts, and how these issues are constructed discursively by a range of social actors. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) was chosen as the preferred method of analysis to meet the aims of this study. The following section will present the definition of CDA and justify its application.

5.5.1 Critical discourse analysis

There are many different types of discourse analysis and these draw on a wide range of theoretical traditions in social theory (Titscher et al., 2000). Wodak (2011) points out that 'CDA is the analysis of linguistic and semiotic aspects of social processes and problems' (p. 17). CDA views the use of language and discourse as a form of social practice (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997), and recognises there is a relationship between discourse and society, where discourse shapes society and at the same time is shaped by social practices (Fairclough, 2003). In addition, Fairclough (1989) claims that the discourses are analysed by referring to a list of values and norms, identifying where those values and norms are, or are not adhered to. Similarly, Rogers (2017) states that CDA aims to integrate social theories and discourse analysis to describe and explain the ways discourses are constructed and represented by the social world. The purpose of CDA is to explore how the representations and meanings of the world, social relationships and social identities are constructed in texts (Taylor, 2004). Wodak and Meyer (2009) suggest that the role of CDA is to analyse relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control through a critical lens. CDA provides a theoretical framework for the in-depth exploration of how texts are constructed in the social, political and economic contexts. This study is concerned with understanding the experiences of early childhood practitioners and as stated these should be viewed as part of a dialectical relationship. Therefore, it is necessary to analyse both the understandings and implementations of 'learning through play' of practitioners as the discursive event, and the situation within which they are framed. Having explored the concept of CDA and the various approaches within it, this study adopts Fairclough's approach, along with Foucauldian discourse analysis and some other social theories (such as Bakhtinian and Bourdieusian ideas) to conduct the analysis.

5.5.2 Procedures for analysis

For analysing the materials, framed by my research questions, the study adopted Fairclough's critical discourse analysis framework where policy documents, interviews and observations with participants were read for significant information, which was then constructed referring to the historical, social, and cultural contexts to identify the underlying meanings.

Fairclough (1989) offers a three-stage model of CDA. In Fairclough's view, every event includes three dimensions: a text (speech, writing, visual images, or a combination of these); a discursive practice that involves the production and consumption of texts, and social practice (Fairclough, 1989). Along with the three dimensions of discourse, Fairclough developed three stages of CDA:

1. Description, which is concerned with formal properties of the text, including vocabulary, grammar and textual structure;
2. Interpretation, which is concerned with the relationship between text and interaction;
3. Explanation, which is concerned with the relationship between interaction and social context;

(Fairclough, 1989, p. 26)

According to Fairclough (1989), the first step of CDA is to identify and describe language features present within the text. Language features of the text are to be explored in a vocabulary section that deals with the choice of different words, a grammar section that deals with grammatical features, and a textual structures section which deals with the ways words and phrases are linked together (Fairclough, 1989). The second step of Fairclough's CDA includes asking questions about discourse type, presuppositions, context and difference and considering changes that occur in each text (Fairclough, 1989). According to Fairclough (1989), 'interpretation is concerned with the relationship between text and interaction with seeing the text as the product of a process of production, and as resource in the process of interpretation' (p. 26). In the second (interpretation) stage, the emphasis is in the analysis of the relationship between

the discourse and its production and its consumption (Fairclough, 1989). The third stage is to analyse the texts referring to their historical, social and cultural contexts. According to Fairclough (1989), 'Explanation is concerned with the relationship between interaction and social context with the social determination of the process of production and interpretation, and their social effects' (p. 26). In the third stage, factors like ideology or power are taken into account so as to fully explain the interaction between social-cultural context and the production and consumption of texts. The above three-stage model offers a spectrum of analytical categories that enables me to identify, describe and capture the major concerns of the participants regarding 'learning through play'.

When coding the materials, I try to look beyond the binarism (the West versus the non-West) and discover new possibilities for detailed analysis and evaluation by using two analytical strategies: inter-referencing and critical syncretism. In undertaking 'Asia as method' (Chen, 2010), first of all, I acknowledged Western knowledge as part of global knowledge production and its dominant position in present-day early childhood education, followed by recognising local histories, cultures and traditions in the process of world knowledge production (Chinese traditional cultures, including the Confucius heritage), and finally analysing teachers' understandings and practices in three territories, noting different or similar discourses to build knowledge and theories that are useful not only in Asian contexts but also elsewhere.

I also draw on some social theories to analyse the materials. Throughout the four analysis chapters, I have employed Foucauldian discourse analysis. According to Allen (2012), although Foucault's works are not specific on modern educational issues, he gives the suggestion to select relevant theories from his writings and recommends not applying these techniques in a uniform way, and this is considered by others as a Foucauldian 'toolbox' from which users can choose a tool and decide its purpose. In my analysis, I paid particular attention to the notion of disciplinary power that indicates several techniques of power such as examination, ranking, assessment, surveillance or normalisation which existed with the purpose of creating 'docile bodies' (1995), and whenever needed, I combine Foucault's concepts with other theoretical inspirations.

To be more specific, in Chapter 6 (Anji Jiguan case), Bakhtin's (1981) double-voicing theory was used to analyse the main characteristics of the Anji approach, and Foucault's (1995) 'docile bodies' theory was adopted to explicitly indicate how teachers step back and take the role of an observer. In Chapter 7 (Spring Kindergarten), I drew on Foucault's (1995) power theory, along with Davies and Harré's (1990) positioning theory, to explore how participant practitioners exercise power and how they take specific positions in implementing 'learning through play', in Chapter 8 (the Hong Kong case), I employed Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital to analyse how kindergarten staff understand and mobilise school- family-community collaboration to facilitate children's learning. Finally, the analysis of Chapter 9 (the Singapore case) again adopted Foucault's power theory to highlight 'purposeful play', which is particularly useful in indicating how teachers exercise their power to control children and how children are gradually compelled to regulate their behaviours toward becoming prepared for Primary One. The analysis of this thesis was informed by these abovementioned social theories to develop a postcolonial framework which would incorporate both local and global ideas.

5.6 Considering the quality of research

In adopting a critical discourse analytic approach, which is in some ways anti- humanist in looking at what language does rather than what people mean by their language, the use of the terms (e.g. trustworthiness, reliability and validity) implying a humanist approach, becomes problematic. According to Morse (1999), such terms are commonly associated with a positivist paradigm. Within the positivist context, these terms are used to judge whether or not this research is able to produce valid knowledge or fundamental truths (Kvale, 1995). In this study, in contrast to the positivist perspective of the world in which language is considered to simply reflect a truth, I drew upon critical discourse analysis that is in some ways anti-humanist, concerning how 'all spoken and written communication' are assembled (Langdrige & Hagger-Johnson, 2004, p. 323). I present four criteria (credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability) as alternatives to terms such as trustworthiness, reliability and validity suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1982), along with other criteria by which I want this thesis to be judged.

One of the main tasks of qualitative research is to capture complexity (Tracy, 2010). The case study approach that I used in my thesis supported me to gather rich materials that represented the complexity of participants' understanding and implementation of 'learning through play'. Using more than one source of material to strengthen the interpretation of the research (Miles & Huberman, 1994) also contributes to the quality of the current study. I used three different methods to collect materials, including interview, observation, and policy documents that provided a fuller picture of kindergarten teachers' perceptions and practice of 'learning through play' in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore. The use of these three kinds of materials were mobilised to look for contradictions or consistencies in the interpretations and analyses.

To ensure credibility, during the interview, I checked with the participants by asking them to point out if any of my questions were unclear and to make sure that they understood my questions correctly and that I had captured their ideas as accurately as possible. In addition, interviews were undertaken individually with the open-ended questions that limited the possibility that my personal experience might influence the questions asked. Furthermore, a summary of the participants' main transcripts were checked with them for comments and verification of their accuracy. Regarding dependability, there were a number of measures I took, including a thick description of participants and settings, methods for collecting materials, approaches to analysis and issues that emerged from the process. All interviews were consistently audio recorded and transcribed systematically, which provided a dependable representation (Cameron, 2011). For transparency, the materials and the procedure for generating the materials were prepared for the audit. Confirmability is suggested by Guba and Lincoln (1982) as a criterion of neutrality. During the process of analysis, I tried to introduce a balance to avoid over-interpretation (Anderson, 2010). I constantly went back to the audio recording to check that what I interpreted was there. Transferability was used to judge the extent to which the analysis can be applied to other contexts (Guba & Lincoln, 1982), and the current study brought about a broader understanding of kindergarten teachers' perspectives of 'learning through play'. It has been found that transferability was applied as I situated the contribution to knowledge not only in Asian countries but also in the world.

5.7 Ethics

The issue of ethics is important in all kinds of research, especially in educational research as it studies human beings, their relationships and behaviour (Bryman, 2016). Researchers experience and observe a code of ethics, such as protecting participants' rights through informed consent, privacy, anonymity and confidentiality (Cohen, et al. 2007) in the process of collecting materials, analysis and reporting to ensure that the research is conducted appropriately.

I gained ethical approval from the School of Environment, Education and Development at the University of Manchester (see Appendix IV) to carry out this research. My research was conducted in four different settings in three territories, where they had different ethical requirements.

5.7.1 Gaining access to research settings

I began the process of negotiating initial consent for my doctoral research by contacting the school principal/centre manager/institution creator acting as the main gatekeepers of the kindergartens selected for my study. They all gave me permission either orally or by sending me a confirmation email. My research focused on the teachers rather than the children, hence no permission was needed from parents or children directly. Information sheets were distributed to the children's parents for them to know my research topic, aims and period for collecting materials. During the consultation with the gatekeepers, I explained the aims and scope of the research, including the criteria for selecting children: 5-6 years old, just one year prior to attending primary school. Also, I explained no pictures would be taken and no interviews with children would be conducted as children were not the focus of my study to their kindergartens.

5.7.2 Informed consent and confidentiality

Informed consent was obtained from practitioners to participate in my research by providing participant information sheets and consent forms (see Appendix III). They were also well informed about their rights to refuse to take part in or withdraw at any

stage of my research without explanation. They were invited to be able to ask me any questions in relation to my research throughout my visits.

To protect the privacy of the participants, the names of the settings and of the participants were all replaced with pseudonyms where necessary. The Anji Jiguan Kindergarten was the exception here since it aims to improve its impact nationally and internationally since 2015, and is so well known as to be impossible to disguise. For example, the Anji Jiguan Kindergarten attracted people coming from different provinces of China to visit because of its famous curriculum. Teachers and children were so used to having their pictures taken or being recorded by visitors for publicity purposes. I was also asked and encouraged by the kindergarten principal to take pictures or videos during my field trip. As the organisation wanted to be researched and publicly known, I used its real name in my research. Furthermore, participants were assured that all the interview transcripts and observation field notes would be kept anonymised and would only be used for research purposes.

5.8 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is a process of reflection on the way in which research is conducted and understanding how the process of doing research affects its findings (Hardy et al., 2001). I have justified my philosophical positioning in relation to my research at the beginning of this chapter. It has also been recognised that the researcher's own situation in the research, such as his/her experience, background and the place they live may sometimes affect their research practice (Hesse-Biber, 2007). Thus, I consider it important to provide an explicit account of my background and my experience of the research processes.

The first reflection is about my personal background and experience. My family runs a private school from primary level to senior high school level in Zhejiang province; moreover, it aims to open a kindergarten due to the abolition of the one-child policy and the encouragement of the two children policy. I was offered the chance to visit many kindergartens when working for my family business. In addition, my interest in early childhood education was further developed, especially around curriculum, when I

studied my Master's degree at the University of Glasgow. What is more, inspired by my main supervisor's introduction of 'Asia as method' (Chen, 2010), Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore were chosen as the location in which to carry out the research. Chen's book *Asia as method* encourages East Asian countries to become each other's reference points, in the hope that this might invite attention to a different sense of Asia (Chen, 2010). Specifically, the three territories share some similarities in relation to their education systems, such as an examination-driven education system, high expectations from parents, teacher authority, and so on. At the same time, Hong Kong has both Chinese cultural heritage and follows the British education systems, while Singapore has almost 80% Chinese ethnicity and emphasises education as an economic strategy (Sun & Rao, 2017).

The second reflection is related to my identity as a PhD student (novice researcher), in a British university, that may have some effect on this study. Practitioners sometimes asked for my comments or advice on their curriculum, teaching approaches, or future development of the setting. For example, the principal of Anji Jiguan Kindergarten invited me to attend their seminars to share my perspectives with the teachers. This experience provided me with an in-depth understanding of teachers' accounts of their roles in children's play. In Singapore, the owner of the school sought my comments about their curriculum in front of Principal C, which made Principal C a little bit uncomfortable. Similarly, Principal A of the Hangzhou setting introduced me as a PhD student the first time I started my classroom observation to the teachers. It seemed I was, then, to be considered as an 'expert', which might bring about some pressure on them. Bearing this in mind, interviews were usually conducted at the end of my visits in order to allow myself to be more familiar with the kindergarten teachers. In general, I did not recognise any specific examples of inhibition or negative pressure that might affect the quality of the study; further, all the interviews and observations were carried out in a comfortable and friendly environment.

The third reflection refers to audio recording equipment. All the interviews were recorded smoothly in Mainland China and Hong Kong, except in Singapore. In Anji Jiguan Kindergarten, it has already been identified that both practitioners and children were so used to cameras, video recorder or voice recorder due to the popularity of

national and international visits. In the beginning, I doubted that children might behave differently in front of the camera. In fact, since children and practitioners operated in an environment which was visited by people most of the school days, so they got used to the situation, and the way they behaved could be recognised the likely to be the same as that there were no visitors. As I have mentioned earlier, the Singapore case was an exception as Principal C and teachers appeared to be a little bit reluctant to be recorded at the beginning of my visit. In this sense, therefore I made notes and did not record them when conducting the interview. Finally, they changed from not being willing to be recorded the interviews to supporting my research by inviting me to record anything that they could provide. I think lunchtime talking and informal conversations provided us with a good opportunity to get to know each other, which, to a large extent, helped teachers to release their nerves and accept the recording.

5.9 Limitations

There are two main limitations to this study. The first limitation of the study comes from the misunderstanding about the case study. According to Merriam (1998), the case study is about investigating a certain phenomenon in a particular context, the idea of generalisability of such case studies is almost impossible. As Flyvbjerg (2006) and Shenton (2004) argue, each individual case study has its own uniqueness, so that researchers and practitioners in similar situations can refer to aspects of each case study to apply to their own contexts. In this research, the case studies are related to specific cultural contexts, and it is hoped that early childhood educators, practitioners and policy makers in other similar contexts will find them useful in terms of reference, comparison and development within their own situation.

The second limitation of the study exists in the purposive sampling. Clearly, this does not represent the entire population of kindergarten teachers of the selected settings, but rather focuses on a small sample limited to 12 participants who agreed to participate in the research. Similarly, although the criteria to choose these four early childhood settings from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore have been explained previously, it is important to say that kindergartens were selected from one certain geographical location in each country, which might have an effect when looking from a

broader view to the situation within these territories. Thus, it might be difficult to make broad conclusions about the wider population based on this type of small sample. However, the main aim was to have a thorough description from an in- depth analysis of the experiences of a small number of early childhood practitioners who are the focus of this case study. I would claim, therefore, that the current study can provide open and rich opinions through those participants who voluntarily agreed to participate.

5.10 Chapter summary

In summary, this chapter has described the rationale for the interpretative methodology employed in this study. It explained how I designed the research and went about gathering and analysing qualitative materials. The design for this thesis used a case study approach to carry out an in-depth cross-culture study of a small sample of early childhood practitioners in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore. I further discussed how the analyses of the research could be improved such as the limitations of sampling and participants. In the chapters that follow, presentations of analyses from the policy documents, interviews and observations which seek to explore how kindergarten practitioners understand and implement ‘learning through play’ in three territories within an Asian context will be presented.

Chapter 6: Free play at Anji Jiguan Kindergarten

6.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter is the first of four where I present the analysis of participants' interviews, observations and policy documents relating to the early childhood education settings in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore. It aims to explore how participant- teachers at Anji Jiguan Kindergarten (the largest one among all public kindergartens employing the Anji approach) understand and implement 'learning through play'. Fieldwork was conducted between 19th December and 29th December 2017 at Anji Jiguan Kindergarten, serving over 700 children aged 3-6 years, located in Anji County, Zhejiang Province, Mainland China.

The chapter starts by drawing upon Bakhtin's (1981) double-voicing theory and a culture-specific reference to Confucian culture to understand the Anji approach. Then Foucault's (1995) 'docile bodies' theory is used to explain teachers' roles. Following this, I analyse three extracts of a classroom discussion related to children's self- determined outdoor activities to explore how teachers help children develop their critical thinking skills and problem-solving skills. Finally, a key guiding document for the Anji approach about children's rights in play is analysed to reflect on practice.

6.2 Using Bakhtin's (1981) double-voicing theory to understand the Anji approach

In this extract, Teacher A, who has been working at Anji Jiguan Kindergarten for about 15 years, reports a conversation with a visiting senior high school physics teacher as a way to explain and justify her ideas and beliefs relating to Anji play.

- 1 I: Do you want to add something else?
- 2 TA: Yesterday, I had a conversation with a senior high school physics teacher who
- 3 came from Yunnan province to visit Anji Jiguan Kindergarten. He told me it was
- 4 really amazing what children explored, referring to science being almost the same
- 5 level as what he taught in senior high school. He really appreciated how children
- 6 explored during play. He pointed out our traditional education lacked critical thinking.

7 Students accepted what was taught by teachers without questioning. So, our education
8 produced the same type of person. He found that children at Anji Jiguan Kindergarten
9 can criticise peers' and teachers' opinions. Confucian culture claims 'teaching
10 students according to individual differences'. In reality, we do not apply it to our
11 classroom practice most of the time. Both of us think Anji Play focuses on individual
12 differences. I think Anji Play develops ZPD [Zone of Proximal Development] by
13 inspiring children to explore all the time. So 'smart' is not the only criteria to define a
14 good kid. I benefit a lot from Anji play, which also influences the way I educate my
15 children. (Teacher A, December 2017)

In this extract, Teacher A draws on the visiting teacher's words to illustrate her understanding, beliefs and attitudes about Anji play. This can be related to Bakhtin's (1981) theories of double-voicing and heteroglossia which have been applied to the study of novels, in particular the works of Dostoevsky. According to Bakhtin, heteroglossia in novels is another person's speech in another person's language, refracting authorial intentions (Bakhtin, 1981). This speech constitutes what Bakhtin terms double-voiced discourse (Bakhtin, 1981) which serves two speakers at the same time and shows two intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking and the refracted intention of the author in a dialogically interrelated environment (Bakhtin, 1981). In this extract from my interview with Teacher A, to explain and justify her ideas and beliefs relating to Anji play, she reconstructs the visiting teacher's words in her voice by appropriating his words to serve her purposes and intentions. In Bakhtin's terms, these words are populated and appropriated by people dialogically, and so, in this sense, these words are 'half ours and half someone else's' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 345). A potential dialogue is embedded in Teacher A's utterance where Teacher A's voice interconnects with the visiting teacher's voice. Now, let us take a closer look at how Teacher A uses double-voicing to support her statements.

At the start of the extract, Teacher A reports her conversation with a visiting teacher in response to my question 'Do you want to add something else' (line 1). Rather than continuing to use the first person 'I', she uses the third person 'he' to make her statement that 'what children explored' (line 4) and 'how children explored' (line 5) at Anji Jiguan Kindergarten 'was really amazing' (line 3). It appears that she recruits the visiting

teacher to speak for her to try to present a broader perspective rather than just her own limited experiences and awareness of the positive influence of Anji play. She speaks through the voice of the visiting teacher to indicate her understanding relating to Anji Play that it is significant; this connects with Bakhtin's (1981) concepts of double-voicing.

There are two voices (Teacher A's voice and the visiting teacher's voice) and two intentions (direct intention of the visiting teacher and refracted intention of Teacher A). Specifically, the direct intention of the visiting teacher is that Anji Play is a suitable 'learning through play' pedagogy for Chinese early childhood education; at the same time, the refracted intention of Teacher A is that she agrees with the visiting teacher's highly positive judgements of Anji play. Here, we can see these two voices are dialogically interrelated. Teacher A's utterance actively responds to the visiting teacher's utterance; she closely paraphrases the visiting teacher's words to justify her strong beliefs concerning the positive effects of the Anji approach in a Chinese context. These two voices act as if they are actually in a conversation with each other. Teacher A uses the visiting teacher's utterances to highlight her positive beliefs about Anji play, from which children learn scientific concepts through self-determined outdoor play activities, and at the same time, she attempts to convince me, as an early childhood researcher, of Anji play's unique characteristics in 'learning through play'.

Teacher A emphasises the visiting teacher's professional identity (authoritative discourse) and populates her own utterance with the visiting teacher's words in agreement with her values and experiences to convince me of the positive influences of Anji Play (internally persuasive discourse). Hence, Bakhtin's (1981) concepts of authoritative and internally persuasive discourse are more likely to be of value to our discussion of how Teacher A develops her own understandings and beliefs about Anji play. It seems relevant to explore why she emphasises the visiting teacher's professional identity as a senior high school physics teacher.

In order to understand what Teacher A is doing by emphasising the visiting teacher's professional identity, it is needed to know what Anji Play is. Anji Play is a play-based pedagogy, through which children freely choose with whom, when, where and how to

play by using unique materials such as blocks, planks, ladders, barrels and climbing cubes and tyres within an open-ended environment which has been carefully designed by Anji educators (Anji Play, 2020). This approach is child-initiated, without teachers' guidance during children's play; after a play session, children are expected to interpret their experiences and the teacher's role is to understand the children, provide opportunities for them to freely express themselves and reflect on their play experiences during a daily reflective sharing session (Anji Play, 2020). As I observed, and others have noted, in terms of self-determined outdoor activities, children's play experiences and after-play reflections are closely related to science. An example of this is when Teacher A pointed out that she had some doubts about how to teach science to kindergarten children, although she also indicates that Anji Play is a good way for children to learn science. In previous interviews, she told me that her knowledge of science was insufficient either to answer children's questions or to facilitate children's reflection in science-related sessions. Her words appear to indicate that she is not confident at organising science-related group discussions with children. Now, she mobilises the visiting teacher to support her statement that Anji Play is an outdoor play-based pedagogy that helps children understand scientific concepts in a better way. Here, she recruits the senior high school physics teacher to support her claim as she appears to lack confidence in managing children's scientific discussions.

It seems that Teacher A's perspective about her understanding of science is that of a kindergarten teacher who lacks power and authority. This can be analysed using Bakhtin's idea of an 'authoritative discourse': a privileged language with power, general acknowledged truths and 'the word of the fathers' (1981, p. 342). We see authoritative discourses operating when Teacher A appears to consider 'senior high school' and 'physics teacher' as a high indicator of professionalism in science. She implies 'the senior high school physics teacher' is knowledgeable in science and well-trained in teaching science, and his professionalism is associated with the authoritativeness of knowledge (lines 3-5). On one hand, she appears to regard the visiting teacher's words as 'the word of the fathers' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 342) to convince me, as an early childhood researcher, to believe that the Anji approach is a good way for children to explore and learn science. On the other hand, it appears to indicate that the way she uses Anji Play in teaching science is acknowledged by the visiting teacher who has the

professional authority, and she appears to think this brings about a strong positive impact on her self-confidence in teaching science. Now, let us move to focus on how Teacher A uses internally persuasive discourse.

According to Bakhtin (1981), internal persuasive discourse is organised as ‘half-ours and half-someone else’s’ (Bakhtin 1981, p. 345). Specifically, according to Bakhtin:

The word in language is half someone else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention (1981, pp. 293-294).

The visiting teacher expresses a positive evaluation relating to Anji Play and Teacher A tries to apply his positive evaluation concerning Anji Play to her context by populating and appropriating the visiting teacher’s words to support her statements. Teacher A is retelling the visiting teacher’s words in her own words and with modifications. She is open to engagements in dialogic relations with the visiting teacher and seeks to supplement and strengthen her own beliefs relating to Anji play.

Let us look at how she recruits the visiting teacher to speak for her, to support her claims, and how this gives us positions from which to make comments and to support and strengthen her statements.

The visiting teacher is reported as making positive judgements about ‘what children explored’ (line 4) and ‘how children explored’ (line 5) in Anji play. The usage of the adjective ‘amazing’ (line 4) suggests a striking impression was made on the visiting teacher concerning what children explore during play. This indicates that the visiting teacher is surprised that children at kindergarten level almost start to experience the same level of knowledge in science as senior high school students. Here, he seems to notice the relationship between early years science learning and later years of science study. His words, populated in the speech of Teacher A, appear to indicate he thinks it is good for kindergarten children to have science-related exploration experience and that is very helpful for their future science study. Furthermore, ‘appreciate’ (line 5) is used to convey the value of early science experience. This would also imply that, from his senior high school science teacher’s perspective, early science experience plays an

important role in students' future science learning. This is related to Bakhtin's idea of authoritative discourse and persuasive discourse.

In Bakhtin's (1981) view, there is a constant struggle between authoritative discourse and persuasive discourse. Initial words are the visiting teacher's and through appropriation, these words become Teacher A's. Teacher A develops her emphasis on the positive influence of Anji Play as she assimilates the visiting teacher's words into her own system, and simultaneously acknowledges the visiting teacher's words as representing power and authority. So, by using Bakhtin's (1981) concept of double-voicing, Teacher A seems to be attempting to convince me of the benefits of Anji Play (internally persuasive discourse), and, also, appears to gain more confidence in teaching children science by drawing upon the visiting teacher's assurances that the teaching would play an important role in children's learning about science in later years (authoritative discourse). Teacher A makes another claim that Anji Play helps children develop their critical thinking skills.

Let us look closer at how she uses double-voicing to further strengthen her argument. Firstly, she speaks through the visiting teacher who criticises traditional education for lacking critical thinking. She then ventriloquates the visiting teacher's words to specifically demonstrate how traditional education lacks critical thinking. According to Teacher A, the visiting teacher points out that 'students accepted what was taught by teachers without questioning' (line 7), and the visiting teacher then draws a conclusion, 'so our education produces the same type of person' (lines 7-8). The 'so' sums up and draws his claims together, making a conclusion. The conclusion indicates that both producing the same type of person and the education system are considered as unacceptable for Teacher A and the visiting teacher. This makes us think about why it is now undesirable and what factors account for producing 'the same type of person' (line 8).

Referring to education culture, Western countries had gradually modernised their education systems over two hundred years while China achieved what Western countries had achieved in terms of education in less than one hundred years (Sato, 2011). Education in China has been typified by high academic achievement through strong

competition, teachers' control over children's learning, knowledge acquisition through memorisation, conformity, discipline and behaviour control (Choy, 2017). Sato (2011) terms this high level of rigidity and the need for social efficiency 'compressed modernisation'. Influenced by this compressed modernisation, Chinese education is extremely competitive, as it promotes hard work to meet the need for a faster and higher level of productivity and very strong competition in the university entrance examination system to achieve individual social mobility (Sato, 2011). That is to say, driven by the idea of compressed modernisation, the Chinese education system has been inevitably producing 'the same type of person' (line 8). Teacher A and the visiting teacher indicate that education now requires children to develop critical thinking to produce a different type of person.

Finally, Teacher A moves from criticising the negative parts of traditional education (a lack of critical thinking) to emphasise that 'children in Anji Play can criticise peers' and teachers' opinions' (lines 8-9). The way the visiting teacher talks about traditional education in this extract appears to indicate that he shows his concerns about the negative effects of using teacher-centred pedagogy, in which children are not expected to criticise teachers. This could also imply that there is a potential comparison between the teacher-centred pedagogy that has historically existed in Chinese traditional education and the student-centred pedagogy (which will be discussed in more detail in Section 5.3.) employed in the Anji approach. Here, the double-voicing is in operation; Teacher A uses the third person 'he' to support her statement that children develop into critical thinkers from Anji play. There is a potential dialogic relationship between the words of Teacher A, who seems to believe that the Anji approach develops children's critical thinking skills, and the visiting teacher, who appears to think the Anji approach encourages children to ask questions which brings about the development of critical thinking skills. It is as if both of them agree with each other.

6.3 A Chinese child-centred pedagogy as the appropriate expression of Confucian culture

Teacher A moves from using double-voicing to making general statements, and showing she agrees with the visiting teacher. In the following statements, she does not say 'the visiting teacher says that Confucian culture ...'; she just directly says 'Confucian

culture'. So, it would seem that this is her own opinion of Confucian culture. The way she uses the quote 'teaching students according to individual differences' (line 10) implies she appears to use this well-known cultural reference to strengthen her argument about the close relationship between the beneficial aspects of traditional education and the Anji approach. In other words, Teacher A draws on a reading of Confucian philosophy to point out the beneficial aspects of traditional education for children's learning to offer a justification for the current approach, Anji play. She mobilises a culture-specific reference that is recognisable, well-known and valued by the Chinese language community. This suggests the convergence of pedagogical ideas: the beneficial aspects of traditional Chinese education and the Anji approach.

Interestingly, what she offers is actually a child-centred reading of Confucian culture. 'Teaching students according to individual differences' (line 10) implies teachers position themselves to be responsible for children's learning, and at the same time, children are directed to learn based on their own interests and needs. Teacher A implies that the positive side of traditional Chinese culture has its own reasons for advocating child-centred pedagogy. What she says here indicates the beneficial aspects of Confucian culture and the Anji approach, which allows children to freely choose when, how, where and with whom to play in an open-ended environment, are quite compatible. This appears to indicate Teacher A sees Anji Play as a way of returning to, and updating, Confucian culture. This would imply Teacher A's belief towards Anji Play is that it is the appropriate expression of Confucian culture.

Traditional education has been shaped primarily by dominant Confucian values, and Confucianism has existed over 2000 years and experienced significant transformations. According to new Confucianism, mutuality and reciprocity are the main concepts of the core value in Confucian thought that emphasises 'xue-zuo-ren' or learning to be human (Tu, 2000). This new Confucianism reflects the beneficial aspects of traditional education, emphasising the relationship between teacher and children, which is based on mutuality and reciprocity of respect rather than a one-way imposition of power. Children and teachers are both expected to teach and learn in a mutual relationship in Anji Play, which can be considered as a way of advocating child-centred pedagogy. For example, based on my observations, the daily sharing session reflecting on children's play

experiences appears to allow both teachers and children to talk and listen, challenge and accept, teach and learn in an equal and interactive discussion to inspire both children's and teachers' thinking.

Teacher A talks about practical issues not being able to apply to reality (line 10-11). She uses 'in reality' (line 10) to introduce her statement about the most commonly used pedagogy that appears to be teacher-centred. Interestingly, here, she does not use 'I', instead, she chooses 'we' to refer to Chinese kindergarten teachers in general, which appears to indicate that the position of teacher-centred pedagogy is a common phenomenon in Chinese early childhood education. In addition, as she told me in the previous interview, she used to be influenced by the teacher-centred pedagogy at the beginning of her teaching career, and her understanding of pedagogy experienced several transformations along with the development of the Anji approach, until the current time where she appears to have a strong belief of the child-centred pedagogy employed in the Anji setting. Her previous interview would imply that she appears to consider herself as part of the 'we' group who preferred teacher-centred pedagogy rather than child-centred pedagogy, but she changes her views as she experiences the difference between what she described as 'false play'⁴ (a teacher-centred pedagogy) compared to 'true play' (a child-centred pedagogy). So, this would indicate that she appears to think people who still believe teacher-centred pedagogy in early childhood education have the potential to change, just as she did. At the same time, she told me that she knew what the difficulties in implementing child-centred pedagogy are, such as a shortage of qualified teachers, large class sizes, teachers' perceived positions as educators. Here, her formulation from the previous interview is consistent with her claim that 'In reality, we do not apply it to our classroom practice most of the time' (lines 10-11) which also appears to indicate that there are many practical conditions restricting the application of 'teaching according to individual differences'. As all the above restrictions mentioned by Teacher A are not easy to change in a short time, she indicates that 'teaching students according to individual differences' in the Chinese context is still challenging.

Teacher A further states 'Both of us think Anji Play focuses on individual differences'

⁴ False Play is directed by adults to serve specific educational and developmental goals (Anji Play, 2020)

(lines 11-12). Her former claim (lines 10 -11) appears to indicate Chinese kindergarten teachers, in general, fail to apply ‘teaching students according to individual differences’ in practice, however, her current claim seems to emphasise this specific cultural reference and indicate that it is more or less successfully applied in the Anji setting. According to her, this does not mean the new approach, Anji play, is so different. Her words suggest that Anji Play is a Chinese child-centred pedagogy: the appropriate expression of the core value of Confucian culture.

Teacher A then moves from discussing Confucian culture to commenting on an international pedagogy, referring to the Vygotskyian concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) by using the Chinese term (zui jin fa zhan qu, 最近发展区) (lines 12-13). In the beginning, she says Confucian culture, and then she says Zone of Proximal Development. So, the question is how does she connects them. It is relevant to explore why she uses the Chinese term for a concept from international psychological and technological language. Under the influence of globalisation, imported theories are widely accepted, such as Vygotsky’s ZPD, Malaguzzi’s Reggio Emilia theories and Bredekamp’s developmentally appropriate practice (Choy, 2017). According to the interview with Teacher A, she graduated from Zhejiang Normal University Hangzhou Kindergarten Teachers College with a Bachelor’s degree in Psychology of Early Childhood Education. This would indicate that her knowledge of Vygotsky’s ZPD comes from her study at the University. That is to say, on one hand, she has the knowledge of Western theories and pedagogies; on the other hand, as she mentions, she is strongly influenced by the philosophy of the Anji approach. Moreover, she does not say ZPD develops Anji play, instead, she says Anji Play develops the concept of ZPD. In terms of the concept of ZPD, when children are supported by more skilled adults or collaborate with more capable peers, they may attain a higher level within their ‘Zone of Proximal Development’ while the Anji approach advocates children learn through play, from which they develop their skills. This perhaps would indicate that she has cultural confidence in her local identity alongside updating traditional education practice. Indeed, she seems to suggest that Anji play, according to both Chinese cultural practices and global (universal) standards, warrants being the appropriate expression of Confucian culture by making a connection with the concept of ZPD.

Finally, Teacher A illustrates her personal relationship with Anji Play referring to how she educates her own children (lines 14-15). As we discussed before, she has knowledge of Western theories and pedagogies in early childhood education, but she does not mention that she uses Western pedagogy to educate her own children. She states that she benefits a lot from Anji play, and she uses this approach to teach her own children. Her formulation would imply that she has a very high and positive evaluation of Anji play. She reports that her way of teaching her own children is affected by the Anji approach to suggest that Anji Play is suitable for Chinese children in general. This indicates that she seems to have a psychological conviction about Anji play, and appears to think that Anji Play is a contextualisation pedagogy through the acknowledgement of the value of Chinese pedagogical practices and its coexistence with Western theories.

6.4 Using Foucault's (1995) 'docile bodies' theory to understand teachers' roles

The following extract comes from Teacher A. She cites Cheng's (the creator of Anji play) words to express her understanding of how children learn in Anji play, emphasising the role of the teacher as the observer. In this extract, I mainly focus on the slogan 'close your mouth, control your hands, open your eyes and prick up your ears' for analysis, using Foucault's (1995) 'docile bodies' theory.

I: Could you please tell me how do children learn and play from your personal perspective?

TA: When we were first introduced to Anji play, we were confused about these questions: 'is there no need for teachers to give children lessons?'; 'how do we transmit knowledge?'; and 'what on earth do children learn?'. And all my confusion is addressed by the slogan 'close your mouth, control your hands, open your eyes and prick up your ears', which is proposed by Cheng who is the creator of Anji Play who asks us to observe what the children are really doing during play. (Teacher A, December 2017)

6.4.1 Why this slogan

In this extract, Teacher A states she was confused about what and how to teach kindergarten children, and she figured her way through this confusion by taking this slogan into practice. According to the previous interview, her personal experience of

transformation from adopting teacher-centred pedagogy (false play) to child-centred pedagogy (true play) would indicate that she appears to strongly believe the significant influence of using this slogan. In addition, her way of describing the dramatic change that she had seems to encourage me to believe that this slogan is an essential part of the success of Anji play. Based on Teacher A's words in this extract, this slogan is attributed to Xueqin Cheng who is the creator of Anji Play and Deputy Director of Anji County Education Bureau in Zhejiang province. Cheng introduced play into Anji Kindergartens after the Ministry of Education released Standards for Kindergarten Education in 1996 which emphasises play as a 'foundational activity to be included in every type of educational activity' (Ministry of Education, 1996). As Cheng experienced what she called 'false play' (teacher-directed play activity), Cheng then mobilised this slogan to foster 'true play' (child-centred play activity). It appears that this slogan suggests a transformation of a teacher's role from the knowledge transmitter to the observer, which marks the revolution of the Anji approach.

6.4.2 Close your mouth, control your hands, open your eyes and prick up your ears

The first impression of this slogan is that it is a very direct expression of giving advice, and it even can be considered as a little impolite. Indeed, this slogan is proposed by the Anji Play creator, Xueqin Cheng, and it is a summary of the instructions given to children by teachers in traditional education mainly focusing on teacher-centred pedagogy. It would perhaps imply that this formulation is used to indicate a new way to train teachers to learn how to observe children by decreasing the teacher's role as a didactic instructor. 'Close your mouth' suggests that Cheng does not want teachers to tell children what to do, and teachers are asked not to give instructions to children all the time. 'Control your hands' suggests that she does not want teachers to intervene immediately when children ask for help. In the philosophy of the Anji approach, teachers are asked to intervene at an appropriate time, rather than always. 'Open your eyes' suggests that she wants teachers to observe children carefully and 'prick up your ears' indicates that she recommends teachers to listen to children's voices attentively. 'Close your mouth'.

This is an instruction to stop speaking. It invites the image of someone who is speaking

too much and then is told to stop speaking. Traditional Chinese preschool teachers are didactic in instructional practices and they appear to regard themselves as knowledge transmitters. Such practices are relevant to what Freire (1970) calls the ‘banking system’ of education. In the concept of the ‘banking system’ education, teachers are depositors who deposit knowledge to students who are considered as depositories to patiently receive, memorise, and repeat knowledge (Freire, 1970). In the frame of the ‘banking system’ concept, Chinese kindergarten teachers can be regarded as depositors, therefore, it may be difficult for them to speak less as they are deeply influenced by traditional pedagogy of positioning themselves as knowledge transmitters. Hence, in order to change teachers’ deeply embedded understanding of their roles, it would seem that Cheng puts forward this slogan to strongly suggest teachers should speak less and observe more.

‘Control your hands’

This phrase suggests stepping back and keeping your hands still. It evokes the idea that someone is doing too much and then is told to stop doing so much. Early childhood teachers are traditionally considered as caregivers by doing everything for children. This becomes more extreme in the Chinese context. Influenced by the one-child policy from 1979 to 2015, four grandparents and two parents invest their time and energy into the only child (Rao et al., 2017). This kind of ‘caregiving’ might overprotect the child, which more or less constrains the child’s learning experience. So ‘control your hands’ reminds teachers to give children time to sort out problems at their own pace.

‘Open your eyes’ and ‘prick up your ears’

‘Open your eyes’ and ‘prick up your ears’ would, therefore, appear to function as a call for teachers in Anji Play to pay more attention to observation. Teachers in the Chinese context place much emphasis on knowledge and skill acquisition rather than children’s needs (Sun & Rao, 2017). ‘Open your eyes’ and ‘prick up your ears’ could be understood as encouraging teachers to observe children’s actions, expressions, gestures and behaviours, and listen to their conversations and interactions.

There are other resonances being mobilised here. In the old days, this slogan was said by kindergarten teachers to children. According to Tobin, Wu and Davidson (1989), Chinese people believe that children with good behaviours are not born like that, but become like that by the hard work and firm control of their parents or teachers. In their analysis of preschools in three cultures, they point out that Chinese kindergarten teachers monitor and correct children's behaviours by providing orders and instructions (Tobin et al., 1989). This slogan represents the way Chinese kindergarten teachers control and govern children by asking them to concentrate, watch and listen carefully. That is, it was addressed by teachers to children. This is a way of speaking to children formulated by teachers in the past. Here it has been mobilised as an instruction which teachers should do themselves. The use of this slogan marks a reversal of educational philosophy; now it is the teachers who should be quiet, attentive and limit their actions. However, in addition to – or precisely because of – reversing this slogan, there is also a further continuity asserted with earlier times because these words are not only recognisable from the past, but also transformed in a new way for the present. While these words were formerly said by teachers to students, now – according to Anji Play philosophy – it has come about that teachers should take their own advice. What is noteworthy here is that a new teaching approach is being proposed and institutionalised through the mobilisation of a modified, even reversed version, of an older well-known slogan. What this achieves, it seems, is a way of justifying innovation by asserting its continuities, if somewhat realigned, with earlier culture norms.

Foucault's analysis of discipline (1995) makes particular use of the concept of 'docile bodies'. This concept offers us useful ways to analyse Cheng's slogan which marks the fact that docility is critical in understanding traditional disciplinary techniques in a school context. This slogan in Anji Play can be seen through aspects of the relationship between discipline and docile bodies. I analyse this slogan from two dimensions. As I have mentioned before, this slogan was used by kindergarten teachers to speak to children in earlier times. So, for children in the past, this slogan indicates maintaining a fixed range of their bodily positions and movements and certain 'the correlation of the body and the gesture' (Foucault, 1995, p.152). 'Close your mouth, control your hands, open your eyes and prick up your ears' implies teachers' instructions for children's particular posture to maximise their concentration, listening and watching capacities. For

Foucault, 'a body is docile that may be subjected, used, transformed and/or improved' (1995, p. 136). He also claims that 'discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, docile bodies' (Foucault, 1995, p.138). In this sense, his argument is that the physical discipline of practicing the arrangement of the body makes bodies docile. Cheng's slogan refers to disciplinary techniques in traditional education to control children's sensory activities, that of mouth, hands, eyes and ears, to facilitate children's learning.

Teachers employ the Anji approach to train children to be docile through controlling and correcting their body-positioning and postures. In Foucauldian disciplinary analysis, concentrating, listening and watching capacities seem to be constructed as a function of a combination of a set of certain bodily positions. Thus, this slogan as used in traditional education appears to focus more on how children should act according to teachers' instructions rather than on how children understand the meaning and purpose of their activities. In general, for children, in the past, the use of this slogan aimed to make their bodies obedient to traditional teaching and to work to maximise their capacities for learning. This slogan is supposed to facilitate children's learning, while actually children are limited in docile bodies, and cannot engage in learning. On the other hand, nowadays, this slogan is used by Cheng as a directive for training kindergarten teachers to perform the role as an observer. Referring to Foucault's terms, rather than the children, these kindergarten teachers are now in some ways the 'docile bodies' of the Anji Play institution who need to put this slogan into their own practice. According to the research literature, Chinese kindergarten teachers usually monitor and correct children's behaviours (Tobin et al., 1989), and governance and control are regarded as their responsibilities (Chao, 1994). Since traditional teaching has been embedded in Chinese culture for such a long time, in order to shift the teacher-centred teaching into child-centred learning, Cheng would appear to be mobilising familiar discourse around disciplining the body by proposing this slogan as an instruction to teachers to stop directing children and encouraging teachers to apply this slogan, which they used to say to children, to themselves instead.

Through the lens of Foucauldian disciplinary analysis, it appears that Cheng uses this slogan for two reasons. Firstly, this slogan is used as a type of power which can be mobilised to shift teacher-centred pedagogy to child-centred pedagogy by enabling

teachers to recognise the necessity and importance of transforming their roles. Secondly, this slogan is an efficient way to use the minimum amount of resources to achieve maximum results in changing teachers' beliefs relating to children's learning. Therefore, through Foucauldian disciplinary analysis, it could be interpreted as Cheng uses this slogan as a new way to train teachers into docile bodies.

6.5 A discourse of a classroom reflective sharing session about children's play period

This section offers three extracts, referring to an activity created and directed by children, that highlights how teachers implement 'learning through play' in classroom practice, using different strategies to help children explore scientific cause and effect relationships. This child-directed activity is about a tyre obstacle race, and the name for this activity is provided by children during the reflective sharing session. Children are engaged in outdoor large-scale construction, using specifically designed materials including blocks, planks, ladders and tyres to design this game and create their own rules for it.

Observational material was collected in a classroom consisting of fifteen 5-6-year-old children and Teacher A. The material reported in the present study documented a 45-minute reflective sharing session about an outdoor large-scale construction activity between Teacher A (TA) and the children. I take the role of low-key participant-observer by observing, note-taking and audio-recording the events.

Extract 1

1 TA Who would like to share his/her play experience in today's sharing session?

[Most children raise their hands. All children are eagerly waiting for their chance to speak.]

2 TA Okay. Let us invite Y to share his experience with us this time and let us listen carefully. It will be your turn soon.

3 Y I want you to guess - what I am going to share today?

[Many children talk at the same time and they are confused about his question.]

- 4 TA Y, would you like to invite someone to answer your question?
 [Y invites B to answer his question and he says ‘no’ to B’s answer.]
- 5 Y I need a picture.
 [TA shows a picture of a group of children playing with tyres on the screen.]
- 6 All Tyre obstacles race.
- 7 Y Can you guess why we put the bricks at the end of planks?
 [Y invites M to answer his question and at the same time other children start to discuss their answers to this question actively.]
- 8 TA Can we hear what M is saying?
- 9 ALL No, we can’t.
- 10 TA Then what should we do when someone is talking?
- 11 All Keep quiet and listen carefully.
- 12 TA Ok, let’s continue.

The reflective sharing session occurs after an outdoor or indoor play period in the middle of the day. The analysis of my observations implies that teachers in Anji Jiguan Kindergarten consider the reflective sharing session to be a discussion event in which learning takes place. According to my observations, the reflective sharing session in Anji Kindergarten is a formal presentation based on children’s interests, through which children learn from each other. Each presenter stands or sits in the teacher’s position in the classroom, first narrating and then receiving comments from peers. In order to maximise children’s learning in the reflective sharing session, one of the teacher’s roles is to facilitate speaking and listening. Here, I focus on speaking rights and listening responsibilities. Let us look at how Teacher A uses different strategies to help children take a turn in talking and undertake their listening responsibilities.

In this extract, Teacher A starts the reflective sharing session by inviting a child to share a personal experience narrative from the playground. Teacher A starts the discussion (line 1) with the question ‘Who wants to share his/her play experience in today’s sharing session?’. She attempts to start the sharing session and get children involved in the conversation. This question receives active responses from children who raise their hands and are eagerly waiting for their chance to speak. In line 2, she begins to give turns to children by nominating Y to share his experience because she notices that Y is

very keen to volunteer his experience. At the same time, as observed, there are many children talking, so, for Teacher A, it seems that finding relevant speakers is a good strategy to manage classroom orders. She then explicitly states a rule ('let us listen carefully') and acts to keep the discussion open and shared ('It will be your turn soon'). As observed, it would indicate that Teacher A appears to focus seriously on children's listening carefully to one another to ensure that children can build on each other's ideas and then ask questions. Teacher A then suggests Y select the next speakers (line 4), and she seems to think this approach gives students more control over speakers' rights. By doing so, she appears to think that children can maximise their learning if every member of the classroom listens and responds.

Teacher A then asks children to listen to - and learn from - each other by asking the question, 'Can we hear what M is saying?' (line 8), which suggests the teacher wants all children to pay attention to the presenter. This would indicate, from Teacher A's perspective, such a strategy seems to produce the classroom norms and helps peer listening take place.

During the session, she then keeps posing the follow-up question: "Then what should we do when someone is talking?" (line 10), indicating her expectation that children need to pay attention to classroom orders and let children realise that they cannot hear what Y is saying as they are talking at the same time. This question receives the expected answer, 'Keep quiet and listen carefully' (line 11), which seems to be what Teacher A is looking for. From my perspective, this is a useful strategy to ask children to speak out classroom orders when they are not listening. My observation is Teacher A regularly uses similar conversation norms, and almost all children answer her questions automatically. This kind of conversational norm is very helpful to remind children to undertake their listening responsibilities. Finally, 'Ok, let's continue' (line 12), gets the discussion going. I now move to Extract 2 which is the dialogue between Teacher A and Child Y.

Extract 2

14 TA Well, how about you tell us why you put the bricks at the end of planks?

15 Y I mean if you want to win the game, then you need to knock

down all the bricks.

- 16 TA I am confused about why M's answer is not right.
- 17 Y He is wrong, because we need to knock down all the bricks.
- 18 All Bricks are the obstacles.
- 19 Y I mean, you need to knock down all the bricks.
- 20 TA Well, how about you tell us the answer?
- 21 Y I don't know what to call it at the moment.
- 22 TA Y explained to us about the use of the bricks in the game - you need to knock down all the bricks, then you win the game, right?
- 23 Y Yes, yes, you need to use tyres to knock down all the bricks and then you win the game.
- 24 TA What else do you want to share with us, Y? Do you need to change the direction of the bricks or just keep them at the end of the planks all the time?
- 25 Y We changed a little bit of the direction of the bricks.
- 26 TA Ok. How did you change them?
- 27 Y We put one brick under the plank and then changed the direction of the other two bricks. [Teacher A shows a picture.]
- 28 Y Yes, we changed the bricks like this.
- 29 TA Why do you change them in this way?
[Many children want to answer this question, so they start to talk about their experiences]
- 30 TA Ok, who else has something to share with us?

At the beginning of the second extract above, Teacher A poses a reflective question about the rules of the game made up by children themselves to encourage children to think about how they designed this activity (line 14). Rather than narrating in a discursive and random way, this question gives Y a clue and points to how to structure his sharing. According to my observations of this event, Y keeps letting other children guess a specific name for his question about why they planned to put the bricks at the end of planks, but other children are not clear about what he wants them to say. That is to say, children are confused about Y's question. Then, Teacher A initiates a request for further explanation by posing her confusion about M's answer, showing her apparent expectation for Y to explain the question more clearly (line 16). This request receives active answers from other children and keeps the discussion moving on. With the help of

Teacher A's request for Y's further explanation (line 15 and line 17), other children appear to understand his question and reach a consensus by saying 'Bricks are the obstacles' (line 18).

Teacher A's next utterance displays how she understands Y's and other children's words as she then delivers a more direct request, 'How about you tell us the answer?' (line 20). Teacher A moves the discussion forward by requesting what Y thinks as the correct answer from him. To this request, Y does not have a definite answer as he says, 'I don't know what to call it now' (line 21). In this case, Teacher A re-voices Y's utterance about the use of bricks in the children's game and then initiates another request for clarification (line 22). Here, her use of re-voicing has at least two functions: (1) framing the discussion to allow children to develop thinking around the reasons why they put the bricks at the end of planks; and (2) facilitating the discussion by asking a question which provides a clue towards the answer. She says, 'You need to knock down all the bricks, then you win the game, right?' (line 22), to suggest how to find the answer Y is seeking. This is followed by Y's re-voicing of Teacher A's question, 'Yes, yes, you need to use tyres to knock down all the bricks and then you win the game' (line 23). By saying 'yes' twice, it appears Y is quite happy about Teacher A's clarification of his thoughts. To extend Y's thoughts, in line 24, Teacher A asks two questions 'What else do you want to share with us, Y?' and 'Do you need to change the direction of the bricks or just keep them at the end of the planks all the time?'. The first question could be considered as a follow-up question. It implies that Teacher A appears to encourage Y to share more of his experience with the children, so she keeps the talking turn for Y.

Teacher A's latter question is more specific, which seems to be aimed at extending Y's thoughts by providing a new direction to the discussion. After posing this question, we find it is obvious that Y's sharing flows smoothly. It receives an answer from Y (line 25). To this, Teacher A responds with another question, 'Okay. How do you change them?' (line 26). It shows this question (line 26) is a follow-up of the original question (line 24). This question successfully receives a more detailed explanation from Y, and Teacher A outlines her encouragement by showing a picture of how children changed the direction of the bricks. Teacher A's next question 'Why do you change in this way?' (line 29) appears to encourage Y and other children to develop their reasoning skills. Teacher A

seems to think that this question is an initiation of explication of reasoning, which provides children with opportunities to explain their reasons why they changed the direction of the bricks. It appears Teacher A is acting to keep the discussion open and shared (line 30), and this question seems to be considered as an invitation to all children who would like to share something else. The next section continues the group discussion and engages more children.

Extract 3

- 38 TA Ok, let us invite G to share his experience with us.
[G raises his hand and is very active in sharing his experience with the other children.]
- 39 G When I rolled the tyre along the planks, then the planks slipped away.
- 40 TA Do you mean the tyre did not roll along the plank?
- 41 G Yes, the tyre is too big and when I started to roll it along the planks, all the planks slipped away.
- 42 Y The tyres are very heavy and big.
- 43 TA So, the planks slipped away because the tyres are too big and heavy?
[Y nods his head.]
- 44 TA So, the tyres are too heavy is one of the reasons why the planks slip away. Any other reasons?
- 45 Y The force of the impact is very strong.
- 46 TA Okay, the force of the impact is very strong, which leads to the planks slipping away. Can someone tell me where the force of the impact comes from?
- 47 Y We push the tyres, and the slope, and the strength of us - the force of the impact becomes strong.
- 48 TA Well. Do you mean the force of the impact comes from the slope and the strength of us, right? [Y and other children nod their heads.]

The third extract above continues the discussion about the same topic, a tyre-obstacle race, but it focuses on reasons why planks slip away when children roll the tyre along the planks. I mainly focus on how Teacher A uses a variety of forms and functions of re-voicing. According to O'Connor and Michaels (1993), re-voicing means 'a particular kind of utterance of a student's contribution by another particular participant in the

discussion' (p.71), and it functions in two ways: (1) reformulation and (2) the creation of alignment. In terms of the two functions, the teacher may clarify a statement, introduce a new idea, direct the discussion in a certain way or elaborate on the comments (O'Connor & Michaels, 1993). From a Bakhtinian perspective, 'the word in language is half someone else's' (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 293). That is to say, we all borrow other's words when we are engaged in a dialogue. When borrowing other's words, we re-appropriate, recontextualise and resituate words according to our own needs (Lee & Moon, 2013).

With the discussion moving on, Teacher A needs to find the next speaker to share his or her thoughts. It occurs again that Teacher A selects a child (G) to share his experience with others since Teacher A recognises that he is very eager to narrate his play story (line 38). G makes the statement, 'When I rolled the tyre along the planks, then the planks slipped away' (line 39), which becomes a basis for Teacher A's revoicing. In line 40, after the explanation is provided by G, Teacher A poses a question, 'Do you mean the tyre did not roll along the plank?', rephrasing what G said to elaborate his explanation. She seems to think this type of re-voicing acknowledges G's contribution and helps to promote children's scientific conceptual understanding. Then G answers in line 41 'the tyre is too big', which offers a reason why the planks slip away when rolling the tyre along the planks. This also receives another explanation from Y in line 42: 'The tyres are very heavy and big'. That is to say, Teacher A's first re-voicing (line 40) helps children get on with the tasks of scientific reasoning. From line 43 to line 44, a discourse marker 'so' links a statement to an earlier statement. In line 43, 'so' refers to 'the tyres are very heavy and big' (line 42), through which the planks slip away. A similar pattern appears in line 44; this 'so' emphasises the reason for planks slipping away again because the tyres are too heavy and big (line 43). In addition, re-voicing occurs again in line 43, 'So the planks slipped away because the tyres are too heavy and big', where Teacher A re-utters Y's explanation through the use of rephrasing in line 42. For Teacher A, it seems that this re-voicing not only clarifies Y's statement, but also allows others to hear what Y is saying. She appears to think hearing an idea again helps all children reflect further on the meaning behind it. Re-voicing occurs for the third time (line 44) when Teacher A re-utters her own words from line 43. This repeating strategy appears to help children understand that it is the weight and size of the tyres which cause the planks to slip away.

In order to extend children's thoughts, Teacher A encourages children to add new explanations by asking 'Any other reasons?' (line 44). This question receives another reason from Y, 'the force of the impact is very strong' (line 45), to demonstrate his thinking more clearly to others. To this, for the fourth time, Teacher A re-voices children's words: "Okay, the force of the impact is very strong, which leads to planks slipping away" (line 46). For the explication of reasoning, this kind of re-voicing appears to point out the cause and effect of why planks slip away. Then Teacher A further asks, 'Can someone tell me where the force of the impact comes from?' (line 46). This question would appear to allow children to further think about some scientific concepts. Y's answer in line 47 offers how he understands where the force of the impact comes from. For the fifth time, Teacher A re-voices his words, 'Well. Do you mean the force of the impact come from the slope, the strength of us, right?' (line 48), which clarifies students' thinking again. According to O'Connor and Michaels (1993), when a teacher re-voices in this way, it gives students a chance to clarify the content of the words they have spoken and also positions them with respect to the content. In this sense, the way Teacher A re-voices in line 48 also empowers Y to be recognised as valued a contributor and member of the classroom community. Altogether, as seen in this extract, Teacher A uses a variety of re-voicing, which aims to align children with scientific content, attribute ideas to children, and eventually positions children as scientific thinkers.

The analysis of the three extracts above would appear to indicate that Teacher A seems to be a learner-centred practitioner who places less emphasis on knowledge transmission and more emphasis on knowledge transformation which entails helping children build on their own knowledge to foster learning. For example, Teacher A fosters the practice of externalising children's reasoning, listening and questioning skills, using different forms of re-voicing. In addition, she sees it as her responsibility to provide children with access to speech activities by encouraging children to listen to and engage in the problem-solving process.

6.6 A key guiding document of Anji approach about children's rights

In this section, I focus on the analysis of the key guiding document of Anji approach

concerning children's rights in play. There are several articles of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) establishing children's rights to participation in early childhood education: the right to play is referred to in Article 31 and the right for children's participation in decision-making processes is also emphasised in Article 12 (Colucci & Wright, 2015). Influenced by these articles, China released 'Standards for Kindergarten Education' in 1996 (Ministry of Education, 1996). Article 5, section 25, subsection 6 of these standards claims that play should be treated as a 'foundational activity to be included in every type of educational activity' in early childhood education (Ministry of Education, 1996). The idea of the importance of play in the new guidelines resonated with Xueqin Cheng (creator of Anji play), and she initiated a revolution of moving 'false play' to 'true play', which is related to children's intention to have fun. In order to apply this revolution into practice, Anji institutions formulated a key guiding document emphasising play as children's rights, including six aspects: self-determined play, time and space, reflection, expression, materials and environments (Anji Play, 2020).

The key document suggests during play teachers are expected to provide a variety of materials and the children are free to choose what they want to play with, with whom and for as long as they wish. In the Anji approach, play as a right is highly valued as a way of organising learning. Other than these general considerations, this document specifically formulates elements which should be considered when giving the right to play back to children. It specifies that the time allocated to play should not be restricted; the environment should be provided to maximise children's imagination and contact with nature; and the roles of teachers are described in detail, for example, one of the teachers' responsibilities is to permit children to encounter risks and challenges within a relatively safe play setting (Anji Play, 2020). The following section analyses how these sub-headings and bullet points from the guiding document serve as a powerful frame of reference for reflecting upon practice.

Children's rights in self-determined play:

- Select materials from a wide variety, determine their use and how long to play with them.
- Self-structure play.

- Select with whom to play.
- Play in large groups, small groups and alone.
- Choose not to play.

Children's rights in time and space:

- Play with materials where and when and how they wish.
- Move freely within play areas.
- Understand that the school is their home, their space to play and learn and grow.
- Determine the pace of play.(Anji Play, 2020)

These statements of children's rights in self-determined play and in time and space illustrate children can choose what, where, when and with whom to play. Self-determined play is related to children's specific needs and intentions that arise from play. It not only allows children to feel that they control their choices but also allows the child to add complexity and depth to their experiences. It is relevant to explore how children manage their free choice and free play. Firstly, these claims indicate that there are a variety of materials provided by Anji educators for children to play with. To be more specific, based on my observations, in the classrooms, there are some play corners which have dolls, small construction materials, dresses for fantasy play, materials for arts and crafts, writing and reading and other equipment, while in outdoor play areas, open-ended materials of all sizes including blocks, planks, tyres, ladders, barrels and climbing cubes are present; this is in addition to sand pits and extensive water elements which are provided for children's play.

Children can use these open-ended large construction materials in any way they like to suit their play. This can be seen in the previous example - the tyre obstacle race - from which children make use of various large construction materials to invent a new game. In addition, as I have observed, children moved freely within different play areas and among different kinds of play such as fantasy play, large-scale construction play, sand and water games, and so forth. In terms of duration of play, Teacher A points out that there used to be one-hour of outdoor play, but it has now reached as long as two hours. That is to say, there is a one-hour outdoor activity in the morning, followed by the reflective sharing session, through which children are expected to share their morning

play experience. This would indicate that teachers from Anji Play appear to think the reflection and discussion session could facilitate children's exploration of cause-and-effect relationships and develop their abstract thinking skills and problem-solving skills. Based on my interviews with participants, children can also decide to continue the morning play session in the afternoon for another hour if they think an hour is not enough for them, and the importance of this extra hour of outdoor play is valued by teachers. Especially, during my observations, I have often noticed that some children still want to continue their play, even after school. This refers to the third and fourth points of children's rights in time and space that children are expected to understand that the kindergarten is their space for play and growth, and they can decide their own pace of play.

Secondly, self-structured play is a category of true play (as opposed to the type of instructor-led play), in which children engage in open-ended play that has no specific learning objectives. As discussed in the literature review (Chapter 2), the self-structured play could be considered as being at one end of the play spectrum, providing children with a very high degree of autonomy and freedom. In addition, in order to help children get the most out of self-structured play, Anji educators and practitioners provide children with plenty of materials, and sufficient space and time.

Thirdly, 'select with whom to play' and 'play in large groups, small groups and alone' indicate that children have the right to choose with which peers to play, and they are expected to choose to engage in different sizes of groups. These two bullet points exemplify how the Anji approach shows respect for children, paying attention to individual preferences. Fourthly, 'Choose not to play' gives children the maximum autonomy, through which they are able to abandon the rights to play. Referring to my observations, there is a little boy in Teacher A's class who usually plays alone or sometimes even does not want to play, but watches other children playing. During my discussion with Teacher A during our lunch time together, she told me that she thought this boy might have special needs, though his parents do not want to admit it, and she regularly checks on him but never pushes him to play with others. From my personal perspective, 'choose not to play' strikes me the most, as this bullet seems to indicate that the Anji approach more or less supports inclusive education.

Children's rights in reflection:

- Be provided with multiple opportunities daily to reflect on their experience, discovery, and problem-solving.
- Interpretation of their own experience is given primary importance.

Children' rights in the expression:

- As many opportunities as possible to give expression to their experience verbally, in pictures, and in text as they are able to begin to use symbolic language.

(Anji Play, 2020)

These statements indicate that children are encouraged to freely express their ideas through all kinds of ways such as verbal language, pictures and symbolic language. Based on my observations, the reflective sharing session is considered as a primary opportunity for children to express their experiences. Children are observed to narrate their stories by using pictures or videos taken by teachers to direct the discussion, and children are invited to use symbolic language to represent their experiences of their play stories. According to interviews with participants, symbolic language in Anji Play means children use picture writing (using drawing to express their ideas) as a resource of language to express ideas. To be more specific, picture writing means children use drawings as a strategy to illustrate what happens during the morning play period, what difficulties they encounter and how they address these problems, and all these experiences are presented in children's own voices. In addition, it is very interesting, as I observed, that all these drawings are displayed on the walls of the classrooms at children's eye level, which would indicate that children's perspectives are considered important and valued.

Lastly, children's rights in the aspects of both materials and physical environments focus on 'challenging themselves at their own level of self-determined risk' (Anji Play, 2020). As children access outdoor open-ended play materials, they freely explore while they also take physical risks which are not often seen in traditional Chinese kindergartens. Interviews indicate that playgrounds at Anji Play are designed for children to set themselves challenges, take risks and experience fun and adventures by providing

materials such as ladders, planks, blocks, mats and other moveable equipment. Based on my observations, children engage in stacking, lining up, climbing, running, jumping, throwing, crawling, rolling and sliding, to which they seem to challenge themselves on different levels. In ‘The Fundamental Rights and Responsibilities of True Play’ (the key guiding document of Anji approach about children's rights), it states that one of the teachers’ responsibilities is to ‘encourage and support risk’ (Anji Play, 2020). According to my interviews with teachers, they express the idea that giving the children opportunities for risk in play, rather than restricting children’s desire for thrills and challenges, would help children to develop both physically and mentally. For example, Teacher A told me: “Children are very clever. They know when to take risks and to what extent.” Her words appear to indicate that she has a very positive attitude towards risk in play and believes that children have the abilities to self-select their level of risk. I have also been told by the participants that the first-day children attended Anji kindergartens, they need to learn how to protect themselves during risky play, and they gradually (over three years) develop the abilities to be acutely aware of their individual risk-taking competence.

Overall, my research highlights that teachers in Anji Play are concerned about safety issues, especially when children are beginning risky play experience, and they help children develop safety awareness and facilitate children to encounter risks and challenges within a relatively safe play setting. In general, the key guiding document of the Anji approach about children's rights ensures that children have the right to play, take risks, and be safe, and it also guides teachers to obtain a better understanding of play-based pedagogy.

6.7 Chapter summary

In this chapter, I have drawn on Bakhtin’s (1981) double-voicing theory and a culture-specific reference to Confucian culture to analyse the main characteristics of the Anji approach: creating the conditions of true play which emerge from children’s uninterrupted and unguided play experiences. My analysis indicated that the role of the teacher was influenced by the idea of encouraging children to engage in true play. Also, I have used Foucault’s (1995) 'docile bodies' theory to explicitly demonstrate how

teachers stepped back and took the role of an observer by following the slogan ‘close your mouth, control your hands, open your eyes and prick up your ears’. This slogan appeared to foster true play and ask teachers to take their own advice to be quiet, attentive, as well as limit teachers’ actions. This seemed to expect the teachers to consider children as capable learners. Finally, my analysis focused on a key guiding document published by Anji institutions which was designed to ensure and protect children’s right to play. Anji Play maybe a singular example of early educational provision in Mainland China, which appeared to be considered in the process of changing China and in the beginning to influence the world. My analysis indicates that it highlighted the Chinese model of ‘learning through play’ (here narrated as the Anji approach) and re-articulated the Western notion of ‘learning through play’ and child-centredness. However, the situation elsewhere in Mainland China has historically been rather different. In the next chapter, I focus my analysis on a very different setting in Mainland China.

Chapter 7: Transition to child-centred learning in Spring Kindergarten

7.1 Chapter introduction

In this chapter, I move my analysis from Anji Jiguan Kindergarten to another kindergarten (here called Spring Kindergarten) in Mainland China. A government-owned kindergarten established in 2012 and located in Hangzhou - the capital city of Zhejiang Province. This kindergarten has 13 classes, across three age stages: 3-4-year-olds in stage one, 4-5-year-olds in stage two and 5-6-year-olds in stage three. Each class has 32 children, so, in total, there are 416 children aged 3-6 years old in the kindergarten. The analysis uses materials from my observations, interviews with participants and policy documents. I draw on Foucault's (1995) discussion of power, along with Davies and Harré's (1990) positioning theory, to analyse how participant practitioners exercise power when implementing 'learning through play' and how they take specific positions in adopting this policy to propose that Spring Kindergarten is in the process of changing towards a more child-centred pedagogy.

7.2 Foucauldian power relations and positioning theory

Foucault claims 'power must be analysed as something which circulates or as something which only functions in the form of a chain' (1980, p. 98). He further argues that power is exercised instead of being possessed (Foucault, 1981); it is to say, power is owned by no one and exists in networks of relations. Foucault also claims that disciplinary power produces 'subjected and practiced bodies' by defining how 'one has a hold over others' bodies to do not only what one wishes but also to operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and efficiency that one determines' (Foucault, 1995, p. 138). Specifically, he argues disciplinary power works through a number of techniques such as surveillance, assessment, ranking and normalisation (Foucault, 1995). Referring to Spring Kindergarten, I draw on the idea of these disciplinary techniques to explore how participants operate power in terms of understanding and implementing 'learning through play'.

The other main theory used in analysis in this chapter is positioning theory, defined as

‘how people use words (and discourse of all types) to locate themselves and others’ (Moghaddam & Harré, 2010, p. 2). According to Davies and Harré(1990), self - positioning can be understood as reflexive positioning ‘in which one positions oneself’ (p. 48), while interactive positioning means ‘in which what one person says positions another’ (p. 48). In this chapter, I use two types of positioning theories (self-positioning and interactive positioning) to discuss how participants position themselves and how they position others.

7.3 A top-down approach of ‘learning through play’ - Principal A’s case

Principal A has been the principal of Spring Kindergarten for five years, and has ten years’ experience working as a kindergarten principal in total. A semi-structured interview was conducted with her along with an analysis of the educational documents she used in her work. What emerges from analysis of the material is how she appears to highlight that she positions herself as being a source of authority in early childhood education by exercising strong power over what to teach children and how to teach children under the top-down pressure from the local Education Bureau. I analyse several extracts indicating how she operates this top-down approach.

7.3.1 The best (最好的人) vs the remnants (被挑选剩下的人)

I am going to focus on the opposition Principal A seems to set up between the best (最好的人, zui hao de ren) and the remnants (被挑选剩下的人, bei tiao xuan sheng xia de ren). She reports how people with lower qualifications go into early childhood education and still it is significant that she sees these people as the leftovers who have not been chosen by the university entrance examination system. Literally, 被挑选剩下的人 (bei tiao xuan sheng xia de ren) means people as those who are not chosen by the education system. It seems Principal A offers a very striking image of these people who remain to be picked up. It also appears that she makes a sharp contrast between the opposing parts. Therefore, in contrast to ‘the best’, I choose to use the English word ‘remnants’ to highlight what seems to be her disappointment about the quality of kindergarten teachers who are not as good as the ones from her generation.

The following interview extracts appear to illustrate Principal A's beliefs about the knowledge of pre-service kindergarten teachers.

- 1 Students with high academic achievements chose to become teachers in the past.
- 2 Thus, kindergarten teachers from my generation were all excellent people. High-
- 3 quality kindergarten teachers cultivate high-quality students. However, this
- 4 situation has changed in the past ten years as students who face difficulties
- 5 passing the university entrance examination would choose to become
- 6 kindergarten teachers. That is to say, in my generation, the best became
- 7 kindergarten teachers while nowadays the remnants become kindergarten
- 8 teachers (Principal A, December 2017).

In this extract, Principal A positions herself as a kindergarten teacher with high academic achievements typical of her generation to distinguish herself from the recent generation of kindergarten teachers who are low achievers in the university entrance examination. Firstly, she claims that students with good academic records in the past chose to become teachers (line 1). This refers to Mainland China being an examination-driven society: students with high scores have more opportunities compared with students who have low scores to choose what they want to do. According to Foucault, examination is a 'normalising gaze', through which people are 'described, judged, measured and compared with others' (1995, p. 191). Principal A's claim (line 1) indicates that the university entrance examination is used to compare individuals, measure levels of knowledge and skills, and previously resulted in high achievers choosing teaching as an occupation. This would also imply that teaching is considered to be a prestigious profession since the top students would choose it as an occupation. Then she draws a conclusion 'kindergarten teachers from my generation were all excellent people' (line 2). This conclusion indicates that she seems to be proud of her occupation as a kindergarten teacher. The word 'all' refers to the whole group of 'excellent people' working as kindergarten teachers, which appears to indicate that Principal A is very confident of the quality of kindergarten teachers in her generation. She specifically emphasises 'from my generation', which excludes current kindergarten teachers as being 'all excellent people'. Her words would imply not all current kindergarten teachers are 'excellent people', but she is one member of a community of excellent people from her

generation. In addition, she seems to equate ‘excellent people’ and ‘students with high academic achievements’ to a certain extent. In line 3, she appears to use ‘high-quality teachers’ to refer to ‘students with high academic achievements’ and ‘excellent people’. However, research indicates that a high-quality kindergarten teacher not only requires professional knowledge, but also needs enthusiasm, patience, respect, and so forth (Colker, 2008; Gourneau, 2005). Therefore, I would argue that it is not sufficient to only focus on academic achievements when selecting kindergarten teachers.

Principal A further states that, rather than maintaining ‘this situation’ from her generation, ‘Students who face difficulties passing the university entrance examination’ (line 4-6) become trainee kindergarten teachers nowadays. According to Foucault (1995), examination is ‘a normalising gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify and to punish’ (p. 184). Aligning with Foucault (1995), Principal A appears to perceive the academic results of the university entrance examination on students as a classification of pre-service teacher quality. Also, her formulation in line 5 could be read as communicating her identity as an experienced kindergarten principal making a professional judgement. This appears to indicate that she positions herself as being a source of authoritative knowledge about kindergarten trainee teacher standards. Based on the idea that pre-service teacher quality is classified by academic results of the university entrance examination, she concludes ‘from my generation the best became kindergarten teachers while nowadays the remnants become kindergarten teachers’ (lines 6-8). She uses ‘the best’ to contrast with ‘the remnants’ to indicate her disappointment that the occupation of kindergarten teacher is not valued by society as much compared to her generation. From an interactive positioning perspective, comparing trainee kindergarten teachers from different generations, she positions pre-service kindergarten teachers graduating from recent years as ‘the remnants’ while positioning kindergarten teachers from her generation as ‘the best’, which could be read as she appears to distance herself as a member of ‘the best’ from ‘the remnants’.

7.3.2 Novice teacher - lacking trust and autonomy

This extract indicates that the teaching approaches adopted by the novice teachers appear not to be trusted by Principal A.

1 For example, novice teachers may not be able to organise some innovative
2 activities. In this sense, we encourage them to use Teachers' Guidebooks⁵ since
3 novice teachers still lack teaching experience. By using Teachers' Guidebooks,
4 novice teachers learn how to organise different teaching activities and create
5 innovative activities. In addition, local educational authorities also encourage
6 kindergarten teachers to use Teachers' Guidebooks by claiming in the policy that
7 teachers need to use two-thirds activities proposed in those guidebooks (Principal
8 A, December 2017).

The positioning in this extract is hierarchical, as Principal A appears to establish herself as privileged and considers novice teachers as inferior teaching staff. Firstly, she appears to doubt the novice teacher's capabilities to accomplish specific teaching tasks. Her claim that novice teachers 'may not be able to' (line 1) organise the innovative activities, appears to indicate that she does not trust novice teachers. Then she suggests novice teachers use Teachers' Guidebooks (textbooks) to help themselves promote teaching skills as she thinks novice teachers lack teaching experience (lines 3-4). Here, rather than criticizing Teachers' Guidebooks recommended by the local authority, which might constrain novice teachers' creativity, she seems to view Teachers' Guidebooks as having no harm, rather bringing only benefits for novice teachers.

Principal A makes another statement (lines 5-7) that the idea of encouraging novice teachers to use Teachers' Guidebooks is also supported by local educational authorities. It is relevant to explore how power operates between Principal A's leadership and the local authorities. Based on interviews and some informal conversations with Principal A, she appears to position herself as the less powerful subject under the pressure of the Education Bureau, in accordance with instructions from the local authorities. Her statement (lines 5-7) highlights that the authorities give the same suggestions as she does, and this would imply that she uses local authority as a powerful reference to support her beliefs and understanding of encouraging novice teachers to use Teachers' Guidebooks to design activities. That is to say, Principal A seems to be subject to the local authority and uses the local authority as the vehicle through which she appears to think that

⁵ Teachers' Guidebooks are textbooks that are mandated by the Education Bureau for teaching in early childhood education in Zhejiang province.

teachers can comply with her instructions.

Through Foucauldian analysis, disciplinary power has created docility and influenced how Principal A positioned herself and novice teachers. The references to Teachers' Guidebooks (textbooks) in the extract can be read as implying that they do not just provide opportunities for pedagogical practice but also indicate how both Principal A and novice teachers were docile and obedient. On one hand, being the principal of this kindergarten, Principal A appears to view herself as providing novice teachers with strong instructional leadership and facilitating novice teachers to apply what she thinks is a good teaching approach – using Guidebooks (textbooks). This is also supported by interviews with novice teachers. My analysis indicated that Principal A appeared to exert power over novice teachers (the docile bodies) who seemed not to be allowed to make autonomous decisions about teaching content and teaching approaches. On the other hand, Principal A seems to be made docile when she appears to perceive Teachers' Guidebooks as authoritative knowledge and a principle of coercion. In this way, power is a means to mould Principal A and novice teachers into 'docile bodies' as one that can be 'subjected, used, transformed and improved' (Foucault, 1995, p. 136).

In the following extract, Principal A appears to be explaining her concerns about the autonomy of novice teachers.

- 1 As novice teachers, they do have autonomy. For example, novice teachers can
- 2 change the sequence of activities when they finish the basic daily activities. They
- 3 can decide which activities go first and which go later. This kind of decision-
- 4 making right gives novice teachers a high degree of autonomy (Principal A, December 2017).

As the interview with Principal A goes on, she provides an example of how novice teachers in her kindergarten exercise their autonomy. This example appears to express her view of the teachers' autonomy being very high. As we know, the concept of teacher autonomy is related to the degree of what and how they can decide to teach to children (Little, 1995). But in this example, as Principal A states that novice teachers are only allowed to change the sequence of activities (line 2), which is neither about the content

of teaching nor the way of teaching. In addition, as Principal A mentions in line 2, this appears to indicate that the autonomy is a conditional offer; novice teachers should make sure that they complete basic activities and then they can change the subsequent activities - which activities go first and which go later (line 3). What is noticeable is that she appears to propose this kind of changing the sequence of activities as providing a high degree of autonomy for novice teachers (line 4). However, I would argue that the degree of teacher autonomy described is low as it only refers to changing the sequence of activities that can be considered as very limited autonomous decisions about what teachers teach to students and how they teach it.

7.3.3 Ranking systems - an issue of normalisation

Currently, Zhejiang is the leading province in China in achieving the goal of universalising kindergarten provision, as 95% of 3-6 years old children are enrolled in three-year ECE programmes (Hu et al., 2015). Having met this goal, Zhejiang's Ministry of Education recently adopted the Kindergarten Quality Rating System to improve the quality of ECE through the whole province (Hu et al., 2015). According to the Kindergarten Quality Rating System's requirements, it ranks kindergartens in terms of: physical space and facilities, management and teacher professional development, curriculum, pedagogy and care, parental involvement and social service, as well as hygiene and safety conditions (Assessment Manual for Quality Kindergartens, Zhejiang Province, 2014). I was informed by Principal A that, the Kindergarten Quality Rating System measures the quality of kindergartens in three levels: Level-1, Level-2 and Level-3. Level-1 represents the highest quality and kindergartens in this level are considered as exemplary kindergartens which are more focused on children's learning through play.

- 1 In order to attract more people to choose our kindergarten, we need to have our
- 2 own unique characteristics. And it is very important for kindergartens in
- 3 Hangzhou to have their unique characteristics as they are related to their
- 4 reputation and ranking. We decided to create a programme based on fairy tales
- 5 after interviewing the children who are big fans of any kind of things related to
- 6 fairy tales. Children can choose what they want to play in the programme based

7 on fairy tales (Principal A, December 2017).

In this extract, Principal A appears to position herself as being responsible for promoting her kindergarten to the public to recruit more children by suggesting creating ‘unique characteristics’ (line 2). Here, ‘unique characteristics’ indicate a particular atmosphere about the kindergarten’s setting and its curriculum. Also, ‘unique characteristics’ represent a kindergarten’s culture which suggests the philosophy, educational aims and principles that visibly or invisibly underpin the curriculum. There is a connection with Ball (2003): performativity is ‘a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of control, attrition and change - based on rewards and sanctions.’ (p. 216). Using Ball’s (2003) concept of performativity, in a performativity-driven education system, Principal A appears to perceive creating ‘unique characteristics’ (line 2) as a good strategy for Spring Kindergarten to become a Level 1 kindergarten by following the ethos of performativity where an organisation is ‘encouraged to make itself different from one another, to stand out, to improve themselves’ (Ball, 2003, p. 219).

In lines 2 to 4, Principal A links ‘unique characteristics’ to the kindergarten’s reputation and ranking. According to Foucault (1995), ranking is used not only to determine a kindergarten’s worth but also as a disciplinary technique that gets individuals ‘to be subjected, used, transformed and improved’ (p. 136). That is to say, the education ranking system is structured in such a way (Level-1 kindergartens are the most highly valued while Level-2 and Level-3 kindergartens are less valued) as to normalise the kindergartens as having preferred forms of behaviours. This is achieved by the hierarchical ranking: achieving (qualified as Level-1, Level-2 and Level-3 along with different levels of additional resources) then punishing outliers (no ranking qualifications and no additional resources) who fail to comply with the criteria. Supported by some informal conversations with teachers in Spring Kindergarten, it appeared that the higher the rank of a kindergarten, the greater the likelihood of obtaining benefits bonuses, teacher training opportunities, additional teaching resources, and so forth, from the local educational authorities.

The kindergarten ranking system might also account for Principal A’s idea of

implementing an outdoor activity programme based on fairy tales which is designed to provide children with more time to play (lines 4-5). Interviews appear to indicate that Principal A positions herself as directly responsible for local educational authorities and ensures that her work is consistent with the local Education Bureau's policies. In this regard, she proposes creating a programme based on fairy tales to achieve a good reputation and a high ranking (line 4).

Before I analyse how she adopts this idea (lines 5-7), I am going to introduce what a programme based on fairy tales is. This programme is proposed by Principal A, and aims to provide children with more time for what she considers as free play. The programme designs 12 play centres, connected with 12 different fairy tales (see Appendix VII) to allow children to freely choose the physical environment based on a specific fairy tale to engage in play every Thursday afternoon. The main role of the teacher is to facilitate children's active participation and to be responsible for children's safety. Based on my observations and informal conversations with participant-teachers, compared with the daily free play session (45 minutes) that limits children to accessing 1-2 play centres, children appear to have more time (the whole Thursday afternoon) and freedom to play as they are allowed to access all 12 play centres. Also, as I observed, in contrast to the Anji approach, teachers from Spring Kindergarten mainly focused on children's safety issues and providing the materials, so there are no reflection sessions after play sessions.

Principal A explains why she decided to create this programme (lines 4-6). The way she formulates appears to indicate that she was trying to convince me, as an early childhood researcher, that the programme is based on children's interest and it is an evidence-based decision rather than her own decision. Also, my analysis and observations appear to indicate that Principal A and teachers give priority to activities that link with reaching the goal of being awarded Level-1 kindergarten status (providing more free play sessions which have been recently emphasised by the ranking standards). In lines 6-7, she concludes that children have the right to choose what to play with and how to play in this programme. This conclusion appears to indicate that she shows me her recognition of the importance of play and she is applying this idea in practice by giving priority to children's play in the programme.

Altogether, this extract indicates that under the influence of the ranking system, Principal A proposes the creation of a unique characteristic for Spring Kindergarten, by suggesting adopting a programme based on fairy tales. My analysis indicates that an administrative top-down approach is experienced by the participants. The local educational authorities appeared to be placed at the top, operating their functions using the educational ranking system to assess, monitor and evaluate kindergartens (principals and teachers). The kindergarten principal and teachers seemed to be situated in a position of authority to comply with the hierarchical ranking that was used to control both Principal A's and teachers' bodies.

7.3.4 The paradox of compliance

In the following extract, I am going to analyse how Principal A indicates her compliance with the adoption of 'free play' in the kindergarten's curriculum.

1 Free play was ignored in the past. We paid more attention to teacher-led
2 activities, but less attention of free play. In recent years, people are more focused
3 on free play. For example, the duration of free play is evaluated in the
4 kindergartens in Hangzhou. According to the kindergarten quality assessment in
5 Hangzhou, children should be provided with at least 45 minutes of free play.
6 Although we are paying more attention to free play now, it does not mean free
7 play can fully replace teacher-led activities (Principal A, December 2017)

In this extract, Principal A opens with a general statement 'Free play was ignored in the past' (line 1). She does not mention who ignored free play in the past. She makes this statement as if it is a fact without any doubt about it. In the literature review (Chapter 2), in the Chinese context, free play is considered as a break to relax children's minds rather than teaching (Cheng, 2004). Here, she uses the passive voice to claim the ignorance of free play without referring to the subjects which appears to be because ignoring free play might be now seen as unacceptable. She further states free play received less attention because more attention was given to teacher-led activities (line 2). Her claim is supported by a substantial volume of research which indicated teacher-directed learning dominated most of the time in Chinese kindergartens (Li et al., 2011; Pang & Richey,

2007; Vong, 2013). Using 'we' connects herself to others, this appears to imply to indirectly acknowledge that she was a member of this group who ignored play. Following this, she makes another statement 'In recent years, people are more focused on free play' (lines 2 to 3). It could be assumed that 'people', 'we' and the unknown agents of ignoring free play might be the same group of people including early childhood practitioners, parents, scholars or policy makers. What this appears to imply is an indirect indication of how Chinese early childhood education is trying to transform from focusing on teacher-centred to child-centred pedagogy by emphasising the importance of free play.

Principal A specifically illustrates how early childhood educators are more focused on free play by providing an example of the local educational authorities assessing the duration of free play sessions (lines 3-4). As mentioned before, Level-1 kindergartens are required to meet specific standards to obtain and retain their rankings. In Principal A's explanation, 'the duration of free play' (line 3) appears to be one of the key elements to be measured in the ranking system. In line 5, Principal A states that the educational guidance stipulates 'children should be provided at least 45 minutes of free play'. This would imply, under pressure from the local educational authorities, both Principal A and teachers seem to be subjected to educational policies and the ranking system that also constructs Principal A and teachers as 'docile bodies'.

Principal A admits that there is a movement in early childhood education to allocate more time for children to play freely, and at the same time she suggests teacher-led activities are also needed to be valued (lines 6-7). This implies that she feels the need to defend the importance of kindergarten teachers' role as educational instructors, a role which seems to have become devalued when more attention is paid to free play. It appears to show that the paradox remains: Principal A has to demonstrate compliance with educational policies emphasising 'free play' due to the top-down pressure, but at the same time, she is resistant adopting this policy because of her conventional Chinese beliefs about teaching and learning. Her statement appears to indicate that she would prefer a balance between free play and teacher-led activities.

7.4 A teacher-led pedagogy of ‘learning through play’ - Teacher C’s case

Teacher C is an experienced kindergarten teacher, and has been working in early childhood education for 21 years. In the following extracts, I mainly focus on how she understands and implements ‘learning through play’, and the difficulties she encounters in the process of adopting this policy.

7.4.1 Insistence on teacher-led pedagogy

I draw on two examples to indicate how Teacher C appears to be insistent on constructing herself as being in a position of authority and having a strong effect on children’s learning.

7.4.1.1 Extract 1 - Playing pogo ball

- 1 I: Can you please tell me: what is your opinion about children’s play?
2 TC: I think children gain experience through rule-based activities. These rule-based
3 play experiences help them better understand how to engage in free play. Children
4 create new ways to play based on understanding these rule-based activities. For
5 example, children created new ways to play pogo ball after I showed them how to
6 play with it. The pogo ball was a new thing for them. And they did not know how to
7 play with it. It was difficult for children to just create new ways to explore new
8 materials without any instructions. But after some basic instructions, they learned how
9 to play with the pogo ball by practising jumping and balancing their bodies. And then,
10 they created some new ways to play with it. I think teachers’ instructions help
11 children develop their creativity (Teacher C, December 2017).

In this extract, Teacher C reports with her understanding of children’s play by giving an example of guiding children how to play pogo ball. Through the opening sequences, from lines 2 to 3, she states that it is better for children to have rule-based activities experience which can help their engagement in free play. Interestingly, she talks about the relationship between rule-based activities and free play in this way. As she states, she seems to think that children are expected to have the experience of activities with

rules and thus this prior experience could contribute to free play. In line 4, she claims that children's experience of rule-based activities provides the foundation for them to create new ways to play with the materials.

In line 5, Teacher C provides an example of how she helps children create new ways to play pogo ball to support her claim in line 4. Following this, she says that the pogo ball is a kind of play material which is something new to children. Based on this, she claims that children have no idea about how to play with it (line 6). Her claim appears to indicate that she considers children to be passive learners who are expected to follow teachers' instructions. In lines 7 to 8, she further states that it is difficult for children to come up with new ways to play with new materials without any instructions. Her statement appears to imply that she emphasises her role as an instructor who needs to guide children to invent new ways to play pogo ball. What her statements appear to imply is Teacher C has a teacher-centred belief, positioning children as the listeners and herself as the expert, having rich experience in the field of how children learn and play.

Teacher C reports that children learn how to play pogo ball with basic instruction, as well as practice (lines 8-9). She then makes the conclusion that teachers' instruction helps children develop their creativity (lines 10-11). Her conclusion appears to indicate that Teacher C considers giving students essential instructions as a way to facilitate their creativity. In fact, my observations suggest that Teacher C focuses on giving children enough instructions rather than providing children enough time to think, discuss and ask questions. Here, I argue that Teacher C's pedagogical strategy, guiding children to follow teachers' instructions without questioning, might not help boost their creativity.

Unlike teachers from Anji kindergarten, claiming that children learn through free play, Teacher C appears to believe that children learn through guided play. Such an understanding appears to cause Teacher C to position herself as an educational instructor to provide children with skills, information and knowledge. Also, her experience of being a kindergarten teacher for 21 years appears to lead her to position herself as a professional expert in children's play and learning. Based on these impressions, Teacher C seems to exercise power by delivering what she thinks is the professional guidance which is connected to an emphasis on children's subordinated status and their

dependence on teachers' decisions, and children are made docile when they come to follow a particular set of behaviours in order to learn how to play pogo ball.

7.4.1.2 Extract 2 - Drawing class

Now I take another example to indicate that Teacher C seems to position herself as being responsible for children's mastery of drawing skills.

1 In my case, I do not follow the Guidelines of Arts education completely. I have my
2 own way of teaching drawing. For example, it is always a controversial topic about
3 whether kindergarten teachers should provide model pictures or not when teaching
4 drawing. I choose to use model pictures since you can notice that it is very often
5 children cannot express their feelings through drawing as they lack basic skills. In
6 addition, I think innovation is based on mastering basic skills. My model pictures are
7 very interesting. For instance, I give children different kinds of model pictures of
8 giraffes when I teach children how to draw a giraffe. 'What is the biggest
9 characteristic of giraffes?'(TC), 'Long long neck'(Children), 'What do you think the
10 giraffe looks like'? (TC). Let's draw two circles: one as the body and the other one as
11 the head of the giraffe. Giraffe's neck is very long and now the giraffe is looking up
12 for leaves. What else will the giraffe do? Now I am going to be a giraffe that squats
13 down and eats; I am going to be a giraffe that turns around and smiles at you... By
14 doing so, children learn how to draw different kinds of giraffes. And I think these are
15 very valuable practices (Teacher C, December 2017)

In this extract, Teacher C reports her approach of teaching children drawing by using model pictures. Firstly, she claims that she does not follow the Guidelines of Arts education completely (line 1). This highlights that she appears to be resistant to the Guidelines which focus on children's feelings and self-expression, but not basic skills. According to *Early learning and development guidelines: age 3 -6* (Ministry of Education, 2012, p. 20): *'it is very important for young children to express their understandings and emotions through their drawings. Kindergarten teachers should support children's expressions of individuality and creativity without emphasising*

mastering skills and meeting standardisation requirements.’ The guidelines suggest teachers should help children express their understandings and feelings rather than providing skills training. It formulates a child-centred teaching approach, through which children’s freedom of choice in terms of drawing is valued. As Teacher C states that she does not agree with the guidelines, she further points out that she has her unique way of teaching drawing (line 2). Following this, she says using model pictures to teach drawing is a controversial issue (line 3). It would perhaps suggest that this formulation is used to indicate that she refers to a debate in the field of ECE, suggesting that she is not the only one who is resistant to the Guidelines.

Foucault (1980) states that ‘there are no relations of power without resistances.’ (p.142). The *Early learning and development guidelines: age 3 -6* can be read as a disciplinary mechanism related to ‘a field of surveillance’ or ‘hierarchical observation’ (Foucault, 1995, p. 170). Interviews with Teacher C indicated that for teaching Arts, the Guidelines suggest that kindergarten teachers focus on children’s expressions of individuality and creativity and specifically move emphasis away from mastering skills, and how teachers apply the Guidelines into practice is central to the assessment of teacher quality. However, Teacher C appears to be resistant to the Guidelines by holding the belief of actually teaching children certain specific drawing skills. Through a Foucauldian lens, the discipline power is challenged by Teacher C’s resistance to the Guidelines through avoiding applying it in practice.

Teacher C states that she appears to think children are not able to express their feelings by what they draw because she seems to think that children lack basic drawing skills (lines 4-5). Combining her words with my observations in the drawing class, she appears to view messy childish drawings in which children indicate their own invented ways of representing the world as lacking the ability to express their feelings. This appears to suggest that she considers adult-like drawing in which children display their ability to master a high level of drawing skill as the correct way for children to express themselves. In line 6, she makes another statement about her understanding of the relationship between skills training and innovation. This appears to indicate that she believes that the acquisition of drawing skills is the foundation for creativity as she seems to believe that mastering skills would free children from the struggle of trying to draw things accurately,

and based on this, children's drawing can be creative.

By claiming that her model pictures are 'very interesting', Teacher C appears to be confident about her teaching pedagogy that she seems to think attracts children's attention (lines 6-7). Following this, she claims that her model pictures are diverse (lines 7-8). Her formulations also appear to indicate that she considers 'interesting' and 'diverse' as the key elements of a good model picture. In lines 8 to 13, she provides specific examples about her approach of using model pictures: asking children a variety of questions. Her words appear to indicate that she is proud of the way she asks questions, through which she seems to help children engage in creative thinking.

Confirming my observations of the pedagogy in the drawing class, Teacher C highlighted the procedure for drawing different kinds of giraffes by drawing on a flip chart. As she drew each part, she asked questions to encourage children to think of the characteristics of a giraffe, demonstrating how to change lines and circles to make various giraffes. She then drew giraffes engaging in various activities: smiling, eating, and galloping. The children were told that they could draw any of these and they were then ready to begin drawing giraffes on their pieces of paper. This appears to indicate Teacher C moulds children in the image of her understanding of drawing. Also, this suggests her view that children were expected to draw more than copying and they were expected to master drawing skills.

In general, my interview and observation materials appear to indicate that Teacher C considers the beauty of drawing is the main point of arts education. In addition, a high level of drawing skills results in drawing beautiful images. In this sense, she appears to hold a teacher-led pedagogy in children's learning about drawing by using model pictures. In order to achieve the point (the beauty of drawing), in the class, she trains children to think of the characteristics of the giraffe, followed by encouraging them to practise drawing different kinds of giraffes. Children are positioned as 'docile bodies'. Children are presented as willing to comply with Teacher C's instructions. They are not portrayed as having their own understanding of the world, and children's own expression of drawing might be considered (by Teacher C) as lacking basic drawing skills in adult world.

7.4.2 Between teacher-led pedagogy and child-centred pedagogy

Now I take another example to indicate how Teacher C encourages children to undertake an experiment about planting garlic in the sand to test whether garlic can grow in the sand or not.

- 1 I: Can you give me some specific examples of your role in children's play?
2 TC: About one week ago, a kid came to me with a question: "Can garlic grow in
3 the sand?". Seriously, I had no idea about it as I lacked the knowledge of nature.
4 According to my understanding, garlic must grow in the soil. But I am not sure
5 whether garlic can grow in the sand or not. So, we did an experiment to plant
6 garlic in the sand. After four to five days, we observed garlic sprouted. The child
7 felt so happy and could not wait to share his observation and feelings with us.
8 "Look, the garlic grows and it grows faster in the sand" (the kid). I thought I was
9 happier than him in a sense. Later, some other children asked me another
10 question: "Can sweet potato grow in the sand?". I am not sure either. So, I
11 suggested children do another experiment to plant sweet potato in the sand and
12 observe what will happen. Hence, this is what I mean by my role as a facilitator
13 by learning together with children (Teacher C, December 2017).

When asked to give examples of her role in children's play (line 1), teacher C appears to consider her key role is to facilitate children's learning through what she thinks as purposeful play and view children as capable learners who are at the centre of their learning. This is inconsistent with what I have discussed in the previous section - her insistence on teacher-led pedagogy. The paradox of Teacher C's ideas about pedagogy appears to imply that she is struggling to balance her traditional understanding about teaching and learning, and the newly emphasised child-centred teaching approach 'learning through play'. In lines 2 to 5, she states that a child asked her whether garlic grows in the sand and she told me that she did not know the answer. Admitting her lack of knowledge, she appears to avoid showing the image that teachers are all-knowing. In lines 5 to 6, she explains how she facilitates children's learning through play. First of all, she describes how she considers planting garlic in the sand as a play activity. As I observed, the formal class lasted around 45 minutes at Spring Kindergarten, through

which children appeared to be guided to do some teacher-led activities designed for them to acquire knowledge. Combining her words with my observations, her formulation suggests her understanding of play is opposite to what happens in formal class. Then, she states that she encouraged children to do an experiment to test whether garlic can grow in the sand or not. Here, she appears to view the experiment (planting garlic in the sand) as a kind of purposeful play activity that she seems to think is a good strategy to facilitate children's learning. When describing the garlic planting experiment, she uses 'we' twice in reference to her attempt to develop a close teacher-child relationship, and by doing this she appears to position herself as a facilitator helping children to construct their knowledge rather than an educational instructor.

Teacher C states that she found the child was so happy and keen to share his experience with others (lines 6-7). This can be read as implying that she is focusing on the learning process rather than the learning results by paying attention to children's emotion during the experiment. In her formulation (lines 8-9), not only is the child portrayed as feeling happy, but also Teacher C reports that she felt even happier when she learnt that garlic can grow in the sand by doing the experiment with the children. This appears to imply that she has a good experience of adopting a child-centred approach, which might change her insistence on teacher-led pedagogy. In lines 10 to 12, Teacher C provides a similar example- supporting children to do another experiment to test whether or not sweet potato grows in the sand. Again, here, she appears to indicate her own identification with the tenets of child-centred pedagogy - the irrelevance of 'getting it right'.

The previous section discussed Teacher C's insistence on teacher-led pedagogy, while this section points out she is also able to adopt a child-centred teaching approach. On one hand, she seems to be insistent on offering children more teacher-directed activities than child-directed activities. On the other hand, she presents herself as having some commitments to a child-centred approach. My interview and observation materials indicate her conflicting beliefs about teacher-led pedagogy and child-led pedagogy actually co-exist, and she is trying to enact 'learning through play' by emphasising a child-centred approach, but how this approach is implemented still appears to lack consistency and clarity.

7.4.3 Difficulties in implementing ‘learning through play’

While reporting Teacher C is trying to use what she considers to be learning through play, Teacher C mentions there are some challenges in adopting this teaching approach. Now I analyse difficulties presented by Teacher C in relation to ‘learning through play’ in the following interview extract.

1 I think there are too many children in a class. For example, there are now 32
2 children with 2 kindergarten teachers and 1 care worker in a class. And, it is
3 really hard for me to give attention to every child when organising some
4 activities. You know, every child wants your attention. Sometimes it is difficult
5 to manage activities as children try to grab your attention by doing things you do
6 not expect. And another difficulty is that we have to do a lot of paperwork in
7 order to cope with teacher assessments. You cannot imagine how much
8 paperwork and how many tasks we need to finish in relation to teacher
9 assessments. The quality of our teaching is evaluated by our kindergarten and the
10 local education bureau, along with the paperwork we submit. Sometimes, I just
11 feel exhausted since I have to make up some activities which I do not even
12 organise for children in order to let my paperwork look beautiful (Teacher C, December
2017).

In this extract, Teacher C reports some difficulties in applying ‘learning through play’ in practice. In lines 1 to 2, she describes the class size and staff-child ratio (2 teaching staff and 1 care worker for nearly 30 children) that is also specified in official documents (Assessment Manual for Quality Kindergartens, Zhejiang Province, 2014). In fact, as I observed, sometimes Teacher C and Teacher D allocated workloads so that one was in charge of the class in the morning and the other in the afternoon. This indicates that the actual teacher-child ratio at Spring Kindergarten may not be the same as the officially registered staff-child ratio. Combining some informal conversations with my observations, I was informed by Teacher C and Teacher D that they appeared to view this kind of work allocation as a strategy to share workloads, so that they could have more time to finish paperwork (or have a rest). From a Foucauldian perspective, the implementation of disciplinary technology (here narrated as teacher assessment

requiring teachers to complete a significant load of paperwork) results in the ‘docile body’ (Teacher C and Teacher D). Following this, Teacher C states that she found it was challenging for one kindergarten teacher to oversee a classroom of around 30 children due to too much attention needed from children (lines 2-6). Supported by my observation materials, I estimate nearly half of my two weeks fieldtrip, either Teacher C or Teacher D was in charge of the whole class. Teacher C’s description appears to indicate that she is influenced by the Western perspectives of child-centredness, and she seems to be constrained by feeling she needs to display particular behaviours consistently, being responsible for meeting all the children’s needs all the time.

Teacher C claims that there is too much paperwork that needs to be completed (lines 6-9). As I mentioned earlier, from a Foucauldian perspective, paperwork can be viewed as a technique of disciplinary power which gets teachers to be monitored by others. According to some informal conversations with Teacher C, the paperwork included giving and recording weekly and monthly assessments, writing teaching plans, building up children’s portfolios and documenting all activities that have been done. She then claims that the paperwork she submitted was evaluated as a way to monitor her teaching and thus to judge the quality of her teaching (lines 9-10). According to Foucault (1995), monitoring, or surveillance, is intended to make people act in a particular way because they constantly feel they are under observation. Teacher C’s formulation appears to indicate that she is subject to continuous monitoring (here narrated as finishing loads of paperwork). Knowing that it is the way to gain good results for her assessment seems to be enough for Teacher C to finish the paperwork. It appears to indicate she is encouraged to believe that complying with the monitoring is what makes her professional. In addition, she is subjected to this paperwork monitoring and so normalising her behaviours to meet teacher assessment standards.

Finally, Teacher C says she is exhausted and she would even make up paperwork to satisfy her kindergarten leaders (lines 11-13). This seems to indicate that the paperwork has kept her too busy to pay enough attention to children or think about how to implement ‘learning through play’. According to Ball (2012), the ways in which audit practices relate to focusing on measurement leads to the devaluation of the meaning of work. A performativity discourse shifts Teacher C’s attention from writing plans and

reports and keeping records to adding values to herself and seeking professional. She seems to perceive completing different kinds of paperwork as a way to calculate her own values. Teacher C is then 'subject to a myriad of judgements, measures, comparisons and targets' (Ball, 2003, p. 220). In general, based on her account, Teacher C seems to have her performance disciplined by the larger class size caused by sharing workloads and too much paperwork.

7.5 A child-centred pedagogy of 'learning through play'-Teacher D's case

Teacher D has been a kindergarten teacher for nearly three years. He works in Spring Kindergarten since he graduated from the University. In this section, I am going to explore how Teacher D - as a male kindergarten teacher - accounts for and practises what he considers to be 'learning through play'.

7.5.1 Confusion of teaching Chinese proverbs and poems

The following extract is used to describe how Teacher D experienced deciding to teach children Chinese proverbs and poems and then stopping teaching them.

1 Last year, I taught children to recite Chinese ancient poems as I was influenced
2 by a TV show introducing the benefits of learning traditional Chinese cultural
3 studies. I had a discussion with the children about learning ancient Chinese
4 poems. And they showed strong interest in learning poems. You cannot imagine
5 that our children learned to recite the book of *Three Character Classic, Hundred*
6 *Family Surnames*⁶ and more than a dozen Tang and Song poems just within one
7 month. But I found that they gradually lost interest as the learning became more
8 difficult. Based on my experience, at least parents were fascinated by their
9 children learning traditional Chinese poems. Children were also interested in
10 these proverbs and poems at the beginning as they have a sense of
11 accomplishment by reciting them. I stopped teaching children Chinese proverbs

⁶ Three Character Classic and Hundred Family Surnames are considered to be the traditional Confucian classics and suitable for teaching young children. When children had learnt to recite the two Children Confucian classics, they can essentially recognise and pronounce around 2,000 characters without accurately being able to write or understand the meaning of the characters.

12 and poems as I noticed they were not interested in them and I respected them.
13 But actually, I was confused about whether children should be taught these kinds
14 of poems or not? (Teacher D, December 2017)

When asked about his understanding of children's learning, Teacher D gives me an example of how he facilitates children to learn Chinese proverbs and poems based on children's interest. He says he was influenced by a TV program introducing the advantages of learning traditional Chinese cultural studies, and then he comes up with the idea to teach children to recite Chinese proverbs and poems (lines 1-3). Research indicates that Traditional Chinese culture considers the early years being a good time for training young children (Rao et al., 2003). He presents himself as having some commitment to traditional Chinese cultural ideas which encourage children to memorise and practise cognitive skills. Bearing this idea in mind, he then discusses with children whether or not they want to learn ancient Chinese poems (lines 3-4). After discussion, he decided to teach children ancient Chinese poems as he found that children showed strong interest in this topic (line 4). Here, he uses 'strong interest' to indicate that he pays attention to observing children. What this appears to imply is an indirect indication of how Teacher D is making efforts to adopt a child-centred approach.

Teacher D then moves to report children's achievements (lines 5-7). He uses 'I cannot imagine' to emphasise how good the children are at learning the poems and proverbs and how surprised he is. This appears to imply that he did not expect children to be so interested in learning Chinese proverbs and poems, but what children have achieved is more than he could have anticipated. In lines 7 to 8, he points out that he stopped teaching these proverbs and poems as he realised that the children had lost interest in reciting them. This appears to indicate that he considers himself to be someone who would not push children to practise these proverbs and poems, but rather prefers to respect children's choices. He explains his own change of mind about teaching poems and proverbs, discussing how children enjoy reciting these proverbs and poems at the beginning and then gradually losing their passion. This also would reflect how *Three Character Classic* and *Hundred Family Surnames* are designed for easy memorisation, and how, through reciting them, children might feel that they are acquiring knowledge. This would appear to indicate his view is that children can sense their obvious progress.

He states that facilitating children to learn traditional Confucian classics meets parents' expectations (lines 8-9). This implies his perspective is that parents of children in Spring Kindergarten might still hold the traditional educational philosophy, which focuses on memorisation of knowledge. According to some informal conversations with Teacher D, I was informed that parents from his class emphasise the acquisition of knowledge by sending their children to supplementary schools. Also, I was informed by both Teacher C and Teacher D that such phenomenon is common in Hangzhou as kindergartens are not allowed to teach children primary school curriculum enforced by monitoring of the local Education Bureau. Parents, therefore, search for alternative provisions. This appears to indicate that parents from Spring Kindergarten are subject to the examination-centred educational system. Teacher D talks about his internal conflict about whether he should teach children traditional Confucian classics or not in their early years (lines 13-14). This implies he appears to be affected by Chinese traditional values and norms. Meanwhile he carries his own educational belief that is more oriented towards a child-centred approach emphasising active learning and respecting children – harnessing children's interests to design the activities.

7.5.2 Letting children choose what they want to do

The following interview extract appears to indicate Teacher D's beliefs about children's play, particular on what he thinks is free play.

1 Well, I prefer to let children choose what they want to do. But you know, the free
2 play in my kindergarten needs to meet some specific requirements. For example,
3 I have to think about organising some activities for children during their free
4 play session because I am assessed by the kindergarten principal, the vice-
5 principal and the curriculum deputy on how we organise the activities and which
6 materials I choose to use. So, I have to plan some activities for children, even
7 during the so-called free play session. In fact, sometimes, I just let children
8 choose what they want to do or I try as much as I can to give children time to
9 play freely after they finish tasks. But, by doing so, I might face some difficulties
10 because our kindergarten wants children to have structured play rather than such
11 kind of free play. Our kindergarten leaders prefer teachers to organise purposeful

12 play through which they think teachers can take up the opportunities to scaffold
13 learning. But for whose purpose is it? Is it for the teacher's purpose to let
14 children learn useful knowledge or the children's purpose to just enjoy the play?
15 I think this kind of transmitting knowledge thing can be done in class or at
16 another time. I prefer to let children play with whatever they want during the free
17 play session. If children feel that they need my help, then I offer my help. I like
18 free play in this way. In this case, I am more relaxed and I think children are
19 happier (Teacher D, December 2017)

In this extract, Teacher D expresses his understanding of what he considers to be 'free play' - to let children choose what they want to do (line 1). Following this, he introduces how free play is implemented in Spring Kindergarten, which he claims is very different from his understanding of free play. In line 2, he demonstrates that the free play session is constrained by 'some specific requirements'. Followed by this statement, he gives an example to imply how the 'free play session' works in his kindergarten (lines 3-6). He explains he needs to adopt teacher-designed activities in order to meet kindergarten leaders' requirements. By stating 'have to', he positions himself as having no choice to decide how to implement what he thinks is 'learning through play', but rather indicates he has to apply in practice what he is required to do by the kindergarten. Also, he states that the free play sessions are monitored by the kindergarten leaders in terms of how he plans the activities for children and which kinds of materials are used. This appears to indicate that kindergarten leaders are embedded within a disciplinary mechanism related to the hierarchical observation where teachers are placed in the 'field of surveillance' (Foucault, 1995, p. 189), which seeks to normalise teachers' behaviours. Teacher D's statement indicates how important it is to prepare the free play session as this is synonymous with high-quality teaching. Also, his formulation implies that he appears to think he is not trusted by the kindergarten leaders who monitor novice teachers regularly. This is consistent with what I discussed in section 6.3.2 of this chapter relating to Principal A's statement about novice teachers lacking trust from kindergarten leaders, as well as autonomy to organise activities.

Teacher D uses 'have to' a second time to indicate that he is not willing to organise the activities as the kindergarten leaders require ((lines 6-7). The word 'so-called' (line 7)

appears to have been adopted to suggest free play means children are supposed to be allowed to choose what, when, where and how to play but in fact what happens in the classroom is not free play. From a Foucauldian analysis, he is disciplined to modify his behaviour as a result of an all-seeing perspective (here, narrated as kindergarten leaders) (Foucault, 1995). He makes another statement which would be surprising to his current kindergarten leaders and the opposite of what they would expect. He says that although he has to comply with the requirements from the school leader, he sometimes goes against the rules by creating opportunities for children to choose what they want to play. He uses 'in fact' to indicate he is following his own way to implement his pedagogical understanding of 'learning through play' when this situation may not be obviously known to the kindergarten leaders. 'Try as much as I can' (line 8) suggests he is making considerable effort to fight for the children's rights to play as they wish, which indicates he presents himself as having the commitment to what he thinks of as 'learning through play'.

Teacher D also mentions that children are allowed to play as they wish when they complete tasks. Here, his formulation appears to indicate that he considers 'free play' as a reward or a time for the children to relax after their work. Following this, in lines 9 to 11, he reports the consequences of challenging the rules. He states that the way he organises activities in children's free play session is beyond his limited autonomy, so he might need to deal with being challenged by the kindergarten leaders. His formulation 'such kind of free play' could be read as indicating a recognition that his understanding of 'free play' without any learning intentions might not be acceptable to the kindergarten leaders. In lines 12 to 13, he makes another claim that compared with free play, kindergarten leaders place structured play at the heart of children's development, and he seems to think the kindergarten leaders suggest teachers take an intervention role to manage and guide children's learning.

Teacher D questions the word purposeful – is it for teachers' purpose or for children's purpose (lines 13-14). This appears to indicate that Teacher D is resistant to a form of play that was organised to achieve pre-determined learning goals, because it is inconsistent with his understanding of free play. In this sense, he questions for whose benefit the play is in order to emphasise play should benefit children rather than

satisfying the school leaders. Also, his formulation appears to imply that he thinks purposeful play is valued by the school leaders while free play is not valued. Interestingly, Teacher D's accounts of how kindergarten leaders understand and implement free play differ from Principal A's claims that she becomes more focused on free play. Teacher D appears to think kindergarten leaders consider purposeful play as a way of transmitting knowledge, and he seems to indicate this kind of play-based learning containing more teacher guidance and less child-centred activities cannot replace what he considers to be free play (lines 15-16). He then makes the claim that he is in favour of 'let children play with whatever they want during the free play session' (lines 16-17). Teacher D's account appears to show how he sees himself as facing a discrepancy between his pedagogical philosophy and preferred practices of the kindergarten leaders.

Teacher D reports his involvement and engagement in children's play is to provide support when they need this (line 17). He expresses 'I like free play in this way' (lines 17-18). Here, 'in this way' refers to his statement in line 18 that he appears to think play is a spontaneous and child-initiated activity that is directed by the child rather than the teacher. Finally, he draws a conclusion that he would be more relaxed and he thinks children would be happier if the possible situation that has just been mentioned actually exists (lines 18-19). 'I am more relaxed' (line 18) indicates that he might face a lot of pressure from the kindergarten leaders who appear to ask him to guide children's free play sessions and monitor his work as a novice teacher. By stating 'I think children are happier' (lines 18-19), it appears to indicate that he uses happiness as one of the key criteria to measure the quality of what he thinks as free play. Also, his formulation appears to imply that he focuses on the importance of children's emotional states and his role is to ensure that children feel happy during the free play session. It should be noted that such attention to emotions and well-being does not necessarily reduce the power relationship. Foucault (2007) states 'Pastoral power is a power of care' (p. 127). Originating in Christian institutions, pastoral power is oriented to assure individual salvation in the next world (Foucault, 1982). According to Teacher D's accounts, he seems to consider himself as treating children with respect, and meeting their needs and supporting or helping children when they ask for it, which can be perceived as an expression of the teacher's pastoral power.

7.5.3 A masculine perspective on play

The following interview extract appears to indicate how Teacher D, as a male kindergarten teacher, accounts for play.

1 I think my understanding of children's play might be related to my personality
2 and gender. As a male kindergarten teacher, I am not rigid with children. Hence,
3 children like me very much. For example, I am always highly in demand by
4 children during their play. I think it might be common that male kindergarten
5 teachers are not as rigid as female kindergarten teachers. In terms of physical
6 activities, male teachers are more confident to organise activities including
7 walking, running, jumping, climbing and crawling while female teachers are less
8 confident. As I have known, female teachers at Spring Kindergarten are more or
9 less resistant to manage physical education, especially when children need to
10 seek challenges and take risks (Teacher D, December 2017).

At the beginning of this extract, Teacher D presents his understanding of children's play as being attributed to his gender as a male kindergarten teacher and his personal characteristics (lines 1-2). Based on his male kindergarten teacher identity, he points out he is not rigid with children (line 2). Combining his words with my observations at Spring Kindergarten, compared with Teacher D, Teacher C (a female teacher) appears to exhibit more authority and discipline when organising children's activities. In particular, the female teacher seems to be rigid in their concerns about improving children's cognitive development and mastering specific skills (see section 6.4.1.2 for more details). My observation of Teacher D's interactions with the children also indicates that he appears to be especially concerned about children's emotional needs and reacted sensitively to help children overcome their difficulties. This is in line with his previous claim that appears to indicate he regards children's enjoyment as a key criterion guiding his actions.

Teacher D draws a conclusion that children like him very much. Following this, he provides an example of how he is welcome in children's play (line 3). Here, he uses two adverbs 'very much' and 'highly', to support the claim that he is very popular among

children. The use of 'very much' appears to highlight that he is favoured by children to a great degree. Similarly, the use of 'highly' indicates that he is considered to have an important position in children's activities. Teacher D's description of his popularity among children implies he enjoys a more equal power-sharing mode which he appears to believe creates a friendly relationship between him and the children. He makes a general claim that male teachers are less rigid compared to female teachers in early childhood education (lines 4-5). The use of 'common' indicates that he appears to think this phenomenon happens very often. This also implies that Teacher D has a particular image of male kindergarten teachers who can give children more freedom in kindergarten activities.

Teacher D provides another example to explain how he constructs a masculine identity in organising physical activities (lines 5-8). He states, compared with female teachers, he is more confident to provide children guidance with the practice of motor skills. This appears to imply that Teacher D considers himself more expected to do physical activities with children. Also, this indicates that Teacher D considers himself as a male to be more physically able than females and more able to participate in children's motor and spatial activities.

Teacher D states female teachers are less willing to organise risky play (lines 8-10). Altogether what is implied here is how Teacher D appears to have a gendered view about children's activities. By presenting masculinity through risk-taking activities, he makes the claim that he is more able to bring benefits to promote children's independent mobility. Substantial research has indicated male kindergarten teachers are more involved in physical play activities with bigger physical movements and risk-taking (Koustourakis et al., 2015; Sandseter, 2014; Xu & Waniganayake, 2018). Combining his words with my observations, Teacher D seems to consider himself specialising in sports, paying particular attention to teaching children being brave and independent, which he appears to think is his unique contribution to Spring Kindergarten.

7.6 Chapter summary

This chapter aimed to explore how power relations were conceptualised and operated

between a kindergarten principal, young children, and two kindergarten teachers, through analysis of their accounts. This chapter has analysed how participant practitioners in different positions address how they account for their practices of 'learning through play' by using the analytical tool of Foucauldian disciplinary power (1995) which includes a number of techniques such as examination, surveillance and ranking, as well as Davies and Harré's (1990) positioning theory.

I have presented Principal A's description of how she deals with the relationship with teachers in a top-down manner and how Teacher C and Teacher D demonstrate how they participate in children's play in a teacher-led and child-centred way respectively. Altogether, my analysis generated from participants' accounts implies that learning is indicated by measurable results while play is considered as relaxing children's minds or reinforcing knowledge. Also, the analysis appears to highlight that teachers at Spring Kindergarten put more emphasis on child-centred activities and de-emphasise direct instruction, yet still retain a commitment to teacher-direction.

Chapter 8: A child-centred approach as a scaffolding technique at Happy Lemon Kindergarten

8.1 Chapter introduction

In this chapter, I move the focus of my analysis from Mainland China to Hong Kong, by examining Happy Lemon Kindergarten, a self-funding kindergarten, registered with the Modern University, a private organisation. This kindergarten provides both half-day and full-day sessions, serving about 180 children aged from one to six years old. In this centre, the Questioning-Exploration-Experience (QEE) orientated curriculum is employed which focuses on developing collaboration between family, school and community at this centre. Structurally, I begin by employing Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital to analyse how kindergarten staff understand and mobilise school-family-community collaboration to facilitate children's learning. Next, I analyse how teachers' accounts suggest how they are translating Western ideas, such as learning by doing, constructivism theory, child-centred pedagogy and scaffolding into the Hong Kong context. Before detailing the analysis, it is useful to consider the materials which inform it.

I draw on materials collected from semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and observations at Happy Lemon Kindergarten. Interviews and informal conversations were conducted in Mandarin, and included some key terms in English. Observations were undertaken in classes taught in Cantonese. The interview participants are four kindergarten staff, namely Principal B, Deputy C, Teacher E (an experienced teacher) and Teacher F (a novice teacher). Principal B is a senior early childhood educator, with nearly thirty years' experience working in early childhood education. Deputy C has twelve years' experience working at kindergartens and holds a Master's degree. Teacher E has a Master's degree and eight years' experience working as a kindergarten teacher, having worked at Happy Lemon Kindergarten since she graduated from the Modern University. Teacher F has been a kindergarten teacher for nearly two years, and, like Teacher E, has worked at Happy Lemon Kindergarten since she graduated from the Modern University.

8.2 School-family-community collaboration as a way to increase children's learning

In this section, based on Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital, I firstly analyse school-level policies, which appear to indicate that Happy Lemon Kindergarten reproduces upper-middle-class values, patterns and forms of communication. Next, I explore how Principal B and teachers understand and implement school-family-community collaboration through communication, decision-making and volunteering.

8.2.1 School level policy

School mission: Promote Family School Community Collaboration.

A spacious and well-equipped Parent Centre is set up within the Happy Lemon Kindergarten (pseudonym) to enhance partnerships between the Happy Lemon Kindergarten, its parents and the community. It aims to promote the family-school-community collaboration culture beyond the Happy Lemon Kindergarten to the wider community (Happy Lemon Kindergarten, 2019).

A school mission is a public declaration which schools use to describe the purpose of education and how the school aims to achieve that purpose. This extract is one of the mission statements of Happy Lemon Kindergarten and aims at improving school-family-community collaboration. It states that the Happy Lemon Kindergarten established a Parent Centre to reinforce the relationship between the kindergarten, parents and the community. Two adjectives 'spacious' and 'well-equipped' are used to describe how the Parent Centre has more than enough space and sufficient equipment. Interestingly, this mission statement emphasises 'spacious' to indicate how Happy Lemon Kindergarten supports the Parent Centre. It has been noted that Hong Kong is one of the most densely populated cities in the world with 6,300 people per square kilometre ("World Population Review," 2020). In this sense, it is recognised that space is highly valued by people living in Hong Kong. Thus, 'spacious' would indicate that Happy Lemon Kindergarten attaches great importance to family-school partnership as space is in short supply. This mission statement further advocates that this kindergarten aims to 'promote the family-school-community collaboration culture' by extending its

focus from the kindergarten to the ‘wider community’. Based on informal conversations, staff at this kindergarten are also concerned with contextual developments which might affect children (who are part of the wider community) in other local kindergartens, community groups, local residents, local businesses, and so forth.

Our Beliefs: Communication and cooperation are the important channels to provide education (Happy Lemon Kindergarten, 2019).

One of the kindergarten’s key beliefs is focusing on providing education through communication and cooperation. This appears to be consistent with its mission statement centring on promoting school-family-community collaboration, through which communication and cooperation are considered as two important channels. In addition, substantial research has identified such school policies referring to school- family- community collaboration benefit advantaged families and stimulate particular actions that may perpetuate inequality in education (Lareau, 2002). The school policy of Happy Lemon Kindergarten appears to privilege family-school- community collaboration as the primary means of delivering teaching and learning. This would suggest that such policies seem to create opportunities for families who can take advantage if they have time and resources to devote and comply with these types of demands for collaboration.

Specifically, compared with lower socioeconomic families, upper-middle-class families are more familiar with the language and etiquette practices of the school as their own cultural capital is generally consistent with that of the child’s school (Ho, 2015). In this instance, the policy of the Happy Lemon Kindergarten would indicate that this centre typically caters for children from upper-middle-class families whose social capital is compatible with its requirements. In other words, Happy Lemon Kindergarten appears to be a middle-class kindergarten, promoting a family-school- community partnership that solicits parental involvement.

8.2.2 The principal’s and teachers’ perceptions of school-family-community collaboration

My analysis indicates that family-school-community collaboration is consistently valued

by the principal and teachers at Happy Lemon Kindergarten as a way to increase the effectiveness of helping children's learning. I draw on Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital to analyse how the principal and teachers account for how they understand and employ school-family-community collaboration.

According to Bourdieu (1986), the concept of cultural capital refers to symbolic elements such as mannerisms, skills, tastes, posture, credentials, and so forth that an individual acquires through being part of a particular social class. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) further argue that cultural capital plays a central role in the process of social reproduction because inequalities in cultural capital reflect inequalities in social class. Furthermore, Bourdieu (1986) claims children from higher socioeconomic backgrounds are privileged in the educational system because their middle-class or elite families' cultural resources are more valued by teachers. In other words, children's cultural experiences at home facilitate their adjustment to school and academic achievement, thereby transforming cultural resources into cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

By using Bourdieu's theoretical concept of cultural capital, I analyse how staff at Happy Lemon Kindergarten formulate and discuss their implementation of school-family-community collaboration through three key features: communication, decision-making and volunteering.

8.2.2.1 Communication

Based on interviews with participants, the kindergarten provides a variety of mechanisms for home-school communication, and staff at this kindergarten appear to have strong beliefs about positive impact of the home-school partnership.

Principal B seems to consider parental involvement to be the foundation of her school's development. For example, she states, 'We always communicate with parents. And we always provide more detailed explanations if parents have doubts (the interview was conducted in Mandarin and this is my translation). She seems to perceive the impact of family-school partnership as positive and particularly focuses on family-school communication. She uses 'we' to refer to staff working as a team, and this implies that

she appears to view every member of Happy Lemon Kindergarten as having the responsibility to create a family-school partnership.

During the interview she uses 'always' twice to refer to the high frequency of the kindergarten's communication with parents. And then she claims that people working at this kindergarten are responsive to parents' questions. Her formulation could be read as meaning these parents are encouraged to communicate any concerns they have about their children.

Teacher E states that teachers at Happy Lemon Kindergarten build a close relationship with parents through written or oral ways.

- 1 We have close relationships with parents. Parents call us when they have
- 2 questions and we also call parents regularly to tell them what is going on with
- 3 their children at school. In addition, we also maintain children's portfolios and
- 4 send messages or emails to communicate with parents (Teacher E, November 2017).

Teacher E, like Principal B, also uses 'we' to refer to her team members which appears to indicate her way of communicating with parents' is influenced by the beliefs and values of Happy Lemon Kindergarten. In line 1, she makes the claim that staff at Happy Lemon Kindergarten build a close relationship with parents. From lines 2 to 5, she then further explains how staff at this kindergarten create such a close relationship. It seems that this kindergarten has opened a variety of channels to increase bidirectional communication such as exchanging mutual regular calls, messages and emails, and keeping children's portfolios. Her account of how staff build close relationships would indicate that the style of communication with parents is mutual, regular and diverse. Not only do the teachers and principal call parents, but also parents call the staff to ask about their children's activities at this kindergarten.

Based on informal conversations with teachers, they call parents monthly and usually parents call them whenever they have questions. Teachers also mention that they send children's portfolios, daily activity pictures, messages and teaching plans to parents. In general, the staff appear to be encouraged to build a positive relationship with parents

who seem to be considered to support their teaching and children's learning.

Teacher E illustrates the importance of communicating with parents in the following extract.

1 However, some parents may have high expectations of our teachers, and we try
2 to communicate with them about our roles. In fact, some of the parents'
3 expectations of the children are high as well. But if you contact them frequently
4 and tell them how their children are developing in our kindergarten, they feel
5 very happy. I think it is very important for teachers to make parents trust them
6 (Teacher E, November 2017).

Teacher E makes a claim that some parents have high expectations of teachers. In terms of parent's high expectations of teachers, in line 2 she states that she 'will try to communicate with them about our roles.' This implies that Teacher E appears to think that some parents at Happy Lemon Kindergarten might expect teachers to do more for their children. In other words, Teacher E appears to think parents' expectations of teachers are ambiguous, so she suggests communicating clear expectations about the roles of teachers with parents. She then uses 'in fact' (in line 2) to indicate that it is true that some parents place high expectations on their children at her current kindergarten. In the context of early childhood education in Hong Kong, this would probably indicate that some parents might still consider early childhood education as the preparation for primary school. It echoes my interview with Teacher F when she told me that: "some parents do not want their children just to play the whole day."

Teacher F's formulation would indicate that parents have raised concerns regarding the drawbacks of learning through play, especially when learning is made to be too much fun. On one hand, this would appear to indicate these parents are aware of the benefits of play. On the other hand, it would indicate that these parents are affected by the pressure from society's competitive education system and the Confucian culture emphasising educational achievement for upward social mobility. In other words, it is assumed that the pressure is related to the middle class' anxieties about preserving their privileged status through education. This would suggest that these parents from Happy Lemon

Kindergarten appear partly in agreement with play as a way of learning for children. However, as I was informed by participants, such parents having high expectations about achievement for their children at this kindergarten are rare. According to my observations and interviews, it seems that most parents' concerns about their children at this kindergarten are about how their children are developing their skills in thinking, creativity and imagination rather than academic work like drill-and-practice⁷ which is employed by the majority of kindergartens in Hong Kong.

Teacher E further reports that communication with parents is regarded as the most effective way to deal with parents' concerns, emphasising the importance of frequency of teacher- parent communication. She states that parents feel very happy if they are informed about how their children learn in the kindergarten (lines 4-5). Finally, she draws the conclusion that another essential part of communication with parents is to gain their trust (line 5). Based on my observations, parents at Happy Lemon Kindergarten appear to have high trust in their children's teachers, and they seem to actively engage in school activities. Altogether, Teacher E suggests communication with parents helps promote partnerships between schools and families.

In terms of home-school communication, Teacher F talks about using children's own language to keep a record of their development.

- 1 We keep a record of children's language by writing it down. As we believe
- 2 children use their own language to explain their works, we think children's
- 3 language is the best way to show their own opinions, imagination and creativity.
- 4 So, we insist on using children's own language to keep a record of their
- 5 development. We email the written version of children's language to their
- 6 parents. Because of this, parents clearly know how their children are making
- 7 progress at the kindergarten (Teacher F, November 2017).

Teacher F reports teachers at the kindergarten use children's language as a source to highlight their development. She states 'we believe children use their own language to explain their works' and 'we think children's language is the best way to show their own

⁷ An instructional practice that can be used to promote the acquisition of skills and knowledge through repetition.

opinions, imagination and creativity' (lines 1-3). Her words appear to indicate that teachers understand that children use their own language to communicate, to think and to learn. This idea could refer to Vygotsky's (1986) theory that language works as a cognitive tool for children to process knowledge, and a social or cultural tool for people to share knowledge with each other. So, it seems that Teacher F and Teacher E appear to convey a message to children that their voice is of primary importance and value.

'We believe' (line 1) implies that teachers are in favour of the idea of valuing children using their own language to make sense of the world around them. 'The best' (line 3) appears to highlight that teachers seem to consider the method of using children's language to record their development as being the highest quality. Teacher F then draws the conclusion from what she talks about 'so, we insist on using children's own language to keep a record of their development' (lines 4-5). The 'so', works to suggest summing up and drawing her claims together, and makes a conclusion. The conclusion appears to indicate that teachers at this kindergarten have strong beliefs about the positive impact of using the record of children's language as one way to understand children's stages of development. 'Insist on' appears to indicate that teachers firmly believe that recording children's language must be carried out. In addition, during informal conversations with Teacher F, she told me that recording children's language helps them know whether the materials in the activity were of interest to children or not and whether the activities met the needs of children or not.

Finally, Teacher F claims that teachers share information with parents by using the record of children's own language to accurately describe how their children develop in school (lines 6-7). Altogether, Teacher F's account of using the record of children's language suggests that it is a useful strategy that can indicate children's developmental progress to parents from children's perspective.

8.2.2.2 Decision-making

I now draw on three extracts which indicate how teachers discuss their understanding of how the middle-class families' cultural capital functions in parents' choice of schools.

Extract 1

1 The parents of these children are all professional or middle class. For example,
2 some parents are university professors who can provide more educational
3 resources for children and not fully rely on our school education (Teacher E, November
4 2017).

Extract 2

1 Interviews are required for children's admission to our kindergarten. The
2 interview mainly focuses on whether the child's parents have the same
3 philosophy as this kindergarten and the parents' educational backgrounds.
4 Though the educational level of some parents may not be high, we give their
5 children the offer when these parents agree with the educational philosophy of
6 our kindergarten (Teacher E, November 2017).

Extract 3

1 You know, our kindergarten is different from other kindergartens in Hong Kong.
2 It does not emphasise the drill-and-practice approach. This kind of kindergarten
3 maybe makes up only 5% of all kindergartens in Hong Kong. Parents who
4 choose Happy Lemon Kindergarten also agree with its kindergarten's
5 educational philosophy. Therefore, when parents choose primary schools for
6 their children, they also choose primary schools which less emphasises academic
7 learning (Deputy C, November 2017).

In Extract 1, Teacher E claims that children at Happy Lemon Kindergarten come from middle-class families, using 'all' (line 1) to indicate that she refers to the whole group of children. She then explains how highly educated middle-class parents use their additional resources to support children's learning by giving the example of some parents who are university professors. According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital consists of three forms—embodied, objectified, and institutionalised. Specifically, 'embodied capital' is the combined cultural attitudes and practices incorporated into oneself, whereas 'objectified capital' consists of cultural objects, and 'institutionalised

capital' refers to credentials and qualifications such as degrees or certifications (Bourdieu, 1986). In Extract 1, referring to the example of parents being university professors provided by Teacher E, let us take a closer look at how these parents make their choice of school. Teacher E then states parents who have high academic achievement are associated with having more academic resources for their children's education and they appear to view school as a supplementary resource since they are well educated and able to help with children's learning at home. This indicates that the institutionalised cultural capital, parents' knowledge as professors, is passed down to their children. This can be read as an example of what Bourdieu argues is "...the best hidden and socially most determinant educational investment" (1986, p. 244).

According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital is associated with parents' knowledge, skills, attitudes and other cultural resources. He further explains that cultural capital is present in the home environment and that it helps parents and children secure privileges from the education process (Bourdieu, 1986). For instance, parents as university professors at Happy Lemon Kindergarten can be read as an example of possessing a high level of 'institutionalised' cultural capital. Teacher E's formulation of these well-educated parents appear to indicate that they are very confident about preserving and reproducing their social 'being' by using their own resources to cultivate children and select a type of school education that is aligned with their own educational philosophy.

Specifically, in Extract 2, from lines 1 to 3, Teacher E reports the kindergarten interviews parents about their educational philosophy and then selects children for admission whose parents share a similar educational philosophy as Happy Lemon Kindergarten. She further states that Happy Lemon Kindergarten gives priority admission to children whose parents agree with its educational philosophy even if these parents' educational background level might not be high (lines 4-6). Referring to Extract 1, on one hand, parents who choose this kindergarten are all middle-class families; on the other hand, as Extract 2 indicates, the kindergarten gives the offer to the child whose families acknowledge and agree with its educational philosophy embracing school-family partnership and parent volunteering. Thus, there are indications that Happy Lemon Kindergarten has become an institution of the reproduction and regeneration of the middle class.

In Extract 3, Deputy C provides another example of school choice in relation to cultural capital. Firstly, in lines 1 to 2, she states Happy Lemon Kindergarten is different from the majority of kindergartens in Hong Kong as it does not focus on academic learning. Other research conducted in Hong Kong has similarly reported that the key pedagogical goals at the pre-primary level were to assure that children obtain formal literacy and numeracy skills through teachers' instruction (Pearson & Rao, 2006). Many parents maintain high expectations of children's academic learning in preschools, and pre-primary education is considered as just providing preparation for primary school (Rao, 2010). In line 3, she further draws on statistics to point out that the number of kindergartens like Happy Lemon Kindergarten is very small, making up only 5% of kindergartens in Hong Kong. Then, Deputy C claims sharing a similar educational philosophy is also valued by parents (line 4), and this claim is almost the same as what Teacher E states in Extract 2. That is to say, along with my interviews and observations, the educational philosophy of Happy Lemon Kindergarten has worked well through the collaboration of teachers and parents.

Finally, Deputy C draws the conclusion that parents are consistent in their choice of school as they subsequently choose a primary school with less academic learning for their children (lines 6-7). As mentioned before, Happy Lemon Kindergarten is not focusing on academically-oriented modes of pedagogy, and parents who choose this kindergarten are clear about its educational philosophy. So, it appears these privileged families choose formal education for their children at a primary school where the curriculum is more or less a continuity of that used in Happy Lemon Kindergarten. Referring to what Teacher E points out in Extract 1, these advantaged parents do not merely rely on school education and can provide additional educational resources for their children (lines 2-3). Her formulation suggests that these parents educate their children using their own cultural capital resources as a way to complement the school education. Altogether, my analysis of the above three extracts highlights that cultural capital affects how parents choose schools, how schools respond to parents' choice and how some parents supplement their children's kindergarten education.

8.2.2.3 Parent volunteering

Happy Lemon Kindergarten offers abundant opportunities for parents to volunteer at the Centre. During my two weeks' observations, I found parents volunteered in a lot of activities such as being kindergarten librarians, joining field trips, helping in administrative work for teachers to lighten their workloads, reading story books, decorating the kindergarten for Christmas, helping gardening, and so forth. In the following extract, Teacher E reports how she perceives the value of parents volunteering in the classroom by providing the example of storybook reading.

- 1 Our kindergarten provides parents with a lot of opportunities to engage in
- 2 children's activities. For example, our kindergarten focuses on reading. We
- 3 invite mothers to read storybooks for children in the classroom which they
- 4 choose according to their preferences while sometimes fathers would come to
- 5 read stories - like car racing - for children as well. You know, I have no idea
- 6 about cars. I have no idea about the structure of cars. What are the components of
- 7 cars? I think parents' volunteering brings new experiences to the children. This is
- 8 very important for children's development (Teacher E, November 2017).

Teacher E reports Happy Lemon Kindergarten offers a variety of opportunities to get parents to engage in volunteering at the Centre. She then gives the example of parents volunteering to read storybooks for children in the classroom, which brings new experiences to children. Based on my informal conversations and observations, I can confirm that the kindergarten adopts a reading programme which engages parents to read six books for their children each week, and parents seem to engage actively in this programme. Thus, it would seem that reading appears to be highly valued by both parents and staff at Happy Lemon Kindergarten. My analysis appears to indicate that they recognise the importance of reading in supporting children's development and they appear to suggest the privileging of preparation for primary school.

There is a library in the kindergarten which provides opportunities for children to choose and take books home to read with family members. In this programme, children are encouraged to take home six books each week. Teacher E told me during our informal

conversations, that most of the time, children enjoy listening to stories and at the same time parents are supportive of this family-school literacy programme. It appears that the kindergarten engages parents and community volunteers in strengthening existing reading programmes. In this extract (lines 3-5), Teacher E states that the kindergarten would invite parents to volunteer to read storybooks for children based on their own preferences. This appears to indicate that teachers explicitly claim the importance of involving parents in the classroom as a way to enable children's development. During informal conversations with Teacher E, she told me that the books selected by teachers themselves are limited by their knowledge, and the books selected by parents could help broaden children's reading. Her words, along with my observations of parental volunteering, would suggest that both she and Teacher F have a very positive attitude towards parent volunteers who appear to be considered to bring a lot of resources and benefits to children. Teacher E further points out the influence of parents' gender on book selection, especially focusing on the father's role in book selection. In line 5 to 7, she claims that she has little knowledge of cars, a topic that she considers as a 'masculine' subject. This could be read as implying she considers fathers to be performing in masculine ways and having a positive potential influence on their children's development. Finally, she draws a conclusion that she perceives parents' volunteering as an important part of her teaching. In this extract, and during the whole period of my field trip at Happy Lemon Kindergarten, the participants do not mention any negative aspects of parental volunteering, and they seem to be happy about the way the school and families work together. So, it would seem to indicate that the family-school partnership is well operationalised at Happy Lemon Kindergarten.

8.2.2.4 Collaborating with the University

According to Epstein (2018), collaborating with the community means coordinating resources and services for families, schools and students with community groups including business organisations, agencies, cultural, civic organizations and other groups. In the context of Happy Lemon Kindergarten, as I observed, the local community resources are used in a variety of ways such as inviting university students to introduce some professional topics to children, getting the local business organisations to show children how to wash hands properly and engaging a charitable organisation to train

teachers to organise free play. In the following extract, Teacher E reports how both children and university pre-service teachers benefit from one-to-one tutoring for reading.

- 1 These pre-service teachers read stories for children once per week for one hour.
- 2 As I mentioned early, our kindergarten focuses on reading. And the one-to-one
- 3 reading tutoring is another strategy to enrich children's reading experiences.
- 4 Also, volunteers gain teaching experience by taking part in this programme
- 5 (Teacher E, November 2017).

In this extract, Teacher E reports the one-to-one tutoring for reading is another strategy to enhance children's reading experiences. As discussed earlier, Happy Lemon Kindergarten seems to value reading highly, and parents are observed to volunteer actively to support this programme. As a university kindergarten, Modern University appears to be regarded at the heart of the communities and it connects its research to Happy Lemon Kindergarten. These pre-service teachers, volunteering as reading tutors, study early childhood education at Modern University. In line 1, Teacher E states, these pre-service teachers regularly read stories for children. I observed that each child was allocated to a certain pre-service teacher who helped to read stories selected by the child. It is as if every child gets a private tutor, from which the child could receive an individualised learning experience or the one-to-one attention which he/she cannot always get in a classroom setting. In line 4, Teacher E claims that pre-service teachers obtain teaching experience by taking part in this one- to-one reading tutoring programme. Her conclusion indicates that the use of the university and kindergarten partnership supports preservice teachers' learning and development, and enables them to facilitate their own transition from students to classroom teachers.

8.3 The hybrid of Chinese and Western cultures: translating, integrating and balancing

With a colonial past, since the 1990s, Hong Kong has incorporated Western educational ECE ideas, pedagogies and approaches such as Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, Katz's project approach, Malaguzzi's Reggio Emilia theories, scaffolding, learning through play and so forth (Ng et al. 2017). Due to sociocultural differences

between Chinese and Western contexts, one of the main challenges and focuses of this thesis is how early childhood teachers contextualise Western ideas in practice. In the following sections, I analyse how teachers account for how they adopt and adapt Western theories into practice.

8.3.1 Combining ‘living education’ and ‘learning through play’

I am now going to present the analysis of how Teacher F claims that she integrates ‘living education’ and ‘learning through play’ in her class. She offers a specific cultural resource alongside the now universal educational model to inform the account of her practice. In the extract below, I refers to Interviewer and TF refers to Teacher F.

- 1 I: How do you understand children’s learning?
- 2 TF: I believe that children learn by doing. I believe that children need to observe,
3 explore and discover by themselves, and by doing so they can learn better.
- 4 I: Which theory influences your current understandings of children’s learning?
- 5 TF: I was affected by Heqin Chen’s educational philosophy ‘living education’.
6 Children are able to have a better understanding of things only after repeated
7 attempts. For example, we always give children a lot of instructions, but they
8 might not understand what we are talking about. Instead, they have a deeper and
9 better understanding by doing. For instance, when children pick up long foam
10 toys, they start using these long foam toys to pretend to fight with each other.
11 From the children’s perspective, they are playing with each other while, from the
12 teachers’ perspectives, this kind of pretend play might be dangerous. So, I need
13 to make a decision about whether to stop them or not. When I found it to be
14 really dangerous, I would stop them. However, I observed that children would
15 find a way to protect themselves during pretend play. If I stop them immediately
16 when they start to use the long foam toys to pretend to fight, children might lose
17 their interest in play. In addition, they might lose the opportunities to develop
18 different kinds of skills such as how to protect themselves, how to understand
19 and consider other people’s feelings and how to deal with conflicts (Teacher F,
November 2017).

At the start of this extract, Teacher F reports that she indicates her understanding that children ‘learn by doing’ by using ‘I believe’ twice. The two ‘I believe’ statements (line 2) appear to indicate that she thinks ‘learning by doing’ is true, but she understands that others may have a different view. In other words, these two statements appear to imply that she considers other people who might not agree with her ideas. For example, interviews with other staff include claims of being affected by different theories such as scaffolding, John Dewey’s educational philosophy, Piaget and Vygotsky’s constructionism theory and so forth. Compared with other staff at Happy Lemon Kindergarten, Teacher F claims to be affected by a localised educational philosophy proposed by a Chinese educator. Interestingly, in contrast with other participants reporting being affected by Western ideas, she is the only one who refers to a Chinese scholar. Thus, I assume that she appears to notice the adaptation of Western pedagogies to fit the local context.

Teacher F then states that children can learn better with hands-on experiences. Further, she reports that her educational philosophy is affected by Heqin Chen, providing an example of combining ‘living education’ (line 5) and ‘learning through play’. Let us take a closer look at why and how she mobilises Heqin Chen to support her beliefs about children’s learning. First of all, I am going to introduce who Heqin Chen is and what ‘living education’ is. Heqin Chen (1892-1982) was one of the Chinese early childhood education pioneers, influenced by John Dewey’s educational philosophy - ‘learning by doing’ - when studying in Teachers College of Columbia University (Choy, 2017). John Dewey’s (1938) book *Experience and Education* offers a justification for ‘learning by doing’ (Lewis & Williams, 1994). In this book, he suggests learning is a process of ‘trying’ and ‘undergoing’: realising there is a problem, coming up with an idea, testing a response, experiencing the results, and either confirming or updating previous understandings (Lewis & Williams, 1994).

Affected by Dewey’s progressive education theories, Heqin Chen advocated - ‘zuo-zhong-xue’ - (learning by doing) and - ‘zuo-zhong-jinbu’ - (making progress by doing) in China’s preschool education (Yu, 2017). Heqin Chen then established the first kindergarten in China by implementing a curriculum, based on his essential theory ‘living education’ that was developed from John Dewey’s theory of ‘learning by doing’.

The theory of 'living education' values young children's learning experiences, daily life and activities; it is considered to be culturally and contextually appropriate to fit the Chinese context (Yu, 2017; Zhu, 2009). It seems like the way Teacher F draws on Heqin Chen's theory to support her teaching pedagogy could be regarded as translating Western theories to meet the needs of children at Happy Lemon Kindergarten. Her statement of being influenced by 'living education' probably assumes that she might experience the sociocultural incompatibilities between Chinese and Western contexts when adopting Western theories in practice. In order to address these problems, a Chinese contextualised 'learning by doing' or what Heqin Chen calls 'living education' is considered by Teacher F as the appropriate pedagogy in actual practice.

I analyse how Teacher F claims she integrates 'living education' and 'learning through play' in her class. She states children have the capabilities to gain a better understanding of the real-world environment after they continuously try to do it (lines 6-7). She then claims that learning is not a sequence of providing children with instructions rather learning is a hands-on experience (lines 7-8). She particularly emphasises that children might not understand the instructions provided by teachers. This implies that she seems to position children as active learners who are able to engage with the world around them but not simply listen to teachers and act on their instructions. She then reports her understandings of how children learn, giving an example of what she thinks as combining the culturally specific reference - 'living education' - and 'learning through play'.

Teacher F describes (lines 9-12) how children perceive pretending to fight with their peers by using a long foam toy as an enjoyable and fun game while teachers consider this kind of pretend play as potentially something which might hurt children. Further, she states the importance of letting children play by themselves, through which children can learn different kinds of skills (lines 14-19). Also, supported by my informal conversations with Teacher F, she appears to be very convinced of the benefits of 'learning through play'; she seems to think that children can nurture their creativity and imagination, learn how to deal with conflicts with others, develop fine and gross motor skills and acquire desirable behaviours like coping with their own feelings, in a fun way.

Research has shown that pretend play is associated with many benefits for children's development such as language, thinking, literacy, imagination and social-emotional skills (Vygotsky, 1967, 1978; Piaget 1962). For example, Vygotsky (1967) points out children develop abstract thought through pretend play. He states 'play takes a child to the upper end of his or her Zone of Proximal Development' (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Piaget (1986) argues that pretend play is the development of the semiotic function, which allows children to separate an object from its label, an idea from its referent and the mental content from the physical reality.

Based on my observations of children's engagement in pretending to fight with their peers by using a long foam toy, I found they used their imagination, such as pretending to be superheroes, making up stories, practising language (discussing rules and roles for scenes in their play), dealing with conflicts, practising their problem-solving skills like negotiating turns. Teacher F appears to think such pretend play scenarios can cultivate experiences of joy, and this joy leads to the child's deep engagement. From lines 12 to 14, Teacher F states that instead of worrying that this type of activity might encourage children to become too aggressive or be too concerned, she suggests teachers could provide appropriate intervention. From this point of view, this would imply that Teacher F's perspective suggests it is important to view pretend play as a joyful opportunity for learning, without providing too much structure that might interfere with play.

Teacher F's formulation of pretend play also relates to Dewey's theory of 'learning by doing' that was discussed by Heqin Chen for adaptation and the development of modern Chinese early childhood education. According to Lewis and Williams (1994), Dewey points out learning occurs as learners actively 'construct' knowledge by summarising experiences which are meaningful and important to them. According to Choy (2017), Heqin proposes that 'living education' expects teachers to encourage children to use their hands, brain, mouth, ears, and eyes as much as possible, regarding children as competent learners. In the example of pretend play, Teacher F appears to think that children construct their own knowledge through the experience of pretending to fight using different parts of their bodies that in turn facilitates the development of their thinking. In other words, she seems to believe that children are capable learners who can sense how to protect themselves during the process of using long foam toys and then

they develop body-protecting techniques to continue to play with peers. As a whole, her statement appears to indicate that she integrates the theory of 'living education' (where children gain hands-on experiences) and 'learning through play' (where children learn in a joyful way).

8.3.2 A fusion of East and West: Questioning-Exploration-Experience (QEE) model

QEE is a teaching model used at Happy Lemon Kindergarten which, based on my understanding, contextualises Western educational theories, namely constructivism, child-centred pedagogy and scaffolding, and adds a new element, Chinese character writing exercises. Interviews indicate that this curriculum includes eight topics providing a meaningful learning context and interesting activities to help children learn in topic-based exploration. The following extracts introduce what QEE is and how staff discuss their understanding and implementation of this model.

The following extract from the website of Happy Lemon Kindergarten, outlines the definition of the Questioning-Exploration-Experience model.

QEE is a constructivism-based curriculum, through which children question their knowledge and experience of a topic, make predictions to their inquiries and solve the problems by hands-on experience and exploration. In the process of exploration, children solve problems gradually, redefine their logic of thinking and, thus, reconstruct a new learning experience (Happy Lemon Kindergarten, 2019).

This extract states QEE is a constructivism-based curriculum. Constructivism learning theory means that children construct their own understandings and knowledge of the world, by experiencing things and reflecting on these experiences (Piaget, 1972; Vygotsky, 1978). John Dewey (1933/1998) is often cited as the philosophical founder of this theory; Bruner (1990) and Piaget (1972) are considered as the main theorists among the cognitive constructivists, while Vygotsky (1978) is the major theorist among the social constructivists (Huitt, 2003). For example, Piaget (1972) states constructivism views individuals as acquiring new knowledge from their experiences in the outside world through the process of accommodation and assimilation. Vygotsky's (1978) theory

on constructivism, claims that learning is by internalisation in the context of socialisation. He further explains that learning occurs when children are involved in social activities on a mutual level and then internalise their experience (Vgostsky, 1978). On the basis of constructivism learning theory, Happy Lemon Kindergarten proposes that children question their knowledge and experiences of a new topic, and the questioning leads to the child's deep engagement in their exploration. The child's reflection on these exploration experiences builds the foundation for ongoing learning.

Having a clear idea of the definition of QEE in mind, I analyse how Teacher F discusses her understandings and implementation of the QEE model.

1 Our kindergarten has its own curriculum focusing on different topics. Currently,
2 we are working on the topic of Nature and Earth. First of all, we encourage
3 children to discuss their understanding of the topic. For example, children ask
4 questions like: "Why are animals and plants on the planet? Where do animals
5 come from?" Based on children's questions or interest, we arrange activities such
6 as visiting local botanic gardens, observing butterflies, snails and ladybirds, and
7 inviting parents to read storybooks related with the topic for their children. By
8 doing so, we try to find out what they are interested in and then encourage
9 children to continue to explore based on their interest. For example, our
10 kindergarten organised an outing to visit the local aquarium as preparation for
11 our current topic. During this trip, I found out children had a strong interest in
12 marine animals, and children had so many questions to ask about the ocean. So,
13 when delivering the session on Nature and Earth, I designed resources that were
14 more about sea life and the ocean. I let children's curiosity lead my class. Let me
15 give you another example. I spent so much time on butterflies when doing the
16 topic on Nature and Earth as children are really, really curious and interested in
17 butterflies. They really enjoy acting out the life cycle of the butterfly. Firstly, I
18 told children they would be an egg. Children demonstrated what an egg looks
19 like by sitting on the floor, grasping their knees, and tucking their heads down.
20 Next, I told children they would change into caterpillars. Children used their
21 bodies to stretch out on the floor and wriggled to act like caterpillars. Children

22 used their imaginations to explore, pretending they were caterpillars in different
23 ways such as crawling on the ground in the rain, searching for food, dancing at a
24 party, and so on. After that, I told them to become a cocoon. Children crossed
25 their arms tightly across their chest to look like a cocoon. Finally, I told children
26 to become a butterfly to fly in the rain forest. Children demonstrated how
27 butterflies enjoy their lives in a variety of ways. Having children act out the life
28 cycle of the butterfly provides them with excellent experience to understand the
29 key concept of different parts of the butterfly's life cycle. (Teacher F, November 2017).

In this extract, Teacher F states that the curriculum (QEE model) at Happy Lemon Kindergarten is an in-depth investigation of a topic that seems to be regarded by participants as being worth learning. Based on the kindergarten curriculum at Happy Lemon Kindergarten, every new topic starts with a special activity, such as visiting museums and gardening, which appears to be to provide a meaningful learning context and interesting experience to help children maximise their learning. In line 1, Teacher F uses 'own', so indicating that the curriculum is particular to Happy Lemon Kindergarten. This is also connected with Deputy C's words: "the QEE model is designed by the Learning and Teaching Development Committee of the Modern University, while other kindergartens in Hong Kong, their curriculum is just designed by the principals and teachers." Deputy C's words, along with the use of 'own' seem to indicate that teachers believe that QEE is a superior teaching model created by professionals and experts. Bourdieu (1988) states that educational institutions become the most important agency for the reproduction of the distribution of cultural capital; he further explains that students gain social capital via schools and at the same time schools support students obtaining the social capital needed for academic success and upward social mobility. From this point of view, Happy Lemon Kindergarten can be seen as an institution that appears to reproduce privileged social and cultural capital. It also seems to be considered by those connected with it as a kindergarten supported by a well-organised management committee specialised in curriculum design, in contrast to the other kindergartens, in Hong Kong, which appears to be regarded as less advanced, having limited resources to design the curriculum.

Teacher F then gives the example of how she implements the question-exploration-

experience model to teach the topic of Nature and Earth. Firstly, she states that she encourages children to come up with questions when introducing the Nature and Earth topic to them (lines 2-3). Then, she claims that she focuses on children's questions rather than her own introduction to this topic (lines 3-9), through which she appears to perceive children as active learners who are curious about animals and plants and want to know more about them. A child-centred view is apparent here as Teacher F seems to place children at the centre of their learning in a developmental and progressive way.

Furthermore, she goes on to discuss how an outing to the local aquarium provided children with rich learning opportunities (lines 9-12). Based on my observations of the class, children had a lot of questions of their experiences of visiting the local aquarium relating to marine animals and sea life, and this links with the question part of QEE model. For instance, as observed, one child was extremely interested in turtles as he asked a series of questions such as: 'what is the birth of turtles like?', 'do turtles take care of their babies?', and 'how long do turtles live?'. Linked to this, my observations indicate Teacher F encourages children to question and develop their knowledge of a topic.

Teacher F is observed to employ some strategies to encourage children to think and question more, such as revoicing children's questions, inviting children to share their opinions, providing a hint to inspire children's interest and giving feedback. This indicates how Teacher F works to get children engaged in exploration, the second part of QEE. During the exploration of QEE, children make predictions based on their inquiries into the topic and solve the problems through hands-on experience. In terms of the third part of QEE (reconstructing a new learning experience), children are observed to follow up their inquiries into the topic through activities such as visiting the aquarium and discussing their curiosity with peers and teachers in class to develop a new learning experience.

Teacher F provides another example of how she sees herself as facilitating children to know more about butterflies. She states that children are really interested in butterflies when engaging in the session of Nature and Earth (lines 15-17). In line 16, she uses 'really' twice to highlight that the butterfly session is the children's favourite. This seems to indicate that she perceives children to be at the centre of learning, and she

designs her class based on children's interest by putting emphasising on the butterfly. I observed that, she asked children to engage in the activity of acting out the life cycle of the butterfly, using different kinds of equipment to make the sounds of rain and thunder, and children appear to enjoy this game. She further describes how she helps children act out different parts of the life cycle of the butterfly (lines 17-29). She describes through pretend play that children seem to develop gross motor skills as they use and move their bodies to demonstrate each stage of a butterfly's life cycle. She also suggests that children appear to develop their cognitive skills as they learn the key concepts of the butterfly's life cycle by linking their pretend play experiences and concepts in a way they enjoy. What is being narrated here is also an example of the theory of how children develop their imagination as they appear to build mental flexibility through performing different life cycle stages: egg, caterpillar, cocoon and butterfly. Altogether, she seems to use pretend play to facilitate children in exploring the topic of the butterfly, through which children appear to construct a new learning experience.

Teachers also engage in a pedagogical exercise where a teacher asks children open-ended questions and helps the children summary their experiences in one sentence at the end of the day. Children are then asked to copy this sentence for fifteen minutes to practise writing Chinese characters, which turns the play and exploration into school-based skills. For example, during my observation of Teacher F's class about butterflies, she summarised the class in one sentence in Chinese: 今天，我们学习了蝴蝶的一生 (Jin tian, wo men xue xi le hu die de yi sheng; today, we learned the life cycle of a butterfly). She wrote down this sentence in Chinese along with the word butterfly in English on a flip chart. Children were asked to copy and practise this Chinese sentence and the English word butterfly for fifteen minutes. During this time, Teacher F and Teacher E were observed to help children with their practice; For example, they held children's hands to guide them how to write when children asked for help, explaining the sequences of strokes and assisting children with correct sitting position, and so forth.

Children start to learn to write Chinese in the third level of the kindergarten (K3, 5 to 6 years old), because children at this stage are already assumed to possess what is called writing readiness (The Curriculum Development Council, 2017). In addition, in 2017, the Education Department revised the *Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide* which

suggests ‘teachers can create meaningful contexts to let children start learning to write basic strokes and then simple characters.’ (Education Department, 2017, p. 36). ‘Basic strokes’ indicates the foundation and necessary strokes and ‘simple characters’ imply that these characters are not complicated and are easy to understand. The guidance indicates that children are not expected to be proficient in Chinese character writing at kindergarten. However, substantial research shows that there is a big gap between this policy and practice as many kindergartens in Hong Kong ensure that children attain formal literacy because they consider pre-primary education as merely a preparation for the primary school (Rao, 2010; Ng et al., 2017). In terms of children’s Chinese character writing at Happy Lemon Kindergarten, teachers seem to consider the 15 minutes’ writing as getting children to be familiar with traditional Chinese characters and helping children construct their experience and knowledge rather than perceiving it as preparation for primary school which would require much more practice.

In general, teachers discussed their implementation of the QEE model in four main stages. Firstly, they encourage children to come up with questions. Secondly, they support children with their exploration. Thirdly, they facilitate children to summarise their experiences. Fourthly, they use a 15-minute Chinese character copying exercise to help children construct knowledge. By translating and integrating constructivism theory and a child-centred pedagogy into their classroom practice, teachers appear to achieve a balance between an Eastern and a Western curriculum.

8.3.3 Scaffolding children’s learning and play

The hybrid educational approaches evolved as Western educational theories are practised alongside local conditions and cultural imperatives. In this section, I explore how the principal and teachers appear to understand the combination of ideas by analysing three interview extracts: drawing class, language learning and free play.

8.3.3.1 Extract 1- Drawing class

In this extract, I take the drawing class as an example to highlight how Principal B and teachers seem to support children as independent creators who are at the centre of the

learning process. Both Principal B and Teacher E report their understanding of how children's learning is affected by scaffolding theory when I ask the question 'Which theory influences your current understanding of children's learning?'

- 1 I am influenced by scaffolding theory. For example, we don't provide any model
- 2 pictures for children to learn how to draw things. Instead, we encourage children
- 3 to use their imagination and creativity to draw things. As teachers, we shouldn't
- 4 provide answers directly to children. Our role is to guide children to explore and
- 5 help children to summarise their experiences (Principal B, November 2017).

In this extract, Principal B states that her educational philosophy is informed by scaffolding theory, providing an example of her understandings of how children learn drawing. Scaffolding can be defined as 'the process that enables a child or novice to solve a problem, carry out a task, or achieve a goal which would be beyond his unassisted efforts' (Wood et al., 1976, p. 90). The term scaffolding is introduced by Bruner (1976) as a part of social constructivist theory, and is particularly inspired by Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (Wood et al., 1976). In other words, the term scaffolding refers to the level of support as a child grows toward gaining independent problem-solving skills.

Though it is her personal opinion of how children learn and how teachers teach, she switches from using singular 'I' (line 1) to the plural 'we' (lines 1) and 'our' (line 4) to refer to herself and other staff at Happy Lemon Kindergarten. This appears to indicate that she considers herself to be speaking for all the staff at Happy Lemon Kindergarten. By using 'don't' (line 1), she seems to indicate her distinct attitude towards refusing to provide children with model pictures. She then suggests children draw pictures by using their own imagination and creativity (line 3). Her formulation of how children learn drawing suggests that she supports children as independent creators who are at the centre of the learning process. She further states that the role of the teacher is to support children to explore and to help them summarise the integration of new knowledge with pre-existing experience (lines 4-5). Principal B appears to indicate that she considers the role of the teacher is to offer support when needed. This statement implies that Principal B is affected by scaffolding theory as she claimed at the beginning of this extract.

Let us take a closer look at how Principal B and other staff are affected by scaffolding theory. My observations about Teacher F and Teacher E support children to independently create their drawings. I observed that Teacher F and Teacher E provided children with a variety of different coloured chalks to play in the playground. Children were encouraged to use different coloured chalks to draw whatever they liked, such as tracing the outlines of their hands or bodies on the floor to express themselves. As children drew shapes, lines and symbols on the floor, Teacher E and Teacher F joined in, asking children questions to encourage them to think about what they were trying to express through their drawings. Based on my observations, most children seemed to love to talk about their drawings. They appeared happy to tell each other and the teachers the stories which they had made up which their pictures depicted.

This scenario appears to indicate that Teacher F and Teacher E value the importance of allowing children to use their imagination and creativity to draw pictures in an open-ended area. Such an open-ended space allows children to make large movements, and this indicates that these experiences are designed to facilitate children to think inventively. In addition, children are encouraged to draw whatever they like, and this would imply how the two teachers work to respect the ideas and aesthetic values of the children. Furthermore, I observed the two teachers facilitating conversations between children during the process of drawing.

Specifically, Teacher E told me that she encouraged the child to describe the elements (lines, colours, shapes) she/he was using and what the picture represented. These kinds of dialogues could be understood as a way of scaffolding. Finally, the two teachers could be said to have employed a scaffolding approach through asking questions or engaging in dialogues between teachers and children. Here it is relevant to note how research shows dialogues between teachers and students is one of the key mechanisms involved in making scaffolding productive (Smit & Van Eerde, 2011; Bakker et al., 2015). Altogether, the drawing class indicates Teacher F and Teacher E emphasise promoting children's artistic growth by respecting children's own desires.

This situation is different from the other contexts I observed. Compared with the drawing class at Spring Kindergarten where Teacher C uses model pictures to master

children's drawing skills, the drawing class here seems to be designed to give children the opportunity to build their imagination and creativity. At Spring Kindergarten, Teacher C emphasised managing drawing skills, and she appeared to consider teachers' instructions as an essential part of the class that could help children develop their drawing skills. At Happy Lemon Kindergarten, however, Teacher F and Teacher E appeared to be trying to provide children the opportunities to develop their artistic growth rather than mastering drawing skills by following prescribed steps. Allowing children to draw whatever they like as a way to express themselves appears to indicate the teachers' commitment to a more personal and imaginative approach to making art. It also suggests that Teacher F and Teacher E appear to hold the view that art is not teachable, but rather a way to inspire creativity.

8.3.3.2 Extract 2-language learning

1 I think I am influenced by scaffolding. I believe children have their own
2 capabilities to solve problems. The teacher's role is just helping rather than
3 transmitting knowledge. I provide different kinds of help based on children's
4 individual development level. For example, in my class, some children are good
5 at expressing themselves while some children's language development is not so
6 smooth. I guide children whose language does not develop well to speak word-
7 by-word. And then I ask them to combine words to make phrases until they can
8 make up a full sentence (Teacher E, November 2017).

Influenced by scaffolding, Teacher E reports how she implements this pedagogy in her class by giving the example of scaffolding children's language learning. Firstly, she makes a child-centred claim that children are able to solve problems by using their capabilities (line 1). Here, Teacher E uses 'I believe', and it could be noticed that 'I believe' is the most frequent phrase used by teachers when making their claims. Such statements suggest a deep commitment to approaches such as learning by doing, constructivism theory and scaffolding. In lines 1-2, Teacher E states 'children have their own capabilities to solve problems', which appears to indicate that she holds a classic child-centred pedagogy by taking a developmental view of the child positioned at the centre of learning. She then offers a very clear statement of her view of the role of the

teacher in children's learning (lines 2-3). Her use of 'just' in line 2 emphasises her claim about what the teacher's role is and then her use of 'rather than' to introduce how 'transmitting knowledge' is not considered as the teacher's role. Her formulation of the teacher's role explicitly indicates she is affected by scaffolding. According to Vygotsky (1978), the role of teachers is to support the learners' development to get the learners to move to the next level. Mobilising these ideas about scaffolding, Teacher E further explains her role in scaffolding is to provide a different level of help to suit the child. This appears to imply that Teacher E thinks that some children may require a higher level of scaffolding support for language learning, whereas others may need limited support for language development.

Teacher E gives examples of the scaffolding techniques she uses in supporting children's language development (lines 6-8). First of all, she notices the different language levels of children. Then, based on her observations of individual language development, she provides different levels of support to help children whose language is less developed. Finally, she states that she helps children whose language does not develop well to move from using simple language to more complex language. Scaffolding appears to occur when Teacher E supports children to move from speaking word-by-word to phrases and then to the full sentences.

Teacher E told me that as children reach a higher level of language development, she reduces the amount of support she provides. This indicates how scaffolding techniques work in children's language learning as Teacher E speaks slightly above the children's level so they can learn and grow. All this was corroborated in my observations of how Teacher E interacted with the children. I found Teacher E would repeat what the children said, reduce the speed, try to include pauses, extend children's words, ask short and open-ended questions and had conversations with children in relation to their experiences. Altogether, Teacher E seems to consider that her role is to make language accessible to children whose language is less developed by adjusting her instructions to suit the children's level.

8.3.3.3 Extract 3-balancing structured play and free play

1 Our kindergarten adopts more structured play and less free play. Now, we are
2 trying to add more free play for children as the Curriculum Guide suggests that
3 kindergartens need to provide children with at least 45 minutes of free play. For
4 example, we are trying to organise a session of 45-60 minutes' free play every
5 two weeks by joining the programme of Playright that provides monthly
6 professional training. After providing more free play, we found the development
7 of children's social skills was much more natural and effective in free play than
8 in structured play which was deliberately arranged by adults. We also found out
9 that some children who used to follow other children became more confident and
10 active in free play than in structured play. Though children can benefit a lot from
11 free play, we still acknowledge the advantages of structured play. I think we are
12 trying to find a balance between structured play and free play (Deputy C, 13, November
2017).

In this extract, Deputy C reports that Happy Lemon Kindergarten is trying to balance structured play and free play in its curriculum, providing an example of participating in a programme organised by an organisation named Playright. In line 1, she states that the kindergarten puts more emphasis on structured play rather than free play. Her statement is consistent with the QEE teaching model that is based on constructivism, and the role of the teacher is to provide scaffolding. However, along with my observations, it would seem that, although teachers appear to focus on intentional planning and facilitation of children's play to help them construct their experience and knowledge, they seem not to be aiming at letting children achieve intended learning outcomes. She then talks about how the kindergarten is trying to add more free play for children, and this idea is also supported by National Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide (lines 2-3). The National Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide in 2017 suggests 'Half-day and full-day kindergartens should arrange no less than 30 and 50 minutes every day respectively for children to participate in free play.' (Education Department, 2017).

Deputy C claims that a regular free play session provided by Playright is added to Happy Lemon Kindergarten's timetable (lines 3-6). As I was informed by participants, influenced by the National Curriculum Guide, Happy Lemon Kindergarten arranged

more free play sessions for children, cooperating with Playright that is a charity organization specialising in play activities by providing professional training, large open space for children to play, consulting service, etc. Also, based on my observations of children's play arranged by Playright, I found that children appeared to direct play, with materials provided by teachers and staff from Playright. Teachers and staff from Playright were observed to pay attention to children's play and offer support when needed, such as playing the role of a playmate when children ask them to join in their play.

Deputy C states that she has observed free play as promoting children's social skills and confidence to a greater extent than structured play (lines 6-10). From lines 6 to 8, she appears to think that compared with structured play children could develop their social skills in a more natural and effective way through free play. Two adjectives 'natural' and 'effective' are used to indicate why Deputy C values free play. 'Natural' implies that Deputy C has the idea that play is a nature thing for children and play constitutes children's natural way of developing social skills. Her view of play being a nature thing is consistent with what I have discussed in the literature review (Chapter 2). Her use of 'effective' implies that in contrast to structured play, free play works better for improving children's social skills. From lines 8 to 10, Deputy C states that children who are not active in structured play gain more confidence by participating in free play.

Finally, Deputy C makes another statement: "Though children can benefit a lot from free play, we still acknowledge the advantages of structured play" (lines 10-11). Her formulation could be read as meaning she agrees on the importance of free play and adding more free play sessions for children, and she also seems to admit the value of structured play. The statement is followed by the conclusion she proposes that the kindergarten is still trying to find a balance between structured play and free play (lines 11-12). Her conclusion suggests she thinks both free play and structured play have their own functions in children's development. In addition, she uses 'we' to indicate that it is not just she as the school deputy who suggests balancing these two kinds of play, but also the other staff seem to perceive both free play and structured play to be important.

8.4 Chapter summary

This chapter explored how Principal B and teachers at Happy Lemon Kindergarten employed a child-centred approach as a scaffolding technique to facilitate children's learning. This offers a particular vantage point on the early childhood education in Hong Kong. In the first part, I analysed how kindergarten staff discussed their understandings and mobilisation of school-family-community collaboration to facilitate children's learning, using Bourdieu's (1986) concept of cultural capital. In the second part, based on my observations and some extracts from Principal B's and teachers' interviews, I discussed their implementation of the Questioning- Exploration-Experience (QEE) model. This model highlights translating Western ideas, such as learning by doing, constructivism theory, child-centred pedagogy and scaffolding, into the Hong Kong context. In the third part, I explored how Principal B and teachers combined the Eastern and Western educational ideas and practices by analysing three extracts: drawing class, language learning, and balancing structured play and free play. Altogether, my analysis appeared to indicate that Happen Lemon Kindergarten adopted and adapted or translated Western theories, creating its own unique curriculum (particularly suitable for the middle class): integrating Chinese character writing exercises into the Questioning-Exploration-Experience (QEE) model.

Chapter 9: Purposeful play at Green Apple Centre

9.1 Chapter introduction

In this chapter, I focus on Green Apple Centre which is a privately-run kindergarten located in the northern part of Singapore. The kindergarten has four classes: Nursery 1 (N1, 2 - 3 years old), Nursery 2 (N2, 3 - 4 years old), Kindergarten 1 (K1, 4 - 5 years old) and Kindergarten 2 (K2, 5 - 6 years old). The centre is a full-day kindergarten, providing education for around 45 children. I draw on materials collated from key national policy documents, semi-structured interviews with teachers and the principal, informal conversations and my observations at Green Apple Centre. Interviews and informal conversations with Teacher G were conducted in Mandarin while interviews and informal conversations with Principal C (Malay Singaporean) were conducted in English. Observations were undertaken in classes taught in English.

Research shows that through high investment in education, Singapore has developed a world-renowned education system, with limited natural resources, becoming consistently one of the strongest countries in international large-scale assessments, as evident in strong PISA and TIMSS performances (Lightfoot-Rueda, 2018). Purposeful play is advocated and highlighted in the national curriculum to actively engage children in exploring and developing knowledge and skills in a fun way (MOE, 2012). Drawing on Foucault's (1995) discussion of power, this chapter aims to explore how teachers and the kindergarten principal account for 'purposeful play' and apply it in practice. Firstly, I analyse the key national educational documents that are related to 'purposeful play'. Following this, the chapter takes a closer look at how power operates in the classroom when employing 'purposeful play'. The analysis appears to indicate that practitioners think that 'purposeful play' functions as a perceived medium to achieve intended learning outcomes. Based on such perspectives, I then explore the discourse of school transition and how power operates in the process of children's school transition from kindergarten education to Primary One.

9.2 Purposeful play in the key national educational policy documents

In 2003, the Ministry of Education (MOE) introduced a curriculum framework called 'Nurturing Early Learners' (NEL) to inform the practices of preschool educators (MOE, 2003). This framework is based on Western theories which are underpinned by the idea that children are active learners who learn through play, and that the role of the teacher is to facilitate their learning through play (Ebbeck & Chan, 2011). In 2012, the revised version of 'Nurturing Early Learners' (NEL) identified six iTeach⁸ principles which are central to the framework to guide teaching and learning, one of which is 'engaging children in learning through purposeful play' (MOE, 2012, p. 34). This highlights that 'Children learn when they are engaged in play that is enjoyable and thoughtfully planned' (MOE, 2012, p. 34). The emphasis of the earlier 2003 version of the curriculum framework is on providing opportunities for structured play while the revised version of 2012 focuses on the role which the teacher is required to play in designing and providing resources to help children achieve specific learning goals (Teo et al., 2018).

Specifically, the NEL (2012) proposes six learning areas: Aesthetics and Creative Expression, Discovery of the World, Language and Literacy, Motor Skills Development, Numeracy, and Social and Emotional Development (MOE, 2012). Each learning area comprises a set of specific learning goals that define what children are expected to achieve at the end of their kindergarten education, and these learning goals are perceived to guide teachers to plan the lessons and to engage children in exploring play and applying knowledge in a joyful way (Teo et al., 2018). In other words, the NEL (2012) appears to indicate that 'purposeful play' is employed by being both child-directed and teacher-directed.

It is notable that the definition of play in the revised version of 2012 is specified as 'purposeful play' (MOE, 2012). Let us take a closer look at what 'purposeful play' is. As the curriculum states, purposeful play is described as (1) enjoyable for the children; (2) indicates active involvement of children in exploring, deepening and applying knowledge and skills; (3) addresses learning objectives that have been carefully thought

⁸ The 'iTeach' principles stand for (1) integrated learning, (2) teachers as supporters of learning, (3) engaging children in learning through play, (4) ample opportunities for interactions, (5) children as active learners, and (6) holistic development.

through by the teachers while taking into consideration children's interests and abilities; and (4) involves facilitation by teachers who observe children playing to discover what they have learned and shaping their activities to reinforce or extend their learning towards intended objectives (MOE, 2012, p. 35). The first descriptor (1) indicates that the teacher is expected to engage children in learning in a fun way. In other words, this implies that play is planned by the teacher to be enjoyable for the children, and children are expected to see such activities as enjoyable. The second descriptor (2) implies children are expected to be actively involved in learning activities that are planned by teachers to achieve specific learning goals. These learning objectives are translated into knowledge and skills that are required to have been obtained by the end of kindergarten education. According to Sims and Brettig (2018), many Western countries have designed their early childhood curricula to focus on the impositions of employer-identified knowledge and skills to prepare children to be future employees. Influenced by globalisation, the Singaporean government aligns its early childhood education with an 'education discourse'; in this discourse, children are regarded as human capital who are expected to make contributions to 'national economic prosperity' (Hunkin, 2018, p. 8). As shown in (3), children's play activities appear to be considered serious and well thought out by teachers, meanwhile, the teacher needs to take children's interests and abilities into consideration. This would indicate that teachers are consciously considering the goals and objectives they wish to work towards through children's play; at the same time, it is also suggested as requiring sensitivity to children's interest and needs. Further, (4) indicates that the teachers are expected to play a supportive role in play with specific learning goals in mind, observing what children have learned during play, and then providing different kinds of assistance to consolidate or expand children's learning.

Altogether, by specifying play in this way, the Singaporean government appears to suggest that teachers should actively engage children in play by making it enjoyable and emphasise that the role of the teacher is to intentionally design and guide children's play by taking into consideration children's interests and abilities to achieve the intended learning goals in the NEL (2012). This suggests specifying that children's activities need to be meaningful along with teachers' support and guidance, through which teachers appear to be requested to clarify and distinguish between child-directed and teacher-

directed play. This kind of understanding of ‘purposeful play’ seems to be similar to what Fler (2013) defines as ‘purposeful play’, lying along a continuum of child-initiated play and adult-initiated play, and what Pyle and Danniels (2017) describe as a type of play that lies midway between free play and structured play. Therefore, it is apparent that ‘purposeful play’ in the Singaporean context is different from the Western notions of child-centred and free play. In the next section, I attempt to analyse how practitioners discuss and implement ‘purposeful play’ in the Singaporean preschool setting.

9.3 Practitioners’ understandings and practices of ‘purposeful play’

Based on interviews and classroom observations, practitioners at this kindergarten seem to believe that children’s play should have educational purposes, rather than simply be fun. Mobilising Foucault’s (1995) notion of power, I draw on the following two extracts to indicate how Teacher G and Principal C discuss their understandings and practice concerning ‘purposeful play’.

9.3.1 Learning through *youxi* (游戏)

I take the example regarding Chinese character learning to indicate how Teacher G uses *youxi* (游戏) to facilitate early literacy learning in a K2 class with 10 children who are in the process of making the transition to Primary One.

- 1 I think learning should be based on *youxi* (games, 游戏), through which knowledge is
- 2 delivered. For example, in my class, I design some *youxi* (games, 游戏) for children to
- 3 learn Chinese characters. These *youxi* (games, 游戏) aim to get children familiar with
- 4 recognising Chinese characters. I set up the fishing game, spreading out cards with
- 5 Chinese characters and cards with pictures (that are considered as fish) on the floor,
- 6 and then asking children to go ‘fishing’. Children catch a card either with a Chinese
- 7 character or a picture, and they are asked to find the matching one. I also design the
- 8 game named ‘finding your friend’ as a way to help children to learn Chinese
- 9 characters. I give children cards either with Chinese characters or pictures, and I ask

10 them to find the corresponding cards among their classmates. Altogether, these
11 picture matching games can help children recognise and be able to write Chinese
12 characters efficiently. (Teacher G, December 2018)

It is important to note here that the English word ‘play’ has two equivalent meanings in Chinese: *youxi* (游戏, games, structured or guided play) and *wan* (free play). Here I choose to use *youxi* 游戏 as the translation of ‘play’ to highlight what seems to be Teacher G’s understanding of learning through play in this activity, which is designed to help children to memorise Chinese characters.

In the extract, Teacher G talks about a matching game using different kinds of pictures to help children learn Chinese characters. She appears to position herself as a possessor of knowledge, stating what children are expected to acquire, whereas children seem to be considered as subordinates, expected to be obedient. In line 1, Teacher G states that her pedagogical idea of play is to use it as a way to deliver knowledge. Based on such a view, she then appears to use ‘should’ (line 1) to point out that she believes *youxi* 游戏 (in this context picture-character matching) is the appropriate way to help children improve the skills of character identification and recognition. She says she designs different types of *youxi* 游戏 to help children learn Chinese characters, which aim in particular to familiarise children with recognising these characters (lines 2-4). Her formulation could be read as she considers this teacher-designed *youxi* (games, 游戏) function as a medium for academic learning, through which children are considered to be able to reach a certain goal related to the identification and recognition of Chinese characters.

Teacher G talks of asking children to play the ‘fishing’ game and ‘finding your friend’ game (lines 4-10). In lines 4 to 7, she asks children to play the ‘fishing’ game (a picture matching game). Her account of the ‘fishing’ game appears to indicate that she has believed the skills of identification and recognition are the basis for Chinese character writing. Next, she provides another similar example - ‘finding your friend’ (another picture matching game) - which she suggests is designed to help children become more familiar with Chinese characters (lines 7-10). Her account appears to indicate that

Teacher G considers these teacher-designed games to be a kind of ‘purposeful play’. Finally, Teacher G concludes that *youxi* 游戏 help children effectively learn Chinese characters (lines 10-12). Here, the word ‘efficiently’ (line 12) appears to indicate Teacher G’s educational philosophy: using these teacher- designed *youxi* 游戏 to improve children’s productivity in learning Chinese characters.

Altogether, Teacher G’s account suggests she believes that Chinese character learning requires recognition and memorisation; based on this, she uses *youxi* (games, 游戏) to help children acquire Chinese character recognition skills and familiarity. Teacher G’s understanding and implementation of *youxi* (game, 游戏) seem to imply that she thinks that ‘purposeful play’ is a type of adult-initiated and guided play, creating a context in which children are expected to achieve specific learning goals. She associates ‘purposeful play’ with ‘*youxi*’, enabling children to gain knowledge rather than ‘*wan*’ which is simply free play. In contrast, my interviews and observations with teachers in Mainland China and Hong Kong suggest that they think play is child- initiated and unstructured. For example, at Anji Jiguan Kindergarten, children were encouraged to choose what, when, how and with whom to play; while, in Hong Kong, teachers were observed to be trying to add more free play sessions.

Combining Teacher G’s words with my observations at Green Apple Centre, the *youxi* (games, 游戏) include a series of activities such as picture-character matching, listen-and-point, point-and-say, and character copying that are all designed for Chinese character recognition and writing. Specifically, I observed that children were given the task of auditory and visual discrimination, and they were asked to point out the character they heard. Following this, Teacher G asked the children to use that character to make up a sentence. Finally, the children were asked to write down the character. These activities can be interpreted as implying that Teacher G thinks the main aim of such tasks is to help children memorise the Chinese characters. Also, my observation materials appear to imply that Teacher G thinks character recognition comes first, then, following sufficient exposure to the target character, it is committed to memory, and finally, the skill of handwriting develops as identification and recognition of characters are remembered. Teacher G’s idea of how to teach children to memorise the characters

is in line with several studies which show that Chinese character recognition is the main basis for writing (Chan & Siegel, 2001; Li et al., 2016; Cao et al., 2013).

Interviews and observations with Teacher G indicate that she highlights the importance of *youxi* 游戏 in helping children learn Chinese characters in an efficient way, and she seems to be quite confident about how she adopts this teaching approach. In contrast, teachers from the other three kindergartens express their different levels of concern about their teaching approaches. For example, Teacher A (Anji Jiguan Kindergarten) reports that she questions the way she teaches science when adopting the Anji approach (in Chapter 6), while Teacher D (Spring Kindergarten) states that he feels confused about whether he should teach children Chinese traditional poems or not (in Chapter 7). Also, both Teacher E and Teacher F (Hong Kong case) describe their uncertainty about the degree of free play they should provide (in Chapter 8).

Drawing on Foucault's (1995) discussion of power, at this juncture I analyse how power operates in the K2 classroom when Teacher G employs *youxi* (games, 游戏) as the teaching approach and what she thinks is 'purposeful play'. The classroom is a place in which teachers exercise their power over students. From Teacher G's account, she appears to position herself as someone who exercises discipline through these teacher-designed *youxi* (games, 游戏) and the school curriculum. For example, supported by my classroom observations, children appear to have little say on issues such as what they want to learn, how they want to learn, and for how long.

Specifically, I have observed that the children were asked to do what Teacher G told them such as how to divide into groups, when to speak, how to do the tasks and for how many times they needed to repeat the same tasks. In general, my observations appear to indicate that children are expected merely to follow the instructions of Teacher G most of the time during *youxi* (games, 游戏). From a Foucauldian analysis, children are made docile as they regulate their own behaviour and discipline themselves to engage in the teacher-designed *youxi* (games, 游戏). Here, discipline could be read as a means of constructing children's 'purposeful play' experience and serving to shape children through *youxi* (games, 游戏) into future employees for an economic-driven society,

which is discussed as a related phenomenon in other contexts by Sims and Brettig (2018).

According to Foucault (1980), ‘power must be analysed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in a chain.’ (p. 98). From this Foucauldian perspective of power, the school curriculum (which specifies one of the learning objectives - teaching 500 Chinese characters) can be considered to be another means of exercising power to control students, as well as teachers. For example, Green Apple Centre curriculum guidelines stipulate children should not only to be able to recognise 500 Chinese characters but also be capable of writing them. According to my observations, K2 children were asked to engage in different kinds of *youxi* (games, 游戏) to practise listening, speaking, reading and writing skills to get ready for Primary One, all of which appears to be under Teacher G’s direct guidance and supervision. On one hand, children were observed to be disciplined both by Teacher G and the school curriculum through practising knowledge and skills in relation to Chinese characters to meet the learning objectives; on the other hand, Teacher G was disciplined by the school curriculum that was aimed at preparing children for Primary One. Thus, disciplinary power operates through the implementation of academic- oriented activities and ensuring that Teacher G gets children ready for Primary One.

Altogether, Teacher G’s behaviours and accounts appear to show that she considers herself as being in the dominant position of decision-making about what children should learn and what they should be taught. Given this background, she chooses teacher-designed *youxi* (games, 游戏) to make a judgement about what children could feel is more or less enjoyable for Chinese character learning, and she does this by abiding by the school curriculum. That is to say, she becomes subordinate to the school curriculum that is linked with specific learning goals and aims to prepare children for Primary One. Foucault’s discussion of power might help us to think of the power relations in the classroom as being fluid and multidimensional – between children and the teacher, between the teacher and the school curriculum - and relations beyond the classroom – such as between parents and teachers, between teachers and the Education Bureau, and amongst staff. All these power relations can influence how power operates in the classroom. In the next section, I discuss how Principal C accounts for her perspective on

‘purposeful play’.

9.3.2 Learning through ‘learning centres’

Principal C was asked about what she understands about how teachers at Green Apple Centre implement ‘learning through play’. I was informed by Principal C that ‘learning through play’ was implemented through classroom learning centres where children are allowed to choose materials pre-selected by the teachers. The following extract indicates that Principal C is trying to rearticulate the Western notion of learning through play and align this term with the ‘purposeful play’ practised in Green Apple Centre.

1 We do not really focus on learning through play, but we do have learning through
2 play in the sense of learning centre activities. In the classroom, there are different
3 centres for the children to play such as numeracy centre, the discovery centre, and the
4 language and literacy centre. Children can choose centres in which they are interested
5 in participating and teachers provide materials for different centres. (Principal C, 6
January 2018)

In this extract, rather than acknowledging directly Green Apple Centre adopts the Western notion of learning through play, instead, Principal C reports that ‘learning through play’ is practised through learning centres (lines 1-2). ‘Not really’ (line 1) suggests that Principal C thinks there is a lack of child-initiated play or unstructured play at her current kindergarten and that as an alternative, children are expected to learn through learning centres. Meanwhile, she uses ‘do’ (line 1) to highlight that she appears to think Green Apple Centre more or less adopts the Western notion of ‘learning through play’. Also, ‘in a sense’ is used to indicate that she is trying to make a connection between the Western notion of ‘learning through play’ and the ‘learning centre activities’ at Green Apple Centre (line 2). Her formulation probably could be read as suggesting that she is trying to convince me and herself that the Western notion of learning through play exists at Green Apple Centre, and is practised through the different learning centres.

Now, let us take a closer look at what a learning centre is. The NEL curriculum framework provides explicit guidelines on how to equip the learning environment,

‘including the physical environment, the interactional environment, and the temporal environment. The physical environment can be set up to provide opportunities for children to engage in purposeful play and learn at their own pace; A space where children can explore with concrete materials and manipulatives to solve problems and discover answers to questions on their own...’(MOE, 2012, p. 32). The NEL curriculum framework appears to suggest teachers use the learning centres based on the six learning areas to engage children in purposeful play, without specifying how the learning centres should be put into practice. Combining her words with my observations at Green Apple Centre, the learning centres include materials and resources pre-selected by the teachers, allowing children to play and engage in different formal and structured learning activities.

Principal C describes how there are different kinds of learning centres which are related to each of the learning areas suggested by the NEL curriculum framework (lines 2-4). As discussed earlier, these learning areas consist of a set of specific learning goals which guide teachers to plan the lessons. Principal C states that the teacher provides resources for children to engage in learning centres and children are allowed to choose how to play based on their interests (lines 4-5). Here, her words would imply that Green Apple Centre adopts a child-centred approach. However, based on my observations, what happened was teachers introduced tasks (with prepared materials) which they appear to want children to complete and children seem to be assigned to different centres and expected to listen and follow teachers’ instructions. Also, during informal conversations, Principal C told me that, compared with teacher-directed teaching, the learning centres system was more or less child-centred. Her words appear to indicate that she thinks the learning centres have some commitments to child-centredness. It is based on such views that she makes the claim that Green Apple Centre does have ‘learning through play’ that is somehow related to learning centre activities. Altogether, this interview extract appears to indicate that Principal C tries to rearticulate the Western notion of learning through play and make this term fit into Green Apple Centre.

From a Foucauldian perspective, the learning centres at Green Apple Centre could be regarded as another form of technology of control of daily activity through which the actions of children are controlled in detail. For example, children were observed to be

assigned to a certain learning centre and allowed to choose materials in the given learning centre in order to prevent disorder. A learning centre is a powerful place and, as students, they need to engage in formal and structured learning activities. The instruction of the teacher regarding how to organise the learning centre activities is a kind of disciplinary power that controls children's play and learning experience, as well as their bodies. For example, children were observed to complete purposeful learning activities with pre-determined materials and resources and focus on the learning of academic knowledge and skills to make the transition to Primary One. By doing so, the teacher is monitoring and regulating children's behaviour and bodies which is the target of the disciplinary power being exercised through the learning centres.

Mobilising Foucault's concept of power, I discussed how power operates in relations between the national curriculum framework (NEL), school curriculum, school leadership, practitioners and children. In terms of 'learning through play', practitioners at Green Apple Centre used *youxi* (games, 游戏) and learning centres as ways of packaging academic knowledge for children. In the next section, I now move on to discuss how practitioners account for the issue of children's transition to Primary One.

9.4 Preparing K2 children to Primary One

It could be noticed that there is a lack of implementation of the Western notion of learning through play at Green Apple Centre, as discussed in the previous section, while the main emphasis had been put on getting K2 children ready for Primary One. I now examine some extracts to explore practitioners' perceptions of the issue of children's school transition to Primary One.

9.4.1 The issue of dis/continuity

This extract from an interview with Principal C appears to indicate that she thinks there is a lack of continuity between kindergarten education and preschool education.

- 1 You know, primary schools do not provide 'learning through play'. In Primary One
- 2 classes, children are more structured like sitting down, listening to the teacher and

3 keeping quiet. But at Green Apple Centre, children learn through *youxi* (games, 游戏)
4 and learning corners, and they are allowed to play freely for 30 minutes outdoors.
5 Also, the teaching style is different. In Primary One, direct teaching methods are
6 prominent while direct teaching is not that much used in the kindergarten, although
7 children are asked to do some tasks by working under the teacher's guidance.
8 (Principal C, January 2018)

At the beginning of this extract, Principal C states there is a lack of 'learning through play' in primary schools (line 1) and she appears to think that children's behaviours are highly disciplined by the teachers to ensure the classroom is well organised (line 2). Drawing on Foucault's (1995) 'docile bodies' theory, 'sitting down, listening to the teacher and keeping quiet' (line 2) indicates that children's sensory activities, involving legs, hands, ears and eyes are manipulated by the primary school teacher to maximise academic learning. Principal C's perspective on primary schooling appears to be affected by the Singaporean education system, and this is supported by the research literature. For example, Sharpe (2002) points out that Primary One in Singapore is the beginning of academic pressure as schools put emphasis on examinations and tests. Also, Lim-Ratnam (2013) reports that the primary school curriculum is designed for children to master the knowledge and skills to pass the high-stakes national examination at the end of primary school.

Principal C claims that compared with Primary One, children at Green Apple Centre are provided with the play activities through *youxi* 游戏 and learning centres, and children are even allowed to have a 30-minute free play session (lines 4-5). Her formulation can be read as suggesting she thinks Green Apple Centre has more or less the Western notion of 'learning through play', whereas this is absent in primary education. Combining her words with my observations, regarding the 30-minute free play session, children were observed to be allowed to play with pre-determined materials outdoors after they completed tasks assigned by teachers. Also, as I observed, children were not allowed to run freely and they were asked to slow down the running. Informed by Teacher G, she says: "I prefer to let children play indoors. They are crazy outdoors and they might hurt themselves. Some parents would blame us for not taking good care of their children." Here, Teacher G claims that she would like to organise the indoor

activity rather than letting children play outdoors since she appears to think parents would blame her for children's accidental injury during play.

My interview and observation materials indicate that the 30-minute session appears to be constrained by several factors (limited play materials, time and place, parents' pressure on teachers, teachers' concerns about safety issues). I argue that the 30-minute session is free play, and for me, it is more like a break between classes.

Principal C makes another claim that the teaching style is different (lines 5-7). This appears to indicate that she recognises that there is a pedagogical discontinuity between kindergarten education and Primary One education. She appears to consider that there is more direct teaching in Primary One. Principal C's understanding of 'different' could be read as the discontinuity of pedagogical approaches. In the following extract, she states her view about addressing this issue.

1 In K2, our curriculum is more about spelling, writing, reading, knowing alphabet
2 letters, and knowing the Chinese language '*Hanyu Pinyin*⁹ (汉语拼音)'. It is very
3 critical for K2 children to have a smooth transition when they go to Primary One
4 where children need to have exams and tests. So, we work closely with what is
5 required in Primary One like academic lessons, especially in the above areas
6 (Principal C, January 2018).

In this extract, Principal C reports that the K2 curriculum of her current kindergarten works closely with what is required in Primary One. At the beginning of this extract, she states that the curriculum adopted at Green Apple Centre focuses on children's knowledge acquisition (lines 1-2). In particular, she highlights the curriculum aims at

⁹ Hanyu Pinyin (汉语拼音), often abbreviated as Pinyin (拼音; 'spelling sounds' literally), is the most widely used Mandarin romanisation system.

developing children's language and literacy skills in English and Chinese. This practice is designed to be consistent with the bilingual language policy in Singapore; kindergarten children are encouraged to learn two languages, English as the first language and mother tongues (Mandarin Chinese, Malay, and Tamil) (Curdt-Christiansen & Sun, 2016).

Principal C claims that it is extremely important to prepare K2 children for Primary One where children's performance in tests and examinations are emphasised (lines 2- 4). Here, she points out the need for curriculum continuity between kindergarten and Primary One. At Green Apple Centre, Principal C emphasises ensuring the Centre's curriculum meets the requirements of Primary One and she appears to think the curriculum in Primary One focuses on preparing children for examinations and tests. Referring to Foucault's ideas of examination, the children are 'described, judged, measured and compared with others' (Foucault, 1995, p. 191). In Singapore primary schooling, the examination system could be read as a way to measure levels of knowledge and skills to supervise children and to facilitate their learning; power seems to be distributed through the process of the acquisition of knowledge and skills.

The extract of the interview with Principal C reminds me of Teacher A's claim about curriculum continuity at Anji Jiguan Kindergarten. Teacher A states: "I think the education of Primary One should get close to the Anji approach." In contrast to Principal C, Teacher A has the opposite opinion about the issue of curriculum continuity. She appears to indicate that she is confident about the quality of the curriculum at Anji Jiguan Kindergarten, so she proposes having the curriculum of the kindergarten curriculum close to Primary One. Interestingly, as the literature review (Chapter 3) highlights, both Mainland China and Singapore have adopted the examination-centred education system, and my analysis appears to indicate that practitioners from these two countries have the opposite perspectives on the issue of continuity between kindergartens and preschools. Also, my analysis indicates that this difference might be attributable to factors such as the school philosophy, parents' attitudes and practitioners' personal beliefs. Now that we know about the issue of curriculum continuity, this brings us to a discussion on the content of the curriculum at Green Apple Centre.

9.4.2 An emphasis on pre-academic skills

It has been found in the analysis above that teachers and Principal C tend to emphasise pre-academic skills to ensure K2 children have a smooth transition from kindergarten to primary school. I now draw on some extracts to explore how Principal C and teachers discuss accounting for and facilitating children's transition to primary school.

9.4.2.1 Chinese character dictation

In this extract from my interview with Teacher G, she is reporting a conversation with parents whose children are in the process of making the transition to Primary One to support her view that children should learn some basic Chinese characters before they go to Primary One.

1 Parents of K2 children request weekly dictation. They told me that they were worried
2 about children's Chinese learning as the teachers teach very fast in Primary One. So,
3 they felt really anxious about their children who might not able to keep up with the
4 teacher. I also remembered once a mother of a K2 child told me that she was really
5 happy about the number of Chinese characters we taught at Green Apple Centre
6 because she found her child could easily keep up with the intensive teaching style in
7 Primary One. And to be honest, children always feel it is very difficult for them to
8 adjust to the teaching style in Primary One. So, it is better for them to learn some
9 basic Chinese characters before they go to Primary One. (Teacher G, December 10,
2018).

A bilingual education policy has been adopted in Singapore since 1966, which has led to English being learned as the first language and used as the medium of instruction in schools, and the child's mother tongue (Mandarin Chinese, Malay or Tamil) being learned as the second language (Cheah & Lim, 1996). However, Singapore is a Chinese-dominated society with more than 70% of its population identifying as being Chinese, which brings about a growing interest in the Chinese language due to its cultural and values transmission (Li & Rao, 2000; Tan & Rao, 2017). Chinese parents in Singapore highly value early learning concerning reading and writing Chinese characters because

they think the Chinese language has a very complex orthography to learn (Li & Rao, 2000). Additionally, the teaching of reading and writing Chinese characters has been widely accepted by preschool teachers in Singapore (Li et al., 2012).

At the beginning of this extract, Teacher G reports that parents at Green Apple Centre request that the teacher prepares weekly Chinese character dictation for their children at K2 level (line 1). Her formulation of the parents' request appears to indicate that she thinks parents want to ensure that their children's Chinese learning adequately prepares them in the early years for future academic readiness. Also, she appears to highlight that it is the parents' idea rather than her own decision. Teacher G states that parents think the teaching style in Primary One is intensive (lines 1-2). Teacher G uses 'so' (line 2) to draw her claims together and make a conclusion. She concludes that parents think that their children might not adjust well to the teaching style in Primary One. The conclusion appears to indicate that Teacher G could understand parents' anxiety as she probably has the same feelings for the discontinuities of teaching style between the kindergarten and Primary One. She provides me with the example of how one of the mothers approves of her way of teaching Chinese characters (lines 4-7). She states that this mother found that her child could 'easily catch up with the intensive teaching style in Primary One' (line 6).

Recalling the Bakhtinian analysis (1981) mobilised in Chapter 6, in this extract, Teacher G can be seen to recruit two different parents' voices (including a worried voice and a contented voice) to support her views of early Chinese language learning. This can be analysed using Bakhtin's double-voice discourse. Firstly, she reconstructs the worried parents' words in her own voice to point out that parents' anxiety comes from the discontinuities of the teaching approach between the kindergarten and Primary One. In her first example, there are two voices: worried parents' voice with a direct intention - highlighting the discontinuities of the teaching approach - and Teacher G's voice with the refracted intention - indicating her agreement with the worried parents' explanation about their anxiety. This appears to indicate that the worried parents prefer the kindergarten's education to fill the gap of the discontinuities of teaching styles. Also, such a perspective has been accepted by Teacher G as she is using the worried parents' utterances to highlight her view about early Chinese literacy learning, that preschool teachers should ensure children reach school readiness. In her second example, she

recruits the happy parents' voice seemingly to justify that her way of teaching Chinese characters is good as parents think that it helps children have a smooth transition to Primary One. There are also two voices in her second example: the happy mother's voice – highlighting that her child has had a smooth school transition experience due to benefiting from Teacher's G teaching approach - and Teacher G's voice - implying that her way of teaching Chinese characters is practical and fitting for school transition.

At the end of this sequence (lines 7-9), Teacher G uses 'to be honest' (line 7) to draw all her claims together and indicate that she is telling the truth about her own opinions that she thinks preschool teachers should get children prepared for Primary One by emphasising pre-academic skills. Rather than making her claim from parents' and preschool teachers' perspectives, she sums up all her claims from children's perspectives. She states that children encounter difficulties in adapting to the new teaching style (lines 7-8), and she suggests that children need to be able to not only recognise but also write a certain number of basic Chinese characters before they go to Primary One (line 8-9). She makes the suggestion which appears to be based on children's needs but is more related to her and the parents' desire about what children need to do. Altogether, Teacher G speaks through the voice of the parents to indicate that the educational activities undertaken at Green Apple Centre need to prepare children for the next educational stage. I now move on to explore how Teacher G accounts for the design of the content of the Chinese curriculum for kindergarten to primary school transition.

9.4.2.2 500 basic Chinese characters

I now focus on how Teacher G at Green Apple Centre accounts for the design of a Chinese language curriculum and how to put it into practice.

- 1 I teach 500 basic Chinese characters to K2 children. It sounds like 500 is a big
- 2 number for K2 children, but actually, it is not. My Chinese curriculum can help
- 3 children learn characters in an efficient way. For example, the characters I teach
- 4 collocate with another. Also, I design some *youxi* (游戏) to help children remember
- 5 these words. By doing so, the K2 children can learn more than 500 characters... There
- 6 are no specific requirements regarding exactly how many characters to teach in the

7 national curriculum guidelines, and it all depends on each kindergarten's curriculum.
8 (Teacher G, December 2018)

In this extract, Teacher G reports that she teaches 500 commonly used Chinese characters to K2 children (line 1). Supported by informal conversations with Teacher G, I was informed that the 500 commonly used Chinese characters refer to the characters that a child should recognise and be able to write. Teacher G claims that learning 500 characters is not a big task for children (lines 1-2). Let us take a closer look at why she has such a perspective. According to the primary school curriculum in Singapore, there are three levels of Chinese courses including basic Chinese courses for students with weak language skills, Chinese courses for students with intermediate language proficiency and higher Chinese courses for students with strong language skills (MOE, 2015). On one hand, this seems to make Chinese teaching more flexible by taking into account differences in pupils' language backgrounds and their abilities. On the other hand, compared with the students who choose the basic or intermediate Chinese course, the students who take the advanced Chinese course are more likely to have a better examination assessment result that eventually enables these students to access the top schools and universities in Singapore (Liu & Zhao, 2008).

The three different levels of Chinese courses could be read as a form of ranking and a means of control. It categorises students into three groups: students with weak, intermediate proficient and strong language skills. This classification appears to represent a hierarchy, and the advanced Chinese course seems to become a symbol of success as students who take this course are considered to be more likely to go to prestigious universities. My analysis appears to indicate that this system invisibly brings societal academic pressure to kindergarten education, particularly preschoolers' parents (requesting weekly dictation, see section 9.4.2.1 for more details) and teachers (focusing on academic training) who seem to be controlled by this ranking system. Children at Primary One are required to recognise and write 300 up to 750 Chinese characters (MOE, 2015). Referring to this requirement, it has been noticed that children at Green Apple Centre are almost asked to approach the same level of Chinese character recognition and writing as expected in Primary One. Teacher G chooses 500 characters, which lies in the middle of the primary school curriculum requirement (from 300 up to

750). This appears to indicate that she considers the teaching of 500 characters as an achievable or an appropriate teaching task as she seems to think it is neither for students with advanced skills nor for students with weak language skills. She appears to have enough confidence in this middle place to convince parents (and me) that the teaching content of the Chinese curriculum at Green Apple Centre is reasonable.

Teacher G states that children can learn characters efficiently by using her curriculum (lines 2-3). Her formulation appears to indicate that she is confident about the content of the curriculum. Such confidence would also account for her attitude towards the task of teaching 500 characters. She describes how she applies the curriculum in practice (lines 3-5). In lines 3 to 4, she explains that these characters are intrinsically related. Supported by my classroom observations, when taught the word 超 (*chao*; super, go beyond, exceed), Teacher G made up phrases like 超市 (*chaoshi*; supermarket), 超人 (*chaoren*; superman) and 超过 (*chaoguo*; surpass). Referring to what she has mentioned, 市 (*shi*), 人 (*ren*) and 过 (*guo*) could be considered as collocations with 超 (*chao*). By doing so, Teacher G appears to think that children are exposed to four new characters rather than one, which she seems to think is effective for learning. The literature implies that different from other languages, most Chinese words are compound words, and 67% of the words in modern Chinese are comprised of two morphemes (Sun et al., 1996). This pattern can be seen in the example provided by Teacher G as 超市 (*chaoshi*; supermarket), 超人 (*chaoren*; superman), and 超过 (*chaoguo*; surpass) all consist of two morphemes. This morphemic structure of Chinese words directs Chinese language teaching for children to focus on combining morphemes for word reading (Xie et al., 2019). Thus, the account of Teacher G indicates that she believes that children can learn characters efficiently through practising two-character word reading.

Teacher G talks about *youxi* (游戏, games, in this context picture-character matching) which is also designed and used by her as an effective teaching approach, through which she appears to think children could improve their character recognition skills (lines 4-5). In line 5, 'By doing so' draws all her claims together and then makes the conclusion that she thinks children are capable of not only recognising, but also being able to use more than 500 Chinese characters in writing. The use of 'more than' (line 5) implies that the

two-character word reading and picture-matching games are effective teaching strategies.

Teacher G makes another claim that the NEL does not specify what comprises the Chinese language curriculum, instead the Chinese language curriculum varies in different kindergartens (lines 5-7). The *Framework for mother tongue language* identifies one of the four skills in foundational language and literacy which children should have at the end of K2: “children are not expected to know the sequence of writing strokes for a character or letter if they have yet to develop their fine motor skills. Nevertheless, they can observe and gradually learn from their teachers who should be good models in holding a pencil in the correct way and writing with the correct sequence of strokes.” (MOE, 2012, p. 32). According to this mother tongue language framework, children at the end of K2 are not expected to learn how to write a character or letter if they are still in the process of developing fine motor skills, although children are encouraged to learn to write the characters if their fine motor skills are ready. This formulation appears to be ambiguous. Who is going to make the decision that children’s fine motor skills are ready? What criteria are used for assessing the readiness of children’s fine motor skills? My analysis and observations appear to indicate that children at Green Apple Centre not only are required to recognise but also be able to write more than 500 Chinese characters. Furthermore, Teacher G states that every kindergarten has its own Chinese curriculum as it is not specified by the national curriculum guidelines (lines 5-7). Her claim is consistent with literature that kindergartens and child care centres in Singapore can choose to implement curricula or teaching approaches that best suit their educational philosophy and meet different preferences of parents and needs of the children, as the national curriculum guidance has no specific requirements of the content to be taught (Tan, 2017). All in all, my analysis suggests that Teacher G considers children’s transition to a competitive primary school system, and the Chinese curriculum and the teaching approaches she has designed to be an effective pedagogy for promoting competent Chinese literacy learning.

9.4.2.3 Homework

Having discussed how practitioners account for and deal with parents’ requests for weekly Chinese language dictation, I explore how Principal C accounts for her

understandings about parents' requests for homework and the strategies that are used to deal with these.

1 Many K2 parents ask for homework for their children. These parents know their
2 children will have homework when they go to Primary One so they believe the earlier
3 the better. But there are few K2 parents who do not want homework for their children
4 at all. And, to me, as a parent, I do not really agree that my preschool children bring
5 schoolwork home. I would say 'yes' only when my children go to Primary One
6 because primary education is more academic. So, at Green Apple Centre, I told my
7 teachers to leave the homework optional. We only provide homework to the parents
8 who request it because we have to meet the parents' requirements as a private
9 kindergarten. (Principal C, January 2018)

In this extract, Principal C claims that a lot of K2 parents would prefer to have homework for their children (line 1). She uses 'many' to highlight that there are a large number of K2 parents who request homework for their children. She further states that she thinks these parents believe their children are able to get used to the homework and make it part of their routine if they start at kindergarten stage (lines 1-3). Here, let us take a closer look at parents' beliefs about 'the earlier the better' (lines 2-3). According to Choy and Karuppiah (2016), the NEL framework in 2012 points out that advocacy of play-based learning, developed from Western philosophies, had raised anxieties among parents who lived in a country where kindergarten education is considered as the preparation for formal education and primary education is related to national examinations. Additionally, as people are Singapore's main resource, the country pursues a knowledge-based economy society by highlighting the relationship between education and the economy (Wei et al., 2008). Based on such context, Singaporean parents focus on school readiness which is considered by them as the essential path to future academic success. Referring to 'the earlier the better', it would indicate that parents do not want their children to lose out in the preparation period, and they would like their children to be prepared to compete in the examination-centred society.

Principal C further claims that a small number of parents would prefer not to have homework for their children (lines 3-4). Following this, she then offers her own opinion

about homework (lines 4-6). It appears that she switches her position as a kindergarten Principal to a supposed ordinary preschooler's parent in order to support the argument that there is no need for kindergarten children to have homework. Here, Principal C changes her identity or narrative voice from speaking as a kindergarten principal to an ordinary parent. This change appears to indicate that she thinks that parents have more power than the kindergarten principal because the private kindergarten has to meet parents' demands. As a principal, she seems to think that she can make decisions about the curriculum adopted at Green Apple Centre while she needs to consider parents' preferences. As Ling-Yin (2006) points out, the Singaporean kindergarten system is market-driven and parents prefer kindergartens that they believe will prepare their children to cope with the primary education curriculum. Supported by informal lunch conversations, Principal C told me that the number of children that her current kindergarten can attract is around 49, whereas some other centres, similar in size to Green Apple Centre, have an enrollment of more than 80 children. Elsewhere in the interview, she told me that there is another new kindergarten which is going to open and the location of this kindergarten is not far from her current kindergarten. Under such pressure, she says she would like to make some changes to improve the enrollment for her current school. At the end of this extract, Principal C concludes that leaving the issue of homework optional, makes it a matter of parental choice (lines 6-8). The use of 'have to' (line 8) appears to indicate that Principal C considers the school enrollment is part of market competition requiring a focus on parents' needs and desires because they are the consumers who pay the money for education, and not their children. Also, she says parents' requirements (line 8) not children's needs. As a result of being located in a marketised education system, Green Apple Centre appears to pay more attention to parents' requirements and desires compared to children's voices and experiences, as well as children's actual desires and agency as learners.

The analysis appears to show that under the market-led kindergarten education system, parents become the customer and the curriculum is customised for the child based on the parents' requirements. So, Green Apple Centre emphasises academic learning and preparedness, which is largely due to the parental expectations of academic preparation for primary education as it creates academic pressure on the local kindergartens. Hence, we have circular logic at play under this market system, the school delivers the kind of

curriculum and pedagogy which the parents want because the parents believe that this will best support and advantage their children's future academic and social success.

9.5 Chapter summary

In this chapter concerning Green Apple Centre in Singapore, I have discussed how power operated regarding 'purposeful play' in relations between the national curriculum framework (NEL), school curriculum, practitioners and children. Practitioners at the Green Apple Centre appear to think 'purposeful play' incorporates academic learning. When asked to give examples of their implementation of 'learning through play', they associated play with teacher-directed *youxi* (games, 游戏) and classroom learning centres. This appears to indicate that the teachers believe children learn pre-academic skills through structured, guided play. Meanwhile, parents also have been found to place great importance on pre-academic skills, and they appreciate that homework and weekly dictation are necessary for their K2 children to be prepared for Primary One. It is noted that parental demands influence Chinese language curriculum and homework. Also, my analysis indicated that these demands are linked to an examination-driven education system which is related to economic competitiveness in the context of Singapore and this influenced both practitioners' and parents' demands for school readiness.

Chapter 10: Cross-national comparison of learning through play across three territories

10.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter draws together the analysis from this study alongside and in relation to relevant research literature to compare and discuss teachers' understandings and implementation of 'learning through play' in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore early childhood education settings, as well as discussing the similarities and differences of educational policies on 'learning through play' in the three related territories. In the chapter, I also consider how, although framed in Chapter 4 as a cross-national comparative case study, this case study can also be viewed through the lens of Chen's (2010) Asia as method. Indeed the comparative empirical analysis extensively presented in Chapters 6-9 could be viewed as an expression of the analytical strategy of critical syncretism that Chen identifies as fruitfully arising from the possible connection with Asia as method. The design of this study was a cross-national comparative case study, but - in the light of postcolonial relationships - can be viewed as a form of what Chen calls inter-referencing. As I discuss later, inter-referencing de-emphasises the relationship with the West and focuses on what can be gained by an analytical attention to the juxtaposition of these Asian countries. I suggest that this could be an alternative way of connecting together the interpretations arising from this cross-national comparative case study; one that possibly invites more fruitful way of looking at these materials.

The chapter is organised as follows. Firstly, it discusses Asia as method as an interpretative frame from which we can see how the potential for inter-referencing and critical syncretism emerges. Secondly, the chapter compares the study findings in relation to four research questions and applies Asia as method across the four settings. The strategies of inter-referencing and critical syncretism were mobilised in this study of four different, but crucially related, Asian early childhood education contexts to highlight the complex pedagogical ways in which models and concepts are being articulated and re-worked.

10.2 Asia as method as an interpretative platform

In this chapter I will extend the theoretical frameworks in which this study can be situated to consider what analytical – empirical and design – features can be gained from consideration. This research may therefore connect up with ‘Asia as method’, which provides an analytical strategy for dialogue within Asia and ‘the Rest’. Such analytical and conceptual dialogue can enhance awareness of different socio-cultural and historical structures and ideologies and creates new opportunities for detailed analysis and evaluation, rather than the constant comparison with the West.

The key innovations of Chen’s (2010) Asia as method are inter-referencing and critical syncretism. The empirical analysis undertaken in this study can be regarded as attending to inter-referencing and critical syncretism. Adopting inter-referencing (promoting inter-regional collaboration rather than looking at the West as the sole reference point) and critical syncretism (combining the local with the global), I seek to look beyond the binary of the West versus the non-West and look at other places in Asia, specifically Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore, to discover alternative categories, different knowledge and practice of ‘learning through play’.

10.2.1 The origin and development of Asia as method

The idea of ‘Asia as method’ was popularised by Chen Kuan-Hsing, a Taiwanese critical cultural studies scholar, who raised questions about the relationships between forms of Asian knowledge in relation to former Western colonial histories and imperialism. Here, the term ‘method’ can be understood as a framework, technique or narrative (Burman, 2019). Perhaps the easiest way of understanding Asia as method (Chen, 2010) is by placing it in opposition to the ‘West and the rest’ worldview identified by Stuart Hall (1992). The book *Asia as method: Toward deimperialization*, was published in English in 2010.

Chen’s ‘Asia as method’, however, is not entirely original, but was influenced by Japanese scholars: Takeuchi Yoshimi (1910–1977) and Mizoguchi Yuzo (1932–2010).

The concept of ‘Asia as method’ was first proposed by a Japanese scholar, Takeuchi Yoshimi, and deliberately re-used by Chen who further developed it as a framework. To illustrate, Takeuchi Yoshimi gave a lecture using the same title, ‘Asia as method’, and Takeuchi’s contribution was acknowledged by Chen (2012) as follows:

“Takeuchi’s method of critique operates outside the binary framework of the East and West, progressive and backward” (p. 323).

Mizoguchi Yuzo (another Japanese scholar, 1989) wrote about China as method and is explicitly acknowledged by Chen as a source of inspiration for his own project, which he considers ‘as an attempt to rework Takeuchi’s unfinished project’ (Chen, 2010, p. 246). Specifically, Chen draws on Mizoguchi’s concept of *kitai*, a Japanese word meaning base entity, to serve Asia as method’s key innovation of the strategy of inter-referencing, that is, ‘multiplying each other’s points of reference’ (2010, p. 212). It can be noted that the essential elements of Chen’s Asia as method are reflected in Takeuchi’s Asia as method and Mizoguchi’s China as method, namely, the idea of Asia as ‘an imaginary anchoring point, societies in Asia can become each other’s points of reference, so the understanding of the self may be transformed, and subjectivity rebuilt’ (Chen, 2010, p. 212). Moreover, this concerns the regional dynamics of Asia, while clearly worthy of attention in its own right, also implies wider conceptualisations. Asia might bring about ‘alternative horizons and perspectives’ for countries inside and outside Asia by using it as a source of ‘diverse historical experiences and rich social practice’ (Chen, 2010, p. 212).

Chen (2010) further explains that the meaning of ‘Asia as method’ originates from ‘the West as method’, as discussed by Hall (1992), as a way to characterise how Western frameworks (i.e. those originating in Europe and North America) have dominated world knowledge production for centuries. As Hall (1992) points out, the West performs a wide range of functions: categorising different societies and their characteristics, forming a set of images that connects with other concepts (the West/ metropolitan/ developed/ industrialized versus the non-West/ rural/ underdeveloped/ agricultural) and providing criteria for what is to be considered the desirable and progressive. As Chen (2010) highlights, rather than being linear, in fact the global structure of power is uneven

as the West has a real impact on the non-West by constituting a solid structure of knowledge, a structure from which it is difficult to shake loose. Under this dominant Western influence, the non-West still experiences anxiety by considering the West as the powerful entity from which to learn and catch up. Chen (2010) problematises the deep-rooted mind-set of looking to the West and emulating the West including knowledge production and the seeking of modernity. A quotation, mobilised by Chen (2010), from colonial critic Frantz Fanon precisely represents the anxiety of the former colonial territories:

The black man wants to be white ... Black men want to prove to white men, at all costs, the richness of their thought, the equal value of their intellect ... For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white. (p. 77)

For Chen (2010), this quotation from Fanon locates the complexity between the coloniser and the colonised that has continued to form post-colonial trajectories, even after half a century. He applies this to the situation of postcolonial Asia, with its different histories of colonisation, including mutual relations of colonisation. Still using Fanon, Chen suggests it is impossible to de-colonise the cultural imaginary if the blacks, or the colonised, suffer from ‘a permanent lack and permanent self-doubt’ (2010, p. 79). This poses the question: how can we move beyond the West as the only powerful framework of reference?

10.2.2 Dealing with the West

Chen discusses several postcolonial strategies which deal with the West. The first strategy is to disrupt the other by deconstructing it, and this strategy argues that the West has no essence and no unity; it is only putative, and therefore cannot be ‘our’ other (Chen, 2010, p. 217). Chen refers to Naoki Sakai’s (1988) discussion on European universalism versus the particularism of the non-West. In *Modernity and Its Critique: The Problem of Universalism and Particularism*, Sakai critiques Habermas’s binary thinking: pre-modern/modern, non-West/West, mythical/rational, he then points out that the complicity between universalism and particularism is a consequence of colonial practices (Chen, 2010).

The second strategy described by Chen is to de-universalise, provincialise, or regionalise the West, thereby limiting the ways the West has been aligned with the universal, and as universal, to consider it only one part of the globe (2010). Chakrabarty (1992) critiques the presumed universal validity of European concepts, pointing out the idea of ‘provincialising Europe’ is to make Europe no longer the home of global modernity. The third strategy is to trace how the origins of certain elements that form the West are actually rooted in the culture of the colonised. This strategy is discussed by Ashis Nandy’s (1982) analysis of how the discourse of sex and age operate in England and then develop in India, and he indicates that these cultural elements have already become one of Indian’s subcultures and denying them could result in taking risks in negating Indian’s traditions. The fourth strategy is ‘third-world nativism’. Neil Garcia (1996)’s analysis of the gay culture of the Philippines demonstrates the coexistence of native conceptions and Western terms in two different systems of knowledge.

Chen, however, considers postcolonial strategies summarised above as having limitations because they still presuppose the binary opposition between the West and the Rest. Chen (2010) proposes an alternative strategy to use Asia as method. What this means is that, rather than reproducing the question of the West, or, alternatively, imagining we can erase its influence, we can instead acknowledge and even trace the constitutive and continuing influence of the West as bits and fragments. From this acknowledgement and tracing, he proposes using critical syncretism that involves looking outwards to alternative and multiple forms of identification, that participate in local social structures in a ‘systematic but never totalizing’ way (Chen, 2010, p. 223).

10.2.3 A rationale for drawing upon Asia as method

‘Asia as method’ has been applied to childhood and educational studies, for example in a comparative study of education in China and Australia (Takayama, 2016; Zhang et al., 2015), in addressing implications for curriculum reform (Lee, 2019; Rhee, 2013) and in early childhood education (Blaise et al., 2013). One key implication of Chen’s ‘Asia as method’ for early childhood education inspires us to reflect on and rethink how teachers

constitute their cultural imaginaries and subjectivities (Blaise et al., 2013; Burman, 2019; Lin, 2012; Zhang et al., 2015). Lin (2012), a professor in language education from Hong Kong, draws on Asia as method for creating a novel version of critical discourse analysis. She argues that Chen's Asia as method can liberate English teachers in former Asian colonial territories. In terms of teacher education, Salter (2014) emphasises the difficulties of Australian teachers' understanding and construction of the Asian literacy curriculum as it requires teachers to engage with Asian culture; she argues that Chen's idea of Asia as method helps to analyse teachers' cultural as ways of thinking and seeing the world.

The relevance of Asia as method to educational research goes beyond analysing worldviews of teachers or direct empirical juxtaposition of views. Asia as method has been formulated as an alternative framework for designing research that disrupts existing world knowledge production system and invites a different understanding of world history.

The existing orientation and reference to the West has its limitations in interpreting what this chapter and thesis explores: kindergarten teachers' perspectives on 'learning through play' and their understandings of their roles in play in children's learning processes in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore kindergartens. Inspired by Chen's 'Asia as method', I propose we can extend the analysis presented in this thesis by using his ideas to analyse the educational debate on 'learning through play', which has become one of the most commonly used pedagogical approaches in early childhood education. This approach is based substantially on the work of (nineteenth and early twentieth-century European and North American) philosophers and educational pioneers such as John Dewey, Maria Montessori, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Froebel, and Margaret MacMillan (Wood & Attfield, 2005). In other words, 'learning through play' originates from western countries, and is based on democratic and scientific ideas, whose different cultural-political contents reflect particular assumptions such that their practices in Asian contexts may function differently. In such contexts, Chen's (2010) 'Asia as method' provides 'an open-ended imaginary space, a horizon through which links can be made and new possibilities can be articulated' (p. 282).

10.2.4 Inter-referencing strategy and critical syncretism

Instead of reproducing the Western/non-Western binary thinking that has characterised both colonial and anti-colonial interpretive approaches, Chen instead highlights longstanding continuities, mutualities and convergences of influence. He does this, by focusing attention on how local specificities inform and structure any cultural practice, such that it cannot readily be interpreted as either Western or non-Western within current conditions of globalisation, notwithstanding specific histories arising from colonisation, decolonisation and the Cold War. With Chen's two strategies of inter-referencing (promoting inter-regional collaboration rather than looking at the West as the sole reference point) and critical syncretism (combining the local with the global) in mind, we can try to liberate ourselves from the influence of the Western concept of 'learning through play', and create alternative categories, different knowledge and practices by transforming existing cultural imaginaries and subjectivities. Specifically, Chen (2010) states, 'Asia and the third world provide an imaginary horizon for comparison or a method for what I call inter-referencing' (p. 223).

Chen also suggests that 'inter-referencing is a mode of analysis to avoid judging any country, region or culture as superior or inferior to any other, and to tease out historical transformations within the base-entity, so that the differences can be properly explained' (2010, p. 250). Given that inter-referencing could be detrimentally based on individuals' own epistemology, an additional strategy is needed which is critical syncretism (Park, 2016). Critical syncretism is a cultural strategy which attempts to understand how cultural elements, in their specific practice, combine to become others (Chen, 2010). According to Chen, others "refers not just to racial, ethnic, and national categories but also includes class, sex and gender, and geographical positions" (2010, p. 99). Instead of essentialising Western ideas, whether by upholding or rejecting them, this position instead attends to how elements of other theories are incorporated into subjectivities and cultures to move beyond the boundaries and divisive positions historically constructed by Western countries (Park, 2016).

Asia as method suggests ways of designing research that disrupts historic and prevailing

knowledge structures and invites different analytical perspectives. In this thesis, the empirical analysis presented in Chapters 6-9 can be regarded as an example of attending to cultural syncretism that Chen identifies as arising from Asia as method. Though this study was a cross-national comparative case study, it can also be viewed as a form of what Chen calls inter-referencing. That is, an analytical strategy taking seriously the region's complex history (including Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore relationships with each other, rather than only with the West).

10.3 RQ1 - How are educational policies on learning through play similar and different in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore?

In order to understand the similarities and differences of educational policies on 'learning through play' in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore, this thesis analysed some key national, regional and site-specific policy documents in the four early childhood education settings. Learning through play' at national government level showed similarities and differences in all three territories according to my policy analysis. In all territories, documents emphasis learning through play. As mentioned in the literature review (Chapter 2), under the great influence of globalisation, countries and regions in East Asia such as Mainland China since 2012, Hong Kong since 2017, and Singapore since 2013 have all updated their national early years curriculum, paying more attention to play (Li & Li, 2003; Rao et al., 2017; Zhu, 2009). There were also differences in the local and national government education policies in the three territories due to different economic development, historical backgrounds and political systems.

Specifically, experiencing the aftermath of British colonisation, both Hong Kong and Singapore experienced rapid economic development in the 1980s and 1990s and have reached the level of developed countries (Lee, 2016), while Mainland China is considered to be a communist Country, highlighting collectivism and effective education systems and economic growth. My analysis in Chapters 6 and 7 appears to confirm previous research as it indicates that public kindergartens in Mainland China were expected to adopt and implement the curriculum and pedagogies advocated by the local Education Bureau, as well as to make these policy documents cater to their own kindergartens' educational philosophy (Rao et al., 2017).

For example, in Mainland China, the early childhood education policy has undergone many transformations which correspond with the changing society and the world (see section 2.2 in Chapter 2). As discussed in Chapter 2, the key national early childhood education guidelines - 3- to 6-Year-Old Children's Learning and Development (Ministry of Education, 2012) - provides suggestions for each learning domain and general guidance about play-based teaching and learning, without concerning regional issues. Also, previous literature indicated that to follow the centralised system, each province has its own provincial-level policies by making the national level policy more concrete and regionally appropriate (Rao et al., 2017). Zhejiang Province, where I selected two cases, Anji Jiguan Kindergarten and Spring Kindergarten, can be taken as an example. In response to the national early childhood education guidelines, the provincial policy document suggested that teachers provided children with at least 45 minutes of free play (Assessment Manual for Quality Kindergartens, Zhejiang Province, 2014). Analysis of interviews and observations from Anji Jiguan Kindergarten and Spring Kindergarten highlighted that there was a huge difference between how each kindergarten applied this policy in practice, complementing Rao et al.'s study (2017). For instance, at Anji Jiguan Kindergarten, it formulated the school-level policy - *The Rights and Responsibilities of True Play* – to elaborate on how to put children's play right into practice. Also, children were encouraged to self-determine their play duration which appeared to be considered to be flexible (one-hour free play session in the morning and children were observed to be allowed to choose to continue the free play session in the afternoon) (Chapter 6). In contrast, my analysis appears to imply that Spring Kindergarten regarded the 45 minutes of free play as an important criterion for achieving Level-1 kindergarten ranking. According to my observations, children from Spring Kindergarten were allowed to have 45 minutes free play session which was considered by practitioners as taking a break and relaxing children's minds (Chapter 7).

Furthermore, as practitioners indicated, Anji Play significantly influenced the development of early childhood education in Zhejiang Province. The view among practitioners that Anji Play played a significant role in promoting the development of early childhood education in Zhejiang Province was echoed by Principal A from Spring Kindergarten, located in the capital city of Zhejiang province. Principal A appeared to imply that the provincial policy of advocating a daily 45 minutes outdoor play session

was more or less affected by the development and influence of Anji Play. Also, in 2018, the Education Bureau in Zhejiang Province issued a policy document requesting the establishment of 103 Anji Kindergartens throughout the province to encourage other kindergartens to learn from the Anji institutions regarding the implementation of ‘learning through play’ (Ministry of Education, 2018).

In Hong Kong, the 2017 version of *the Guide to the Pre-Primary Curriculum* was the most up-to-date official document for ECE and it highlights promoting learning through play and strengthening the element of free exploration in play (Curriculum Development Council, 2017). In the latest version of national curriculum guidelines, free play has been advocated for the first time and detailed information about play arrangements has been offered. For example, the revised curriculum suggested that teachers provide not less than 30 minutes per day for free play for the half-day programme and 50 minutes for the whole-day programme (Curriculum Development Council, 2017).

As discussed in Chapter 2, due to the influence of around 150 years of colonial history, early childhood education policy in Hong Kong has been a hybrid of Eastern and Western cultures, with an emphasis on child-centred and ‘learning through play’ approaches in curricula (Li et al., 2012). However, in Chapter 2 I discussed how, for most kindergartens in Hong Kong, it might be still challenging for practitioners to apply ‘learning through play’ due to academic pressures (Ho, 2015; Lau & Cheng, 2010; Rao, 2002). Different from the mainstream, in the elite kindergarten in Hong Kong selected for study in my research, ‘learning through play’ was highly valued by both practitioners and parents, and there was an emphasis on finding a balance between structured play and free play (Chapter 8).

For Singapore, in 2003, the Ministry of Education (MOE) launched a new curriculum ‘Nurturing Early Learners’, which encouraged a play-based approach to children’s development and learning (MOE, 2003). This vision of the curriculum framework was extended in 2008 and revised in 2012. The 2008 version emphasised purposeful play which should be provided for children to learn meaningfully with guidance from teachers by distinguishing between ‘child-directed play’ and ‘teacher-directed play’ (MOE, 2008). In 2012, the MOE refreshed the NEL Framework to highlight the role of

the teacher in intentionally planning children's play in order to meet the desired learning goals (2012). For example, the NEL Framework states that:

“In purposeful play, the teacher intentionally plans the play experiences and organises the environment to enhance the learning of children. At the same time, children are given the flexibility to explore the materials and initiate play within what the teacher has provided.” (MOE, 2012, p. 35)

This means, instead of adopting the Western concept of play as child-directed (unstructured play or free play), the Singapore government advocates purposeful play that is characterised by being both teacher- and child-directed (Chapter 9).

In relation to the formulation and implementation of 'learning through play' policies originating from the West across national boundaries, my analysis of the policy documents from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore indicated that these territories translated this policy into their specific contexts through adaptation, modification and reformulation. Chen's strategy of inter-referencing may prove to be useful in attending to these translation processes because it promotes attention to regional relationships - whether as historical contestation or hopefully future collaboration, rather than looking at the West as the sole reference point.

10.4 RQ2 - How do teachers working in four early educational settings enact educational policies on 'learning through play'?

All practitioners who were interviewed claimed that they integrated 'learning through play' into different activities. My analysis also indicated that the way practitioners implemented 'learning through play' was to some extent related to the way they account for their understandings of this teaching approach and their roles in children's play. This concurs with the previous study conducted by Pyle and Bigelow (2015) who highlighted how play-based learning is implemented depends on exploring teachers' knowledge of 'learning through play' and interpretation of their roles within children's play.

An example of teachers' knowledge and interpretation of their roles in 'learning through

play' is found in my observation of the practice of the Anji approach where teachers created free and open indoor and outdoor environments conducive to play, and children were allowed to select various materials, invite playmates and design ways to play based on their own preferences. Children were also asked to articulate their play experiences (narrated as processes of problem-solving) in their daily reflection sessions and teachers paid careful attention not to lead children's discussions during the reflection. Also, it indicated that the term 'free play' (also narrated as the self-determined play by practitioners from Anji Jiguan Kindergarten) was frequently used to describe the Anji approach that was child-directed, flexible and voluntary. Also, my analysis of interviews and observations implied that practitioners paid particular attention to the role of the teacher as the observer among all the other roles they assumed to perform in children's play. Based on such understandings, the leaders from Anji institution formulated a key guiding document - *The Rights and Responsibilities of True Play* specifying children's rights and the role of the teacher in children's play, to provide teachers with a framework to implement the Anji approach.

In contrast to the Anji setting, at Spring Kindergarten (from Zhejiang province), my analysis indicated that practitioners were 'subjected' to the policy documents. Analysis indicated that practitioners from Spring Kindergarten considered the main role in children's play was to ensure that children were safe; they appeared to see 'learning through play' was allowing children to have enough time to stay outdoors to relax and providing children with thematic teaching (selecting and highlighting a theme through the textbooks suggested by the local Education Bureau). Regarding implementing 'learning through play', the analysis indicated that two kinds of play occur: (1) a 45 minutes outdoor play session, from which teachers seemed to perceive 'play' as the opposite of 'learning'; (2) a weekly half-day fairy tale-based outdoor activity programme as a response to the emphasis on play in the provincial policy, where children's play was restricted by time, place and materials.

In the context of Hong Kong, time allocation for children to participate in free play (no less than 30 for half-day kindergartens and no less than 50 minutes for full-day kindergartens) was suggested in the national kindergarten education curriculum guide (Curriculum Development Council, 2017). My analysis indicated that practitioners from

the Hong Kong case appeared to think that there was no gap between the policy document and the practice of ‘learning through play’ at Happy Lemon Kindergarten. This view contradicted the previous studies that I have discussed in Chapter 2 (Li, 2010; Ng et al., 2017; Rao et al., 2013), highlighting the tension between policy and practice regarding ‘learning through play’. The analysis seemed to imply that practitioners believe that play provided children opportunities to have substantial learning experience; meanwhile, affected by the Western notion of scaffolding theory, practitioners appeared to think that adults were expected to participate in children’s play when needed.

At the Singapore setting, my analysis indicated that a predominantly didactic pedagogy still persisted at Green Apple Centre. ‘Learning through play’ was formulated as ‘purposeful play’ which suggested teachers plan the curriculum to help children achieve specific academic goals. Two main teaching strategies – learning through youxi 游戏 (games; adding playful elements to the curriculum) and learning through learning centres in the classroom (pre-assigned tasks to each learning centre) were adopted by teachers at the Singapore setting. Both appeared to be designed to maximise children’s learning, especially for getting children academically ready for Primary One.

In general, my analysis of Research Question 2 compared pedagogic strategies adopted in terms of learning through play across four settings. This indicated new possibilities of practising ‘learning through play’ within Asian locations, such as the Anji approach, QEE model and learning through youxi. I suggest that juxtaposing their accounts in this way, attending to commonalities and differences between them, rather than in relation to the West, enacts a strategy of Chen’s (2010) strategy inter-referencing. Indeed, in the analysis of this thesis, across all four settings, suggests such cultural and historically specific resources are mixed and blended with apparently modern and western ideas in a way which produces distinct cultural hybridities.

10.5 RQ3 - How do teachers explain the meaning of ‘learning through play’?

The third research question aimed to explore how teachers account for the meaning of ‘learning through play’. Correspondingly, this research involved interviewing 12 practitioners who worked in early childhood settings in Mainland China, Hong Kong

and Singapore. In the hour-long interviews, participant practitioners accounted for their understandings of what constitutes play, children's learning, the relationship between learning and play, and their experiences of conducting 'learning through play' in each setting. According to my analysis of the data (Chapter 6, 7, 8 & 9), supported by previous research outlined in the literature review (Chapter 2 & 3), participant practitioners appeared to draw upon a number of discourses to interpret their understandings about 'learning through play' within specific cultural contexts.

10.5.1 The discourse of play: play as a spectrum

As discussed in Chapter 3, play has been extensively researched and its importance for children's learning and development has been widely acknowledged. My analysis (Chapter 6, 7, 8 & 9) indicated that participant practitioners presented different understandings of play which were affected by cultural difference and personal experience, though there were some commonalities in interpreting what constructs play among participant practitioners. This analysis is in accordance with Wood and Attfield's (2005) research which found that play is a culturally situated process as it is embedded in different social and cultural contexts. For example, 'free play', as discussed in the literature review (Fleer, 2015; Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006; Santer et al., 2007; Wood, 2014), was reflected among participant practitioners in the four settings. Practitioners from Anji Jiguan Kindergarten indicated that children were allowed to freely choose when, how, where and with whom to play within an open-ended environment, while interviews with teachers and Principal A from Spring Kindergarten implied that children were provided with a 45-minute free play session, without giving children the right to make decisions about place, time and equipment. In the Hong Kong context, teachers were observed to be trained to organise the free play session outdoors under the guidance of a charity organisation called Playright which provides practitioners with professional training for children's play. My observations in the Hong Kong setting appeared to indicate that children directed their play, choosing what and how they want to play; meanwhile, teachers provided space and materials, responding to cues from children. In the Singapore context, children were observed to be allowed to have a 30 minutes break (narrated by practitioners as free play) with pre-determined

materials outdoors after they completed tasks assigned by teachers. I, therefore, argue that practitioners' accounts of 'free play' are different and might be constrained by influences such as: teachers' personal beliefs and values; space (the Hong Kong case and the Singapore cases were observed not to have enough space for children to play); the role of the teacher; policy documents (more emphasis being put on purposeful play in Singapore); parents' expectations; and primary school curriculum. Furthermore, my analysis indicated that practitioners presented multiple meanings of play.

By considering my analysis with previous research, it is apparent that the diverse definitions of play provided by participants are consistent with those in the literature which highlights its complexity and diversity in behaviour and context (Fleer, 2009; Fleer & Van, 2017; Rogers, 2010; Wood & Attfield, 2005). My analysis of the Anji setting implied that children's exploration in free play was highly valued by practitioners. Teacher A's account of children's play (see Chapter 6) would suggest that she believes that the self-determined outdoor activities (narrated as 'free play') help children to develop problem-solving skills and improve their understandings about abstract concepts. Simply, Teacher A views play as learning. Such a perspective accords with Piaget's (1962) and Vygotsky's (1978) theories of child development discussed in the literature review (Chapter 3). Piaget (1962) suggests children build knowledge through the exploration of play, and Vygotsky (1978) views children as building and extending their knowledge and skills as they interact with peers and adults.

While the Anji play approach might be a singular example which highlights children having a high degree of freedom in play, the situation elsewhere in Mainland China has historically been rather different. In contrast to the high degree of freedom in play at the Anji Setting, analysis of practitioners at Spring Kindergarten indicated that 'free play' was considered as a break rather than pedagogy. 'Free play' was conceptualised at Spring Kindergarten as: the daily 45 minutes of outdoor activities which were limited to children accessing one or two play centres and a once-weekly programme based on fairy tales every Thursday afternoon. The analysis of the participant practitioners' interviews (see Chapter 7) implied that the provision of these two types of play aimed to help Spring Kindergarten achieve a high ranking. According to my observations at Spring Kindergarten, children played with limited space and materials, and the main role of the

teacher was to focus on children's safety issues. On one hand, practitioners' views of play appeared to be consistent with Wood's (2014) concept of policy-driven play (Chapter 3) which aims at achieving curriculum goals defined by the policy, and the goal for the pedagogy is instrumental. On the other hand, the way practitioners accounted for play was influenced by the local Education Bureau which suggested putting greater emphasis on play-based learning by creating a series of standards that were developed to rank the kindergarten. My analysis indicated that practitioners from Spring Kindergarten just dogmatically followed the policy to achieve the first-level ranking, under the top-down pressure from the local Education Bureau. In other words, the practitioners appeared to be driven by the policy to implement 'learning through play', without having a deep understanding of what constitutes play and its role in learning.

As I have discussed in Chapter 6, the main role of the teacher in the Anji context was to observe and understand children, to provide opportunities for them to freely express and reflect on their experiences, and to sustain their uncertainty and curiosity for developing knowledge. Different from the Anji context, my analysis indicated that the main role of the teacher at Spring Kindergarten appeared to establish a safe environment, and the relationship between play and learning was not considered as a matter for major consideration.

In the Hong Kong context, the practitioner appeared to be expected to find a balance between free play and guided play for children to optimise their learning. 'Free play' was considered to mean play without external goals set by practitioners and having no teacher-imposed curriculum. As observed, although teachers from the Hong Kong context (Happy Lemon Kindergarten) were involved in children's play, providing children with the space and resources for free play, the child was regarded as taking the leading position to explore. Also, my analysis indicated that practitioners considered guided play as helping children to structure the activity (which was centred around a learning goal) in an enriched environment; meanwhile, the children were still expected to retain agency to direct the activity. Practitioners' accounts of guided play in my analysis corroborate the study of Weisberg et al.'s (2013a) definition of this term that involves providing an environment for play and reserving children's agency to direct the activity. It also echoes Wood's (2014) study about guided play that values children's

spontaneity in deciding the direction and pace of their play and learning. In general, practitioners from Happy Lemon Kindergarten appeared to think that play was considered as finding a balance between allowing children to play on behalf of themselves and offering support to children. This view is supported by Pellegrini (2013) who argues that ‘play can be categorised as more or less play, not dichotomously as play or not play’ (p. 215) (Chapter 2). It further indicates Vygotsky’s (1978) ‘Zone of Proximal Development’ theory that has focused on the practice of providing guidance and support. In contrast to the Happy Lemon Kindergarten, there is a different understanding of play suggested in the Green Apple Centre.

Another understanding of play was presented by participants in the Green Apple Centre who drew on ‘purposeful play’ advocated by the Singaporean government to present how they viewed the relationship between learning and play. This is in line with Wood’s (2014) discussion of policy-driven play that treats play as a means for achieving specific learning goals defined by the curriculum policy. Chinese character learning can be seen as a good example of how teachers perceived ‘purposeful play’; teachers were expected to take leading roles in helping children achieve academic learning goals and children’s agency to participate or not participate in the activity was not considered. Play was conceptualised as a teaching tool that helps children achieve curriculum objectives while maintaining playful elements. My analysis of practitioners’ interpretations of play was supported by previous empirical work which indicated teacher-centred pedagogy still predominated in Singaporean preschools when teaching Chinese literacy (Li et al., 2012).

Altogether, my analysis of practitioners’ accounts of ‘learning through play’ in different cultural contexts has added more specificity and nuance to the existing definition of play, especially in understanding the relationship between play and learning. Also, my analysis has extended Zosh et al.’s (2018) definition of play which considers it as a spectrum that ranges from free play (without guidance or support) to teacher-directed instruction to explain how play is perceived and how it relates to learning.

10.5.2 The discourse of choice

Key within the discourse of play is the degree of choice afforded to children in their play. In the Anji approach, the choice of the child was considered to be one of the children's rights and advocated in the institution's policy. Children were expected to make choices about activities, materials, ways of communication and representation, as well as who, when, what, where and how to play and not to play. Among all this, what struck me the most was the child was given the choice not to play in the school policy. This appeared to indicate that children's individual differences were highly considered and respected. Both participant practitioners' interviews and the practice of respecting children's choices were found to be remarkably consistent with the school policy. This indicated that at the Anji Jiguan Kindergarten children's choices were privileged, and children took the leading role in play.

Although they share the same Chinese cultural background, participants from Spring Kindergarten indicated different understandings of children's choices. Interviews with Principal A appeared to imply that she was proud of the fairy tales based programme that she thought to offer children freedom of choice. Based on my observations, children were allowed to access all 12 play centres once per week for a whole afternoon. This was different from what children were allowed to do in daily play sessions: accessing 1-2 play centres around one hour. In other words, except for Tuesday afternoon, children's choices were limited in terms of place, materials and time. Also, the analysis of Teacher C's interview indicated that she (as an experienced teacher) tended to prefer organising teacher-directed activities to help children gain specific skills (e.g. drawing skills). Interviews with Teacher D (as a novice teacher) seemed to indicate that he considered the child as the centre (the unit of choice) in play since he was trying to allow children to make their own choices in his class. Though practitioners from the same educational setting, their conceptions of the discourse of choice differed. I, therefore, would argue that children's choice is affected by teachers' beliefs and values.

In the Hong Kong case, the teacher-participants appeared to seek the balance between child-initiated and teacher-led activities. For example, children were observed to be expected to direct their own exploration to choose what and how to play. The analysis

indicated that children's choices of the types of play (e.g. rough and tumble play) were respected while teachers were trained to develop their knowledge of these kinds of play. Different from the above three settings, children's choice appeared not to be valued in the Singapore case as it was found that practitioners appeared to place the main emphasis on children's readiness for school. In other words, the analysis appeared to imply that the teachers undermined children's own ideas during their transition to formal schooling. For instance, Teacher G appeared to direct children's Chinese character learning using playful elements (teacher-directed teaching with minor playful elements to try to keep children's interests) toward an academic goal. By doing so, she seemed to think it was an effective teaching approach to help children recognise, identify and become familiar with the words. Here, in the Singapore case, my analysis indicated that the way children made and managed their choices was directed by teachers, parents' expectations and school curriculum. This accords with the study conducted by Brooker (2011) who points out that children's choices are restricted as the curriculum policy gives priority to adults rather than children.

10.5.3 The discourse of interests

Central to 'learning through play' is the belief that a major purpose of education is to use children's interests to create curriculum. The creator of the Anji approach, Xueqin Cheng, pointed out that the minimally structured, open-ended and large materials made with wood were of great interest to children. So, she and her team designed and refined hundreds of large physical play materials (including ladders, barrels, planks, climbing cubes, mats and a range of large wooden blocks) for children to use in Anji Kindergartens. Also, Teacher A claimed that it was important that children's interests are detailed and recorded for future development as the child become familiar with all the materials and their interests may change. Interviews and observations in the Anji case appeared to indicate that practitioners took seriously how to capture and develop children's interests.

In the case of Spring Kindergarten, the ways practitioners conceptualised children's interests differed. Principal A and Teacher C appeared to take more of their own

preferences into account rather than children's interests when planning the curriculum, whereas Teacher D (a newly qualified teacher) seemed to pay more attention to the interests of the child. My analysis appeared to imply that the difference in the way practitioners responded to children's interests may be associated with differences in their understandings of what constitutes worthwhile knowledge for children. For both Principal A and Teacher C who were considered to have a large degree of autonomy over how to plan the curriculum, they tended to provide direct instructions focusing on knowledge acquisition. In contrast, Teacher D, as a novice teacher, who was given very limited autonomy in planning and organising children's curriculum, tried to integrate children's interests into the suggested activities.

In the Hong Kong setting, children's interests were recognised in the form of engagement in different topics such as plants, animals and insects. Participant- teachers tended to link children's interests with the topics and activities in which children chose to engage in. As observed, through the Question-Exploration- Experience (QEE) model, teachers provided materials and organised activities that they appeared to think could capture children's curiosity, increase their motivation and encourage them to take ownership of their learning; children were expected to question their interest-driven experiences of a topic or an activity and discover their inquiries and solve problems gradually. For instance, an interview with Teacher F appeared to indicate that she planned an outing to the local aquarium as she found children showed strong interest in sea animals in the daily conversation. So, the teacher tried to orient herself to children's interests by working on topics children like to construct the curriculum.

In the Singapore setting, the national curriculum guidelines (NEL) introduced the term 'purposeful play' in 2012 and suggested teachers take children's interests into consideration when addressing learning objectives (MOE, 2012). My analysis indicated that children's interests were not recognised when designing the curriculum. In other words, the analysis implied that children's interests were ignored and, instead, specific academic objectives were emphasised to get children ready for Primary One.

This section explored different ways in which the notion of 'interests' can be interpreted in relation to curriculum design. In the Anji and Hong Kong settings, practitioners

appeared to take account of children's interests by providing children with choices of activities and incorporating them into planning the school curriculum (Bereiter, 2005; Wood, 2014; Wood & Hedges, 2016). Practitioners from Spring Kindergarten and the Singapore setting, however, seemed to make judgements about children's interests aligned with what teachers regarded as important.

10.5.4 The discourse of needs

Meeting children's needs is one of the most common phrases used by interviewees when describing their interpretations of 'learning through play'. For example, teachers from the Hong Kong setting proposed that children were involved in complex processes that affected all aspects of their learning and development when they played, and teachers were expected to recognise and meet the needs of the child. At Spring Kindergarten, teachers focused on developing a programme that was designed to meet children's needs and inspire their interests, alongside teacher-initiated activities to help children learn specific skills and concepts. In addition to this, the analysis of interviews with practitioners from Anji setting indicated that they appeared to consider the Anji approach was the appropriate and authentic expression of Confucian culture. They seemed to think that this teaching method took into consideration meeting individual needs that were reflected in 'teaching students according to individual differences' from *Confucian Analects*. Finally, from observing and interviewing Singaporean kindergarten teachers, they appeared to indicate that they focused on preparing children for school transition and children's future educational needs.

As can be seen from the above examples, children's needs appeared to be identified and determined by teachers. This is in line with studies on the problematic aspect of the discourse of children's needs. These researchers claim that identifying children's needs appears to be authoritative as the needy label privileges experts with authority over others to decide what the needs of children and create programmes to meet those needs (Cottam & Espie, 2014; Santer et al., 2017).

10.5.5 The discourse of school readiness

Globally, there has long been a debate around the term ‘school readiness’ in early childhood education (Bialostok & Kamberelis, 2010; Ebbeck, 2002; Fung & Cheng, 2012; Meisels, 1999). There are two dominant understandings relating to children’s readiness for school. The maturational perspective focuses on children’s biological and physiological development (Dalton, 2005), while the interventionist perspective highlights the skills that children need to develop and the role of the teacher (Miller & Almon, 2009).

The analysis indicated that participant practitioners’ perceptions of school readiness differed in each setting. This is consistent with Niklas et al.’s (2018)’s study which indicated that the definition of school readiness varies and is culturally constructed. For instance, Teacher A from Anji Jiguan Kindergarten suggested that the curriculum of Primary One should get closer to the curriculum at her kindergarten. Her formulation could be read as suggesting the educational system in primary school should change its pedagogical approaches and methods to the Anji approach as she appeared to believe the Anji approach offered a better education for children than current primary school provision. As I discussed in Chapter 6, Teacher A seemed to be very confident about the Anji approach, through which she appeared to think children were provided with great extent freedom to choose what and how to play. Also, she appeared to think that teachers were carefully trained to integrate play in teaching and to help children develop problem-solving and critical thinking skills. Based on such views, she seemed to think that the Anji approach was a good way to prepare children for Primary One.

Throughout the interviews with participants from Anji Jiguan Kindergarten, regarding the interpretation of school readiness, they appeared to put more emphasis on developing children’s fine motor skills, social skills and creativities rather than academic competencies. Also, the importance of play seemed to be highly valued by practitioners, so, they appeared to suggest bridging curriculum and pedagogical discontinuities between the primary school and kindergarten through play.

It was noted that participants from Spring Kindergarten, in contrast to Anji Jiguan

Kindergarten, did not pay much attention to children's academic learning. As indicated, formal academic activities (i.e., Chinese character writing, English letters writing and numeracy knowledge) appeared not to be encouraged in Spring Kindergarten. For example, Principal A from Spring Kindergarten clearly stated that "our kindergarten does not provide formal academic activities, such as Chinese character writing and numeracy training as these are prohibited by the local Education Bureau. Instead of requesting academic practice from us, the parents usually send their children to supplementary schools to get their children ready for school." In other words, little attention was paid to children's academic learning as requested by the local authority, so supplementary schools took the role to prepare children academically for primary school.

As the analysis of interviews and observations indicated, for practitioners from Spring Kindergarten, readiness was defined as having academic competencies. However, they seemed not to consider themselves to be responsible for helping children achieve the academic goals requested by the Primary One; meanwhile, supplementary school became a popular choice for parents (from Spring Kindergarten) who wanted their children to master academic skills (Wang & Li, 2018).

As discussed in Chapter 2, the educational system in Hong Kong is highly competitive and rigid; university entrance examination achievements are considered as the dominant force in all decision-making in terms of schooling (Yang & Li, 2019). There is downward pressure that results in a large majority of kindergartens choosing to adopt an academic-oriented curriculum that is more suitable for primary education (Yang & Li, 2018). This is in line with Deputy C's (from the Hong Kong case) formulation that most kindergartens in Hong Kong emphasised academic preparation for admissions to primary schools, while her current kindergarten (maybe taking up 5% of all kindergartens) was different from the majority, using the play-based curriculum.

My analysis indicated that the Hong Kong case was a kindergarten for the upper- and middle-class families. Also, Deputy C states: "When parents choose primary schools for their children, they choose primary schools which have less academic learning." Deputy C's words could be read as thinking parents of her current school used their privileged culture power to choose primary schools focusing on play-based rather than academic-

oriented curriculum for their children. As I discussed in Chapter 8, my analysis indicates that most parents (from the Hong Kong case) privilege social competence, emotional skills, creativity and imagination rather than academic work like drill-and-practice which has been employed by the majority of kindergartens in Hong Kong. This is consistent with how the practitioners from the Hong Kong case define school readiness. Meanwhile, it appeared to imply that there were still few parents (from the Hong Kong) case who regarded school readiness as preparing children academically for primary school. Also, children were observed to practise writing Chinese characters for fifteen minutes to turn their play experience into academic skills. That is to say, while most practitioners and parents seemed to conceptualise children's school readiness as improving children's socio-emotional skills, there was also a different voice about highlighting the importance of academic learning.

My analysis appeared to indicate that practitioners from the Singapore case considered a transition to Primary One as a one-way process in which children need to fit into the primary school settings, and they seemed to think that children's learning was based more on actual knowledge. So, as indicated, in order to get children to fit into the primary school system, practitioners appeared to regard pre-academic skills as the most important factor for a successful school transition. For instance, Principal C said: "When it comes to K2, it is more about getting children to have a smooth transition... We want to ensure that our K2 curriculum works well with the primary school curriculum." Here, we notice two things. Firstly, children appeared to be expected to fit in at Primary One and secondly, when talking about the issue of curriculum continuity Principal C suggested her current kindergarten was the one which needs to adapt its curriculum to Primary One. Also, my analysis appeared to imply that practitioners expressed the significant pressures they faced from parents and primary school curriculum. Both practitioners and parents seemed to define readiness as having strong academic skills (which was defined by the practitioners as having literacy and numeracy skills) necessary to ensure success in primary school. In general, my analysis suggests that practitioners have different perspectives on readiness, which leads to how they manage the kindergarten curriculum and how they account for their role in supporting the curriculum.

This research indicated that the multiple understandings of ‘learning through play’ across Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore were locally and culturally embedded. This is consistent with Arndt et al.’s (2018) study which highlights that ‘the global and the local are inseparable’ (p. 111) regarding shifting practitioners’ professional identities across New Zealand, the USA, Ireland, Australia and Denmark. Also, Arndt et al.’s (2018) study claims that the global is controlled by the force of homogeneity while the diverse local contexts are considered as the weak parts, and they suggest that local and different conceptualisation of teachers’ professional identities can bring more possibilities to the global context.

Furthermore, my analysis is in line with Urban’s (2012) study about perspective scale and the need for transnational research in early small-scale local studies in early childhood education. According to Urban (2012), ‘Researchers, like cartographers, must find the right scale for their representations of the world ... The larger the scale, the less detail can be included in the map, the smaller the scale, the less likely it is to see the big picture’ (p. 499). I think his words help support the case for the relevance of using Chen’s (2010) work on inter-referencing; the analysis relating to the second research question works against the dominant trends of accepting the western notion of ‘learning through play’, generating a complex, diverse and multifaceted meaning of this term.

10.6 RQ4 - How do teachers account for their roles in teaching ‘learning through play’?

In discussing the participant practitioners’ accounts of their roles in employing ‘learning through play’, as well as from observation, six categories emerged from the analysis. They are (1) Observer, (2) Planner, (3) Play partner, (4) Facilitator, (5) Educator and (6) Reflector.

10.6.1 The observer

In 2006, Xueqin Cheng, as the Anji approach creator, initiated a revolution in engaging children in ‘true play’ rather than ‘false play’. She trained the teachers with the slogan ‘close your mouth, control your hands, open your eyes and prick up your ears’ to suggest

a transformation of the role of the teacher from being a knowledge transmitter to an observer. When asked the role of the teacher in children's learning and play, Teacher A cited Cheng's (the creator of Anji play) slogan to stress the role of the teacher as an observer in children's play sessions. The analysis of her interviews suggested that this slogan trained practitioners to step back and see the children as competent and capable learners. As reported by Teacher A, observing children enabled teachers to provide information based on children's interests and needs, as well as to gather evidence for their own professional development.

Similarly, it seems that practitioners from the Hong Kong case have concrete knowledge and rich experience regarding how to observe children as they stated that the university provided them with different kinds of resources and training. For example, I observed teachers were trained to observe how and when to intervene in children's free play by an organisation called Playright (a charity organisation specialising in play activities by providing professional training). My observations appeared to indicate that Principal B and Deputy C wanted teachers to conduct the child-centred observation (that seemed to be narrated by Principal B and Deputy as viewing children as active learners), respect children's needs and interests, and be committed to the play-based curriculum. In the process of conducting the child-centred observation, Principal B and Deputy C appeared to focus on observing how teachers organised children's activities; based on this, they gave teachers immediate guidance to improve their observation skills.

My analysis implied that there were some commonalities concerning being an observer between Anji Jiguan Kindergarten and the Hong Kong setting, such as attending training sessions, using pictures, videos, observation forms and children's drawings. However, at both Spring Kindergarten (another case from Mainland China) and the Singapore setting, participant practitioners appeared to pay less attention to the role of the teacher as an observer. For instance, regarding observation, practitioners from these two kindergartens seemed to put the emphasis on children's safety issues. Altogether, the importance of teachers as observers appeared to be highly valued at Anji Jiguan Kindergarten and the Hong Kong case, whereas Spring Kindergarten (another case from Mainland China) and the Singapore setting seemed not to take this role seriously.

10.6.2 The planner

Analysis of the interviews indicated that all teacher-participants stressed their role as planners in ‘learning through play’. In the Anji setting, it seemed that practitioners gave particular emphasis to providing a playful learning environment and rich opportunities for children to explore. For example, Teacher A claimed that: “in order to let children learn from play, we must provide them with a playful learning environment; children can learn everything from a playful learning environment.” Teacher A’s formulation appeared to suggest that she believed children are active learners who are able to make play meaningful in an enabling environment. She used ‘must’ to indicate that providing children with a playful learning environment was an essential part of applying the approach of ‘learning through play’. Now, let us take a closer look at the core task of a teacher as a planner in ‘a playful learning environment’. According to Anji Play philosophy, this ‘playful learning environment’ includes love, risk, joy, engagement, and reflection (Anji Play, 2020). To be more specific, love is the basis of the learning environment, which allows children to take risks at their own pace; these risks bring about children’s experiences of joy; this joy helps children become deeply engaged in their own thinking; lastly, children’s daily reflection on these experiences develop their future learning (Coffino & Chelsea, 2019).

Similarly, teachers from the Hong Kong setting appeared to indicate that planning was a critical part of ‘learning through play’. Specifically, my analysis indicated that teachers used children’s interests as a starting point for planning children’s activities. As I discussed in the previous section, practitioners paid much attention to observing children. Through such observations, teachers appeared to harness the emerging interest of children as a reference for planning the curriculum.

At Spring Kindergarten (in Mainland China), it appeared that teachers planned the school curriculum with the intention of achieving specific pre-defined educational purposes. For instance, as informed by Teacher C, children seemed to be expected to know basic concepts such as numbers, month and year, so, she planned the topic about the calendar for children to learn these concepts. This would indicate that rather than considering children’s interests, Teacher C designed the topic according to her

perceptions of children's needs, with the expected goals or outcomes in mind.

Finally, in the Singapore setting, the 2012 version of the national curriculum - 'Nurturing Early Learners' (NEL) - required teachers to plan a school curriculum which could help children achieve learning goals (MOE, 2012). Also, my analysis appeared to indicate that teachers stressed their role as a planner by selecting teaching materials, managing resources and setting up learning corners to prepare children to make a smooth transition to Primary One. It appeared to indicate that the role of the teacher as a planner was closely related to training children's (especially those who are at the end of their kindergarten education) academic skills.

In general, my analysis highlighted that a planner was a common role discussed among all practitioners and they connected this role to the design of the kindergarten curriculum. In terms of how they account for planning the school curriculum, practitioners from Anji Jiguan Kindergarten and the Hong Kong setting appeared to adopt a child-centred view, privileging children's needs and interests, while participants from Spring Kindergarten and the Singapore setting seemed to prioritise adults' needs or academic requirement required from primary schooling.

10.6.3 The play partner

Previous literature indicated that it was a controversial issue of whether teachers should be a participant in children's play or not as there were both advantages and disadvantages of teacher involvement (Chapter 3). Teacher E and Teacher F from the Hong Kong setting indicated that teacher participation enriched children's play experience and developed children's intellectual and emotional communication skills, while teachers from the Anji setting seemed to think that teachers should not interfere in children's play as they appear to believe teacher intervention would disrupt play, constrain children from showing their feelings and reduce the beneficial aspects of play. Specifically, it was observed that both Teacher E and Teacher F (from the Hong Kong setting) took part in the scenario imagined by the children, allowing the child to direct the plot such as adopting one of the roles that were requested by children within the

make-believe play (e.g., students and teachers were all sea turtles or butterflies). Teachers appeared not to control the play plots, but rather followed the children's lead. At Anji Jiguan Kindergarten, teachers were rarely observed playing with children as they appeared to think the nature of children's play was fragile and children seemed to be considered to be capable and competent to construct their own play experiences. However, my analysis indicated that the playmate role was not valued in both Spring Kindergarten (in Mainland China) and the Singapore kindergarten, except where Teacher D from Spring Kindergarten described his personality leading to his participation in children's play, when he was invited to do so.

10.6.4 The facilitator

My analysis of interviews indicated that one of the most common ways which the participant practitioners positioned themselves in relation to children was constituting themselves as facilitators. As discussed in Chapter 2, the idea of the teacher as a facilitator comes from the concept of children as active learners, drawing on constructivist theories proposed by Piaget (1962), Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1972) among others. In the Anji setting, it seemed that teachers were asked to step back, watch, listen and wait for children to develop their thinking skills. Particularly, after the outdoor play session followed by the reflective sharing session, children appeared to be given a great extent of freedom to express themselves and reflect on their play experiences; teachers were observed to remain sensitive and attentive to children's interests and to intervene in children's discussion by asking thought-provoking questions to extend children's thinking.

Regarding being a good facilitator, teachers from the Hong Kong case suggested putting forward strategies such as scaffolding and co-construction to enhance children's higher-level thinking skills. The QEE (Question-Exploration-Experience) model employed by teachers at the Hong Kong setting appeared to be considered as a constructivism-based curriculum that treated children as active constructors of their own learning rather than simply passive recipients. By using this teaching model, teachers seemed to provide children with different levels of support such as modelling, demonstrating, asking open-

questions and giving children clues to help them construct explicit thinking. Also, Teacher F (from the Hong Kong setting) appeared to indicate that in the context of role play, children co-constructed pedagogy (incorporating children's and her own ideas), shared the decision-making process of how to choose the learning content and how to organise the environment (respecting children's emerging ideas).

At another case (Spring Kindergarten) in Mainland China, as I observed, the activities appeared to be mainly initiated by teachers, though practitioners seemed to focus on adding more child-initiated activities. For instance, my observations appeared to indicate that, most of the time, Teacher C facilitated children's learning by employing intentional teaching practices such as direct instructions and providing model pictures. In the Singapore case, it was noticed that the idea of being the facilitator was very challenging because teachers seemed to be subject to pressures from parental expectations, primary educational system and kindergarten curriculum goals. Overall, there were great disparities in how the teacher functions as a facilitator in practice in the four settings.

10.6.5 The educator

The preschool teachers from the Singapore setting appeared to position themselves as educators who were responsible for children's cognitive development, as well as children's smooth transition to Primary One. The analysis of observations and interviews implied that teachers taught children pre-academic skills, and their role seemed to stretch beyond being a kindergarten teacher and may be similar to a primary school teacher. Specifically, Teacher G reported that in her Chinese class, children were expected to be able to not only recognise but also to write 500 commonly used Chinese characters. Also, children appeared to be expected to engage in classroom learning centres with a set of specific learning goals that mainly focus on literacy, reading, letter and spelling games. In this context, the teacher appeared to have full control over children's learning, following the national curriculum specifying which topics to discuss and which skills to teach. At the same time, I observed that children appeared to be forced to read, write or do the assigned tasks.

Similar to the Singapore setting, at Spring Kindergarten teachers indicated that one of their central roles was to educate children, including introducing basic concepts and specific skills, managing children's behaviours and maintaining discipline. According to the two examples provided by Teacher C (see Chapter 6), it was found that she appeared to act as an educator who considered that children needed to be instructed to learn how to play pogo ball and how to draw pictures.

The interpretation of participant practitioners from Anji and the Hong Kong cases differed from that of teachers from the Singapore setting and Spring Kindergarten, who seemed to position themselves as the source of knowledge and impart that knowledge through a variety of means to children. Rather than using the idea of educator to describe their roles, teachers (from Anji and the Hong Kong settings) appeared to draw on the role of a facilitator to explain their attitudes towards teaching, considering children as active contributors in constructing knowledge. Thus, the role of the teacher as an educator appeared to relate to how practitioners account for what constitutes children's learning.

10.6.6 The reflector

Participant practitioners from both the Anji Play and Hong Kong settings reported that a central aspect of their role was to reflect their thinking and actions, as well as to make an evaluation to improve the quality of provision. Based on my observations, teachers from Anji setting were required to attend a daily hour-long discussion to share their reflective thinking in terms of whether the child's needs and interests have been met and inspired (or not) and whether the goals of the activities have been achieved (or not) with their colleagues. In other words, the teacher appeared to be trained to take a critical stance to discuss his/her professional knowledge and practices regarding children's learning and development and to have a reflective dialogue with their colleagues. For example, my analysis of Teacher C's (an experienced Anji approach teacher) interview indicated that she still challenged her professional knowledge about what science means to children and how to teach children science, and questioned her way of facilitating children's discussion session.

The importance of being a reflective practitioner also appeared to be emphasised in the Hong Kong setting. It was observed that teachers from the Hong Kong case used both written and verbal feedback provided by Principal B, Deputy C and other teachers to reflect upon and improve their practices. My analysis of interviews and observations at Spring Kindergarten (in Mainland China) indicated that teachers considered reflective journals (narrated as paperwork) as being associated with evaluation of the teacher quality. Teacher C (from Spring Kindergarten) stated she needed to make up things to let her reflective journals look beautiful. In other words, teachers from Spring Kindergarten were supposed to use the reflective journals to reflect on their practices, however, this kind of reflective journal (paperwork) appeared to be misused to pass the teacher assessment. In the Singapore setting, the practices of teachers seemed to be routinised and reflection appeared to be neglected because practitioners seemed to take things for granted without questioning their knowledge about children's learning and development, as well as the goals of the activities and their teaching strategies.

The importance of the role of practitioners in children's play has been emphasised by a substantial body of research (Berk & Meyers, 2013; Singer et al., 2014; Van Oers & Duijkers, 2013; Weisberg et al., 2013b). The practitioners' interpretations of the differing roles they have in supporting children's play were similar to what I have discussed in the literature review (see Chapter 3). Nonetheless, my analysis emphasised the image of teachers as reflectors which is under-researched in Asian early childhood education. Analysis of the material indicated that practitioners from Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore have reported differing roles in children's play (the interplay between local knowledge and the global). Informed by the design of this study as a cross-national comparative case study, along with possible connection with Chen's (2010) idea of inter-referencing. This helps to develop a broader understanding of teachers' roles within and beyond the Asian context, as well as challenging the dominant western method of knowledge production and illuminate the process of cultural hybridity.

10.7 Chapter summary

This chapter has discussed the key emerging features of the analysis, and made the case

for how this cross national comparative case study benefits from being interpreted through the analytic lens of Chen's (2010) Asia as method. It discussed inter-referencing across Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore in relation to the four research questions, by referring to policy documents regarding 'learning through play', practitioners' accounts of their understandings and implementation of this policy, as well as the role of the teacher in children's play. The analysis of the research questions was discussed with reference to literature and previous research studies. Also, I have further oriented the discussion to highlight the relevance of Chen's notion of inter-referencing to inspire the formulation and implementation of pedagogical ideas and models in early childhood education to move beyond Western universalism and to call for Asian collaboration. There are fruitful resources and materials between and within Asian countries which might provide possible frameworks for early childhood education elsewhere, and this also may extend how comparative studies in education are carried out.

Chapter 11: Conclusion

11.1 Chapter introduction

This chapter summarises the key analysis of the four research questions discussed in detail earlier in the previous chapter (Chapter 10). Then, it moves to present contributions to knowledge put forward by this thesis. This is followed by implications brought about by the research analysis. Finally, the limitations of this research and corresponding recommendations will be outlined to inspire potential future research directions.

11.2 Summary of the key analyses

In answering Research Question 1, I have investigated the similarities and differences of educational policies on ‘learning through play’ in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore. The analysis indicated that this policy was advocated in a number of relevant national, regional and site-specific policy documents.

In all territories, ‘learning through play’ at the national government level is similar, emphasising play-based learning. For example, the key ECE policy document in the three territories: the Guide for 3- to 6-year-old Children’s Learning and Development (Ministry of Education, 2012) in Mainland China, the Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide – joyful learning through play balanced development all the way (Curriculum Development Council, 2017) in Hong Kong and the Nurturing Early Learners - a framework for kindergarten curriculum (MOE, 2012) in Singapore all advocated ‘learning through play’.

Although the three territories shared the same developmental trend of developing ECE - learning through play, it was conceptualised differently in policy between these three territories. As my analyses indicated, the Hong Kong government focused on promoting learning through play and especially ‘strengthening the element of free exploration in play’ (Curriculum Development Council, 2017, p. 66), while the Singapore government suggested that ‘learning through play’ should be facilitated by the teacher using a

specific idea of ‘purposeful play’. Different from Hong Kong and Singapore, Mainland China had broad national guidelines for play-based teaching and learning, and each province had its own provincial-level policies to make these national-level guidelines more concrete and regionally appropriate. Therefore, my analysis of Research Question 1 confirmed that the policy of integrating play into early childhood education to promote children’s learning has been widely advocated by governments under the impact of globalisation, and it might be able to extend our knowledge of cross-cultural influences on ‘learning through play’ in the context of East Asian early childhood education.

The analysis in relation to Research Question 2 indicated that the implementation of educational policies on learning through play varied in four different contexts. In the context of Anji Play, interviews and observations suggested that participant-teachers had deep understandings of the concept of ‘learning through play’ and provided children with opportunities to participate in free play. However, the situation elsewhere, even in the same province, has been rather different. The research analysis indicated that participants from Spring Kindergarten seemed to be still rooted in a top- down approach, led by the government of Hangzhou, the provincial capital city of Zhejiang province. Interviews and observations with participants indicated that the provincial suggestions for the implementation of ‘learning through play’ appeared to be centralised, hierarchical and bureaucratic.

The Hong Kong case also highlighted that play was integrated into kindergarten practice in two main ways: structured play with teachers’ instruction and free play with little support from teachers. The Questioning-Exploration-Experience model, based on constructivism, was adopted by teachers, who were observed to design a variety of forms of play in line with the curriculum content, and in accordance with children’s interests. Also, influenced by the National Curriculum Guide, more free play sessions were arranged during which, children were observed to be allowed to choose how to play. In the Singapore case, it seemed that play was considered as the medium for informal learning and intervals between different learning sessions.

Analysis from the Singapore case would indicate that the implementation of ‘learning through play’ seemed to be characterised by teacher-directed play that was highly

structured with only teacher-led instructions. I argue that the implementation of 'learning through play' provided by practitioners (within their specific social-cultural contexts) enriches our understanding regarding ways of integrating play into pedagogy that I have discussed in Chapter 3.

Analysis and interpretations arising from this study provided answers to the Research Question 3 in the form of five discourses that reflected participant practitioners' understandings of 'learning through play' in each setting, that is, the following discourses: (1) the discourse of play as a spectrum; (2) the discourse of choice; (3) the discourse of interests; (4) the discourse of needs; and (5) the discourse of school readiness.

Altogether, the five discourses identified that there were three ways of integrating play into pedagogy across the sites studied. Firstly, play was considered as a separate part of learning (play–work dichotomy, the Singapore case). Secondly, play was integrated into the curriculum for achieving learning outcomes and curriculum goals (the Spring case). Thirdly, play was child-initiated, allowing children to freely choose materials, resources and partners, and the role of the teacher was to provide appropriate provision (the Anji and the Hong Kong cases). In summary, I would argue that these diverse dimensions of 'learning through play', as partly from the analysis of practitioners' accounts are consistent with the claims that different people define play differently (see Chapter 3), and much more work is required to achieve a more nuanced and in-depth understanding of this approach. Also, my analysis rearticulated both 'western' and 'eastern' notions of 'learning through play' and challenged the binary thinking about the West and the East.

When summarising analysis in relation to Research Question 4, I discussed six categories as emerging from the analysis. The analysis indicated that teachers adopted diverse roles in play as: observer, planner, play partner, facilitator, educator and reflector. As an observer, the teacher steps back, sees children as competent learners, and watches children's interaction with the materials and their peers. As a planner, the teacher provides a playful learning environment. As a play partner, the teacher takes part in the children's play to enrich and extend the play. As a facilitator, the teacher engages in children's play, scaffolding and assisting their learning when stepping in and out of

children's play. As an educator, the teacher takes responsibility for children's cognitive development in academic learning, maintains classroom discipline and manages children's behaviour. As a reflector, the teacher reflects on their teaching pedagogies and makes an evaluation in order to improve the quality of provision. My analysis also indicated that the roles of teachers in play showed differences between contexts.

Analysis indicated that the roles of teachers in children's play were represented differently by teacher-participants within different social and cultural contexts. The roles as observers, facilitators and reflectors were prevalent in both the Anji case and the Hong Kong case, but in different ways. Regarding the role of observer, it should be noted that teachers from the Anji case have been trained in how to observe children since 2006. Taking a slightly different, but not unrelated, representation, teachers from the Hong Kong case were advised to undertake the planned observations (e.g. tick box) which was embedded in everyday practice to identify children's needs and interests. Teachers from both the Hong Kong context and Anji context, therefore, seemed to have an in-depth understanding of what was typically understood, in 'western' educational theory as scaffolding and used scaffolding to facilitate children's higher-level thinking. In terms of being a reflector, teachers in the Anji case attended a daily hour-long discussion to share their reflective thinking as well as to receive feedback from their colleagues, and teachers from the Hong Kong case, albeit observed by the principal and curriculum deputy, had regular round-table discussions to reflect on their teaching.

By contrast, participant practitioners from Spring Kindergarten in Mainland China and the Singapore setting were noted as tending to pay less attention to these three roles. The role of an educator was particularly emphasised by the teachers in the Singapore context, preparing children for school transition, and some teachers from the Spring Kindergarten also positioned themselves as educators to help children to obtain specific skills. In addition, this study suggested that the role of being a play partner was documented as being most emphasised in the Hong Kong context, where teachers offered the possibility to enter into a teacher-initiated activity. Finally, the role of being a planner was also prevalent in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore cultures, but significantly this was interpreted differently/or to a varying extent. Thus, analysis of observations and interviews of practitioners' roles from this research provides categorisation and labelling

of teaching practices, which makes a contribution to this topic in academic literature. In general, this research could be considered as addressing the gap focusing on Asian localities (Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore) that are under-researched in relation to 'learning through play'. Also, it offered some references for rearticulating and unpacking the binary between 'western' and 'Asian' in pedagogical and educational practice. By doing so, this research might prompt more situated and nuanced analyses that could inform the theory and practice in other early childhood education settings. In the next section, I discuss how this study makes theoretical and methodological contributions.

11.3 Contribution of the research

This research makes several contributions. First of all, by cross-culturally comparing how teachers investigate learning through play, this study offers opportunities for practitioners to reflect on their regular practices. The cross-national case study also facilitates mutual understanding of cultural differences and similarities among nations and encourages rethinking of pedagogical concepts and practices in other early childhood education settings. This study is a particular version of cross-national case study looking at the four different cases. The second key contribution concerns the potential for linking with 'Asia as Method'. As I have described earlier (in Chapter 10), most educational research that draws on 'Asia as method' has not deeply engaged with the strategies and conceptualisations that Chen (2010) puts forward. This study discussed how 'learning through play' was understood and implemented in four early childhood settings from three territories in relation to a range of social theories. In addition, as I have discussed in the previous chapter, building from this study, there is a potential contribution to the engagement of education and childhood studies with 'Asia as Method' to postcolonial approaches, mediating the relationship between Asian countries, as well as between 'Asia' and 'the West'. Furthermore, Chen's (2010) strategy of inter-referencing across three territories helpfully widens more traditional comparative studies.

11.3.1 Applying inter-referencing strategy

Inter-referencing emerges as a way to take the complex history of the three territories seriously and mediating the relationships between ‘Asia’ and ‘the West’, as well as between ‘Asian’ countries (rather than only with the West). It works as a potential way to inform the cross-national case study across the four settings. The study is innovative, in avoiding the longstanding binary thinking about the mutual relations between ‘East’ and ‘West’, acknowledging a system of ‘multiple reference points’, applied specifically to ‘learning through play’ in early childhood education. This allows the knowledge of pedagogical philosophy and practice regarding learning through play to flow in different directions.

11.3.1.1 Challenging binary thinking

In Asian educational contexts, however, there has been limited research into ‘learning through play’ while there are substantial references around this topic in Western countries. In addition, research in Western countries generally presumes a background in and orientation to Western theories and philosophy so displaying what Hall (1992) dubbed ‘the west as method’, placing Western culture in a dominant position in world knowledge production. Under this Western dominant influence, Chen (2010) reminds us that the non-West seem to have long been using ‘the West as method’, trying to follow and apply Western knowledge in their contexts. For instance, there is a widespread perception that a ‘good’ school is measured by whether it is employing Western curricula and teaching strategies, which results in developing countries being tied to Western standards (Gupta, 2015).

This dominance of Western standards has been discussed in Chapter 3, in relation to the field of early childhood education, Western-based pedagogical approaches such as Reggio Emilia, Montessori, Froebel, Waldorf-Steiner, Multiple Intelligences, and the Project Approach are prevalent in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore seemingly so as to catch up with the West. However, Western early childhood methods and materials are based on particular educational values (such as child- centredness), having their corresponding educational systems. Various research has critiqued the

practice of applying Western theoretical frameworks in the non-West context (Gupta, 2015; Lee & Tseng, 2008). For example, Burman (2016) argued that it is impossible for a teacher to conform to child-centredness, as she thought that there is a conflict between the teacher's non-intervention role to improve children's independence and how teachers position themselves as being responsible for children's learning when translating the child-centred approach into practice. Also, Walkerdine (1990) argued that the child-centredness imposes impossible requirements on female teachers, as nurturers, who are responsible for producing the free male child. In Walkerdine's view, this practice of child-centredness is untrainable, with teachers being constrained to display certain behaviours consistent with this pedagogy.

Moreover, post-Second World War, child-rearing and educational practices have become oriented to a child-centred approach with the notion of 'democracy' becoming central to Western society (Burman, 2016). Existing literature on play and pedagogy originating from Western countries (such as the ideas of Piaget, 1986; Piaget, 1983; Vygotsky, 1978; Fler, 2009; Wood & Attfield, 2005; Sutton-Smith, 1967; Bruner, 1972) has emphasised democratic and scientific ideas, whose different cultural, political and economic content reflects different assumptions such that their practice in Asian contexts may function differently.

This research suggested teachers' understandings and practices of 'learning through play' can be diverse, and challenged binary thinking of either emulating the Western perspectives of this approach or, alternatively, reacting against understandings from the West. For instance, the child-centred teaching approach is usually seen as being from the West and advocated in many Asian contexts such as Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, South Korea (Liu & Feng, 2005; Faas et al., 2017; Tan, 2017), and is considered as one of the most important aspects in evaluating the quality of early education provision in these places. The binary thinking of viewing child-centredness constructed by Western knowledge (a particular image of the child, the teacher and teacher-child interactions) as universal can limit teachers' experiences of, and potential opportunities for, employing this teaching pedagogy in Asian contexts. In the case of Teacher C (the Spring Kindergarten case) discussed in Chapter 7, it was challenging for her to oversee a classroom of around 30 children due to too much attention being needed

by the children. This analysis draws upon literature that critiques child-centred pedagogies (Burman, 2016; Cannella, 1998; Walkerdine, 1990:), as well as being a cultural critique with possible connections to ‘Asia as Method’ (Chen, 2010) to the rediscovery of the child-centred pedagogy in the context of Chinese early childhood education. Also, Teacher C’s description interrogated the Western notion of pedagogical ideas and practice, as well as providing applications and implications for childhood and education not only between and within Asian countries but also worldwide.

In addition, according to Teacher G (the Singapore case, Chapter 8), although the Singapore government emphasised ‘engaging children in learning through purposeful play’ (MOE, p. 34), the curriculum was still teacher-centred in her kindergarten, focusing on academic training. Hence, countries like Singapore whose national system driven by academic achievements only partially implement or subscribe to implement such educational policy. ‘Asia as Method’, proposed by Chen (2010), as an innovative strategy to challenge the binary thinking between East and West, helpfully moves the analytic focus from just adopting and adapting the Western early childhood curricula standards in Asian contexts. Instead, it attends to how diverse and multiple early childhood educational ideas may be functioning and invites attention towards other places in Asia, Africa, South America, Middle East, and to other areas to discover new pedagogical theories and practices.

11.3.1.2 Becoming each other’s reference point

Chen (2010) suggests becoming a reference point for each other, especially those coming from non-Western traditions, while at the same time avoiding putting the West in an antagonistic position, shifting the reference points away from the most powerful model (the West) and towards a wide range of possible models elsewhere sharing similar sociocultural background. He employs the notion of ‘internationalist localism’ to deal with the problem of opposing the West, pointing out ‘the operating site is local, but at the same time internationalist localism actively transgresses nation- states’ boundaries’ (Chen, 2010, p. 233). As he states, internationalist localism ‘looks for new political possibilities’, where the traditional culture is respected but not essentialised and the non-West provides an ‘imaginary anchoring point’. Such ‘internationalist localism’ prompt a

reconsideration of the relationship between local traditional culture and the West, as has been exemplified in the analysis chapters (Chapter 6, 7, 8, 9).

Furthermore, Chen mobilises the notion of ‘translation’ to assist with the rethinking of traditional cultures as operating in a critical dialogue with the West (Chen, 2010). Chen points out that translation is the process of both ‘negotiations’ and ‘blending’ between the local culture and the exotic culture (2010). For instance, I have discussed practitioners’ practices of the QEE model that contextualised Western educational theories and added a new element into the Hong Kong context. Based on Chen’s notion of ‘internationalist localism’, in terms of ways of knowledge flow, there is not a one-way flow of knowledge from Western countries to non-West but the cultures and traditions of non-Western countries are brought out in the context of world knowledge production. Here, I argue that the QEE model in the Hong Kong case can be regarded as one form of transnational knowledge flow, with the Western culture adapting to the Hong Kong cultural context and then engaging in a critical dialogue with the reinvestigated Hong Kong historical traditions. The localised Western curricula (QEE) may be rooted in the Hong Kong context, and eventually, become one of the elements of the local culture.

This thesis makes contributions to building knowledge, theories and epistemologies that are useful in Asian contexts. As I presented in Chapter 2, Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore share a similar educational culture: a highly examination-centred educational system, a privileging of teacher authority, alongside parents’ high academic expectations of children and legacies of Confucianism, while Western countries focus more on individualism, democracy and religious culture (Rao et al., 2017). In this case, it is suggested that developing indigenous theories and knowledge for their own contexts, and not necessarily relying on using Western theories (Lin, 2012). For example, In Mainland China, some participants acknowledged that, historically speaking, a child-centred educational approach was specified in ancient Chinese texts from Confucian Analects. Teacher A (the Anji case) drew the reading ‘teaching students according to individual differences’ from Confucian Analects to propose the convergence of pedagogical ideas (the beneficial aspects of traditional education and Anji Play), indicating that Chinese culture has its own roots for advocating child-centred pedagogy.

Interviews with teachers from the Anji case indicated that, rather than only appearing as an adaptation or adoption of western child-centred pedagogies, Anji Play was a Chinese child-centred pedagogy, with claims mobilised in their accounts of the core values of Confucian culture. Moreover, this approach is changing China and beginning to influence the world. So, the contribution to knowledge here is the documentation of how Asian early childhood curricula provides models that are developed from local cultural heritage or glocalising practice which may provide references points for early childhood education elsewhere.

11.3.1.3 Providing new opportunities for comparison

This research connects with other work, drawing attention to the problem of traditional cross-national comparative studies which takes the nation-state as the unit of analysis (Kohn, 1989). Here it is relevant to explore the critique of the so-called methodological nationalism that takes the nation-state as the organising principle of modernity (Chernilo, 2006). This view has also been criticised by Beck (2007) who critiques the presumption that ‘humanity is naturally divided into a limited number of nations, which on the inside, organise themselves as nation-states and, on the outside, set boundaries to distinguish themselves from other nation-states (p. 287)’. Thus, the cross-national comparative research homogenises within the nation and overstates diversity across nations. Furthermore, Urban (2012) makes a useful critique of traditional ‘comparative’ studies: “the underlying question of comparative studies tends to be one of transferability: How can what works there be made to work here?” (p. 499). Urban (2012) argues this rationale restricts the complexity and diversity of early childhood practices including children, families, practitioners and communities. My analysis indicated that the contrast between East and West has obscured the commonalities, and also homogenised those countries in ignoring major differences produced by factors such as gender, ethnicity and class inequality.

The purpose of this study was not to compare one case in relation to another, nor was it to make the claim that one case was better or worse than the other. In my study, the four different cases were not comparable because they were in three different territories, and each of them has a particular context. For example, the four observed kindergartens

varied not only in funding resources (public and private) and physical size, but also in the number of children enrolled and their educational approaches. To be more specific, compared with the private settings (the Hong Kong case and the Singapore case), the public kindergarten (Anji case and the Spring case) have spacious classrooms, outdoor play areas and a greater number of registered children. Also, it should be noted that the Anji case is becoming well-known nationally and internationally for creating the Anji approach and the Hong Kong setting is a university-based early childhood centre that can access the resources of the university.

Rather than comparing teachers' understandings and implementations of 'learning through play' in three territories, my interpretations and analyses addressed how certain socio-cultural-political conditions brought about the similarities and differences and provided us opportunities to rethink how to work with the similarities and differences across these territories. Also, influenced by the inter - referencing approach, this study attempted to avoid judging any case with its particular cultural and material context as superior or inferior to any other, and instead focused on an explanation of historical conditions and transformations in each country. This research may therefore connects up with 'Asia as method', which provides a platform for dialogue within Asia and 'the Rest'. Such dialogue can enhance awareness of different socio-cultural and historical structures and ideologies and creates new opportunities for detailed analysis and evaluation, rather than the sole comparison with the West.

11.3.2 Applying the strategy of critical syncretism

Analysis of cultural syncretism invites engaging in understanding how cultural elements, in their specific practices, integrate to become different has the potential to advance alternative and multiple forms of pedagogical models and concepts. The empirical analysis undertaken here can be regarded as an example of attending to cultural syncretism.

11.3.2.1 Spotting neglected subjectivities

The idea of 'Asia as method' challenges the dominant way of understanding world

history from the Euro-American imperialism lens. The rethinking world history and so 'sees Asia as a product of history and realises that Asia has been an active participant in historical processes' (Chen, 2010, p.215). Traditionally, neglected subjectivities are defined by the dominant, and rarely have opportunities to be identified as possible models.

In this study, analysis indicated that teachers from different cases mobilised understandings and implementations of 'learning through play' that were complex and multifaceted due in part to how each context having its unique sociocultural-historical elements. According to Zhu and Zhang (2008), early childhood education in Mainland China indicates the combination of Confucian culture, Communist, and Western cultures. Correspondingly, both Hong Kong and Singapore have been historically influenced by Chinese culture and shaped by British colonial culture. Specifically, the Anji approach originating from the local area (Anji county) which resonated with the Western model of learning by doing (experiential learning), and it also created the collaboration between children, teachers, families, communities, and policy makers.

Thus, this bottom-up approach challenged the traditional assumption about the capacity of the child and the role of the teacher. Although the Spring Kindergarten case was a very different setting, it was also selected from Mainland China. From the interviews and observations, it seemed that at Spring Kindergarten, participants were primarily affected by the pressure of the top-down national policy and parents' expectations, emphasising 'learning through play' in its curriculum, so the pedagogy was teacher-centred rather than child-centred. Children were organised by teachers to engage in outdoor activities after they complete formal learning sessions. In fact, my analyses suggest that market forces, in the form of parental power as buyers of childcare services, are practised differently in different contexts, as well as suggesting capitalism is a transnational unifying condition.

Teachers from the Hong Kong context appeared to reflect a hybrid of the policy shaped by British colonial administrators and Chinese culture that features the legacies of Confucianism, employing the QEE model in which play and learning were closely integrated. Although Singapore and Hong Kong share a similar educational system, the

Hong Kong case is a singular example due to its unique university location, from the schedule for formal learning, it seems like in the Singapore setting, play and learning are divided. Purposeful play is emphasised in the curriculum, teachers were observed designing playful elements to help children achieve certain academic learning goals.

Building from this study, I suggest that by using ‘Asia as method’ we might change the Eurocentric history of the current world and unlock identities of the colonised previously defined by the colonizer. Echoing Chen (2010), the specific practice of this approach in the four early childhood settings invites attention to diverse perspectives and identity positions, through which we might be able to discover new narratives of viewing and practising learning through play and multiply our frames of reference.

11.3.2.2 Becoming others

Chen suggests engaging in the search for an alternative perspective. This thesis has deeply researched ‘learning through play’ practices in four different early childhood settings of Asian contexts to question the possibility of ‘traditional culture’ outside wider geopolitical relations, as well as how these local histories are configured and reconfigured.

One of the Confucian core values – ‘teaching students according to individual differences’ that was mobilised by Teacher A from the Anji case appears to indicate the convergence of pedagogical ideas between the beneficial aspects of traditional education and the Anji approach. Teacher A’s account of the culturally specific reference can not only enrich our understanding of early childhood education in Mainland China but also be shared with other Asian countries whose culture is more or less shaped by Confucian influences, and such values might provide an alternative to those informing Western contexts. In addition, the Anji model of ‘learning through play’ illuminates play-based pedagogy that is different in some aspects from those commonly used in the West; children in Anji Play programmes reflect on their daily experiences by creating drawings of their activities and engaging in group discussion, through which children are expected to develop their critical thinking skills, problem-solving skills and their understandings of science. Furthermore, the Anji approach encourages collaboration between teachers,

children, communities, parents, communities and policy makers. Such strategies seem to be consistent with the much-discussed collectivist concerns historically associated with Chinese culture (Choy, 2017), in which people are encouraged to work together for mutual benefits.

The QEE model, combined with an emphasis on a session of Chinese character writing exercises as employed being used in the Hong Kong context, challenges the restrictions of translating Western early educational philosophies into the local context and sheds light on alternative approaches influenced by Chinese culture. Moreover, in the Spring Kindergarten case, although the pedagogy is still teacher-centred, it was observed that children were allowed and encouraged to have a daily free play session. They are also organised to have the weekly fairy tale-based outdoor activities programme which was designed to give children more time to play based on their interests. While teachers from the Singapore case were observed to adopt a primary school pedagogical model, teachers were documented as including playful elements to make the learning process interesting for children.

The understandings and implementations of ‘learning through play’ of the four cases from the East Asian contexts, where early childhood education has been more or less shaped by European influences, provide extra possible pedagogical models. By engaging attending to these multi-layered practices, researchers of early childhood education are able to start the process of transforming them into others, and ‘move beyond the boundaries and divisive positions historically constructed by colonial power relations’ (Chen, 2010, p. 99). So, I argue that pedagogical models identified from this study might inspire new perspectives on other early childhood education settings.

11.4 Implications of this research

This research may therefore connect up with a postcolonial approach – ‘Asia as method’, through which a society in Asia might be inspired by how other Asian countries deal with kindergarten teachers’ perspectives of play and the interpretation of play that is similar to its own. In this way, I have developed new categories, knowledge and practices. Analysis from the current research suggests implications for teacher training

programmes, and for policy-makers and practitioners.

Analysis of the current research provides some implications for consideration in the design of teacher training programmes. For example, while some teachers from the Spring and the Singapore cases reported a lack of relevant and continuous training in play-based teaching, participants from the Anji and the Hong Kong cases indicate that regular workshops and group discussions and daily reflection helped them have a better understanding of ‘learning through play’ and that they know how to integrate play into learning. Specifically, in the Anji case, kindergarten teachers used to say the slogan – ‘close your mouth, control your hands, open your eyes and prick up your ears’ to children, but now they apply this to themselves. Stepping back and viewing children as capable learners is something that may inspire teacher education in other countries which are still highly influenced by teacher-centred pedagogy. This study also indicates that if practitioners have a deep understanding of the concept of ‘learning through play’, then this will help them to adopt the appropriate practice. Moreover, teacher training institutions need to organise regularly appropriate and diversity training for the student teachers to improve pre-service teachers’ knowledge of and skills for ‘learning through play’. It is suggested that school-based training workshops need to provide kindergarten teachers with opportunities to exchange their views on the understandings and the use of ‘learning through play’.

Drawing on analysis from this research, there is a need for policy makers to consider the appropriateness of the relevant policy for teachers to implement play in their classroom practice. For example, in Mainland China, due to the uneven economic development across regions, there are regional disparities in the quality of early childhood education. As presented, Mainland China has broad and flexible national guidelines for play-based teaching and learning for each province to make necessary changes according to local contexts, while the key policy guidelines of Hong Kong and Singapore are clear and specific in offering kindergarten teachers detailed requirements. In addition, this study indicates that some parents who are deeply influenced by the examination-centred culture have high expectations for their children’s academic achievements. Therefore, policy makers could help to make policies to guide parents to support play-based pedagogy.

This study adds to the existing play literature from teachers' perspectives which can assist teachers in reflecting on their own practice in 'learning through play'. By using the analysis of the material generated for this thesis, this can provide kindergarten teachers with insights and implications for reflecting upon their current teaching practices to support 'learning through play'. This includes how they integrate play in teaching and how they interact with children in play. Moreover, the analysis may be helpful to kindergarten administrators who could provide teachers with training opportunities such as visiting other kindergarten settings, offering regular workshops for communication and discussion between colleagues to learn from each other and organising routine parents' meetings to enhance their understandings of the value of play.

11.5 Limitations and recommendations for further research

By reflecting on the research, I recognise that the study has a number of limitations. Only four kindergartens (two in Mainland China, one in Hong Kong and Singapore) were selected as the four study sites. Thus, the sample size of this study was relatively small, so the analysis of this study is not generalisable to the larger population in the three territories but just in the four participating kindergartens (and maybe not even those on another occasion). For example, in Mainland China, with its large population, vast territory and unbalanced socio-economic development and educational resources, the quality of early childhood provision varies across different regions of China (Feng, 2017). Some less-developed western provinces do not take responsibility for funding and managing preschool education, which results in even more regional disparities (Feng, 2017). Also, due to time and financial constraints, the research was limited to the 12 interviewee participants who agreed to participate in the study, so it is unlikely to be representative of all the preschool teachers in each territory in general, or even perhaps in each of those settings. However, the value of the work is its specificity and richness of description and interpretation by using case studies and discourse analysis. Regarding 'Asia as method', such particularities are not limitations but useful resources and possibilities.

Secondly, as a result of the focus of this research, the core aspect was teachers, and this led to the absence of children's and parents' voices. Apart from practitioners, the early

childhood educational system also includes important stakeholders such as children, parents, and policy-makers who might have different perspectives on ‘learning through play’ and influence the practice of ‘learning through play’. For example, children’s opinions are likely to be different from adults, and they might prefer adult-initiated activities as they would have regular interaction with teachers. Thus, it would be worthwhile to investigate children’s perspectives. As a result of the limitations of time and the difficulties in gaining access to parents, I only carried out interviews with teachers to explore their perspectives and practices in play. As the analysis of this research indicates, parents’ understandings on play seem to influence teachers’ role and interaction with children in play. Therefore, research on parents’ perspectives is recommended to enrich our understanding of ‘learning through play’.

Thirdly, due to the time constraints, the observations were carried out in each setting for only ten working days, which of course could well have influenced the range and types of play that were observed. For example, I missed some potentially rich opportunities to observe practice; I was informed that the Spring Kindergarten was going to have a big party for children two weeks after I left, and children from the Hong Kong setting were going to have another outing with their teachers. This research focuses on play in a broad sense; for future research, the study of the specific type of play (e.g. outdoor play, dramatic play) is recommended.

11.6 Final conclusion

All in all, this thesis is a particular version of cross-national case study looking at the four different cases. In addition, I have suggested that this analysis is compatible with the lens of Asia as method, and mobilises the strategies of inter-referencing and critical syncretism to highlight the complex ways (in this case pedagogical) models and concepts are practised. It is argued that these postcolonial strategies rearticulated and re-worked these pedagogical ideas and practices within specific, distinct geopolitical contexts, as well as challenged the long-standing East-West binary relationship. The empirical research generated from three different, but crucially related, Asian contexts - Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore – contributes to interrogating theoretical frameworks in childhood and educational studies. This invites attention to an enriched

understanding of the theories and practices of what 'learning through play' can mean, not only in these Asian contexts, but also in other early childhood education settings.

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Appendices

Appendix I

Interview questions

Personal information

1. How long have you been a kindergarten teacher?
2. How long have you been working in the current school?
3. Do you mind to tell me your academic background (professional qualifications)?
4. What is the age of children that you teach?
5. Which activities are you in charge of?

Perceptions of ‘learning through play’

1. Do you mind to tell me how do children learn from your personal perspective?
2. Can you describe what play is like? (Can you please tell me your own beliefs towards ‘learning through play’ and how do you form such kind of beliefs?)
3. Can you please tell me your current school’s philosophy towards ‘learning through play’ and how does it affect your beliefs and practice of ‘learning through play’?
4. Can you tell me what type of play do you provide in the classroom and why?
5. Can you tell me which theories of childhood development affect you the most and how it shapes your beliefs towards ‘learning through play’?
6. Can you describe your role in play?
7. Can you please tell me your idea about Curriculum guidance around ‘learning through play’ in your country and to what extent does it affect your teaching, do you think it is feasible for practice?
8. Do you face any difficulties when enacting this approach?

Implementation of ‘learning through play’

1. How do you arrange ‘learning through play’ in the activities?
2. How do you intervene in children during the process of ‘learning through play’? (when and how do you engage in children’s play, why do you think it is the appropriate time to intervene)

3. Can you give me specific examples of your role in children's play?
4. Is there any gap between educational policies and practice towards 'learning through play', if there is any, please describe them and give your own suggestions about how to solve them?

Appendix II

Observation guide

School: _____

Date: _____

Start time: _____ End time: _____

Activities observed: _____

The number of Children _____ and Adults _____ in the classroom at the time of observation.

The focus of the observation:

1. Describe the physical environment.
2. Describe what type of instruction and what type of play.
3. Describe what teachers and children are doing in the process of 'learning through play' (How teachers organise children's activities, what strategies do teachers use, how children play and learn?).
4. Describe how teachers ask questions (what, where, when, how and why questions).
5. Describe how and when teachers intervene children during 'learning through play'.

Appendix III: Information Sheet and Consent Form

Participant Information Sheet

Title of the Research

A study of ‘learning through play’ in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore kindergartens using Asia as method.

Who will conduct the study?

The research will be conducted by Luting Zhou, a student of Manchester University in the UK.

What is the aim of the research?

The main aim of this research is to explore teachers’ understandings and implementation of ‘learning through play’ in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore.

Why have I been chosen?

You have been chosen to participate in the project as you work with kindergarten children in the selected centres. There will be 12 practitioners recruited for this study in total.

What would I be asked to do if I took part?

You will be asked to tell me about your understandings and implementation of ‘learning through play’ through a semi-structured interview around 1 hour. Also, you will be observed how you organise children’s activities and how you interact with children regarding implementing the play-based teaching strategy.

What happens to the data collected?

Luting Zhou will transcribe and analyse the data. The data will enable me to know how teachers understand and implement ‘learning through play’ in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore. Your data will be used for the completion of my PhD dissertation

to be submitted to the Manchester Institute of Education at the University of Manchester.

How is confidentiality maintained?

No-one within Luting's analysis will be identified by name. She will use pseudonyms and you will not be identified by the way you speak or the things you say. Also, the name of the centre will also be anonymous to support confidentiality. Any information you tell Luting stored on a password protected computer file.

What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide not to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.

Will I be paid for participating in the research?

No payment will be required for this research.

What is the duration of the research?

The individual interview will last for around 1 hour and the observation will last around two weeks.

Where will the research be conducted?

The interview will take place in a quiet space at the kindergarten you work, and the observation will be conducted at the kindergarten as well.

Will the outcomes of the research be published?

The outcomes of the research may be published in academic journals and in the form of PhD thesis.

Criminal Records Check

Luting Zhou has enhanced DBS clearance.

Contact for further information

If you would like any more information about the project please email me. My email address is luting.zhou@manchester.ac.uk. Alternatively, please contact my supervisor Erica.burman@manchester.ac.uk.

What if something goes wrong?

If anything goes wrong, please contact Luting Zhou in the first instance. Alternatively, you may wish to speak with Luting Zhou's supervisor, Erica Burman Erica.burman@manchester.ac.uk.

If there are any issues regarding this research that you would prefer not to discuss with Luting or her supervisor, please contact the Research Practice and Governance Co-ordinator by either writing to 'The Research Practice and Governance Co-ordinator, Research Office, Christie Building, The University of Manchester, Oxford Road, Manchester M13 9PL, by emailing: Research-Governance@manchester.ac.uk., or by telephoning 0161 275 7583 or 275 8093.

Please note that the title of this thesis was changed after ethical approval was gained and the interviews were conducted – and in response to the examiners' feedback.

A letter to parents

Dear parents

My name is Luting Zhou, the second year PhD student of University of Manchester. My research topic is a study of 'learning through play' in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore kindergartens. This study aims to explore preschool teachers' perspectives on play and their understandings of their roles of play in children's learning process. It focuses on preschool teachers' perceptions about 'learning through play' and how they enact 'learning through play' in classroom practices.

During the process of conducting my research, my role is to collect data of the interaction between teachers and children. Specially, I will focus on teachers' perceptions of 'learning through play' and how they enact this teaching approach. To collect data, I would like to observe your child's activities during their learning process.

I will keep you informed of how my research is going on through the project. I hope that my research would be of value to you and your child. In addition, the research will be kept confidential of your children's information. It is also necessary for you to withdraw from my research if you feel uncomfortable with it.

Please read this letter with your child and discuss any questions that may have. I do appreciate your time reading this letter and please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or interests of my research. This is my Email address:

Luting.zhou@postgrad.manchester.ac.uk

Best wishes

Luting Zhou

A study of ‘learning through play’ in Mainland China, Hong Kong and Singapore kindergartens using Asia as method

CONSENT FORM

If you are happy to participate please complete and sign the consent form below

I confirm that I have read the attached information sheet on the above study and have had the opportunity to consider the information and ask questions and had these answered satisfactorily.	
I understand that my participation in the study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.	
I understand that the interviews will be audio -recorded.	
I agree to the use of anonymous quotes	
I agree that any data collected may be published in anonymous form in academic books or journals.	

I agree to take part in the above project

Name of participant

Date

Signature

Name of person taking consent

Date

Signature

Please note that the title of this thesis was changed after ethical approval was gained and the interviews were conducted – and in response to the examiners’ feedback.

Appendix IV

Ethical Approval



The University of Manchester

Environment, Education and Development School Panel PGR

School for Environment, Education and Development
Humanities Bridgeford Street 1.17

The University of Manchester

Manchester

M13 9PL

Email: PGR.ethics.seed@manchester.ac.uk

Ref: 2017-2327-3768

22/08/2017

Dear Miss Luting Zhou, , Prof Erica Buman

Study Title: A Comparative Study around Learning Through Play

Thank you for submitting your ethics application for the project named above.

I have formally 'logged' your application on the Ethical Review Manager system (ERM). Please note, this email does not imply approval for your research from the School Ethics Committee. By submitting the project via ERM, you are signalling that your application has been fully reviewed and approved by the supervisor and/or programme director.

For those undertaking research requiring a DBS Certificate: As you have now completed your ethical application if required a colleague at the University of Manchester will be in touch for you to undertake a DBS check. Please note that you do not have DBS approval until you have received a DBS Certificate completed by the University of Manchester, or you are an MA Teach First student who holds a DBS certificate for your current teaching role.

If anything untoward happens during your research or any changes take place then please inform your supervisor and/or programme director immediately.

This email is confirmation that your low risk Ethical Approval application has been safely logged in ERM.

Please let us know if you have any additional queries by emailing: PGR.ethics.seed@manchester.ac.uk

Yours sincerely,

Dr Sarah Marie Hall

Environment, Education and Development School Panel PGR

Appendix V

Example of interview transcription

I: Do you mind telling me how do children learn and play in your personal perspective?

TA: We used to teach children by using textbooks. For example, if the current season is winter, then we teach children things about winter from textbooks. Maybe we did not consider what children really needed at that time. We used to think children aged 3-6 year old might not know what they should learn, so we took it for granted to teach what we thought children needed at this age. We used to think learning goals designed by us were right, and we designed our curriculum based on these kinds of thoughts.

Afterwards, we found that we always paid attention to children who were either actively answering teachers' questions or who were noisy in the classroom; we paid little attention to children who were neither active nor noisy in the classroom. When we were first introduced to Anji play, we were confused about these questions: is there no need for teachers to deliver lessons, how would we transmit knowledge and what on earth will children learn?

Cheng (Anji creator) let us 'close your mouth, hold your hands, open your eyes and prick up your ears' to observe what the children were really doing. In the past, I thought children who answered teachers' questions actively in the classroom were the good kids. After 'speak less and observe more', nowadays, I find children are so great, so smart, and so amazing. In the past, what we observed were: this kid was very active in the classroom or this kid was very clever or this kid was very noisy. We ignored the good points of the noisy children. At the same time, we ignored the bad points of children who were regarded as good kids by answering teachers' questions actively. In Anji play, we observe children fully when they play in the playground. We notice individual differences as we do not expect that children should achieve certain things from play. We think this kind of 'no rush' perspective makes us understand more about how children learn and play. I think kindergarten children learn from practice. They forget what they learn quickly if the knowledge is just transmitted by teachers directly.

Appendix VI

Example of interview (Chinese)

我：你自己对于小朋友的学习、玩以及游戏是什么看法？

TA：我是觉得就是，我们也接触过以前传统的这样子的这种教育的模式。比如课程是老师书本里面的，比如说今天就是冬天，冬天的内容，那我们就来学习冬天这样的东西。可能我们没有基于考虑孩子他真正在这个时间需要的是什么东西，这个是我们之前永远不会这样去考虑的。我觉得老师我们会有目标呀我觉得我们的目标是对的，我们觉得孩子应该在这个时间学什么东西。因为孩子可能他不太会去，不太能够知道，噢，我需要学什么东西。那么以前，我们可能没有从他年龄段考虑。从他现在需要那种知识点考虑，然后去推进它的课程。然后我们会发现在课堂当中永远就是看到几个孩子，就是那些上课非常积极回答你的孩子，然后其他就是坐那边要么就来咕咕的或者索性很吵的，我们也能关注到。但是中间这种灰色地带确实是不太关注到的，他也不吵也不闹，然后你又不是能怎么样。然后那几个吵的反正你也关注的多一点，让他们要坐在旁边或者坐在老师旁边啊这样子。然后慢慢的其实一开始我们那个安吉游戏开展嘛，我们也觉得难道不需要课了吗？难道我们不需要跟孩子们上课，那么这些知识怎么教怎孩子们到底在学什么东西？

所以那个程老师让我们要管住自己的嘴巴，要去睁大眼睛看到底看看孩子们在干什么。那么我觉得以前孩子在我们眼里面没有现在我们看到了这么伟大，这么聪明，这么厉害。这是我自己真的切实的感受。因为以前我们可能看到就是，噢，这个孩子上课很积极，或者说很聪明。噢，这孩子真吵诶，就是我们看不到吵的孩子他也有优点。然后这些上课回答很积极的小朋友，其实他也有一些不太那个地方。比如说他与同伴之间的交往可能同学们不太喜欢，孩子们不太喜欢跟他一起玩。我们就看不到。那么我们在游戏场的时候，我们就会放手地去观察这些孩子！他们的个体差异到底在哪里。每个人的优势在哪里，每个人的不足在什么地方。那么我们因为我们放慢了脚步，我们也不急着说在这个时间段，我一定要他掌握什么东西，所以我们可能就会放慢脚步去观察去看，那这样就能够让我更了

解到孩子他是怎么学习的。其实我觉得孩子他是 如果说像幼儿园的孩子，我们一味地把这些知识传输给它，其实不是他自己，自己习得的话，如果不是他在尝试当中自己习得的话，这个经验会慢慢会遗忘掉的。

Appendix VII

A fairy tale-based programme at Spring Kindergarten

Name of play centre	Description
The Wizard of Oz	Children perform the characters in Wizard of Oz to complete various challenging tasks while practising fine and motor skills.
Monkeys Fish the Moon	Children use nets to take balls out of the water.
Little Red Riding Hood	Children participate in a role-play game based on the Little Red Riding Hood fairy tale.
Magic Pen Maliang	Children use different kinds of pens, such as brush pens, to make artwork.
Calabash Brothers	Children develop jumping skills to reach the calabash plants, inspired by the Calabash cartoon series which is popular in China.
The Little Mermaid	Children dress up as princes and princesses to attend a ball and during the ball children blow soap bubbles. These activities are inspired by the Disney movie called The Little Mermaid.
Balala the Fairies	Children dress up and choose their favourite music to dance.
Kung Fu Panda	Children use tyres and ladders to construct different kinds of structures, and also take part in a boxing game. These activities are based on the Kung Fu Panda movies.
Angry Birds	Children use paper to represent the Angry Birds Toons animation series.
Mulan	Children perform the characters in the Chinese fairy tale, Mulan.
The Tale of the Fisherman and the Fish	Children play with water and sand.
Boonie Bears	Children go through a challenging trail based on the Chinese animated series Boonie Bears.