



Parents' and Teachers' Attitudes to Play and Drama in Education in Early Years Classrooms in Jiangsu Province, China

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| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
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| <p>Received: 19 June 2017 Revised: 24 February 2017 Accepted: 20 May 2017 online: 22 May 2019</p> | <p>Set against the background of the Chinese government's commitment to universalise early childhood educational provision, this exploratory study investigated the value attributed to play and drama-based teaching and learning in ECE from the perspectives of parents, teachers and Head Teachers from Suzhou in Jiangsu Province. We applied content and statistical analyses on the search results, and the findings indicate that while parents expressed interest in less regimented and more active, play-based approaches to education in their children's classrooms, broader societal and philosophical influences about the purposes of education prevail, and they are concerned about their children falling behind in a highly competitive education system. Teachers and Head Teachers are similarly aware of the value of play in young children's development, but lack the knowledge, skills and resources to implement a play-based approach to teaching and learning in their classrooms. The implications of the modernisation project in early childhood education in China is discussed.</p> |
| <p>KEYWORDS Early Years Education Play-based learning Drama in Education Chinese education system</p> | |

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Early Childhood Education in a Chinese Context

This inquiry was set against the backdrop of one of the most pressurized education systems in the world (Lucenta, 2012). In a climate of expectation and pressure from parents on children to succeed from very early in their lives (Wang, 2014), 'Rote memorization, listening and copying' are key features of Chinese education (Thakkar, 2011, p. 53). Emphasising 'academic achievement and promotion for the most talented, (making) learning a heavy burden and (killing) a love of learning for learning's sake' (Paine & Fang, 2006, p. 282), Chinese education culminates in the Gaokao or National College Entrance Examination, which it is claimed is 'not just a test, but the beginning or end of a student's future' (Lucenta, 2012, p. 76). The pressure is extreme, and there are far fewer university places available than numbers of students taking the examination (Liang, 2010; Gu & Magazniner, 2016). Claimed to reward 'a special type of student: very strong memory; very strong logical and analytical ability; little imagination; little desire to question authority' (Jackson, 2015), everyone has to take this exam if they want to go to university. The Gaokao is seen as having a profound impact on students' life chances and is a gateway to opportunity 'in a country where a degree is essential for a good job' (Wong, 2015).

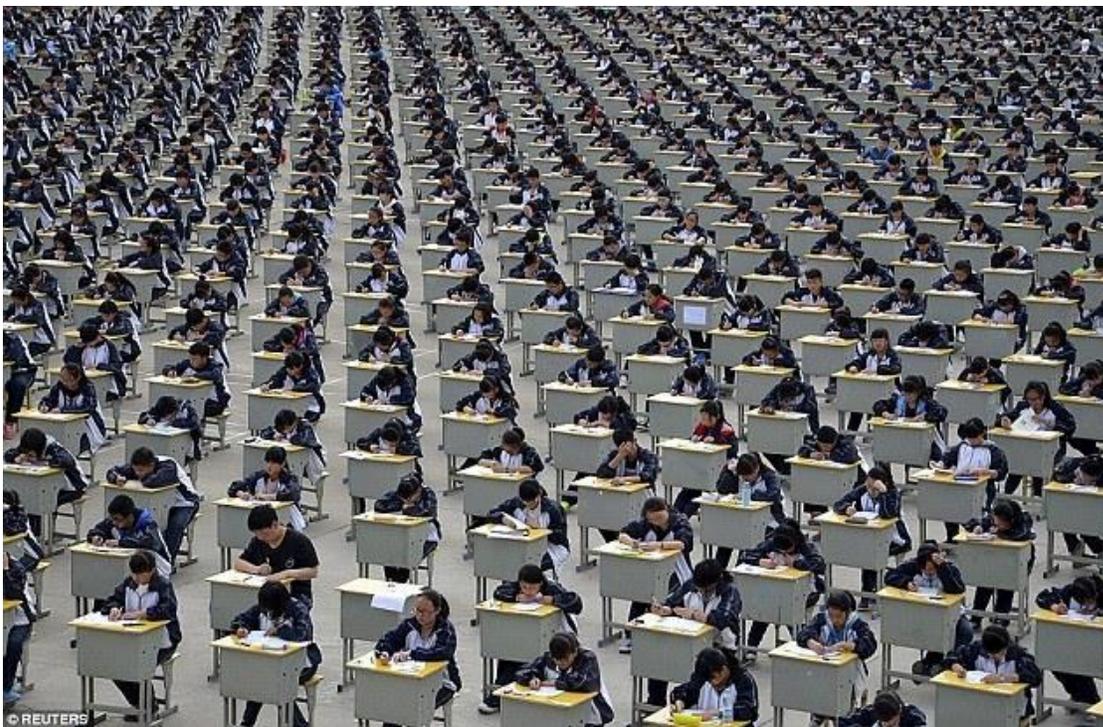


Figure 1: Students sitting the Gaokao (Chan & Chow, 2015)

China faces additional challenges in its education system relating to under resourcing in rural areas, inadequate teacher qualifications, with a third of teachers and Head Teachers qualified to high school level or below (Ministry of Education, 2013), and unregulated private practices, particularly in preschool education. Following the trend internationally, China has started to reform its early childhood provision in an effort to revitalize its education sector overall and improve children's readiness for school and success in later life. Researchers in China are calling for greater investment in the early stages of children's schooling to help increase access to Higher Education for all (Xie, 2015; Weiyi, 2015), and the Chinese government has committed 50 billion Yuan to transform early childhood education (ECE) (Chen, 2015). It is acknowledged that ECE lasts a life time; positive experiences can switch children 'on' to learning, and negative experiences can have detrimental effects on their subsequent learning, damaging children's curiosity and motivation, and limiting their creative, imaginative and entrepreneurial potential in later life (O'Sullivan and Price, 2016). ECE is not a new phenomenon in China, and some early commentators have argued that it is not talent that makes a difference to a person's life chances, but participation in ECE (Xingchu, 1983). However, it is recognised that in reforming China's ECE sector, public feelings should be respected, and widespread support and acknowledgement for these reforms should first be obtained (Yingqi, 2008). Recognising that school is but one element of the learning environment that is the larger society, Webe (1978) argued that education in China was an integral part of the process of revolutionary social change, and consequently required mass involvement. Li *et al.* (2011) recognize that top down reforms employing imported ideas has resulted in a significant policy-practice gap where teachers are aware of Western style models but there is little evidence of them in teachers' practices. They argue that curriculum reform must take into consideration the culture, language, teachers' and parents' opinions, available resources and the prevailing education system. In recognising that ECE in China is strongly influenced by sociocultural changes, Zhu and Zhang (2008) suggest the evolvement of a hybrid of traditional, communist and Western cultures in order to promote meaningful reform and development.

Despite multiple waves of reform in China since the 1980s to transform ECE 'into a Western-style, progressive model' (Li *et al.*, 2011), little attention has been paid to the area of early years pedagogy and learning through play. A recent study comparing Chinese and German children's perceptions of play in kindergartens found that the Chinese children remembered academic learning content while the German children associated learning with play and

remembered more play events (Wu, 2015). Wu's findings highlight a significant difference between these two groups of children's understanding of the relationship between play and learning, and she advocates a play-based pedagogy, which integrates learning elements in a play-oriented curriculum (Wu, 2015). Three pioneers of early childhood education in China, Xingzhi Dao (1891-1946), Xuemen Zhang (1891-1973), and Heqin Chen (1892-1982) recognised the importance of play, creativity and 'learning by doing' in young children's development many years ago (O'Sullivan and Price, 2016). And despite the fact that the importance of play and active learning in an integrated curriculum was mentioned in the *Kindergarten Work Regulations and Procedures* issued by the National Education Committee of the People's Republic of China in 1989 (Zhu & Zhang, 2008), little attention has been paid to this area in policy or practice until relatively recently. In the *Early Learning and Development Guidelines for Children Aged 3 to 6 Years* (Ministry of Education, 2013), the arts have been included as one of five areas of study for kindergarten teachers, and are listed as one of the five learning domains for children (Health, Language and Early Literacy, Social Development, Sciences, including Mathematical Learning, and Arts). The *Early Learning and Development Guidelines* (ELDG) have been designed to support the implementation of the *National Outline for Medium and Long Term-Educational Reform and Development (2010-2020)* (China State Council, 2010) and the *State Council's Commentary on the Development of Contemporary Preschool Education* (GUO FA, 2010, No.41). The ELDG provides guidance to kindergarten teachers and parents on educational practices that promote the development of the whole child. They are forward looking in identifying that children learn through play and advise teachers not to take curriculum content from primary school grades, highlighting that intensive skills training is inappropriate for young children. They offer a potentially rich and stimulating curriculum for young learners, in an approach which suggests that children take the lead in creative and imaginative exploration.

Learning through Play and Drama

It is acknowledged worldwide that play in ECE is a key facet of quality classroom provision, and notwithstanding the debate around definitions and contested discourses about different forms of play (Wood, 2014; Aras, 2016), there is universal support for the role of play in young children's development and learning. However, Vong (2012) testifies that while play as an educational concept has entered many kindergartens in China, it has not yet become a core

idea or prioritized as a teaching and learning process. Hu and Szente (2009) found that kindergarten teachers are highly motivated, enthusiastic and well trained in encouraging active participation in large classrooms, but note that pressure caused by academic competition leads parents to prioritise memorization of songs and poems, rather than learning through play. In addition, Chinese early years teachers lack skill, experience and confidence in facilitating learning opportunities through play, and are strongly influenced by the Confucian principles of scholarship, rote learning and academic progress. In referring to what she calls a 'traditional teaching culture', Cheng (2012) queries the extent to which a play-based pedagogy can be achieved in China in a curriculum with considerable external prescriptive objectives.

This study was interested in examining the extent to which a policy-practice divide is operational in relation to teachers' and parents' perspectives on implementing a play-based, active learning curriculum in ECE classrooms. It hypothesized that Drama in Education as a creative and structured play-based pedagogy, could occupy a middle ground between (i) direct academic instruction within a drill and practice tradition, and (ii) an as yet weakly evidenced play-based approach in China. Drama in Education provides structured pathways to learning for all learners in an inclusive environment, using a playful, creative, exploratory and participatory pedagogy with defined content knowledge. It has the potential to cultivate children's cognitive and non-cognitive skills within the framework of the *Child Friendly Kindergarten Curriculum* (CFKC) and the ELDG (O'Sullivan and Price, 2016). Drama in Education is a play-based pedagogy which supports learning across disciplines including literacy, mathematics and science (Braund, 2015; Hui *et al.*, 2015; Tam, 2010; Coltman, 2003; Erdogan & Baran, 2009; Smyth & Smyth, 2009). A Drama in Education approach acknowledges the centrality of language to expression, which is particularly important in the context of the relationship between oral language development and future ability in reading, academic achievement and social disposition (Greenfader & Brouillette, 2013). Incorporating drama strategies into storytelling has been found to improve students' abilities to remember details and form a connection to the text, enabling advanced levels of sophisticated thinking to occur (Rose *et al.*, 2000; Wright *et al.*, 2008).

The current study

Set in the city of Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, this study sought to ascertain the level of knowledge, skills and attitudes of teachers and Head Teachers to play-based pedagogies in their ECE classrooms, and to solicit parent attitudes towards a novel teaching and learning approach in China using the elements of play, make-believe, story and drama to create a structured and experiential teaching and learning approach.

Methods

This small-scale exploratory study adopted a mixed-methods approach, using content and statistical analyses on the search results in an inductive process (Patton, 1990). Following initial coding, tentative categories were later analysed at a deeper level to generate a number of themes. Qualitative data representing respondents' viewpoints are directly quoted. The study operated in accordance with the European Early Childhood Educational Research Association's ethical code and principles (Bertram, 2016), and informed consent was received from participants. Ethical approval was received from The School of Education in Trinity College Dublin, Ireland and respondents' names and identities have been changed.

An online semi-structured questionnaire was made available to Chinese parents of young children in the local public school system. Parents were invited to share their opinions on the value of play in educational settings and as a learning medium. Definitions of key terms and examples were provided with all questions. Invitations to participate were written in Mandarin and published in the local newspaper, a local newsletter and also placed on the research school's noticeboard. An online instrument was preferred over the traditional survey owing to access issues and language barriers. Li & Wang (2008) report that the internet has increasingly become the preferred means of information exchange in China, highlighting the availability of broadband and the anonymous nature of the internet in encouraging people to express their opinions freely as key advantages for its use in educational research. An online semi-structured questionnaire was completed by 5 Chinese Head Teachers in local public schools exploring their knowledge and practices in relation to play and Drama in Education. Contact was initially established with one Head Teacher, who sent the survey link to her network of colleagues. All respondents were practicing, in-service school Heads. A Chinese national fluent in English translated data from both questionnaires.

6 self-selecting Chinese parents responded to an advertisement (published in Mandarin in the local newspaper) to participate in a semi-structured individual interview of approximately 30 minutes duration, about their knowledge and opinions of play and drama in ECE. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. 3 of the parents had some English and a translator was present at all interviews. Table 1 summarises the respondents' profiles.

Table 1

| Parent Name | Age of Parent | Education Level | Profession | Family |
|-------------|---------------|-------------------|--|-----------------------------------|
| Ling | 29 | University | Business Administrator | Mother to a 26 month old daughter |
| Wu | 32 | University | English Teacher | Mother to a 33 month old daughter |
| Mei | 33 | Community College | Secretary | Mother to a 7 year old son |
| Yufeng | 34 | Community College | Secretary | Mother to 25 month old twin boys |
| Fen | 36 | University | Elementary Teacher /High School Councillor | Mother to a 4 year old son |
| Amber | 37 | University | Human Resources | Mother to a 9 year old son |

Finally, 3 Chinese early years teachers participated in a pre- and post-demonstration lesson focus group interview about their knowledge, practices and attitudes towards play and drama-based learning. The teachers were invited to observe a 30-minute exemplar lesson based on a Drama in Education approach (*Goldilocks and the Three Bears*), which was conducted in one of the teacher's classes. A follow up focus group interview was held shortly after the lesson to critically appraise the approach and discuss whether a Drama in Education method could be applied in a Chinese context. Both interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. All of the teachers spoke English and a translator was available if required. Jenny had been teaching for 18 years, and qualified after a 2-year training program.

Susie has been teaching for 12 years, and Joy for 9 years. Both Susie and Joy qualified after 3 year training programs. These teachers had experience of working in the public school system, but at the time of the study (2015) were working in the same international school as one of the researchers. All 3 stated that they had not received any CPD in the area of play while working in the public school system, but had attended a one-day International Baccalaureate training course on play-based learning in 2011 after having moved to the international school.

Results

Parent Survey Data

51 respondents completed the online parent survey. A majority of respondents (31) were parents of children aged between 3-6 years. Most parents (91.8%) reported that their child had opportunities to play at home, with 76.6% indicating opportunities to play every day. A combination of indoor and outdoor play was reported (68.9%); with 31.1% citing mostly indoor play, and no respondent selecting the option of mostly outdoor play. A significant majority of children have play opportunities at school or at day-care (84%). Over a third of parents (36.4%) stated that their children play mostly with other children, while 40.9% play with parents, and 22.7% play mostly on their own. A majority of parents agreed that play is essential and may help in the social, emotional and personal development of their child, positively impacting on cognition and learning (see Figures 1-4).

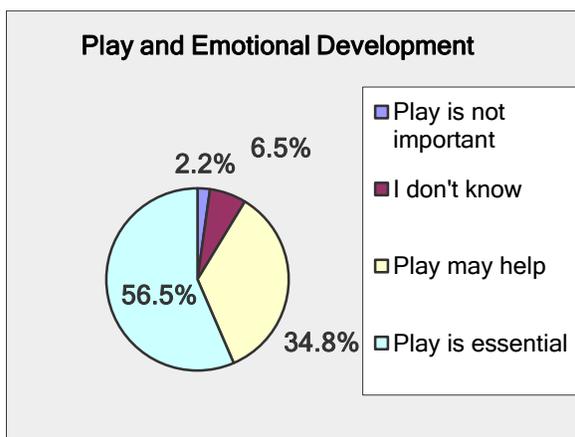


Figure 2: Play and emotional development

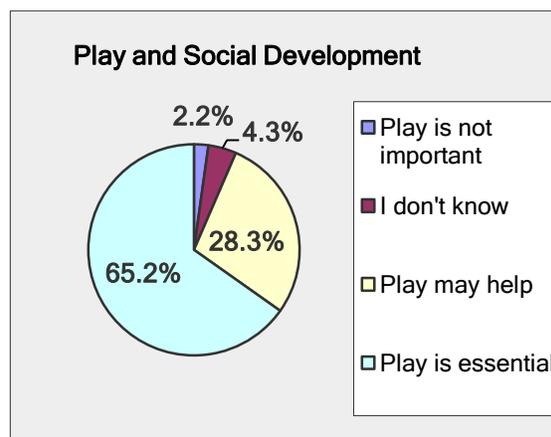


Figure 3: Play and social development

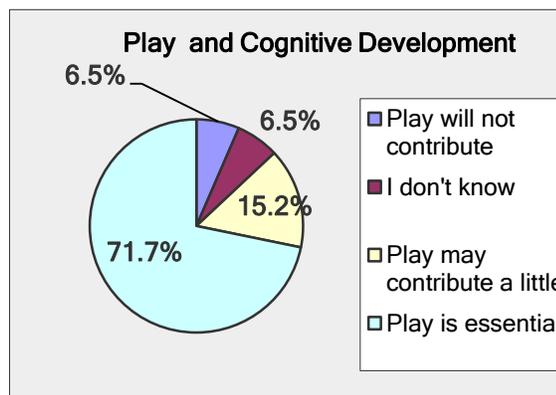
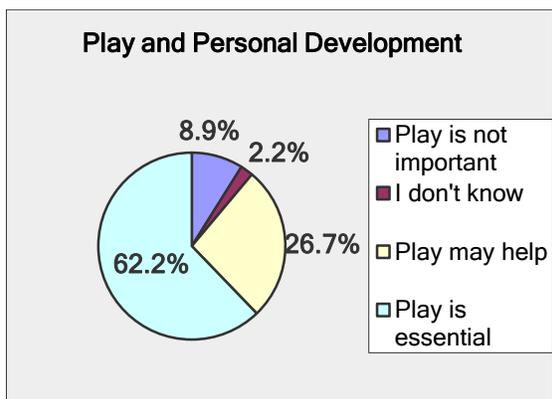


Figure 4: Play and personal development

Figure 5: Play and cognitive development

Parents reported that a combination of rote and collaborative learning is the most effective way their child learns (67%), with 13% selecting rote only and 14% indicating collaborative learning only. Whilst the majority affirmed the positive role of play in their child's holistic development, they suggested that play in school should happen only at break times or once or twice a week. When introduced to a detailed practical example of using the story of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* to demonstrate the potential of a structured play-based method to teaching mathematics called Drama in Education, over 84% indicated a positive interest in this approach in their child's education.

Head Teacher Survey Data

5 Heads completed the online survey. All affirmed that play is on the timetable for children in the early years classes at their schools. Children have opportunities to play indoors and outdoors, with an emphasis on both recreational and instructional play. 4 Heads supported the use of socio-dramatic play in the early years, acknowledging that play is beneficial for the social, emotional, personal and cognitive development of children, and 3 reported that they would expect constructive play, exploratory play, manipulative play, physical play and games with rules to be used in their ECE teachers' classrooms. However, all respondents insisted that young pupils should experience the curriculum and their learning through direct teacher instruction.

In relation to their attitude to teacher training in play pedagogy, all expressed a belief that teachers do not need a high level of pedagogical knowledge in the area of play. When asked about planning for play, only one indicated that play can be planned for, with most referring to it as a spontaneous activity. Additional comments suggested that ‘孩子的主要课程比游戏更重要。学术的主题是我们如何评估孩子们。’ *The core subjects are more important. It is how the children are assessed*’ (PT2, March 17th 2015); ‘游戏过程中,孩子应该成为游戏的主体,教师的职责是从旁观察,确保孩子从游戏中充分体验和学习。’ *I think there are more important things to learn in training. Teachers need to monitor the play, but the children will be the ones playing*’ (PT4, April 8th 2015). However, one Head noted that ‘孩子成为教学的主导,教师了解孩子的需求从而安排教学材料。The children tell us what to do and we provide the materials. We must open our minds to the children’ (PT5, March 19th 2015).

Drama in education is not a strategy or pedagogy that is currently used in their schools, with only 2 noting that it may be useful in conjunction with other teaching strategies. This is in contrast to the parent data where 84% expressed interest in a Drama in Education play-based approach. Some reservations about this method emerged in the Heads’ comments, largely relating to large class sizes and space: ‘孩子的数量太多会成为一个难题。With too many children, this is difficult’ (PT1, April 7th 2015). Another noted that ‘太多孩子会导致教学空间的缺乏。There are too many children to do it. There is not enough space’ (PT5, March 19th 2015).

Parent Interview Data

Data from the 6 parent interviews is presented under three themes: cultural pressure; conflicting perceptions of the Chinese public education system; and perceptions of a Drama in Education teaching and learning approach.

(1) Cultural Pressure

The word ‘pressure’ emerged throughout the data, relating particularly to a culture of competition amongst parents. For example, Wu noted that parents tend to make their children learn poetry, songs and sentences to ‘amaze people’ (February 13th 2015), without them

understanding their true meaning. Ling agreed, observing that parents routinely compare what their child knows against the knowledge of other children. The dominant source of pressure appeared to be the family unit, with Ling observing that 'we [parents] put a lot of hopes and expectations on them ... so that they could be ... get more achievements. They could be someone really important. Famous or something. I can't say it's not right' (February 20th 2015). This sentiment is echoed by Amber, who believes that 'most Chinese parents... they put too much wish, personal wish on a kid. The little kid' (March 16th 2015). The notion of passivity as a desirable trait among children was also evident. Ling reported that 70-80% of Chinese parents would prefer a child who does not ask many questions and accepts what they are told.

The data reveal that worries about the future and a desire for children to succeed leads parents to place high expectations on their child. Amber noted that her son's classmates have all of their free time scheduled around extra-curricular classes and 'have few times playing' as a result (March 16th 2015). When asked why this might be, she replied that it is 'Success. They need success. They want family to be success and all they wish out on the little kid. They don't think he human' (March 16th 2015). She shared a story about her son's 7-year-old friend who wished he could retire like his grandfather because of the pressure he feels. In contrast, while Mei's interview reflected her concerns about the 'strict examinations' her First Grade son will need to undertake to enter high school and university (March 4th 2015), she accepted this pressure as a regrettable but necessary feature of Chinese life. When asked whether it is important that he participates in art and music lessons available at his school, she shook her head and replied 'I don't think so', and highlighted the importance of Science, English and Mathematics which will help him to gain entry to university.

The data reveal a certain amount of pressure inherent in the schooling system itself, with Fen noting 'I don't want my son in the future, he just like A or B or C or D, one of the alphabet. You know, I want him to be him. He is special, he is unique' (March 24th 2015). However, all respondents expressed conflicting opinions during their interviews. On the one hand, they appeared to espouse a child-centred approach to education, but on the other, they were keenly aware of the competitive nature of the education system. Ling noted that in the 1970s and '80s, 'not every Chinese child had the right to go to school and to do schooling, to have money, a chance to get education, to get higher education', and she argued that there is an expectation on students now to make the most of the opportunities they have (February 20th

2015). The competitive nature of parents, coupled with exam expectations, were cited as reasons why 'In the year of 2015, in my opinion most of the Chinese parents would prefer more direct instruction, instead of spending a lot of time to make some realise, to find out the nature' (Ling, February 20th 2015). She added that in 10 to 30 years time, Chinese parents might realise that allowing children to inquire for themselves is a better way of learning. Fen echoed this sentiment strongly. In discussing a creative versus the traditional Chinese approach to teaching, she stated:

I am sure in the future they [Chinese parents] will like it, but right now they only think this [the current system] is the best way for them. So it needs time to make them to realize, and at the end, they will find something we hold for so many years is totally wrong. I am sure one day they will be here with me, but it just needs time. (Fen, March 24th 2015)

She also noted 'It's already 2015. If your main goal is to sending your kids to stand on the international stage, you have to do some changes at the very beginning' (March 24th 2015). Several respondents connected these 'changes' to better teacher education. There was evidence that the larger socio-historical, political and economic realities dominated the perspectives of this cohort of respondents, with several of them considering the possibilities of a different mentality amongst parents in the future: but they were unanimous that such thoughts and aspirations are not for now.

Conflicts between traditional values and attitudes to children, and cultural expectations were also evident in comments relating to gender, but these were less evident in the data than had been anticipated. Only two parents explicitly raised the theme of gender. Amber shared marked gender-related expectations. She reported that traditionally, the family, particularly grandparents, 'do everything ... cooking for him, service to him' (March 16th 2015). When asked more about this, she reported that 'if he [the child] is a boy, I really wish him getting independent as soon as possible but if he is a girl, maybe the parents and the family give more and more warm and love' (March 16th 2015). Clarifying that she would show more 'smile and gentle' to a girl, she suggested that this is because 'he is a son; he has a independent logic and mind. It's totally different than a girl' (March 16th 2015). She also expects her son to be a 'master of the maths' because he is a boy. Fen held similar perspectives reporting that 'Sometimes he [my son] is still naughty, but he is a boy' (March 24th 2016). While 2 parents expressed an image of their child in terms of gender roles, Wu reported an alternative perspective, possibly alluding to the impact of the *One Child Policy*:

I think the most important thing is you can't treat them like kid. You have to treat them as adult. You have to believe that they have their own opinion... The longer you treat her like a baby, the more difficult you stop that. So that's why a lot of Chinese kids are so childish when they are old enough. They still think they are young in the family. (February 13th 2015)

(2) The Chinese Public Education System and Conflicting Perceptions

There was consensus among 4 of the 6 parents that the current public education system is based on the principle that the teachers tell their child what they need to know, typically being taught just one way of doing something, with few opportunities to think independently. Fen likened the system to children being placed in a 'square box' where non-conformity is not acceptable (March 24th 2015). Wu reported that Chinese children do not get opportunities to think and talk for themselves; rather, they are expected to accept what they are told. Yufeng suggested that the teacher should be 'a mentor, guiding understandings', and she was critical of the approach in Chinese schools where 'They always have the standard answer. Most Chinese education seems just tell them to do one thing by the one way... never have the option to discover by themselves' (Yufeng, March 16th 2015). Mei who placed a question mark above the place of creativity in the public education system supported this. She believed that children should 'study in the creative way their whole life' (March 4th 2015), but acknowledged that this was at odds with the expectations of the Chinese education system: 'The answer for examinations are very standard answers. And you cannot give a very creative one'. However, she believed that her son being able to think for himself 'will help him with his life', but she expressed the opinion that teachers in the local system do not value independent thought: 'I hope that in the future children in local school can think by themselves, not a teacher say "Oh what you do". I don't like when teacher control students. I hope children can control by themselves' (Mei, March 4th 2015). Ling indicated that the children should realise knowledge by themselves instead of being told what they should know: 'They have the curiosity, that way much better than a children can memorise all the math' (February 20th 2015). There was strong consensus amongst parent interviewees of the importance of nurturing the child as an individual rather than viewing him/her as a component in the system. At odds with the traditional notion of children passively accepting what they are told, Yufeng hoped that her child will grow to 'train himself. He can seek and find his way to help himself' (February 20th 2015). She reinforced the importance of individuality by stating that

'you are a parent, you are yourself, the child is the child' (Yufeng, February 20th 2015), an idea also expressed by Ling who noted that children are their own people, and not the 'belongings' of the parent (February 20th 2015). Expressing a desire for a more humanistic system than the current model, Fen suggested that teaching in the local education system should be more 'from the heart' (March 24th 2015).

The same degree of internal conflict was evident in this discussion however, where on the one hand Wu, for example, compared China to 'other countries', noting that elsewhere educators guide students 'step by step' in their learning, whereas in China, the children are 'rush' (February 13th 2015). But on the other hand, she expressed a worry that if her child spends one week learning to count from 0-5, and other children can count from 0-60, 'this will influence their future learning' (Wu, February 13th 2015). Despite her knowledge and declared empathy with Western approaches, Wu's comments reveal her concern about an experiential approach to learning, rather than pushing ahead to keep pace with others in China. Data from 5 of the 6 parents revealed a similar tension between wanting to have a more child-centred approach but experiencing a genuine fear of falling behind in the Chinese education system, which parents believed would be detrimental to their child's future. All agreed that academic success is expected from the very beginning of their schooling.

(3) Perceptions of a Drama in Education Approach

A Drama in Education approach was described to the parents using an exemplar lesson. All reported being receptive to this way of teaching, and attributed their positivity and enthusiasm towards it as a reflection of its attempt to break away from more traditional practices of children being told what to think and do, and enabling them to inquire collaboratively. Yufeng noted:

For my personality, I like to get the different answers. So if you choose through 3 different ways to indicate, to teach them, for me would be much more acceptable because not everything just have one way to do. So they can discover, they can find their own solution to solve the problem. (March 2nd 2015)

This perspective was shared by Ling; 'I think it is better that you could group them into do different tasks. Because it is better that they found out or they realised "Oh, this is what it is!" than you tell her "It is what it is" ' (February 20th 2015). Fen agreed that a collaborative,

playful approach such as Drama in Education is 'how I would like to teach my son' (March 24th 2015). There was a feeling that adopting a creative approach could better sustain the interest of their child. Mei noted that 'if teacher can play some games, some interesting things I think, the boys can focus on it long time' (March 4th 2015). Similarly, Wu commented that a creative and structured approach such as Drama in Education would maintain the interest of the children and 'put the knowledge in the brain' rather than telling the children to learn something (February 13th 2015). Wu also noted however, that other Chinese parents might view such an approach as a 'waste of time' worrying that their children 'aren't learning enough' (February 13th 2015). While receptivity was expressed towards a new approach to learning, more traditional understandings of play emerged consistently throughout the data, with several referring to the tradition of memorisation as a means of play and learning. Yufeng noted that her 25-month-old twin boys have been practicing memorisation of numbers with their grandmother, but commented that 'I don't think it's understanding, they just keep learning, keep copying' (March 2nd 2015).

Teacher Interview Data

Data from the teacher focus group interviews is presented under four themes: the role of play in early years classes; play in the public school system; perceptions of a Drama in Education teaching and learning approach; and teacher training and professional development.

(1) The role of play in early years classes

There is evidence of a strong culture of play in the respective practices of the three interviewed teachers, which is not surprising, considering they were working in an international school. Role-play, free play and play with choices were mentioned.

If, for example, if we teach them a story, tell them a story, then we play the role-play, and we play for that game. Somebody act this one, somebody act this one, they can choose. I wanna be mom, I wanna be grandma, I wanna be the wolf, then somebody be the audience. (Jenny, March 30th 2015)

We can give everybody a different character, if anybody didn't get a character maybe they can all read a story together or do the action together, be the audience, or they do different time.

Second time. (Joy, March 30th 2015)

The data suggest that play is used within lessons such as Chinese language instruction in order to further learning. All three expressed an understanding of the importance of play in the educational development of young children. Jenny and Susie spoke about the importance of play for socialisation while Joy discussed the place of play in language acquisition. She noted that play is 'especially (important) for the international school. Some kids they don't have that language so use action' (March 30th 2015). Joy mentioned the importance of choice within play, providing free-play opportunities to the class within the context of clear rules and guidance. This was somewhat at odds with Jenny, who only allows free play for those children who have finished their work:

Sometimes if they finish the activity so quickly, so neatly, so nicely, so faster, then they can free play. Looks like we praise them: 'You did a great job, you have free play. Because you very slow, you have no time play'. So for the kids, if they do nicely, quickly and listen carefully, focus on the lesson, they have time to play. (Jenny, March 30th 2015)

One challenge associated with using play was the issue of classroom management. Jenny reported that 'sometimes, is very hard to control the play' (March 30th 2015). Susie agreed, stating that 'if lots of children then hard to control' (April 2nd 2015). Joy noted that once 'you give the rules, or give them certain areas' to play in, the issue of management is reduced.

(2) Play in the public school system

The teachers were asked about play in the local public education system. All 3 explained that typically children start the day with formal lessons and play-time happens in the afternoon, when children play at centres or areas in the classroom using role-play cards to depict what character they are. According to Jenny 'in the local early years school, lesson time only lesson time, only write, listen, sit down. Then afternoon, after they snack, they wake up, playtime' (March 30th 2015). Joy's experience was similar, noting that 'In their teaching, maybe not lots of play but after their lesson, the local children gets lots of playtime' (March 30th 2015). The challenge of large class sizes in public schools was mentioned frequently. Noting that the numbers of children makes using play difficult in such settings, Joy remarked that play is not used as a teaching and learning approach: 'It just the end of the day for role-play time because the class size is very big, so we cannot always use play' (March 30th 2015). She reported that

in large classes, not everyone will get a turn to role-play during stories, but with a smaller number, defined by these teachers as anything under 30 children, it would be possible to allow every child to have a turn. The OECD estimates that the average Chinese class size in the State elementary system is 38 students (Paton, 2014), but the range extends to between 50 and 60 children in many areas.

All agreed that the role of the teacher in local schools during play sessions is to write down observations about the children as they play. Susie noted that teachers are not looking for anything in particular: 'maybe just watch, nothing very formal to write anything' (March 30th 2015). Teachers incorporate themes from their lessons into afternoon play where possible, such as using money at the shop if learning about number, or using Playdoh if focusing on art. The consensus amongst these teachers is that the children choose where they want to play, as opposed to the teacher allocating children to play centres and rotating them. Joy explained that the children choose first thing in the morning, and put their name at the centre where they will later play. The number of centres depends on the size of the room, but 3-6 centres in each classroom, changed twice a year is typical in these respondents' experience. In terms of teacher intervention or facilitation, it was noted that 'different teachers doing it through different ways' (Susie, March 30th 2015). Some teachers join in with the play, others observe, and some discuss the play afterwards with their children. However, there appeared to be no standard practice in this regard.

(3) Perceptions of a Drama in Education approach

There was a mixed reaction to the Drama in Education exemplar lesson the teachers observed. They praised how well the children moved about the classroom, singing and drawing about the topic as well as talking about their ideas whilst in role as characters from the story of *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. They commented on how interested the children appeared to be: 'this is not like a traditional teacher tell story but children also can go acting and ... they are just in the story, and ... we can see ... children are all very happy' (Joy, April 2nd 2015). The consensus was that this lesson was different to a traditional Chinese lesson because children were not appointed to particular character roles nor did they use physical props. The teachers discussed the fact that in this approach all children were involved. They indicated that they would be willing to try this method but noted that other Chinese teachers may not be, as public schools have large classes, which could lead to classroom management and control

issues.

In their opinion, this method would be suitable for children aged 3-6, suggesting that older children may not enter into the make-believe of the drama as easily. They acknowledged that any topic could be explored through this play-based approach, but indicated a preference to lead the direction of children's play and the drama, and not follow the ideas of the children as demonstrated during the exemplar lesson. Joy noted that if allowed to generate their own ideas: 'the children will just distract from the topic' (April 2nd 2015). There was consensus that the teacher should lead and decide what is going to happen next in the drama.

(4) Teacher training and professional development

There was a positive response to the prospect of further training and up-skilling in play-based and drama in education pedagogies during the post-lesson interview. The opportunity to acquire new strategies was welcomed:

I think if you have chance, teacher need to train how to plan let the kids play. Because we just use the old experience. If we have new information, new ideas, somebody give us the very good suggestion, it's very good. Yeah. We can get new information because we use old one, it's limited. Getting new things in, we can open our mind to find new ideas and new things. (Jenny, April 2nd 2015)

Susie agreed with this view citing that 'more training or some active opportunity to watch the other schools' would be beneficial in improving current practices (April 2nd 2015). All teachers explained that when they trained to be teachers, their courses and curricula were more vocational and skills oriented than theoretical, where they learnt how to do painting and play musical instruments with young children, rather than explore philosophically why these activities are important in early childhood development.

Discussion

This study investigated parents' and teachers' attitudes to play and play-based pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning in early years classes in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province. The study was conducted during a time of considerable change at policy level in the Chinese education system, particularly within the early childhood and Higher Education sectors (Zhou, 2011; Council of China, 2014). Changing political agendas in an attempt to stave off the impact of global economic recession and uncertainty, had led to a climate of intense pressure in governments worldwide, as they try to manage annual fiscal targets and longer term strategic

planning frameworks (Deev & Hodula, 2016), whilst meeting the increasingly diverse needs of their citizens. Slowly emerging from the 'One Child Policy', and entering a new era where entrepreneurship and creativity are being recognised as the hallmarks of creating a new educated workforce to compete on the international stage, China has somewhat reluctantly begun to re-embrace the concepts of innovation, creativity and entrepreneurship in order to maintain and strengthen its position as an economic super-power and a potential world 'thought leader' (Xu, 2012). Education has been identified as playing a key role in the modernisation and reform agenda of Chinese society (China State Council, 2010, 2014), but while considerable resources are being invested in the area, it is likely to take some time for these to permeate through the system at all levels.

The data reported in this small-scale study, whilst not conclusive, appear to highlight a schism in Chinese society. They reflect not only a potential clash between traditional Chinese values and culture and increased awareness of Western ideology and educational approaches, but a more pressing reality where intense competition for a limited number of university places is likely to countermand any progress which the Ministry of Education hope to achieve in its goal to modernise the education sector by 2020. The concept of pressure was a dominant theme across all data sets in this study. Societal pressure and a desire to succeed at all costs were evident in parent interviews. The parenting style of Chinese parents, influenced by the tenets of Confucianism, 'place a high priority on educational success and that success is often measured by the test scores' (Huang & Gove, 2015, p. 392). One potential consequence of this trend is reputed to be social and mental health issues for only children who grow up surrounded by adults and lacking interaction with children of their own age (Lee, 2012). Crucially, with only one child, there is often considerable pressure placed on the child to succeed. Chen acknowledges that while the socialization of young only-children is essential, 'individual parents' over-emphasis on students' academic performance over-shadows parents' concern for their children's social capabilities' (Chen, p. 76). The majority of parents in this study expressed a belief that play is essential or important for the social, emotional, cognitive and personal development of their child, but this claim was undermined by the finding that almost two thirds (64%) of children play mostly alone or with adults. This may indicate a lack of understanding amongst parents of play as a social construct. It also highlights the socio-cultural and political dimension of children's participation in play, which can be influenced by ethnicity, social class and economic factors (Wood, 2014). In a society where grandparents play a significant role in child rearing, particularly in rural areas (Zhou et al., 2014), children

being partially or wholly raised by an older generation could suggest that former traditions and practices in relation to play are still dominant today. The role of kindergartens and ECE settings in the socialization of children is particularly strong in a society where many parents spend long hours at work or are migrant workers (Li & Wang, 2008). The limited opportunities for children to explore, play, interact and 'be themselves' in highly regimented and inflexible ECE settings as reported in this study, is therefore of concern. It may be explained by the extensive up-scaling project undertaken by the Ministry of Education to provide universal ECE to all children within an ambitious time scale. Lack of resources, lack of qualified teachers and large class sizes are likely consequences of these sweeping changes, which makes the introduction of child-centred pedagogies in these settings highly challenging. In addition, the long hours of academic study reported by parents and the somewhat gruelling and regimented timetable in ECE discussed by teachers adds further complexities to a system which arguably focuses more on quantity of engagement than quality. The necessary time spent to *explore* a concept through a play-based learning method like Drama in Education can not as yet compete with parents' and teachers' expectations of keeping pace with others throughout China. As reported by all respondents, if it takes a week to explore the numbers 0-5 through a drama-based approach, others in China may have studied 0-60 in the same time period, and time is a commodity that cannot be sacrificed in the 'rush' to succeed in the terminal examination, the Gaokao.

The results suggested a tentative openness to a more active and child-centred model of teaching and learning in Chinese ECE. However, strong reservations permeate the data. On the one hand, parents expressed interest in incorporating elements of a play-based Drama in Education approach, aspiring for their children to be happy, capable and independent thinkers. But on the other, they feel pressurized by society, family members, teachers' and other parents' aspirations and ambitions; all located within the context of the existing Chinese education system which continues to place a huge emphasis on achievement through academic attainment and competition. Similarly, Head Teachers and classroom teachers recognized some value in a drama-based approach, but expressed concerns about class size and classroom management issues. The data suggest that much additional work is needed in these schools to communicate the intrinsic and educational value of *learning* through play to teachers and Head Teachers. This is evident from the practice of denying access to play to children have not finished their work quietly or neatly, and the fact that none of the Head Teachers reported the need for a high level of teacher pedagogical knowledge in play. It would

appear that while there is cautious interest in play and drama-based pedagogies, there is a lack of knowledge and understanding about what such practices might look like in action, how they would be facilitated, and concern about whether they would prove effective in a highly competitive education system. Based on the evidence from this exploratory study, there is an appetite for change among parents, and to a lesser degree among teachers, but while providing opportunities for continuing professional development in play pedagogy and other more structured interactive approaches such as Drama in Education would be welcomed, the size and scale of the shift required to transform the sector should not be underestimated. Despite the Chinese Governments' attempt to modernize education from the early years sector upwards, there is a risk that ECE in China will remain intrinsically linked to the preparation of students for the final terminal examination, and will not develop its own identity as a separate and fundamental stage of development for young children.

Conclusion

This study sought to explore whether a Drama in Education approach in early years classrooms in China could achieve a balance between combining free-play and child-led activities, with a more structured play-based pedagogical approach, which might accommodate current constraints such as policy frameworks, space, time, teachers' roles, parents' expectations and the demands of the curriculum (File *et al.*, 2012). The data support that greater investment is needed in initial teacher education and in continuing professional development in the areas of play-based pedagogies such as Drama in Education. Teachers demonstrated a certain level of awareness of the value of play in early childhood education, but it appeared that this was not always translated into practice. Efforts to improve current play practices may succeed if new knowledge and ideas are made available to teachers via CPD opportunities that develop both theory *and* practice (Cheng, 2012). Any success however would be contingent on engaging Head Teachers' support for these practices. Heads typically lead by example, and the message emerging from this study was that play pedagogy is not strongly embedded in the underpinning philosophy or practices of the participating schools. The interaction of traditional Chinese culture with predominantly Western approaches to pedagogy, assessment and school culture requires further investigation. It would also be valuable to explore how classical Chinese philosophies such as Confucianism impact on the Ministry of Education's plans to transform ECE provision in the coming years.

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