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Private or State, Chinese or English? A report on Early Years provision in both a private and state kindergarten in Beijing

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Abstract – *This report is based upon visits to both private and state kindergartens in Beijing by a group of UK student teachers following an Early Years course. Day visits were made to both types of provision during two visits to China in 2008 and 2010. The whole range of year groups, subject areas, resources and pedagogy were observed. Data was collected through student reflections and logs. Initial findings after the first visit suggested that the Chinese state sector was far superior to the private sector in provision, staff qualifications and pedagogical approaches. However both sectors adopted more didactic approaches to teaching and learning in comparison with the more child-centred play-based approaches to learning in England. During the second visit there was significant change to the pedagogical approaches in both the private and state sectors in China. There was evidence that China's approach to Early Years education was beginning to reflect similar principles to those adopted in England.*

Key words: Early Years; kindergartens; Chinese; education; play

Where did the research take place?

The visits to Beijing were in July 2008 and September 2010. A number of day visits were made to a private kindergarten and a state kindergarten. The private kindergarten was recommended as an example of good Early Years provision within Beijing. A company own thirty kindergartens throughout the city and these are used by wealthy Chinese families. The company also provides education from early years up to and including university level.

What are international perspectives on Early Years education?

International approaches to early years education emphasise both the importance of child-centred education and providing children with a balance of different types of activities. The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project in England identified several key characteristics of excellent pre-school settings. Key findings from this seminal research suggest that in excellent settings practitioners provide children with balanced adult-initiated and child-initiated activities and are able to extend child-initiated interactions (Sylva et al, 2004). The importance of practitioners demonstrating warmth to children and being responsive to children's individual needs was a key feature of high quality pre-school provision (Sylva et al, 2004). The researchers argue that:

Freely chosen play activities often provided the best opportunities for adults to extend children's thinking. It may be that extending child-initiated play, coupled with the provision of teacher-initiated group work, are the most effective vehicles for learning.

In England a dominant discourse of child-centred, play-based learning has influenced both policy and practice over the last ten years. In addition a discourse of designing the learning experience around children's interests and needs has also permeated pre-school settings. Within this context, children are viewed as unique individuals, each with their own needs. Assessment forms the starting point for planning the learning experiences of each child so that learning builds on what children already know and can do. Additionally, the voices of both children and parents are seen as crucial and consequently education is represented as a partnership between key stakeholders. These key principles are embedded within the statutory Early Years Foundation Stage framework in England (DFES, 2007) which influences, shapes and ultimately defines practice for all children from birth to the age of five. This framework emphasises the importance of:

- play and exploration;
- active learning;
- practitioner understanding of child development;
- the unique child;
- the role of assessment in enabling practitioners to build on what learners already know and can do;
- inclusive practice;
- mutual respect between practitioners and practitioners and children and establishing effective relationships;
- rich and varied indoor and outdoor learning environments;
- viewing children as competent learners.

(DFES, 2007)

Other countries have also adopted a child-centred approach to Early Years education. In Italy the Reggio Emilia approach emphasises a pedagogy of listening (Rinaldi, 2006) and the role of the adult in co-constructing learning with children. This model of education emphasises the importance of allowing children to express themselves in many different ways. Consequently this approach rejects didactic approaches to teaching and learning. The early childhood curriculum in New Zealand, Te Whariki, views children as competent learners and communicators. It emphasises the importance of empowering children and focuses on children's holistic development as learners, as well as the importance of community and family relationships (Tang and Maxwell, 2007). This framework also stresses the importance of children's well-being, sense of belonging and the role of informal play-based approaches within the learning process. Research in New Zealand also suggests that teachers scaffold children's learning through a process of co-constructing understandings. In Norway educators are also encouraged to balance formal and informal learning experiences (Tang and Maxwell, 2007). Essentially:

The clear message is that a good balance between formal teaching and child-initiated learning activities is encouraged in Western Early Years contexts.

(Tang and Maxwell, 2007: 146).

Such approaches to Early Years education in Western countries have undoubtedly been influenced by socio-constructivist theories which have emphasised the role of the adult in guiding children's learning and the importance of language and social interaction within the learning process. In particular Vygotsky's work (Vygotsky, 1978) has emphasised the importance of children and adults co-constructing learning together. Within a socio-constructivist framework, learning and development are therefore advanced through a process of

guided participation (Rogoff, 1993). Vygotsky also emphasised the importance of play in learning. Pretend play in particular can enhance children's language, social and moral development (Evangelou et al, 2009). Given the popularity of child-centred discourses in relation to early years education in Western contexts, we became interested in exploring Chinese approaches to early years education.

This study focuses on approaches to early years education adopted by two kindergartens in Beijing. The importance attached to pre-school education in China is evident through the increasing number of laws and regulatory documents which have been issued in recent years (Hsueh and Tobin, 2003). It has been suggested that:

Chinese preschool education seems to be at a crossroads of economic, social and cultural change. The call for respect for children, freedom and equality in preschool education is emerging as a powerful new perspective in Chinese early childhood education, a perspective being pushed by university experts and strongly responded to by many in-service teachers. But it is not yet clear where these new beliefs and values will lead and how they will be balanced and integrated with traditional Chinese values.

(Hsueh and Tobin, 2003: 87)

China has, over recent years, 'become a major player in the global economic system' (Hsueh and Tobin, 2003: 87). The literature suggests that Chinese experts view Western pedagogical approaches to be the route to enabling Chinese citizens to compete in the international global economy (Chen, 1996; Ye, 1996). Thus, consideration needs to be given to whether traditional approaches to education in China are capable of fostering the skills, knowledge and attitudes that young people require to participate within a developing modern economy. Research has indicated that American approaches to Early Years education are gaining popularity in China (Pan, 2000).

However, the emergence of social and economic changes and the concern that core cultural beliefs are being lost creates a tension for early years educators working in China (Hsueh and Tobin, 2003). The importance of treating learners with respect and giving them autonomy and a voice are new ideas which are beginning to infiltrate China from other countries (Hsueh and Tobin, 2003).

Tang and Maxwell (2007) found that although teachers recognised the importance of children's interests within the learning process, time to develop these interests is limited. Where there is a focus on the use of textbooks and teaching plans, teachers find it difficult to develop the flexibility needed to follow children's interests (Tang and Maxwell, 2007). Teachers' trust of textbooks in China often leads to formal approaches to teaching and large class sizes often results in collective teaching (whole class approaches) (Tang and Maxwell, 2007). There is also emerging evidence that suggests that a minority of Chinese parents place emphasis on children's holistic development rather than their academic progress in the Early Years. However this often has little impact on the pedagogical approaches adopted in Early Years settings and some teachers adopt more formal approaches simply to please parents (Tang and Maxwell, 2007).

How did we collect data?

The student teachers observed a private and state kindergarten in Beijing, China during the summer of 2008. Follow-up observations were made to both settings in 2010. The students were

asked to keep a log of their observations and reflections and this was treated as a basis for the data.

How did the settings compare?

Similarities of both kindergartens

In both the private and state kindergartens the length of the day was significantly longer than in the UK. Lessons started at 7.30am and finished at 6pm, with a two hour sleep break for the children in the middle of the day. During this time staff members in the private sector were free to leave the site, while in the state sector staff were expected to perform administrative duties during sleep time.

Private facility -Kindergarten one (first visit)

Children can enter the private kindergarten from the age of 3 and leave to go to the private primary school at the age of 7. The kindergarten provides purpose built provision, in an affluent area of Beijing. It is based on three floors with office, cooking, storage facilities and a meeting room on the ground floor with classrooms and toilets on the first and second floor. The outside play area was 'carpeted' with safety matting and there were plenty of resources (balls, ropes, hoops, play houses, etc.) for the children to play with. The children had two breaks per day in addition to lunchtime. The kindergarten had high metal fencing all around the site, with an electric call button and gate. Throughout the day parents and grandparents stood at the kindergarten perimeter fence watching the children play.

The classrooms were quite large, housing all the resources for each class within them, including beds for afternoon sleep. Lunch and breaks, with drinks and food, were all taken in the classroom. There was a carpeted area with a book trolley and bean bags to sit and read on. There was one wall in each classroom that was made of glass, making the rooms quite light. Within, the rooms had very limited display areas. The displays lacked stimulation and were generally of a poor standard. There was limited use of information technology. The only electronic devices in the classroom were an old television and video recorder. Any board work was done on a chalkboard.

Informal conversations with staff in school produced interesting data. Each class had a 'teacher' plus three young assistants. The teachers were mainly from other countries other than China. They had a degree, but not necessarily in education. None of these teachers had any teaching qualifications. The turnover of staff was high. If staff refused 'requests' to work overtime or dared to question decisions made by senior staff then contracts were simply terminated. Only one of the Chinese teachers had teacher training qualifications. These were gained in the Philippines.

Classroom observations suggested that teaching approaches were, in the main, formal. The children were mainly taught in English, using worksheets to either write one word answers or colour in a picture. Teaching was often to whole classes and carried out in a didactic manner with no differentiation or apparent planning. There was no evidence of assessment processes. . The children sat at rectangular tables which were grouped in sixes or eights. There were a limited number of play areas and resources for use in these areas were limited.

Extracts from the student teachers' reflective diaries are presented below:

My general feeling of Chinese education is they are training the children to conform to the strict regime of the government. Children were watched in the bathroom from the classroom through a glass window. During lessons children were taught by rote where they had no opportunity to express their own views. In the kindergarten the children stood in perfectly straight lines following the movements of a person at the front like robots.

(Student 1)

The learning environment in China is very different to England. The classrooms I saw in the private kindergarten were uninviting to children with little resources and dull displays. I observed a lot of playtime for the children where the adults played alongside but with no teaching, observing or assessment going on. Maybe this is due to some staff not being qualified teachers but the kindergarten employing anybody who wants to work there.

(Student 2)

Overall I found the education in China very different to England and we saw no evidence of learning through play and active, meaningful experiences. However, it is hard to fully understand their education system from a couple of visits. The lessons mostly seemed like a performance rather than a true reflection of the education system.

(Student 3)

Private facility – kindergarten one (second visit)

On the second visit to this kindergarten there was a complete change of staff, including the Principal. Informal discussions with teachers in the kindergarten revealed that they felt that the private sector of education in China from the age of 3 to University level was financially motivated.

Background qualifications and training of teachers

The new Principal was trained in Canada as a teacher in early years. She had taught in Canada for a number of years before finally holding the position of Kindergarten Principal. Some of the teachers, both Chinese and foreign, had teaching qualifications in teaching English. None of them had Qualified Teacher Status (QTS). However the calibre of the teaching staff was higher than on the first visit. The children up to the age of seven did not have access to a qualified teacher, unlike in England where all children have access to a qualified teacher following entry to school at the age of 5. One of the teachers had been unsuccessful in applying for PGCE in the UK and had gone to South Africa to undertake his teacher training. He indicated that the entry qualifications were less stringent than in the UK. The classroom assistants were not qualified in any way but were employed to translate English into Chinese. They performed menial tasks and generally supported the class teacher. One teacher, who was not qualified at all except for a bachelor's degree, had researched into early years teaching and learning whilst at the kindergarten. The staff were not given professional development opportunities as the turn-over of staff was so frequent.

Informal discussions between the student teachers and the teachers they revealed that their salary was approximately 6000 RMB per year (£600 approximately) plus free accommodation. This doubled in the second year of teaching and doubled again in the third year if they remained in employment. This was a highly paid salary in China.

All the company's kindergartens now follow the International Baccalaureate curriculum using the Primary Years Programme (PYP). This programme aims to develop a set of learner attributes such as curiosity, empathy, independence, tolerance and respect. Planning in the PYP

programme is done around 6 transdisciplinary themes.

Learning environment

There was a significant improvement in the quality of the early years environment in comparison with the first visit. How much this was due to the new Principal was not clear but she certainly had an early years philosophy that was in keeping with current approaches in England. Classrooms had role play areas, book areas and some evidence of mark making provision. The Principal was keen to develop these play based learning environments further.

On the first visit it was noted that the classroom environment was formal with an over-use of worksheets and few play areas within the classrooms. Although the quality of the provision had improved, in comparison with early years environments within the UK, the quality of provision needed further development. For example, there was limited ICT provision to support children's independent learning. Additionally, further development of play areas was required in order to provide a range of environments other than the restricted area for role play. The classroom was on the first floor which restricted indoor and outdoor play. This was timetabled at specific points during the day rather than free access to outdoor environments which is common in England. There was a lack of children's work on display, although the Principal acknowledged this and was working towards the staff developing this aspect. There was no evidence of practitioners extending child initiated interactions, for example in the role play. The play lacked structure and purpose for the children and provision areas were not enhanced to link to over-arching themes or topics. The Principal talked about including sand and water trays within the classroom to extend the children's scientific knowledge and understanding, but as of yet, she has not been able to do this. This was partly due to staff resistance, due a lack of understanding of the value of play in early years education. There was also resistance to the introduction of more enquiry based approaches to learning from some staff in the kindergarten. Informal discussions with staff indicated that this was due to staff not appreciating the value of this type of learning environment for children in the early years, the preference for the use of printed worksheets and the general belief that didactic approaches were superior.

Planning for teaching and learning

Student observations indicated that there was a lack of planning to support curriculum areas despite being involved with PYP. The Principal encouraged the teaching staff to remain on site on Friday after 3.30 to develop their planning for the next week. This, she admitted, sometimes degenerated into 'social' chit-chat rather than focused planning.

Despite using PYP, it became apparent that there were no curricular frameworks to support planning for learning, unlike the UK. It also became evident that the teachers were not engaging in the assessment process or using assessment to inform future planning. The teachers demonstrated a lack of understanding of the value of classroom assessment in identifying the next steps in children's learning and consequently progression in learning was hampered.

Teachers appeared to be teaching themes that they had a personal interest in, rather than about designing teaching to facilitate progression in children's learning. In the absence of teaching framework it is impossible to undertake effective assessment of children or to plan for future

progress.

Special educational needs

Informal discussions between the student teachers and practitioners in the setting identified that many Chinese parents are reluctant to recognise special educational needs as this is deemed to bring shame to the family. Consequently children with special educational needs are rarely identified and support is not provided to help them make further progress. This contrasts with the current emphasis on inclusive education in the UK and notions of personalised learning. Parent partnership in the UK is central to the process of identification of special needs and initiating the process of gaining specific support to aid children's progress. Observations in the setting suggest that children with different needs are not provided with different programmes of work and informal discussions with practitioners indicated that children with major cognitive difficulties are not included within mainstream environments. Again this contrasts with the current emphasis in the UK on inclusive education.

Transition to primary school

Informal discussions between the student teachers and the Principal suggested that once children start primary school, the pedagogical approach adopted is very formal. It became apparent that in primary schools children are taught in a very formal manner and are subjected to considerable amounts of pressure to gain high marks in examinations to enter good quality middle schools. This bears a similarity to the current standards agenda in the UK which focuses on children achieving narrow performance indicators in a limited range of curriculum areas.

Forward vision

The Principal was well aware of the deficit in the kindergarten's overall practice and development. She was already becoming frustrated with the situation, but she had a 'grand' plan for the future. A part of her frustration was the fact that parents were complaining about the high turn-over of staff and lack of continuity within the kindergarten. This was quite understandable as the fees were in the region of £7000 per year. This is an extremely high amount of money in the Chinese society.

Despite the improvements it was clear that there were also some significant differences in comparison with early years education in England. The Principal was aware of some of the issues that needed to be addressed and was working towards addressing these with her team.

On the second visit the student logs recorded their perspectives on the quality of provision that they had observed in this setting:

I think that the learning environment for the children is a very relaxed one where the children appear comfortable in their environment. However, I believe that the children are not getting the quality first teaching that they are entitled to, due to the teachers not being qualified and lacking understanding of the value of Early Years provision for children. The resources are not adequate in quality or quantity for the amount of the children. I do like the number of staff the children have access to and the bilingual approach. I like the sleep time that the children have as it will give them a good base for an afternoon's learning. But again this is only as they are

here for such a long day.

(Student 4)

During the visit it was evident that there was limited planning and assessment. This, together with the high turnover of staff, does not stand well for the children's learning and progression. Bare walls and no recognition of children's work is no basis for building children's self-esteem.

(Student 5)

The thing I found most shocking when visiting the private kindergarten was the fact that the majority of English speaking staff had no official qualifications and had no proper understanding of the stages children had reached in their learning.

(Student 6)

The outdoor provision was very different to what we would normally see, with a variety of climbing frames, which would be seen as a health and safety risk. I do, however, believe that something like we saw in China could benefit children in Britain; they sometimes need that element of risk. There was no thought given to the use of the outdoors for supporting children's literacy and mathematical or scientific development.

(Student 7)

The outdoor area was all related to children's physical development. Practitioners in the UK recognise the potential of using the outdoor area to develop children's abilities in all six areas of learning. The equipment was plastic rather than natural.

(Student 8)

From what I have observed I do not feel that the education children are receiving in the kindergarten is adequate. Teachers do not have any teaching qualifications and there is no curriculum framework to follow. Children's progress is not tracked and I feel that due to the high staff turnover this wouldn't be possible even if guidelines and policies were in place. There are no policies and when staff start at the kindergarten they do not receive any information about the children they are going to be teaching. There are many health and safety issues in the outdoor provision. Rubbish is stacked high in the sand pit, climbing frames are red hot due to the sun and sharp bolts used to screw down climbing frames are not covered. On a positive note, children are taught to be independent from a young age.

(Student 9)

State Kindergarten (first visit)

The state kindergarten was just outside the city centre in a busy suburb of Beijing. This was not an affluent area, nor was it a poor one. There were many high-rise flats and shops. A major road to the city centre was just a few hundred metres away from the side road where the kindergarten was situated. The pupils entered the kindergarten aged 3 and left at age 7 to go onto the state primary school.

The kindergarten was purpose built on two floors. There was a central courtyard which was the playground, around which all the kindergarten facilities and classrooms were built. The playground was 'carpeted' with rubber safety matting which had various games painted on it. In the playground there were a number of different fixed structures for the pupils to play on and in. Balls, hoops and skipping ropes were available for the children to use. The walls were painted

with colourful scenes and targets. Outdoor provision focused mainly on children's physical development and many of the outdoor resources were made of plastic.

Inside the building the pupils were taught in large classrooms with carpeted areas as well as wet areas. The rooms were rather dark, needing lights on during the day. The rooms were interlinked with each other so that large areas could be opened up if necessary. There was a corridor around the inside of the building. The rooms were colourful with displays were of the children's work and also resources to support learning. In the classroom there were a whole range of facilities and resources for a range of activities. There were a number of CD players, computers, televisions and DVD players around the kindergarten as well as mobile interactive white boards.

The children were grouped on curved tables which could be put together in a variety of configurations. Worksheets were a common method of working. The teaching was done in Chinese, with English lessons being given a high priority. In one lesson a mobile interactive whiteboard was used with a computer program, teaching the pupils numbers and phrases in English. The pupils were encouraged to interact with the white board, although the teaching was quite didactic. In an 'art' lesson the children were asked to make houses from cardboard boxes and 'junk' materials; this again was totally teacher led with the teacher and classroom assistants doing most of the making while the pupils watched.

All the teaching staff had a degree in education for the appropriate age they were teaching. There was a numbering system for the staff in the kindergarten. The Head Teacher was number 1; the Deputy Head was number 2 and so on. Every member of staff wore a badge with their number on. Each class had a designated teacher who had a number of classroom assistants.

Student perceptions during the first visit suggested that the state provision was superior in quality to the private provision. There were more resources and children were provided with opportunities to learn through experimentation, albeit via a teacher-led approach. However the quality of the provision did not appear to reflect the principles and practices of early years education in England. There was no evidence of differentiation or the use of assessment to support planning, learning, teaching or progression in children's learning.

State Kindergarten (Second visit)

During the second visit to the state Kindergarten there was a significant change in the pedagogical approaches adopted by the kindergarten and practitioners in this setting. Observations indicated that the classrooms had many play-based resources and children were learning through a process of experimentation and rich concrete experiences. In the previous 12 months the kindergarten had adopted a Montessori style of teaching. Many of the resources were made out of wood and children were able to access resources freely, thus fostering independence. Classrooms had reading areas with a range of English and Chinese books, role play areas, mark making areas and a variety of shapes. Children's work was celebrated through classroom display and there was evidence of children working together in a cooperative way. There was no evidence of formal approaches and practitioners were making good use of observational assessment within lessons. Practitioners were relaxed and played with the children focusing on a learning task. The children were encouraged to interact with all adults. Relationships were positive, warm and trusting. There was evidence of the use of self-teaching techniques, for example equipment was used to enable children to match two and three dimensional shapes independently. During the second visit it became apparent that the state provision was not free as

originally assumed. Parents were required to pay 600 RMB per month for their child's education. This was significantly lower than the fees for the private sector provision.

Conclusion

The research highlighted the fact that early years education in both private and state kindergartens is not free in China, unlike the state school sector in the UK. Consequently this places some children at a disadvantage. The data indicates that the quality of the state provision that we observed was better than the provision that we observed in the private sector. However, the change in leadership in the private kindergarten was having a positive effect on pedagogy. We have concerns about the lack of a suitably qualified workforce in the private kindergarten and we feel that this is pivotal for establishing high quality early years provision.

In both kindergartens there was a need for teachers to undertake further professional training in planning, teaching, assessment and recording, specifically the link between assessment and planning. It appeared that teachers could only develop their knowledge and skills through the use of personal research and not all teachers were willing to embrace change. Additionally there is a need for the stigma associated with 'special educational needs' to be erased and further training in differentiation and personalised learning is required to enable all teachers to successfully meet the needs of all children.

It was refreshing to see evidence of some innovation in the state sector with respect to play based approaches to learning. However the role of adults in extending children's development through play-based learning was an area for development. Additionally, the role of the outdoor learning environment in developing children's learning across a range of domains appeared to need further consideration.

Key points

- Early years education in China is beginning to reflect a play based approach to learning.
- Further training and professional development may be required to ensure that early years practitioners in China understand the principles of effective early years practice.
- The role of outdoor provision to support learning across the curriculum may be an area for further development in China.

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