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Can Hearts and Minds be Changed in an ‘Experimental’ Chinese Kindergarten

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Abstract

This paper reviews a visit to a private university kindergarten in Beijing. Further visits are planned to continue to monitor developments. The kindergarten was recommended as an example of innovative provision. The university own thirty kindergarten schools throughout the city and are patronised by wealthy Chinese families. We found some of these kindergartens to be teaching in a didactic manner. The kindergarten was a member of the International Baccalaureate (IB) of schools who were authorised to use the Primary Years Programme (PYP). The most significant and distinctive feature of the IB Primary Years Programme is the six transdisciplinary themes. These themes of: Who we are; Where we are in place and time; How we express ourselves; How the world works; How we organize ourselves and Sharing the planet are intended to offer a balance between learning about or through the subject areas, and learning beyond them by allowing students to "step up" beyond the confines of learning within subject areas. This is achieved by the teachers developing a programme of inquiries which are in-depth investigations into important ideas and require a high level of involvement on the part of the pupils. It is acknowledged that assessment is an important part of each unit of inquiry as it both enhances learning and provides opportunities for pupils to reflect on what they know, understand and can do. The teacher's feedback to the pupils provides the guidance, the tools and the incentive for them to become more competent, more skilful and better at understanding how to learn.

The experimental setting was also used for trainees at the university as well as kindergarten practitioners throughout Beijing. We focused on identifying commonalities and differences between the Early Years provision in the Chinese kindergarten and what we would expect to see in England.

Key Words: Child centred, didactic, play based, Early Years

1. International perspectives on Early Years Education

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 balance 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). In England a dominant discourse of child-centred, play-based learning has influenced both policy and practice. In addition a discourse of designing the learning experience around children's interests and needs has also permeated pre-school settings. The voices of both children and parents are seen as crucial and consequently education is conceptualised as a partnership between key stakeholders.

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 an experimental kindergarten 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, questions need to be asked about 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 of child-centred learning in 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 (Tang and Maxwell, 2007) 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).

2. Methodology

We were only allowed one observation of the experimental kindergarten due to visitors from all over China coming to see the approach they were taking. A range of approaches for collecting data were adopted, including observation, a focus group and informal discussion with staff from the kindergarten setting. The focus group comprised of senior staff of Beijing University, Early Years practitioners and student teachers from China and England.

3. The Building

The kindergarten had both indoor and outdoor provision. There was a covered area for children to play when the weather was inclement. The building was on the university site and had been converted from a former teaching block. Consequently there were a number of large steps between the outdoor and indoor provision. In the outdoor setting there was a large pool which had no fencing around it and a step up to the edge of the pool. It would appear from our observations that there is a greater understanding of health and safety issues in England where risk assessments are given high priority. The outdoor provision was covered in soft matting with car tyres around the edge of the area, presumably to stop children hurting themselves. There were a number of climbing/sliding activity provisions, toys, buggies and bikes as well as imaginative play buildings and some markings on the floor for games. A large part of the outdoor provision was shaded by trees or with canopies and umbrellas. There was a high staff to pupil ratio when playing outside. The outdoor provision in the experimental kindergarten focused upon developing children's physical development. In contrast the EYFS framework (DfES, 2007) focuses on the use of the outdoor learning environment to support children's development across all areas of learning.

On entering the building a board was provided for parents to express their views about the provision in the setting. This reflects the principles of the EYFS framework in England. However there was no evidence that parents had contributed to this. A 'roundabout' was painted on the floor in the entrance hall. Different coloured 'footsteps' indicated pathways to different rooms. Children could freely choose to move between the different rooms and the coloured footsteps indicated the direction of the rooms. There were a range of rooms in the Kindergarten, including an exploratory/ science room, a role play room, a Chinese room and an English room. In both the Chinese and English rooms there were role

play opportunities. For example in the Chinese room a role play was set up around the theme of Chinese tea. Opportunities for children to freely make marks through scribbling, writing or drawing were not evident within the various rooms. Spaces were divided by shaped wooden walls with a large shaped door for adults and a smaller one for children. The furniture was either plastic or wooden.

When entering the indoor provision, visitors had to wear plastic overshoes. The staff did not wear the overshoes and walked in and out with the same shoes. The indoor provision was on two different floor levels as well as having two mezzanine floors where children could play in make believe scenarios. The rooms were light and airy with a spacious feeling to them.

4. Teaching and Learning Philosophy

Throughout the kindergarten there was clear visual evidence of PYP's philosophy and intended outcomes for the pupils. Walls had displays of PYP attitudes, essential elements for learning, transdisciplinary themes and feeling walls on which the children were expected to place their work and express their feelings. There was very little evidence of this happening on any of the walls. These elements reflect the principles of the Early Years Foundation Stage in England. The EYFS framework stresses the importance of children forming appropriate attitudes towards learning and the importance of practitioners acknowledging children's feelings.

What evidence there was of children's work appeared to be teacher instigated and directed. The art work had teacher writing and outline drawings for the children to 'fill in'. This was merely a large scale worksheet observed in other Chinese kindergartens. This style of didactic teaching was common in other private kindergartens that were observed by us during our current and previous visits. The colouring in of a 'worksheet' was seen as a quite acceptable activity for the children to do. Only on the 'feeling wall' did there appear to be any children's undirected work. All the wall displays, some of which were beautifully done, were done by adults. There was no children's work on display in any of the rooms except for the 'feeling wall', where children were encouraged to express their feelings.

Generally the kindergarten was exceptionally clean and tidy. There was no mess or untidiness anywhere in the setting. Everything in the kindergarten was pristine. We only observed practitioner directed outdoor play and we saw no child initiated outdoor play. We saw no evidence of the children working or playing independently. All the activities were teacher directed. During our observation there was no child initiated play. It appeared that play was largely directed by the

adults in the setting. Throughout the provision there was CCTV which was monitored and recorded at a central control room outside the building. This was for security and further training purposes for other teachers and students. The recordings were to be played back or live coverage beamed into classrooms for discussion or training.

5. Data from Focus Group

During discussions in the focus group it was identified that many Chinese parents are reluctant to recognise special educational needs as this is deemed to bring shame to the family. It would appear that 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 England and notions of personalised learning. Parent partnership in England is central to the process of identification of special needs and initiating the process of gaining specific support to aid children's progress. Chinese practitioners indicated that children with major cognitive difficulties are not included within mainstream environments. Again this contrasts with the current emphasis on inclusive education in Western contexts.

During the focus group the Vice-President of the University suggested that the pedagogical approaches adopted in primary schools are very formal, in stark contrast to the kindergarten. 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. However the private kindergarten evidences the importance attached to learning through play in the Early Years and the commitment of Early Years educators to the principles of child-voice and parent partnerships. During the focus group it was clear that little thought is given to children's transition from kindergarten to primary school. In contrast Early Years educators in England follow the Early Years Foundation Framework which emphasises the importance of a smooth transition from the Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1.

6. Conclusion

There was evidence that Early Years philosophy in this private kindergarten recognises the central importance of the voice of the child and parents in the learning process. There was also evidence that Early Years policy advocates the use of play-based approaches and child-initiated learning. However, our observations indicate that there may be a mismatch between policy and practice. During our observation we saw no evidence of child initiated independent learning. Whilst a commitment to play-based approaches was evident we saw no evidence of

children being active agents in their own learning, nor did we observe children taking an active role in planning the curriculum and assessing their own learning.

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