

## Practitioners' views of early years pedagogical issues: a cross-cultural perspective

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### Background

Understandings of the early years curriculum have moved from the traditional perception of the curriculum - a body of knowledge to be transmitted or subjects to be delivered to children - to growing awareness of the socio-cultural constructed nature of the curriculum (Siraj-Blatchford, 1998; David, 2001; Sole and Miller, 2003; Wood and Attfeld, 2005). It is recognised that any curriculum model is underpinned by a set of traditions, beliefs and values about what is considered to be appropriate for children's developmental and learning needs (Sole and Miller, 2003; Duffy, 2006). A limited number of research has explored in depth the socio-cultural nature of the early years curriculum between Chinese and Western contexts. Among the very few, David and Powell (2005) argue that teacher-directed activities alongside parents' emphasis on children's academic development in China lead to a gap between a principle that encourages children's play and the curricular practice that undermines the values of play in Chinese kindergartens. Merry, Wei and Rogers (2006) identify a significant difference between the British and Chinese children's drawings in their research. The British children's drawings were more related to individual expressions whilst Chinese children's drawings revealed likeness to the model drawing instructed by teachers but with a lack of individuality. The pedagogical traditions underpinning the two contexts are recognised as a key factor in leading to the difference. For example, the importance of encouraging children's individual exploration and creative development is addressed in the British context, opposing to the Chinese pedagogy which emphasizes the value of being compliant and obedient (Merry et al., 2006).

### Research Questions

This paper presents part of the author's completed PhD entitled 'A comparative ethnographic case study of the early years curriculum in Chinese and English settings' (Tang, 2008). The study aimed to explore similarities and differences emerging from the early years curriculum practice between the two cultural contexts and attempted to understand those similarities and differences from research participants' perspectives. This paper focuses on practitioner's views of pedagogical issues such as view of childhood, young children's learning, and teaching in Chinese and English contexts.

### Methods

Influenced by the qualitative, interpretive paradigm, the author adopted an ethnographic approach in the study in order to explore the socially culturally constructed similarities and differences of the early years curriculum between the Chinese and English contexts. Data collection methods included participant observation, semi-structured interview with practitioners, headteachers, parents and daily conversations with children, practitioners and parents in a Chinese kindergarten run by local government in East China and a state-maintained nursery school in London. The author spent three months collecting data in each setting.

### Frame

This paper particularly focuses on practitioner's views of pedagogical issues such as view of childhood, young children's learning, and teaching as part of the author's PhD. Both similarities and differences were identified through practitioners' views. For example, a romantic notion of childhood with children's happiness, welfare and play experiences at the centre followed by concerns over increasing childhood pressure were strongly voiced among all the practitioners interviewed although the contents of childhood pressures perceived by practitioners varied between the two cultural contexts. With regard to teaching, the importance of teaching was highly acknowledged in both

cultural contexts regarding its roles in setting up the environment, keeping the children's learning interests, and maintaining good relationships. The differences lay in that teaching in the Chinese context was expanded into topics as quality teaching and collective teaching whilst 'informality' and the disputable nature were attached to teaching by the practitioners in the English context. Striking contrasts emerged from practitioners' understandings of children's learning. In the Chinese context, 'learning' itself seemed to be vague in meaning to most of the practitioners interviewed whilst perceptions of the ways how young children learn were most linked with 'learning from books' and the aid of teaching. By contrast, 'learning through play' was a strong motif among the practitioners in the English context alongside the importance of 'first-hand experiences' and children's emotional attributes.

## **Research findings**

It could be argued that similarities were due to the impact of globalized ideologies such as child-centred education and the importance of play for young children (OECD, 2006) whilst differences between the two contexts were due to individual teachers' understandings and perceptions. However, the individual differences were very much embedded in the contextualisation of globalized ideologies in Chinese and English contexts. The process of contextualisation is hugely influenced by traditions, policies, and philosophies that have underpinned a certain culture (Kraidy, 2002). The author's observational data further confirmed the interview data in a way that the Chinese context most showed a culture of teaching while the English context more revealed a culture of learning. The culture of teaching in the Chinese context seemed to fit in well with the Confucian tradition based society (Zhang and Fang, 2004). Modern liberal democracy ideology underpinning the Western society, however, could be argued as being in line with the prevalence of the learning culture in the English context. This would perhaps convey bias due to the author's appreciation and experience of cultures - a limited time of living in English society as an outsider or perhaps as a blinded insider of Chinese culture. But it is strongly hoped that this comparative study provides academics with opportunities to understand 'otherness' and reflect upon own ways of doing things regarding practice, theoretical perspectives or policy (Fairbrother, 2005; David, 2006). Furthermore, the author anticipates that this paper will encourage academics to scrutinize issues identified by research participants in both cultural contexts in order to support children to develop to their full potential.