

What Knowledge and Skills Do Chinese Kindergarten Teachers Need in a Time of Reform: Director's Perspectives

Xin Fan¹⁾

Sun Yat-sen University

Berenice Nyland

RMIT University

Chris Nyland

Monash University

Abstract

This paper reports on a research program that investigates policy and practice relating to the building of a Chinese early childhood workforce in a context of changed government policy, improved standards regarding teacher qualifications and curriculum content, and changing parental expectations. The evolving context reflects the fact that recent economic development in China has witnessed enhanced need for a workforce that is suitable for jobs that require advanced skills and a high capacity to learn. This identified need has brought a renewed interest in early childhood education. Subsequently, policy makers have raised questions regarding what early childhood teachers should know and the skills they need to acquire to be competent practitioners. The research findings draw on interviews conducted with 24 kindergarten directors from provinces across China. The interview explored opinions about skills and attributes teachers require, level and form of knowledge they need, and how teachers' capacities might be enhanced.

Keywords: Chinese kindergarten teacher, early childhood education policy, skills and knowledge, teacher supports

Corresponding author, ¹⁾ fanxinpzh2004@163.com

As in many countries early childhood education in China developed in the early 20th century with the first kindergarten opening in 1903 (Zhu & Zhang, 2008). However, the century was a historically tempestuous time for China with war and revolution dominating economic and social development. The background to present reforms described here will therefore only refer to the decades since 1978 when the national government, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, initiated a process of marketization which saw the opening of China and the re-emergence of interest in sharing ideas from around the world (Liu & Pan, 2013). Zhu and Zhang (2008) report that, with this opening, educational concepts began to be introduced, or reintroduced, from abroad and as a consequence education theorists such as Dewey, Montessori, Bronfenbrenner, Bruner and especially Piaget and Vygotsky became key intellectual influences within the Chinese education system.

The importation of ideas from outside China has posed significant challenges for kindergarten teachers and this development has been compounded by a series of reforms that have implications for what these teachers are expected to know and achieve and how they might be supported. The reforms are reflective of the global importance educators and policy makers now attach to early-years education and care. In brief, they are a product of policy makers' beliefs that a comprehensive and sophisticated early childhood education experience can make a major contribution to equity and to children's capacity to become effective learners (Heckman, Pinto, & Savelyev, 2013). This focus was particularly pronounced in China's 2010 *Outline for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development (2010-2020)* and associated documents (Zhou, 2011). The promulgation of these policy statements is widely recognised to have been a milestone for early childhood education in China. This is not least because they stipulate that significant financial resources will be directed to the sector through to 2020 and because the document stipulates that the body of knowledge that kindergarten teachers are expected to gain, prior to employment, needs to be enhanced and subsequently sustained and enriched by comprehensive in-servicing (Zhou, 2011). In this paper we explore how our interviewees view the evolution of early childhood education and what is expected of kindergarten teachers in a context where theory and policy are undergoing rapid and marked change. The paper reviews the international and Chinese literature on the changing nature of early childhood teaching, identifies the research questions, describes the research, presents

analysis of the data from the interview questions and reports on findings. It was found that many of the directors believe the role of the kindergarten, as an educational institution, is being seriously challenged by the ongoing reform process.

The Literature

Early childhood education has experienced a surge of attention politically and academically in recent decades (MacEwan, 2013). This increased interest has been induced both by the growth of the female labour force and by evidence that significant social and individual gains can be generated by investing in the education and care of preschool aged children (Sammons, 2010; Sims, 2007; Peisner-Feinberg & Yazejian, 2010). Notable in this regard is the body of knowledge known as the New Economics of Life Cycle Skill Formation (LCSF) (Cunha, Heckman, Lochner, & Masterov, 2006). Drawing on brain research and longitudinal studies of child development the LCSF literature argues that skill formation is a whole life process, that skill begets skill and that investment in children's development in the pre-compulsory school years can greatly assist children's ability to learn and develop skills in later years.

Of particular interest for many researchers has been the quality of the kindergarten teaching workforce and how to support prospective and novice teachers in gaining the knowledge and skills required to further children's development (Hyson, Tomlinson, & Morris, 2009). Whitebook et al. (2012) suggest that debates that centre on training and education required for the early childhood education (ECE) teacher are necessary because it enables a clear sense of expectation for people who are working in the ECE setting. However, she also believes a (college) degree is insufficient and that teaching practice and ongoing professional development are needed to support EC teachers. Theorising just what it is that preschool teachers need to know and how to enable them to gain this knowledge has been challenged by the fact that research findings on the relationship between teacher qualifications and children's learning have not been definitive (Page, Tayler & Church, 2013). A study by Early et al. (2007) examined children's academic outcomes in relation to teacher training and was unable to identify an association between the quality of a centre,

children's academic gains and teachers' qualifications. Warren and Haisken-DeNew (2013), by contrast, found preschool teachers with diploma or degree level qualifications were positively associated with increases in children's longitudinal learning in terms of numeracy, reading and spelling.

The diverse findings regarding teacher's education qualifications and child development outcomes have fuelled suspicion of the need for higher education degrees for ECE teachers in some government circles (Early et al., 2007). However, Whitebook et al. (2012) hold that this response is inappropriate and insist that the quality of education for teacher preparation does matter and there is a need for intentionally designed and evidence based training to ensure effective teacher development. In short, if training programs were more closely linked to the nature of ECE work it is highly probable a positive association between teacher training and child development outcomes would be evident.

A further factor influencing an understanding of what kindergarten teachers need to know, undertake and how they can be assisted as teachers, is the recent practice of introducing national curricula for early childhood services. These documents commonly detail what children are expected to learn and by so doing indicate what teachers must know, how they should teach, and how can they be helped (Alvestad & Duncan, 2006; Ortlipp, Arthur, & Woodrow, 2011; Rockel, 2009; Sofou & Tsafos, 2010). However, studies of national curricula have found these documents can undermine teachers' professional autonomy and generate difficulties for practitioners if these practitioners are expected to gain new knowledge and adapt long-established work practices without the resources required to achieve these goals. Ortlipp et al. (2011) argue that the extent to which ECE work is affected by government policies depends on the level of knowledge and skills teachers bring to the process.

In the Chinese context expectations of teachers' skills and knowledge was specified in the 2011 *Curriculum Standards for Teacher Education* and the 2012 *Kindergarten Teacher Professional Standards*. The first of these documents prescribes a national curriculum for pre-service and in-service teacher training at all levels and is designed to inform teacher education institutions of what is expected of the teacher professional and hence what needs to be included in college and university training programs (Hu & Cui, 2012). The *Curriculum Standards* document declares training programs should aim to provide students

with: 1) a clear understanding of what it means to be a teacher and the nature of teachers' responsibilities; 2) a sound knowledge of relevant pedagogy and the history and philosophy of education; and 3) educational practice and experience. The Curriculum Standards document also identifies six modules that need to be incorporated in the curriculum of preschool teacher training institutions. These are 1) child development and learning, 2) child pedagogy foundations, 3) child activity and guidance; 4) kindergarten, family and society, 5) professional ethics and professional development, and 6) education practice. Hu and Cui (2012) note that the Curriculum Standards identify the need for in-service training, but admit this requirement is relatively vague and suggest this is an area that should be addressed in the teacher professional standards documents.

This latter suggestion was taken up in the *Kindergarten Teacher Professional Standards* document which was released in 2012. According to Pang (2012), who was actively involved in drafting this document, it was a direct product of the 2010 *Outline* and a consequence of the worldwide practice of developing and promulgating teacher standards. Pang also reports that the document was formulated collectively by researchers, practitioners and administrators in the ECE field. Specifically, this document lists sixty-two areas in which EC teachers are expected to be knowledgeable and competent and these are grouped in Table 1.

Table 1. *Kindergarten Teacher Professional Standards*

Dimension	Domain
Professional Understanding and Ethics	Professional Understanding
	Attitude and Conduct towards Children
	Attitude and Conduct towards care and education
Professional Knowledge	Personal conduct
	Child Development knowledge
	Child Care and Education Knowledge
	General knowledge
Professional Competence	Environment set-up
	Arrange daily routines and care
	Support and guide play
	Plan and conduct educational activities
	Motivation and evaluation
	Communication and cooperation
Reflection and development	

As well as specifying what teachers are expected to know and undertake the 2012 *Professional Standards* document also suggests teachers should be supported to gain the knowledge and skills required to meet the specified standards. Four stakeholders are identified as contributing to this process; a) **local educational authorities** are expected to develop and supervise the regional early childhood teacher workforce, set and enforce recruiting standards and ensure teachers are aware of the national standards and rules relating to evaluation and dismissal; b) **early childhood teacher education institutions** are required to design and set curricula and institute teaching and evaluation practices that will assist prospective teachers to gain a comprehensive understanding of what skills and knowledge are required of the EC teacher in the workplace; c) **kindergartens** should undertake comprehensive in-servicing underpinned by ‘teacher professional development plans’ that lay stress on professional beliefs and ethics, on-site teaching-study and job descriptions and evaluation systems that will support staff to perform according to the standards of their profession; d) **kindergarten teachers** should plan their own professional development, love their careers, engage in innovative practices, self-evaluate, and commit to participating in teacher training in ways that will enhance their personal professional development (Ministry of Education, 2012).

While promulgation of the *Teacher Training Curriculum* and *Professional Standards* the documents should assist the development and standardisation of ECE teaching scholars have observed that four issues should be taken into consideration when discussing what practitioners need to know and achieve in China. First, there is a need to motivate incoming and established teachers to institutionalise the new standards as prior to 2012 understanding of what constitutes good ECE theory and practice had evolved in an environment in which there was insufficient guidance from the national government. This point is highlighted by Vong (2013) who has observed that when discussing kindergarten teachers in China the researcher needs to remain sensitive to the fact that there is marked variation across the country. Second, the curriculum reforms envisage that ECE teachers need to be ‘researchers’, who have the knowledge needed to “attend school based research and reflect their own classroom behaviours, and make authentic connections between the learning tasks they plan, and the activities which children themselves initiate” (Zhu 2009, p. 58). However, teacher training in normal schools has not prepared teachers to fulfil this role as

emphasis has traditionally been placed on the learning of skills in teaching physical education and art rather than on the competence to organise educational activities, resolve problems in teaching and apply educational theories to practice (Zhu, 2009). Third, scholars need to be sensitive to the unique characteristics of Chinese ECE work that are a consequence of China's cultural and political traditions. Wong and Pang (2002) suggest that cultivating good habits and self-care skills, as well as moral education, are distinctive Chinese features in ECE practice that have been retained from the 1950s. In this regard it is notable that the first standard identified in the 2012 *Professional Standards* document is that teachers are expected to have knowledge of the Communist Party's education agenda. Others (Hu & Szente, 2009) discuss the pressure caused by academic competition and parents' preference for academic learning. In brief, while scholars accept that liberal beliefs relating to such issues as individualism have been incorporated into the curriculum, many features that are uniquely Chinese remain intact (Vong, 2008; Wong & Pang, 2002). Finally, researchers need to appreciate that China has moved towards a system of assessing quality early childhood teacher practices through the establishment of standards for teachers (Guo & Yong, 2013) and a rating system for preschools that is now becoming inclusive of the growing private sector (Hu & Li, 2012). Given the release of the curriculum and teacher standards documents there is a need to clarify and theorise what Chinese teachers need to know in order to deliver a high quality preschool program, what are the expectations of teachers in a rapidly changing China and how might tensions between preschool practitioners' curriculum beliefs and the educational philosophy espoused in the recently released policy documents be addressed. These issues were explored by asking directors, as educational leaders directly responsible for delivering government reforms and mentoring the teacher workforce, questions that aimed to clarify their understanding of the purpose of early childhood education and care and what the work of the early childhood teacher entails. We therefore ask the questions:

- What do teachers need to know in a time of education reform?
- How should teachers be supported to meet new expectations in their practice during a time of educational reform?

The Research

A qualitative, interpretive methodology, based on interview data, was adopted for this inquiry. The aim of the research was to explore the perceptions and understandings of a group of kindergarten directors in relation to the knowledge and skills of kindergarten teachers in China under current reform. The participants were senior practitioners from different regions and the research was designed to explicate patterns in the experience of these directors that could be themed and discussed in relation to the research literature on early childhood education and the development of the Chinese early childhood workforce during a time of growth and reform. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were designed and piloted to enable information on how these directors approached the idea of the changes being introduced in relation to the kindergarten teachers' work. Ethics approval for the study was gained from a University Ethics Committee.

Participants

Twenty four kindergarten directors from 16 provinces were recruited during the *Ninth Advanced Kindergarten Director Training Program* held at Beijing Normal University (BNU) in 2012. The research endeavored to capture regional and rural-urban variation during the sampling process and participants were all female, aged from 24 to 46 years, who had worked in kindergartens from 1-28 years. Permission to access the training program was obtained from BNU before the program started and consent forms were signed by the interviewees before the interviews. The majority of the interviewees were from centres designated as being of high quality and were centres that had the dual responsibility of implementing curriculum reforms and professional standards and of disseminating lessons from practice to other practitioners. Locations and demographic information of the directors are listed in table 2.

Table 2. *Geographical Demographic Information of the Interview Participates*

		Urban	Rural	Total
Region	Eastern	5	0	5
	Central	7	2	9
	Western	8	2	10
Teaching experience	0-10 years	4	3	7
	11-20 years	8	1	9
	21 years and above	8	0	8
Education qualification	Normal school certificate	2	4	6
	3-year college diploma	2	0	2
	Bachelor degree	12	0	12
	Master degree	4	0	4
Total		20	4	24

Data

The interview protocol was designed by the researchers drawing on the literature and four sets of questions were asked during the interview relating to (1) personal and work-related information of interviewees, (2) purpose of the ECE work and perceptions of the ECE worker, (3) qualification and work experience (4) opinions on ECE workforce policy. The first set of questions was used to collect institutional and personal information. The other three sets of questions were the central focus of the study. The utilisation of the semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to gather information in a concentrated, focused and consistent manner, as well as enabling flexible exploration of new lines of inquiry emerging during the interview process (Tharenou, Donohue, & Cooper, 2007). Interviews with all participants were conducted in Chinese and are ranged from approximately 45 to 90 minutes. Majority of the interviews were audio recorded unless the interviewees did not want to and the researcher translated the transcripts into English.

Analysis

To clarify what knowledge and skills our interviewees believe EC teachers need to know and obtain and how their efforts can and should be supported, the set of interview questions

were to centre on the perceived purpose of early childhood education and care and what the work of the early childhood teacher is perceived to entail. These interview questions were categorized and sub-themes emerged in relation to the issues addressed in this paper. The process of the analysis was iterative or cyclical, consisting of three concurrent flows of activity, namely, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Coding was utilised to reduce the data, employing conceptual codes, guided by previous research and theory, and open (in vivo) codes that emerged from the data. Analytic strategies were used to generate categories, themes, typologies and clusters (Marshall & Rossman, 1999).

For the first question of what teachers need to know, five main areas were raised in the data these being 1) care is as important as education, 2) changing understanding of education for young children, 3) curriculum development, 4) moral education and habit formation, and 5) parent involvement. These findings are discussed under the following heading of; *Findings–what teachers need to know*. For the question of how teachers should be supported in their practice the findings are discussed under the heading; *Findings–supporting teachers*.

Findings

Findings –What Teachers Need to Know

“Care is as important as education”. The majority of the kindergarten directors believed teachers need to know how to provide both “care” and “education”. Interviewees frequently mentioned that the kindergarten experience should combine care and education (*bao jiao he yi* in Chinese) and referred to the popular understanding of preschool as education that builds a life foundation for children. All agreed that ‘care’ is the basic requirement in order to ensure children have a ‘safe’, ‘healthy’ and ‘happy’ childhood. This focus on the care function was especially pronounced in the interviews with rural kindergarten directors though even the majority of this cohort acknowledged education was equally important. This awareness was underscored by a rural interviewee who had the

knowledge needed to appreciate that keeping children safe and happy was important. By attending the training program at BNU, however, she had also come to appreciate that while play could help children be happy this was not sufficient and she needed to gain knowledge of how to use play to facilitate children's development:

Our philosophy is to lay a solid foundation for children's life-long happiness. I want to give them a healthy and happy childhood. I used to think let them play happily will do, but now I realise play should have purpose, which I think I don't know how to achieve. This is what I got from today's lecture on play (Interview 20).

Changing understanding of "education" for young children. The data illustrates that directors believe that teachers need to know how to adapt to the fact that the educational function of kindergartens is undergoing a transformation from 'knowledge learning' to 'child development'. Directors, including those from the rural areas, argued that teachers need to know how to address children's cognitive, emotional, social and physical development rather than how to teach reading and writing. The directors drew a distinction between 'knowledge learning' and 'cognitive development' and were critical of teachers who did not recognise and act on this distinction:

Many private kindergartens and some parents still stick to the old educational philosophy, which puts memorising knowledge in first place. Our kindergarten has changed and most children are learning through play, except those who are about to start school. I think cultivating the overall capability of children -- that is their cognitive competence, creativity, imagination and behaviour -- is the most important aim. And children should develop those capabilities in a happy and relaxing environment. (Interview 10)

Nevertheless, this move from knowledge learning to a developmental approach is causing confusion with some rural directors conceding they did not know how to facilitate children's development without teaching 'knowledge'. A director, who had no training in ECE prior to taking up her post, reported that she imported her experience from primary school into her kindergarten and found that her knowledge was deficient both in terms of cognitive and emotional development and in relation to such basic issues as how to keep preschool children safe (Interview 8). She added that on taking up her position as director she was aware that knowledge learning was not the approach promulgated by the

government but she was provided with no understanding as to what was appropriate practice. Such confusion seemed more common in rural and the western regions and less so in urban and more developed regions. Directors from some urban kindergartens explicitly stated that they believed cultivating and encouraging interests, curiosity and creativity should be the goal of the EC educator.

Curriculum development. All interviewees believed that teachers must have a detailed knowledge of the curriculum and many observed their practices in the kindergarten followed the content of government documents, especially the 2001 *Preschool Curriculum Guidelines* (youeryuan jiaoyu zhidao gangyao) which is considered the leading foundation document for ECE in China (Hu & Li, 2012). They used the terminology derived from this key document such as ‘five content areas’ and ‘play’ to explain how they organised their own curriculum. However, the directors made it clear they accepted that the 2001 document identified ‘guidelines’ that are abstract in nature and that teachers need to know how to translate these guidelines into action on the local level. One director commented:

When the *Preschool Curriculum Guidelines* were first issued, people tended to interpret them literally and strictly followed the instruction. I think we should consider the guidelines as principles that need to be integrated into practice. The *Preschool Curriculum Guidelines* (2001) provides us with an overall perspective that there are five key areas of development; then the *Development Guideline for Three to Six Year-olds* (2012) further explains what goals should be reached in certain age cohorts. I think we should hold the essence of the policy and apply it creatively. (Interview 6)

The approach to the Guidelines described here is indicative of the evolutionary way in which policy documents are normally addressed in China (Hawkins, 2000; Heilmann, 2008). In brief, a document is promulgated that is highly abstract and understanding of how it is to be interpreted becomes more specific as experiences are generated from local practice.

Habit formation and moral education. Many interviewees insisted that teachers must know how to cultivate ‘good habits’ in children. This is a characteristic of Chinese ECE practice (Wong & Pang, 2002) and was frequently mentioned by the directors, one of

whom explained:

We have a saying that 'one can be seen how his adulthood could be when he is 3 years old, and his old age when he is 7' (*sansui kan da, qisui kan lao*), which indicates a consensus on the importance of habit. I think the service for 3-6 year-olds should emphasize habit formation because good habits will benefit children for the rest of their lives. (Interview 13)

This emphasis on habit formation and the first seven years is one that is found across many cultures. Desirable habits were raised in the interviews, including habits of reading, hygiene and self-care. Moral education was also considered to be part of the purpose of ECE, with a focus on abiding by social rules and ethics such as respect for elders, being trustworthy and good-hearted.

Parental involvement. Teachers are expected to know how to build productive relationships with parents. The directors agreed this is an important part of kindergarten teachers' work and there was a consensus that early childhood educators need to support families. Three types of practice were mentioned by the interviewees: 1) communicating with parents about the child's progress; 2) organising activities that involve parents and enhance child-parent interaction; and 3) educating parents about early childhood education. The last activity received most attention because the majority of the directors thought many parents misunderstand, or lack an adequate knowledge, of preschool education. To change these perceptions kindergarten teachers are expected to have knowledge of how to conduct parent-teacher meetings and provide education through lectures and on-line activities. Operating a parents' school has been a well-received method of education for families that has been embraced by many kindergartens and one of the directors explained:

Our Parents' Academy is very good and has been named a national excellent parent school. Our slogan is "parents enrol in the Parent Academy when the child enrolls in the kindergarten". We have established a standardised procedure and a settled syllabus. Parents should preview the lesson, go to the lecture on time, participate in the class and do their homework. We also evaluate parents and give prizes to the excellent ones. Our model Parent School has been operating for 3 years and is now being introduced to the whole province. (Interview 10)

The above quote indicates that the purpose of cooperation with parents is to enhance the educational function of the kindergarten and that the emphasis is on child development. This point and the fact that teachers must have the knowledge needed to determine what occurs in the kindergarten, was also emphasised by the following interviewee:

Parents used to want children to learn more. Many parents want their children to stay in the senior class for two years and skip the middle class. We used to compromise if parents insisted. But from last semester, we have refused. If the parents insist, we suggest they transfer to another kindergarten. We also persuade parents from the perspective of child development. We have more expertise than the parents, so we should inform them what is right. Most parents understand after explanation. (Interview 1)

Findings - Supporting Teachers

The 2012 Professional Standards document expanded on earlier regulations that obliged local governments to implement and supervise the introduction of the curriculum in kindergartens. Our interviewees observed that this development was required because local governments have been seriously remiss in providing teachers with the supports they need. As one director observed:

The local education bureau should supervise us but they chose not to, because they care more about the kindergartens they directly run. ... Besides, none of the officers in charge of preschool education in the municipal, or the district education bureau has a kindergarten background. They all come from primary schools or education administration positions. (Interview 10)

To support teachers to address concerns generated by the limited support of the state prior to 2010, when the *Outline* was promulgated, the government has supported training programs in which directors from across China travel to national centres for month long training and it was at one of these events that the first named author of this article was able to access and interview attendees. The government also supported the creation of demonstration kindergartens that are charged with the task of developing detailed curriculum that accord with the promulgated policies, develop exemplar practices and support teachers generally by disseminating their outputs to other kindergartens:

My kindergarten was chosen as one of the 15 experimental kindergartens nationwide to implement the *Preschool Curriculum Guidelines*. Our task was to translate the document into practice and

disseminate our experience to the rest of the provinces. Based on the *guidelines*, we restructured our curriculum and provided training for the teachers. We also initiated research on 'effective teacher-children interactions' to improve the interactions between teacher and child. (Interview 6)

The national experimental-demonstration kindergartens are also expected to work with their equivalents at the provincial level. Sixteen of the directors interviewed were from provincial demonstration kindergartens which are the highest ranked kindergartens at the sub-national level. All of the demonstration kindergarten directors confirmed they were expected to support teachers within their province by setting examples on how to implement the new curriculum, by disseminating best practices and sometimes, by assessing practices in other kindergartens.

The gap between national government policies and everyday practices has been partially filled by practitioners with the help of the broader education community which provides training on a commercial basis. Interviewees suggested that individual kindergartens are the main agent between the national curriculum and curriculum in practice. Directors indicated that pedagogic practices in each kindergarten have their own characteristics and the type of support teachers receive is greatly dependent on the ideas and skills of individual directors and the centre's history.

The background of the kindergarten is very important and our kindergarten has a good one. Our kindergarten was re-established in 1952, before that we had been run by an American Christian church. When the People's Republic of China was established and the Americans left it became a public kindergarten. Because of its background, our teachers were cultivated in a different culture. For instance, we designed handbooks/manuals for new teachers because our long history enables us to form a detailed and systematic text. (Interview 6)

The expanded role of the market in China has also provided teachers with new supports through commercial educational products. More than half (15/24) of the directors stated that they had purchased some form of training and a minority (3/24) had purchased a whole curriculum for their kindergarten including textbooks, teaching materials and teacher training. However, the marketization of kindergarten texts has also tended to induce a degree of disarray. Interviewees indicated that the fact that pedagogic practices in each

kindergarten have their own characteristics and how teachers are supported is greatly dependent on the ideas and skills of individual directors can be problematic given the wide range of teaching materials and texts available.

I think one severe problem in the kindergarten is the chaos of existing curricula. Unlike the primary schools, there is no unified standard for the kindergarten curriculum. We used to believe it's good to have 'contention of a hundred schools of thought' (*bai jia zheng ming*), but I disagree. Despite being good for kindergartens to have unique features, I hope we have unified curriculum standards. Based on these standards, we can then explore unique features. I think what we miss in the kindergarten is such standards. (That's why) we follow suit when an expert praises certain method of teaching, and feel confused when another criticises it. When the 'five content areas' was promulgated, many textbooks emerged on the market. The publishers make a fortune out of that. And now all sorts of curricula are claimed to be used in the kindergarten: arts based, Montessori, Orff, Reggio Emilia. They confuse you. At the end of the day, all curricula should be based on child development theories, or they are useless. We should get hold of the essentials. (Interview 12)

In addition, while teachers from the elite kindergartens have the resources to develop their practice, those from less privileged kindergartens are more likely to be left by themselves, especially when the local governments provide insufficient guidance and kindergartens cannot afford to purchase training and resources. Although this scenario was less evident in the interviewed kindergartens, due to the sample of directors interviewed, many interviewees acknowledged the existence of inappropriate practices in rural or private kindergartens and the need for increased support from both the national and local government.

Regarding child education, we referred to some books such as *Child Education*, *Primary School Education*, *Child Safety*. We had little chance to go out and learn, so we rely on those books and develop the curriculum by ourselves. ... I think we need to improve our way of teaching. Because teachers still instruct instead of facilitate the children in the class. (Interview 8)

Many teachers used to think of teaching as following the instruction of a textbook. Step by step, and easy. So when they are required to become a guider who guides the children to explore and a facilitator who assists the children in their activities instead of an instructor, they find it very

difficult and lost control. Let alone the poor infrastructure. How can you organise activities when there is no space for activity and 70 to 80 children in a classroom of 70-80 square meters? Teaching in those kindergartens means children repeat whatever the teacher teaches. Our kindergarten is much better than the rest of the local kindergartens. (Interview 10)

Discussion and Conclusion

The transformation of Chinese preschool services since 1989 have been strongly influenced by government policies with curriculum reforms, professional standards and content of teaching training becoming part of legislation in 2001, 2010 and 2012. From the interviews reported upon here a number of issues have emerged. The uneven support for reform across the provinces has had a major impact on the diverse understanding of the purpose of ECE and is partly due to the model of the national government promulgating reform and relying on provinces with different levels of resources and priorities to implement change. Generally the care function of the kindergarten was accepted as equally important to the educational role by most of the director interviewees from across China, while attention to child development and habit formation was privileged in a number of the interviews. This understanding of ECE work is highly consistent with government policies. However, the rural urban divide is a concern as almost half the population still lives in the country. As presented above directors from rural kindergartens or/and western regions tended to be more confident about providing care in kindergarten than in facilitating child development and they explained this through perceived inadequate training in in early childhood education methods.

In relation to ECE teachers' work and to China specifically, what emerges from these interviews is the tension between 'traditional' group/collective teaching methodologies and a more developmental, whole child, approach to growth and learning.

Implementing curriculum reform leads to issues of training and assessment of services, which are issues shared internationally. The question of qualifications and what type of training will provide the best results is an international dilemma (Early et al., 2007). The interview findings suggest that lack of unified curriculum standards and government supervision markedly affect the quality of the ECE services and make it harder to set the

standards for teacher training programs. Kindergartens and teachers are expected to develop and implement the curriculum according to their understanding of ECE work, while literature and the interview findings suggest this expectation might not be realistic. This becomes especially problematic when there are push-pull factors like a significant for-profit sector providing services. However, it is noticeable that ECE policies have been developed with regard to the quality of the ECE (Feng, 2013) as well as the on-going development of the national quality rating system (Hu, Vong, & Chi Kuan Mak, 2015). Diversified practices would still be hard to change if local governments fail to assist and supervise practice and professional development in kindergartens and if the teacher training system does not change to meet new demands.

The scope of the reforms China is undertaking in the area of ECE are enormous and the goals ambitious. In their book of *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited*, Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa (2009, 91) proposed that the ECE development unfolding in China is a hybrid of China's past and ideas from the west. However, they could not predict whether it is a hybrid that draws on the best practices of both worlds, or that also includes "some of the worst elements of Western capitalism into China's chaotic post-socialist society". While the direction of development was not clear before 2010, the unprecedented attention accorded to teacher development and in-service training indicates a more optimistic future. Indeed, Hu and colleagues (2015) suggest that China has learnt from the best advances in ECE curriculum studies around the world and is now moving to a position where local conditions and Chinese research will help advance reform. Comparative research has become important in a global context. The development of a workforce that can meet the challenges of the changing context is crucial for China's plans for economic development and potentially will have policy implementation lessons for others.

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