

Early Education



Volume 65 Spring / Summer 2019

- Politics of funding for Playcentre
- Walking the talk: Leadership in ECE
- Te Whariki and inclusive practice
- Soft skills of collaborative reading
- Joining a Kahui Ako
- Quality in ECE in China



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Contributions

Contributions of articles and photos are welcome from the early childhood community.

Early Education welcomes:

- Innovative practice papers with a maximum of 3,500 words, plus an abstract or professional summary of 150 words and up to five keywords.
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- Think pieces with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Commentaries on management matters with a maximum of 1500 words.
- Book or resource reviews with a maximum of 1000 words.

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An introduction to early childhood education in China

A consideration of quality

Dan Wan

Research has shown that there are strong relationships between quality in early childhood and children's outcomes (Howes, et al. 2008). It is argued that preschool quality covers structural quality and process quality, therefore, this paper introduces preschool quality in China within this framework. Structural quality involves class size, child-staff ratio, teacher qualification, amount of space per child, resources, daily routine, and layout of play centre, while process quality is presented by illustrating two specific preschool programs. Description and consideration of preschool quality in China can help broaden early childhood educators' horizons and inspire them to reflect on their educational practice.

Introduction

Longitudinal studies demonstrate clear links between preschool quality and children's later educational achievement (Siraj-Blatchford, Sammons, Taggart, Sylva, & Melhuish, 2006). The quality of early childhood education (ECE) in different cultures and social contexts can be quite different. The examination of ECE quality in different cultures can broaden early childhood educators' horizons, inspire them to reflect on their educational practice and embrace more possibilities. However, at present, there is scarce research that examines the quality of ECE in China. Thus, this paper is designed to fill the void.

It is argued that quality has two major components in the early childhood settings: structure and process (Morrow, 2012). Generally speaking, structural quality involves aspects of quality that are associated with specific measurable issues associated with the provision of education, such as class size, resources and teachers' qualifications, while process quality

involves aspects of learning associated with the type and frequency of interaction between teachers and learners (McLachlan, Fleer & Edwards, 2018). Therefore, this paper will consider the quality of ECE in China within this framework.

Structural quality

Anders, et al. (2012) claim that structural quality characteristics of ECE include class size, child-staff ratio, average age of the class, staff qualification levels, amount of space per child, and so on. For kindergartens in China, these characteristics are demonstrated in relevant policies and documents. To date, there have been four important documents in early childhood education in China—The Working Rules of Kindergarten (MoE, 2016a), The Guidelines for Kindergarten Education (MoE, 2001), The Guidelines for 3–6-year-old Children's Learning and Development (MoE, 2012a), and The Professional Standards For Kindergarten Teachers (MoE, 2012b). Among them, The Guidelines for 3–6-year-old Children's Learning and Development (MoE, 2012a) for China is similar to *Belonging, Being & Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework for Australia* (DEEWR, 2009), and *Te Whāriki: Early Childhood Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2017) for New Zealand. These three similar documents can support early childhood educators better understand children's growth and develop their early childhood curriculum.

Eligible children

According to The Working Rules of Kindergarten (MoE, 2016a), kindergarten in China is to provide child care and education for 3–6-year-old children. Usually, kindergartens in China have three grades, including a 3–4-year-old class, 4–5-year-old class, and 5–6-year-old class. Nowadays, an increasing number of

kindergartens provide child care for 2–3-year-old children. Infants’ and toddlers’ care and education is also attracting increasing attention.

Overall situation

At the end of 2018, there were 267 thousand kindergartens in total in China. The number of children attending kindergartens is more than 46 million, with more than 4.5 million staff (MOE, 2019a). We have public kindergartens as well as private kindergartens. Public kindergartens are all non-profit, consisting of 37% of all kindergartens, while private kindergartens are half profit and half non-profit.

Class size and child-staff ratio

It is required that the number of children in one kindergarten should not exceed 360. The class size of 3–4-year-old children is limited to 25. For 4–5-year-old children, the class size is limited to 30. For 5–6-year-old children, the class size is limited to 35. For mixed-age class, the class size is limited to 30. Usually, there are three practitioners in one class, two teachers and

one nursery-person. In other words, the child-staff ratio is 10:1.

Teacher qualification

The staff working in kindergartens include a principal, deputy principal, teachers, nursery-persons, health care practitioners, cook, and security guard. Generally speaking, two teachers and one nursery-person cooperate to implement child care and education in one classroom. For teachers, they have to study in normal colleges and schools, pass the kindergarten teacher qualification examination, and get the Kindergarten Teacher Qualification Certificate. For nursery-persons, they have to have a high school degree or above and experience professional training.

According to the data collected by the Ministry of Education of China (MoE, 2019b), as of 2018, 57.72% of kindergarten teachers had der-graduates, and 16.57% had graduated from high school. At the same time, 1.55% of kindergarten teachers had a qualification lower than high school. Only 0.27% of kindergarten teachers are graduate students (see in Figure 1).

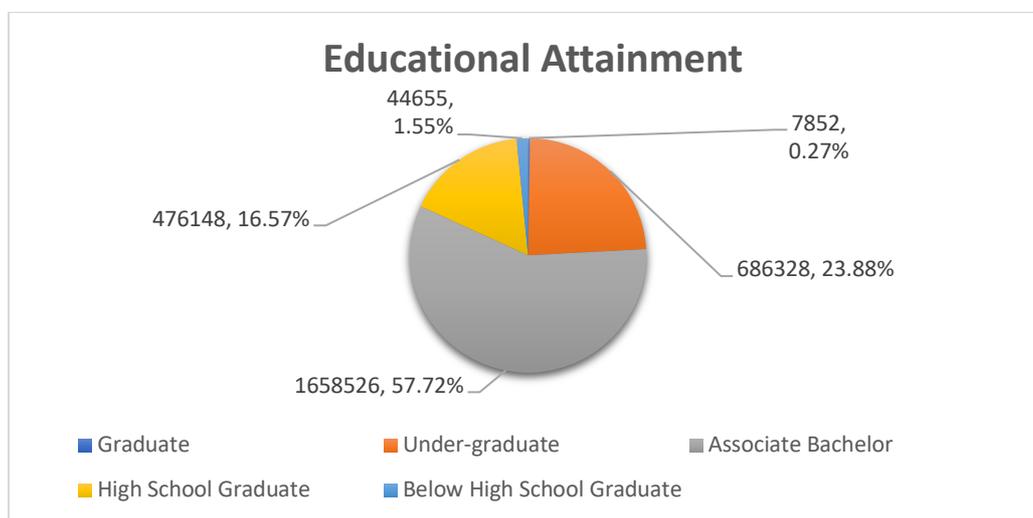


Figure 1. Educational attainment of kindergarten teachers in China

The amount of space per child

According to the Kindergarten Construction Standard (MoE, 2016b), there are mainly four kindergarten sizes in China, i.e. three classes, six classes, nine classes, and 12 classes. It is required that kindergartens of different sizes have different amounts of space per child (see Table 1). Take nine classes kindergartens for example.

The amount of floor area per child is from 6.99 m² to 8.53 m², and the amount of building area per child is from 11.65 m² to 14.22 m². For kindergartens of all sizes, the amount of outdoor area per child must be no less than 4 m² and the amount of green area per child no less than 2 m².

Table 1. The amount of space per child in kindergartens in China

Kindergarten size	Floor area (m ² /per child)	Building area (m ² /per child)
3 classes	6.19~7.84	8.84~11.20
6 classes	7.31~8.88	10.44~12.69
9 classes	6.99~8.53	11.65~14.22
12 classes	6.67~8.18	11.12~13.63

Resources, routine, and layout

Next, I will explore the resources and routines of kindergartens in China. This is presented through a glimpse of children's daily routine and

layout of kindergartens. Usually, children arrive at kindergarten at 8 am and leave at 4 pm. Table 2 below shows a typical daily routine of kindergartens in China

Table 2 Daily routine of kindergartens in China

Daily routine	Timetable
Arriving and Morning check	8:00-9:00
Morning exercise	9:00-9:40
Morning tea	9:40-10:10
Group activity	10:10-10:50
Free play	10:50-11:30
Lunch time	11:30-12:10
Taking a walk	12:10-12:30
Nap time	12:30-14:30
Afternoon tea	14:30-15:00
Outdoor exercise	15:00-16:00
Free play and Departure	16:00-16:30

Morning check

After children arrive at kindergarten, the first thing is to have morning health check-up in the reception room. The health care practitioners will check the hands and mouth of every child carefully in case they have any infectious disease. As young children are susceptible populations, the daily morning check is imperative in every kindergarten in China. Such time also provides an opportunity for parents to talk with the health care practitioners about the health conditions of their children, for instance, when and how to take medicines.

Morning exercise

From 9:00 to 9:40, children will have outdoor free play and group morning exercise. For example, they may slide, climb, cast, balance, push, pull, drill circles, and experience other body movements. After outdoor free play, children will have group morning exercise. Different kindergartens may choose different background music and setting-up exercises. It is worth mentioning that kindergartens will hold a raising flag ceremony every Monday morning. Two children are chosen to raise the flag, during which teachers and children sing the national song together. We do this because patriotism is an important educational objective in kindergartens.

Morning tea

After morning exercise, children will go back to their classroom and prepare to have morning tea. Usually, children will have steamed bread, pancakes, porridge, muffins, bread, fresh fruit, or milk for morning tea. The meal has been carefully calculated by health care practitioners to ensure well-balanced nourishment.

Group activity

Next, children will have group activity time. Usually, group activity lasts for 15 minutes for 3–4-year-old children, 20 minutes for 4–5-year-old children, and 25 minutes for 5–6-year-old children. Group activity is quite prevalent in China, for we believe that this kind of educational form is useful when dealing with common needs and interests that most children may have, similar to circle time or mat time in Australia and New Zealand.

Based on The Guidelines For 3–6-year-old Children's Learning and Development (MoE, 2012a), most kindergartens in China divide their curriculum into five content areas—health, social, science, language, and art. In Developmental Milestones and EYLF and NQS, children's developmental areas are divided as physical, social, emotional, cognitive and language. In Te Whāriki, children's development outcomes are divided into wellbeing, belonging, contribution, communication, and exploration. These differences suggest that our understandings and expectations towards children's development are quite different.

Free play

After group activity, children will have free play indoor or outdoor, depending on the weather. For indoor areas, we have a blocks centre, science centre, reading centre, math centre, dramatic-play centre, self-service centre, art centre, and game-with-rules centre, and so on. For outdoor areas, we have a slide, sandpit, blocks centre, dramatic-play centre, art centre, planting area, and cultivation area.

Nowadays, more and more teachers use 3+X mode (Morrow, 2012) for centre management, in which complete their three allocated daily centres, then may choose other centres to work in. Thus, children have a combination of required activities in centres assigned by teachers and self-selected activities in centres of their own choice.

Lunch time

Next, children will have quiet group activities before lunch. For example, teachers may read children a book, or children may play finger games or guessing games. Usually, children are divided into three to four groups, so that they can go to the toilet and wash their hands group by group. From 11:30 to 12:10, nursery-persons will serve children with food and children are expected to enjoy their lunch quietly and neatly. Meanwhile, children are free to ask for more rice or soup if they wish.

Taking a walk

After lunch, teachers and children will go for a walk in the outdoor areas. They may have a good look at their outdoor environment, especially the

planting area and cultivation area. Children may water their plants or feed their animals during this period. If the weather is not good, children may stay indoors and read picture books individually or in pairs.

Nap time

For hygienic purposes, it is recommended that each class has its specialised nap room and it should be separated from the activity room. On Friday afternoon, parents will bring children's bedding home to clean and return them on Monday morning. Generally speaking, all children in kindergartens are expected to develop the habit of a nap. When children lie in bed quietly, teachers may read them a story and say "Have a good rest" to them. Lunch break usually lasts for two hours.

Afternoon tea

After the nap, children will go to the toilet, wash their hands, and have their afternoon tea.

Outdoor exercise

Then, it is time for sports games on the playground. For example, children may play Wolf, Wolf, What Time Is It, The Eagle Catches the Chickens, Wooden Men, Freeze Tag, and so on. Some kindergartens may also have their special sports events, for example, football or basketball.

Departure

After outdoor exercise, children will play freely indoors at activities of their own choice until 4:00 pm, when their parents are ready to pick them up.

This is a typical day for kindergarten children in China.

Process quality

It is argued that process quality refers to global characteristics such as warm climate (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 1998) as well as domain-specific stimulation in educational areas (Sylva, Siraj-Blatchford, & Taggart, 2003). To assist understanding of process quality in ECE in China, some stories from ECE programs may be helpful.

Program 1: Persimmon theme project

This first example describes a kindergarten from Nanjing, Jiangsu province, China. There is a persimmon tree in Kindergarten L. Every year, 5–6-year-old children will pick and gather the persimmons. At the very beginning, children would discuss and plan how to pick persimmons safely and efficiently, for example, they had to decide what tools they might need and how to cooperate with each other. After discussion, children were divided into three groups and each group had their tasks, including picking persimmons, gathering persimmons, and packing up tools.

Then, children began to carry out their plans. They put thick sponge mat on the ground to protect themselves, they used desks and ladders to climb high, and they used their hands or hooks to pick persimmons. However, it turned out that it was not efficient enough. Then, children turned to the gardener in their kindergarten for help. Luckily, the gardener brought children a very helpful tool, a long bamboo pole with a hook and net at the top. With this powerful tool, children picked and gathered abundant persimmons safely and efficiently.



How to deal with these persimmons? Children began to brainstorm and they created various activities with persimmons. In the self-service centre, children made persimmon jam and persimmon pancakes. In the math centre, children weighed persimmons with scale and recorded their weight. In the science centre, children experimented to examine which way was the best to accelerate the ripening of

persimmons. In the art centre, children made a persimmon tree with papers. They even drew persimmon trees in the form of Chinese ink painting. What's more, in blocks centre, they pretended that one persimmon was caught in a high place and they had to rescue it. At last, children even made books based on their experience with persimmons.



Program 2: Teeth theme project

Program 2 shows a preschool project with teeth theme in Kindergarten N from Nanjing, Jiangsu province, China. In daily life, teachers found that an increasing number of children had decayed teeth and some children were in the transition of growing permanent teeth. Therefore, children showed great interest in their teeth, and a series of activities about teeth emerged.

In the science centre, children explored how to clean eggs, which had the same components as teeth. In the art centre, children decorated a special box, which could serve as a home for their

deciduous teeth. In the reading centre, various picture books about teeth were offered. In the blocks centre, children built a teeth street with blocks. In the self-service centre, posters of steps of tooth brushing were provided and children could practice by following these steps. In the role-play centre, children acted as dentists, explored the model of teeth, and gave treatment to children who had decayed teeth. Moreover, teachers encouraged every child to add their photos in different stages into the memorial album to record the change of their teeth.



Apart from these play centres, children also participated in group activities to explore teeth. For example, children learned the names and functions of different teeth. Teachers even invited a dentist into their classroom to introduce how to take better care of our teeth. Parents were also invited to join group activities so that teachers, parents, and children could cooperate better on how to protect children's teeth.

Sylva, Taggart, et al. (2007) suggest that quality preschool programs are ones that involve children spending more time in adult-led small group and individual activities, where instruction

is provided through teacher questioning, modelling, and scaffolding of children's play, rather than the context of whole group 'instruction'. In these two preschool programs, both group activities and individual activities play important roles, supporting and completing each other. When studying persimmons or teeth, all play centres are integrated into the theme unit. Through the exploration of persimmons and teeth, children have participated in various activities and accumulated rich experience in various domains. The global climate and domain-specific stimulation are both supportive and positive.

Summary and conclusions

To date, ECE in China has made great progress in structural quality, e.g. class size and child-staff ratio are more appropriate, teacher qualification has improved, the layout of kindergarten considers more about children's initiative. Nevertheless, the process quality is not that optimistic—not all kindergartens can present high-quality educational programs as Kindergarten L and Kindergarten N. Actually, quite a few early childhood educators are still confused about how to provide better mediation for children's learning. In short, ECE in China has absorbed experience abroad and it is on the way to construct our characteristic ECE model. As the preschool quality is deeply rooted in national conditions and culture, it is suggested that the following research can focus on exploring the relationship between cultural background and preschool quality status. Besides, a systematical comparison of preschool quality between China and other countries is in need.

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