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Promoting culturally sensitive teacher agency in Chinese kindergarten teachers: an integrated learning approach

Jie Gao , Yuwei Xu , Eleanor Kitto, Helen Bradford and Clare Brooks

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ABSTRACT

As increasingly more Chinese kindergarten teachers attend continuing professional development (CPD) based on pedagogies of international early childhood education and care (ECEC), it is imperative to explore how to address the well-documented rhetoric/practice dissonance that teachers fail to enact what they learn from CPD to enhance their everyday practice. We used a CPD workshop based on English play-based pedagogy as an opportunity to collect first-hand data from Chinese kindergarten teachers through pre- and post-workshop questionnaires and semi-structured interviews at six-month follow-up, in order to shed light on characteristics of effective CPD provision. The findings suggest that CPD based on international ECEC pedagogies should endeavour to promote Chinese kindergarten teachers' agency at both collective and individual levels by providing integrated learning that aims at enhancing capability and reflexivity in cultural integration, that is, to integrate international pedagogies with culturally acceptable practices under the regimes of cultural and sociopolitical norms in Chinese ECEC system. Characteristics of integrated learning are proposed. To promote culturally sensitive teacher agency in CPD for Chinese kindergarten teachers has profound implications on building a quality workforce in Chinese ECEC.

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Teacher agency; integrated learning; continuing professional development; international early childhood care and education; culturally sensitive

Introduction

With a strong motivation to learn from international experience of early childhood education and care (ECEC), increasingly more Chinese kindergarten teachers attend continuing professional development (CPD) courses based on international ECEC pedagogies (Qi and Melhuish 2017). While such CPD provision offers global perspectives welcomed by Chinese kindergarten teachers, there is a noticeable degree of rhetoric/practice dissonance that teachers fail to enact what they learn from CPD to enhance their everyday practice (Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland, and Wollscheid 2019). Indeed, such dissonance is not a unique problem faced by CPD based on international ECEC pedagogies, but also prevails in local CPD for Chinese kindergarten teachers (Li, Wang, and Wong 2011; Zhou 2014). Nonetheless, the cultural differences in ECEC pedagogies and contexts render

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it especially challenging for CPD based on international ECEC pedagogies to address this rhetoric/practice dissonance.

We acknowledge that the gap or mismatch between pedagogical understandings and practice may be partly due to structural barriers posed by local contexts (Brooks and Kitto [Under Review](#)). To an extent, we agree with Kemmis et al. (2013), who underline the importance of having fundamental changes in the contexts in which teachers are situated, in order for teachers to sustain newly adopted educational practice. Nonetheless, mindful of the cultural, social, political and economic contexts in China, we understand that education reforms take time and often take place in a top (*i.e.*, policy)-down (*i.e.*, teacher practice) manner (Gu and Qiong 2013; Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland, and Wollscheid 2019). Given the circumstances, it is imperative for CPD, particularly sessions based on international ECEC pedagogies, to explore teaching approaches that can effectively enable Chinese kindergarten teachers to translate what they learn from CPD into contextually relevant practice through dynamic interplay with the local contexts. Informed by the data of this study, we employ the lens of agency (Rainio and Jaakko 2017; Simpson et al. 2018) to explain why CPD based on international ECEC pedagogies may (not) enact sustained changes in practices among Chinese kindergarten teachers. Our paper also provides insights into an integrated learning approach that promotes culturally sensitive teacher agency at both collective and individual levels, so that Chinese kindergarten teachers can agentially engage with CPD based on international ECEC pedagogies to enact changes in their practices.

Teacher agency in CPD of Chinese kindergarten teachers

Teacher agency is broadly theorised as teachers' active responses to social structures embedded in their teaching practice (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015a). Generally speaking, it entails the *capacity* to impact and transform their practice, and the *proactive actions* of taking initiatives, making decisions and interacting with the resources and constraints of the contexts (Hofmann and Rainio 2007; Imants and Van Der Wal 2020). Extensive studies have demonstrated that teacher agency contributes to significant changes in quality improvement in education (Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015a). In particular, it is widely acknowledged that teacher agency is instrumental to CPD (Imants and Van Der Wal 2020; Tao and Gao 2017), which leads to sustained improvement in quality of educational practices.

Despite the consensus in academia that teacher agency is contextually constructed (Edwards 2015; Priestley, Biesta, and Robinson 2015a), the dominant theoretical frameworks of teacher agency are mostly developed in Western contexts. Simpson et al. (2018) reviewed Chinese scholars' perspectives on teacher agency and argue that a more nuanced reading of teacher agency is needed to account for the sociocultural differences as well as the commonalities shared by different cultures. Teacher agency in Chinese kindergarten teachers is seldom discussed or researched, possibly due to the regime of top-down approaches to ECEC reforms and development in China (Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland, and Wollscheid 2019). Mindful of the contexts in which our study is situated, we seek to explore culturally sensitive teacher agency and its role in Chinese kindergarten teachers' CPD.

Our theorisation of culturally sensitive teacher agency echoes Simpson et al. (2018, 316) in recognising '*the critical importance of building capacity in contextualised decision*

making spurred by teachers' professional reflection on 'what might be' (Edwards, in Ludvigsen, 2011, 28). In attending the CPD courses based on international ECEC pedagogies, Chinese kindergarten teachers need to actively integrate what they learn with their local pedagogical approaches in order to fulfill their CPD goals. This not only entails the capability of cultural integration within the practicability and constraints of local ECEC systems, but also the sustained actions of proactively reflecting on the integration in given situations. It is critical for kindergarten teachers to establish a sense of capability and empowerment in order to play an active and agentic role in enacting changes in practice in their local ECEC contexts. Meanwhile, to better understand the interplay between structure and human agency within Chinese contexts (Fu and Clark 2018), it is pertinent to draw attention to the notions of proxy and collective agency (Bandura 2006), which both emphasise the '*interdependent effort*' and '*collective capability*' to achieve a shared pursuit (p.165). Teachers' collective agency drives collective actions which can lead to institutional transformation that enables changes in teaching practices (Hökkä, Vähäsantanen, and Mahlakaarto 2017; Spicer 2011). The negotiation between individual and collective agency takes place throughout teachers' professional development, which seems to be of particular importance in collectivist cultures, such as China (Fu and Clark 2017). Therefore, in this study we regard teacher agency as a socially embedded construct that is exercised through interpersonal transactions and dynamic interplay with the immediate and broader contexts. Culturally sensitive teacher agency in the Chinese ECEC contexts as we propose in this paper thus embraces the following aspects: (i) capability to actively experiment integrating international ECEC pedagogies into culturally relevant practices; (ii) reflexivity on how to sustain such practices so that transformative changes can happen in the local contexts; (iii) collective agency through interactions with other kindergarten teachers in response to perceived barriers in similar contexts.

Taking an exploratory approach, we started with the question of whether and how CPD based on international ECEC pedagogies can effectively enable Chinese kindergarten teachers to translate what they learn into contextually relevant practice in their local kindergartens. Based on the empirical data collected from Chinese kindergarten teachers who attended a CPD workshop based on English play-based pedagogy, we argue that promoting culturally sensitive teacher agency plays an instrumental role in addressing the rhetoric/practice dissonance in CPD provision for Chinese kindergarten teachers, particularly those based on international ECEC pedagogies. In the rest of this paper, we demonstrate the empirical data in detail to support our argument and to inform the discussion on findings of this study.

Methodology

The CPD workshop around which data was collected for this study is a whole-day, interactive workshop on English play-based pedagogy, which took place in Beijing, China. The workshop was designed and delivered by the authors of this paper, including both English-speaking and Chinese-speaking ECEC scholars based at a UK institution. It is part of a series of participative CPD workshops designed for ECEC practitioners in China. These workshops per se seek to examine the folk pedagogies of change proposed by Brooks and Kitto [Under Review](#) in Chinese contexts. For the current study, we used the workshop focusing on English play-based pedagogy as an opportunity to gain insight into Chinese kindergarten

teachers' perceptions and practice with regard to play-based pedagogy, their CPD needs, as well as their reflections on CPD courses based on international ECEC pedagogies in general. While play-based pedagogy is currently emphasised in Chinese ECEC policy (Li and Chen 2017) and has gained growing recognition among the sector, many Chinese kindergarten teachers still find it challenging to enact play-based pedagogy in everyday practice (Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland, and Wollscheid 2019). Targeting front-line kindergarten teachers in China, the present CPD workshop started by introducing English play-based pedagogy and the historical, cultural and social contexts in which the pedagogical approaches are situated; subsequently, the CPD workshop focused on guiding and facilitating teachers' discussion and reflection on cultural comparisons between English and Chinese play-based pedagogies based on their own experiences. We conducted pre- and post-workshop questionnaire surveys, as well as semi-structured interviews at six-month follow-up to explore the impacts of such CPD provision on Chinese kindergarten teachers' practice. The following sections provide a detailed account of the instruments, participants, and the procedure of data collection and analysis of this study.

Instruments

Pre-workshop questionnaire

The purpose of the pre-workshop questionnaire is twofold: first, to investigate participants' current perceptions and practice of play-based pedagogy; second, to understand their CPD needs in relation to play-based pedagogy. Accordingly, the questionnaire consists of three parts:

- A set of open-ended questions to elicit participants' perceptions, for example, '*what is play for young children?*'; '*is play important to children and why?*'; '*what is teacher's role in children's play?*'; '*how much time in a day at kindergarten is ideal for children to spend on play? How much time is currently spent in your kindergarten?*' and '*what are the difficulties in practising play-based pedagogy?*'.
- A self-evaluation measure using the COM-B model (Capability, Opportunity and Motivation [Michie, Atkins, and West 2014]; see [Figure 1](#)) as a framework to identify participants' needs for applying play-based pedagogy in practice. The items tap participants' needs in three domains, namely, capability (e.g., '*have a better knowledge of how to incorporate play in a holistic manner* '); opportunity (e.g., '*parents understand and support the practice*'); and motivation (e.g., '*be more certain about the developmental benefits of play for children*'). Participants were required to indicate the degree of need using a four-point scale: '1 = *very much needed*; 2 = *slightly needed*; 3 = *already know/have*; 4 = *don't need because it is not important/relevant*'. Participants were also asked to write down any additional needs that were not presented in the existing items.
- Questions to gather demographic information, including gender, qualifications, years of teaching and type of kindergarten.

Post-workshop feedback questionnaire

The purpose of the post-workshop feedback questionnaire is to obtain instant feedback from participants to inform the design and teaching of future workshops. The first part

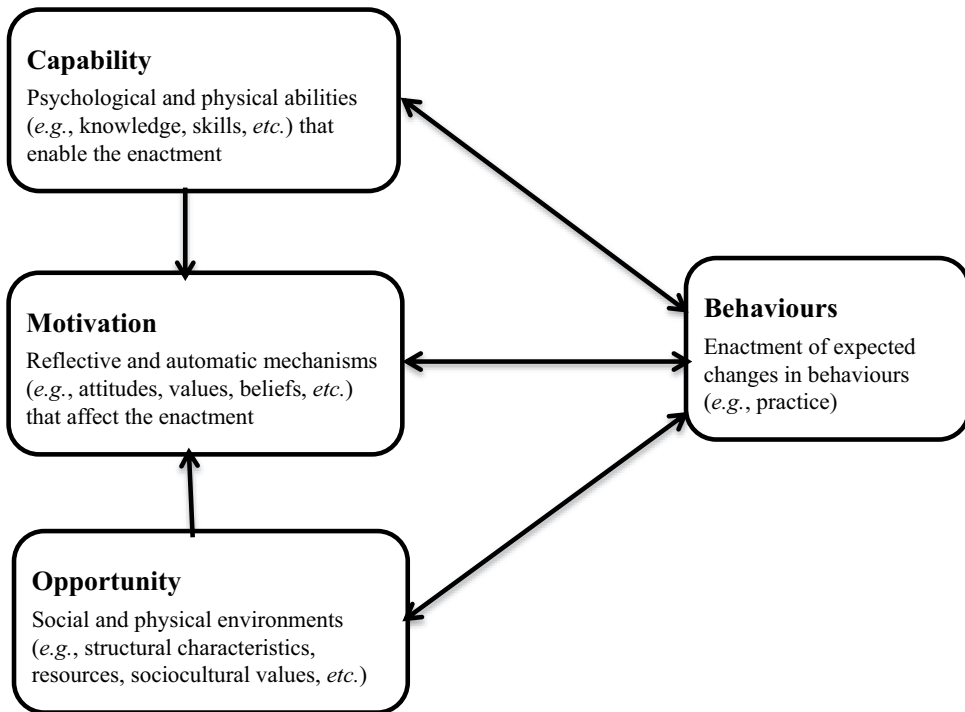


Figure 1. *The COM-B model* (Michie, Atkins, and West 2014).

focuses on participants' evaluation of the quality of the workshop, which is not included in the data analysis of this study since it is not relevant to the research question. The second part consists of open-ended questions asking participants about the most and least helpful topics and activities of the workshop.

Semi-structured interview

A six-month follow-up interview aimed to explore participants' reflection on the CPD workshop. The six-month period allowed participants to practise translating what they had learnt from the workshop into contextually relevant practice in their kindergartens and to reflect on the translation process. Two sets of questions were asked during the interview. The first part focused on the impact of the workshop on participants' understanding and practice of play-based pedagogy. The second part explored participants' reflection on their experiences of attending CPD provision that is based on international ECEC (*i.e.*, beyond the English play-based workshop).

Participants

We recruited participants from the attendees (*i.e.*, self-volunteered Chinese kindergarten teachers) of the CPD workshop on English play-based pedagogy. They were teachers from across China. However, we are conscious of the limitation of this sampling strategy in that only teachers with the CPD needs as well as the resources (e.g., time, travel cost, etc.) would choose/were able to attend the workshop. We were particularly mindful of the characteristics of participants throughout the analysis and interpretation of the collected

data. In total, 76 Chinese kindergarten teachers completed the pre-workshop questionnaire, among whom 41 completed the post-workshop feedback questionnaire. The characteristics of the survey participants are illustrated in [Table 1](#).

A further recruitment was conducted six months after the workshop for semi-structured interviews. The participants who indicated consent to be contacted in the pre-workshop questionnaire were invited. Consequently, eight teachers (all females) agreed to participate in the interviews. The background information of interview participants is illustrated in [Table 2](#). We use pseudonyms to protect the identities of participants.

Data collection

The pre- and post-workshop questionnaire surveys were administered using an online platform accredited by the authors' university following GDPR regulations (*i.e.*, Onlinesurveys). Links to the two questionnaires were shared with participants before and after the workshop, respectively. Information about the research was presented and consent to participation was obtained before participants could proceed to filling in the questionnaires. After submission of the questionnaires, participants were debriefed and provided with contact information of the researchers. The semi-structured interviews were conducted by the first author over phone calls. Information about the research was provided and consent to participation was obtained before scheduling the interviews.

Table 1. Characteristics of participants (pre-workshop questionnaire).

Gender		
Female	75	98.7%
Male	1	1.3%
Type of kindergarten		
Public Kindergarten	63	82.9%
Private Kindergarten	13	17.1%
Qualifications		
Diploma	4	5.3%
Bachelor degree	39	26.3%
Master degree	20	40.7%
PhD	1	1.3%
Missing data	12	15.8%
Years of Teaching		
< 3 years	19	25%
4–10 years	24	31.6%
Over 10 years	27	35.6%
Missing data	6	7.9%

Table 2. The participants of follow-up interviews.

Participant pseudonym	Background	Years of teaching in ECEC	Participant pseudonym	Background	Years of teaching in ECEC
Li	Senior teacher/mentor	over 10 years	Xue	Class teacher	about 3 years
Han	Class teacher	about 7 years	Ge	ECEC course teacher	about 1 year
Bai	Class teacher	about 4 years	Sun	Trainee teacher	about half a year
Zhu	Senior teacher/mentor	about 10 years	Yang	Class teacher	about 5 years

Each interview lasted around 30–45 mins. We audio-recorded the interviews for verbatim transcription.

Data analysis

A summative content analysis (Hsieh and Shannon 2005) was conducted with the questionnaire data to gain an understanding of participants' perspectives on play-based pedagogy. Participants' answers to the open-ended questions were coded question by question. Two researchers (the first and second author) coded the answers separately. Their codes were compared and discussed within the research team to reach consensus. Participants' responses to the COM-B self-evaluation measure were summarised using percentage calculation, which allows us to obtain an overview of the CPD needs of the participants. The findings of questionnaire data were used to inform the subsequent semi-structured interview.

Thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) was conducted with the interview data to explore participants' reflection on the CPD workshop. The audio recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were firstly analysed by the first and second author separately to identify the patterns in the data. The initial codes were discussed within the research team to form themes that are relevant to the research question. Using the initial thematic coding framework (*i.e.*, themes with sub-themes), we conducted a second round of analysis to double-check the coding and refine the final themes with sub-themes.

Findings

Findings of the questionnaire data and the interview data were integrated to address the research question of this study, organised into three themes as below:

Dissonance between perceptions and practice

A considerable degree of dissonance between participants' perceptions and reported practice of play-based pedagogy emerged from our data. The findings of the pre-workshop questionnaire show that participants embraced the theoretical underpinnings and principles of 'western' play-based pedagogy, which in general values child-initiated and child-led play with teachers acting as facilitators, playmates and observers (Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland, and Wollscheid 2019). The participants reported the viewpoints that play ought to be child-initiated (37 out of 68 responses), led by children's interests (40 out of 68 responses), fun/joyful for children (20 out of 68 responses) and enabling children to explore, learn and develop during the process (28 out of 68 responses). The participants agreed on the importance of play to young children's development, especially highlighting the benefits to cognitive (45 out of 71 responses) and socio-emotional development (30 out of 71 responses). They recognised the multiple roles of adults in children's play, including facilitator/supporter (55 out of 72 responses), playmate (45 out of 72 responses), guide (36 out of 72 responses) and observer (36 out of 72 responses). While 58 out of 72 participants believed that children should spend half or more of the time in kindergarten on play, they admitted that the actual time allocated for children to be

engaged in play activities in kindergarten was considerably less, with a varied amount of time between different kindergartens. They further indicated that play activities in their kindergartens were mostly teacher-led, pre-designed and structured with specific developing goals rather than free play (*i.e.*, child-initiated and child-led). The participants pointed out a number of barriers that had hindered them from carrying out what they considered as the ‘best practice’ of play-based pedagogy, which mainly entails facilitating child-led play with creative provisions, keeping a good balance between free play and structured play, allowing children more freedom to explore and experience, and assessing children’s development through observation of children play. The perceived barriers to enacting play-based practice are detailed in the next section with reference to the corresponding CPD needs expressed by the participants in order to improve their practice of play-based pedagogy.

Similar patterns pertaining to the rhetoric/practice dissonance also emerged from the interview data. All eight participants of the follow-up interview gave examples of not being able to enact what they believe to be ‘theoretically optimal’ for children in their daily practice, such as allowing more time for free play, flexibly adjusting provision/teaching plan to be based on children’s interests, encouraging risky play, and recognising and supporting individual differences in play. They acknowledged this theory-practice gap as quoted below:

I think, ideally, including in the government guidance, play is highly valued. But in terms of how to implement play-based pedagogy in kindergarten, teachers are very perplexed [...]. Kindergarten teachers can fluently talk about all these theories and ideals, but they are not capable to make it happen in practice. (Zhu, senior teacher, about 10 years’ experience)

In China, learning through play is merely a slogan. If it is implemented [in kindergarten], parents would question “why don’t you teach calculation? Why don’t you teach writing?” (Li, senior teacher, over 10 years’ experience)

The interview participants elaborated on the reasons why Chinese kindergarten teachers had difficulties in resolving this rhetoric/practice dissonance, which echo the barriers identified from the questionnaire data. Subsequently, we discuss these perceived barriers in more detail.

Perceived barriers and CPD needs

In the pre-workshop questionnaire, participants were asked to indicate the difficulties they had in adopting a play-based pedagogical approach in practice. Some participants regarded insufficient capabilities as the biggest obstacle, highlighting the lack of capabilities in judging the right time to facilitate or intervene in children’s play (28 out of 66 responses), conducting observation and assessment while children play (17 out of 66 responses), designing play activities that entail meaningful learning (12 out of 66 responses) and planning play activities that meet children’s interests (11 out of 66 responses). A few participants also mentioned obstacles posed by structural constraints, including fixed timetables in kindergarten (7 out of 66 responses), safety issues (4 out of 66 responses), pressure from parents (3 out of 66 responses) and restriction in space/facilities for outdoor play (2 out of 66 responses). This corresponds with participants’

responses to the COM-B self-evaluation measure that examines what they need in order to improve their play-based pedagogical practice.

Table 3 illustrates the percentage of participants by the degree of need for each item. The participants expressed a pressing need to improve their capability, especially, to have a better knowledge of how to holistically incorporate play in ECEC (86.7% participants rating it as ‘very much needed’); to know how to design the day around play (85.5%); to have a sense of when to facilitate/when not to intervene in children’s play (84.2%); and to have more opportunities to observe good practice of play pedagogy (81.3%). The participants also considered the support from kindergarten management (63.2%), peer practitioners (67.1%) and parents (60.5%) as important factors that affect their practice of play-based pedagogy. Besides, the participants underlined their needs to become more aware and reflective (63.2%); and to make it a norm (68.4%) to take a play-based pedagogical approach in their daily practice. Finally, it is noted that over one third of the participants already had a strong belief in the developmental benefits of play to children and that children need to play.

Table 3. The percentage of participants by the degree of need.

		Items	1	2	3	4
C	1	have a better understanding of why play is important for children	43.4%	11.8%	42.1%	2.6%
A	2	have a better knowledge of how to incorporate play in a holistic manner	86.7%	13.3%	0	0
B	3	know how to design the day around play	85.5%	13.2%	1.3%	0
I	4	have a sense of when to facilitate and when not to intervene during children’s play	84.2%	10.5%	5.3%	0
L	5	be more comfortable about children’s rough and tumble play	58.7%	22.7%	17.3%	1.3%
Y	6	have better tolerance of messy play	47.4%	25%	25%	2.6%
	7	have more patience when play with children	44.7%	18.4%	35.5%	1.3%
	8	be more engaged in interaction with children during play	56%	26.7%	17.3%	0
	9	know more theories about play-based pedagogy	67.1%	26.3%	6.6%	0
	10	more opportunities to observe good practice of play pedagogy	81.3%	14.7%	4%	0
O	11	have more time to play with children	50%	28.9%	19.7%	1.3%
P	12	have more time for free play	50%	32.9%	15.8%	1.3%
O	13	have more funding for play activities	51.3%	22.4%	12.1%	5.3%
R	14	have sufficient toys and playground facilities	48.6%	23%	24.3%	4.1%
T	15	better layout for play in classroom	55.3%	21.1%	22.4%	1.3%
U	16	more peer support and chance to share experience	67.1%	25%	6.6%	1.3%
N	17	more encouraging atmosphere in kindergarten	51.3%	30.3%	17.1%	1.3%
T	18	Headteacher/leadership understands and supports the practice	63.2%	14.5%	22.4%	0
Y	19	parents understand and support the practice	60.5%	27.6%	10.5%	1.3%
M	20	become more motivated to enact play-based pedagogy in daily practice	51.3%	23.7%	21.1%	3.9%
O	21	have a stronger belief that children need to play	48.7%	10.5%	36.8%	3.9%
T	22	firmly believe in the developmental benefits of play to children	51.3%	5.3%	39.5%	3.9%
V	23	be more aware of and reflective on one’s own practice	63.2%	21.1%	14.5%	1.3%
A	24	make it a norm to adopt play-based pedagogical approach	68.4%	21.1%	9.2%	1.3%
I						
O						
N						

Note: ‘1 = very much needed; 2 = slightly needed; 3 = already know/have; 4 = don’t need because it is not important/relevant’.

As mentioned earlier, in the follow-up interviews, participants reflected on the rhetoric/practice dissonance that they experienced after the workshop. They shed light on the barriers which they perceived had rendered them unable to enact what they learnt from the workshop in their practice. In general, the perceived barriers are consistent with what they regarded as obstacles in the pre-workshop questionnaire. However, their emphasis slightly shifted from the lack of certain capabilities to structural restraints, a lack of autonomy for teachers, and perceived resistance from parents and/or kindergarten leadership. The following quotes demonstrate some examples reported by the participants:

Most of our play activities are still teacher-led, or designed by teachers. I think it is very hard to let child do free play in kindergarten because parents would question what teachers are doing, if the child just comes to play, parents would say that children learn nothing. And if we include too much free play in our teaching plan, it wouldn't get approval [from kindergarten leadership]. (Xue, class teacher, about 3 years' experience)

It depends on the kindergarten principal, what is the principal's vision of the kindergarten, whether s/he holds a global perspective in provision, course design and teacher professional development. (Ge, ECEC course teacher, about 1 year of experience)

Sometimes you think the international [pedagogical] approach is quite good, but you would get resistance, maybe parents wouldn't understand, maybe your fellow colleagues in kindergarten would think it is too far ahead. (Han, class teacher, about 7 years' experience)

Because we have more children in each class, teachers cannot take care of each individual child [in a similar way as shown in the English context]. (Sun, trainee teacher, about six months' experience)

Kindergarten teachers don't have the autonomy to try out [pedagogical approaches] as they like'. (Yang, class teacher, about 5 years' experience)

In the face of these barriers, the participants described feeling '*powerless*' (Li [senior teacher, over 10 years' experience]) and '*demotivated*' (Yang [class teacher, about 5 years' experience]) to translate what they learnt from the CPD workshop into practice. The participants recognised that they lacked the capability to firstly reflect on what they have newly learnt (*i.e.*, the international pedagogical aspects that they agree with) and what they know/do (*i.e.*, the current practice and the cultural, historical and sociopolitical contexts in which the practice situated); and then integrate their knowledge of both sides to generate culturally relevant practice inspired by international pedagogical approaches. Retrospectively, they indicated that they needed support from the CPD workshop to improve their capabilities to integrate international and local pedagogical approaches, thereby adapting the practice for better local use. Just like Li (senior teacher, over 10 years' experience) emphasised, '*the international pedagogy needs to be related to Chinese contexts. The adapted pedagogical contents are easier to understand and more likely to be applied in practice by kindergarten teachers.*' The following section further demonstrates participants' reflection on their experience of attending the CPD workshop on English play-based pedagogy and CPD courses which are based on international ECEC pedagogies.

Reflections on CPD courses based on international ECEC pedagogies

In the follow-up interviews, all of the eight participants enumerated the benefits of attending CPD courses based on international ECEC pedagogies. The following three benefits emerged as the most prominent ones:

- enabling kindergarten teachers to gain a *'global perspective'* on pedagogy (as mentioned by Li, Han, Bai, Ge, Sun and Yang) and to learn about what they regarded as *'more advanced'* (Han, Yang) and *'innovative'* (Bai) pedagogical approaches
- challenging what Chinese kindergarten teachers take for granted and prompting them to reflect on their current pedagogy (e.g., Xue [class teacher, about 3 years' experience]: *'I think it considerably changes my perceptions. [. . .] These changes in perceptions have substantial impact on my interaction with children.'*; Han [class teacher, about 7 years' experience]: *'Learning these international pedagogical approaches is very helpful for us to reflect on our everyday practice'*)
- providing kindergarten teachers with new resources and tools that can be used to improve their practice (e.g., Bai [class teacher, about 4 years' experience]: *'I think it has expanded my skills, the professor has taught me some new ways of thinking and what they do in England [. . .] my provision and activities for play become richer'*; Zhu [senior teacher, about 10 years' experience]: *'What is very useful is the form given to us at the workshop, the learning through play observation sheet'*)

In contrast to the aforementioned benefits, a few drawbacks of CPD courses based on international ECEC pedagogies have been identified from the interview data. The biggest drawback is that the participants found some contents irrelevant to or inappropriate for their local contexts. In line with the perceived barriers mentioned earlier, the participants of the interview reflected that some international pedagogical approaches were not manageable under the local circumstances and/or were unlikely to get support from parents, peer colleagues and kindergarten leadership. Just as Xue (class teacher, about 3 years' experience) explained,

Some contents are indeed rather irrelevant to Chinese contexts, thereby hard to put into practice. We can only say that it is really good, we have seen and learnt, foreign pedagogy is really good, but how applicable is it to my own kindergarten? Even though I think it is good, it means nothing if the kindergarten principal or other teachers don't agree. Maybe in some private kindergartens, the teachers have more autonomy and flexibility, they could try out things, but they are also affected by the parents. So I think the key thing about international pedagogies is that when you think the contents are good, new and make sense, as teachers, you need to think whether they are applicable or ponder how to adapt.

In addition, the interview participants mentioned a few other potential drawbacks of CPD courses based on international ECEC pedagogies, such as, due to language issues, some teachers may find it intimidating/difficult to communicate with foreign experts, thereby they reported being less engaged in interactive activities (e.g., Ge, ECEC course teacher, about 1 year's experience); the CPD courses may not speak directly to teachers' needs and the materials provided may not be readily for use (e.g., Li, senior teacher, over 10 years' experience); it requires teachers to have relatively high level of reflective ability and adaptability in order to truly benefit from the courses (e.g., Zhu, senior teacher, about

10 years' experience); and such CPD courses may not be accessible to or affordable for kindergarten teachers from disadvantaged areas in China (e.g., Han, class teacher, about 7 years' experience).

Despite these potential drawbacks, the participants of this study also reflected on how CPD courses based on international ECEC could best help them improve their practice. In the post-workshop feedback questionnaire, the participants listed the most useful topics and activities of the play-pedagogy workshop. The majority of participants (76%) regarded the hands-on and interactive activities as the most useful, such as practising observation with video clips, brainstorming creative ways of facilitating play using simple materials (e.g., a scarf), case study of learning through play and small group discussion on the comparison between English and Chinese pedagogical approaches of play. In the same vein, the participants of the follow-up interview further elaborated on how the participative learning during the workshop had positively impacted their practice. As mentioned earlier, the interview participants recognised the need to improve their capabilities to translate the pedagogical knowledge and skills gained from CPD courses into local practice in their own kindergartens. Based on their experience of attending the English play-based pedagogy workshop and other CPD courses based on international ECEC pedagogies, they highlighted the characteristics of effective CPD provision, which we summarise as an integrated learning approach that includes the following characteristics:

- integrating international and Chinese contexts in the content and teaching of CPD courses (e.g., co-facilitators from both contexts model integration during CPD courses);
- offering hands-on and interactive activities that enable teachers to reflect on cultural comparisons, practise integration and receive instant feedback (e.g., teachers role-play alternative contextually appropriate practice that represents culturally universal principles);
- building up a sustained learning community where teachers can receive long-term support for self-evaluation and self-reflection on transformations in practice (e.g., to use web- or mobile-based platforms such as Wechat group).

Informed by the interview data, we argue that the emphasis is laid on empowering kindergarten teachers by improving their capabilities of integrating international pedagogies with culturally relevant practices under the regimes of cultural and sociopolitical norms in Chinese ECEC systems. We further elaborate on this integrated learning approach in the following discussion.

Discussion

The findings of our study show a considerable degree of dissonance between Chinese kindergarten teachers' ideals and practice of play-based pedagogy, which is also recognised by previous studies of ECEC practitioners in western contexts (Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland, and Wollscheid 2019; McInnes et al. 2011). The Chinese kindergarten teachers in our study were themselves aware of the dissonance and pointed out a number of contextual barriers which they believed had hindered them from enacting

what they regarded as ‘best practice’ of play-based pedagogy. These perceived barriers coincide with the findings of Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland, and Wollscheid (2019), which reviewed ECEC teachers’ views on play-based pedagogy in 24 national contexts. The challenge to tackle the gap or mismatch between pedagogical understanding and practice is not unique to China but rather has wider implications on ECEC development worldwide.

Taking a critical stance towards the structural restraints and relational resistance in local contexts (Vahasantanen and Etelapelto 2011), the Chinese kindergarten teachers in our study demonstrated a lack of agency in transforming their practice through active attempts to translate what they have learnt from the CPD workshop into contextually relevant practice in their own kindergartens. The insufficiency of agency is mainly evident in two aspects, which to a certain extent corresponds with the conceptualisations of teacher agency in both western and Chinese contexts, namely, the capacity and the enactment (Imants and Van Der Wal 2020; Simpson et al. 2018). The kindergarten teachers in our study showed a low level of self-efficacy (Bandura 1997) in cultural integration, expressing an urgent need to improve their capabilities of reflection, adaptation and integration. Meanwhile, they were aware of their senses of powerlessness and autonomy deprivation (Deci and Ryan 2000), rendering them demotivated to actively experiment and validate new pedagogical approaches in practice within local contexts. Therefore, it is essential for CPD courses to address these two hindering aspects in order to promote teacher agency – both at individual levels and collectively for kindergarten teachers in a collective, top-down Chinese ECEC system (Fu and Clark 2017). As shown in our findings, Chinese kindergarten teachers of this study particularly highlighted lacking capability and regarded improving their capability as the most urgent need. We argue that it is reasonable to lay more emphasis on the capacity aspect in order to promote culturally sensitive teacher agency (Simpson et al. 2018) among Chinese kindergarten teachers.

Based on the findings of this study, we propose that an integrated learning approach that aims at enhancing teachers’ capability and reflectivity in cultural integration can enhance teacher agency, thereby contributing to tackling the rhetoric/practice dissonance in Chinese kindergarten teachers. The first step is to integrate international and Chinese contexts in the content and teaching of CPD courses. This paves the foundation for further integration. Imants and Wal (2020) suggest that teachers’ CPD is inherently contextualised with multiple levels (e.g., direct work environment of teachers, kindergarten policy, general kindergarten culture, managerial decision making, national policy and guidance). We should be mindful of the heterogeneity of cultural experience within Chinese kindergarten teachers (Ladson-Billings 2014; Brooks and Kitto [Under Review](#)). No one understands the local contexts better than the teachers themselves. Therefore, CPD provision should offer hands-on and interactive activities that enable teachers to reflect on cultural comparisons, practise integration based on their own experience and receive instant feedback from the facilitators and fellow participants. These participative activities focus on strengthening teachers’ capabilities of coming up with and enacting alternative contextually appropriate practice that represents culturally universal pedagogical principles, as well as building up their self-efficacy during the

process (Bandura 1997). The activities also promote interactions among Chinese kindergarten teachers themselves, allowing collective agency to be enabled. Finally, it is critical to form and maintain a sustained learning community where teachers can share experience of enactment with each other, obtain feedback about self-evaluation and self-reflection on transformations in practice, provide each other with moral support when needed, and most importantly, empower each other during the process of CPD. Empirical evidence from previous studies on Chinese teachers' professional development (e.g. Gu 2013; Sansom 2020) shows that Chinese teachers value relatedness which refers to '*feeling connected to others [and] having a sense of belongingness both with other individuals and with one's community*' (Deci and Ryan 2002, 7). Accordingly, building up a sustained learning community for CPD contributes to the fulfillment of teachers' psychological need for relatedness, which is instrumental to their self-determined motivation for enactment in CPD (Ryan and Deci 2000). This may also contribute to the formation of collective agency, which highlights '*the context-dependent, relational, and distributed nature of agency: human agency is a "hybrid" that can be understood only as a relation between different entities.*' (Rainio and Jaakko 2017, 84). This is particularly relevant to collectivist societies, like China. To foster a sense of collective agency in a CPD community can boost a collective effort to drive transformations in practice. Therefore, we regard forming a sustained learning community as an essential element of the integrated learning approach to promoting culturally sensitive teacher agency in Chinese kindergarten teachers.

We acknowledge the limitations of this study, of which we are mindful during the process of data analysis and interpretation of findings. Given that the participants of this study were recruited from Chinese kindergarten teachers who were interested in and also could afford to attend the CPD workshop on English play-based pedagogy, they were hardly representative of the population of Chinese kindergarten teachers. We are conscious that some Chinese kindergarten teachers may hold a more critical stance towards play-based pedagogy (Bubikova-Moan, Hjetland, and Wollscheid 2019) and we could have obtained more diverse perspectives if we had reached out to kindergarten teachers of more heterogeneous backgrounds. Nonetheless, by collecting data using different methods at different time points around the CPD workshop, this study has generated some intriguing findings about the impact of CPD courses that are based on international ECEC pedagogies from selected Chinese kindergarten teachers' perspectives. We recognise the complexity in contextualising teacher agency in Chinese ECEC, given the heterogeneous contexts within China. Future studies can build on the current findings and seek to promote teacher agency in CPD for building a quality workforce in Chinese ECEC.

Conclusion

This paper aims to explore how CPD courses based on international ECEC pedagogies could improve the knowledge and practice of Chinese kindergarten teachers. We used our CPD workshop on English play-based pedagogy as an opportunity to collect first-hand data to explore the characteristics of effective CPD provision for Chinese kindergarten teachers. The findings show that there is a considerable

degree of dissonance between Chinese kindergarten teachers' perceptions and practice of play-based pedagogy, which may be partly due to a number of perceived barriers, including insufficient capability, structural restraints, discouraging kindergarten leadership and disapproval from parents. A lack of teacher agency at both individual and collective levels is evident among Chinese kindergarten teachers as they described feeling 'powerless' and 'demotivated' in resolving the rhetoric/practice dissonance under current circumstances. We argue that international ECEC CPD provision for Chinese kindergarten teachers should take an integrated learning approach, which promotes culturally sensitive teacher agency by enhancing teachers' capability and reflectivity in cultural integration. By empowering teachers in a culturally sensitive manner, CPD provision that takes an integrated learning approach can contribute toward building a quality workforce in Chinese ECEC.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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