

**Universality versus culturality in early childhood education (ECE):
What are they and where are they located in the everyday practice of
Chinese and English ECE?**

Yuwei Xu¹, Sarah Barton^{2*}, Huan Chen³, & Sally Pratt⁴

¹ *School of Education, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, United Kingdom;*

² *School of Education and Sociology, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, UK;*

³ *Independent Researcher, China;*

⁴ *Early Years Consultant, UK.*

* Corresponding author: sarah.barton@port.ac.uk; St Georges' Building, 141 High Street,
Portsmouth PO1 2HY, United Kingdom

ORCID:

Yuwei Xu: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4210-9963>

Sarah Barton: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4133-2154>

Huan Chen: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5400-8951>

Universality versus culturality in early childhood education (ECE): What are they and where are they located in the everyday practice of Chinese and English ECE?

Criticisms on the dominance of ‘Western’ mores and values in shaping early childhood education (ECE) curriculum frameworks in Asian contexts have led to arguments for culturally appropriate pedagogy that addresses conflict and fusion of Western and non-Western cultures. However, whether concerns about quality of practice in ECE relate to cultural differences or structural limitations is not empirically established in existing literature. There is ongoing debate on whether international quality standards are possible/necessary. Our paper responds to the research gap and adds insight into universality and culturality of quality ECE from cross-cultural perspectives. Taking interpretative approach, four scholars from China and England seek to make sense of observed differences across English and Chinese practices in ECE. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) informed our data analysis, and a three-stage inter-researcher and cross-cultural analyses were followed. Our reflections challenge the deficit model often associated with Chinese ECE practices in international literature. Findings suggest full contextualisation and cultural understanding are essential in interpreting different practices; whereby cross-cultural reflections among researchers and practitioners offer learning opportunities for such understanding.

Keywords: culturally appropriate pedagogy; comparative early childhood education; globalisation; IPA; researcher reflectivity

Introduction

In the context of globalisation effects in early childhood education (ECE) (Ball, 2012; Faas & Wasmuth, 2019; Yang et al., 2022), the socio-cultural constructions of ECE pedagogy and practice have attracted increasing scholarly interest particularly in Global South contexts. Scholars criticize the dominance of ‘Western’ mores and values in the curriculum frameworks in non-Western societies (Bautista et al., 2021; Gupta, 2018), and argue for culturally appropriate curricula in ECE that address the conflict and fusion of Western and non-Western cultures (Ang, 2010; Harvell, 2013; Yang & Li, 2019).

However, we find that whether concerns about quality and practices in ECE (particularly in non-Western contexts) relate to cultural differences or structural limitations is not empirically established in existing literature. Yet, under the impact of globalisation in shaping the curriculum and practice of Chinese Kindergartens, Huang et al. (2019) suggest characteristics of Chinese ECE practices demonstrate a unique Chinese pedagogical interaction that is a fusion of participatory and transmissive pedagogies. Furthermore, Yang and Li (2018 & 2019) indicated that the school-based curriculum in China was characterised by a school-based fusion of East and West. There is need for a more comprehensive understanding of the current landscape of ECE in China and the role of culture in the ECE practices.

There is also ongoing debate on whether international quality standards are possible/necessary (Elwick et al, 2018). Our paper responds to the research gap and adds insight into the universality and culturality of quality ECE from cross-cultural perspectives, Western and non-Western. To examine this, we specifically identify day-to-day influences on young children namely: ECE environments (visual and aesthetic), free-flow and structured activities, and personal care. Those aspects of ECE provide a venue where discussion on the cultural underpinnings shaping ECE occur.

Taking reflective and interpretive approaches, we seek to answer two research questions in our paper: 1. How do Chinese and English scholars interpret the observed differences across English and Chinese practices in ECE? 2. What changes of views/practices do reflections on those differences lead to?. The four authors (2 originally come from China and two are English) each wrote a reflective piece on our interpretations and understanding of the similarities and differences that we experienced in ECE practices in China and England. Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2008) informed our data analysis, and a three-stage inter-researcher & cross-cultural

analyses were followed to make sense of our interpretations. The process also facilitated further reflections among us, contributing to a co-constructed interpretation of the phenomena (i.e., similarities and differences in Chinese and English ECE practices).

As mentioned above, three themes emerged in our data analysis, including ECE environments (visual and aesthetic), free-flow and structured activities, and personal care. Under each theme, we discuss what similarities and differences are observed in the two countries and how we interpret them in relation to socio-cultural and political contexts. In what follows, this article starts by situating itself in international literature on the globalization effects in ECE and the cultural comparisons of ECE in Western and Asian societies (Brooker & Whitehead, 2010; Choy, 2017; Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014; Roopnarine et al, 2018). We then introduce the research gaps addressed and the methodology. After presenting findings of the three themes, we conclude the article with reflections that challenge the deficit model often associated with Chinese ECE practices in international literature.

The globalization effects in ECE

Starting as an economic phenomenon, globalization has impacted every aspect of daily life around the world at multiple levels. It creates a common culture through the flow of individuals, the distribution of technology, and the distribution of information and values (Rana, 2012). However, instead of an active two-way interaction, these cultural messages are more emanated from the United States of America and other 'western' countries (through colonisation). In the context of ECE, this is evidenced by the domination of developmental psychology and developmentally appropriate practice discourses that impulse a universal understanding of childhood and ECE across various cultures (Campbell-Barr & Bogatić, 2017; Moss, 2015; Wood & Hedges, 2016;).

Emerging from Piaget's ages and stages conceptualisation, developmental psychology advocates for the idea that all children will achieve maturity by following a universal, measurable path of development. The theory was embodied in the *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* put forward by National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997) and then actively promoted by The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) through widespread and decontextualized studies such as the International Early Learning and Child Well-Being Study (OECD, 2020), Starting Strong (OECD, 2001; OECD, 2015) and Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) (Berliner, 2011; Bieber & Martens, 2011; Delaune, 2019; Moss & Urban, 2020). The OECD widely spread its educational values and definition of the best practice, making the idea of observable age-related stages of behaviour and development milestones become the "basic fabric of practice" (Fleer, 2006, p.126) and the "ontological and epistemological meta-narrative" (Wood, 2020, p. 322) of ECE.

Developmental psychology provides a logic that is appealing to policy makers and thus deeply shapes ECE curriculum frameworks and policy structures, potentially disrespecting cultural differences. It created a discourse of control that Rose (1999) termed "human technologies" (cited by Moss, 2015, p. 227), which posits that early monetary intervention with an emphasis on process accountability and cost-effectiveness will produce monetary gains - not only for a more competent labour force in the future but also for women's employment in the current. In order to ensure such benefits, a highly evidence-based quality regulation system is needed, as well as a more rigorous way of monitoring and tracking children's progress. This singular truth strongly promotes market sensibilities (Foucault, 2012) and a neoliberal ideology of governance (Sellar & Lingard, 2013), in respect of legality or moral correctness (Foucault, 2008). Countries with lower

ranking tend to imitate higher-ranked countries' policies and alter their curricular approaches in favour of standardized instruction, including more testing (Berliner, 2011) and one-size-fits-all curriculum (Delaune, 2019). An example comes from the analysis of Yang et al. (2022), although culturally different from each other, ECE policies in Australia, China, New Zealand and Singapore are all influenced by the OECD neoliberalism discourse. Ebrahim (2010) also noted how teachers unproblematically use the dominant developmental discourses in South Africa.

However, the dominance of psychology and child development, as well as the neoliberal human capital discourses have been questioned since the mid-1980s. Rogoff (2003) points out that children's development can be understood as transformation of their participation in cultural activities, where culture not only defines development, but also frames the context of supporting development. Hedegaard (2004) observes development happens when the child interacts with their surroundings, which means that it is not something that exists within the child. Much empirical research has provided evidence to these discussions. Gupta (2006) writes how the learning styles of young children in India are different from what *Developmentally Appropriate Practice* promotes, calling for awareness of the fact that context- and culture-specific norms can guide children's growth and behaviour. For example, the Chinese attitude that academic achievement is most highly prized (more so than in the UK) normalises child development (Luo et al., 2013). Other cross-cultural research has also proved significant differences in children's development in various cultures (e.g., Lau et al., 2022; Super & Harkness, 1998; Woodhead et al., 1998). Scholars like Edwards (2004) and Flear (2006) thus suggest the urgent need to understand how the cultural world of children is shaped by adults who participate in it, breaking the logic cycle of purely individually oriented. Research conducted by Yang and Li (2018) and Huang et al (2019) claim that Chinese school-based

curricula provide a balance of child-centred and teacher-directed pedagogies, highlighting dynamic adult-child interactions in Chinese cultural contexts of ECE.

Goswami (2015) argues that children's learning is socially mediated. Instead of a linear age and stage Piagetian model, understanding children as social actors is critical. Barron & Taylor (2017) remind us to challenge dominant policy driven discourses and ways of working. For example supporting practitioners in finding harmony between the tension of fulfilling Ofsted requirements whilst simultaneously meeting the emotions and needs of the children and families they serve in the English context.

The globalized domination of investment and return discourse has largely simplified the value of ECE to serve the global market or global race (Department for Education, 2013; Haslip & Gullo, 2018). Moss (2015) reflects that ECE institutions become nothing but *factories* for early learning goals and school readiness, education thus is reduced to an utterly technical practice. Commenting on this issue, McLaren and Farahmandpur (2003) and later Miller et al (2017) concur that marketisation, in this way, becomes imposed on the whole of humankind. In order to achieve the desired high return, tightly defined programs are compiled to ensure that even those less well-educated teachers can apply an evidence-based approach. The institutionalised path of understanding therefore ignores children's endless potentiality and possibility that Regio Emilia approach emphasise for example, refusing to admit that authentic learning cannot be predicted or managed (Edwards et al., 2011). As Loris Malaguzzi reminds us, "Anglo-Saxon testology is nothing but a ridiculous simplification of knowledge" (Cagliari et al., 2016, p.378), where Moss and Urban (2020), in critique of the recently published OECD's (2020) International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study (IELS) see no contribution to sustainability or social and ecological justice and another example of restrictive datafication, testing and a mode of governance.

Recognizing the globalisation effects as dominant, however, in the context of glocalization as a complementary concept, Ritzer (2003) and Robertson (2012) ask us to reject current notions and implications of globalisation in maintaining a culture (particularly Eastern culture in opposition to Western moors) that is true to itself. One which seeks to embrace other ideas yet balances this with local ‘something’ (p.194) that does not diminish its rich and distinctive content. Underpinned by this argument, our paper now moves on to introduce the glocalised cultural contexts of ECE in England and China.

Cultural contexts of ECE in England and China

The criticism of a dominated best practice and singular truth calls for an alternative discourse of culturally appropriate practice, respecting and embracing the diversity of cultures where children live and grow. Fleer (2006) considers intersubjectivity between the early childhood institution and cultural communities, in which a dominant worldview and practice is seriously questioned and proposes that children’s development is carefully put into the social and cultural situation. In turn educators seek out a much richer understanding of children from their everyday activities within communities and plan their teaching accordingly (Chen, 2023). Furthermore, Millei and Jones (2014) discussed how the outcome-based curriculum framework of Australia contains some elements of social imaginaries which might create space for moving away from the narrow economic understanding of children to a wider global interconnectivity positioning childhood as a means to equip children for their future in a global society.

Among this attempt to awaken the awareness of cultural impact in children’s learning and development, there is one significant force majorly led by Asian scholars to map out the cultural background of ECE in Asian countries, especially those based on ancient Chinese

culture. It is reported that ECE in western countries such as England is based on biology, neuroscience, and developmental psychology: respect for individuality, truth and certainty (Soto & Swadener, 2002; Qu et al., 2021). Curriculum guidance in England emphasises child-centeredness, creativity, self-expression, and the pathway of children's development (Xu, Brooks, Gao, & Kitto, 2020). In contrast, ECE in countries based on ancient Chinese culture is largely impacted by Confucianism, which means respect for authority, conformity, loyalty to good leaders, hard work, collectivism, thrift, and emphasis on education (Yang & Li, 2019). Philips and Schweisfurth (2014) note that in some cultures like China, kindergartens may prioritise structured routines to instill discipline and order, while others such as England may emphasize autonomy to foster independence and creativity. Furthermore, aesthetic choices in classroom setups can reflect broader societal values and educational philosophies in the two countries, influencing children's engagement and learning experiences - as we shall illustrate in our findings.

Formerly, Chinese teachers emphasise the acquisition of pre-academic knowledge and skills and believe children's play time occurs after classwork is finished (Che & Yan, 2008). Yet, in contemporary China there is an emerging paradigm shift and reforms suggest that a play based, child-centred approach is favourable like in England and other western countries (Lin & Li, 2018). Bautista et al. (2021) explain how kindergarten curriculum frameworks in both Singapore and the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (SAR) of the People's Republic of China are all grounded in western theories, acknowledging children as protagonists of their own learning; whilst in reality teachers perceive it as impossible to implement in practice due to the traditional Chinese cultures as illustrated above (Cheung, 2016). Fleer and Li (2020) observed the collective play of children in a Chinese rural kindergarten and supported the statement that Chinese people

tend to be in groups instead of individually oriented (Zhu & Zhang, 2008) - again a tension manifested in the process of practicing Western ECE theories in China.

Nevertheless, the existing literature somehow oversimplifies the issue by implying a deficit model of defining a certain culture and its relationship with culturally appropriate practice. Some interpretations defend the eligibility of a certain pedagogical phenomenon based on a conceptualized picture of culture. One example is to classify individualism as western culture and discuss how it is incompatible with cultural values in an Asian country (Gupta, 2006; Liu & Tobin, 2018). Without further scrutiny into what the actual value and impact of individualism is in daily ECE practice in both cultures, it is important to consider how local practice contributes to modifying the existing discourse and why it is the future pathway. Another example is different curricula grouped as western approaches in respect of their opposite foundation, such as Reggio Emilia in Italy converged with Early Years Foundation Stage in England just because they all come from European countries (Bautista et al., 2021), who disregard how Dahlberg et al. (2013) argue that Reggio Emilia represents the alternative to the neoliberalism rationale.

Research gaps

Although previous discussions are rich, one gap as we see in the literature is that it generally criticises the dominance of developmentalism at a theoretical or conceptual level. Nevertheless, how this links to a practical level or day to day practice for practitioners is not clear. Because of this lack of clarity, more detailed discussion on pedagogical differences in culturally different countries is needed to provide a better picture of how certain pedagogical phenomenon is impacted by the power of globalization or local culture. This paper contributes by transparentising the process of how Chinese and English scholars make sense of the daily ECE practices from a cultural lens.

In addition, this paper shares cross-cultural experiences from England and China, offering insights into the complexities of cultural constructions of ECE practice. By having the discussion between scholars with cross-culture experiences from both England and China, we on the one hand aim to be more critical in terms of shared experiences and shared perspectives - on both negative and positive sides of all phenomena we have observed; on the other hand we are also looking for ways to promote reflection and facilitate possible changes. Such cross-cultural reflection opens space for problematizing and exploring discourses of developmental appropriateness and cultural appropriateness; (re)constructing universally shared and culturally specific ECE values and practices.

Methods

Taking reflective and interpretative approaches, this paper addresses two research questions:

1. How do Chinese and English scholars interpret the observed differences across English and Chinese practices in ECE?
2. What changes of views/practices do reflections on those differences lead to?

Our approaches are informed by Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in that we attempt to make sense of our (the ‘participants’) lived experiences of visiting and working in Chinese/English ECE settings (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Those experiences are not confined to interpretations by any pre-existing theories but are instead sense-made by us with our personal, professional and (inter)cultural backgrounds. In the meanwhile, we are also the researchers who make sense of our own sense making as participants (Smith, 2011). Therefore, our approaches further embrace the underpinning theories of autoethnography, whereby our reflections on personal experiences are situated in the

social, cultural and political norms that we interact with in the two countries (Adams et al., 2017). We argue that the knowledge produced through our approaches are co-constructed reflectivity on our personal experiences both as the researcher and the researched (Xu et al., 2021). The findings and interpretations presented in this paper are thus acknowledged as premised on and limited by our personal experiences. Future research may build on our personal reflections and extend to experiences of a diverse population of practitioners.

The ‘researcher participants’

Our methodological approaches render it important to introduce ourselves as the researcher participants (i.e., researchers who are also participants). We identify ourselves as either practitioner-facing academics or practitioners, who have gained intercultural experiences of Chinese and English ECE through work, study, and academic visits in/to the two countries. Two of us originally come from China and two were born and grew up in England - our experiences in, and understandings of, the two cultural contexts (Xu, 2018) thus complement each other and promote further reflections (or ‘*work discussions*’ Elfer and Wilson, 2021, p.167) on each other’s experiences. Below are our brief self-introductions relevant to this paper:

Yuwei Xu has over 10 years’ cross-cultural experiences in ECE in the UK and China. He studied for a BA in ECE in a Chinese university, worked as an intern kindergarten teacher & a university teacher in China, did research fieldwork in Chinese kindergartens, and frequently visits Chinese kindergartens to deliver workshops and seminars. In the meantime, he obtained his Master’s and PhD in (early) childhood studies in the UK, and delivers talks and consultancy to local authorities and practitioners, and has thus far worked as a lecturer/researcher in ECE in four UK universities. His research largely

adopts comparative and cross-cultural approaches concerning ECE in the UK and China. Those experiences position him as an 'insider' and 'outsider' in both British and Chinese contexts of ECE. He is familiar with the two systems and their wider socio-cultural contexts, but also maintains a level of distance not having to work in the frontiers in both countries. Therefore, his reflections are limited to his personal and professional subjectivities as one who experienced educational systems in Britain and China, as well as one who researches about British and Chinese ECE from sociological and educational perspectives.

Sarah Barton has over 30 years' experience in the field of early years education. After her initial careers as an early years practitioner and qualified primary school teacher in the UK she moved focus into training emerging and existing early years practitioners; teaching, training, and lecturing in the post compulsory education sector. Sarah joined the University of Portsmouth in January 2011 as the Course Leader for Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) (and until recently the Early Years Initial Teacher Training programme leading to Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS)). She is now Course Leader BA in Early Childhood Studies. In her role she similarly supports students from overseas, most notably those from mainland China and Hong Kong and has visited the country in a professional capacity in the last 5 years. Sarah therefore considers herself as an insider practitioner/ researcher/participant in terms of her UK based experience of the education system and a motivated observer of the Chinese system.

Huan Chen did her BA and MA in a Chinese university, during which she regularly visited local kindergartens for voluntary and academic reasons, and also worked as a part-time lecturer of ECE in a local college. She investigated the history of government intervention in the ECE market in England in her doctorate research and did field work in various types of ECE providers during her academic visit in London. After her

graduation, she has been working with a nursery manager from the UK to provide online training to Chinese practitioners, managers and parents. Based on her experiences, she perceives herself more of an insider of the ECE in China than in the UK, but she is actively being an observer of the daily educational practice (and issues) in nurseries of both countries, especially from an institutional perspective.

Sally Pratt is an Early Years Consultant and Nursery Operations Manager and a former tutor at Southampton City College. She has over 30 years' experience of working within the early years sector. Training and professional development resulted in gaining a managerial position in a pre-school, where she developed the quality of practice, and expansion to a second setting and achieved an outstanding inspection outcome within 7 months of opening. She moved on to work as an advisor for the local authority, working with a diverse range of childcare settings. Sally's reflections followed a short trip to South China. The experience provoked reflection on curriculum delivery and areas of pedagogical practice she would like to explore further. Although her experience of Chinese ECE is limited she is able to provide a comprehensive practitioner's perspective.

Data collection

Drawing on our personal and professional experiences, we each wrote a reflective piece on our interpretations and understanding of the similarities and differences that we experienced in ECE practices in China and England. We started with writing an unstructured reflection that captures everything as we see relevant about our experiences of Chinese and English ECE. After reading our first drafts and some face-to-face discussions, we identified some common themes that emerged in our initial reflections and wrote about those aspects in further depth. Whilst these second drafts of reflections constitute the major raw data that we analysed, the reflections continued to enrich as we

navigated through the data analysis.

Data analysis

A three-stage inter-researcher and cross-cultural analyses were followed to make sense of our interpretations of ECE practices in China and England. As said above, the process facilitated further reflections among us, contributing to a co-constructed interpretation of the phenomena (i.e. similarities and differences in Chinese and English ECE practices).

Each stage is described in detail below:

Stage 1: Inner-culture analysis. The two Chinese/English researchers analysed each other's reflections and discussed the analyses together to clarify unclear points and share thoughts. Notes were added to the reflections for further analyses;

Stage 2: Cross-culture analysis. We were divided into two groups each comprising a Chinese and an English researcher. Our reflections were analysed cross-culturally, following discussions and clarifications;

Stage 3: All reflections and notes from Stages 1 & 2 were read by/shared with the whole team. We then met to agree on key aspects that are included in this paper as findings.

Findings

The data analysis established three themes including ECE environments, free-flow and structured activities, and personal care. Similarities and differences were observed between the two countries, and these are robustly interpreted using Smith's (2011) model of good IPA, in relation to socio-cultural and political contexts. As previously acknowledged, our reflections on the three themes are based on what we experienced ourselves. It is not intended to compare the two countries in these regards; nor to

thoroughly review the complexities of ECE environments, activities or personal care. The focus is on how the reflections have provided space for disrupting widely believed tensions between and binary constructions of Western and Chinese ECE cultures.

ECE environments

Reflecting on their physical experience visiting a kindergarten in southern China, the two English researchers particularly noted differences in the ways ECE environments were organized. For them, ECE environments are effective when they represent children's lived experience and are recognised as socio-culturally authentic by young children. In England, the statutory curriculum, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2024), requires practitioners to provide an environment which supports children's individual needs in partnership with parents. Smith & Dyer (2019) suggest that a quality environment is one which stimulates curiosity, is developmentally appropriate and makes use of indoor, outdoor, and naturalistic spaces. Yet, whilst appreciation of the arts, in this context visual, is somewhat established in English settings through the *curiosity approach* for example (Gater, 2022), there is no recognised theoretical framework within which practitioners can operate (Lim, 2004). The value placed upon the visual aestheticism of the environment was thus most noted in the China kindergarten visited by us. We observed joint displays from teachers and children that provided a rich, aesthetically pleasing, environment. A contrasting perspective was perceived - many of the displays were exhibited high up on walls and from ceilings, on which we reflected that in England our thinking is that children's work would be at a child's eye line. However, it was aesthetically pleasing, and we assumed it would have a positive impact for the children as it had for us. Indeed, Chen (2023) notes greater adherence to eastern values and practices in replicating an environment known to children; possibly indicating a refusal to wholly

adopt western practices and engagement with the global-local dilemma. The emotional environment was very positive from our perspectives. There was a strong sense of community, and the children exhibited a strong sense of belonging and received emotional support from those around them. There was a respect for each other and the environment. There was a strong feeling of wellbeing and calm. Simple touches such as plants both inside and small plant display areas outside seem to have an impact to the overall environment. Additionally, the children all took great care of their learning environment. Resources were replaced neatly within the appropriate learning areas and the area cleared, with extreme care after use. This may indicate a high level of expectation and the resulting level of attainment.

One aspect of English ECE practice as we understand it is to celebrate the child's voice, showcasing the learning process through displays within the environment (Harris & Manatakis, 2013). Conversely, we were informed that Chinese ECE tend to embed parental expectations and a competitive culture within their environments. Whilst the latter is usually criticised by Chinese scholars and teachers, our reflection supports that the impact of these environmental aesthetics, engenders teacher praxis and children's feeling of security and welfare (Davies, 2022). We noted keen emphasis on physical development and art and design. Observations of children participating in a variety of art projects highlighted extremely well-developed fine motor skills. This may be due to a number of factors: extended periods of engagement, attainment linked to high expectation, use and manipulation of small tools including the use of chopsticks and the development of gross motor skills. There is little research on kindergarten environments situated in eastern cultures. However, Lim and Bahauddin (2019) indicate that the environment will represent the prevailing pedagogy and culturally appropriate context within which that preschool is situated. We therefore reflect that children in the Chinese

kindergarten would identify themselves in the environment, where home and kindergarten converge.

To summarise, in this respect, IPA methodology involved examination of co-constructed phenomenological experience (Smith et al., 2009). Through sharing this experience among ourselves, new insights into the cultural and pedagogical underpinnings for ECE environments are facilitated. Our example above shows one expectation in Chinese ECE that the environment embeds parental expectations and a competitive culture. This expectation is normally criticized within the Chinese context, against a Western construction that ECE environments normally suggest children's learning journeys and trajectories and their experiences of different environments in the social world. Our reflections instead, point to the pleasant feelings and mood the environments can bring to children and adults.

Free-flow and structured activities

Our second example relates to the organization of play activities; whereby structured activities in non-Western contexts are often devalued for not promoting individual child freedom, interest, or agency (Gao et al., 2022). In England practitioners and academics work upon the premise that play is the primary vehicle for learning, supported and extended by co-exploration and episodes of sustained shared thinking with practitioners (Smidt, 2010; Sylva et al., 2004,). Play is the means by which children learn and develop and practitioners have a duty to reflect upon practice and lead improvements in order to meet the changing needs of each child. This is part of the observe, assess, plan, do, review process advocated with the Early Years Curriculum - Early Years Foundation Stage - EYFS (Crow & Firth, 2019; DfE, 2024). Observation is key, without this planning cannot be relevant and tracking children's learning trajectories underpins the planning of guiding

sequential experiences and activities to stimulate children's interest and encourage depth of learning (Pyle & Daniels, 2017). Practitioners question, model, encourage problem solving and prompt reflection within a framework that incorporates free and structured play, through child-initiated and adult-directed activities. The framework delivery is free-flow in nature. This is not only from one area to another, inside and outside, but the use of a variety of resources to allow ideas and concepts to develop and connections to be made. This ethos fundamentally relies on a child-centred, play-based pedagogy.

In China, Keung & Cheung (2019) and Yin et al. (2022) also found that a collaborative culture supported children's development through teacher interaction and their own interpretation of play pedagogy and home-school partnerships. However, we recognise that there are multi-layered definitions of play, and that two pervading approaches can be identified: child-led and adult directed. Previous studies have shown an inconsistency between teachers' curriculum beliefs and practices (Chan, 2016; Wen et al., 2011). It is suggested that in England the former approach dominates and in China the latter - with many teachers finding it a challenge to practice individually oriented play-based pedagogy in a collective culture of Chinese ECE (Gao et al. 2022). This is not to deny that in some Chinese kindergarten contexts a balanced pedagogy between child-centredness and teacher-directedness exists (Yang and Li, 2019); but to point out the prevalence of a binary tension shaping Chinese and western play activities.

In England, the notion of free-flow play, where children are given the opportunity to play without any restrictions, expectation of conformity or adult interference is embedded as a result of the quality environment both indoors and outdoors (Bruce, 2011; DfE, 2024). The strengths of free-flow delivery afford practitioners opportunities to note and support

schematic play which is strongly embedded in English practice. Perhaps in contrast, whilst staff at the Chinese kindergarten we visited did express awareness of the importance of play and a child focussed curriculum, they are acutely aware of parental expectations regarding the content and mode of delivery. For example, aesthetic instruction and environment, more academic input and in some cases homework. It was with this lens that the stark difference in Chinese kindergartens were observed. The kindergarten routine appeared to rely on a schedule and order. Children indeed chose their play area yet were expected to play there for up to 40 minutes. We, as experienced practitioners representing both etic and emic perspectives (insider/outsider researchers) (Naaeke et al., 2011), imagined the challenge is to determine the role of the adult and to be strategic, for example, is it intervention or intrusion (Pyle & Daniels, 2017)? We reflected that in regard to the way free-flow is enacted in England there may be potential to disadvantage children and there is much to learn from Chinese practice. For instance, children in China were witnessed to engage for an extended period of time and in doing so had the opportunity to master a variety of skills.

We further recalled a professional dialogue highlighted that in the Chinese kindergarten children would typically experience whole group input to deliver a planned learning objective, which may include a demonstration from the teacher. The children would then have an opportunity to independently explore the resources used during the demonstration. The concept of free-flow play and how learning objectives were planned for in England were explored with the staff in China. Although the idea of a holistic approach, using multi-media across the learning environment was unfamiliar, staff were interested to discuss this approach at length to enable them to explore how they could incorporate it into their own practice and provide a learning environment that would

support this. The children in the Chinese kindergarten we visited appeared to have far more advanced skills in self-regulation, than children we worked with in England. Could this be linked to higher expectations both within nursery and at home? In addition, during observations, only brief interactions between the children and the teachers were noted. How the children are supported to extend their enquiries, develop deeper meaning and understanding, higher order thinking and problem-solving skills is a matter for further examination.

In the English context, we understand that the emphasis on remaining in one play area in the kindergartens, appeared restrictive to notions of creativity and making connections between play materials - for example what might be if you could transport sand play resources to the paint area and develop some different mark making experiments? What if the children in the water tray wanted to build a bridge to allow vehicles to pass above the fast-rushing river? In these instances, children “lead” their own learning (Broadhead & Burt, 2012, p.98). Ideas develop in a cross-curriculum manner - creativity meets physical adeptness, language develops as ideas are explained and new vocabulary explored to imagine, and problem solve, writing and reading are developed, and knowledge of the world (Science) helps support conceptual understanding (Moyles et al., 2014). However, we also agreed in our reflections that routine in Chinese ECE offers reassurance, predictability and stability (Lancy, 2017) and it was also exceptionally apparent, that because children were expected to play in one area for that length of time that they could truly develop depth to that play - they needed to invoke new ways to explore the materials and work in different ways with the few children who had also chosen to be there. Their levels of concentration were also highly established. In contrast,

in free-flow environments seen in England, those children who are prone to uncertainty and indecisiveness, often skim through activities unable to settle or become absorbed.

We therefore see legitimate pedagogical reasoning that underpins free-flow and structured activities - with merits in both approaches. This observation does not seem to emerge in international literature, which largely takes a deficit view on group-based and structured activities in Chinese ECE (Bullough & Palaiologou, 2020).

Personal care

Thirdly, it was noted that in the Chinese kindergarten, adults appeared more likely to assist children in functions they may be able to complete themselves. This may include dressing themselves, carrying a drink, cutting fruit for snack, transporting resources and material about the classroom. In England there are several references to promoting children's independence from 16 months in statutory guidelines e.g. "Respond to children's increasing independence and sense of responsibility" (DfE, 2024. p. 51). Liu and Tobin (2018) found evidence of the continuity in Chinese preschools of other bodily practices, including routines for separation, meals, nap, and the bathroom, bodily practices that are more difficult to associate with authoritarianism or communism. This is not to say that children's learning styles were not acknowledged or provided for. Perhaps Communist influences help to explain how teachers organise daily routines and activities and their inclination for the use of group teaching instead of child-centred teaching according to Tobin et al. (2009).

Yet it was also interesting that staff were exceptionally open to further embrace Western educational theories and approaches to ECE with simplified learning objectives and

increased emphasis on the importance of children's free play and self-discovery (Wu, 2021; Yin et al., 2022). Child agency and children's participation are merging ideologies in both countries, with the growing popularity of child-centred pedagogies. There are however different interpretations of child-centredness including for example developmental, democratic, and individualistic (Campbell-Barr, 2019); and those different interpretations are to various degrees reflected in English and Chinese ECE settings. This problematizes the oftentimes binary divide of child-centred and teacher-directed practices in Chinese ECE (and in other contexts). There is therefore a need for practitioners to become reflective and sensitive in their pedagogies. Nevertheless, we reckon in China when caring for large numbers of children in a kindergarten classroom physical space and logistics are influential factors. The Chinese teachers we talked to understand the imperative that caring relationships between themselves and the children is foundational to ECE pedagogy, in the same way as the EYFS in England seeks to provide "quality and consistency in all early years' settings, so that every child makes good progress, and no child gets left behind" (DfE, 2024, p. 5). It was clear that children in China often spend up to 10 hours in the setting, essentially their entire waking day, then this practice may replicate that of a home practice and create a time of rest and relaxation - this is important for young children, especially so in day care (Drugli et al., 2018).

Discussion

This paper has highlighted the processes of interpreting inter-cultural curriculum models and practices with a view to evaluating wider integration of such between Chinese and English ECE settings. Utilising Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and a three-stage inter-researcher and cross-cultural analyses, we proceeded to make sense of our interpretations and reflected on the socio-cultural and pedagogical reasons that

underpin observed practices in our experiences of ECE in the two countries. As we shall illustrate below, the IPA-informed reflection has resulted in enhanced understanding of culturally-relevant practice in English and Chinese ECE; as well as in the problematisation of a deficit model often implied in global ECE context over practices other than those Western-based.

In particular, the process led to reflections on 3 exemplar themes emerging from the most striking observations: ECE environments; free-flow and structured activities; personal care. With regard to observable differences (and similarities) between the two cultures we noted that English ECE environments we are familiar with encapsulate an inherently child centred approach where children's experiences in their social worlds are reflected through play opportunities created, in an often bespoke manner, and foster a sense of independence in self-care routines, to engender trajectories of learning; whereas Chinese ECE environments in the particular kindergartens we visited tend to embed parental expectations and a competitive culture where play is aligned with adult initiated conceptualisations (Morley & Glazzard, 2012). This was derived, for example, from observing children in Chinese kindergartens engaged in set activities for up to 40 minutes and a keen sense of aestheticism promoted within the settings with an understanding that this would appeal to parents as much as creating a stimulating and vibrant atmosphere for the children. This led us to surmise that whilst children may have more opportunity to affect their own learning in a free flow context, there was great value in encouraging children to extend their levels of application, without distraction, to a given task thereby enhancing qualities such as higher order thinking and learning dispositions. We continued by questioning the role of the adult and their capacity to respond to children's emerging interests and needs as a feature of their pedagogy and secure, in-depth knowledge of child

development. We found limited evidence that children in the Chinese kindergartens we visited were any less served by their curriculum than those in English settings.

Our reflections challenge the deficit model often associated with Chinese ECE practices in international literature (Bullough & Palaiologou, 2020) and argue that China and England can learn from each other to enhance quality practices. Full contextualisation and cultural understanding are essential both in the interpretations of different practices and in facilitating changes. We conclude that cultural differences are important in cross-cultural comparisons of ECE practices, for the purpose of providing alternative and/or various practices and possibilities to achieve high-quality ECE (Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014). Nevertheless, cultural differences are not the excuses for reluctance in change. A certain level of universality in international standards of quality ECE is achievable with culturality embedded in such standards. We recommend that globally shared ECE values and beliefs (such as child agency, the importance of play, etc.) are more explicitly promoted and discussed through pre-service training and continuing professional development, specifically exemplifying how practices across cultures manifest these values and beliefs. Meanwhile, when sharing practices from other cultures it is essential to unfold the socio-cultural underpinnings and to fully explain the contexts situating those practices; particularly through the lenses of researchers and practitioners who are familiar with both cultures (like we did in this paper). This is a practice not currently fully employed when international ECE training workshops are delivered in China (and elsewhere) (Gao et al., 2022).

References

- Adams, T. E., Ellis, C., & Jones, S. H. (2017). Autoethnography. *The international encyclopedia of communication research methods*, 1-11. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118901731.iecrm0011>
- Ang, L. (2010). Critical perspectives on cultural diversity in early childhood: building an inclusive curriculum and provision. *Early Years*, 30(1), 41–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575140903562387>
- Ball, S. J. (2012). *Global Education Inc.: New Policy Networks and the Neoliberal Imaginary*. Routledge.
- Barron, I., & Taylor, L. (2017). Eating and scraping away at practice with two-year-olds. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 25(4), 567-581. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2017.1305437>
- Bautista, A., Bull, R., Ng, E. L., & Lee, K. (2021). “That’s just impossible in my kindergarten.” Advocating for ‘glocal’ early childhood curriculum frameworks. *Policy Futures in Education*, 19(2), 155-174. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210320956500>
- Berliner, D. (2011). Rational responses to high stakes testing: The case of curriculum narrowing and the harm that follows. *Cambridge journal of education*, 41(3), 287-302. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305764X.2011.607151>
- Bieber, T., & Martens, K. (2011). The OECD PISA study as a soft power in education? Lessons from Switzerland and the US. *European Journal of Education*, 46(1), 101-116. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1465-3435.2010.01462.x>
- Broadhead, P., & Burt, A. (2012). *Understanding Young Children's Learning Through Play: Building Playful Pedagogies*. Routledge

- Bullough, L., & Palaiologou, I. (2020). *Early Childhood Education in People's Republic of China: a Literature Review of the Publications Written in English*. UCL Institute of Education: <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10094639>
- Bredekamp, S., & Copple, C. (Eds.). (1997). *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs*. (Revised Edition). National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Brodie, K. (2014). *Sustained shared thinking in the early years*. Routledge.
- Brooker, L. and Woodhead, M. (eds.) (2010). *Culture and Learning. Early Childhood in Focus*. The Open University.
- Bruce, T. (2011). *Learning through play*. Hodder Education.
- Cagliari, P., Castegnetti, M., Giudici, C., et al. (Eds.). (2016). *Loris Malaguzzi and the Schools of Reggio Emilia: A Selection of His Writings and Speeches 1945–1993*. Routledge.
- Campbell-Barr, V. (2019). Interpretations of child centred practice in early childhood education and care. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 49(2), 249-265. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057925.2017.1401452>
- Campbell-Barr, V., & Bogatić, K. (2017). Global to local perspectives of early childhood education and care. *Early Child Development and Care*, 187(10), 1461-1470. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/03004430.2017.1342436>
- Carr, M., & Lee, W. (2019). *Learning Stories in Practice*. Sage.
- Chan, W. L. (2016). The discrepancy between teachers' beliefs and practices: a study of kindergarten teachers in Hong Kong. *Teacher Development*, 20(3), 417-433. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13664530.2016.1161658>
- Che, Y., & Yan, C. Y. (2008). "On Teacher's View of Play and Children's Freedom: Inspirations from Comparison between Preschool Education in Urban and Rural

Areas [In Chinese].” *Early Childhood Education (Educational Sciences)*, 10(1), 19–24.

Chen, J. J. (2023). Neoliberalism and neocolonialism in the mix: Evidence of glocalization in the globalization–localization dynamics of early childhood practices in Hong Kong. *Policy Futures in Education*, 0(0).
<https://doi.org/10.1177/14782103231171977>

Cheung, R.H.P. (2016). The challenge of developing creativity in a Chinese context: the effectiveness of adapting Western creative pedagogy to inform creative practice. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 24(1), 141-160.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2015.1087419>

Choy, G. (2017). Chinese Culture in Early Educational Environments. In R. Nirmala, Z, Jing and S Jin (Eds.). *Early Childhood Education in Chinese Societies (19)* (pp.31-54). Springer
<http://ndl.ethernet.edu.et/bitstream/123456789/40866/1/565.Nirmala%20Rao.pdf#page=45>

Crow, A., & Firth, N. (2019). Principles of planning. In J. McEvoy, S. McMahon (Eds.), *Child Centred Planning in the Early Years Foundation Stage*. (pp. 15-29). Learning Matters.

Dahlberg, G., Moss, P., & Pence, A. (2013). *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: Languages of evaluation* (3rd Ed.). Routledge.

Davies, T. (2022). Towards a praxis of difference: Reimagining intercultural understanding in Australian schools as a challenge of practice. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2022.2027002>

- Department for Education (DfE). (2024). Early years foundation stage statutory framework. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2>
- Delaune, A. (2019). Neoliberalism, neoconservatism, and globalisation: The OECD and new images of what is ‘best’ in early childhood education. *Policy Futures in Education*, 17(1), 59-70. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210318822182>
- Drugli, M. B., Solheim, E., Lydersen, S., Moe, V., Smith, L., & Berg-Nielsen, T. S. (2018). Elevated cortisol levels in Norwegian toddlers in childcare. *Early Child Development and Care*, 188(12), 1684–1695. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2016.1278368>
- Ebrahim, H. B. (2010). Dominant discourses of teachers in early childhood education. *Perspectives in Education*, 28(4), 80-88. <https://www.ajol.info/index.php/pie/article/view/76946>
- Edwards, C., Gandini, L., & Forman, G. (Eds.). (2011). *The Hundred Languages of Children: The Reggio Emilia Experience in Transformation: The Reggio Emilia Experience in Transformation*. ABC-CLIO.
- Edwards, A. (2004). Understanding context, understanding practice in early education. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 12(1), 85-101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13502930485209331>
- Elfer, P., & Wilson, D. (2021). Talking with feeling: using Bion to theorise ‘work discussion’ as a model of professional reflection with nursery practitioners. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 31(1), 165–183. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2021.1895290>

- Elwick, A., Osgood, J., Robertson, L., Sakr, M., & Wilson, D. (2018). In pursuit of quality: early childhood qualifications and training policy. *Journal of Education Policy*. 33(4), 510-525. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2017.1416426>
- Faas, S., & Wasmuth, H. (2019). Globalization, Transformation, and Cultures: Theoretical Notes and Perspectives on Reconceptualization and International Comparison in Early Childhood Education and Care. In: Faas, S., Kasüschke, D., Nitecki, E., Urban, M., Wasmuth, H. (eds) *Globalization, Transformation, and Cultures in Early Childhood Education and Care. Critical Cultural Studies of Childhood* (pp. 1-14). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27119-0_1
- Fleer, M. (2006). The cultural construction of child development: creating institutional and cultural intersubjectivity. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 14(2), 127-140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760600661294>
- Fleer, M., & Li, L. (2020). Curriculum reforms as a productive force for the development of new play practices in rural Chinese kindergartens. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 31(1), 63-78. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2020.1778447>
- Foucault, M. (2008). *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-79*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Foucault, M. (2012). *The Order of Things*. Routledge classics.
- Gao, J., Xu, Y., Kitto, E., Bradford, H., & Brooks, C. (2022). Promoting culturally-sensitive teacher agency in Chinese kindergarten teachers: an integrated learning approach. *Early Years: An International Research Journal*, 42(1), 55-70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575146.2021.1901661>
- Gater, M. (2022, November 12). Integration of the Curiosity Approach. *Early Years Educator*, 23(17). <https://doi.org/10.12968/eyed.2022.23.17.S7>

- Goswami, U., & Bryant, P. (2007). *Children's cognitive development and learning. Research report 3*. Cambridge Primary Review Trust.
- Goswami, U. (2015). *Children's cognitive development and learning. CPRT Research Survey 3 (new series)*. Cambridge Primary Review Trust.
- Gupta, A. (2006). *Early childhood education, postcolonial theory, and teaching practices in India: Balancing Vygotsky and the Veda*. Springer.
- Gupta, A. (2018). How neoliberal globalization is shaping early childhood education policies in India, China, Singapore, Sri Lanka and the Maldives. *Policy Futures in Education*, 16(1), 11-28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1478210317715796>
- Harris, P., & Manatakis, H. (2013). *Children as citizens: Engaging with the child's voice in educational settings*. Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group.
- Harvell, J. (2103). *The same ... or different? A comparative study of kindergarten policy and practices in China and England*. Unpublished Masters thesis. University of Plymouth.
- Haslip, M.J., & Gullo, D.F. (2018). The Changing Landscape of Early Childhood Education: Implications for Policy and Practice. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 46, 249-264. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-017-0865-7>
- Hedegaard, M. (2004, July 12-13). A cultural-historical approach to learning in classrooms [paper presentation]. International Society for Cultural and Activity Research Regional Conference, Wollongong, WG, Australia.
- Huang, R., Yang, W., & Hui, I. (2019). On the road to participatory pedagogy: A mixed-methods study of pedagogical interaction in Chinese kindergartens, *Teaching and Teacher Education* 85, p. 81-91
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0742051X18318821?via%3Dihub>

- Keung, C. P. C., & Cheung, A. C. K. (2019). Towards Holistic Supporting of Play-Based Learning Implementation in Kindergartens: A Mixed Method Study. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 47(5), p27-640. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-019-00956-2>
- Lancy, D. (2017). *Raising Children: Surprising Insights from Other Cultures*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lau, J., Vähäsantanen, K., & Collin, K. (2022). Teachers' professional agency in a centralisation-decentralisation system and a hierarchical cultural context: the case of Hong Kong. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2022.2086606>
- Lin, X., & Li, H. (2018). Parents' play beliefs and engagement in young children's play at home. *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, 26(2), 161-176. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1350293X.2018.1441979>
- Liu, C., & Tobin, J. (2018). Group Exercise in Chinese Preschools in an Era of Child-Centred Pedagogy. *Comparative Education Review*, 62(1) 1-30. <https://doi.org/10.1086/695486>
- Louis, S., Beswick, C., & Featherstone, S. (2013). *Again, Again!: Understanding Schemas in Young Children*. (2nd Ed.). Bloomsbury.
- Li, H., & Chen, J. J. (2017). Evolution of the early childhood curriculum in China: The impact of social and cultural factors on revolution and innovation. *Early Child Development and Care*, 187(10), 1471-1483. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2016.1220373>
- Lim, B. (2004). Aesthetic discourses in early childhood settings: Dewey, Steiner, and Vygotsky. *Early Child Development and Care*, 174(5), 473-486. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0300443032000153633>

- Lim, P. P. L., & Bahauddin, A. (2019). Factors for consideration to achieve a contextually appropriate physical environment in Malaysian preschools. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 27(4), 391-408.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2018.1507903>
- Luo, R., Tamis-LeMonda, C.S., & Song, L. (2013). Chinese parents' goals and practices in early childhood. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, (28)4, 843-857.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2013.08.001>
- McLaren, P., & Farahmandpur, R. (2003). *Critical Pedagogy and Marxism: Rethinking Revolutionary Praxis in Education*. Routledge.
- Millei, Z., & Jones, A. (2014). The Australian early childhood curriculum and a cosmopolitan imaginary. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 46(1), 63-79.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13158-014-0100-2>
- Miller, L., Barbour, N., Dalli, C., & Cameron, C. (2017). *The SAGE Handbook of Early Childhood Policy*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Morley, G., & Glazzard, J. (2012). Kindergartens in China: a report into private and state provision in Beijing. *Early Years Educator*, 13(12), pp. 38-44.
- Moss, P. (2015). There are alternatives! Contestation and hope in early childhood education. *Global Studies of Childhood*, 5(3), 226-238.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/2043610615597130>
- Moss, P., & Urban, M. (2020). The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's International Early Learning and Child Well-being Study: The scores are in!. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 21(2), 165-171.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1463949120929466>
- Moyles, J., Payler, J., & Georgeson, J. (Eds.). (2014). *Early Years Foundations: Critical Issues*. (2nd Ed.). Open University Press.

- Naaeke, A., Kurylo, A., Grabowski, M., Linton, D., & Radford, M.L. (2011). Insider and outsider perspective in ethnographic research. *Proceedings of the New York State Communication Association*, 2010 (9).
<https://docs.rwu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1017&context=nyscaproceedings>
- OECD The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. (2020). *Early Learning and Child Well-being: A Study of Five-year-Olds in England, Estonia, and the United States*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/3990407f-en>
- OECD. (2001). *Starting Strong: Early Childhood Education and Care*.
<https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264192829-en>
- OECD. (2015). *Starting Strong IV: Monitoring Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264233515-en>
- Philips, D., & Schweisfurth, M. (2014). *Comparative and international education: an introduction to theory, method, and practice*. (2nd ed.). Bloomsbury.
- Pyle, A., & Daniels, E. (2017). A Continuum of Play-Based Learning: The Role of the Teacher in Play-Based Pedagogy and the Fear of Hijacking Play. *Early Education and Development*, 28(3), 274-289.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2016.1220771>
- Qu, Y., Jorgensen, N. A., & Telzer, E. H. (2021). A Call for Greater Attention to Culture in the Study of Brain and Development. *Perspectives on Psychological Science*, 16(2), 275–293. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691620931461>
- Rana, L. (2012). Globalisation and its implications for early childhood education. *He Kupu*, 3(1), 14-22. <https://www.hekupu.ac.nz/article/globalisation-and-its-implications-early-childhood-education>

- Ritzer, G. (2003). Rethinking Globalization: Glocalization/Globalization and Something/Nothing. *Sociological Theory*, 21(3) 193-209.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9558.00185>
- Robertson, R. (2012). "Globalisation or Glocalisation?" *The Journal of International Communication* 18 (2):191-208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13216597.2012.709925>
- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development*. Oxford University Press.
- Roopnarine, J.L., Johnson, J.E., Flannery Quinn, S., & Patte, M.M. (Eds.). (2018). *Handbook of International Perspectives on Early Childhood Education*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315562193>
- Sellar, S., & Lingard, B. (2013). The OECD and global governance in education. *Journal of Education Policy*, 28(5), 710-725.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/02680939.2013.779791>
- Smidt, S. (2010). *Playing to Learn: The role of play in the early years*. Routledge.
- Smith, J.A. (2011). Evaluating the contribution of Interpretative Phenomenological analysis. *Health psychology review*, 5(1). 9-27.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17437199.2010.510659>
- Smith, J. A., & Osborn, M. (2008). Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. In J. A. Smith (Ed.), *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (2nd ed.). (pp. 53–80). Sage.
- Smith, J.A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009). *Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis theory; method and research*. Sage.
- Smith, K., & Dyer, M. (2019). Planning the Learning Environment. In S. McMahon, & J., McEvoy (Eds.), *Child centred planning in the early years foundation stage*. (p69-82). Learning Matters.

- Soto, L. D., & Swadener, B. B. (2002). Toward liberatory early childhood theory, research and praxis: Decolonizing a field. *Contemporary issues in early childhood*, 3(1), 38-66. <https://doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2002.3.1.8>
- Super, C. M., & Harkness, S. (1998). The development of affect in infancy and early childhood. In M. Woodhead, D. Faulkner & K. Littleton (Eds.), *Cultural worlds of early childhood*, (pp. 34-47). Routledge.
- Sylva, K., Melhuish, E., Sammons, P., Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Taggart, B. (2004). The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project: Final Report: A Longitudinal Study Funded by the DfES 1997-2004. Institute of Education. https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/sites/ioe/files/Ratios_in_Pre-School_Settings_DfEE.pdf
- Tobin, J., Hsueh, Y., & Karasawa, M. (2009). *Preschool in three cultures revisited: China, Japan, and the United States*. University of Chicago Press.
- Wen, C., Elicker, J. G., & McMullen, M. B. (2011). Early childhood teachers' curriculum beliefs: Are they consistent with observed classroom practices. *Early Education and Development*, 22(6), 945-969. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2010.507495>
- Wood, E., & Hedges, H. (2016). Curriculum in early childhood education: Critical questions about content, coherence, and control. *The curriculum journal*, 27(3), 387-405. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585176.2015.1129981>
- Wood, E. (2020). Learning, development and the early childhood curriculum: A critical discourse analysis of the Early Years Foundation Stage in England. *Journal of Early Childhood Research*, 18(3), 321–336. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1476718X20927726>
- Woodhead, M., Faulkner, D. & Littleton, K. (Eds.). (1998). *Cultural worlds of early childhood*. Routledge.

- Wu, Q. (2021). The quality evaluation of the enabling conditions for kindergarten teachers in China and improvement strategies [in Chinese]. *Studies in Early Childhood Education*. 1, 57–66.
- Xu, Y. (2018) *A cross-cultural analysis of gender and practitioner-child interactions in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) settings in Scotland, Hong Kong, and Mainland China*. PhD thesis, University of Glasgow.
- Xu, Y., Brooks, C., Gao, J., & Kitto, E. (2020). *From Global to Local: How can international 0-3 curriculum frameworks inform the development of 0-3 care and education guidelines in China?* UCL Institute of Education, Centre for Teacher and Early Years Education: London, UK.
<https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10103137/>
- Xu, Y., Warin, J., Thorpe, K., & Rohramann, T. (2021). Researching men's career trajectories in ECEC: A cross-cultural inter-researcher approach. In D. Brody, K. Emilsen, T. Rohrmann, & J. Warin (Eds.), *Exploring Career Trajectories of Men in the Early Childhood Education and Care Workforce: Why They Leave and Why They Stay*. Routledge.
- Yang, W., & Li, H. (2018). A school-based fusion of East and West: a case study of modern curriculum innovations in a Chinese kindergarten. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 50(1), 17–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2017.1294710>
- Yang, W., & Li, H. (2019). Changing culture, changing curriculum: a case study of early childhood curriculum innovations in two Chinese kindergartens. *The Curriculum Journal*, 30(3), 279-297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585176.2019.1568269>
- Yang, W., Xu, P., Liu, H., & Li, H. (2022). Neoliberalism and sociocultural specificities: a discourse analysis of early childhood curriculum policies in Australia, China, New Zealand, and Singapore. *Early Child Development and Care*, 192(2), 203-219.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03004430.2020.1754210>

Yin, H., Keung, C.P.C., & Tam, W.W.Y. (2022). What Facilitates Kindergarten Teachers' Intentions to Implement Play-Based Learning? *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 50(4), 555-566. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10643-021-01176-3>

Zhu, J., & Zhang, J. (2008). Contemporary trends and developments in early childhood education in China. *Early years*, 28(2), 173-182. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575140802163584>