

Study on Three Positions Framing Kindergarten Play-Based Curriculum in China: Through Analyses of the Attitudes of Teachers to Early Linguistic Education

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Abstract

Since 2001, there is a hot debate on Curriculum Reform of Elementary Education (CRED) in China which is called a debate between Child-centered and Rationalism. The policies of CRED advocates play-based model and since 2017 focuses on Chinese traditional culture learning. However, some people believe play is opposed to linguistic education and the moon in the west is more round than in China. Operating in the paradoxes, Chinese kindergarten teachers always are faced with dilemmas: should the teacher obey the government’s guidance, or satisfy parents’ English learning preference and literacy readiness oriented requirements? Few studies have examined how Chinese kindergarten teachers struggled for early literacy and linguistic education. In this article we examined twenty teachers’ understandings on play-based curriculum and play-literacy relationships. Comparing with the two popular positions toward Chinese play-based linguistic curriculum reforms, Chinese kindergarten teachers tend to hold a golden means. With the professional development of the kindergarten teacher, education approaches in Chinese kindergarten education based on play and local cultures will be used more often and more extensively. Under such circumstances, the English teaching and learning at the kindergarten level is also believed very important to cultivate global citizens and Chinese national citizens.

Keywords

play-literacy relationship, Chinese kindergarten education, social culture, English teaching and learning, teachers’ beliefs

1. Introduction

With the rapid pace of globalization and modernization, China has launched a large-scale curriculum reform in basic education (K-9) since 2001 (called “Basic Education Reform of 2001”), aiming at correcting the conceived shortcomings of traditional education, mainly from the constructivist and progressive perspectives, advocating play-based and child-centered curriculum. In China, Kindergarten education object is 3-6 years old children before they enter the primary school. Chinese educational reform policies have moved forward to focus on early linguistic education in recent years just because there were large debates about the problems: what level should young children develop in the area of linguistic education? Could play-based program models be used in early literacy development? Should Chinese kindergarten education be play-based or academic oriented? What kind of relationships should be between play and linguistic education? It is the emergences of large supplies of bilingual kindergartens, which spend the majority of time learning English other than learning kids’ mother language with the demand of young-age trend of English teaching and learning. “The upsurge of learning English of preschooler” has aroused controversy and worry: should English learning be prior to mandarin learning in critical period of learning language for young kids?

An authoritative answer to these questions in Chinese educational policies in recent years is that native language learning based on play activities has its advantages. For example, Beijing will strengthen excellent Chinese culture and traditional education which includes reading, writing and traditional arts since 2017. In fact, during the last 20 years of the 20th century and the first years of the 21st century, a large range of researches and theoretical perspectives from cultural psychology to ethnography impacted the study of young children’s play and native language literacy. Literacy is redefined according to understandings of the role of young children’s play of making sense of literacy, the role of cultural activities in children’s learning, and the process and necessity of socialization experiences. Although there are still different perspectives on play-literacy relationship, play-based linguistic learning has been accepted by some countries’ early childhood policies, and curriculum theories and practices. For example, early childhood reforms that China and Australia have embarked on highlight play-based curriculum and accordingly play-based linguistic education. Can or should a young child learn literacy? What is the ideal approach to teach young children to learn literacy? Should play-based linguistic learning be an instruction choice? All these problems still continue to be argued in China.

Among the debates, there are three positions that frame the pursuit of play-linguistic learning relationships in early childhood education: Progressive, Rationalism and Blended (Smith, 2010; Roskos, Christie, Widman, & Holding, 2010). Recently, drawing on postcolonial perspectives, scholars began to realize that Western academic models of literacy modeled by many developing countries fail to represent the different ways in which literacy is embedded in cultural practices. For example, young children learn native languages to construct native cultural identity by singing, telling stories, playing, and anticipating the community’s cultural activities with native language in Taiwan. This paper will explain the dilemmas and different assumptions that Chinese kindergarten teachers are faced, by

examining the assumption of child-centered, culture-related and market-catered approaches, which have important impacts on the curriculum reform, and practices of Chinese Kindergarten education. In fact, the process of the reform is a struggle involving powers and benefits, specifically governments' power and personal professional power, and market benefits and child-development benefits. I argue that it is important for Chinese early childhood education reforms to balance different educational approaches to benefit children's development. In the future, play based on local/native cultures will be caught more attention in educating young children's culture identity.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Debates on Play-Literacy Connection

For decades, American educators have engaged in an ongoing debate over how to most effectively teach children to read. There is still no universal agreement among researchers and practitioners which is the best practices in teaching young children to read, direct instruction or socioculturally constructed meaning through everyday literacy activities, in other words, skills-based reading readiness perspective or emergent literacy perspective (Rebecca & Karyn, 2015). In China, on account of literacy level of young children mainly judged by the quantity of reading and writing words, debates over early literacy education focus on "should young children learn to read and write?" Researchers and practitioners argue on the content, goal and method of early literacy education based on the literacy readiness perspective and emergent literacy perspective (Yang, 2005). Exactly, the debate over literacy education always badgers with the debate over the Primary School-oriented Early Childhood Education in China. Play-based literacy education is viewed as an effective method (Yan & Gai, 2014; Gao, 2016). However, play-based learning has historically been associated with the notion of child-centered pedagogy. Child-centered play as an informant to the early childhood curriculum has been critiqued as an insufficient pedagogical approach. The arguments about play-based learning and the role of environmental education in early childhood curriculum are framed in relation to the newly released Australian Early Years Learning Framework (Susan & Amy, 2011).

The criticisms on play-based literacy education are due to the lack of data on the question: Does play directly contribute to literacy development (James & Kathleen, 2013)? Even though, play-based literacy education is practiced all through the world recently through playshop, play areas and play activities and so on (Wohlwend, 2013; Marianne et al., 2015; Jennifer, Sue, Felicity, & Paul, 2014; Marianne, Zohreh, & Jeong, 2015). Play has been found currently to be the central pedagogy in the learning of young children in 21 countries in the world. However, the quality of play-based pedagogy is becoming a key concern across countries (Doris, 2012).

2.2 Teacher Agency and K-Teachers' Beliefs about Early Literacy Education

Individual teachers negotiated power structures of schooling and exerted their agency in ways that were influenced by their in-service education such as project participation (Cory et al., 2015). Teachers also struggle for parents' satisfaction which has become the most main basis of kindergarten education

quality evaluation and teachers' performance in China (Yuan, 2011). It often causes conflicts of motives in teachers who want to do justice to their pupils' interests and sense making due to the increasingly popular conception of schools as an economic production factor. Teachers' agency in a play-based curriculum can be fostered by offering them appropriate auxiliary means (both material and conceptual) that they can employ willfully and according to their personal system of pedagogical beliefs (Bert, 2015).

Teachers, whether they are novices or seasoned professionals, enter the classroom with assumptions about teaching and learning. A growing body of research has identified teachers' knowledge and belief about children's early literacy learning as having a critical impact on pedagogical practices. These studies work with United States, Korean, Canada and New Zealand (Rebecca et al., 2015). Researchers have emphasized the impact of teachers' beliefs on their pedagogical decisions and classroom practices (Fang, 1996; Mansour, 2009; Doris, 2012; Rebecca & Karyn, 2015). However, few studies have been conducted on teachers' views of play in daily practices within formal kindergarten (Pirkko, 2011; Robin, 2014). Teachers' beliefs about literacy and linguistic education can explain children's involvement in literacy activities and the quality and quantity of literacy materials in class (Mcmullen et al., 2006). For example, although operation and practice is becoming the main learning methods for young children in Chinese kindergarten, children are absent of language expression and communication. The equipment and use of dramatic play materials are sorely missed because of teachers' beliefs (Liu, 2012). A strong knowledge base of child development and play theories may in fact impact educators' beliefs and philosophies of education (McCarthy et al., 2001).

2.3 Contextual Influence on Teachers' Beliefs

Beliefs about childhood and education vary across cultures (Rosenthal & Roer-Stirer, 1999). Sociocultural practices including curriculum guidelines, cultural norms and social resources always mould beliefs of individual teachers (Ransford et al., 2009). Parental, government and societal attitudes act as a potential threat to play and often force educators to internalize certain constraints that may in turn go against their own personal beliefs (Amy, 2013).

Child rearing in Chinese societies is strongly influence by Confucian values, which emphasize academic achievement, effort, and perseverance (Nirmala et al., 2003). According to observation and investigation from Liu, nearly 70% classes or personal teachers are curriculum decision maker and it makes learning contents for young children depend on kindergarten teachers mostly (Liu, 2012). Curricular based on play is viewed as a means to improve young children's outcomes including learning quality and abilities like the ability of problem solving according to the central government's policy. And play areas are effective ways of implementation of Guideline to the Learning and Development of Children Aged 3-6 issued by China's Ministry of Education in 2012 (Li & Feng, 2013). According to Whole country education the business development statistics official gazette for 2016, there are private kindergartens 0.1542 million which hold 64.3% in Chinese kindergarten (Ministry of Education of P.R.China, 2017). It means most K-teachers may pay more attention to parental

satisfactions which are related to the amount of students and earnings of private preschools.

3. Method

3.1 Purpose and Significance of Study

Research on aspects of language education such as sociocultural concerns and policy-level issues may be more qualitatively oriented (Seyyed-Abdolhamid, 2017). Given the emphasis on teachers' culture-based perceptions of play-literacy connection, a qualitative rather than quantitative approach was used. A qualitative research model herein, refers to Ethnography used to investigate kindergarten teachers' perceptions and positions towards early linguistic instruction in this paper. Ethnography is a specific type of case study. Data was collected through in-depth interviews and analysed. Teachers in China work mainly behind closed doors, where activities are not seen by others. Hence, by using a qualitative approach and in-depth interviews, the teachers were given the opportunity to express their views about play-based curriculum reform and play-based learning. Another purpose of the indepth intervies was to hear multiple viewpoints and discussed teachers' experiences about PSOKE while PSOKE is a popular phenomenon in Chinese early childhood education, seriously existing in rural or private kindergarten (Zhang, 2017; Zhang, 2016; Yang et al., 2015). This study was conducted to investigate the conceptions and attitudes of kindergarten teachers in South-China regarding children's development of literacy in an attempt to gain perspective on current teachers' attitudes or acceptance of constructing viewpoints on literacy education of early childhood under the background of the curriculum reform based on "westernized" and "child-centered". Specific research questions are as follows:

- a) Do kindergarten teachers accept the viewpoints of the linguistic education reform policy?
- b) What positions may kindergarten teachers hold among the three popular attitudes toward the literacy education and curriculum reform?
- c) How should kindergarten teachers show their perceptions of linguistic education in their pedagogical practices?

3.2 Participants and Procedures

In this study, we explored the early childhood linguistic education reform in China by looking closely at specific examples. According to sociocultural theory, working together over time creates the conditions for people to develop shared meaning, norms, values, goals (Cole, 1985). It is in day-to-day routines and structures that a shared sense of culture and community develops in schools (Siskin, 1994).

The study was carried out in the city of Guangzhou in south China. Kindergarten teachers, aged from 25 to 50 years (N=20, 2 males and 18 females), were observed and interviewed about their practices and understanding about literacy education, school readiness and play-based curriculum. Teachers were selected to cover private kindergarten and public schools. I asked for volunteer teachers to participate in the study while I guided student interships for two months every year between 2013 and 2016.

The teachers were told that their views would be used to build a better understanding of play-based curriculum, and for designing the measures for wiping off the PSOKE.

After briefly introducing the research context, I asked the teachers about the implication of school readiness and the role of playing in their daily teaching practices, and the connection between play and literacy. The interview followed a thematic plan, in which the main themes included play, school readiness, literacy and teachers' roles. Teachers were asked questions such as:

How do you see play-based curriculum reform?

How do you use play in literacy education?

What kind of play areas do you offer children?

What kind of play do children play related literacy development?

What is your role and children's role during play?

How is play generally planned and discussed?

Teachers were asked to give examples and descriptions of such play situations. Each interview took between thirty minutes and one hour. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Data collection and analysis were conducted simultaneously using the process of constant comparison. Categories were saturated when concepts and understood. I transcribed the data, and read and coded the data. Meanwhile, I began to construct hypotheses from the data. At last, hypotheses, questions and analytical ideas were shared and answered by contacting participants.

The research did in-depth interviews with self-designed outline which prompts kindergarten teachers to engender epistemology, ontological and political self-reflection. At the same time, considering the ethics of research, I build a mutual trust and respect relationship with the researched through sharing and discussing the research findings to help the researched professional development.

4. Findings

According to my investigation, comparing with other studies, there are progressive, traditional and golden mean attitudes toward Chinese play-based linguistic curriculum reforms. Chinese kindergarten teachers tend to hold a position like a pendulum between the progressive approaches and the traditional approaches, which are called golden means.

4.1 The Progressive Reform Based on Child-Centered Approaches

The progressive approaches assume that play, life and activities are essentially beneficial for children's development and learning. They criticize skill-focused lessons and adult-structured activities, assuming that play is necessary for whole child development (Yang et al., 2015). Roskos et al. (2010) warned that forcing playtime out of the preschool curricula and homes may place children at risk for social problems and school failure. Obviously, the progressive educators support the play-based curriculum and maintain that children's literacy abilities can be improved by playing. Play is like a gold mine in its potential for facilitating literacy in children, providing lots of clues for sorting out written language (Owocki, 1999). Wohlwend (2013) explained how writing and play workshops could level the literacy

playing field by giving young children access to their cultural expertise and time to play out the stories they know best. Similarly, literacy-embedded play centers give young children chances to practice their fledgling literacy through their play engagements. Dramatic play with literacy props in thematic literacy play centers provide children with opportunities to explore the functions and features of print as they reenact what has been demonstrated during shared readings or read aloud sessions (Bouley-Picard, 2005).

Obviously, as one part of “Basic Education Reform of 2001”, Chinese linguistic education reforms of kindergarten in recent years are based on the progressivism and constructivism, which focus on kids’ interests, abilities and subject spirit. However, the progressive approaches are opposed to Chinese traditional culture and the prevailing viewpoints of parents and kindergarten teachers. As a Chinese saying goes, Achievements are reached by hard work rather than reaction. And the popular Chinese educational models require young people to respect the elders and teachers. So, in China, traditional and typical behaviors of literacy instruction are teacher-directed and skill-oriented. It is common for kindergartens in China, especially in villages, to focus on teaching young children reading and writing of the Chinese phonetic alphabet, numbers, addition, and subtraction. The progressive viewpoints on literacy education criticize that the traditional Chinese instruction models rarely provide students with chances to express and communicate themselves with their developing oral language. The following is what kindergarten teachers may think about children’s interest and instruction.

Li: I agree with forbidding to teach young children alphabet and English according to some local governments’ administration for early childhood education. As you know, knowledge and skills of reading, writing and calculating is unimportant anymore for young children to master. Kids’ interest is what we should pay attention to.

Hu: Kids like play and play give them a feeling of freedom and autonomously. Playing conforms to kids’ instinct. Too much work and academic burdens may lead kids to lose interest on learning. So, teachers should observe and listen to kids, following kids’ interests.

Ying: Kindergarten education is a process of growing together for teachers and students. Play-based curriculum can make kids to be agency to explore, research and grow with the teacher.

The early childhood education section of “Basic Education Reform of 2001” Guidance for Kindergarten Education produced by the Ministry of Education emphasizes the need to pursue a play-based curriculum model. Kindergarten Work Regulation issued in 2016 focused on “play-based activities” through daily life. The curriculum reforms of Chinese Kindergarten education have been promoting child-centered approaches while criticizing teacher-directed curriculum, modeling Western curriculum methods and theories, especially constructivist and post-modernist theories of learning. Various imported Western curriculum models, such as the Montessori method, the project approach, the Reggio Emilia method, and the high/scope method, have been advocated and adopted in China. These reforms are intended to transform traditional classroom practice into children-initiated/teacher-facilitated, play-based or child-centered teaching and learning. In their

systematic review of these reform efforts, Liu and Feng (2005) concluded that such curriculum reform had promoted three main ideas: (1) respecting children, (2) active learning, and (3) play-based teaching and learning. As a result, Chinese early childhood educational reform advocates children's interests, play-based learning, children's participation in the instruction and so on. It emphasizes processes more than outcomes.

In recent years, the central government published guidelines about literacy to control the tendency of Primary School-Oriented Kindergarten Education (PSOKE). Used as a proper noun, PSOKE refers to kindergarten education modeling the teaching methods of primary school education. It is skill-heavy, teacher-managed instruction with academic achievement oriented. To avoid these perceived shortcomings, Chinese early childhood educational policies about language education define literacy education in Kindergarten as "pre-literacy" (Note 1).

The view of play-based curriculum now prevails in Chinese early childhood education, vaulting in a range of important outcomes for the whole child inherent in play processes. However, there is still a Chinese cultural tendency that positions play as being antithetical to young children's teaching and learning. For example, while some local governments adhere to or implement the central educational policy, they often assume that literacy education is opposite to play with rules, for example, you should not use reading books with young children, or do not teach spelling. This leads to problems that for some teachers' mandates play can be random without learning goals. Teachers just follow children's interest. While the children's playing, teachers might do some other "important" things, such as preparing for the next lesson, or writing observation notes because these "important" things will be used as visible indicators of learning while teachers are assessed. Kindergarten-based curriculum policy in China gives the kindergarten teacher power to design or choose curriculum. At the same time, China has no clear criteria for evaluating and monitoring play-based instruction. While play-based curriculum is believed progressive and required by the policies, the play-literacy relationship may be as follows: the teacher creates and presents literacy related play materials in the play centers, operates as an inspector or as a nanny while children are playing, without any involvement in discussion, or guidance, teachers just let young children play on their own. Many of these teachers seem to be unconcerned about children's achievement and development.

4.2 Rejecting from Rationalism Based on Social Reality and Culture

Tough competition between the rationalist approaches and the progressive approaches existed since the curriculum reform in basic education (K-9) launched in 2001, although progressive perspectives dominated the curriculum reform of 2001.

The rationalist approaches assume that play is nice, but not necessary. Learning can happen through play, while play itself isn't learning. Children's growth and learning advance due to more significant behavioral complexes and outside influences, such as independent goal-related activity, adult modeling and assistance, and direct forms of instruction. They say:

Zeng: Everyone likes play which makes people feeling happy and it's true that we can learn something

from play. However, as a purposive, planned activities to cultivate social citizen, kindergarten education should not just be led by kids' interest. In my viewpoint, native language and foreign language learning is not contradictory. I know a lot of kids learning several languages simultaneously.

Hao: I am not so agree with strictly investigation the phenomena of teaching alphabet and English in some areas in China. Even Chinese traditional instruction methods can work in some learning content in some way.

According to the traditional approaches, "Basic Education Reform since 2001" understands Western models mainly as "child-centered" instruction and play-based curriculum in early childhood education since play-based learning has historically been associated with the notion of child-centered pedagogy (Edwards & Cutter-Mackenzie, 2011). Criticisms point out those problems that have been increasingly exposed after nearly 15 years of the reform. These problems include lowered educational quality that undertakes a perceived weakening of children's abilities to grasp basic knowledge and skills. The most rigorous criticisms come from supporters of rationalistic or conservative primary education methods.

Since child-centered models of instruction are mainly imported from the West, rationalistic education supporters worry that just copying Western models would bring problems: (1) cultural colonization that would devalue and lead to the loss of the national and local cultures, especially Chinese excellent educational traditions because the progressive approaches neglect Chinese local culture and social needs, (2) lower the quality of education, decreasing the control and guidance from the teacher, (3) neglect the complexity of educational reforms, and (4) lower the local cultural identity of kids while it takes kids a lot of time to learn foreign language because languages, books, playing, movies and other media certainly bring information of cultures.

With the help of social culture theory, ethnography and post-colonialism, the social and cultural nature of literacy has drawn worldwide attention. Street (1984) examined community literacy practices in Iran and concluded that Western academic models of literacy failed to represent the different ways in which literacy was embedded in cultural practices. Viruru (2013) concluded that young children's literacy instruction all around the world are being modeled on Euro-Western models of education mostly for economic reasons. In fact, children around the world are exposed not only to the language, but also a world of "objects and values" that reflect Western biases. The conservative educator believes that conservative approaches of instruction should not be rejected but reformed because conservative approaches have their own merits that have been established through long-time practices. Oral and written repetition, and copying models are still useful for some learning and for some students in some situations. For example, direct instruction with play can improve early children's literacy ability and increase their literacy knowledge with high efficiency. For children from villages without play materials, traditional instruction using goal-related activity, adult modeling and assistance, and direct forms of instruction can give them an equal chance to succeed in literacy learning. Traditionalists point out that American educational policies paid more attention to the acquisition of literacy skill since 1960s as a response to the 1957 launch of the Russian satellite Sputnik. This example shows that it will

necessarily lower educational quality if education just follows Dewey's child-centered approaches. Rationalistic educators argue that Chinese education should not just adapt to Western models because the concept of child-centered play has been criticized as an insufficient pedagogical approach for supporting children's knowledge development. A comprehensive investigation into how the term child-centered is used by Chung and Walsh (2000) discovered that up to 40 different interpretations of the concept were found in texts associated with early learning. These interpretations referenced learning based on children's interests, children's participation in the decisions related to their learning, and an emphasis on the individual development of children. Conservative education approaches criticize child-centered instruction as teachers being led by the nose by students and their interests in a flash. In these views, play is a nice tool to achieve educational aims but the student to lead the teacher (Hawkins et al., 2012).

4.3 Attitudes of Golden Mean to Early Childhood Linguistic Education

Smith (2010) found that children in both the play treatments and control conditions were reasonably equivalent in terms of stimulation and social interaction. Smith argued for a "middle way" of viewing play's role in development-it may not be essential but it is very useful and meaningful, funning for young children. Roskos et al. (2010) argued that key literacy skills, such as concepts about print and alphabet knowledge, can be developed through a variety of strategies, including literacy-enriched dramatic play, games, storybook reading, language experience dictation, and age-appropriate direct instruction. Roskos and his colleagues called it "blended" approach which play had direct connections with academic curriculum, keystone emergent literacy strategies, and brief lessons with focused instruction. The "blended" approach aimed to make all the pathways to core early literacy skills available to every child. This kind of "blended" approach can be called as "Golden Mean" according to Chinese culture and it is a popular reasoning way in Chinese cultural context.

Zhao: I don't think there is one best way to teach kids. In our kindergarten, we would like to choose some part of one curriculum model and integrate kinds of curriculum model together. For example, our kindergarten (curriculum) has integrated high-scope model, Reggio model, Montessori's Curriculum. At the same time, we also adopt mass instruction. So, you can see free play, teacher guided play and mass instruction in the kindergarten's schedule.

For many kindergarten teachers in China, play is just one of learning methods that lead toward developmental outcomes. Chinese kindergarten teachers tend to adhere to blended approaches to the play-literacy relationship, exactly, swinging like a pendulum from the progressive approaches to the traditional approaches according to current situations and needs. So, a lot of Chinese kindergarten teachers are hedgers. The Chinese kindergarten educator's practices prefer to blend free-play, guided play, dramatic play and directed instruction. For example, typical curriculum activities of a kindergarten in Canton province include: free-play or guided play in the playground or in the classroom's play area and collective instruction activities involving teachers' modeling children to read a book. Even in the dramatic play center, kids should follow the teacher's instructions, and guidance

through discussing problems, such as “what polite language will you use if someone give you a service, for example, when a salesman checks out for you, what should you say to him or her? What should you say if you are a taxi driver when you provide services to your guests?” On the one hand, teachers say that they show respects on kids’ abilities and playing needs, designing schedules and areas for kids’ play according to kids’ age and development level. On the other side, teachers’ educational practices pay more attention to the scheduled curriculum, other than the emergent curriculum coming from kids’ playing.

Why do Chinese kindergarten teachers choose blended approaches? After investigating the perceptions of early childhood educators regarding children’s acquisition of literacy, Giles (2015) concluded that blended instruction rather than the application of a single instructional approach fully grounded in a particular perception may be the best approach to facilitating young children’s literacy acquisition. After mapping changing relationships around literacy and play within converging childhood cultures, Wohlwend (2013) drew a conclusion that early childhood teachers who make room for playing in their classrooms should be prepared to mediate the social and cultural tensions. Maybe for many Chinese kindergarten teachers, they feel constrained to adopt these blended approaches. Chinese kindergarten education has imported a lot of western education models in recent years and these models may contradict with each other, and contradict with teachers’ preexistent beliefs. At the same time, teachers, exhausted from dealing with the seemingly endless education reforms, are unable or unwilling to change familiar education approaches, However, they must show new education approaches especially play-based approaches while administrative staffs are present. At the same time, accountability and performance assessments implemented throughout China force Chinese kindergarten teachers to focus on skills or tasks. Obviously, Chinese educational policies and the performance administrative model conflict with each other, compelling Chinese kindergarten teachers to take a blended standpoint.

In addition, Chinese kindergarten teachers are also faced with pressures from educational marketization and professional development. First, Chinese kindergartens especially private kindergartens get funds from parents. So, satisfying parents’ expectations is crucial for many kindergartens. However, Chinese parents commonly believe that children should learn to succeed since huge social competitions begin from young age. These educational beliefs of parents are strengthened by the entrance examination that a lot of elementary schools do on the sly before 6-year-old children achieving permits of the elementary schools. In China, curriculum standards for each subject are issued to guide primary school education. Many Chinese kindergarten teachers report that they feel massive pressures from children’s parents who always require teachers to teach young children material that is easily measured such as singing a song, reciting a piece of ancient poetry or even teaching children primary school curriculum ahead. Principals often ask kindergarten teachers to follow parents’ request to retain students. This may be the primacy social and economic reason that explains why play-based curricula reforms don’t predominate in Chinese kindergarten education. Secondly, Chinese teacher’s professional development simultaneously gives teachers opportunities and pressures to judge and weigh all kinds of viewpoints

about early childhood curriculum and play-literacy relationship. In the past, kindergarten teachers in China experienced a lower degree of professionalization with low social status, low pay and low accomplishments when compared with teachers of other stages of education. A lot of teachers may not have their own firm understanding about the play-literacy relationship, or the aim of education. As a result, they just follow the popular tendency. However, the situations have changed a lot in recent years. With the curriculum leadership of governments, especially with the leadership of preschool principals, kindergarten-based curriculum should take where it is such as curriculum tradition of the kindergarten, the conditions of the faculty and local resources that the kindergarten can get. Many kindergarten teachers realize that every western model of curriculum has its merits and limits and Chinese instructional models should be inherited.

5. Discussion and Implications

This study explained the complex educational situations and paradoxes that kindergarten teachers are faced with the progress of early childhood curriculum reform, using early linguistic education as an example.

Li et al. (Li, Wang, & Wong, 2011) concluded that curricula reform adopted from Western progressive ideology unavoidably clashes with Chinese traditional practices. Since 1980s, scholars began to realize that implementing the western child-centered models bump its challenges and Chinese kindergartens should develop curriculum and instruction models based on their own cultures. Recently, some scholars began to appeal the localization of education reform. Kindergarten play-based curricula in China started to deflower local cultures and educational traditions, developing some curriculum programs with local cultural attributes. For example, the curriculum of folk games emerged, focusing on using traditional folk games and playing materials. Folk games are seen as important curriculum resources (Li, 2005).

Furthermore, successful curriculum reforms of the kindergarten should be understood as cultural, contextual and language adaptations. Local cultures should be understood as local industrial or farming conclusions, producing processes and technology of products, or traditional dramas, architecture, handicrafts, and local languages. Persons in the local community who know or master how to make traditional foods or other special cultures could be invited to teach young children. For example, folk workmanship such as Cantonese embroidery, weaving and ash sculpture, folk games such as shadow play, lion dance and nursery rhyme are provided to young children playing, or playing with parents or volunteers of the communities in Guangzhou's kindergartens. The famous play of An'ji use the local natural and cultural resources such as bamboo, wood, stone, box sand and arts of building to create the connections between children's learning and their daily life circumstances, the connections between children's playing and their parents' childhood games, the connection between children's interest and the necessary of cultural transmission. The reform of An'ji play promoted three main ideas: (1) Respect and belief in children. Children have the rights and abilities to play by themselves. During the process

of young children playing, the responsibilities of teachers are to observe, appreciate and understand children's playing. After playing, teachers may organize discussions about the play progress, process, problems or successful experiences by asking children questions, (2) Ecological style of education. First, teachers stimulate children's creativity by simple, local and waste play materials. Teachers believe that the simpler local flavor is, the more local culture identity and more creativity there will be. Secondly, playing should accord with and satisfy children's development needs, (3) Systematic supports include supports from education Bureau of the local school district, supports from early childhood education experts, and supports from parents.

Play-based instruction, play-based curriculum, curriculum gamification and other similar words and models emerge in China, co-existing with Chinese traditional culture, too-high expectation from parents and traditional education models. At the same time, education marketization, the reforms of performance and other education reforms conflicting each other flood Chinese kindergarten education. Different theories, beliefs and diverse pressures place Chinese kindergarten teachers at a paradox. For example, while paying attention to education objectives of play, Chinese kindergarten teachers may be criticized as not "children playing", but "teacher teasing children". However, if they act on the opposite, they might be criticized as "let things drift". Should teachers design play-based curriculum for some educational objectives? How might educators deal with the relationship between children's benefits and social needs? How might they integrate the play-based curriculum and traditional culture, and educational goals? In fact, present answers to the questions above are connected to contests for benefits between marketization and children's development. On the one hand, Chinese kindergarten should enforce play-based curriculum models, and put native language and Chinese traditional culture learning in the first place, according to the guidance that the central government has issued. On the other hand, Chinese kindergarten may overtly agree but covertly reject because there are no specific regulations of rewards and punishment, especially under the pressures from parents' requirement of school-readiness and English learning first. Private kindergartens hold 68.8% in 2012 through the whole country according to <http://www.china.org.cn>, while staff working in private kindergarten holding 65.6%. The survival of private kindergartens depends on the satisfaction of children's parents. Though we can't say private schools don't care for children's development and interests, they must adapt to market demands herein, parents' demands. If parents want the kindergarten to teach their children spelling, writing or English learning, it is very dangerous or an adventure to just goes opposite, especially when parents and teachers make mistakes about relationship between play and learning, native language learning and English learning.

Why Chinese kindergarten teachers show a blended attitude toward the play-based curriculum? The above-mentioned refer to the reasons of educational policies, society, and parents. Of course, the main reason exists in the kindergarten teacher himself/herself. The low level of professionalization is an important reason. To connect play and early literacy, teacher education should develop teachers' pedagogical thinking through theoretical understanding of play and learning, as well as through

discussions and the modeling of play and playful teaching within teacher education programs (Pirkko, 2011).

6. Conclusion

In the complex reformational and practical circumstances, Chinese kindergarten teachers tend to take golden mean attitudes toward early linguistic education and early child educational practices. In the future, Chinese kindergarten teachers need to balance different educational approaches, mediate benefits and conflicts based on benefits of children's developments through kindergarten teachers' professional development. In order to improve the personal development and social development meanings of kids' play-based language learning, local play and playing materials in cultivating bi-linguistic learners should be paid more attention since they can play an important role in local culture identity of young children especially in those post-colonial developing countries. In the future, play based on native cultures will achieve more attention in educating young children's culture identity and de-colonization all over the world. Compared with English learning, native language should be put in the first place for young kids despite the fact that English learning is helpful to cultivate global citizens.

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Note

Note 1. According to Cherland and Harper (2007), there are approximately 197 different kinds of literacy listed in the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC) database, ranging from media literacy to Christian literacy to post literacy.