

Integrating Western Play-Based Pedagogy with Chinese Educational Traditions: A Tale of Two Public Kindergartens

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the integration of Western play-based pedagogy with traditional Chinese educational practices in two Chinese kindergartens. Focusing on how twelve teachers adapt and blend global and local pedagogical influences, the study identifies key strategies for implementing a hybrid play-based approach. The teachers in these kindergartens employed two primary methods: first, by shaping the physical environment and engaging directly in children's play; and second, by incorporating playful activities into teacher-directed instruction. The findings reveal that while Western play-based approaches were incorporated, traditional Chinese values such as collectivism, teacher authority, and discipline remained central to educational practices. These insights highlight the complexities of educational reform in Confucian-heritage societies, where the blending of Western and local pedagogies creates a "third space" for new educational practices while maintaining cultural traditions. The study further highlights the challenges teachers face in balancing these influences, particularly regarding the management of class dynamics and maintaining discipline, suggesting the need for culturally responsive teacher training programs that emphasize the integration of child-centered play and traditional practices. These findings have important implications for early childhood education in other Asian contexts, particularly those with Confucian-heritage values or large class sizes.

Keywords: *Play-based pedagogy, Confucian education, early childhood education, cultural integration*

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Introduction

In recent years, many governments in the Asia-Pacific region have imported and introduced Western theories and models including play-based pedagogy, through the release of new curricula (Bautista et al., 2021; Fleer & Li, 2020). In China, early childhood education (ECE) has undergone significant changes since the 1980s education reform, shifting from teacher-directed collective teaching to a play-based approach (Liu & Feng, 2005; Tobin et al., 2009; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). However, existing literature points to a cultural conflict between these imported child-centered Western models and China's ECE traditions, which are rooted in Confucianism and collectivism (Li & Chen, 2017; Tang & Maxwell, 2007). Teachers face challenges in implementing the promoted play-based approach. Scholars have noted the incompatibility between global trends and local realities, emphasizing the need to blend both in developing a culturally sensitive pedagogy (Bautista et al., 2021; Li & Chen, 2017; Tobin et al., 2009; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). While many previous studies have identified the policy-practice gap and proposed conceptual strategies to tackle this issue, few (Chen et al., 2017; Li et al., 2012; Pui-Wah, 2006) have focused on investigating teachers' practical implementation of play-based pedagogy, particularly within the context of mainland China. This study aims to fill this gap by examining how teachers from two public kindergartens implement play-based pedagogy, which is largely imported from the West, while preserving educational practices rooted in traditional Confucian and collectivist values. The key research questions guiding this study are:

1. How do Chinese preschool teachers integrate child-initiated play and whole class instruction to meet the societal demands arising from the educational reform?
2. How is the cultural interaction between Western and Eastern educational models embedded and reflected in kindergarten play practices?

Literature Review

Play and Chinese educational traditions: historical and contemporary practices

Understanding education requires an examination of its cultural foundation (Gu, 2014). The nature, purpose, and methods of education are shaped by a society's dominant cultural values, beliefs, and aspirations. In China, Confucianism has been the predominant educational philosophy, influencing many of today's educational practices and pedagogies (Choy, 2017). According to Confucianism, the ultimate goal of education is to become a gentleman who achieves moral perfection through self-cultivation. However, this “self-cultivation” does not align with the Western ideas of individualism; rather, it refers to the “cultivation of self in community”, where the “self” is conceived within relationships (Choy, 2017). The expression of personal desires or the display of autonomous behaviors is considered unacceptable, especially when it threatens group harmony. Conformity, discipline, and self-regulation are encouraged and intentionally cultivated in Chinese education, including early childhood education (Rao et al., 2010). This group-orientation is a critical part of Chinese education tradition (Zhu & Zhang, 2008).

Teacher-centered collective teaching, with the teacher as the moral authority and primary source of knowledge (Huang et al., 2019), has been a cornerstone of Chinese education, reflecting Confucian ideals of order and hierarchy. With the establishment of the imperial examination system in 606 AD, the focus of education shifted from cultivating moral sages to the practical goal of passing exams. Education is viewed as a pathway to upward social mobility, a perception that has profoundly shaped Chinese education for centuries. For Chinese educators and parents, education is a serious matter, rarely associated with light-heartedness and playfulness. Serious learning is associated with hard work and diligence, with mainstream Confucians viewing play either as a distraction (Pan et al., 2018) or as a tool to enhance learning (Vong, 2012). During imperial China, the content of learning primarily came from the Confucian classics. Teachers were responsible for instructing and transmitting these works, with students required to recite and memorize them. This led to the emphasis on basic knowledge, the authoritative role of teachers, and a pedagogy focused on knowledge transmission. Instruction, recitation, and memorization have since remained

fundamental pedagogical approaches (Qi & Melhuish, 2017).

The first modern kindergarten was founded in 1903 under the late Qing dynasty, and it adopted the Froebelian approaches imported from Japan. In the following century, ECE values and practices in China have been influenced by foreign ECE theories and China's own educational traditions (Qi & Melhuish, 2017). Kindergarten practices before 1949 were heavily influenced by Western theories, particularly those of Dewey. Chen Heqin, a student of Dewey and a pioneer in early education, localized Dewey's educational theories and established the unit-based curriculum, with play as the central pedagogy (Zhu & Zhang, 2008). Chen's educational theories and the unit-based curriculum were officially promoted in the 1930s. However, after the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the Americanized curriculum was completely discarded and replaced by models from the Soviet Union (Li & Chen, 2017). Kindergarten practices from 1950 to 1980 were characterized by structured planning, clear objectives, and teacher-directed instruction (Liu & Feng, 2005). Although play was regarded as important, its instructional value was overshadowed by the teacher's directive role, effectively turning it into a form of collective teaching.

In 1980, amidst the reform and opening-up context, the Chinese government initiated a top-down ECE reform by introducing Western theories and curricular models (Zhu & Zhang, 2008), which emphasize play and child-centeredness (Hedges & Cooper, 2018). This approach, advocating for children's choice, autonomy, and freedom (Fleer, 2009), encourages children to learn and make meaning through exploration, discovery, and hands-on experiences (Wood, 2010). To support this child-initiated learning, teachers are expected to provide an enriched learning environment and to support children's choices. However, in many cultures, including China, adult involvement in children's learning is not well understood, and it is often viewed as an intrusion (Bertram & Pascal, 2022). Hence, despite the advocacy of Western theories, the adoption of a play-based approach in China has not been without its challenges.

In response to these imported ideas, China's national curriculum framework positioned play as a core method for curriculum delivery, making it the mandated pedagogy for Chinese ECE kindergartens (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2001). This reform led to significant changes such as the establishment of learning corners², increased playtime, more teacher

² Learning corners are separated sections with corresponding materials inside classrooms, aiming to provide opportunities for children to engage in exploration, discovery and hands-on activities. #

involvement in play (Liu & Feng, 2005; Liu et al., 2005), and a growing focus on children's individualism. However, research has also identified challenges in translating these reforms into classroom practices, particularly tensions between the Western values and Chinese educational tradition and ECE realities (Li & Chen, 2017). Many teachers were unclear about the purpose of learning corners, using them merely as a form of collective teaching or as a way to manage transitions between activities (Liu, 2011). Additionally, teachers continued to emphasize discipline and control, resulting in less interaction with children during free play (Liu, 2011). The dominance of group instruction in many kindergartens (Li et al., 2011; Tang & Maxwell, 2007) further highlights the need for ECE educators to reconsider the implementation of the Western play-based approach within the context of China's educational tradition and realities. While several Chinese scholars have proposed theoretical strategies for glocalizing Western play in the Chinese context (Li & Chen, 2017), there remains a gap in empirical research exploring how this integration is enacted at the institutional level. This study aims to address this gap by examining how teachers in two public kindergartens blend child-initiated play with traditional collective teaching practices, balancing both local Eastern culture and global Western educational trends.

Method

This study, which is part of a doctoral study, focuses on gaining an in-depth understanding of teachers' beliefs and practices related to the integration of play-based approaches in Chinese kindergartens. The first author, a doctoral student in Malaysia, is a Chinese national who obtained both her undergraduate and Master's degrees in ECE from mainland China. The second author is a Chinese Malaysian PhD supervisor, who is familiar with Chinese cultural values and education in Confucian societies.

Twelve teachers (see Table 1) from two public kindergartens located in the Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region of southeastern China were purposively selected. This region was selected to provide a representation of an understudied yet rapidly developing area where educational reforms are being actively implemented. The two selected kindergartens, Blue Sky Kindergarten (BSK, pseudonym) and Happy Hippo Kindergarten (HHK, pseudonym),

both receive funding from the local government and primarily serve children from low-income families. Public kindergartens were chosen for their relatively progressive practices and greater capacity to implement play-based curricula, as indicated by previous research (Vong, 2012).

Table 1. *Profile of the Twelve Participant Teachers*

Participants	Educational background	Age group	Teaching experience	Classes taught
BSK-Audrey	Bachelor	21-25	3 years	K1 (3-4 years old)
BSK-Anna	Diploma	41-45	15 years	K1 (3-4 years old)
BSK-Yolanda	Bachelor	21-25	2 years	K2 (4-5 years old)
BSK-Emma	Bachelor	31-35	5 years	K2 (4-5 years old)
BSK-Sofia	Diploma	21-25	3 years	K3 (5-6 years old)
BSK-Emily	Diploma	31-35	9 years	K3 (5-6 years old)
HHK-Lily	Bachelor	26-30	5 years	K1 (3-4 years old)
HHK-Rita	Bachelor	21-25	1 year	K1 (3-4 years old)
HHK-Paul	Bachelor	26-30	9 years	K2 (4-5 years old)
HHK-Elisa	Diploma	21-25	2.5 years	K2 (4-5 years old)
HHK-Heidi	Bachelor	26-30	8 years	K3 (5-6 years old)
HHK-Alice	Bachelor	21-25	2 years	K3 (5-6 years old)

Ethics approval from the authors' institution and informed consent from participants were obtained prior to the commencement of data collection. The data collection included a combination of classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and documents (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2009). This study presents findings mainly from observations and documents, supplemented by the interview data. The first author spent six consecutive workdays in each kindergarten, observing from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. (excluding nap time), resulting in a total of 84 hours' of observational data. The focus of the observations was on documenting teacher-child interactions during child-initiated play and group activities, as well as examining the classroom environment, and the integration of both play-based and traditional, structured teaching practices. This method provided firsthand insights into how the play-based approach was enacted and how conventional teaching methods were maintained or adapted in response to the national educational reforms. After the observations,

the researcher conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews to explore teachers' perceptions about play and its relationship with collective teaching. In addition, several documents were collected, including curriculum guidelines at both the national and local levels, lesson plans, daily schedules for both kindergartens, children's work, teachers' curricular guidebooks, and other related materials (e.g., requirements for setting up learning corners). These documents provided context for the observed classroom practices and helped triangulate the data collected through observations, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of how play-based approaches were implemented in practice.

The data were analyzed thematically using NVIVO software by the first author, adhering to the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The coding process involved three main stages: open coding, axial coding, and theoretical coding (Saldaña, 2021). The researcher employed both deductive and inductive strategies. On one hand, she used themes from previous studies (e.g., Fung & Cheng, 2012; Wu, 2021) to guide her codebook. On the other hand, she continually refined the themes based on new insights generated from the study. To ensure reliability, the second author independently reviewed a subset of the data. Inter-rater reliability was established through discussions and consensus on the coding framework (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To enhance validity, member checking was conducted throughout and after the data analysis, allowing participants to comment on the accuracy of the data as well as the researchers' interpretations (Maxwell, 2013). Peer debriefing was also employed with the researchers consulting two ECE scholars not involved in the study, as well as a teacher from a different kindergarten. Additionally, the use of multiple data sources enabled triangulation of findings, further enhancing the credibility and accuracy of the study's conclusions (Yin, 2009).

Findings

To provide context for the findings, it is important to note that both BSK and HHK follow similar daily schedules. Each day, children participate in one session of collective teaching, lasting 20-30 minutes, and two sessions of outdoor play, totaling approximately 120 minutes. Additionally, children engage in one or two sessions of indoor free play, which last for around

60 minutes. Both kindergartens meet the official requirement of at least 2 hours of outdoor play time per day. These daily routines provide a structured yet flexible environment for observing the integration of play-based approaches with traditional teaching methods.

Integration of child-initiated play and intentional teaching

Data analysis revealed that teachers integrated child-initiated play and traditional collective teaching in two primary ways. First, they facilitated intentional teaching by providing play materials and directly engaging in children's play. Second, they incorporated playful activities such as games and hands-on opportunities into group instruction to make it more child-centered.

Incorporating intentional teaching into play

Intentional teaching refers to teachers' actions with specific outcomes or goals in mind for children's development (Epstein, 2007). Data analysis identified two themes: 1) intentional teaching through play materials and 2) intentional teaching in teachers' play involvement. In all six observed classrooms, teachers thoughtfully set up learning corners with intentional materials designed to support specific educational objectives. Each classroom featured learning corners dedicated to cognitive play, dramatic play, constructive play, a book corner, an arts corner, and a nature corner, corresponding to the five curricular areas³. The selection of materials in these learning corners was based on the objectives outlined in the official Ministry of Education guidelines and the needs of the current theme. For example, in the book corner, materials were provided to promote various skills such as speaking (microphones), listening (recorders, headphones), reading (books, flashcards), writing (pens and papers), and storytelling performance (finger puppets). Teachers also differentiated materials according to children's ages. For example, in the K1 class (3-4 years old), teachers provided tools for measuring weight (scales), while in the K2 classes (4-5 years old), additional tools for measuring length (rulers) were introduced. Furthermore, materials in learning corners were adjusted according to the needs of the current theme. All twelve teachers reported that they provided theme-related materials in learning corners to reinforce

³ Language, health, society, science, arts.

and extend the content from collective teaching.

Under the theme of “Hello Winter”, our first lesson is an introduction to snowflakes such as how they look. We provide white and black pictures of snowflakes and encourage children to color them, or provide white playdough for making snowflakes. In the constructive play corner, we supply snowflake interlocking blocks. In the second lesson, we explore how snow is formed, and we extend this content in the cognitive play corner. (Interview HHK-Lily)

Teachers’ integration of intentional teaching was also evident in their direct involvement in play. Eight distinct roles were identified to capture teachers’ involvement in play: facilitator, demonstrator, play partner, stage manager, recorder, onlooker, peacemaker, and play director, ranked from most frequent to least frequent. Teachers sought to enhance children’s learning in play by offering suggestions, asking open-ended questions, engaging in parallel play, and providing props or materials. For example, when children were merely riding bicycles back and forth, Rita (HHK) placed a traffic light in a corner. This sparked imaginative play as a boy, dressed as a “traffic officer” began directing children on bikes. The findings suggest that teachers tended to adopt more facilitative roles rather than directive ones, and they were more actively involved during indoor play than outdoor play. However, teachers also reported challenges in observing and effectively engaging in children’s play.

Integrating playful activities in collective teaching.

Observations revealed that all the teacher participants incorporated a variety of playful activities, often enhanced by multimedia, to make instruction more engaging playful and attractive to children. At the beginning of teaching sessions, teachers employed riddles, nursery rhymes, singings, imaginary scenarios, and visual aids such as pictures or videos to stimulate children’s interest in the lesson content. The following excerpt illustrates this approach:

Teacher: *Recently, I noticed that some children in our class have a fireball in their hearts. And sometimes, these fireballs exploded. This may hurt people around you. Today, we are going to solve this problem. I found a good place called Happy Island. The islanders there also have fireballs in their hearts, but they know many ways to deal with them. Do you want to go with me to this island?*

All children: *Yes!*

Teacher: *To land on this island, we must follow the instructions on the pictures*

(presenting pictures on the computer), and we need to say the spell together.
(Observation HHK-Paul)

During the instruction process, a variety of playful activities were observed, with teachers incorporating games and hands-on opportunities to enhance children's participation and deepen their understanding of the content. These activities led to greater interactions among children. For example, in Sofia's (BSK) class, while learning a crab-themed song, children were invited to mimic the movements of crabs as they listened to the music. Fieldnotes indicated that children were notably more active and engaged during these structured play-based activities compared to traditional listening or question-and-answer sessions. At the end of the teaching session, some teachers used hands-on activities or singing to reinforce the content covered. For example, after teaching the features of rectangles, Audrey (BSK) encouraged the children to actively apply their learning by asking them to search for rectangular objects within the classroom.

While these playful activities enhanced children's interest, motivation, and participation, they also posed challenges in maintaining discipline. Teachers struggled to manage the classroom while allowing children greater freedom and opportunities to interact with materials. Additionally, they expressed difficulties in designing and organizing didactic play, which consists of playful activities intended to deliver curriculum content during group instruction, in a way that effectively addressed the diverse needs of all children.

A fusion of cultures in play practices

Individualized learning under collective framework

One of the most striking features of the play-based pedagogy observed was the interplay between collectivism and individualism. As institutions rooted in a collectivist society, both kindergartens structured daily activities collectively, ensuring that all children participated in the same activity at the same time. Three types of play were identified in the study: didactic play, collective physical play (e.g., morning exercise), and child-initiated play. Didactic play, embedded within collective teaching, was organized at the whole-class level. Similarly, collective physical play required all children in the class to perform the same movements in

unison, following the steps demonstrated by the teachers. Even child-initiated play, which is typically more individualized, was organised with a collective structure. Children could begin playing only after the teachers' announcement and were expected to tidy up as soon as music signaled the end of playtime. Moreover, materials in the learning corners were thoughtfully selected to foster a sense of collective spirit among the children. The most popular learning corners such as those for arts, constructive play, cognitive play corners, were stocked with small and medium-sized materials, encouraging children to sit and play together at a table. This arrangement created opportunities for children to engage with their peers, learning essential skills like cooperation, negotiation, and compromise. As Lily, a teacher at HHK, noted during her interview, these values are highly emphasized in traditional Chinese education. During observations, with the exception of a few children playing with the large wooden blocks, most children sat at tables or manipulated materials alongside their peers. Collectivism was further reinforced through the enforcement of behavioral rules. In both kindergartens, clear expectations were set for children, such as returning items after use, refraining from hurting others, and caring for public property. These rules conveyed to children that their actions and interests should not take precedence over those of the group; and they were encouraged to always be mindful of others while playing. For instance, during an indoor free play session, some children in Lily's class, acting as "firefighters" were running around and making noise. Lily reminded them to be mindful of their behavior and not disturb others.

Despite the collective features, play activities in both kindergartens also reflected individualistic elements. During free play sessions, children were encouraged to choose their own activities and make decisions based on their interests. Even when teachers made suggestions, children had the freedom to accept or decline them. Teachers demonstrated respect for individual differences in two ways. First, they allowed flexibility in when children could start playing. While free play sessions were scheduled, with children expected to start and end together, teachers permitted some leeway. For example, during indoor free play scheduled after breakfast, teachers encouraged children who finished eating to start playing sooner. Similarly, children who needed more time to "warm up" were respected and allowed to begin at their own pace. Second, teachers provided individualized guidance based on children's developmental levels. For children who were less sociable or had lower play skills,

teachers displayed patience and encouraged them to choose any activity they liked or initiated play and invited the child to join (Observation BSK-Anna & Audrey). For “play experts”, teachers took on a minor role, allowing these children to take the lead (Observation BSK-Emma). Teachers also considered individual differences while designing and organizing didactic play. They gave quieter children more opportunities to participate, often inviting them to be “teacher’s assistants”. Teachers also reflected on their play practices:

The content of this activity was closely related to the children’s life, as they were familiar with gingers in their own kitchens. During the hands-on activity, most children were able to communicate and express themselves well, but some struggled. Teachers should have been more involved more in children’s activities and provided appropriate support to assist those who needed help (Document HHK-Heidi)

Freedom within boundaries

In this study, teacher authority was evident through the rules established in the learning corners, control over the availability of play spaces, their leading role in collective play, and interventions to correct children’s inappropriate behaviors. In all six classes, both explicit and implicit rules were enforced, focusing on safety, tidiness, respecting others, protecting shared items, and maintaining classroom order. These rules were consistently reiterated and reinforced by teachers, serving as guidelines for resolving conflicts or addressing unacceptable behaviors. Teachers also exercised authority in deciding which learning corners and materials were available, especially during transition times⁴. For example, at BSK, most learning corners were “open” during transitions, except for those that required additional time to clean up (e.g., the Supermarket). At HHK, only the book and the nature corners were open as teachers believed quiet play aided digestion. Teacher authority was most apparent in collective play, where they determined the content, rules, and steps. Additionally, teachers used their authority to correct disruptive behaviors such as when a boy in Lily’s class threw a tantrum in the family corner, disturbing other children. Lily guided him to express his needs properly and even had him repeat polite phrases. Many teachers expressed the importance of

⁴ Transition times refer to the time period between two activities when children may go to toilet, drink water, or play. Transition sessions could be 10 minutes (e.g., between breakfast and outdoor play) or 30 minutes (e.g., between lunch and afternoon nap).

maintaining discipline and harmony of the class during free play. As Rita explained:

I don't think teachers' authority conflicts with children's freedom. If some children misbehave during play, teachers must use their authority to stop them and guide them on how to play appropriately and get along with others. (Interview HHK-Rita)

In general, more emphasis was placed on discipline during collective activities, where children were required to remain in their seats. Each classroom had lines marked at the center of the room for children to position their chairs during whole-class activities. Movement or speaking out of turn was not allowed, and typically, one teacher led the activity while another maintained order.

Despite this authority, children in both kindergartens enjoyed a degree of freedom during both child-initiated play and teacher-directed activities. For example, in a drawing game during a group teaching, children in Yolanda's (BSK) class were free to choose their own partners rather than being assigned. In Sofia's (BSK) class, some children requested to lead the morning exercise, and this request was granted. Freedom was most evident during child-initiated play where children decided what, how and with whom to play. Furthermore, both kindergartens held two weekly sessions of mixed-age free play, allowing children to interact with peers of different ages and classes. During this hour, children could visit other classes and explore various materials, while teachers adopted a more relaxed approach with fewer disciplinary expectations. The following entry from fieldnotes describes how indoor mixed-age free play unfolded at BSK:

At 10 a.m., while some children from the K2 class were still eating their snacks, three girls from a K3 class (5-6 years old) entered the room. They asked the teacher (Yolanda) if they could play in the arts area. The teacher nodded in approval. The three girls sat down and began playing with playdough. At 10:04 a.m., the children from Yolanda's class finished their snacks and went to other classrooms. Some went to the milk tea shop in a K3 class, while others headed to the photo shop in another K3 class. (Observation BSK-Yolanda)

Holistic development with a priority on academics

As previously mentioned, teachers designed the physical learning environment based on the content outlined in the official MOE guidelines, which aim to promote children's physical,

intellectual, moral, and aesthetic development. Data analysis revealed that materials supported both academic learning (mainly math, science, literacy) and developmental areas (physical, moral, socio-emotional). For math, the materials included resources related to numbers, patterns, shapes, measurement, dates and time, categorization, and basic arithmetic. Science was supported by tools such as magnifying glasses, instructions for scientific experiments, observation and recording forms, and scientific information cards. Literacy development was encouraged through books, Chinese flashcards, recorders, and audio stories. Additionally, academic learning was integrated in dramatic play such as price tags in the “Supermarket”, order forms in the “Flower shop”, daily registration form, and play plans. Materials fostering developmental goals mainly focused on physical, moral and socio-emotional development. Physical development was supported by resources promoting fine motor skills and hand-eye coordination such as magnetic mazes and stringing games. For moral development, materials included slogans featuring the core values of Chinese socialism (e.g., democracy, civility, equality, justice) and patriotic education elements, such as books related to the Communist Party, the Sino-Japanese War, and revolutionary martyrs. Iconic Chinese architecture such as the Forbidden City, and the Great Wall were also featured. Socio-emotional development was emphasized through play materials and teacher involvement. Observations also showed that most materials in learning corners were of small to medium size, enabling children to manipulate them at tables. This setup encouraged communication skills and fostered socio-emotional growth as children engaged in discussions, negotiations, and compromise. Additionally, children were encouraged to assist one another including younger peers, and to take responsibility for caring for both their classrooms and the broader kindergarten environment.

Further analysis revealed that academic learning and knowledge transmission were prioritized in both kindergartens. Coding of photos of learning corners found that there were more materials (91 codes) related to academics than materials focused on development (55 codes). This emphasis was also reflected in teachers’ classroom behaviors. In all classrooms, teachers referred to “collective teaching” as “learning skills” (*xue ben ling*). During these sessions, children were required to stop their activities and pay full attention to the teacher’s instructions. Teachers demonstrated different attitudes towards serious learning and play. If children did not finish their play plans, teachers would suggest they complete them during

transition time, implying that play activities are considered more flexible and less urgent. However, if children did not finish their workbooks, the teacher would use the free play time to ensure the tasks were completed, indicating that academic tasks are prioritized and seen as more important than play. The following field note illustrates such prioritization:

At 3:15 p.m., Audrey handed out workbooks to children, as they didn't complete them during the morning teaching session. The task required children to circle the rectangular items. Only after finishing all the exercise correctly, children were allowed to go and play. (Observation BSK-Audrey)

In interviews, teachers acknowledged spending more time preparing teaching plans than adjusting play materials. Moreover, analysis of teacher involvement in play revealed that interactions were more often geared towards knowledge transmission, rather than promoting broader developmental goals, particularly among novice teachers. The following example illustrates how a novice teacher subtly integrated academic learning into play by redirecting a child's play toward structured learning outcomes on colors and numbers:

During the morning free play session, a girl was playing with three straws, attempting to roll them together. After realizing it was difficult, she put two straws back into the container and continued rolling one. The teacher approached and suggested, "I have a good way to play. We can group all the pink straws together, all the yellow straws together." The teacher demonstrated and left. After a while, the teacher returned and advised the child, "Let's count how many straws we have!" (Observation HHK-Rita)

Discussion

Integration of play and intentional teaching

This study identified a two-way integration of play and intentional teaching in both child-initiated play and teacher-directed group instruction. The intentionality within child-initiated play aligns with the concept of "guided play" (Weisberg et al., 2013), where teachers enhance children's learning through the strategic infusion of curricular-related materials and a

combination of direct and indirect teaching strategies. This practice also reflects the official stance of kindergarten education as a process where teachers organize purposeful activities to guide children's active learning (Ministry of Education [MOE], 2001). This study also found that teachers prioritized materials for academic learning (math, science, literacy) over those supporting overall development. This focus on academics reflects longstanding Chinese educational traditions (Gu, 2014) and supports previous research (Fleer & Li, 2020; Vong, 2012). The emphasis on academics may be further influenced by the socioeconomic backgrounds of the children and parental expectations. In both kindergartens, the majority of children came from low-income families, making it less likely that they had access to adequate resources for play at home (Li et al., 2023; Zhang et al., 2021). Prior research shows that Chinese parents from lower socioeconomic backgrounds tend to place more importance on explicit academic learning, while higher-income parents are more likely to support child-initiated play and value play for its intrinsic benefits (Lin et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2021). This finding highlighted the tension between the official promotion of a play-based approach and parents pushing for more academic instruction, a dynamic observed in mainland China (Zhu & Zhang, 2008) and other Confucian-heritage societies such as Singapore (Yin et al., 2020), Hong Kong (Wu, 2021), and South Korea (Lee et al., 2023).

In terms of teachers' involvement in play, this study found that teachers adopted more facilitative roles than directive roles, aligning with the officially advocated roles of supporters, cooperators, and guides for children's learning. This contrasts with previous findings where teachers in Chinese kindergartens either engaged too much or too little (Fleer & Li, 2020). Furthermore, this study revealed that teachers were more active in indoor play than outdoor play, consistent with findings from other international contexts (Leggett & Newman, 2017; Little et al., 2011). The increased teacher involvement in indoor play and reduced involvement in outdoor play can be attributed to the belief that indoor environments offer more opportunities for structured, intentional teaching. Indoor settings are often perceived as better equipped for focused learning activities, where teachers can more easily integrate academic content and provide direct guidance. In contrast, outdoor play is typically viewed as a time for children to explore freely, with the teacher's role mainly focused on supervision to ensure safety rather than actively guiding learning. Another challenge noted was how to meaningfully engage in play to enhance children's learning. This highlights a persistent issue

in the reform process, as teacher training programs have not fully equipped educators with the necessary knowledge and skills to implement a play-based approach (Yang & Li, 2018).

The integration of playful activities in group instruction is another strategy teachers used to implement the advocated play-based approach. While collective teaching remains dominant in many Chinese kindergartens, both the form and content of this traditional pedagogy have undergone significant changes. In this study, teachers considered children's individual needs during lesson planning and introduced various playful activities, such as hands-on opportunities, into collective teaching. These classroom practices align with findings from research conducted in other Confucian-heritage societies such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, which highlight that Chinese teachers are adopting both constructive and instructive pedagogies (Chen et al., 2017; Tsai, 2017; Yin et al., 2020). The observed changes in collective teaching reflect the top-down impact of educational reforms in reshaping teachers' beliefs and practices. By incorporating playful activities, teachers sought to make their lessons more child-centered. However, they expressed concern about maintaining discipline and addressing the diverse needs of all children need, especially considering the large class size. This tension illustrates the ongoing challenges teachers face in play-based approaches, exacerbated by insufficient training and the difficulties of managing large classes (Huang et al., 2019; Liu & Feng, 2005).

A cultural fusion

This study identified a distinctive Chinese play-based pedagogy that blends Western educational philosophies with traditional Chinese educational values rooted in Confucianism. The dynamic interaction between the global and local influences is reflected in three key aspects: individualized learning within a collective framework, freedom within boundaries, a holistic development approach with a strong emphasis on academics. This shows that Chinese preschool teachers have gradually accepted and adapted Western ideas (Chen et al., 2017). However, the retention of collectivism, teacher authority, and discipline highlights that learning in Chinese society continues to center around the "cultivation of self in community" (Choy, 2017, p. 33) and reinforces the belief that "the core foundation of Chinese education is traditional Chinese cultural practices" (Gu, 2014, p. 251). While the

reform in early childhood education aims to develop a competitive workforce for the global market (Qi & Melhuish, 2017), it also seeks to nurture children who are “socially minded and recognizably Chinese” (Tobin et al., 2009, p. 227) by embedding group-oriented cultural values. As cultural conduits, Chinese kindergartens are responsible for instilling Chinese traditional values to children (Tobin et al., 2009). Across all three aspects, traditional Chinese perspectives tended to dominate over Western influences. This finding supports the idea that glocalization of reformed ideas and pedagogical models must be contextually adapted to align with China's unique social and educational landscape (Zhu & Zhang, 2008). Teachers in this study did not merely adopt new policy texts and adjust their practices according to prescribed principles. Instead, they reinterpreted and enacted these instructional policies through the lens of their inherited knowledge, beliefs, and practices. In doing so, they blended global and local perspectives while preserving the unique contributions of the communities they served (Bautista et al., 2021).

At the same time, early childhood education in China, guided by Western theories introduced through the reforms, inevitably bears certain Western characteristics. Teachers demonstrated a growing awareness of individual differences in their planning and organization of play and collective teaching, aligning with findings from previous research (Liu, 2011). Furthermore, a noticeable shift was observed as children were granted more autonomy, not only during play, but also in group activities that were traditionally under complete teacher control. This shift signifies genuine institutional changes brought about by the reform. The autonomy and freedom given to children in this study contrast with previous findings where children had limited freedom and teachers’ frequently intervened to discipline behaviors (Liu, 2011). In addition, the emphasis on holistic development was evident in both the physical environment and teacher-child interaction. Teachers no longer focused solely on academics, but also began to address children’s physical, moral, socio-emotional development, aligning with the overarching goal of kindergarten education - to foster children’s moral, intellectual, physical and aesthetic growth.

Overall, the hybridized play-based approach observed in these two kindergartens can be likened to a painting that combines Eastern and Western elements. The base of this “painting” is rooted in Confucian values and traditional Chinese ECE practices, while the Western pedagogical tones are skillfully layered on top, creating a rich, nuanced educational

experience.

Conclusion, implication, and limitation

The study offers a compelling example of how the Eastern and Western educational cultures have intertwined to form a unique “Chinese play pedagogy”. Teachers in the two Chinese kindergartens used two main methods to integrate Western play-based approaches with traditional Chinese group instruction. First, they infused pedagogical intentions into the physical environment and actively participated in children’s play. Second, they incorporated playful activities into teacher-directed instruction to enhance children’s engagement. The dynamic interplay between the Eastern and Western pedagogical practices highlights the importance of balancing traditional cultural values with the integration of foreign ideas during educational reform (Gu, 2014). The blending of global and local influences creates a “third space”, fostering new pedagogical hybrids (Gupta, 2018) and prompting reflection on preserving traditional practices (Choy, 2017). This integration ensures that pedagogies are adapted to local contexts, balancing global trends with cultural complexities, leading to more effective and sustainable educational approaches and better learning outcomes.

The findings have important implications for Western play-based pedagogy in non-Western contexts, especially in societies where play has not traditionally been a core component of ECE (Pan et al., 2018). While this study focused on two Chinese kindergartens, the insights could be transferable to other Asian contexts, particularly those with Confucian-heritage values or large class sizes. Many Asian countries have launched ECE reforms to introduce child-centered, progressive theories, but have encountered challenges in their implementation (see Kheioh & Low, 2022; Lee et al., 2023). Teachers in similar contexts may find success by starting with changes in the physical environment, providing materials with clear pedagogical intentions, and gradually incorporating more opportunities for child-initiated play and playful activities in group instruction.

The findings of this study also have significant implications for teacher training programs. While this study identified several effective strategies that teachers used to develop a hybrid pedagogy at the classroom level, it also revealed significant obstacles to implementing a play-

based approach. For example, the provision of more academic-related materials in learning corners and the challenge of managing playful activities in collective teaching highlight teachers' struggle to integrate the new and traditional pedagogies. Thus, current teacher training programs should be reviewed to focus on helping teachers develop and implement a balanced play-based approach that is culturally and contextually appropriate (Li & Chen, 2017). Drawing on successful experiences from other kindergartens with similar contextual challenges may provide valuable examples and solutions.

Despite its contributions, this study has some limitations. The findings are context-specific and may not be easily generalized beyond the two public kindergartens in China. With a sample size of twelve teachers from a specific ethnic minority region, the study may not fully reflect the diversity of early childhood education practices across the country. Future research should include a wider range of schools, including private and rural settings, to offer a more comprehensive view. Additionally, the study did not examine how teachers' experience, educational background, or professional development influence their use of play-based pedagogy. Exploring these factors could provide deeper insights into how diverse teacher profiles affect classroom practices. Comparative studies across countries, both in the East and West, would also help to understand how cultural and contextual factors shape the integration of Western and local pedagogies. Finally, the focus on a specific regional context in China limits global applicability, and further research should investigate similar dynamics in other countries undergoing educational reforms, particularly in Asia.

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