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*Perspectives on curriculum and pedagogy in a private kindergarten in China*

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# **Perspectives on curriculum and pedagogy in a private kindergarten in China**

Yuan GUO

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of  
Sheffield Hallam University  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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# Abstract

Set against the rapid development of private kindergartens in China in the last two decades, this thesis explores the Chinese perspectives of practitioners, parents and children on the curriculum and pedagogy of a private kindergarten delivering the Western Multiple Intelligence (MI) programme.

This ethnographic study captures practitioners and parents perspectives by employing multiple methods including participant and non-participant observations, formal and informal interviews. It generated data on children's views through multiple participatory techniques.

Research findings identify a changing perspective of childhood and children's rights in early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision in China. Practitioners and parents demonstrated a positive view about the MI programme and supporting children's learning in relation to their different patterns of intelligences. Children liked the opportunities to develop their own interests in the areas of play provision linked to individual intelligences. Whilst practitioners and parents valued play-based activities in the MI programme, children conceptualised play differently and viewed some activities as 'learning' rather than 'play', which were defined by adults as 'play'. Practitioners and parents believed there was rich provision for 'play', however children felt opportunities for 'play' at kindergarten were fairly limited, in particular their 'play' time had been reduced in the final year of kindergarten due to the pressure of the transition from kindergarten to primary school. Children generally felt controlled and led by adults for most of their time at kindergarten and they articulated competently their interests, preferences and experiences in the kindergarten.

The thesis identifies a need for Chinese policy-makers and ECEC practitioners to address the challenges of transplanting international programmes to a society with a Confucian educational tradition. Addressing the issue of children's participation in and construction of their kindergarten life would require acknowledging a wider range of stakeholder perspectives, including children's own voices.

# Statement

I declare that this PhD thesis is the end result of my own work carried out in accordance with the regulation of Sheffield Hallam University. The work is original, and any views expressed in this thesis are those of the author, except where indicated by reference in the text. It is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Sheffield Hallam University for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy and has not been presented to any other institution in support of an application of any other academic award.

**Signed: Yuan GUO**

**Date:...**05 July 2015...

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# Chapter 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Rationale for research

### 1.1.1 Personal background

I was born and raised in a medium-sized city of Inner Mongolia in Northern China. Ever since I could remember I have always been around children. As a little girl, I liked to baby-sit for family and friends and watch over my younger brother, cousins and the neighbourhood babies. These were the most fascinating and interesting experiences of my childhood. From that time on, I was clear that my goal in life was to become an early years practitioner and work with young children.

Regarding my personal experience of early childhood education and care (ECEC) in China, I attended a nursery and then a kindergarten <sup>1</sup> during my childhood. I remember attending a nursery at two years of age from the early 1980s onwards, which was a mixed experience. It was an affiliated day care nursery of a state-owned company where my mother worked. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, this kind of nursery represented the main provision of ECEC in Inner Mongolia of China, and it was seen as one of the benefits for employees of state-owned companies and enterprises in the context of a socialist planned economy. The main function of these nurseries was seen as providing childcare rather than education in order to reduce the burden of

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<sup>1</sup> Nurseries and kindergartens were the main provision of ECEC for preschool children in Inner Mongolia, China at that time. Nurseries enrolled children from birth up to three years; kindergartens enrolled children from three up to seven years.

childcare, especially for female employees. Therefore, generally the staff members of these nurseries were the female relatives of existing male employee who were not seen as professionals because they did not have recognised qualifications in ECEC and so they were called 'A Yi 阿姨' (childcare-givers) instead of 'Lao Shi 老师' (teachers). I remember that there were two 'A Yi' in the nursery I attended. They took care of nearly 30 children from birth up to seven years and their main responsibilities were to help children to eat and sleep well. My experience was typical of Chinese people of my generation in Inner Mongolia in Northern China.

From the end of the 1970s, China entered into a new era of reforming and reinvigorating social and economic development after the chaos of the Cultural Revolution (Wang, C.Y. 2008). Along with the implementation of the Reform and Opening-up Policy <sup>2</sup>, the Chinese government began a transition from a planned economy to a market economy. At the same time, the former national leader Xiao-Ping Deng put forward the ideas of firstly "respecting knowledge and talented people" and secondly that "science and technology" were the key to China's "modernization" and the development of science and technology could not be achieved unless "we gave priority to education" (Wang and Liang 2011, p7). The Chinese people started to refocus attention onto the development of education including the early childhood stage. Linked to this, from the early 1980s, the national government established a large number of public kindergartens as the main provision of ECEC for children aged three to six years nationwide.

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<sup>2</sup> The Reform and Opening-up policy of China, also known as Open-door Policy, describes the adoption of a new economic development strategy initiated by Deng Xiao-Ping in 1978. Under the leadership of Deng, the Chinese government began to pursue the policy, in which it adopted a stance of achieving economic growth through the active introduction of foreign capital and technology while maintaining its commitment to socialism. This policy set into motion the economic transformation of modern China.



As a result, I was able to attend a day care kindergarten from three years of age, which offered a different kind of service to my first childcare setting, with qualified staff and an explicit curriculum. The kindergarten was the first one established in my home city after the Cultural Revolution and it still maintains the top-ranked reputation for quality of ECEC in my home city today. I was sent to the kindergarten because both of my parents had full-time jobs and they did not have time to look after me during their working hours. As the first generation of children attending kindergarten after the Culture Revolution in my home city, I still remember that I enjoyed my kindergarten life because, except for having teaching and learning activities relating to numeracy and literacy, I enjoyed learning with other children and playing with toys and games at kindergarten. I also enjoyed the activities such as singing, dancing and festival performances. In my class, there were 37 children in the same age group, two teachers who were the graduates of vocational high schools (equivalent to NVQ level 3 in England) for teachers who had professional knowledge, and one childcare assistant. The classroom was divided into different play areas, such as role-play, blocks construction, art, music, science and nature. I have very happy memories of this experience of attending kindergarten and this contributed to my curiosity and interest in seeing if there have been any differences and changes in kindergartens in China today.

Pursuing my interests in young children and early education, I became a qualified kindergarten teacher in China after obtaining a higher education qualification in Preschool Education at the beginning of the 2000s. Working with young children at public and private kindergartens in China led me to consider

the recent and significant developments in China's early years' provision since my childhood. During the placement practices on my professional training, I gradually realised that there has been an increasing trend in China of employing educational theories and training modules from Western countries relating to kindergarten education. Many kindergartens in China, especially private kindergartens have started to copy and employ programmes such as Multiple Intelligences, Montessori, and Orff music education. However, there are still limitations, including difficulties in acquiring the knowledge of relevant theories, models and practices relating to the specific characteristics of different regions, languages and cultures. Therefore, I developed interests in obtaining first-hand experience and knowledge of ECEC in Western countries, and in exploring the issues of ECEC within different cultural contexts.

Subsequently, I came to study ECEC in the UK. During the study process, I obtained not only academic knowledge and research skills in ECEC, but also the opportunities to undertake placements within early years settings in the UK. Such academic and practical experiences have provided me with a relatively in-depth view of the differences in early childhood education systems, educational concepts and teaching methods and approaches between the East and the West, especially between China and the UK.

I started to believe that the essential precondition of ECEC is children's rights. In Western society the perspective of children's rights is compatible with theoretical developments in social constructionism and the new social studies of childhood. For example, children are viewed as active social actors in their present lives who can influence their social circumstances by themselves

(Qvortrup, Corsaro and Honig, 2009; Prout and James, 2015), as well as by their interaction with peers and adults (Corsaro 1994, 2009). Therefore, it is vital to respect children's rights and listen to their voices when researchers conduct their research and studies in the early years.

In China, although the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has been ratified by the Chinese government since 1990, there is still a lack of research and development work relating to children's rights and listening to their voices. This is, especially so in relation to children's perspectives on curriculum and pedagogy as well as on their kindergarten experiences. In fact, such studies have been mostly undertaken by researchers in Western countries, such as the UK and the US. There is limited information about these issues in China. I therefore thought it was significant to address these issues so as to begin to fill this gap in the literature.

### **1.1.2 General statement**

China has over 130 million preschool children (0-6 years) and government provision of public facilities has been unable to meet rising demands for preschool education (Hong and Pang, 2009). Since the early 1990s and as an intended supplement to public kindergartens, private kindergartens have been established and significantly developed by individuals, the private sector and non-governmental organizations within the context of a market economy with Chinese characteristics (Cai, 2011). According to a report issued by the Preschool Education Committee of the Chinese Association for Non-Governmental Education in 2011, nearly 70% of Chinese kindergartens were private and half of children receiving kindergarten education attended private

kindergartens (Zhang, 2012). This means that private kindergartens have become a significant component of ECEC provision in China. As a consequence, the development of private kindergartens directly influences the development of China's preschool education system as a whole.

While maintaining a momentum of rapid growth, a distinguishing feature of such private kindergartens, in contrast to public kindergartens, is that they are relatively more flexible in their management and operation, including programme provision, curriculum and pedagogy design and delivery, as well as educational resources distribution (Tao, 2010). In fact, it has become a significant trend for private kindergartens to employ diverse educational theories, programmes, methods and approaches in order to meet the various educational demands of children and parents' expectations and preferences (Lü, 2009). Within the competitive environment of a market economy, and as a unique selling point in for-profit businesses, many private kindergartens have adopted highly regarded progressive educational theories and programmes originating from Western countries in recent years (Zhou and Wang, 2000).

After years of development, there is still an unevenness of the distribution and quality of private kindergartens between urban and rural areas in different regions in China, and the overall quality of educational and care in private kindergartens is lower than public kindergartens (Cai, 2011). However, a number of legally registered private kindergartens employing Western theories and programmes in urban areas, especially some large economically developed cities, have gradually built up a solid reputation by providing high quality professional services and facilities for preschool children and their parents. As

an example of the new trend, some private kindergartens have offered a kindergarten curriculum and pedagogy based on the Multiple Intelligences (MI) theory (Gardner, 1993; 1999). They have greater opportunities than public kindergartens for innovation in terms of the characteristics of flexibility and diversity in operation and development of curriculum and pedagogy (Tao, 2010). Chinese researchers and practitioners of ECEC have addressed issues in relation to the implementation of MI theory over the last two decades, such as the studies of Zeng (2001), Feng (2003), Li, Fang and Liu (2004), Huo and Wang (2006), Cheung (2009) and Liu, H.Y. (2011). However, a systematic understanding of how MI theory contributes to ECEC practice is still missing.

The concepts and theoretical perspectives about young children's perspectives are mainly rooted in the traditions of Western society, as opposed to thinking about children and childhood in China. In framing my research, I considered cross-cultural issues, including the effects of political and cultural differences in different societies. Alexander's (2001) study provides a framework for examining various aspects of primary education in cross-cultural contexts, including curriculum and different cultural influences across five countries (France, Russia, India, the US and England), though not China. I subsequently focused on the curriculum and pedagogy of preschool education in China. Another key influence in framing my research was Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa's (2009) study of preschool education across three different cultures (the US, Japan and China). They argue that globalization and social transformation have affected the development of preschool education and care in China. This important study examines the patterns and processes of continuity and change in each of the three countries studied. However, Tobin,

Hsueh and Karasawa's (2009) study was conducted within public kindergartens in China and the growing private sector was not included. The study mainly addressed the practitioners' perspectives rather than children's. Also, it has been over a decade since Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa (2009) collected data within two public kindergartens in 2002. I therefore considered that it was important to address private kindergarten issues from my distinctive perspective on what is a relatively new development of ECEC in China.

## **1.2 Research questions**

My strong memories of my own experiences of ECEC as a child and new knowledge about participatory research with children (Corsaro, 1994; Brooker, 2002; Garrick et al., 2010) led me to eventually decide to undertake my PhD research project in this area. My research aims at exploring a range of perspectives on curriculum and pedagogy in a private ECEC setting in China, including that of parents and practitioners, as well as children whose perspective is commonly ignored and unheard in China.

Moreover, the research into a private kindergarten is original because no similar studies of different voices, especially young children's, have so far been conducted in the private settings of ECEC in China. Following the identification of the research topic, the research questions were set out specifically as follows:

- What are the perspectives on curriculum and pedagogy in a private kindergarten in China?
  - What are young children's perspectives on their experiences of

- curriculum and pedagogy?
- What are adults' perspectives on the implementation of curriculum and pedagogy?
  - What are the practitioners' viewpoints?
  - What are the parents' viewpoints?
- What are the commonalities and differences between children's and adults' perspectives on curriculum and pedagogy?
- What are the main issues raised in the research to inform the development of early years curriculum and pedagogy in private kindergartens in China?

The data relating to different perspectives was generated by employing an ethnographic research strategy with the use of multiple methods including participant and non-participant observations, formal interviews and informal conversations. In addition, the study generated data on children's perspectives through the use of various research activities with multiple participatory techniques. The findings which addressed the research questions are expected to contribute to the development of theory and practice in private kindergarten education. The research has implications for the research and development of ECEC in China and in other ECEC contexts.

### **1.3 Thesis structure**

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. Chapter One introduces the background information of my personal experience and interests in this study, and an account of ECEC development in China within the last three decades, as well as the wider rationale and research questions for this study. Chapter

Two reviews the theoretical framework of the study and the literature in the field of ECEC from both Western and Chinese perspectives. It comprises two main sections: the first section provides an overview of the essential concepts, knowledge and principal theories in relation to ECEC within a Western context; the second section reviews the key policies and research studies focused on kindergarten education and care in China. Chapter Three discusses the research design and the rationale for determining ethnographic research methods and approaches employed for data collection in the pilot studies and main study, the justification of the site and sample selection, and the development of the research instruments and strategies of data management and analysis, as well as the consideration of ethical issues that arose within the context of ECEC in China. Chapter Four addresses the issues of curriculum and pedagogy at the kindergarten from the practitioners' viewpoints. Chapter Five presents parental understanding of and opinions on what and how their children learnt at kindergarten and their children's experience of their kindergarten lives. Chapter Six highlights the findings relating to children's views, feelings and experience of their daily life at kindergarten. Finally, Chapter Seven concludes by synthesising the key findings of the research project, discussed in chapters four to six. It also outlines the main contributions of the study, its limitations and suggestions for further studies.

Chapter One, Two, Three and Seven are organised by following the research tradition of structuring a thesis and the essential processes for conducting research in the academic field. Regarding the organisation of the research findings presented in Chapters Four, Five and Six, there are several key considerations. Firstly, the presentation and discussion of findings relating to



adults' views is placed first, in Chapters Four and Five, because the readers of this thesis are adults, so that the data gathered from adults, including ECEC practitioners and parents, is relatively easy for readers to understand. Also, the findings relating to practitioners' perspectives demonstrate a professional viewpoint as reference point that contextualises other findings. In contrast, children's views and voices are presented last, in Chapter Six, because these are likely to be less familiar to readers and so they offer a sharp contrast to the findings relating to adults. This allows the thesis to highlight the findings relating to children's perspectives which are rarely heard in China. Last but not least, the study was undertaken in China and Chinese society has a convention of generally leaving the most important points to the end. Consequently, the findings relating to children's perspectives and experiences are presented and discussed in the last of the findings chapters, which Chinese readers will recognise as the most important point in this group of chapters.

## **Chapter 2 Research context and background**

This chapter reviews the literature relating to the research context and background, including the theoretical framework of the study and the main issues in the field of ECEC relevant to the study. It is divided into two main parts. Firstly, the key concepts, knowledge and principle theories in relation to ECEC within a Western context are reviewed. Secondly, key policies and research studies focused on kindergarten education and care in China are reviewed. The chapter aims to show the relations between the key concerns of this thesis and relevant investigations in the field in both China and internationally. The emphasis is on policy, research and theory with particular relevance to the relatively recent development of kindergarten education, especially private kindergarten education, within the Chinese context.

### **2.1 Early childhood education and care within a Western context**

This part opens with a consideration of the key concepts and essential issues relating to the concerns about childhood and children's rights in ECEC developed within a Western context. Terms such as "Western countries" and "Western context" are used throughout this thesis to refer to economically developed countries, especially the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and countries in the West of Europe. This is the tacit meaning of the notion in commonly-used literature on education such as, for example, "Western culture" in the studies of Alexander (2001) and Dahlberg and Moss (2005, p61, p73),

and "Western world" in the studies of Pramling-Samuelsson and Fleer (2009, p107, p159) and Georgeson and Payler (2013, p23, p205). The discussion then moves on to review different models of curriculum and pedagogy as developed in different cultures and the influence of these models internationally.

### **2.1.1 Constructions of childhood and early childhood education and care**

The initial focus is on theoretical understandings of children and childhood, and the related concern of children's rights; these are prerequisite to the consideration of any issue in ECEC.

#### 2.1.1.1 Understanding childhood

It is widely acknowledged that that how children and childhood are understood underpins any exploration of the key issues relating to ECEC (Pugh and Duffy 2010; Bruce, 2011; Robson, 2012). Developmental psychologists view children as "becoming" rather than "being" fully human (Qvortrup 1994, p2) and therefore seeing children as unfinished, less competent or incomplete social actors (Jenks, 2005). In contrast, sociologists tend to perceive children as active social actors and holders of rights (Qvortrup, 1994; James and James, 2004; Qvortrup, Corsaro and Honig, 2009), who contribute to society and influence their social circumstances by themselves, as well as through their interaction with peers and adults (Corsaro, 1994; 2009; 2011).

Shanahan (2007) argues that children do not assume a passive and vulnerable role in terms of being dependent upon adults, but are active in the construction of childhood. Other sociologists argue that children, including new-born babies,

have the capacity not only to contribute to society as competent social actors (Qvortrup, 1994; James and James, 2004; Corsaro, 2011), but also to shape their own experiences (Brooker, 2002; Garrick et al., 2010), create their own cultures (Corsaro, 1994; 2009) and determine their own lives and the society around them (Qvortrup, Corsaro and Honig, 2009; Prout and James, 2015). For example, Alanen (2014, p4) conceptualises children as "social actors" and as "participants" in the "everyday social world, contributing to its events and thereby also to its reproduction and transformation". This argument echoes to Smith (2002, 2007) who has pointed out that children's capacity and competence in this regard can be enhanced through a combination of experience, cultural context and relationships. Similarly, Prout (2000) has also highlighted that academic studies of childhood and the acceptance of children's rights to participate have a close relationship with social policies and practices and they support and impact on each other.

Ideas about children and young people's agency are a key element in the "new sociology of childhood" (Prout and James 2015, p7). James and James (2004) argue that the concept of childhood is a unique social phenomenon of cultural and constructed meanings. Childhood is therefore considered as a social and historical construction rather than simply a growth stage in the process of life (Qvortrup et al., 1994; Corsaro, 2011; James and Prout, 2015); it exists and has value in its own right (Smith, 2002; Qvortrup, Corsaro and Honig, 2009). As a structural part of society, it is deemed to be highly variable and interlinked with variables of class, gender, ethnicity, economy and culture (Qvortrup, 1994; Jenks, 2005; Morrow, 2011). Therefore, the notion of childhood has no fixed meaning (Walkerdine, 2005); instead it changes according to different times,

space, and cultures (Evans and Holt, 2011; Maconochie, 2013). In other words, childhood is socially constructed as can be seen in the different roles for children and different activities undertaken in different historical periods and within different socio-cultural contexts (Morrow, 2011).

This new thinking, shaped by sociological perspectives, has informed thinking about ECEC in Western countries, challenging the earlier, predominant focus on child development. Reconceptualizations and redefinitions of childhood have resulted in a growing interest in childhood studies in the academic area, and this has led to an increase in research involving children as participants and exploring children's perspectives on issues regarding their own rights and lives (Tisdall and Punch, 2012). For instance, in the UK, childhood studies have influenced the research for ECEC, including some government funded research projects. Tisdall and Bell's study (2006) demonstrates the importance of involving young children in public decision making at a national governmental level, which exemplifies children's voices as a significant component in the development of UK public services. Garrick et al. (2010) conducted a Department for Education (DfE) funded research project investigating children's (3-5 years) perspectives on their experiences of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (Great Britain DCSF, 2008), to inform changes to the curriculum framework; this confirms Prout's (2000) argument about the significance of children's participation in social policy-making and practice. The revised EYFS statutory framework (Great Britain DfE, 2014) continues to display a strong developmental focus whilst simultaneously championing children's interests. For example, it requires teachers to observe children and plan with an understanding of the child's perspective, as illustrated by the following policy

statement (Great Britain DfE 2014, p8-13):

Practitioners must consider the individual needs, interests...respond to each child's emerging needs and interests...observe children to understand their level of achievement, interests and learning styles.

Adults are prompted to attend closely and attach more importance to respecting and protecting children's rights.

#### 2.1.1.2 Children's rights

Following the enactment of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), there has been a significant growth, in the Western world, in research exploring children's perspectives, that is, studies which aim to support and encourage adults to protect and promote children's rights. As Lancaster (2010) argues, listening to children is regarded as the first step in protecting children's rights. Pascal and Bertram (2009) also highlight that the rights of young children, even babies, should be respected; that they should be treated as are other adult citizens, even though listening to young children creates particular challenges due to their biological and linguistic immaturities. Despite the difficulties, Tisdall and Punch (2012) point out that a number of researchers have been successful in addressing children's views through employing particular methodological strategies in their studies. Examples of such studies are provided by Corsaro (1994), Brooker (2002); Rogers and Evans (2006, 2008) and Garrick et al. (2010).

The development of this relatively recent theoretical perspective on childhood and children's rights has significant implications for this study, as established conceptualisations of childhood in China are likely to be different from those shaping education services in many Western countries. Until recently, ideas

about childhood in China have been entrenched in the traditional cultural values of Confucianism (Gu, 2006; Tang, 2006; Yim, Lee and Ebbeck, 2011; Luo, Tamis-Lemonda and Song, 2013), with children primarily seen as subordinate to adults (Gu, 2006; Lin, 2009) expected to be obedient and to comply with the order and expectations of the adult world (Tang, 2006). However, these traditional conceptualisations of children and childhood are likely to be coming under pressure due to the influence of globalisation (Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa 2009). These changes can also be related back to the sociological perspective mentioned above, concerned with children not "becoming" but already "being" significant social actors and rights-holders (Qvortrup 1994, p2). Accordingly, the matter of children's rights bears on my study and has shaped my decision to focus on children's voices, including children's voices as recognised by adult participants, both practitioners and parents.

### **2.1.2 Curriculum, pedagogy and culture**

As cultural influences are increasingly recognized as playing an important part in shaping the early years' curriculum and pedagogy, this section addresses the key issues of curriculum, pedagogy and culture in ECEC. In order to explore the relevant issues of curriculum and pedagogy within different cultural contexts, it is necessary here to clarify exactly what is meant by curriculum and pedagogy.

#### 2.1.2.1 Definition of curriculum and pedagogy

During recent decades, the curriculum as a field of study has come to play a key role in educational research and development. However, the concept of curriculum is not easy or straightforward to define. *The Webster's Dictionary* (1913) provides an early definition of curriculum as "a course, in particular a

fixed course of study". This implies students' progression under fixed and established circumstances to achieve a presupposed goal. Jackson (1992, p16) extends the term with broader implications such as "learning opportunities and experiences". Greeno, Conllins and Resnick (1996, p33) propose that curriculum is "a set of educational goals and a sequence of learning activities". With particular relevance for ECEC, Bruce (2011) interprets the curriculum as having three key aspects: child, content and context. She argues that the curriculum has a close relationship with the particular cultural context of provision; this strongly influences the selection of what and how children should be taught. Looking to an international definition focused on ECEC, Te Whariki (New Zealand MoE 1996, p10) defines the curriculum as a series of combinations of "experiences, activities and events" that take place within an environment "designed to foster children's learning and development". This definition is useful because it broadly reflects the mainstream in contemporary Western ECEC organizations and institutions; it will thus be the working definition deployed in this study.

The term "pedagogy" was traditionally used in the domain of art and science teaching with some negative connotations, that is, to connote the overly didactic and pedantic (McNamara, 1994), and this caused some concern initially when employed in relation to young children in ECEC (BERA, 2003). However, Watkins and Mortimore (1999, p3) have taken a perspective different from previous understandings and argue that "pedagogy", particularly in some European countries, has had changing connotations and can be seen as "any conscious action by one person designed to enhance learning in another". In other words, it can be understood positively, as educators creatively applying



their general theoretical knowledge to the specific contexts in which they are working and, specifically, to the children they work with. Although Watkins and Mortimore's (1999) argument has shown an awareness of the changing connotations of pedagogy and its significance in early years, some researchers disagree with this definition which merely places emphasis on a teacher's unilateral action. For example, Alexander (2001; 2005; 2009) believes pedagogy is a joint activity in which the learner needs to be taken into account with a recognition of their active role. Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002, p27) take a similar view, arguing that, within the early childhood context, effective pedagogy incorporates not only the act of "teaching" and being "instructive", but also the "provision of learning environments for play and exploration", as well as the adult's "interaction" with young learners and opportunities for "hands-on experience". Siraj-Blatchford (2010, p150) adds to this, suggesting that pedagogy refers to "the full set of instructional techniques and strategies that enabled learning to take place in early childhood that provided opportunities for the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and dispositions". Accordingly, he believes that a successful curriculum and pedagogy should be designed with a consideration of adult-initiated and child-initiated activities, and with priority given to adults extending child-initiated interactions. In other words, drawing on the findings of key studies, a balance between adult-led activities and child-initiated learning activities is encouraged in Western early years contexts such as England.

The above discussion reveals how curriculum and pedagogy have been defined and understood in the academic sphere. Before looking further into this, Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002, p32) remind us that "children do not learn in a social

vacuum", in fact, their learning must involve interactions with adults, peers and the environment (physical and mental), and must take place within a specific social, cultural and historical context. No exploration of curriculum and pedagogy would be complete without consideration of socio-cultural influences. Therefore, the following section details recent socio-cultural theories and research relating to the development of curriculum and pedagogy in ECEC.

#### 2.1.2.2 Culture

Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) argue that pedagogy as instructive practices is underpinned by different educational beliefs, ideologies and values within different cultural contexts; this illustrates the importance of cultural influences in ECEC. Also, an empirical study by Brooker (2002) indicates that what and how children learn is in some degree influenced by the cultural capital and social expectations of different families and how these relate to the educational opportunities provided by different settings. Robson (2012) likewise claims that young children's learning always takes place within, and is also conditioned by, the particular socio-cultural context in which they were born and have grown up. Some researchers (Alexander, 2001; Anning and Edwards, 2006; Ang, 2010; Sylva et al., 2010) maintain similar viewpoints and argue that curriculum and pedagogy are traditionally influenced by the values, experiences and perspectives of the adults involved in a particular society and culture. To some extent, while adults provide opportunities for children's learning through particular models of curriculum and pedagogy, they also simultaneously impose limitations. Therefore, what children learn within different cultural contexts is shaped by a range of factors: material resources, activities, social interactions, linguistic and cultural context, as well as the environment that adults offer

children (Alexander, 2001).

A recent and growing body of literature has investigated the issues of curriculum and pedagogy in ECEC within different societies. For example, Alexander's (2001) influential research includes a number of empirical studies on various aspects of primary education for children from five years of age, focusing on curriculum and pedagogy, and with a consideration of cultural influences in five countries (India, Russia, England, France and the US). The research findings based on an international comparison indicate that pedagogy is a type of cultural intervention rather than simply a series of instructional approaches, skills and techniques in the process of teaching. To a certain extent, pedagogy is deemed as the purposive act of teaching, with educational goals, theories and justification, underpinned by a given society's beliefs, ideas and values; namely, pedagogy is governed and shaped, as well as informed and explained, by a given state's culture and history (Alexander, 2001; 2009). This leads to very different exemplars of a primary curriculum and pedagogy in the five countries studied. Key dimensions of difference in Alexander's complex model relate to the frames in the generic model of teaching, i.e. space, time, children's organisation and interaction, curriculum and routine, rules and ritual (Alexander, 2005); as well as what he termed as "the versions of teaching" which highlights "teaching as initiation, facilitation, transmission, negotiation, acceleration and technique" (Alexander 2005, p6).

Tobin and his followers (Tobin, Wu and Davidson, 1989; Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa, 2009) explore the issues facing preschool education in three cultures (the US, Japan and China), identifying a range of approaches to the

early childhood curriculum and pedagogy across the three cultures and demonstrating the influences of globalization and social transformation, as well as implicit practices that persist despite globalisation. A key dimension of difference identified in their longitudinal study is that the growing impact of globalisation is more evident in China than the US and Japan. As Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa (2009, p225) argue "preschools both reflect and help to perpetuate the cultures and societies of which they are a part". The differences between trends in preschools across the three countries can be ultimately attributed to the impact of culture, not merely political, economic and demographic changes. Despite globalisation, however, Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa (2009) find out that the preschool settings within three cultures have changed in some ways and stayed the same in others. This is because culture is firmly resilient and resistant and "acts as a source of continuity and as a brake" (ibid, p224) on the impacts of globalisation, modernisation and economic change. In fact, every society has an "implicit cultural logic" (ibid, p242), namely, a range of tacit, and normally informally taught, assumptions about how to teach and care for young children, and this has continued to inform practice within preschools even when teaching content and approaches have been revised to adapt to international models and theories. These findings indicate that it is essential for contemporary scholarship, including the present study ECEC in China, to take into account the impact of globalisation and culture.

Taken together, these aforementioned studies provide an essential insight into the issues raised by cultural diversity and its impact on the development of ECEC across cultures, and conceptualised theoretically as the socio-cultural analytic framework for this study. It is important to note that neither of the key

studies by Alexander (2001) and Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa (2009) takes explicit account of young children's perspectives on the relevant issues of curriculum and pedagogy in terms of their methodologies.

### 2.1.2.3 Influential models of curriculum and pedagogy

In the light of Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa's (2009) observations about the influence of globalization on Chinese early years' practice, the following section explores historical and contemporary perspectives on theories and educational approaches rooted in Western cultural contexts which have influenced ECEC in China today.

Historically, the pioneers of ECEC in Western society have conceptualised curricula and pedagogies in ways that draw on Western ideological perspectives, emphasising understanding of child development, including young children's interests and needs, and especially their manner of learning (Stephen, 2006). For example, Froebel, working in Germany at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, attached importance to meeting young children's spiritual needs and promoted more child-centred approaches, including play with blocks, than was common during this period (Garrick, 2009). Later, in Italy at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Montessori argued for creating a prepared educational environment for children with materials designed for their self-directed learning (Montessori, 2002). Such theories and approaches, rooted in Western culture, have a continuing influence in many Western countries and have spread beyond, informing the development of China's ECEC in a range of ways. There is a consensus among researchers (Liu and Feng, 2005; Pan and Liu, 2008; Zhu, 2008b; Vong, 2013) that the ECEC curriculum reforms that have taken

place in China since the 1990s are underpinned by Western educational concepts, ideas and models. Vong (2013, p179) argues that there has been a shift from a "long tradition of teacher-centred" pedagogical beliefs to "a play-based curriculum and less structured pedagogies with a child-centred orientation" (see Section 2.2.5 for further discussion).

There is limited contemporary research into the impact of the curricular models of the above-mentioned pioneers because they are rarely made explicit in current practice (Miller and Pound, 2011a). However, psychologically based models and constructivist theories have been widely adopted in Western countries in recent years. For example, the development of early childhood curriculum and pedagogy in the UK has emphasised planning in terms of young children's individual interests, and providing opportunities for self-initiated play in well-planned learning activities (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002; Siraj-Blatchford, 2010). England's curriculum framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (Great Britain DfE, 2014) proposes that teachers regard children as competent learners and communicators, who learn through play, and a balance between teacher and child-initiated learning activities is encouraged.

A further instance of this type of pedagogy is instanced by the Reggio Emilia approach to ECEC, which is a particularly influential model internationally and was initiated in Italy. Drawing on the ideas of Piaget and Vygotsky (Hewett, 2001), the approach highlights that children could and should have opportunities to think and act independently (Malaguzzi, 1994). Also, it promotes young children's learning competencies through dialogue and communication in their own languages from "the hundred languages"

recognised in the approach (Malaguzzi, 2012, p3), and provides a distinct pedagogy to encourage children's understanding and thinking through multiple forms of expression. This involves keeping records of documentation with photographs, videos and observation notes, as well as through children's own work, such as drawings and paintings (Rinaldi, 2012). The aim is to render children's learning process visible to children and their families. Although the Reggio Emilia approach has been influential amongst early years educators and practitioners internationally, some researchers (Moss, 2001; Browne, 2004; Miller and Pound, 2011b) point out that it is not easy to emulate the Reggio approach because of the challenges posed by different societal values and ethnic diversity that is a feature of other countries but was not a concern for practitioners in this part of Italy during the development of this approach.

In New Zealand, the Te Whariki model, on the other hand, addresses the matter of cultural diversity in the classroom. As the first set of national curriculum guidelines for ECEC, the model has been developed by a group of specialists and practitioners with an emphasis on quality provision within a state with two dominant cultures (Maori and Western) (New Zealand MoE, 1996). As a bi-cultural curriculum, it adopts a socio-cultural perspective of learning, influenced by the Western development theories of, in particular, Bronfenbrenner, Piaget and Vygotsky (Farquhar, 2012) and takes a holistic view of children. Meanwhile, its play-oriented philosophies are underpinned by the Maori principle of empowering children's learning and growth (Smith and May, 2006) with emphasis on health and well-being, a sense of belonging and exploration, and obtaining valuable knowledge which makes a contribution to society (Smith, 2011). The pedagogy highlights learning stories as the distinctive approach for

assessment and keeps track of children's learning processes by documentation records that evoke the Reggio approach. Although Te Whariki is widely considered as a successful model for "incorporating equitable educational opportunities in a bicultural society" (Miller and Pound 2011b, p166), there have been critiques of the manner in which it involves children with special needs (Williamson, Cullen and Lepper, 2006) and of children from minority groups (McNaughton, Phillips and Macdonald, 2003). Against a background of globalisation, this model offers valuable insights into the impact that cultural diversity has on the development of an ECEC curriculum and pedagogy with a socio-cultural perspective.

While Te Whariki was developed as a national bi-cultural curriculum framework, the High Scope curriculum and approach, initiated in the US, was originated as an early intervention programme for disadvantaged children aged two to six years. It aims to recognise, support and develop children's self-confidence through interest-led active experiences and independent play (Hohmann and Weikart, 1995). There is some empirical evidence (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1997) to show that children from socially disadvantaged backgrounds who experience the High Scope approach have more success in adulthood, for example obtaining higher educational qualifications and incomes, and engaging less in criminal behaviour. Epstein, Johnson and Lafferty (2011, p114) claim that High Scope is a "validated approach to early learning", because it underlines children's active, participatory and constructive processes of learning. It also highlights the adult's scaffolding support which is a signature feature of High Scope's "plan-do-review" sequence. Also, Tyler (2012) argues that this programme, informed by brain research and child cognitive and intellectual



development theory, originally drawing on the work of Jean Piaget and later Lev Vygotsky, has influenced ECEC practice beyond the US. In recent years, it has also drawn the attention of Chinese educators and researchers (Yang and Jiang, 2005; Zheng, 2010; Qian, 2014) as a valuable Western model for promoting the development of ECEC in China.

In general, these models of curriculum and pedagogy focus on children's independence and autonomy in learning, reflecting the liberal tradition of valuing individual rights, predominant in Western society (Stephen, 2006; Miller and Pound, 2011a). These and similar models, informed by influential psychological theories (Liu, Pan and Sun, 2007; Zhu, 2008b) and displaying respect for children's own interests and their agency (Liu, Pan and Sun, 2005; Li, Wang and Wong, 2011; Vong, 2013), have become popular in the recent development of ECEC in China.

The above discussion aims to exemplify rather than be exhaustive about influential models in the development of curriculum and pedagogy in the provision of ECEC in Western countries. The discussion below focuses on the specific model of most relevance to my study.

#### 2.1.2.4 Multiple Intelligences theory and the programme

In the US, the theory of MI (Gardner, 1993; 1999), working in the fields of physiology and anthropology, has become influential; it has informed the development of the MI programme for educational settings, including early childhood settings worldwide.

Gardner (1993; 1999) proposed eight intelligences (linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, bodily-kinaesthetic, spatial, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalist) based on the suggestion that "the mind is organised into relatively independent realms of functioning" (Gardner 1993, p120). In his mind, the definition of intelligence is "the ability to solve problems, or to fashion products, that are valued in one or more cultural or community settings" (Gardner 1993, p7). Davis et al. (2011) additionally point out, the implication is that the emergence and development of the eight intelligences is influenced by the opportunities provided to children, and also to adults' experiences within a specific contextual setting and with a particular socio-cultural background.

Gardner (1993, 1999) claims that a key point of the theory is that one of eight intelligences is supposed to be an "entry point" as a strength to support "analogies" and facilitate performance in other weaker areas, over time supporting multiple representations. Robson (2012, p42) explains Gardner's viewpoint:

The starting point is children's strength, rather than weakness, which involves using what they are good at to support the development of areas of intelligence which are less developed, and presenting material in ways which tap into different children's strengths, to support their understating of new ideas, and concepts.

In other words, to some extent, every individual's activity will involve some of these intelligences (Robson, 2012).

Gardner (1993, 1999) also believes that each of the eight intelligences is equally valuable and viable. Campbell (1992) points out that differences in the development of each type of intelligence may occur. For example, in Western cultures, such as the US, the development of linguistic as well as logical and

mathematical intelligences has been valorised while other intelligences such as body-kinaesthetic intelligence have been undervalued. Davis et al. (2011) therefore argue that the traditional theory of intelligence has shaped this trend, leading to limitations in the development of curricula and pedagogy in ECEC.

MI theory has captured the imagination of educators on an international scale (Chen, Moran and Gardner, 2009) and led to increasing attempts to apply it in ECEC practice worldwide (Chen and McNamee, 2008; Fleetham, 2009; Delgoshaei and Delavari, 2012; McPartland, 2012). Davis et al. (2011) argue that MI theory has changed many educators' view of intelligence. They explain that, before Gardner's MI theory became widely known, a learner was traditionally assessed and evaluated by teachers according to his/her academic performance or achievement in educational settings. Moreover, Gardner (1999) suggests that it is necessary to take additional account of personal life history and socio-cultural and historical context apart from the genetic factors that shape learning because everyone has multiple intelligences from birth.

Whilst MI theory reconstructs the traditional dominant view of intelligence that represents it as a measurable IQ score (Cheung, 2009), Robson (2012) has reviewed critiques of Gardner's work. For example, she cites Woolfolk, Hughes and Walkup (2008) who disapprove of describing particular talents or personality traits as intelligence, such as musical and interpersonal intelligence. Additionally, Robson (2012) summarises Gold's (2002) argument that MI theory overstates the importance of the arts, but neglects the importance of practical intelligence; and a key critique is that the existence of the different intelligences has not been proved with any conclusive evidence because there are not

specific tests to measure the eight intelligences. Similarly, Pound (2006) points out that some of the ideas within MI theory are controversial and contradictory, arguing for example, that Gardner has taken less account of "which intelligences exist than the fact that everyone has a unique mix of strengths and weaknesses" (Pound 2006, p66).

Despite these critiques, MI theory has been one of the most influential models of intelligence on education internationally (Chen, Moran and Gardner, 2009). In particular, MI theory and MI programmes have been introduced into educational settings and drawn great interest in educational circles, including ECEC, in China over the last two decades (Zeng, 2001; Feng, 2003; Li, Fang and Liu, 2004; Huo and Wang, 2006; Zhang and Zhi, 2009; Liu, H.Y., 2011). As a result, unlike other Western theories and models which have been only partly adopted or employed, certain kindergartens, especially private kindergartens, have adopted MI theory and the programme as a whole (Lü, 2009). However, very little attention has been paid to the development and implementation of MI theory in private kindergartens in China (see Section 2.2.5.5 for further discussion).

### **2.1.3 Perspectives on curriculum and pedagogy**

With some key issues of curriculum and pedagogy in ECEC now considered, it is now possible to review the literature on different perspectives on the curriculum and pedagogy of ECEC; the perspectives considered here are those of practitioners, parents and young children in early years' settings.

#### **2.1.3.1 Practitioners' perspectives**

A large body of literature has been published on practitioners' perspectives on the relevant issues of ECEC, especially within a Western context. Turning to England, there have been recent studies into the practitioners' perspectives on the ECEC curriculum and pedagogy. For example, to inform the development of a new framework, Brooker et al. (2010) conducted a study exploring the perspectives of early years practitioners on their current curriculum framework, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) for children aged birth to five years (a set of guidelines and legal requirements for England). This was a relatively large scale project using the qualitative techniques of focus groups, and individual telephone interviews with over 190 practitioners from different settings providing early years services for children aged birth to five years across six English regions. The study reported that most practitioners commented positively on the framework because it matched their beliefs and practices regarding a play-based and child-led curriculum. Some practitioners, however, criticised aspects, such as the age and stage related norms in Development Matters (the guidance for supporting early years' practitioners) within the EYFS; the wide variation in levels of support for implementing the EYFS across different regions, local authorities and practitioner groups; and a lack of clarity about practitioners' role and responsibilities. This English study demonstrates the value of accessing practitioners' views and has significant implications for my study of different perspectives on ECEC, above all the importance of taking into consideration the reflective practice of those working in the classroom, and not simply their educational and training background, and the educational theories to which they have been exposed and which they espouse.

Undertaking cross-cultural research of relevance for this study, Wang et al.

(2008) report preschool teachers' views on curricula in different cultural contexts, including discussion of the similarities and differences between the US and Chinese teachers in terms of their personal, professional and socio-cultural characteristics. The study adopted a mixed method approach to collect quantitative data by using questionnaires, and qualitative data by conducting interviews involving 296 Chinese and 146 American preschool teachers. Findings are that the teachers in both countries espouse the value of an all-round "integrated" curriculum emphasising "child-initiated" and "teacher-directed" learning approaches, but criticise more highly structured, teacher-led learning approaches (Wang et al. 2008, p247). However, the Chinese teachers tended to use the teacher-structured, practice-oriented approaches, while the American teachers believed that "less formal, less structured, child-initiated learning approaches" were more effective (ibid). The differences identified in Wang et al.'s (2008) study bear on my own, which is likewise concerned with cultural differences in regard to classroom practice. Wang et al. (2008) also claim that such differences relate to various factors for the Chinese teachers, including professional training experiences, qualifications, location of schools and class size, but for American teachers, only overall educational level influenced their perspectives on the curriculum. The findings about the preferences of Chinese preschool teachers in practice have potential relevance to my study. However, while Wang et al.'s (2008) study explores teachers' perspectives in a relatively in-depth manner, the teachers' self-reporting was not triangulated with the perspectives of other stakeholders.

Another study undertaken in a multi-ethnic and multicultural society was that conducted by Ang (2008), in Singapore, a city state with a main population of

Chinese residents and a dominance of Chinese cultural values. Ang's (2008) study explores kindergarten teachers' views on introducing the new national curriculum framework for children aged three to six years, drawing on data from interviews with 15 teachers from three preschool settings in Singapore. The interviewees indicated their main concerns in implementing the new curriculum, including a shortage of teaching resources caused by limited financial support, and a lack of appropriate training for delivering the curriculum in practice. In particular, the author points out that the teachers' responses also pointed to a tension in managing the parents' expectations of an academically driven curriculum, for example, focusing on the more formal learning of literacy, and the new national curriculum, informed by teaching and learning processes based on play. Also, the teachers believed that if such problems could not be resolved, the new curriculum document would not meet the expectations of parents. Ang's (2008) investigation demonstrates the significance of issues in the implementation of new curriculum and pedagogy from the standpoint of kindergarten practitioners. The study is important for my research because it was undertaken in Singapore, where the majority of the population are of Chinese descent and their cultural traditions and educational beliefs are similar to those of China's practitioners by drawing on the concept identified in Li and Rao's (2000, 2005) studies. The issues raised by Ang's (2008) study of ECEC curriculum and pedagogy have received considerable critical attention as they draw on practitioners' understandings and views within a Chinese influenced context.

Whilst practitioner's views have received much scholarly attention and been widely investigated in relation to the development of ECEC, China remains

relatively unexplored. Much less published studies have treated Chinese kindergarten practitioner's perspectives in much detail, despite Tobin, Wu and Davidson (1989), Hsueh and Tobin (2003), Zhang et al. (2005), Chang and Hong (2008) and Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa (2009) having considered practitioners' views on issues regarding ECEC curriculum and pedagogy in their studies. Instead, most studies on ECEC practitioners focus on issues relating to staff training and professional development (Yang and Zhai, 2006; Lu and Wang, 2006; Zhou, 2007; Feng and Cai, 2007; Zhang and Zhou, 2009; Feng, Wang and Liang, 2011).

#### 2.1.3.2 Children's perspectives

With scholarship into practitioner perspectives now outlined, an overview of children's perspectives follows; this includes a survey of literature on the importance of involving children, and the contribution they have made to different studies and research internationally. The development and advancement of children's participation in education and public decision-making have been increasingly proposed on international agendas (Pascal and Bertram, 2009). Bath (2012) argues that, in England, children's participation has been highly valued and promoted by early years professionals and researchers, as well as some local authorities such as Hertfordshire Council, although the government has not developed relevant policy as a legal requirement. In recent years, many early years practitioners and academics have made great efforts to hear children's voices on both a policy-making level and a practical level, and to develop more participatory approaches and methods to involve children in practice. For example, a number of studies have explored young children's experiences and perspectives on their daily lives in early years or school



settings, such as Brooker (2002), Rogers and Evans (2006), Garrick et al. (2010) and Coleyshaw et al. (2012).

Garrick et al.'s (2010) study is an example of a relatively large-scale government funded research project, it explored the perspectives of children aged three to five years on their setting-based experiences of the EYFS in England. The study involved 146 children who attended full day care and sessional care in 15 case study settings across urban and rural areas with varying levels of social advantage and disadvantage in northern England. Specific participatory approaches and tools such as photos and games were used to support children's expression of thinking. It revealed that in general, children enjoyed their experiences but often lacked engagement in the planning of their learning, and in compiling the records and profiles of their learning progress; furthermore, many children did not recognize the setting record as their own and some children were unhappy that they could not understand the written information (Garrick et al., 2010). This study shows what policy makers can learn from asking children for their views.

Researchers from countries beyond the UK have also provided children with opportunities to engage in research into matters that directly affect them. For example, in Australia, Mirkhil (2010) worked with children to examine the multidimensional nature of children's transition from kindergarten to primary school. The study involved children aged four to five years in three day care centres in Melbourne offering full-time kindergarten programmes for children aged three to five years. Over two months, the study used the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews and participatory approaches of sharing a

storybook and children's drawings to explore in-depth accounts of children's perceptions of their transition to primary school. Findings were that the children all expected to go to school and were keen to participate in the extracurricular activities offered by schools while in kindergarten. Also, their views of school focused on friends, play and the physical environment rather than on more formal and structured academic learning; moreover, their views were influenced by the level of involvement they had experienced in their proposed primary schools. This study also shows how much children can contribute as active agents and competent research participants if researchers take into account their views on the transition from kindergarten to primary school.

Working with slightly older children, Einarsdottir (2010a) explored children's first-year experience at primary school in Iceland. 20 children aged six to seven years participated in the study which took place over a one-month period. Diverse research approaches and methods of data collection were used, including focus groups, children's photographs and drawings. Findings suggest that while most children understand reading and mathematics as the main component of their first grade curriculum, many children also identify free time, recess and playing with friends as the most enjoyable and attractive aspects of school. Moreover, Einarsdottir (2010a) concludes that the children did not feel democratically involved in school life and did not feel that their experiences and views had influence on their curriculum and education. These are important findings which bear on my study; they offer insight into the employment of multiple research approaches to data collection, especially nonverbal data, such as children's photographs and drawings by children within a school setting; the research also shows how the children made meaning from their feelings about

and experience of their school lives; furthermore, the study relates to my own as the children studied were in the same age group as the participant children in my research.

There are some common themes across these studies, for example children valuing school as a place to make friends and their awareness of limited participation in some school matters. The studies presented here provide evidence that, recognising the perspectives of young children has become part of a wider culture of respecting children's rights and listening to their voices (Tisdall and Punch, 2012) in many Western ECEC contexts. In recent years, researchers have shown an increased interest in involving young children as active participants, and there is a growing literature on studying their views on issues affecting their daily lives internationally, especially in Western countries.

However, there are few studies of children's views about their ECEC experiences using participatory methods within a Chinese context. Among the very few studies reported to date, Yim, Lee and Ebbeck (2011) conducted research about young children's perspectives on the traditional stories of four Chinese festivals that are underpinned by the traditional values of Confucianism in Hong Kong, China. The research project involved 392 children aged four to five years who attended full-time day care programmes from 29 kindergartens and childcare centres in Hong Kong. The study adopted qualitative methods to collect data from children's verbal and non-verbal responses to their experiences of the festivals or the related stories told by the participant teachers. Data collection methods included non-participant observations and notes, as well as the children's drawings and their accompanying comments. Also, it

needs to be underlined that in this research, Yim, Lee and Ebbeck (2011) considered storytelling as not only an effective tool for promoting children's understandings of cultures, but also a research tool for exploring young children's views of Confucian values. Yim, Lee and Ebbeck (2011) argue that both the festivals and the traditional stories were the representation of social culture underpinned by Confucian values which highlight the five virtues: Ren 仁 (benevolence), Yi 义 (righteousness), Li 礼 (propriety), Xia 孝 (filial piety) and Zhi 智 (wisdom). The authors also claim that Confucian values, which form the core of most Asian cultures, set the standards for most Chinese families, communities and political behaviour. These findings form a useful backdrop to my study, which likewise deals with children from predominantly Chinese backgrounds. Their findings also show that Chinese children's views have been influenced by Confucian values, which have penetrated different levels of social life in Chinese society, including the area of ECEC. However, the study explored children's perspectives on quite a narrow aspect of their early years' experience, contrasting with the broader view taken in the studies from outside China reported above. My research seeks to extend this.

Overall, all the studies presented in this section confirm the importance of children's perspectives for researchers and practitioners. As Lancaster (2010) argues, researching children's perspectives enables adults to develop their skills in working with children as active participants in their own learning, and furthermore, it contributes to adults' knowledge of child development and ECEC development.

#### 2.1.3.3 Parents' perspectives

Parents are often represented as the first and most enduring educators of children, for example having the closest relationship with their child and the most powerful effect on their children's early lives and learning (Harris and Goodall, 2008). Therefore, parents' involvement in ECEC is very important because it affects not only their children's early learning and development, but also their later academic success and career achievement (Henrich and Gadaire, 2008). International organisations such as OECD (2006) and UNICEF (2008) have also designated parents' involvement in ECEC as a fundamental right and obligation.

In this context, the significance of parents' involvement and relevant conceptual and methodological issues has been addressed in a growing body of research in ECEC. A number of studies, such as Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003; Flouri and Buchanan, 2004; Harris and Goodall, 2008 have generally focused on parent's involvement in ECEC in the UK context with the purpose of improving the quality of ECEC and children's achievement through positive and effective collaboration between schools and parents. As Cryer, Tietze and Wessels (2002) point out that although parents are not the direct-users of educational services, they are the decision makers in selecting schools for their children. Also, Desforges and Abouchaar (2003) argue that parents' satisfaction and involvement are generally considered as significant indicators when researchers investigate the quality of early childhood educational provision.

In England, the government undertakes regular surveys and reviews of parents' views and experiences in relation to the use of childcare and early years provision (Bryson et al., 2006; Kazimirski et al., 2008; Huskinson et al., 2013;

2014). For example, the Childcare and Early Years Survey of parents 2012-2013 (Huskinson et al., 2014), a 8-month large scale research project funded by the Department of Education, involved 6393 parents of children in England aged under fifteen. The parents were individually interviewed for 30-45 minutes, regarding the issues of their use and perceptions of childcare and early years provision, cost of childcare, and mothers' work and childcare. Findings suggest that most parents' selection of early years' provision was determined by the provider's reputation, followed by convenience, quality of care, and opportunities for the child's social contact with peers. Most parents reported that their child's learning activities in formal day care programmes focus on developing a range of academic skills, such as enjoying books and recognising letters, words, numbers and shapes, and social skills, such as playing with peers and good behaviour. The parents also reported that they shared information with the providers by face-to-face talking, provider's feedback, such as child's pictures, drawings and other work, about the child's progress, as well as parents' meetings and written reports. Regarding curriculum and pedagogy, the majority (76%) of parents with children aged two to five years reported that they were aware of the EYFS framework, having received information about this from the provider. This indicates relatively high levels of engagement with ECEC provision.

Siraj-Blatchford et al.'s (2002) study, based on in-depth qualitative case-studies, has pointed to the interrelations between parents' involvement and effective pedagogy in high quality early years' programmes in England. The study (Siraj-Blatchford et al. 2002, p11) reports that:

In the most effective settings, child-related information, especially about curriculum and learning aims, was most frequently shared

between parents and staff, and the parents were often involved in decision making about their child's learning programme.

This exemplifies how parents' participation affects the effectiveness and quality of early years' programmes and that collaborative working is well established in some English preschool settings, though not all.

Parents' views and experiences of their children's education and care can have a significant impact, not only at the individual level of child, family and school, but also at a national level of educational policy-making. There have been some studies of parents' views and expectations of ECEC internationally (Laloumi-Vidali, 1998; Petrie and Holloway, 2006; Achhpal et al., 2007; Einarsdottir, 2010b; Şahin, Sak and Şahin, 2013). For example, Einarsdottir (2010b) explored parents' perspectives on preschool education and the compatibility with the state's preschool policy in Iceland. The researcher invited 43 parents of children aged five to six years to join focus group discussions. The findings show that the parents paid attention to their children's learning of social skills, such as self-reliance and respecting others, and regarded play as a central part of the preschool curriculum; but took less account of the arrangement of the daily programme including teaching content and methods. The parents were more concerned with practitioners being attentive to the children, providing them with loving care, than teaching them academic knowledge and skills. Einarsdottir (2010b) argues that such views and ideology reflects the social tradition of instruction in Iceland and closely matches the values emphasised in the national preschool policies. In brief, these studies have provided an insight into cross-cultural variation in parental views and expectations.

Within a Chinese context, much of the current literature on parent's

perspectives pays particular attention to their beliefs and expectations of ECEC generally (Xu and Pang, 2001; Liu, Li and Song, 2006; Yu, 2006; Lu and Liu, 2011), such as parents expecting young children's to achieve academically (Chao, 1996; Li and Rao, 2000; Wu et al., 2002; Yang, Fang and Tu, 2006; Luo, Tamis-Lemonda and Song, 2013) and satisfaction with the level of service and quality of childcare (Chen and He, 2010; Huang, 2014; Yu, Chen and Gao, 2014). For instance, Luo, Tamis-Lemonda and Song's (2013) study of Chinese parents' views on early years practice examines how Confucian beliefs are reflected in parents' views on ECEC and how they impact on their parenting in a general way; but no attempt was made to explore their views on any particular curriculum and pedagogy. The literature reviewed indicates a lack of research into parent's views on any specific ECEC curriculum and related pedagogy within a Chinese context.

In summary, this first part of the chapter has identified key debates and concerns about children and childhood, children's rights, and the development of the ECEC curriculum and pedagogy and the perspectives on it in different cultures, especially in Western countries. This includes the perspectives of practitioners, parents and children.

## **2.2 Early childhood education and care provision and kindergarten education in China**

With an international perspective on the ECEC curriculum and pedagogy outlined, this second part turns to China, investigating relevant issues regarding kindergarten education and provision in that country. It reviews literature about



the general background and different types of kindergarten and its curriculum and pedagogy. This part draws on studies and research (partly in Mandarin and partly in English) as well as national policy documents (mainly in Mandarin) issued by the Ministry of Education (MoE) and the State Council, mainland China.

### **2.2.1 Political, economic and cultural implications**

In China, ECEC is regarded as an essential component of educational cause (China MoE, 2004); and kindergarten education, as the main provision of ECEC for children aged between 3-6 years (China MoE, 2004), is categorised as “a preparatory stage of formal school education” (China MoE, 1996). Li and Xiao (2011) argue that kindergarten education as the early foundation stage of a lifelong education, has a mutual influence on and places limits on social, economic and cultural development. There is a consensus among Chinese ECEC educators (Li and Xiao, 2011; Liu and Lu, 2013; Liang 2014; Li, 2014) that kindergarten education is a unique social phenomenon and social activity and it plays a vital role in the survival of the human race, cultural inheritance and innovation; meanwhile, political, economic and cultural development influences and restricts the development of ECEC including kindergarten education.

Firstly, regarding interactions between ECEC and politics, Li (2014) argues that the political system determines rights and opportunities for receiving education, as well as the formulation of educational policies, goals and content. Likewise, Li and Xiao (2011) claim that the nature of education is decided by the social and political system, setting the rationale for education; therefore, education,

including ECEC in China, contributes to the success of the governing party, maintaining its authority within wider society. This is exemplified in the functions of ECEC in China which Liang (2014) argues:

- shapes young children's earliest political ideas and ambitions in the context of Chinese society;
- delivers specific political knowledge to young children and raises their early awareness of being citizens who can contribute to the state;
- helps to maintain social stability and development by sharing families' responsibility for their children's education and care.

Secondly, these authors (Li and Xiao, 2011; Liu and Lu, 2013; Liang 2014; Li, 2014) have demonstrated that education at all stages, including ECEC, is tightly imbricated with economic development. Li and Xiao (2011) argue that improving the socio-economic status of citizens is the material foundation for developing ECEC settings, as well as promoting the development of ECEC. They explain that this is because the establishment and development of ECEC settings requires human, material and financial resources, directly relating to the socio-economic status of citizens. More specifically, Liang (2014) points out that economic development affects the number of ECEC settings provided, financial investment in ECEC settings and enrolment rates. This is exemplified in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports on quality in childhood education in different countries. For example, the report of England (OECD, 2012) shows that, countries and regions such as Denmark, Finland, France, Belgium, the UK, New Zealand and the US, with relatively high levels of economic development, normally have high enrolment rates in early childhood and preschool education and care. In addition, the economic level of

a country or region influences the educational demands of wider society and specifically parents (Liu and Lu, 2013). According to Liu et al. (2013), in the past 35 years, Chinese society has experienced significant reform of economic systems, which has led to rapid development of the social economy and ordinary living standards; and meanwhile, there has been a rising demand for ECEC. To meet such demand, there has been significant development of kindergarten education as the main provision of ECEC in China, especially in urban areas (China MoE, 2004). Furthermore, since the 1990s the government has supported and encouraged investment by individuals and the private sector in the development of kindergartens, especially private kindergartens (Cai, 2011). Pang and Hong (2011) report that the number of kindergartens in China has risen dramatically since 2005.

Meanwhile, it is argued that the development of ECEC reciprocally contributes to economic development (Li and Xiao, 2011; Liang, 2014; Li, 2014). For example, Liang (2014) points out that ECEC

- enhances the quality of the labour force over the longer term strengthening and cultivating high-level skilled labour; and
- strengthens the workforce by reducing the burden on parents in terms of raising children.

Liang (2014) believes that these factors contribute to modernisation and the strength of the market economic system. Therefore, both the Chinese government and Chinese people have attached increasing importance to the development of ECEC, which has led to increased demand (Liu et al., 2013).

Thirdly, as discussed earlier in Section 2.1.2.2, education at all stages including

ECEC, always takes place within a particular cultural context (Alexander, 2001; Brooker, 2002; Tobin, Huseh and Karasawa, 2009). Li (2014) further clarifies this point in her study and argues that the selection of educational content is a selection of culture. In her view, particular cultural traditions have unique ethics, customs, and spiritual character; and therefore, the aims and content of education in different nations have distinctive features.

In China, traditional culture is underpinned by Confucianism, as mentioned in Section 2.1.1.2. Such thoughts on children and ECEC emphasise moral education by promoting the concepts of seniority and hierarchy (Tang, 2006; Lin, 2009; Yim, Lee and Ebbeck, 2011); therefore, a superior-subordinate relationship between teachers and students is a distinctive feature of educational settings in China (Lin, 2009). As a result, traditional ECEC pedagogy underpinned by Confucianism advocate teacher-centred didactic approaches (Zhu and Wang, 2005; Gu, 2006). In contrast, Pan and Liu (2008) find out that, nowadays, ECEC pedagogy has gradually shifted to focus on child-centred and play-based approaches, influenced by contemporary educational thoughts and theories developed within Western cultural contexts. In addition, Pan and Li (2012) point out that kindergarten education nowadays aims to promote children's all-round development through play-based activating learning. Meanwhile, it advocates respect for children's rights, individual differences, and equality in relationships between adults and children. This last point, in particular, with its focus on rights, challenges traditional ideas about children as discussed above.

At the same time, some Chinese researchers (Pan 2006; Chen, 2009; Li and

Xiao, 2011; Li, 2014; Liang, 2014) argue for the influence of kindergarten education on cultural development in China, for example selectively preserving cultural patterns through the medium of the curriculum, to disseminate particular knowledge, skills, ethics and values. This is exemplified in Bi's (2014) study that children's textbooks which have been popular for thousands of years, such as San Zi Jing 《三字经》 (Three Character Scripture), Bai Jia Xing 《百家姓》 (Hundred Family Surnames) and Di Zi Gui 《弟子规》 (Being a Good Student and Child), still reflect the ideology, culture and ethics of Confucianism. Moreover, Pan and Li (2012) point out that kindergarten education has had an impact on recreational activities and contemporary culture. They provide the examples of this including the adoption of contemporary Western educational theories and models, the revision of traditional curriculum and pedagogy, and the development of teaching materials, textbooks and toys.

As discussed above, the change in education, including the early childhood stage, is necessarily influenced by political, economic and cultural factors. Kindergarten education in China has been developed in the context of a distinctive social and cultural background.

### **2.2.2 Different provision of early childhood education and care**

Having set out the political, economic and cultural context of ECEC in China, the following section gives an overview of the system and provision of ECEC in China.

ECEC is also known by the name of preschool education in China (Liu, 2009),

which are interchangeable terms used to refer education and care provision for children aged 0-6 years (or 7 years, varying by region) in a range of government documents (China State Council, 2003; China MoE, 2004; China State Council, 2010a) and academic publications (Zhai and Gao, 2008; Zhu, 2009; Liu, 2009; Li, 2014; Liang, 2014). Du and Dong (2013) claim that providing preschool education for young children is now a parental and national expectation. Zhai and Gao (2008) argue that, acting in accordance with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) policies for ECEC, China has prioritised ECEC, and made sustained efforts to develop centre-based preschool programmes in recent years. There are three main forms of ECEC provision for children before attending formal primary schools at seven years of age (see Table 2.1 below): nurseries which provide one to three years of childcare provision for children under three years; kindergartens which offer three years of childcare and education for children aged three to six years; and pre-primary classes which provide one year of childcare and education for children aged six to seven years (Vaughan, 1993; Zhai and Gao, 2008; Zhu, 2009; Li, 2014; Liang, 2014).

**Table 2.1 The preschool provision for children aged 0-6 years in China**

	<b>Stage</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Compulsory</b>
<b>Preschool education</b>	Nursery	under 3 years	no
	Kindergarten	2.5/3-6 years	no
	Pre-primary	6-7 years	no
<b>Primary education</b>		7 and above	yes

(Source: based on Vaughan, 1993; Zhai and Gao, 2008; Zhu, 2009; Li, 2014; Liang, 2014)

Wang and Liang (2011) report that in the last three decades, nursery provision in China has dramatically declined. They believe that this is because whereas

children under three years used to attend nurseries, but now tend to be taken care of in informal or family childcare arrangements, such as by parents, grandparents or nannies. Zeng (2011) points out that this is the result of a change in government policy which gives priority to kindergarten funding.

According to *The Kindergarten Work Regulations* (China MoE, 1996), “kindergarten” refers to the settings providing ECEC service for children aged 3 to 6 years. The Regulation stipulates that kindergartens are generally based on three years of full-time provision, with children divided into classes by age: a junior class has up to 25 children aged three to four years; a middle-class, with up to 30 children aged four to five years; and a senior class, with up to 35 children aged five to six years. The Regulation also requires that each class is commonly assigned two teachers and one childcare assistant, generally maintaining a 1: 5 adult-child ratio. Zhao and Hu (2008) argue that, although falling under the macro-level control of the national education department, kindergartens come more directly under the administration of local education departments, operating at all levels in accordance with relevant national laws, rules and policies. Wang and Liang (2011) also note that public kindergartens are usually strict in terms of only enrolling 3 to 6 year olds (because only this age group receives funding) while private kindergartens are generally more flexible, and enrol children between 2 and 7 years.

Zhao and Hu (2008) report that the government has established pre-primary classes to implement at least one year of preschool education for children living in areas of poverty and in relatively underdeveloped rural areas. In contrast, Zhang (2009) states that pre-primary classes in urban areas are mainly run by

individuals and private enterprises to support children's transition between kindergarten and primary school. She explains that urban areas mainly offer two types of provision: firstly, the one-year day care programmes for children who have graduated from kindergarten but not yet met the primary school age requirement; secondly, the after-school classes teaching academic knowledge and all subjects taught at grade one of primary school. Moreover, Zhang (2009) points out that in recent years, the government has banned kindergartens from setting up pre-primary classes or programmes, or from teaching primary level academic knowledge, such as literacy and maths in order to prevent the phenomenon of primary school-oriented kindergarten education. However, Chen (2008) claims that, because of a shortage of places, the need to prepare children for entrance competitive exam of primary schools has raised parental demands for pre-primary classes in urban areas.

### **2.2.3 Kindergarten provision**

Kindergarten education is a unique and vital stage within lifelong education and development (Li and Xiao, 2011; Liu and Lu, 2013; Li, 2014; Liang, 2014). With the aim of promoting children's all-round development and well-being, as well as reducing the burden of childcare for families, kindergarten education in China provides both childcare and education (Zhu, 2009). Additionally, Hong and Pang (2009) highlight that kindergarten education in China belongs to the school education system, providing formal education, but it is also a public welfare service providing childcare.

#### **2.2.3.1 Public kindergarten**

Public kindergartens refer to state-owned kindergartens under the jurisdiction of



Ministry of Education (China State Council, 2003). Zeng (2011) clarifies that public kindergartens are financially supported by the government with public funds; and the assets are state-owned. The principals of public kindergarten are directly appointed by government; and the teachers work under the jurisdiction of the government as state officers (China MoE, 1989; Feng and Cai, 2007).

Feng, Wang and Liang (2011) point out that one of key advantages of public kindergartens is that the teachers have trained in colleges and junior colleges majoring in ECEC and they must have preschool teacher certificates. Zhou (2007) reports that teachers, in particular in public kindergartens generally understand the age characteristics of preschool children in terms of both physical and cognitive development and they are experienced in the methods and skills of preschool teaching. A further advantage is that public kindergartens enjoy various subsidies given to state organisations and institutions, and their operation and management are established for a relative long time (Zeng, 2011).

However, public kindergartens funded by government are a scarce resource and cannot meet demand (Wang and Liang, 2011). Due to the national reform of economic system, there has been a shift from a planned economic system, fully funded by government, to a market system with educational costs jointly born by individuals and the government (Zeng, 2011). The result of this has been the reorganization, merger and even closure of numerous kindergartens between 1995 and 2005 (Liu, 2007; Pang and Hong, 2011). As Zhou (2011) reports that the proportion of public kindergartens dropped from 60% to 40% of kindergarten provision between 2000 and 2007.

In this context, market competition has become increasingly fierce, and the development of private kindergartens run by enterprises, individuals and foreign-owned agencies has gradually grown, posing a challenge to traditional public kindergarten education (Cai, 2011). Hong and Pang (2009) criticise that the government mainly allocates limited funds to public kindergartens, meanwhile, fails to provide sufficient regulation and supervision for private funds to private kindergartens. They therefore point out this would result in uneven quality of kindergarten education. Zeng (2011) also argues that it is problematic for public kindergartens to rely on state funding because this leads to a situation where they are unable to adapt to the socio-economic context.

Explaining the difficulties faced by Chinese ECEC, Feng, Wang and Liang (2011) claim that, while establishing public kindergartens, the government has set standards for management that leads to overstaffing of senior staff with a waste of social resources. Yu, Yuan and Fang (2011) point out that teaching in public kindergartens is implemented exactly in line with syllabuses for the kindergarten stage and so teaching methods are relatively traditional with a lack of innovative features. Overall, a number of problems have undermined the dominant position of public kindergartens and weakened the nature of public welfare (Liu and Feng, 2005; Zhou, 2011).

#### 2.2.3.2 Private kindergarten

In terms of The Private Education Promotion Law (China, 2002), private education generally implies drawing on non-government resources; and so private kindergartens, in a narrow sense, refer to the kindergartens being established and administered by non-state organisations or individuals to the

public, and also being funded by non-government resources including private enterprises, civic groups, solely foreign-owned enterprises or joint ventures and individuals (China State Council, 2004). Cai (2011) points out that the term "private" cannot cover all non-state-owned kindergartens as many are jointly funded by private and public resources in recent years. In the literature, a variety of definitions have been suggested but not clearly defined. The term "private kindergarten" is used throughout this thesis to refer to the kindergartens run by social organizations or individuals outside state agencies and using funds beyond state fiscal support.

By 2011, the total number of kindergartens in China had reached 166,700, with 115,400 private kindergartens, accounting for nearly 70% of the total (Zhang, 2012). Along with continuous improvements in living conditions, parents are also coming to attach more importance to personalized services when choosing kindergartens for their children (Huang, 2014). Therefore, market demand and parental aspirations have guided more private capital investment into kindergartens, and, as a result, private kindergarten provision has developed dramatically in urban areas over the last 20 years (Hong and Pang, 2009).

According to Shi (2011), the distinctive features of private kindergartens include: a market-driven approach, a strong sense of service, flexibility and variability. Wang (2006) also argues that private kindergartens are characterized by their diverse programmes and flexible operations. The researcher analyses that as the state has relatively less control over private kindergartens, they have a higher level of autonomy. Therefore, private kindergartens are allowed to have different management systems and use various approaches to curriculum and

pedagogy (ibid). Likewise, Tao (2010) highlights that the teaching methods, curriculum design and implementation of private kindergartens are generally more flexible and innovative than those of public kindergartens. Zhou (2011) also points out that, private kindergartens rely on social resources and private funding, and therefore, the recruitment becomes very important for their survival. In order to attract more children and expand, many private kindergartens adjust their management and teaching approaches to meet the needs and expectations of parents (ibid). As noted by Wang, Ji and Wang (2009), private kindergartens are market-oriented, and therefore they pay more attention to increasing revenue and managing finances.

Cai (2011) reports that the conditions and quality of private kindergartens show a serious disparity. By way of illustration, Lü's (2009) study shows that, to meet diverse market needs, some of private kindergarten attract children with innovative educational programmes and fancy equipment, charging high fees and implementing high-quality provision whilst others win the customers of parents through low prices and convenient services. Huang's (2014) study also reveals that, although the government regulates private kindergartens by specifying how they are to be run and what standards they must meet, and ensuring that these are implemented with an annual inspection, its control does not stretch to specifying criteria for tuition fees for private kindergartens; they are therefore found at the luxury and the relatively budget end of a spectrum.

In recent, there has been a trend of marketization in private education in China (Cai, 2011). As Wang, Ji and Wang (2009) argue, competition is not restricted to curriculum and pedagogy, and services; there is also competition in

marketing strategy. Private kindergartens continuously modify internal organisation, curriculum and pedagogy, as well as the level of staff qualifications to meet market demand (Shi, 2011). Parental satisfaction is essential to the survival of private kindergartens and therefore, meeting parent's demands has become an important consideration for private kindergartens (Hong and Pang, 2009; Zhang, 2009; Zhou, 2011). Tao's (2010) study reveals that many private kindergartens adopt programmes from Western countries, and employ teaching staff with higher qualifications to meet parental demand. Her study also shows that some private kindergartens, especially in large cities, successfully established and developed for more than 10 years, have gradually established brand awareness and been accepted by more parents, becoming chain kindergartens with branches nationwide.

#### **2.2.4 Historical development of kindergarten education**

Over the past three decades, kindergarten education as an important part of the Chinese education system has been developed significantly (Li and Xiao, 2011). As Zhu (2009) argues, kindergarten education is no longer a single and closed kind of provision but is now a part of a comprehensive and integrated system of education and care for all three to six years old preschool children.

##### **2.2.4.1 After 1979**

The Reform and Opening-up Policy implemented by the Chinese government since 1979 has profoundly changed the country's economic structure, social life, as well as its cultural and educational development (Zhu, 2009; Wang and Liang, 2011; Zhou and Shen, 2011). Moreover, the implementation of the One-child policy launched in 1979 (Peng, 1997) and the rapid improvement of living

conditions brought about by economic reform gradually raised demand for high quality care and early education from birth to school age (Zhou and Shen, 2011). Liu, Pan and Sun (2007) examine how, in order to strengthen international competitiveness within the context of globalisation, the Chinese government accelerated economic development. This included changing the way that early years' provision was run, namely releasing the total control it had had since the People's Republic of China was established in 1949. As noted by the authors, the government began to permit state-owned kindergartens to be taken over by other organisations including social organizations, enterprises, agencies, individuals and foreign-funded enterprises and individuals.

Cai (2011) further reports that, in the previous era of a planned economy, state-owned enterprises were expected to share the government's responsibility for social functions; and therefore, state-owned enterprises ran kindergartens as affiliated settings for providing a childcare service as part of employee's social welfare benefits. The author also points out that, after the economic reforms, state-owned enterprises had to follow the market system and reduce their social function by abolishing the welfare system; and therefore, due to the lack of resources and capacity, the government could only partially take over the kindergartens and the remaining kindergartens were exposed to the market with new self-management practices and independent operations.

#### 2.2.4.2 From the 1990s

Building on the change of ECEC provision in the 1980s, the 1990s was a hard time for kindergarten development although it saw further growth, especially in the private sector (Liu, Pan and Sun, 2007). Zeng (2011) claims that there is a

conflict in that kindergarten education does not belong to the compulsory education system in China, and therefore it is excluded from government budgets for public education. Liu and Feng (2005) argue that kindergarten education during the 1990s not only lost the previous financial support as welfare benefits from state-owned enterprises, but also became ineligible for financial support from the government; and as a result, most kindergartens were taken over by private investment capital. Moreover, the economic and social change led to many kindergartens closing down and the number of kindergartens dramatically decreased between the end of 1980s and beginning of 1990s (Liu, Pang and Sun, 2007; Cai, 2011; Pang and Hong, 2011). In order to resolve this problem, the government enacted a series of policies, such as the *Outline of China's Education Reform and Development* in 1993 and the *Regulations on School Running by Social Forces* in 1997, to encourage the private sector and individuals to run kindergartens and invest in kindergarten education (Sun, Liu and Wang, 2011).

In addition, Cai (2011) points out that the breakup of public ownership in the economic system has promoted the development of a diverse private sector in China, and this lays the foundation for diversified ownership of educational settings. Pang and Hong (2011) also suggest that since China is a developing country, it is impractical for the nation to be responsible for all aspects of ECEC development and it has to be undertaken jointly by the government, private sectors and individuals. Furthermore, Zeng (2011) argues that, with proper incentives and market constraints, competition amongst educational institutions could help improve the quality and standards of education.

Since the 1990s, according to Cai (2011), the corporate welfare housing system has been gradually replaced by a commercial system, and a large number of commercial organisations have developed very rapidly. The author highlights that in order to meet residents' demands for neighbourhood schools, community developers have developed various cultural and educational facilities, including kindergartens, as a marketing feature, with this becoming an important factor that leads to rises in house prices from the 1990s. Issues, such as having "a good kindergarten in the community" and "the convenience of children going to kindergarten", have become important considerations for young parents when they buy houses (Cai 2011, p246); and so, there has been a growing trend in China for community-based social and private resources to be used to establish kindergartens and to invest in kindergarten education in the past two decades.

Overall, the private sector as part of China's economic reforms has rapidly developed, making possible diversified sponsors, and enabling joint regulation through government and market mechanisms from the 1990s (Zeng, 2011). To a certain extent, Liu (2007) believes that, such changes has made up for the deficiency of ECEC development in China during the 1990s, and have met the rising demands for a widened range of kindergarten education and care. The more important point is that it provides the conditions and context for the continuing development of private kindergartens in China (Cai, 2011).

#### 2.2.4.3 Since 2000

In 2001, the Ministry of Education issued the national guidance outline for kindergarten education (China MoE, 2001) to support the development of kindergarten education nationwide from a policy level. The guidance sets out



five official learning areas for kindergarten children: art, health, society, science and language. It also emphasises that educational content needs to be close to children's life experiences and respect children's rights, individual demands and interests (China MoE, 2001), as well as recognising the value of childhood, and play-based learning in a child-centred curriculum (Liu and Feng, 2005; Liu, Pan and Sun, 2007; Li, 2009). In contrast to the traditional Chinese view of children and ECEC, this national document now reflects the contemporary view of children (as discussed in Section 2.1.1), as active, competent and independent learners, which is consistent with the prevalent concept of children within a Western context (Zhu and Zhang, 2008).

In 2003, the State Council launched *The Guidance on the Reform and Development of Early Childhood Education* (China State Council, 2003). Wang and Liang (2011) analyse that this policy document sets up a government-led kindergarten management mechanism; it outlines the blueprint of kindergarten provision. To act in accordance with the guidance, the pattern for kindergarten education provision has been gradually formed, that is “public kindergartens being the demonstration model” and “private kindergartens being the main component” (China State Council, 2003). Moreover, Zhu and Zhang (2008) argue that the educational function of kindergartens has been highlighted beyond childcare as stated in the national policies that is kindergarten education is “an important part of basic education” (China State Council, 2003) and “the foundation stage of the school education system” (China MoE, 2004). Liu (2009, p31) analyses relevant national policies of ECEC in recent years and argues that, kindergartens have been positioned by the government as "a component of social and public welfare undertaking" with the purpose of easing the family

childcare burden and meeting the increasing demands for female labour-force participation. As demonstrated by Zhai and Gao (2008), kindergarten provision in China has turned to undertake the dual responsibility of education and care rather than just childcare for pre-schoolers.

Liu et al. (2013) report that since 2003, kindergarten education has made rapid progress. In response to the implementation of the guidance outline for kindergarten education (China MoE, 2001), it has been put forward in *The Several Opinions of the State Council on Developing Preschool Education at Present* (China State Council, 2010b), that the government has a lead in the new direction taken by kindergartens: mobilizing local government to establish public kindergartens and developing preschool provision jointly through multiple means; namely, encouraging and supporting the private sector, enterprises, social organizations, community committees and individuals to found and donate to kindergarten provision. The Ministry of Education published official statistics on education (China MoE, 2014), which shows that by 2013, the number of kindergartens across the country had risen to 198,600 and the population of children in kindergartens was 38.9469 million, with the admission rate of three years olds standing at 67.5%. However, this meant that 32.5% of children in this age group, that is to say, 18.75 million children, did not attend kindergarten. Liu et al. (2013) point out that given the huge school-age population in China, the country faces a great challenge; and therefore, the government set the objective of preschool education for the next decade, that is to vigorously develop public kindergartens and actively support private kindergartens, with joint efforts made by public and private agencies.

## **2.2.5 Approaches and methods of teaching and learning**

Teaching and learning in China's kindergartens is conceptualised as an integrated system, which is composed of the basic elements: teachers, children, teaching goals, content, methods and environment (Huo and Li, 2010).

### **2.2.5.1 Curriculum and pedagogy**

Wang, C.Y.'s (2004; 2008) studies show that the Chinese kindergarten education sector has been exploring educational objectives, content and methods for nearly a century. She also points out that kindergarten education in China has experienced a process of copying education and curriculum models from Japan, Russia, Europe and the US and also experienced a process of continuous self-reflection, reform and innovation, leading to the diverse development of Chinese kindergarten curricula today.

In China, traditional Confucian ideas lay stress on collectivism and social hierarchy (Gu, 2006; Yim, Lee and Ebbeck, 2011; Luo, Tamis-Lemonda and Song, 2013) and have shaped the culture and education of Chinese society for thousands of years (Wang, 2004; Lin, 2009 Ren, 2010; Bi, 2014). Traditional Confucian thinking does not acknowledge the independent personality of each child because children are deemed naïve and incompetent small adults (Tang, 2006; Zhao, 2006) and the private property of families (Lin, 2009) the purpose of which is to carry on the family line (Zhao, 2006). Accordingly, traditional early years education took a home-based form, the purpose of which was to learn to make a living, fulfil parents' aims, build the family and continue its success (Lin, 2009). Wang, C.Y.'s (2004; 2008) studies also show that the basic curriculum content of ECEC included initial training based on ethics and morality, with

regular training relating to the quotidian tasks such as watering crops and cleaning as the main activities and with simple cultural learning as auxiliary activities; meanwhile, preaching and immersion teaching approaches were the main approaches adopted.

From the founding of PRC in 1949 to the 1980s, and due to the state political impact of communism and socialism, children were deemed to be the state's property: "the flowers of the motherland and successors to the cause of socialism", namely "the future of the state" (Lin 2009, p26). Lin (2009) therefore thinks that this contrasts radically with the position of children within traditional Confucian thinking. Starting from the 1950s, Soviet educational thought and behaviourist theory became a major theoretical basis of kindergarten curricula in China (Zhu and Wang, 2005). It is reported by Zhu and Wang (2005) that Chinese kindergarten education fully imitated Soviet educational patterns, and the curricula were conceptualised as teaching activities for different subjects, such as physical education, language, drawing, handwork, music and calculation. The study also reveals that teacher-centred whole class activities and teaching materials, such as textbooks, became the main approach and tools for curriculum implementation.

Since the 1990s, when kindergarten curriculum began to be influenced by those from Western theories, a more individualistic view of children, education and teachers has gradually grown in China (Zhou and Wang, 2000; Wang, 2004; Zhu, 2008b). Tang (2006; 2008) argues that children have been more likely to be regarded as individuals, independent from adults, who have their own rights and capacity for self-development. Zhu and Wang (2005) highlight that the

notions of learning through play, activity and areas of play of provision were adopted in ECEC. Their study also indicates that the curricula at that time emphasized the importance of children's overall development and the integration of curriculum content, underlining the interaction between children and the environment and highlighting the value of games and daily life activities in curriculum implementation.

Over the last two decades, contemporary Western ECEC theories, such as the Montessori approach, Gardner's MI, and the Reggio approach, have become influential in the development of China's kindergarten education (Pan, 2006; Liu, Pan and Sun, 2007; Zhu, 2008b; Li, Wang and Wong, 2011). This has made curricula diversify of ECEC (Zhu and Zhang, 2008). According to Xu and Liu (2014), ECEC educators and practitioners in China have started to understand the curriculum from a broader perspective, considering it as the result of an interaction between educational principles and plans, which includes educational objectives, curriculum content, methods, assessment and children's learning activities. Hua (2007) points out that during the exploration and practice of different curricula models, Chinese researchers and practitioners have gradually realized that different kindergarten educational theories and programmes all have their advantages and disadvantages, and there is no perfect model or programme which can be simply copied or applied universally for China's kindergarten education. The author, therefore, suggests that kindergarten curriculum designers need to critically adopt and integrate different theories and programmes in terms of the framework at national, local and kindergarten levels, and establish diverse curricula responsive to local conditions.

Making a critical point about recent developments, Zhu (2009) finds out that curriculum theory is divorced from practice. He analyses that there is a tension between dominant and collective teaching patterns and the concept of advocating respect for children's rights, recognising individual differences in the teaching, and promoting children's initiative, creativity and critical spirit. Also, Yu, Yuan and Fang (2011) criticise that children have become passive learners, and exemplify that, in classroom, the topics which children raise from their existing experience or interests are often ignored or even regarded as irrelevant by teachers; and because they neither truly respect nor understand children. Similarly, Liu, Pan and Sun's (2007) study reveals that it is theoretically emphasised that teaching content should come from children's life experience, and the curriculum should be implemented through children's daily life experiences; however, in practice, it is common to see teachers ignore those experiences important to children. Pang (2015) also reports that parents and teachers are still influenced by a traditional ideology of education, and pay more attention to the teaching of academic knowledge and children's cognitive development than on moral issues, children's social relationships and the development of personality.

A key finding from this review of literature relating to Chinese kindergarten education is that most studies have focused on issues of relevance to public kindergartens and the development of the curriculum and pedagogy within this sector. The critical points above refer to public sector kindergarten. Few studies have focused on private kindergartens and the development of the curriculum and pedagogy in these. The limited studies that do exist have mainly

concentrated on highlighting the problems and deficiencies of private kindergartens, including curriculum issues. For example, Cai (2011) argues that whilst private kindergartens benefit from having room to manoeuvre and be flexible when it comes to the development of curriculum and pedagogy, they suffer from the limited guidance and support they receive from the government. Shi (2011) finds out that the curriculum of private kindergartens is designed more with consideration of parents in mind than the principles of child development. He criticises that, to meet parents' expectations, the curriculum is set to deliver academic knowledge such as literacy and numeracy, with increased academic content and levels of challenge that are inappropriate. According to Tao (2010), in public kindergartens, the daily teaching activities are planned in terms of textbooks and teaching materials issued by state and local education departments; whereas, private kindergartens mainly adopt textbooks edited by private educational institutions or organisations, and make limited use of national textbooks and guidelines. Overall, the evidence presented in the existing literature shows a range of criticisms made of kindergarten curricula and pedagogy generally.

#### 2.2.5.2 The daily kindergarten programme

The daily kindergarten programme in public and private kindergartens is generally composed of various kinds of activities, including whole class activities, group activities, optional activities, outdoor-activities, clean and tidy up time, daily living activities and transition activities (Li and Xiao, 2011). Table 2.2 sets out the various daily activities and their key characteristics.

**Table 2.2 Typical daily activities of kindergarten in China**

Whole Class activities	Teachers plan and organise teacher-led, whole class (collective) activities. All children undertake the same activity at the same time.
Group activities	Teachers plan and organise small group activities. Children are in divided into small groups (6-7 children per group) and are involved in self-directed learning through play with learning materials, communicating and interacting with peers. Teachers are mainly responsible for observation and guidance.
Optional activities	Children freely choose from a range of resources (i.e. toys and other learning materials), areas (i.e. cognition area, art area, and construction area) and playmates (i.e. peers), depending on their individual interests and needs, but within a specific range provided and prepared by teachers.
Outdoor activities	The outdoor activities include running, jumping, climbing, throwing, chasing, hiding, collecting and observing leaves and insects or observing pets such as gold fish bred by the kindergarten. Children are expected to have more autonomy in these activities. Teachers are responsible for participating in, supporting, encouraging and enhancing children's activities.
Clean &Tidy up time	Children are often requested to clean and tidy up toys and materials after play periods to cultivate their sense of responsibility for the kindergartens' environment.
Daily living activities	This includes activities such having lunch, naps, using the toilet, morning register and afternoon leaving time. The purpose is to establish healthy living habits, including knowledge about hygiene, diet and nutrition, and self-care abilities.
Transition activities	Teachers plan links and transitions between activities in advance so as to nurture children's concepts of time and efficiency, to enable them to be mentally ready for the subsequent activities and to enhance children's sense of safety.

(Source: based on China MoE, 1996, 2001; Li and Xiao 2011, p186-189)



Li and Xiao (2011) state that the whole class activities and the group activities both are collective, and undertaken in accordance with the teacher's planning and organisation. Liang (2014) claims that although group activities involve teachers in dividing a class into groups, the teaching practices remains identical; the only difference is smaller group size. This educator therefore criticises that the potential advantages of group activities has not been fully realised. Li and Xiao (2011) report that the optional activities are mainly undertaken within the areas of play provision. However, Liu and Lu (2013) claim that, although the quantity and variety of materials and resources for children to choose from have been improved, the time allocated for these activities is still limited. According to Li and Xiao (2011), the outdoor activities combine children's physical activity and their interactions with nature, and are seen by teachers as activities where children have the most individual freedom and autonomy. Nonetheless, Liang (2014) argues that outdoor activities are often replaced by teacher-led physical education and other collective physical experiences. In general, the above four types of activities (the whole class activities, the group activities, the optional activities and the outdoor activities) are regarded as educational activities, while the other three activities, clean and tidy up time, daily living activities and transition links, are deemed to be childcare and nursing activities, used to cultivate children's self-care skills for daily living (Li and Xiao, 2011).

The term "Chang Gui 常规 (routine)"<sup>3</sup> as used in kindergarten education in China, is officially interpreted as "the daily life of children in kindergartens" (China MoE, 2001). Zheng and Sun (2006) argue that in practice, "routine" is the name commonly used by practitioners for basic behaviour rules and

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<sup>3</sup> It is equivalent to the term 'programme' used in ECEC in England.

regulations that children are expected to obey in the various activities of their daily life at kindergarten. This is often called "behaviour management" in the field of ECEC in England and it would be incorporated within personal, social and emotional development (managing feelings and behaviour) and physical development (health and self-care) as areas of learning and development (Great Britain DfE, 2014). It is also considered an important part of kindergarten education in China, with the aim of cultivating children's self-management skills, and their awareness and habits in terms of obeying rules and following kindergarten discipline (China MoE, 2001).

Liang (2014) points out that many teachers believe establishing good routines is an essential precondition for the successful implementation of teaching and learning activities, class management, and especially children's safety. Zheng and Sun (2006) report that many teachers spend a lot of time and energy on educational routines, for instance, when a child breaks the rules, the teacher gives considerable time to correcting the child in front of the whole class. The researchers however believe that children's sense of discipline and self-control come from their participation in activities rather than through external restriction. They argue that it is seen as being against the original aims of kindergarten education if rules and discipline are over-emphasised in an unthinking manner as the precondition for participation in activities.

Some Chinese researchers are critical of kindergarten routine practice. For example, Zou (2007) argues that children are often regarded as the objects of behaviour management strategies, and are often controlled and restricted by teachers, in ways that threatens their rights and freedom. Wang, C.Y. (2007)

suggests that while it is necessary to establish suitable rules and discipline, teachers should see this as a process to guide children to be actively involved in giving their opinions and gradually learning self-management rather than restricting children. Only in this way, she believes, teachers are able to strengthen children's awareness of rules, develop their habit of following rules and teach them how to behave in a positive manner.

As stipulated in the *Kindergarten Work Regulations and Procedures* (China MoE, 1996), kindergarten work is based on the principle of combining childcare with education, and achieving overall development in respect to the child's morality, intelligence, physical development and emotional well-being. In practice rather than theory, Liu (2010) argues that kindergarten work should not just be concerned with the activities of daily living, health and nutrition for children, but also should be concerned with creating a relaxed and harmonious environment for children's learning and their overall development of both body and mind.

Zhao (2012) reports that for a long time, the position of childcare has been lower than that of education in kindergartens in China. Many kindergarten teachers think that childcare is the responsibility of the childcare assistant whose "professional level is lower" than that of teachers (Zhao 2012, p117). This is reflected in Feng and Wang's (2014) findings that during practical work, teachers usually focus on teaching rather than nursing and care, and therefore emphasise the development of teaching content, methods and tools but pay less attention to childcare in terms of physical and mental health. They analyse that the main reason for this is the lack of an adequate concept of childcare. In

Yao's (2007) opinion, alongside social development, the concept of childcare has been expanded from a traditional focus on physical development to the promotion of children's personal development and the improvement of their social adaptability, as well as from concerns for safety and health to physical, psychological and social healthcare. Also, Feng and Wang (2014) point out that on the basis of more recent views of childcare, the Chinese government now expects kindergarten education to integrate and balance the services of childcare and education. They highlight that in the context of this integrated approach, teachers, teaching assistants and childcare assistants have the same and equal responsibility for children's health.

#### 2.2.5.3 Play

The place of play has been privileged by researchers and practitioners within both the theory and practice of ECEC in the West (and more recently in eastern countries) (Fleer, 2009); nevertheless, definitions of play remain contested (Wood and Attfield, 2005; Rogers and Evans, 2008; Fleer, 2009; Broadhead, Howard and Wood, 2010). Aliwood (2003) claims that the word 'play' has almost been considered synonymous with early childhood education. Wood (2010, p9) also argues that play is seen as a "key characteristic of effective practice" in early childhood education. Additionally, early years' educators and researchers have long striven for a curriculum that recognises the value and the efficacy of play in the light of social diversity and complexity (Pramling-Samuelsson and Fleer, 2009). However, this is not a straightforward subject; what play means, what kind of play we want, and how adults can support play (Broadhead, Howard and Wood, 2010) remain disputed issues across a range of ECEC contexts. In recent years, the role of play, underpinned by socio-

cultural theory, has generated far-ranging critical discussion about "agency, power and control in adult- and child-initiated activities" (Wood 2010, p14). For instance, Brooker (2010) argue that socio-cultural theories have shifted the focus from a child's individual development onto the social characteristics of play, in a way that highlights child-initiated and free /unstructured play for children's active participation in socio-cultural practice and the creation of knowledge within their cultural world, in contrast to the traditional consideration of play as a vehicle for learning, or as tool for teaching.

Most recently, there has been an international trend towards reconceptualising the adult's role in play (Goncu and Perone, 2009; Wood, 2009). For example, in the UK, Wood's (2004; 2009; 2010; 2014) research has proposed a model of integrated pedagogical approaches underpinned by a socio-cultural theory of play and learning, which focuses on integrating play and learning to become a co-constructive process, balancing child-initiated and adult-directed activities, and highlighting the adult's roles in leading and responding to children's choice, interests and activities. In addition, Booker's (2002) study demonstrates that any model of integrated pedagogies should involve the integration of the social, in terms of communities' and families' cultural and educational beliefs, as well as childcare practices, because play is valued and proceeds very differently within different cultural contexts, and therefore the relationship between play and learning may also be viewed divergently.

Some of the debates on play that have taken place within Western societies can also be heard in the field of ECEC in today's China, although respecting children's right to play and recognising the significant role of play is a recent

phenomenon in China. As indicated above, despite general international recognition that different forms of play benefit learning and development, the meaning and role of play are variously conceptualised within different socio-cultural contexts (Brooker, 2002; Pramling-Samuelsson and Fler, 2009; Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa, 2009; Wood, 2009).

In China, historically, play and learning have been regarded as a contradictory binary; the Confucian view, emphasising academic achievement and learning outcomes, maintains that “业精于勤荒于嬉 (achievements are reached by hard work and wasted upon play)” and “玩物丧志 (people lost in play will lose their ambitions)” (Vong 2013, p37). Since the 1980s, there has been a reconceptualization of play, underpinned by developmental theory and Vygotsky’s socio-historical-cultural theory; the notion of seeing play as pedagogy, namely, a means of teaching has had a huge impact on Chinese belief in ECEC (Rao and Li, 2009; Vong, 2013).

In Chinese society today, the notion of play heads the list of concerns in ECEC (Liu and Feng, 2005; Rao and Li, 2009; Pan and Li, 2012). From the early 1980s onwards, the value and role of play in China’s ECEC have been acknowledged, and the integration of play into the kindergarten curriculum and pedagogy has become the primary task in kindergarten education reform, influenced by Western thinking (Liu, Pan and Sun, 2005; Zhu, 2008b; Li, Wang and Wong, 2011; Vong, 2013). The significance of play in kindergarten education has been reiterated on a policy level since the 1980s and is on-going (Yu, Yuan and Fang, 2011). For example, the national *Guidance Outline on Kindergarten Education* (China MoE, 2001) explicitly prescribes that "play is the

basic activity in kindergarten". Rao and Li (2009) argue that this reformed notion in relevant policy documents has been increasingly acknowledged by Chinese ECEC educators and practitioners, and they have progressively given attention to play in their research and practice throughout the country. Liu and Pan (2013) report that over the last 30 years, play-based teaching and learning activities have generally gained prominence in the daily programme of kindergartens nationwide.

During this period, there has been widespread discussion about the meaning, significance, and role of play in ECEC within Chinese society. For example, Li and Xiao (2011) take into account developmental appropriateness and individual needs, to argue that play is a basic right of children and a powerful agent in the promotion of children's holistic development. Liu, Pan and Sun (2005) claim that while the kindergarten curriculum is regarded as the entire experience of children's learning, designed and organised according to kindergarten educational goals, play is identified as the content of the curriculum and as a powerful vehicle for delivering course content. Yu, Yuan and Fang (2011) argue that play is an enjoyable process of active involvement in the daily activities of the kindergarten programme and that it should be freely chosen by children according to their intrinsic interests. Wang, X.Y. (2007) highlights the role of play, and believes that different forms of play enable children to not only develop their movement skills, verbal skills, problem-solving capacity, imagination and creativity, but also to gain an understanding of the relation between themselves, others and the environment within a specific Chinese context.

Over the last decade, although the value of play in early years has been widely highlighted in China, there has continued to surface critical debates about the contentious issues and problems that have arisen during the implementation of a play-based curriculum and pedagogy in Chinese kindergarten education. For instance, as with the above mentioned UK research re-conceptualising the adult's role in play, Liu and Pan (2013) argue that not all free play is conducive to child development, and that, therefore, teachers need to participate in play as partners, observing and guiding children so as to fully realise the educational potential of play. Rao and Li (2009), drawing upon the Western socio-cultural theory of play and learning, emphasise the importance of adults' role in play, and advocate that Chinese kindergarten teachers need to rethink their role, in terms, for example, of methods, materials and roles, in creating a play environment for children conducive to their making choices about play.

In addition, despite clear policy statements about the key position of play in ECEC, some researchers have raised concerns about adults' various conflicting understandings of the ECEC curriculum and the relationship between play and learning. For example, Ishigaki and Lin (1999) found out that the Chinese kindergarten teachers in their study acknowledged the significance of play but did not fully respect children's right to play and did not prioritise play in their practice. Their study reveals that the teachers did not understand play as inherently educational. Furthermore, Yu, Yuan and Fang (2011) report that whilst play is expected to be the main component of children's daily lives, many parents and practitioners, and even children themselves, regard it as leisure time after formal class teaching. A similar problem is also noted by Vong (2013), who argues that Chinese kindergarten teachers do not have a proper



understanding of the concept of play, especially free play, which means that child-initiated play-based activities in the kindergarten curriculum have not been given the priority that was expected. This is due to the influence of a traditional teacher-centred and subject-centred curriculum underpinned by the ideology of Confucianism and Communism within the Chinese educational and socio-cultural context (Liu, Pan and Sun, 2005; Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa, 2009; Rao and Li, 2009; Li, Wang and Wong, 2011; Vong, 2013).

Liu, Pan and Sun (2005), who consider children as active learners, examined the quality of kindergarten education involving young children's perspectives, primarily their perspectives on play. Their research findings show that play-oriented whole class activities were the main activities in kindergarten; little time was allocated to free play; and teacher-led/ directed approaches were still dominant in daily routines at kindergarten. However, these researchers believe that the early childhood educational reform has led to positive changes in the practice of the play-based kindergarten curriculum. They argue that although the significance of free play has not been fully realised by practitioners, the areas of play provision are becoming increasingly important and the key means to providing children with the space, time and materials for child-initiated free play linked to individual interests and choices. Rao and Li (2009, p97) use the term "eduplay" to characterise the play-orientated but teacher-directed education in Chinese kindergartens and to reflect the relationship between play and learning evident in their study. However, it is worth noting that Hua (2007) highlights that Chinese ECEC researchers and practitioners maintain an appropriate balance between education and play in implementing their reform proposals so as to comply with particular Chinese educational, social, cultural

beliefs and economic conditions. This evidences the argument of some researchers in the West (Pramling-Samuelsson and Fler, 2009; Wood, 2009; Brooker, 2010), who assert that the meaning and role of play change across history and cultures in accordance with diverse historical, ideological and economic conditions.

The research and studies discussed above suggest that although Western concepts of and theories about play and its role in ECEC have impacted on China's kindergarten education in terms of policy and practice, these have not been entirely realised by ECEC practitioners within Chinese society.

#### 2.2.5.4 Transition to school

With respect to kindergarten to school transitions, different Chinese researchers hold different views. Wang and Yang (2011) believe that kindergarten to school transition is a process that aims to promote children's healthy growth. They therefore suggest that kindergartens create favourable conditions and make efforts to help children achieve a smooth transition from ECEC to primary school education and obtain good teaching results. Cui, Liu and Li (2011) discuss the transitions in a broad sense, and argue that all educational activities undertaken in kindergarten have been seen as preparing children for the next educational stage, and therefore, all the activities promoting children's all-around development can be seen as preparation for primary school. Yang, Fang and Tu's (2006) study explores the issues of the transition in a narrow sense. Their findings show that the transition period usually indicates the final year of kindergarten education with a focus on school preparation by undertaking a targeted and concentrated preschool programme.

Wang and Yang (2011) point out that Chinese research into the curriculum for kindergarten to school transition mainly employs quantitative research approaches and concentrates on two aspects: numeracy and literacy. It focuses on the investigation of goals, content, organisation, implementation and assessment of the curriculum. The debates among researchers is mainly about how to effectively implement the curriculum for kindergarten to school transitions. For instance, Chen (2008) suggests that the curriculum for the transition should place emphasis on developing and strengthening children's abilities in observing, logical thinking and summarising, creativity and verbal expression. However, Li (2012), from children's perspectives, argues that play is an effective approach for delivering the curriculum of kindergarten to school transitions. Additionally, Cui, Liu and Li (2011) suggest that kindergartens should pay particular attention to the importance of cultivating children's skills of self-management and self-discipline, improving children's concentration in learning. They also emphasise the need to cultivate children's good learning habits, and to engage in subject teaching to promote continuity in learning for children and to motivate them to look forward to school. Overall, there is a lack of consensus on an appropriate transition curriculum in ECEC, with limited attempts to address relevant issues from children's perspectives in China.

#### 2.2.5.5 The Multiple Intelligences programme

MI theory has been introduced since the mid 1990s and continues to exert an influence over education practices in China (Zhang, 2003; Cheung, 2009). Along with the national curriculum reform for kindergarten education, Chinese ECEC educators and practitioners are gradually informed by MI theory (Zhang and Zhi, 2009).

Some researchers have attempted to explore the application of MI theory as an overall theoretical rationale for kindergarten education (Zeng, 2001; Zhang, 2003; Yu, 2004; Zhang and Zhi, 2009; Liu, H.Y., 2011). For example, Yu (2004) believes that MI theory enriches the criteria for assessing learning outcomes, in other words, providing new criteria for success. Cheung (2009) similarly points that MI theory challenges the traditional view of intelligence as a unitary capacity, and provides Chinese educators and teachers with a new perspective to appreciate learners' diverse talents. Liu, H. Y. (2011) additionally argues that MI theory guides the selection of teaching content and activity design, but more specifically, it promotes a consideration of children's individual differences and the use of targeted activities and experiences for children with different development levels. A few researchers focus on the investigation of kindergarten teaching practice relating to different intelligence areas as identified in MI theory. For instance, Li, Fang and Liu's (2004) study empirically examines how a kindergarten in Shanghai employed MI theory with the creative practice in relation to young children's individual differences and their development of multiple intelligences.

More recent discussion has revealed that, MI theory and the MI programme have been considered and become prevalent as a theory meeting the demands of educational reform in Chinese society (Cheung, 2009; Liu, H. Y., 2011). As Huo and Wang (2006) argue that, MI theory fits with the state's educational reform programme in a timely way. They point out that the aim of the reform is shifting from traditional exam-oriented education (应试教育) which focuses on learner's cognitive achievement and academic outcome to competence-oriented education (素质教育) which pays attention to learner's holistic development of

diverse intellectual abilities. Both MI theory and the reform programme attach importance to learner's individual differences, and they advocate that exams and academic results should not be the only criteria used to assess learning outcomes and individual achievement (Huo and Wang, 2006). This argument is supported by Zhang and Zhi (2009) who claims that MI theory broadens the horizons of ECEC staff and promoted new understandings of children's intelligence and their development. Therefore, Liu, H.Y. (2011) concludes that the application of MI theory, to some extent, has pushed forward reform and innovation in ECEC practice and accordingly improved the quality of ECEC provision in China. However, Tian (2006) takes issues with the contention and points out that some kindergartens use MI theory as a pretext for ignoring children's actual development levels and interests, advocating instead increased literacy and mathematical activities that are not developmentally appropriate.

Overall, although MI theory has grown in popularity, as an innovative Western educational theory in Chinese society, a systematic understanding of how MI theory contributes to ECEC practice is still lacking.

## **2.2.6 Practitioners in China's Kindergartens**

### **2.2.6.1 A gendered staff structure**

Li (2014) argues that staff gender issues represent a significant issue in the field of kindergarten education in China, as they do in the development of ECEC worldwide. Li (2014, p227) also reports that according to statistics of the Ministry of Education in 2012, the number of kindergarten practitioners was

2,489,972, with 91.57% female; and the number of kindergarten teachers was 1,479,237, with 97.97% female and 2.03% male; thus, it can be seen, Chinese kindergartens are overwhelmingly staffed by females.

The situation of female practitioners forming the majority of the staff team in kindergartens is longstanding (Zhu, 2008a). Chinese practitioners have gradually realised the potentially negative effect of female only teaching teams. For example, Feng and Cai (2007) point out that it influences children's gender socialization and development. They explain that teachers are aware of equality issues in education, and agree that children should not be treated differently in terms of gender. However, the authors report that gender stereotypes still exist for teachers and influence their practice due to the traditional cultural influence.

Chang and Hong's (2008) study reveals that the presence of female teachers for children of different genders subtly demonstrates gendered views and behaviours. According to Chen and Rao (2011, p113), the Chinese kindergarten teachers "perpetuated traditional Chinese gender values, beliefs, and stereotypes in their interactions with children", and this leads the teachers to have different expectations of children of different genders, and so through language, facial expressions or behaviour, they unconsciously convey information about gender stereotypes. Yang's (2009) study of gender culture in Chinese kindergarten education found out that female teachers criticized boys more than girls, showing stricter attitudes, but were more gentle in dealings with girls. The study also revealed that in kindergarten activities, teachers always grouped children according to gender, for example, the brave, adventurous roles in role-play were often given to boys, while the gentle, and more compliant

roles to girls. As a result, in order to be a good child in the teacher's mind, boys developed brave and more independent behaviors, while girls developed in a quieter and more obedient direction (ibid). In general, a predominantly female labour force appears linked to some significant gender stereotyping in kindergarten practices, with a potential impact on children's experience of the curriculum (Chang and Hong, 2008; Yang, 2009; Chen and Rao, 2011).

#### 2.2.6.2 Training, qualifications and employment conditions

Since the early 1990s, vocational colleges and normal universities for kindergarten teacher education have been established and developed rapidly as the main provision for kindergarten teacher education (Zhu, 2008a). This, in Huo and Li's (2010, p60) words, strengthens kindergarten teacher's "educational" responsibility, rather than just play the role of "nursing and caring children". As a result, a number of graduates with professional qualification from vocational high schools and colleges have gained employment in kindergartens (Feng, Wang and Liang, 2011). They also report that there has been dramatic improvement in kindergarten teacher's number, attainment and qualification over the last two decades although there is still a shortage of qualified teachers. Meanwhile, some studies reveal the challenges, problems and difficulties for kindergarten practitioners, such as low incomes and low social status (Feng and Cai, 2007; Zhu, 2008a; Feng, Wang and Liang, 2011); high pressure from work and job burnout (Lu and Wang, 2006; Zhang and Zhou, 2009); lack of professional education and in-job trainings (Yang and Zhai, 2006; Zhou, 2007; Zhu, 2008a; Feng, Wang and Liang, 2011).

In addition, Cai (2011) points out the particular problems for practitioners in

private kindergartens: firstly, it is difficult for them to obtain opportunities for in-job professional training, professional titles and awards, while their salary and benefits are much lower than those of teachers in public kindergarten; secondly, these practitioners mostly work under temporary contracts and working as temporary staff members, they often lack a sense of affiliation and security; thirdly, they commonly have lower level qualifications than those in public kindergartens and display a higher turnover rates. Also, Tao (2010) argues that practitioners in private kindergartens easily experience occupational burnout because they have low salaries but working overtime and overload, demanding responsibilities, and complicated interpersonal relationships.

### **2.2.7 The One-child policy and parental expectations**

The well-known One-child policy launched in 1979, as a social phenomenon unique to China, has had a significant impact on the development of contemporary ECEC in Chinese society (Gu, 2006; Zhu, 2009; Zhai and Gao, 2008; 2010), regardless of whether it has achieved the expected goal of lowering the birth rate, postponing population growth and driving economic development (Peng, 1997; Attane, 2002; Fong, 2002; Zhai and Gao, 2008). Wang, G.S.(2008) states that as statutory, Chinese parents especially in urban areas have to comply with the policy (the exception is those living in ethnic minority regions and particular kinds of families, for example, where the first child is disabled); otherwise, they incur a heavy fine and a related penalty (for instance, the second child is unable to obtain the registered permanent residence card, or the parents will get an administrative sanction affecting their prospects of promotion). Furthermore, according to Lin (2009), there is also evidence of voluntary compliance for personal reasons, such as financial



circumstances, the time and energy required for child-raising and other factors. The author analyses that under the new market-economy conditions and with growing commercialization, Chinese child-rearing costs have significantly increased; and in urban areas in particular, most families have to devote a major part of their income to support children's education through kindergarten, school and college. As a result, some researchers (Gu, 2006; Lin, 2009; Bao, 2012; Zhai, Zhang and Jin, 2014) similarly find out, many working class parents with full-time jobs expressed that they would not like to have more than one child due to a lack of time, money and energy.

As a direct consequence of the impact of the One-child policy, family size and the structure of Chinese society has changed (Ding and Xu, 2001; Hesketh, Lu and Xing, 2005; Gu, 2006; Zhu, 2009). Zhai and Gao (2010) state that under the influence of Confucianism, with an emphasis on lineage, filial piety and close relationships, all family members traditionally lived together in China. However, Ding and Xu's (2001) study reveals that, instead of living with parents, young couples nowadays prefer to establish their own nuclear families after getting married in urban areas. This makes the current Chinese family "a simple structure with two generations and three family members: two parents and one child" (Gu 2006, p38). Moreover, as reported by Hesketh, Lu and Xing (2005), single-child families in China have become a very common family type in urban society, with a growing percentage in recent years. Meanwhile, Gu (2006, p39) notices that the child rearing pattern of families has also been changed from a typical family of three including two parents and one child to "4-2-1 Syndrome", i.e. four grandparents and two parents jointly raise the only child.

More importantly, the One-child policy has changed the philosophy of the family by both strengthening and weakening traditional customs (Lin, 2009; Zhai and Gao, 2010; Xu and Feng, 2011). As discussed in Section 2.2.5.1, within traditional Chinese feudal society under Confucianism, children were regarded as the private property of their families (Lin, 2009), and their purpose was to continue the family line or to provide labour (Zhao, 2006). Such philosophy of the family was epitomised in old Chinese sayings: "多子多福 (more children, more blessing) ", "养儿防老 (children's upbringing is for taking care of parents in their old age)" and "望子成龙 (high expectation of a child becoming a 'dragon', a metaphor for children bringing their families' future success) " (Lin 2009, p264-267). To some extent, the One-child policy strengthens the traditional child-raising idea of children bringing their families' future success. Lin (2009) claims that, nowadays, for most one-child families, the future success of the child is still the key index of high family status, namely, the success of the family. Therefore, children cannot afford to fail in their education and they have to start on an educational path as early as possible, in Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa's (2009, p39) words: "not being left behind at the starting line". Moreover, Gu (2006) has examined how, with social, political and economic developments and exposure to Western educational philosophy, Chinese parents have gradually come to realize the importance of respecting the independent personality and rights of the child, and they are now more likely to recognize and accept a "play-based" and "child-centred" educational philosophy (Gu 2006, p34, p40). This is distinctively different from the traditional Chinese philosophy of the family and children underpinned by Confucianism.

In addition, Ding and Xu (2001) state that China has adopted a highly selective

employment system with examination as a key method of selection. Their study shows that many employers tend to treat educational qualifications and diplomas as the key indicators for employment and promotion, and those employees from better-known universities and higher rated education establishments have better work and material rewards. Most parents consequently expect their children to enter higher education because they believe that from early childhood their children should be finely nurtured and prepared for a future career (ibid). The authors point out that this also increases the emphasis and input given to ECEC in single-child families. In order to cultivate "the perfect only child" (Milwertz 1997, p121), many parents especially in urban areas devote all their energy, money and time to attentive child-rearing. As Lin (2009) argues, the bulk of the Chinese urban family's outgoings is on their child's education including ECEC. Such economic phenomenon has also become an important factor in the development of kindergarten education.

Besides the above impact, numerous scholars and researchers, such as Hesketh and Zhu (1997), Fong (2002), Ebenstein (2010), Xiao and Feng (2010), Bao (2011), Cameron et al. (2013), Xu, Zhang and Liu (2013), have criticized the problems and disadvantages caused by the policy. From the very outset, the policy has received harsh criticism from voices within Western society. For instance, some scholars (Hesketh and Zhu, 1997; Winckler, 2002; Hesketh, Lu and Xing, 2005) express the comparable views that the policy of birth restriction infringes on a basic human right and is the most extreme method for curbing population growth. Other researchers (Attane, 2002; Meulenbergh, 2004; Greenhalgh, 2008; Ebenstein, 2010) similarly argue that the implementation of the One-child policy has caused an aging population vulnerable and an

unbalanced gender ratio as a result of selective abortions.

In China, educators mainly pay attention to the potential behaviour problems of the single-child. For example, Ding and Xu (2001) argue that, compared with multi-children families, parents always try their best to provide quality resources into the only-child's education, and accordingly they have higher expectations of the child, which makes the child under great pressure to fulfil the parents' ambitions. Xu, Zhang and Liu (2013) point out that parents of single-children universally emphasize the child development of intelligence, such as measuring the success of their children by examination scores; meanwhile, they are likely to ignore issues of moral development, with educational ambitions taking over all other aspects of life and work, and restricting social life. In addition, Cameron et al. (2013) criticise the way that excessive attention is given to the single-children and they are treated with too much indulgence. This, as the authors stated, has resulted in Chinese children having low stamina, high levels of dependence on adults, weak self-management, limited experience of socialisation, alongside little sense of the importance of sharing with or helping others. Bao's (2011) study also demonstrates that the generation of single-children grown up under the One-child policy is more pessimistic, less responsible and even more anxious than previous generations. Rather than being "little emperors" (Cameron et al., 2013), Lin (2009) argues that the only-children of Chinese cities are manipulated in significant ways by the principle of competition and influenced by their parents' desires or the expectations of the adult world; in fact, they can be seen as a special sub-population, much loved and even over-protected but under strict management and control.

It is noteworthy that the first generation of only-children has now become the mainstay of society as adults (Xu and Feng, 2011). In recent years, many educators and researchers have expressed different opinions on this generation. ECEC researchers represented by Zhu (2009) claim that society at large has shown prejudice against only-children. He reports that compared with children having siblings, single-children are in fact not very different except for in terms of their poor ability to socialize early on; however, once experiencing life in a group, they very rapidly make up for the weakness in their socializing abilities. Likewise, Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa (2009) also report that only-children in their study felt hard to adapt to collective life when they first started kindergarten; but with appropriate guidance and care from adults, they could universally adapt to the regular rules of kindergarten life. Thus, they argue that the prejudice prevailing in society against only-children is groundless. This is supported by Bao (2012) who claims that the achievements, inter-personal relationships and other developmental indicators of only-children are not lower than children having siblings. According to the recent research by Xu and Feng (2011), only-children in China are often criticized as not filial, not capable of sharing, selfish and short of independence; however, as adults, their study shows that most of them live near to their parents as this is convenient for them in terms of caring for their aging parents. Therefore, it seems that the problems of only-children are in fact remediable during the educational process, beginning with kindergarten education.

In addition, Lin (2009) reports that more parents have gradually realized that the reported problems with only-children are caused by their own lack of experience and flawed child-raising methods. The author points out, without brothers and

sisters at home, communication and interaction with adults leads to over socialization into social groups beyond the children's age-level. Therefore, more and more parents expect kindergartens as a place for the children to be trained appropriately in social awareness and socializing ability; and it is believed that professionally qualified kindergarten teachers can help to remedy the child's existing behavioural problems (ibid). Such parental demand also becomes another factor promoting the development of kindergartens.

Finally, more than three decades after the first implementation of the One-child policy, the Chinese government has reviewed these related problems (Xiao and Feng, 2010). Yu and Yue (2013) report that the national government has been proposed a new plan to effectively ease a range of problems caused by the One-child policy, such as an aging population, the shortage of a working-age population, and the problem of families losing only-children. The authors point out that the new plan attempts stick to the basic state policy of family planning but to allow single-children families to have two children as a policy to balance population development. Consequently, in terms of Zhai, Zhang and Jin's (2014) study of demographic consequences of easing the One-child policy, China will have a baby boom and kindergarten education provision will face new problems and challenges.

## **2.3 Summary**

This chapter has discussed the theoretical context and research background of the current study. It has reviewed relevant literature in terms of the theoretical framework of the study and identified main issues of relevance for the study in

the field of ECEC within both Western and Chinese contexts. The first part, focused on ECEC within a Western context, has considered constructions of childhood and ECEC, including recent understandings of children's agency and their rights; and then investigated different models of curriculum and pedagogy as developed in different cultures, and the influence of these models internationally, as well as the studies on different Western perspectives on the ECEC curriculum and pedagogy. The second part has given a detailed review of the key issues and debates within the particular context of ECEC in China. This has included policies and research studies focused on China's ECEC provision and development, highlighting the main issues for kindergarten curriculum and pedagogy, including the training, professional development and employment conditions of practitioners, as well as the impact of the One-child policy and parental expectations regarding the kindergarten curriculum and pedagogy. The discussion demonstrates the relations between the key concerns of this thesis, which are focused on addressing the issues of kindergarten curriculum and pedagogy from different perspectives of children, practitioners and parents and relevant investigations in the field in both China and internationally. The emphasis is on policy, research and theory with particular relevance to the relatively recent development of kindergarten education, especially private kindergarten education within a Chinese context.

## **Chapter 3 Methodology**

This chapter explains the approaches to research design taken in this study and how it was developed to answer the research questions. It incorporates two main sections; firstly, the methodological and ethical issues that arose are discussed in the context of ECEC in China, including the theoretical basis for ethnography as the research design and the way specific methods were developed to answer the research questions; the strategies of sample selection, and the consideration of ethical issues involved in the study. Secondly, it focuses on justifying and determining the specific techniques used in the research project. This second section also includes an account of the data analysis including methods for data management and the analytic framework.

### **3.1 Research design**

This section discusses the approach to research design of the study including the theoretical foundation for employing qualitative-based research strategies highlighting the rationale for using ethnographic research in the field of ECEC, and the approaches for sample selection. It includes the contextual information about the kindergarten and the participants, as well as the essential ethical consideration of researching in the field of ECEC.

#### **3.1.1 The research design and methodology**



### 3.1.1.1 The rationale for qualitative research

Denzin and Lincoln (2011) argue that qualitative research can be used for exploring the richness of the individual's point of view. This is particularly relevant to my study which aims to capture different perspectives of kindergarten staff, parents and children on curriculum and pedagogy in China. According to Bell (2010), it is most productive to understand human experience, thoughts and perceptions of the world through a qualitative lens. This is because qualitative research usually focuses on the individual and is sensitive to the context, and so interpretive practices have been used to gain an in-depth understanding of the respondents involved in a study (Neuman, 2011). Different from a positivist approach such as collecting and analysing statistical data and generalising the findings by a representative sample (Mason, 2002), qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews, participant observation and documentary analysis are used in a more naturalistic way to capture data (Silverman, 2010; Gray, 2014) on individuals' perspectives on issues relevant to their lives. This is because of the characteristics of flexibility, openness and inclusiveness (Greene and Hill, 2005) of these interpretivist approaches. Furthermore, Gray (2014) points out that conducting qualitative research requires the researcher to play an empathetic but neutral role in relation to the participants in the context of their environment in order to show an in-depth and comprehensive insight into the fieldwork context through daily interactions with the research subjects (Silverman, 2010). In addition, qualitative research is usually undertaken to gather data on people's perceptions and experiences within a specific time and space, so as to provide dependable and trustworthy findings that support a holistic and deep understanding of a particular phenomenon or problem within its own context-specific setting (Denzin and

Lincoln, 2011).

Given qualitative approaches and methods have been increasingly and also successfully used in ECEC research over recent decades (MacNaughton, Rolfe and Siraj-Blatchford, 2001) within a Western context, I have developed research interests in examining ECEC in China from an interpretivist ethnographic approach. This approach would require a focus on a specific point in time in relation to children's educational journey. It also requires researcher to build rapport with the participants in order to gain both emic/insider and etic/outsider perspectives (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Gregory and Ruby, 2011).

Based on my experience of reviewing the literature, I found that there have been few ethnographic studies or research directly involving children so far in China. By contrast, there is a stronger tradition in some Western countries, such as England, in the use of qualitative methods to explore or understand various participants' experience of ECEC. For example, the research project *Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY)* by Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2002) used qualitative case studies to follow up on the large-scale cohort quantitative study so as to explore the impact of pedagogies on children's learning in the Foundation Stage of early years settings in England. This qualitative approach within a larger mixed-methods study supports new understanding of the importance of balancing adult-led and child-led activities in ECEC.

Following the above discussion, I therefore chose to adopt primarily qualitative methods and approaches to explore the research questions of this study.

### 3.1.1.2 The rationale for ethnography

The term ethnography has been used to refer to an approach characterised by systematic and periodic participant observations over time within unfamiliar cultural contexts by anthropologists and sociologists from the 1970s onwards (Gray, 2014). It is "a descriptive account of social life and culture in a particular social system based on detailed observations of what people actually do" (Johnson 2000, p111). However, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) argue that the purpose has been to understand the complexities of social phenomenon or processes rather than merely "make reports" (Gray 2014, p164) on social events or activities. In recent years, ethnography as a distinctive approach to qualitative research has been widely applied and developed as a productive and exploratory research approach by educators and psychologists (Brooker, 2002; Hodkinson, 2005; Gregory and Ruby, 2011) beyond the fields of anthropology and sociology. For example, Creswell (2007) argues that ethnography fundamentally represents the nature of human behaviour, attitude, beliefs, values and the social systems of power that control and restrain through the researcher's long-term engagement and immersion in a social context, and their intensive naturalistic observations undertaken over time. Regarding the advantages of this approach, Atkinson et al. (2001) claim that ethnographic methods and techniques are regarded as a distinct and useful strategy to uncover complex and significant data and findings about people's lives in natural settings, which are impossible to gather by applying quantitative strategies. This is elucidated further in Hammersley and Atkinson's (2007) account, as they argue that ethnographic methods provide opportunities for researchers to capture significant data as insiders but with a critical stance towards taken-for-granted concepts and knowledge, especially some hidden or

sensitive information which cannot be obtained or accessed from an outsider's perspective.

Moreover, it seems that ethnographic methods are particularly well-designed for interpreting socio-cultural phenomenon from the perspectives of participants. For instance, Buchbinder et al. (2006, p48) report that the purpose of conducting ethnographic research is for the "elicitation of cultural knowledge, the holistic analysis of societies, and the understanding of social interactions and meaning-making", which is traditionally focused on "microscopic observation" of "a single setting or group" and as a small-scale project. The rationale underlying ethnography is traditionally based on fieldwork and participant observation (Delamont and Atkinson, 1995; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007), which are deemed as the hallmark of ethnographic research (Buchbinder et al., 2006; Blommaert and Dong, 2010). However, this does not mean that ethnographic methods are limited to participant observations. As Siraj-Blachford and Siraj-Blachford (2001) argue, although participant observation is an essential element of ethnographic methods, there is a flexibility of employing a mixture of methods, such as formal or informal interviews / conversations, documentary analysis (hardcopy / online), visual (video, pictures, photographs) and art (drawing, painting, other artefact) materials analysis. In addition, although there is no ideal length of time for ethnographic fieldwork in terms of the varied nature of studies (Wolcott, 2005), it does take time to establish a positive and close relationship between the researcher and participants, and gain their trust so as to see an ongoing pattern, which cannot be seen with one-off or a short time-scale visit to the setting (James, 2001; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Taking full account of above discussion, I considered

ethnography to be most appropriate for my study which aims to provide an in-depth exploration of different and potentially complex perspectives on curriculum and pedagogy in relation to a specific group of children in one Chinese private kindergarten. To gain an in-depth understanding of this specific social context from the perspectives of children and adults, it was important that I planned to take an active part in the setting so as to conduct the research within an ethnographic framework.

### **3.1.2 Working with young children**

Ethnography is very important in studying young children and it is particularly relevant for my study as I planned to explore children's perspectives on their experience in the kindergarten in China. From the perspective of the new social studies of childhood, James (2001) argue that in ethnographic research children, like adult participants, are provided with more opportunities to directly and openly express their opinions. In other words, ethnography is regarded as a more effective research tool for listening to participants' voices, especially those of young children than other tools (James, 2001; Buchbinder et al., 2006; Gregory and Ruby, 201;). Within the context of naturalistic participant observations of activities, children are able to take a lead in relation to the content, timing and their participation in research (Warming, 2011). It is undeniable that children, especially those of a younger age or those who are disabled, have limitations in terms of verbal communication, and they often choose to express meanings through their facial expression and body movements (Clark and Moss, 2011). Nevertheless, this difficulty can be to a large extent resolved in ethnography. Participatory research using ethnographic methods, especially participant observation, facilitates researchers to capture

rich and meaningful data from young children as active participants (Warming, 2005; Gregory and Ruby, 2011).

Researchers from different countries have adopted ethnographic methods to explore issues in early years settings, for example, the studies by Corsaro (1994) in Italy and the US, Brooker (2002) in England, and Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa (2009) within three countries (China, Japan and the US). Corsaro (1994) argue that the most important aim of participant observation within ethnographic research is to discover how children learn, what children do with peers and adults, as well as what children's own perspectives are; and this allows children to be considered as competent participants who have a right to express their own feelings and opinions concerning their lives and other relevant issues related to their welfare. Another study by Brooker (2002, p15) adopted ethnographic methods of "living with research subjects" in a reception class setting to characterise the culture of an early years setting in England and to explore young children's home experience and early experience of school. Ethnographic tools such as participant observation made it possible to explore cultural differences, such as the "familiar triumvirate of race, sex and social class, which continues to distribute power and opportunities unequally to different social groups" (ibid, p157). This study shows the importance of being alert to the barriers caused by the different cultures of early years settings, professionals and families. Cultural diversity and difference is identified as a significant issue in my study.

Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa's (2009) study of preschool in three cultures exemplifies the dialogical encounter between insider and outsider in

ethnographic research that is pertinent to my situation. The study demonstrates that there is a challenge for ethnographers to position themselves in a study of culture from an insider's point of view and to privilege context and the meanings as produced by insiders (ibid). It can be seen that in ethnographic research, there is a tension between being an insider and outsider; and it is commonly acknowledged that the researcher's role constantly changes from being an outsider to being a member of the group by interacting with other members in their everyday lives (James, 2001), so as to obtain a deep understanding of what these people believe, what they say, and what they do (Creswell, 2007). Whilst doing ethnographic research requires researchers to engage in the research fully so as to enable researchers to go beyond surface accounts and to explore people's lived experiences (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007), the researcher's role and level of participation on the spectrum from a complete participant, to a participant as observer, nonparticipant observer and complete observer is debated (Fetterman, 2010).

The above discussion supports me in justifying and clarifying my own role in this study. In relation to my personal background, as a Chinese student of ECEC, I easily take on the role of an insider. In particular, I previously worked in kindergartens and have professional knowledge and experience of kindergarten education in China. This insider insight provides me with significant potential benefits as a researcher in a Chinese early years' context, particularly in understanding the kindergarten settings as well as the wider social and cultural background. On the other hand, I have been studying and living in England for a number of years, which is a society different from China in significant way. This makes me less familiar than previously with the Chinese context, in terms of the

changes of culture, educational system and research traditions, while becoming more familiar with early years settings in England. This change in my experience enables me to look at Chinese kindergarten with fresh eyes and to see previously taken-for-granted things differently, in another word to adopt more of an outsider's perspective. Therefore, in planning this study, I had the advantage of bringing both insider and outsider's perspectives. At the same time, by researching at the site over time, I would gain something of the strength of being an insider which would be evident in terms of being able to obtain people's trust and make them feel relatively relaxed with me during the research process (Green, Skukauskaite and Baker, 2012; Desmond, 2014).

The recent exploratory studies of ECEC by Corsaro (1994), Brooker (2002) and Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa (2009) set out to understand and interpret participants' perspective on diverse practices of ECEC with reference to the socially constructed meanings of reality in different cultural contexts and societies using ethnographic frameworks. The discussion above provides paradigmatic examples and illuminates my research design. My study aims to explore the perspectives of adults and children on what and how young children experience their lives in a private kindergarten in China. Therefore, by employing an ethnographic approach, I chose to undertake my fieldwork in one class within a Chinese private kindergarten which can be conceived of as an institution within a local Chinese culture and knowledge structure, as defined by Buchbinder et al. (2006), a site for daily practices of not only family-based and institution-based educational beliefs, theory and systems, but also for the everyday practice of values, culture and government policies for the whole society. The study was designed to ensure that rich data would be collected



from all potentially relevant participants including children, parents, teachers, teaching and childcare assistants, and the management team at the kindergarten. All participants involved were considered together as a specific cultural group. In order to find the answer to the research questions, I worked within this group sharing their experiences and exploring participants' perspectives on and their experience of the kindergarten's curriculum and pedagogy.

### **3.1.3 Selection of the site**

According to Edwards (2001), qualitative early childhood researchers usually select the site with a particular purpose in relation to their research aims and questions, and / or with a consideration of convenience such as having easy access or feeling comfortable with the site environment. My consideration of my ethnographic study site first took into account practical factors such as easy access within a large city. Therefore, I initially considered undertaking my fieldwork at the kindergarten where I previously worked. This would allow the study to become a reality (Coffey, 1999). Knowing the headteacher (the gatekeeper) and most of the staff there was likely to be facilitative in gaining access to the site. This is particularly important in China, a society where social networks play a significant and sometimes a vital role. Since there is not a tradition of qualitative research in early years settings, especially in private kindergartens, my ethnographic research quickly attracted the interest of kindergarten staff. Moreover, it is also important to have a positive working relationship between the researcher and the participants at the research site from the beginning, which helps the researcher to undertake the fieldwork smoothly so as to ensure the quality of this study (Laine, 2000; Blommaert and

Dong, 2010).

However, I did not simply select the most convenient kindergarten where I could obtain access most easily but took careful consideration of other relevant research factors in selecting the site. In fact, I targeted three optional sites in my initial research proposal. All of them were private kindergartens delivering the MI curriculum. There is an increasing trend to use such programmes in a context where many Chinese kindergartens are looking to Western approaches due to the increasing influence of globalisation. My initially targeted kindergarten where I was an ex-employee, as explained above, had a mixed curriculum and pedagogy based on MI theory but also drew on other Western educational theories and principles. The second optional kindergarten had only one kindergarten (not a chain) and mainly served a community composed of Chinese residents. The third one was part of a nationwide kindergarten chain, which was important as outlined below. The chain applied MI theory and the MI programme exclusively. This was potentially valuable in terms of using ethnographic methods and approaches to gain in-depth insights into one particular kindergarten programme based on a specific Western theory. As discussed previously in Section 2.2.3.2, one of the distinctive aspects of private kindergartens is that they often adopt programmes from Western countries. However, the chain should not be seen as a representative sample of Chinese private kindergartens in that "it does not represent the wider population" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison. 2000, p102). However, importantly, the third kindergarten enrolled children from both Chinese families and those of other cultural backgrounds. In a context where China is opening up internationally, the selection of such a setting would allow me to capture a range of different

perspectives from participants with diverse family backgrounds, particularly in terms of children and parents' perspectives. This was one of the key criteria in my choice of kindergarten. For these reasons, the third kindergarten was selected as the research site.

As with most ethnographers, I wanted to provide more meaningful details and information in order to draw a full picture of the contextual background of the kindergarten. This is to give a "thick description", in Geertz's words (1994, p6). Although it is not possible to select "everything" needed for readers to understand what is happening, a thick ethnographic description enables readers to establish an in-depth understanding about how the participants live and work (ibid), as well as what they think within the specific cultural context (Geertz, 1994; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Green, Skukauskaite and Baker, 2012). As discussed previously (see Section 3.1.1), qualitative research strategies, including ethnography, do not focus on generalising findings in a broad way (Sliverman, 2010; Gray, 2014); nonetheless, Delamont and Atkinson (1995) argue that good ethnography, driven by its interpretative nature, should not be limited by "thick description" (Geertz 1994, p6) and should aim to develop context-bound generalisations. I accordingly planned to adopt this argument and attempted to offer elaborate accounts of the more meaningful details of contextual information. The following content provides more detailed contextualised information about the sampled kindergarten and the reasons for selecting it as my research site.

#### 3.1.3.1 The city

The study was undertaken within one of a national chain of private

kindergartens in a big city in Northern China. Since the beginning of the 1990s, there has been significant growth in individuals and private enterprises investing in developing private kindergartens as business (Cai, 2005; Wang, Ji and Wang, 2009; Cai, 2011). Therefore, the establishment and development of private kindergartens has been expanding rapidly across the country. According to Lü (2009), the number of private kindergartens in this city was over 25% higher than the national average. Therefore, it was important to address the issues relating to private kindergartens in this city.

In addition, the model of 'brand chain' management and operation was a key feature of some private kindergartens in big cities of this kind. In fact, such 'branded' private kindergarten chains have become increasingly prevalent and reputable nationwide in China in recent years, and so it was considered important to include this aspect in the selection of a site, but it was not representative of private kindergartens in China.

#### 3.1.3.2 The chain

The sample kindergarten chain is one of such branded kindergarten chains, which is anonymously named as 'Newton' educational group in this study. The setting's design, staff management and training, kindergarten administration as well as curriculum and pedagogy were standardized in all the kindergartens in the chain. The headquarters and the first kindergarten were established in the city in 2001. Over a decade, the kindergarten chain had rapidly developed and expanded. By 2012, there were 28 kindergartens nationwide with approximately 700 employees and 3,300 children aged between two to six years.

The kindergarten chain offered a kindergarten-based curriculum and pedagogy underpinned by MI theory (Gardner, 1993). In fact, it is common for private kindergartens to adopt international models of curriculum and pedagogy, such as Reggio Emilia, Montessori, and Steiner approaches (Cai, 2011; Huang, 2014). Therefore, it was important to sample this kind of approach, blending an international approach with Chinese traditions. Accordingly, while this kindergarten chain accepted, to a certain extent, the national framework of kindergarten curriculum, the Guidance outline on Kindergarten Education (China, Ministry of Education, 2001), MI theory was also applied according to the national framework.

There were three types of programmes within the Newton kindergarten chain: international kindergartens (with a pure English language environment), bilingual kindergartens (with an immersive English-Chinese bilingual environment with full time English and Chinese lead teachers in every class) and Chinese kindergartens (with a bilingual but Chinese-focused environment).

There were 12 kindergartens of the chain including three Chinese kindergartens in the city. By 2011, 8 out of the 12 kindergartens had been assessed as 'model kindergartens' (top-ranked kindergartens in the assessment and evaluation by the local education bureau authority). My fieldwork was conducted in one of the Chinese kindergartens.

### 3.1.3.3 The kindergarten

The sample kindergarten was located in a community in the central Business District of the city. According to Wang's (2009) report, there were approximately

3000 enterprises, companies and agencies in this area. 500 of them were multinational corporations, such as Motorola, Ford and Samsung, and these included enterprises among 160 of the world's Top 500 enterprises. Also, there were 570 representative offices of transcontinental companies, 150 foreign capital banks in this district and its surrounding area. The residents of the community were partly from the middle-class<sup>4</sup> including foreigners and overseas returnees who worked and lived in the community. In order to meet the educational requirement of these parents and children, a number of private, international kindergartens with claims to better facilities and reputation were established in this district. The sample kindergarten was one of them.

As introduced in Section 3.1.3.2, after the first kindergarten in the chain was established in 2001, the sample kindergarten was established in 2009 as a relatively new branch providing a bilingual but Chinese-focused MI programme. By 2012, there were eight classes in this kindergarten, including one senior class (anonymised as Galaxy in this study) with 15 children aged five to six years; three intermediate classes with 62 children aged four to five years; three junior classes with 47 children aged three to four years; and one nursery class with 13 children aged two to three years. There was only one Galaxy (senior) class of five to six years old children because the kindergarten was just established three years ago. As a relatively new kindergarten, there were only 13 children aged two and half to three years enrolled in the first year. This class was extended to a group of 15 children after three years and upgraded to be a Galaxy (senior) class with the eldest children at kindergarten. Meanwhile, the recruitment to other age groups expanded rapidly.

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<sup>4</sup> Middle-class people are defined as those who earn more than 7,000 yuan (\$1,110) per month in so-called Tier 1 cities like Beijing and Shanghai, or yuan 5,000 (\$793) per month in Tier 2 cities like Tianjin or Chengdu. They are mostly white-collar office workers in state or private business, or self-employed small - medium business owners (Lin, 2012).

I was acquainted with the kindergarten through my professional social network. An ex-colleague of mine, who had good relationship with the headteacher (gatekeeper), introduced me. Thus, it was relatively easy for me to gain access to this kindergarten. Even though this kindergarten was unable to reflect the whole picture of China's private preschool education, it was one of the branches of a relatively large-scale private kindergarten chain which had provided preschool education and care for over ten years and it was similar in some key respects to other private kindergartens. Whichever Western educational theory and approaches were adopted and applied, private kindergartens faced similar problems, including educational and cultural differences between China and the West, for example, in terms of the design and creation of the curriculum and pedagogy, teacher's training and development, as well as the recruitment of children. Therefore, this kindergarten had commonalities with other private kindergartens in China.

### **3.1.4 Selection of participants**

It is important to make a clear statement about the sampling strategy of the participants so as to improve the internal validity of my research design (Ochsner, 2001). The following sections discuss how and why I selected the participants for my study.

#### **3.1.4.1 Sampling strategies**

The careful sampling of participants and data sources is a key component of any research study... In qualitative research, sampling selection will have a profound impact on the ultimate quality of the research...

Gray (2014, p208)

Although sampling strategies in qualitative studies are diverse depending on the

research objectives, characteristics, paradigm and epistemology of the study (Creswell, 2007), my study underpinned by ethnography seeks to think critically about a relatively "small" but "information-rich" sample (Gray 2014, p217) and select data in terms of the strategy of layers and purposive, but not random sampling (Teddie and Yu, 2007) so as to generate strong, abundant and in-depth data about different perspectives on the curriculum and pedagogy of the kindergarten.

More specifically, my sampling criteria for selecting a kindergarten and class was based on several key points although the sample kindergarten is not representative of Chinese kindergartens or even private Chinese kindergartens. Regarding the setting, firstly, it needed to be private in nature as opposed to kindergartens in the public sector which have been more widely studied. My study was also designed to address the issues of curriculum and pedagogy in a private ECEC setting which normally employs educational models or programmes rooted in Western economically developed countries. Therefore, selecting a private kindergarten delivering the MI curriculum and pedagogy was important in meeting the sampling requirements of the study. Secondly, it needed to be a branch of a nationwide kindergarten chain nationwide so as to enable some degree of representativeness in terms of characteristics of the chain. Thirdly, it needed to offer me access to the site as a researcher I was able to make contact with the gatekeeper, the headteacher, of the selected kindergarten from the beginning due to my personal social network within the field of ECEC in China. Regarding the class, it needed to be a small size of class group to ensure that I could quickly achieve rapport with the children, their teachers, carers and parents. Also, it needed to have children between the ages



of five to six years from both gender groups and from both Chinese and international family backgrounds.

#### 3.1.4.2 Characteristics of participants

Based on the above sampling criteria, I chose the Galaxy class, the only senior class with children aged five to six years. The children and their parents, class staff members and the headteachers were all invited to take part in the study. As Huang (2014) argues, the design and implementation of curriculum and pedagogy in private kindergartens are inevitably affected by the perspectives of children and adults.

The Galaxy class was targeted with 15 children aged five to six years in this kindergarten. A mixed-sex class ensured a sample of boys and girls with a gender consideration. Children aged five to six years are usually the eldest group in Chinese kindergartens. Children in this age group generally have had more experience in kindergarten. They are likely to be familiar with the learning and living environment including curriculum and pedagogy in kindergartens and may be able to talk about earlier experiences in kindergarten in a more confident and articulate manner than younger children. In order to make a connection between preschool and the school foundation stage, most Chinese kindergartens set up extra curriculum experiences as similar to those children will experience in primary schools (Chen, 2008; Wang and Yang, 2011). These are solely for children aged five to six years old and this is an additional area of interest for the study.

All the children attended the kindergarten regularly except one Chinese boy

who always asked for leave due to his illness. There were six children (five boys and one girl) with Chinese nationality and from Chinese families and nine children (two boys and seven girls) with non-Chinese nationalities including one boy from a Taiwanese family, one boy from an American Chinese-Singaporean family, three girls respectively from three Malaysian families, one girl from a Singaporean family, one girl from an Italian Chinese family, one girl from a Canadian Chinese - Italian family and one girl from a Taiwanese-Indian family. 10 of the 15 children were only children. Most children had been enrolled in this kindergarten since 2009 except five children (three Chinese boys, one American Chinese boy and one Malaysian girl) who transferred to this kindergarten between 2010 and 2011 from other kindergartens. This group of children was considered as a multi-cultural group.

Kindergarten headteachers were the decision-makers for choosing or designing the curriculum and pedagogy. Classroom teachers and teaching assistants implemented the curriculum and pedagogy. Their perspectives on the curriculum and pedagogy directly affected their teaching performance. Therefore, these kindergarten staff members were invited to participate in the research.

The new middle-class in China has been expanding in recent years because of the rapid economic growth (Lin, 2012). Private kindergartens, especially those adopting Western educational theories and models, just like this national chain, generally attract relative wealth middle-class parents with experience of living abroad, and commonly working as governmental officers, business people and white collar workers.

The main characteristics of all participants are shown in the Table 3.1 below:

**Table 3.1 Participants information - practitioners, parents and children**

	Total No.	Age group (years)	Gender		Qualifications	Nationality	
			Male	Female		China (Mainland)	Others (Malaysia, Singapore, Canada, Italy, the US)
<b>Practitioners</b>	6	20-64	1	5	Higher Education Diplomas, Bachelor Degrees, Postgraduate Diploma	5	1
<b>Parents</b>	9	30-44	0	9	Higher Education Diplomas, Bachelor Degrees, Master Degrees	4	5
<b>Children</b>	15	5-6	6	9	N/A	6	9

### 3.1.5 Ethical considerations

Every researcher needs to be aware of the procedures relating to ethical issues, such as informed consent, confidentiality and privacy (SHU, 2012). This is because participants' safety and well-being must be protected throughout the research process. Therefore, every name used in this study including the city, the chain, the kindergarten and the adult and children participants is anonymised. Each of the main ethical issues was accordingly considered for the study.

I prepared a participant information sheet containing a consent form for all participants (see Appendix A and B) as a formal written letter to inform all the participants about my personal background and research information. All adult participants were given sufficient opportunity to opt in or out of the research at any time and this was explained to them at the outset. This was stated clearly in

the participant's information form and the consent form. I also verbally briefed participants before conducting the research and explained that the participants always had the right to withdraw from the research or to withhold information from the research at any time with no consequence. Also, they were informed that I would destroy any materials or data related to the person who decided to withdraw. I checked continuing consent regularly to remind them. After obtaining the consent from all adult participants including both practitioners and parents, I additionally obtained six practitioners' and nine parents' consent for formal interviews.

Children's assent was also obtained when they were included in the research. The potential benefits, risks, and discomforts of the research process for children were comprehensively considered. This is because, Coyne (2010) clarifies, if children are considered legally competent, researchers need to obtain their consent. However, if children are not considered legally competent to consent, researchers need to obtain their assent. The term "assent" here refers to a child's own agreement to participate in the research process, not including anyone on behalf of them. Thomas and O'Kane's (1998) study finds that some children may be prevented from engaging in research despite having expressed a personal wish to do so. Therefore, I had a responsibility for ongoing monitoring of interactions with the child for evidence of agreement before and throughout the research process (Cocks, 2006). Adequate provision for protecting children was made as well. Moreover, I maintained an awareness of children's verbal or nonverbal signals. When the children showed less interest in the research process, I tried to have a break and come back later. However, I also tried to remind the children that they had the right to withdraw

from the research at any time.

In China, there has been no strong research tradition to address ethical issues in research, and it has been rarely considered in research with young children. However, I strictly followed the regulation and policies of ethics in research (SHU, 2012) during the whole process of my study. I initially sent the information sheet and consent form to the parents so as to obtain their consent to participating in my research, and also agree for their children to be involved in my research. All parents agreed to be my research participants and gave consent for me to research with their children, except one mother who did not want her son to be involved initially. She gave no reason. Before inviting children to participate in my research, I made a picture-book containing an assent page (see Appendix C) for children as an information sheet to inform them about my research so as to obtain the children's assent. I gave a short presentation about the book, myself and my research to children and invited them to participate in my research, and asked children who were happy to take part in to draw a happy face on the assent page of the picture book, or write down their name if they could. I obtained the assent of 13 children straight away (two children were absent on that day), and obtained another two days later. Also, during the whole research process, I kept reminding the children they could withdraw from the research at any point and that it was not necessary to give an explanation. One girl did tell me that she did not want to continue to play with me one day, but later she came back to say she decided to join in with us again. In addition, I designed all research activities to be undertaken with children to take place within 10-15 minutes, a relatively short time, so as to avoid children feeling tired or findings activities boring. For example, some children could not

finish a drawing within 15 minutes, and I therefore told the child to take it home to compete or to come back to continue it on the next day as they liked. In another case, one boy wanted to join in my research activities, but his mother, as previously mentioned, did not give consent for her son to participate at first. When I did the activities with other children, the boy watched us and asked me about joining us. I explained to him that I was very happy to have him join us; however, he could only watch us before his mother allowed him to participate. Then, after a few days, the boy's mother came to tell me that she was concerned about any potential risk of involving him in my research, but her son told her what and how I played with the other children every day and told her he did want to join in us. So the mother eventually agreed for her son to join in my study.

According to the ethical guidelines (SHU, 2012), I made plans to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of data collected. Participants' personal data was processed fairly and lawfully. Names and addresses were coded in the text, but the class group and, in most cases; the gender of the child was identified. I did use pseudonyms for children and adults, as well as the setting and city. The data was coded and stored in a laptop and the access to the stored data was password protected and it was only accessed by the researcher. Personal data was obtained only for research purposes and that information was never passed on to other parties. If I felt there would be any risk to participants, especially children, I would share my concerns with relevant people such as the headteacher and the lead teacher. This was made clear to all participants at the beginning of the research.

## **3.2 Ethnographic techniques and fieldwork**

This section explains how my fieldwork was conducted and how ethnographic methods and techniques were applied for collecting data including non-participant and participant observations, semi-structured interviews and informal conversations with different groups of participants, such as practitioners, parents and children. It is followed by the discussion of the ethical considerations, data management and data analysis.

### **3.2.1 Pilot study**

After I initially completed my research design, I did pilot studies with the purpose of practising my research skills and revealing deficiencies in the research design and the proposed methods. I undertook two pilot studies; one was in England when I was on a placement at a reception class of a local primary school; and the other was in one private kindergarten in China. These pilot studies were undertaken before carrying out the fieldwork of the main study in another kindergarten in the same city.

#### **3.2.1.1 Pilot in England**

The first pilot study was conducted between October 2010 and March 2011 in a Reception (Foundation Stage two) class of a local primary school in a large Northern city with children of both British origin and ethnic minority backgrounds. The class where I conducted my research had one lead teacher, one teaching assistant and 28 children aged between four to five years, having daily sessions from 9am – 3:30pm. I was undertaking my placement as a University student at that time, which facilitated me with easy access. I worked one day a week there

in an assistant role working with individuals and small groups of children i.e. reading stories. I conducted observations with the children and had an interview with a parent, research activities which were designed for providing in-depth accounts of perspectives on young children's school lives from children's and parental viewpoints.

The approaches employed in collecting data in this pilot study were non-participant observation and semi-structured interview. As a university research student, I was not involved much in teaching but conducted non-participant observation for most of the time. Field-notes were primarily employed as my key strategy to record data obtained from observations. Also, photography was used as a supplementary tool to record different activities indoors and outdoors. In Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa's study (2009), observations were undertaken to effectively record specific times of the day during the typical daily routine of the programme of the early years settings with the purpose of representing and sampling the typical routine activities and events of children's school life. I accordingly observed, made notes and took photos for what the participants did and said, especially for the children's behaviour, facial expressions and other non-verbal expressions in different activities indoors and outdoors, such as whole class teaching and learning activities, play in areas of provision and small group activities.

I also did a semi-structured interview with one parent during this pilot study. She was a mother of one British-born Chinese girl in the class. The mother had been living in England for 12 years and worked in a company as an accountant. I initially chatted to the mother when she sent or picked up her daughter. We



gradually became familiar with each other. I introduced myself and my research to the mother and she was enthusiastic and interested in my research and agreed to be my interviewee. The interview was conducted in the classroom and lasted 20 minutes with nine structured questions and one open-ended question with an explicit focus on exploring the mother's point of view on her daughter's life at school. A digital voice recorder was used to record the interview.

### 3.2.1.2 Pilot in China

I did the second pilot study in the city where I conducted the main study (see Section 3.1.3.1) between mid-November 2011 and mid-January 2012. It was a private kindergarten in the eastern area of the city. The residents were mainly Chinese residents, with some Muslim Chinese who were relocated households and some Chinese migrants who had bought commercial residential apartments in the community and worked in the central area of the city. The families of the community were mainly middle-income residents.

I was introduced to the headteacher (gatekeeper) through my professorial network. Before meeting the headteacher, I emailed her my CV and the information sheet for my pilot study. After obtaining her oral consent, we had a meeting in her office at the kindergarten and I explained more detail of my personal background and research information. Then, the headteacher formally agreed to sign the consent form. Also, she introduced general information about the kindergarten including the mixed-models (MI, Montessori and Orff musical) of curriculum and pedagogy. Afterwards, she took me to visit three senior classes of the kindergarten. Each class had 30 children aged five to six years

having day sessions from 7.30am to 5:30pm, from Monday to Friday. I eventually chose to research with the class where the staff, including one Chinese language lead teacher, one English language teacher (non-Chinese and part-time), one English assistant teacher and one childcare assistant, expressed strong interest in my research and looked happy to be involved. I worked in the class from 7.00am to 6:00pm Monday to Friday, the same as other staff members.

I piloted the non-participant observation for the whole class activities which were mainly led by the teachers; and I piloted participant observations by playing with children as a member of the group during the time for play in areas of provision. I also piloted several approaches to working with the children in this class. Firstly, I piloted the approach of 'Video-taking and Replaying' with the children. The kindergarten had a tradition of video-recording teachers' class activities, and then replaying this to other teachers to support teacher's self-reflection during the kindergarten's staff training meetings. I was invited to attend the meeting by the headteacher to share and communicate my professional knowledge and skills with other teachers. I then discussed with the staff members and obtained their agreement to replay the video on a whiteboard for whole class of children to watch. Then, I invited the children to comment on what they liked/disliked in the video, and I simultaneously made notes on the comments. All children were excited to watch themselves in the video. Many children were keen to tell their comments. I highlighted the points which were different from what the teachers said during the training meeting.

After two weeks, I had established a positive relationship with the staff and the

children. I piloted the approaches of drawings and sorting pictures with the children. Usually, the children were free after dinner in the classroom when they were waiting for parents to pick them up. Thus, I was able to conduct the research activities with them. For the drawing activity, I invited the children to draw what they liked and disliked at the kindergarten. During their drawing, I chatted with them and asked them what/who were in their drawings and why they were drawing them; and simultaneously made notes on their comments. Regarding the sorting pictures activity, I took photos for different typical activities and people at the kindergarten and printed out the photographs. Then I invited two to three children each time to put the photographs under three types of facial expression card (smiling, neutral and sad) on a table in terms of their preference. During the process, I chatted with the children and made notes for their comments if there were any.

### 3.2.1.3 The implications of my pilot studies

These pilot studies before my main study provided me a deeper insight into how the routines and ECEC programmes were arranged in the different settings of England and China, which revealed the significant areas of curriculum and pedagogy for the focus of the main study and developed the research design of my study. I accordingly reformulated my interview questions, adjusted the data collection strategies of observation and the techniques of researching with children, and even reassessed the strategies of selecting research sites after conducting the second pilot study in China. For example, when I reviewed my first pilot study in England, I found:

- I needed to add more relevant and significant topics and critical questions to the interview questions list the main study in China, such as what and how

parents understand childhood and their children's learning at kindergarten. Also, I needed to revise the interview questions from the formal written style into a more conversational style, and especially avoid using specialized vocabulary.

- My observation notes were focused on assessing children from a teacher's perspective, rather than representing children's perspectives as a researcher. This was because my thinking and philosophy of ECEC was heavily influenced by the Chinese tradition of kindergarten observation which highlights the function of assessing children's learning and practitioner's teaching outcomes (Su and Xu, 2010). Moreover, undertaking ethnography requires the researcher to remain in a role of outsider in the study so as to keep objectivity and avoid "preconceived perceptions or unconscious prejudices, in order to relate the facts concerning the new culture in an unbiased way" (Crowley-Henry 2009, p41). It was originally difficult to meet such requirements because of my Chinese background. However, I had been away from China, studying and working in the UK many years. The first pilot study made me more familiar with the ECEC setting in England.

On another hand, regarding the second pilot study in China, I found:

- As an insider, I had been away from Chinese kindergartens and the education system for some time. Undertaking the second pilot study in China enabled me to orient myself back to the Chinese kindergarten education system.
- It alerted me reflect further on the connection between my literature review and research design, so as to strengthen the research methods and

approaches for the main study. This is because pilot studies benefits researchers to refine the schedule and strategies of data collection in relation to not only the content of the data but also the procedures that researchers follow (Sampson, 2004).

- For instance, from my literature review, I noticed that there is a traditional perception of considering researchers as authorities and experts in the field when researchers conduct research in schools (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003). According to Fang's study (2009), especially in China, school practitioners usually think doing research is for the purpose of assessing learning and teaching outcomes by researchers, educators or governmental officers who have high levels of professional knowledge. And so the researcher's role was connected with such a perception by most practitioners. In order to avoid it happening in my study, I initially explained my personal background and research in detail with an emphasis on my role of researcher and teaching assistant to the classroom staff. Then, I tried to build up trust with them by helping and sharing their work as much as I could, including preparing teaching materials and managing children within the role of teaching assistant. However, I found this made children keep a distance with me and some children even felt scared to express themselves in front of teachers including me. From what I learnt from this pilot study, I decided to spend relatively more time with the children in the main study and mainly involved myself in children's activities as a member of the group so as to gain children's trust and obtain data from children's viewpoint rather than an adult participant's (Punch, 2002; Warming, 2011). However, it also alerted me to keep a balanced and positive relationship with children and practitioners, in order to avoid practitioners being estranged from me.

- For the activities I initially invited the whole class of children to do activities together, but children became very overexcited and were noisy during the activity. I therefore had to reduce the number of children and conducted the activities with 3-4 children for each group in my main study.
- During some research activities with children, the lead teacher was involved so as to support my research. She interrupted children and questioned or even blamed them, when the teacher thought children's answers were not appropriate. This made children stop talking to me. This alerted me to the need to avoid this situation in the main study and so I explained to the practitioners the need to give privacy to children when they were working with me.

Reflections on the two pilot studies enabled me to improve my data collection methods and research instruments. In the following sections, a detailed account of my ethnographic fieldwork is provided.

### **3.2.2 Non-participant observation**

According to Gray (2014), observations enable researchers to obtain rich data relating to participants' perspectives and their actions, as well as some concealed data which might be hidden by using interviews or questionnaires. Therefore, I conducted non-participant and participant observations in my study and the observations were unstructured because my study focuses on the meaning rather than the frequency that participants give to their opinions and actions. Field notes were taken as the essential tool of recording data obtained from observation in the main study because it allows "the documenting of speech, observations and also personal reflections" (Gray 2014, p412).

At the beginning of the main study, the participants including adults and children kept a physical and emotional distance from me as a stranger. There was a possibility that when the participants knew that they were being observed, they would change their behaviour and act differently to their usual behaviour (Gray, 2014); in other words, my observation would begin to influence the activities happening in the natural setting. Therefore, in the beginning, I introduced myself and my research to the staff and children, and I emphasised that as a new member of the class, I was unfamiliar with the environment and the people, so I would need to make notes for some key information. I explained that my observations were mainly descriptive records of general information about the class including the layout of the classroom (Fetterman, 2010), as well as what people did and said during daily routines and so on. I shared my notes with the staff and children at the end of the day in the beginning so as to make them clear about what I was doing and to build up trust, which then enabled them to feel comfortable and act as naturally as possible.

During the first three weeks, I mainly played the role of a passive observer doing non-participant observation on the setting (see Appendix J). Following the class timetable, I carefully made extensive and comprehensive notes of my sensations and perceptions of significant factors within the setting, including the physical and emotional environment, the curriculum and pedagogy, the relationships in the classroom (children-children, children-adults, adults-adults) rather than simply noting down what I saw. What I noticed, how I classified and interpreted events to note down were underpinned by my existing knowledge, experience and understanding of the world (McMillian and Schumacher, 2001). Also, I attempted to act to reduce any unnecessarily disturbance of class

routines caused by the observation process or other behaviour difficulties within the class, a fresh context to me (Delamont and Atkinson, 1995). For example, there was a whole class session of Chinese language, English language or Preschool formal teaching and learning every morning between Monday and Friday led by different teachers. During the sessions, I just sat quietly in a corner of the classroom (usually at the back of children) and conducted my observations of both the teachers and children. Also, during the time for play in the areas of play provision, I quietly sat at the edge of different play areas so as to observe a small group of three to four children, listening to their conversations and observing their behaviour in different areas. This observer's role provided me with opportunities to:

- get familiar with the research environment;
- understand the routine, especially the curriculum and pedagogy of this kindergarten;
- get to know staff members, parents, and more importantly the children in the selected class;
- select key participants for the research; and
- record daily routines and activities in the setting.

### **3.2.3 Participant observation**

Participant observation has been regarded as the fundamental characteristic of ethnographic investigation (Atkinson et al., 2001; Warning, 2005; Hamersley and Atkinson, 2007). This is because researchers are able to understand and make first-hand accounts of participants' perspectives and behaviour through actively joining in daily routines and activities, building up a close relationship with the participants, and obtaining intimate knowledge of their practices (Siraj-



Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 2001). Within three weeks (see Appendix J), my passive role as a non-participant observer gradually changed to a participant observer's role since I had smoothly built rapport with the participants and become more familiar with the setting. I basically had awareness and judgment of what, when and how I could help the staff members and the children, as well as what, when and how I could participate in their activities. The field notes of participant observation, especially in ethnography, contain not only researcher's observation of participants, but also her/his own actions, feelings, questions and reflections (Gray, 2014). Later on, by taking Gray's suggestion, I used a form (see Appendix D) to make notes for my observation, which contains the information of place, time, participants (Lofland and Lofland, 1995) and was divided into three columns: the first one was the primary observation for noting down raw data (no explanation or analysis); the second one was for my reflection and recall of things omitted from jotted notes recorded at the time ; the third one was the experiential notes for recording my personal impressions and feelings.

I became increasingly involved in daily routines and activities by gradually taking on the teaching assistant role with responsibilities such as helping the staff prepare teaching materials, working with children during small group activities, assisting children during dinner time, and becoming involved in children's play during areas of provision time. However, based on the research experience gained from previous pilot studies, I decided to spend more time with the children and involved in most of children's activities, positioning my role as a play-partner, a researcher and a teaching assistant. This positionality enabled me to establish a trustful relationship with children so as to understand

their discourse and capture their viewpoints and preferences by participant observation and experiencing what activities the children engaged with and enjoyed most or less; what or who made them feel happy or upset; and what they liked /disliked, were satisfied /dissatisfied with and why (Warming 2005; 2011). However, there was a danger that this might conversely cause an estrangement and difficulties between me and the practitioner participants (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003). In order to avoid this, I clearly explained my research purpose and strategies, especially my role in the research to the classroom staff members and the headteachers in advance so as to obtain their understanding and cooperation, and get me involved in the work of managing or leading children as little as possible.

I initially intended to observe the practitioners and the children respectively. However, I gradually found out that the observation process recorded the inseparable involvement of both children and practitioners. This was because most activities were led by teachers and children's words and behaviour occurred during their interactions with adults and peers. In this way, my observations to some extent were conducted during the interactions amongst all participants. During my observations I used a small notebook, conversational memos, and a digital camera and video recorder to record what was happening, what the participants were saying and doing, especially in some particular interesting activities or events.

In order to achieve data triangulation, I employed the in-depth interview and informal conversation techniques in addition to ethnographic observations. These methods helped to enhance the trustworthiness of the research.

### **3.2.4 In-depth interviews**

The rationale underpinning this approach is that qualitative interviewing has been used as one of the most common and powerful ways in which the "how" and "what" (Fontana and Frey, 2005, p698) of people and their lives can be studied. Fontana and Frey (2005) also clarify that in structured interviews, respondents are asked set questions, and they usually have limited time and room for a variation of responses, whereas unstructured interviews are informal and flexible, but do not impose any pre-categorisation of responses, which might limit the field of inquiry. Semi-structured interviews allow for elements of both structured and unstructured interviewing and respondents have the time and scope to talk about their opinions on particular subjects. Gall, Gall and Borg (2007) argue that the main questions for respondents are always identical, but the questions are worded so that responses are open-ended. Open-ended questions allow respondents to provide as much detailed information as they like so that they can fully express their ideas and experiences. Meanwhile, the researchers are allowed to ask flexible questions as a means of follow-up. Also, Heyl (2001) points out that ethnographic interviewing is distinguished from other forms of interviewing because the respondents are not passively questioned, but co-operate with the researchers to shape the questions to be asked owing to a relatively long-term respectful and close relationship and frequent contact between the researcher and respondents. For the reasons above, semi-structured ethnographic interview protocols with open-ended questions was considered as the most appropriate approach to explore the practitioners' and the parents' perspectives in my study.

As part of my ethnographic study of the kindergarten, I conducted in-depth

interviews with two groups of adults: the practitioners in the selected kindergarten and the parents of selected children participants. Early and adequate preparation is vital to avoid potential biases and alleviate the problematic circumstances that could potentially occur for the implementation stage of the interview process (Heyl, 2001; Sliverman, 2010; Turner, 2010). Therefore, qualitative semi-structured interview protocols with open-ended questions were carefully designed for both of the groups (see Appendix E). All interviews were digitally voice-recorded and varied in length from 20 to 90 minutes, undertaken in a conversational style; meanwhile, I also made notes of significant points. The interviews were structured thematically but questions were open-ended. All of the taped interviews and field notes were entered into computer files for analysis.

#### 3.2.4.1 Interviews with practitioners

In the interviews with the practitioners of the kindergarten, an information sheet containing a consent form was sent to the kindergarten headteacher and deputy headteacher first. After an initial meeting with them and further explanation of the details of my plan for interviews, they permitted my interviews with themselves, the classroom staff members and parents. I conducted the first interview with the headteacher and second interview with the deputy headteacher (see Appendix J) in their different offices and they both were happy with the interview questions and the process. I explained orally to the interviewees the purpose, format and length of the interview, as well as the confidentiality and anonymity of the interview before I started my interview questions.

Following the interviews with them, I distributed my research information sheet containing a consent form and an interview invitation to the classroom staff members in a bilingual version (English and Chinese) because the English teacher did not read any Chinese. After obtaining consent from five classroom staff members, I set up the interviews to fit in with their convenient times, for instance, during the breaks between their classes or lunch time. All the six interviews were conducted face-to-face and involved myself, the interviewer, and one participant in the staff meeting room of the kindergarten. In this environment, the respondent felt comfortable and free to share personal information (Fontana and Frey, 2005; Creswell, 2007; McBurney and White, 2009; Sliverman, 2010). I also explained orally to the interviewees the purpose, format and length of the interview, as well as the confidentiality and anonymity of the interview before I started my interview questions. My contact detail was given to them for getting in touch with me or my university supervisor if necessary. They were reminded that they could ask any questions before, during or after the interview. I also explained that the interview would be recorded, if they agreed.

For the implementation stage of the interview process, Fontana and Frey's (2005) recommendations were adopted so as to improve the instrumentality and provide maximum benefit to the study. The interview was conducted with an explicit focus on exploring the interviewee's point of view. I prepared a written list of topics and questions (see Appendix E) and asked the interviewee one question at a time (see the schedule in Appendix J). Sometimes I used prompts to encourage the respondent to freely express opinions and provide information that the interviewee thought was important. For example, in interviewing the

teaching and childcare assistant, when she became uncertain about the question, 'What do you think about the teaching content and approaches?', I prompted by saying, 'Probably you could introduce what and how you do things to support teaching, and your comments on your these'. This allowed me to explore her perspectives on the curriculum and pedagogy of the kindergarten.

#### 3.2.4.2 Interviews with parents

I distributed my research information sheet containing a consent form and an interview invitation to the parents. Creswell (2007) suggests conducting interviews with candidates who are likely to be willing to openly and honestly share their ideas and experiences in a positive way to obtain the most credible information for the study. Therefore, nine parents who were willing to participate in my research were selected to attend the interview. In the interviews with nine parents, the interview process appeared different from the interviews with practitioners. I started with informal chats with parents when they came to the kindergarten to send or pick up children. The purpose of such informal chatting was twofold: to establish rapport with potential participants and to select interviewees. After one week I gained knowledge of parents' background information, such as who were their children, where they lived and worked, what their jobs were about and their nationality. Based on such knowledge, I selected 9 parents for the interview.

However, the setting up of interviews took much longer than with the practitioners. Some of them agreed a time but did not turn up due to their other priorities. Some had to change the dates by giving short notice. Therefore, it took me two weeks to complete the nine interviews (see Appendix J). I

conducted the interviews with one parent each time in the reception meeting room at the kindergarten and the interviews lasted from 25 - 70 Minutes. I also explained orally to the interviewees the purpose, format and length of the interview, as well as the confidentiality and anonymity of the interview before I started my interview questions. My contact details were given to them for getting in touch with me or my university supervisor if necessary. They were reminded that they could ask any questions before, during or after the interview. I also explained that the interview would be recorded, if they agreed. I also prepared a written list of topics and questions and asked the interviewee one question at a time (see Appendix E). Except for one interview conducted in English, the remaining 8 interviews were conducted in Chinese. All of the interviews voice-recordings and field notes were entered into computer files for analysis.

Beyond the formal interviews, I often had informal conversations with the participants, adults and children. Thus, I used a notebook to capture significant data that emerged during daily informal conversations, which happened in more naturalistic scenarios.

### **3.2.5 Researching with young children**

In the ethnographic study of children, my strategy was to use multiple mechanisms, as discussed earlier in Section 3.1.2, for eliciting children's subjective narratives about their experiences, perceptions and feelings concerning the curriculum and pedagogy. Researching children's perspectives is an extremely challenging task (Clark, Kjørholt and Moss, 2005; Greene and Hogan, 2005; Christensen and James, 2008; Harcourt, Perry and Waller, 2011),

children's response to questions posed, including their sentence structures, differs from one child to another depending on the individual's ability to understand the meaning or the requirements of a particular question (Clark, 2005; Mayall, 2008). Behind each child's response to the questions posed in this research, such as 'What do you like or dislike at kindergarten?' lay a different background. Moreover, the children's feelings about their kindergarten life could not be interpreted simply by listening to their verbal expressions, due to their language limitation (Clark and Moss, 2005; Mayall, 2008; Pascal and Bertram, 2009). In order to most accurately establish the children's true and deepest feelings, the data obtained by the research was drawn not only from children's verbal expression, but also from non-participant and participant observations and inviting children to attend various research activities mainly informed-by the Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2011) and other approaches or tools used for researching with young children (Warming, 2005; Dockett, Einarsdottir and Perry, 2011; Dunphy and Farrell, 2011; Te One, 2011).

Firstly, participant observation was used because this allowed children's active participation, and also helped me to build trust with children participants. For example, after I became more familiar with the children, I often took part in the play and games during time in areas of play provision. Also, sometimes, I played with the children during outdoor activities. I used a small note book to make fieldwork notes during or following periods of participant observation.

Secondly, small group discussion has been innovatively employed to explore children's experiences in research with young children by ECEC researchers



such as Mauthner (1997), Clark and Moss (2011) and Dockett and Perry (2005). Brooker (2002) argues that this technique can weaken adult-dominated power within the relationship between children and adults. This is because children can interact and support each other when taking part in research (Hennessy and Heary, 2005; Greene and Hogan, 2005). I ran small group activities with two to three children each time. For example, an informal small group discussion was conducted while children were working on a story-telling activity. The discussion was audio-recorded after I orally asked for children's permission.

Thirdly, in order to communicate effectively with children, visual methods, informed-by the Mosaic approach (Clark and Moss, 2011), including the use of images, drawing, photographs and videos were adopted to stimulate research-focused discussions with children, especially for those who had relatively limited language and for those who struggle to respond to abstract questions (Clark, 2005; Dockett and Perry, 2005; Clark and Moss, 2011). Instead of text-based research tools, images provided reference points for discussion. Drawing was important for exploring children's perspectives. This is because children often talk more freely while being involved in the activity. During the process of drawing, children did not need to maintain eye contact and they were likely to feel more comfortable to be interviewed (Clark and Moss, 2011). Drawing also allowed children to express their perspectives on not only current experience, but also previous experience (Clark, 2005; Clark and Moss, 2011). I recorded children's comments or annotated their drawings so as to capture the complexity and nuances of children's thinking and feeling. Children's photography was used to generate particularly rich data because children were confidently engaged in the research, and were allowed opportunities to make

their own decisions by taking photos themselves (Clark, 2005; Clark and Moss, 2011). In the Chinese setting, children had not been given such opportunities before and this method therefore appeared particularly effective as children participants were very enthusiastic about taking photos of themselves and with each other. To support and sustain children's involvement in the research, toys (a puppy or teddy) were provided too during the research process in order to help children to talk (Clark and Moss, 2011). I used a small note book to make fieldwork notes during or following periods of participant observation.

Fourthly, I conducted the activity of sorting pictures (Clark and Moss, 2011) with children usually before their parents came to pick them up after dinner. I took photos for different typical activities and people from the kindergarten and printed out the photographs. Then I invited two to three children each time to put the photographs under three types of facial expression card (smiling, neutral and sad) on a table in terms of their preference. During the process, I chatted with the children and made notes on their comments if there was any.

Fifthly, I employed the method of the kindergarten guided tour (Clark, 2005; Clark and Moss, 2011). This method was sometimes initiated by the researcher and sometimes by children. In my research I focused on child-led tours as I hoped to encourage children participants to play an active role in the activity. For example, I invited two children to take me and a new 'friend', teddy bear, on a tour of the kindergarten and asked them similar questions about the kindergarten. I also encouraged them to take photographs of everything they liked. On one occasion, a girl initiated her own tour in which she interviewed and audio-recorded a few children, as well as every adult she came across in

the kindergarten, asking 'Why do you come here?' Another girl was also invited to accompany the tour, taking photos of all the respondents.

### **3.2.6 Data analysis**

#### **3.2.6.1 Data management**

Since I employed different data collection methods in my ethnographic research, my fieldwork produced rich data in terms of both data sources and a wide range of perspectives from different groups of participants. This would have resulted in difficulty in later data analysis if a data management strategy had not been set up from the beginning of the fieldwork. I therefore developed a master list of types of information gathered, as suggested by Coffey, Holbrook and Atkinson (1996). I tried to record data collected every day during the fieldwork in the list. By the end of the fieldwork I produced a data collection matrix (see Appendix F) to locate and identifying data for the research (Ibid). Such a matrix helped me in understanding the levels of significance of the data collected as well as in identifying new themes when addressing my initial research questions. In the process of data management, I coded the names of participants and related background information in order to protect the anonymity of participants. I also saved a backup copy of my computer files as advised by Kaiser (2009).

#### **3.2.6.2 Approach to data analysis**

As I discussed earlier a large amount of detailed data was gathered from my ethnographic fieldwork, and I started with writing up an account of my non-participant and participant observations from short jottings made during the day. In this way I tried to approach my data analysis from smaller units of analysis to

more complex data categories.

According to Richards (2015), the strategies for data analysis in qualitative research should be identifying, coding, and categorizing patterns found in the data. I followed such strategies in my data analysis by:

- Working on the data matrix to identify and collating key themes addressed in my research questions and emerging themes that I was not aware of before;
- Transcribing tape recorded data and translating data collected in Chinese to English;
- Breaking down transcripts into smaller significant parts of data by a process of open coding;
- Refining themes by a constant comparison approach as analysis was progressed;
- Demonstrating adult participants' perspectives by the use of quotations taken directly from the transcripts of interviews;
- Demonstrating children's perspectives by the use of quotations and other evidence such as pictures, drawings, photographs;
- Highlighting the arguments to draw a conclusion.

My study focuses on making meanings or interpretation of the viewpoints and experience of the research participants (Lofland and Lofland, 1995; Mason, 2002). This decides the ethnographic nature of my data analysis. Thus, my study can be regarded as a process to generate a theoretical and empirical account of participants' perspectives within a specific cultural context through the ethnographic investigation in the field of ECEC. The data analysis of my

study is accordingly not limited to a pre-planned hypothetical framework whilst it develops from fieldwork as well as with the investigations of the literature review. Therefore, the nature of data analysis in my study is qualitative and ethnographic by discovering and interpreting rather than testing some pre-designed hypotheses.

The process of data analysis was based upon the data collected from the pilot study and the main study, including observational data obtained from field notes, photographs, and videos, which reveals direct and indirect meanings of what the participants did and think; communicative data obtained from formal interviews and informal conversations, which provides direct interpretation of participant's perspectives on relevant research questions; as well as documentary data obtained from school policies and handbook, teacher's teaching plans, textbooks, and children's learning journals, even national policies of ECEC in China, which offered supplementary evidence beyond the previous two types of data. The process of data analysis in my study attempted to develop meaning-making and sufficient account by breaking down data into components in terms of different themes generated from the initial analysis of data. Then, I attempted to make connections between and within the components. The procedure of coding was simultaneously ongoing during the process of breaking down data. In other words, the aim was to describe, classify and connect them (Dey, 1993) with the purpose of deeply understanding the relevance between the data and my research questions (Mason, 2002). I initially started the analysis from looking through and annotating data including the field notes, visual data and literature review, which provided me a general picture of the data. Then, I subsequently collected data to go beyond description, and

code and classify them under different themes which were related to the research questions of the study. Then, a clearer whole picture of the data was generated by making connections between categories generated by different research approaches and methods.

### **3.3 Summary**

The chapter has explained how the data was collected in pilot studies in England and in China and during the main study in China, as well as the underpinning rationale. It focuses on demonstrating how the ethnographic approach was adopted for the research design and how it was developed to answer the research questions. There are two main sections. Firstly, the methodological and ethical issues in researching ECEC are discussed in the context of China, including the theoretical basis for ethnography as the research design and the way specific methods were developed to answer the research questions; and the strategies of sample selection, and the consideration of ethical issues involved in the study. Secondly, it reflects on the ethnographic fieldwork justifying the specific techniques used in the research process. This second section also includes an account of the data analysis including methods for data management and the analytic framework.

## **Chapter 4 Practitioners' perspectives**

ECEC practitioners, as the adults directly working with young children, play a pivotal role in children's learning and development in their daily lives in early years settings (Stephen, 2006; Chen and Rao, 2011). The practitioners' views on the kindergarten's curriculum and pedagogy reflect their underlying beliefs about children along with their convictions about ECEC directly relate to the kindergarten's educational practice and quality (Ang, 2008; Wang et al., 2008; Li, Wang and Wong, 2011). This chapter addresses issues of curriculum and pedagogy at the research setting from the practitioners' perspectives, including perspectives of the two headteachers and the four classroom staff members. The data were primarily gathered from formal interviews, informal conversations, the field notes from observations, as well as kindergarten documents such as the Newton Staff Handbook (X Kindergarten, 2012) and other paperwork. The chapter begins by presenting the practitioners' personal information, educational and work experience, and their opinions on positions, roles and responsibilities. It subsequently explores the practitioners' views on the curriculum and pedagogy of this MI Chinese kindergarten, including how this contrasts with traditional ways of teaching and learning in China.

### **4.1 Staff background information**

The practitioners' perspectives were formed and shaped by their personal, educational and professional experience; they were further underpinned by their

positions, roles and responsibilities at the kindergarten. Thus, it is necessary to analyse the data regarding staff background, drawing on the evidence from formal interviews and informal conversations, as well as the Newton Staff Handbook (X Kindergarten, 2012).

#### **4.1.1 Personal information and professional backgrounds**

It is important to identify the practitioners' personal and educational backgrounds, work and training experience, positions and roles as these are likely to have a direct influence on their understanding and views on MI theory and the MI curriculum and pedagogy. Table 4.1 (see below) shows this background information. All participant practitioners were Chinese and female, except for one male member of staff who was from Canada and spoke English as his first language. Although not all participant practitioners hold qualifications in ECEC, they all had higher education diplomas or degrees. In terms of age profile, the headteacher, the deputy headteacher, the lead teacher and the teaching and childcare assistant were in a similar age group, between 28 and 35 years old. The youngest staff member was the English teacher, aged 24, and the eldest one was the preschool teacher, aged 58. Therefore, this was a relatively young team. However, this does not mean that they lacked experience. For example, the headteacher and the deputy headteacher had worked in the field of ECEC for 14 and 10 years respectively. Also, the lead teacher and the teaching and childcare assistant had respectively seven and five years' experience of working in kindergartens. The preschool teacher had more than 40 years' work experience in a primary school and seven years' experience of working in kindergartens. In contrast, the youngest teacher, the English teacher, had only two years' work experience in the field of ECEC. However, as this



particular Chinese setting within the Newton kindergarten chain was only established in 2009, all staff members in this study had relatively limited experience at this particular kindergarten; they had been working at it for approximately three years only.

There were different training programmes accessed by the kindergarten staff. As the headteacher mentioned during the interview, 'most of the training programmes were organised by this kindergarten and the company [Newton Kindergarten Group]'. She also pointed out that in recent years the local educational authority 'had attached importance to supporting private kindergartens'. Therefore, there were several external training programmes for staff members to attend. The headteacher, the deputy headteacher and the lead teacher both told that they had attended 'a great number of' internal and external ECEC training programmes, more than other staff members. The lead teacher said she had attended 'some' internal and external ECEC and MI trainings. The English teacher also explained that he had attended 'only the internal MI training programme organised by the Curriculum Department of head office [Newton Kindergarten Group]', whereas the teaching and childcare assistant and the preschool teacher had 'not attended any training relating to MI theory'.

**Table 4.1 Staff personal information and professional backgrounds**

Position	Age group	Cultural background	Qualification & Certificate	Place of Study	Professional experience	Years of working in ECEC*	Years of working at Newton	Training	
								External	Internal
Headteacher	30-34	Chinese	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bachelor's Degree in Education Studies</li> <li>• Kindergarten Head Teacher &amp; Teacher Certificate</li> <li>• The MI Training Programme Certificate</li> </ul>	A Normal University*, Province A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kindergarten Teacher</li> <li>• 0-3 years Parents Involved Education Teacher</li> </ul>	14	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Private Kindergarten Headteacher &amp; Outstanding Teacher Training</li> <li>• Kindergarten Head Teacher Forum</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The MI induction training</li> <li>• Annual Training Week</li> <li>• Conference &amp; Workshop</li> </ul>
Deputy Head-teacher	35-39	Chinese	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bachelor's Degree in Music Education</li> <li>• Kindergarten Head Teacher &amp; Teacher Certificate</li> <li>• The MI Training Programme Certificate</li> </ul>	City Normal University, Province A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Primary school Music Teacher</li> <li>• 0-3 years Parents Involved Education Teacher</li> </ul>	10	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Private Kindergarten Headteacher &amp; Outstanding Teacher Training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The MI induction training</li> <li>• Annually Training Week</li> <li>• Conference &amp; Workshop</li> </ul>
Lead Teacher	25-29	Chinese	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HE* Diploma in ECEC*</li> <li>• Kindergarten Teacher Certificate</li> <li>• The MI Training Programme Certificate</li> </ul>	China B University, Province A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Kindergarten Lead Teacher</li> </ul>	7	1.5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Outstanding Teacher Training</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The MI induction training</li> <li>• Teaching Training Funding Programme</li> <li>• Annual Training Week</li> <li>• Conference &amp; Workshop</li> <li>• Weekly Teaching Training Session</li> <li>• Model Lesson Observation Activity</li> </ul>
Teaching & Childcare Assistant	30-34	Chinese	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HE Diploma in Computer Art Design</li> <li>• Childcare Assistant Certificate</li> </ul>	City Second Light Industry College, Province A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shop Assistant</li> <li>• Warehouse Keeper</li> <li>• Self-employed</li> </ul>	5	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Training for Childcare Assistant Certificate</li> </ul>	N/A (The childcare assistants in this kindergarten do not have training opportunities once they have achieved their certificates)
English Teacher	20-24	Canadian	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Bachelor's Degree in Health Science</li> <li>• TEFL* Certificate</li> <li>• The MI Training Programme Certificate</li> </ul>	A Canadian University, Canada	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hospital Volunteer</li> </ul>	2	2	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The MI induction training</li> <li>• Curriculum Department Assessment &amp; Guide</li> </ul>
Preschool Teacher	55-59	Chinese	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• HE Diploma in Primary School Education</li> <li>• Primary School Teacher Certificate</li> </ul>	City Normal University, Province A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Primary School Teacher</li> <li>• Primary School Director of Teaching and Discipline</li> </ul>	7	2	N/A	N/A

\* ECEC: Early Childhood Education and Care \*HE: Higher Education \*Normal University: the university for teacher education and training. \* TEFL: Teaching English as a Foreign Language

## 4.1.2 Positions, roles and responsibilities

This section explores the various individual understandings of and attitudes towards staff participants' different positions, roles and responsibilities. I initially gathered data from the Newton Staff Handbook (X Kindergarten, 2012), which provides a broad description of each role. Subsequently, staff members expressed personal opinions about their positions, roles and responsibilities during interviews and conversations with me. In the following sections, extracts from interviews and conversations are used to exemplify findings and they are preceded by each staff member.

### 4.1.2.1 Management staff

The practitioners' responses during interviews and conversations confirmed the importance of the management structure of the kindergarten as described in the Newton Staff Handbook (X Kindergarten, 2012).

The headteacher explained that she was appointed by the head office of the Newton Group and she managed the overall operation of this Chinese kindergarten. This included the development and implementation of all operational plans and budgets associated with the delivery of the setting's programmes and services to meet the needs of children and parents (as described in the Newton Staff Handbook (X Kindergarten, 2012)). The headteacher explained during the interview that she was mainly in charge of the kindergarten's operations and administration, such as recruitment and all services including management services <sup>5</sup> (后勤服务). In the headteacher's

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<sup>5</sup> Management services: finance and purchasing, HR file management, support team management including security, health and hygiene, environment and property maintenance and so on (Staff Handbook, X Kindergarten, 2012, p3).

words, she managed 'all aspects' but was 'mainly in charge of the administrative aspects of the kindergarten's work'. The headteacher also pointed out that the deputy headteacher was mainly responsible for the aspects of curriculum and pedagogy, while her own role was 'merely to monitor and maintain overall control' of teaching practice of the MI programme. She explained that:

*The deputy headteacher is mainly in charge of overall planning and implementing educational and teaching activities, as well as guiding the teaching staff's implementation of teaching and education. What I have to do is to monitor and maintain overall control of her [the deputy headteacher's] work.*

Additionally, during one of our informal conversations, the headteacher explained that the whole teaching staff team was also supported by the Curriculum Department of Newton Kindergarten Group head office. It seemed that the headteacher was confident in explaining her role and emphasised her position as the 'overall leader tasked to coordinate, lead and manage delivery of the setting's services in all relevant areas'. She was responsible for the on-going effectiveness of the kindergarten services and operations.

Turning to the deputy headteacher's views, during the interview, she explained that her role was to provide educational leadership, as well as operational management in the design and implementation of the MI curriculum and pedagogy of this kindergarten. She further explained that she was expected to 'monitor', 'evaluate' and 'review' classroom teaching practice and 'promote improvement strategies', with the aim prescribed in the Newton Staff Handbook (X Kindergarten, 2012, p1-3) to 'achieve outstanding standards of learning and teaching' at all times.

As a course director, the deputy headteacher showed her passionate

commitment to design, plan, guide and support teaching staff in the practical application of MI theory and the implementation of the MI programme. She also displayed a strong interest in the MI programme, explaining:

*I spent over a year working to truly understand MI theory and its application... How to apply MI theory into our curriculum and pedagogy has been explored and discussed by our teachers from the very start to the present day...*

In other words, in the context of her executive leadership and management role, the deputy headteacher saw herself as playing a significant and specific role in the development and practice of the MI curriculum and pedagogy.

#### 4.1.2.2 Classroom staff

The classroom staff members including the lead teacher, the English teacher, the teaching and childcare assistant, and the preschool teacher expressed their opinions of their roles and responsibilities from a relatively practical standpoint. For example, the lead teacher was expected to lead the classroom teaching and management of the kindergarten class according to the Newton Staff Handbook (X Kindergarten, 2012). Her responsibilities included getting to know children's family backgrounds and children's development levels; establishing good communication with children's parents, grandparents and carers; coordinating work and staff working relationships within the classroom; and planning, preparing, organising and implementing all teaching educational activities and programmes for the class. The lead teacher voiced her understanding of her important role in the following terms:

*My position is to be the lead teacher of the class, and I undertake the main responsibility of knowing how every child is doing on a day-to-day basis, communicating with parents, balancing the workload of the classroom staff, devising teaching and lesson plans, as well as organising and implementing educational and teaching activities.*

The lead teacher also explained that she took responsibility not only for leading the MI programme in Chinese, but also for teaching children how to write Chinese characters, which was a part of the preschool curriculum.

The English teacher, Mark was from Canada. His role was to teach children English based on the MI programme, as well as to work with Chinese colleagues and help them to create a balanced English-Chinese learning environment. Additionally, he bore part of the responsibility for communication with parents. He explained his responsibilities for:

*recognising the development level of every child, communicating with parents, balancing the workload of classroom staff, making teaching and lesson plans, as well as organising and implementing educational and teaching activities.*

The English teacher pointed out that according to the class weekly timetable which was drawn up by the deputy headteacher, he worked with the children in this class only during the English circle times (1.30pm-2.10pm Monday - Friday) and in English afternoons (2.30pm-4.10pm Tuesday and Thursday). As he explained:

*...I only see the children maybe 40 minutes each day ... and alternate between different classes...actually I'll spend an afternoon with a different class, um... coordinate what they're learning in the Chinese class with the English class...*

He expressed his satisfaction with the coordination between the Chinese and English activities transition. He explained that:

*...when we're doing the same thing it's actually really great and you can see how the kids can link what they learned in the Chinese class over into the English class...*

However, he also pointed out there were still some challenges of working across different classes of the kindergarten:

*It's actually hard sometimes to coordinate what they're learning in the Chinese class...there's sometimes ... because I do not know...the Chinese language.*

This might have occurred because of the language communication barrier and because his work involved different classes. The English teacher's expression reflects his mixed feelings, perhaps linked to his relative limited professional experience and complex role.

The preschool teacher was a part-time teacher in the kindergarten. There was no specific description of the preschool teacher's responsibilities in the Newton Staff Handbook (X Kindergarten, 2012). She introduced her role and responsibilities as follows:

*I teach maths and Pinyin [Mandarin Chinese Phonetics]. Chinese language basically involves teaching Pinyin. Then in the second semester, when we have plenty of time, I provide a 'speaking' class for children, which focuses on developing their expressive language skills and abilities. These are the two main aspects of the teaching content.*

As a part-time member of staff, the preschool teacher said she only took 'maths' (numeracy) and 'Pinyin' (Mandarin Chinese Phonetics). She taught four sessions per week with each session running for 45 minutes (one session on Tuesday, Wednesday and two sessions on Friday). Although the preschool teacher worked part-time and regarded her role as relatively simple, she expressed a strong sense of responsibility for the children's learning, as much as the full-time lead teacher. As she explained:

*I never regard myself as a part-time staff member...although I work here only a few hours each week, what I do and say in my class will impact on children's learning and development the same as for other staff members in the classroom.*

Another full-time staff member, the teaching and childcare assistant explained that her 'primary role was that of childcare' and that she had a 'secondary role as a teaching assistant'. According to the Newton Staff Handbook (X Kindergarten, 2012), a childcare assistant was expected to assist in the care and maintenance of the classroom equipment and supplies, as well as meeting the children's physical needs. In terms of caring responsibilities, the teaching and childcare assistant described these as 'helping children with meals, dressing, sleeping and washing' with the aim of 'supporting children to establish healthy routines'. As a teaching assistant, the job description in the Newton Staff Handbook (X Kindergarten, 2012) expected her to 'assist teachers to carry out the curriculum and pedagogy and support children to achieve learning outcomes'; more specifically in her words: 'preparing paints, helping children with their paint smocks and labelling their art work'. However, the teaching and childcare assistant seemed to regard herself as a childcare assistant rather than a teaching assistant. For example, when she introduced her roles, she said

*My job is just to take care of the children...help children with meals, dressing, sleeping and washing...then support them to establish a healthy routine, and then to provide care for the children's daily life... these are the main things I need to do...the teaching aspect seems very distant from me (laughing).*

In response to my comment that she in fact was often involved in teaching activities, she explained the reason:

*Yes, sometimes, because only two staff members, a lead teacher and a childcare assistant, work in this classroom there's no teaching assistant, so I partly take on that role, but it's just for a small amount of time, most of the time I take care of children's daily life.*

When asked to explain further the limited role, she said

*I teach children some simple things. This is because I am good at drawing and painting, so it mainly involves these kinds of art activities.*



From the teaching and childcare assistant's perspective, she was able to 'teach' children some 'simple things' only in 'art activities'. She seemed to lack confidence and even engaged in self-mockery when she talked about her teaching assistant role. Based on my observation, she was frequently involved in teaching activities related to the arts and she performed other teaching related tasks assigned to her, such as making handcrafts to decorate the classroom. This was because, as the teaching and childcare assistant said, she was 'good at drawing and painting' due to her educational background and personal interest. During my observations, the teaching and childcare assistant mostly expressed her satisfaction with the dual role in the classroom, despite showing tentativeness about her teaching assistant role when she was talking about her role and responsibilities during the interview.

The section above demonstrates practitioners' views on their individual positions and their related roles and responsibilities. All practitioners were clearly aware of their authority or more limited roles at different levels within the kindergarten. Their understanding of roles and responsibilities is partly related to the roles and responsibilities assigned in the Kindergarten Handbook but also reflected an association with their training background and personal expertise such as in language and arts. Their individual perspectives on the MI curriculum and pedagogy are explored in the next section.

## **4.2 Views on curriculum and pedagogy**

This part outlines what and how the practitioners in this study understood and thought about the curriculum and pedagogy of the kindergarten including both

the MI programme and traditional ways of teaching.

#### **4.2.1 The Multiple Intelligences programme**

All practitioners were asked about their understanding and views on the kindergarten curriculum and pedagogy based on MI theory and the MI programme. Their responses showed interesting areas of consensus as well as some differences.

##### 4.2.1.1 Individual differences

In the discussions of curriculum and pedagogy of the kindergarten MI programmes, all practitioners made frequent references to the concept of children's 'individual differences'. All of them expressed acknowledgement of the importance of individual differences, though there were variations in their understanding of MI theory and the MI programme due to their different personal, educational, professional and cultural backgrounds. As explained in Section 4.1, they had different levels of qualifications, work and training experiences and distinctive roles.

On a management level, the headteacher and deputy headteacher expressed a similar understanding about the core of MI theory. The headteacher stated:

*The theory of multiple intelligences contrasts with the traditional notion that children have a single, fixed intelligence. MI educators embrace the view that children have multiple intelligences.*

Similarly, the deputy headteacher said:

*Different people have different particular strengths and weaknesses. ...So I think the advantage of the MI curriculum and pedagogy is in recognising children's different intelligences and*

*encouraging them to build on areas of strength so as to overcome their weakness...*

They both claimed that the advantage of the MI curriculum and pedagogy was in recognising children's different intelligences and encouraging them to build on areas of strength, so as to overcome their weakness. Linked to this, they explained that the key to implementing the MI programme lay in 'a consideration of children's individual differences'. They explained that the practical strategies for implementation were 'to observe children carefully' and 'identify their individual strengths and weakness', then to 'start working from the strengths so as to overcome the weaknesses'. Both the headteacher and deputy headteacher believed that children would 'become confident' in learning if teachers followed MI programme strategies. In particular, they were convinced that 'self-confidence' was an essential ingredient for all aspects of a child's well-being and development and a key disposition for success as an adult.

Furthermore, the headteacher expressed her knowledge of the MI programme, which underpinned the kindergarten's curriculum and pedagogy, by referring to the research of Howard Gardner: 'As Gardner demonstrated, every child is unique'. In her opinion, the notion of children's uniqueness was highlighted as an essential feature of the MI programme, supported by empirical evidence. Her claim that 'tests only skim the surface of individual differences' seems to suggest a view that more traditional forms of education, reliant on tests, often fail to grasp the extent of children's diverse abilities.

Whilst the deputy headteacher voiced a similar opinion on the importance of 'individual difference' within the MI programme, she also emphasised the pragmatic and practical side of the MI curriculum and pedagogy:

*The MI curriculum and pedagogy requires that teachers take account of children's individual differences when they choose teaching materials...*

As both were managers of the kindergarten, and in a 'leadership' position, although with different roles and responsibilities, it is unsurprising that they held similarly committed and informed views on MI theory and that both attached great importance to the notion of individual differences within the MI programme.

At an operational level, the teachers and the teaching and childcare assistant, as implementers of the programme, also discussed MI theory and the MI programme with generally favourable attitudes. For example, when taking about their understanding of MI theory, the lead teacher commented: 'I think the MI programme is generally good...' And the teaching and childcare assistant was similarly positive: 'I think it is pretty good'.

However, the staff team could be divided clearly into two groups, 'trained' and 'untrained' staff, in relation to the MI programme. The trained teachers were the lead teacher and the English teacher. At the start of their work at Newton, they had both attended an MI training programme involving one month's part-time distance learning. They both highlighted the advantages of the MI programme. For example, the lead teacher said:

*I think MI (theory) can [help us to] find every child's strongest area, whatever it is, and then build on it.*

Similarly, the English teacher claimed that the MI programme enabled staff to 'find out about every child's strongest area whichever it is, and then build on it'.

These two teachers seemed more concerned than other staff about how best to

respect children's individual differences and how to simulate children's development of multiple intelligences successfully during their daily teaching. For example, the lead teacher maintained that in setting up 'various play areas', providing 'rich materials', making monthly teaching themes, lesson plans and designing teaching activities, 'all needed to take account of children's individual differences'. She explained that this was 'an effective means of delivering the MI programme'. Moreover, the English teacher expressed a similar viewpoint, giving a practical example of how to learn about children's individual interests:

*Um, yeah like different students have different things that they like and they like to do and different topics that they want to learn about. Like when I first...was making the things myself usually I try and ask them before I bring up a topic, like, 'What do you guys want to learn about? What do you want to know about? What are you curious about?' and they tell me a list of things that they want to know about...*

In the English teacher's view, such consideration of children's interests and preferences led to positive teaching practices:

*...so sometimes I remember they said oh they want to learn about hot-air balloons, so like sure we'll learn about hot-air balloons, and so because they chose that topic, because they were interested in it, it was very easy to engage them in that learning. It's very easy for them to pay attention, very easy for them to ask questions because they really wanted to know about it.*

The English teacher also took a reflective approach in the teaching:

*Um, other times, if I chose that myself, they'd be like, 'Why are we learning this?' (laughing)*

The above examples of the lead teacher and the English teacher indicate that as classroom teachers, these two practitioners recognised the significant benefits from respecting children's individual differences and interests in the delivery of the MI programme.

The 'untrained' staff members in relation to the MI programme were the preschool teacher and the teaching and childcare assistant. In spite of the fact that she had not undertaken any MI training, the preschool teacher also seemed to attach importance to individual differences:

*I don't really know about MI theory. Does it mean developing a child's whole brain potential? ...Whatever, we should teach children with a consideration of individual differences.*

She continued to talk about her teaching practice which actually integrated an element of understanding children's individual differences:

*Basically, I teach Chinese Pinyin year after year, but the teaching methods, content and specific arrangements are different each year because the learners are different ...*

This 'untrained' preschool teacher also confidently discussed how the notion of individual differences should be employed in the implementation of the preschool curriculum and pedagogy by relating it to an individual case:

*...In our class, for example, Tao is a bit of a special child, isn't he? The teacher should have more patience for this kind of child. The teacher should have different expectations of him than for other children. Sometimes, it is easy for teachers to get anxious and lose patience. ...The lead teacher often teaches him using the 'one-size-fits-all' approach ---'You must do it in the same way!' I discussed the problem with the lead teacher last time and told her that a special child should be treated specially ...*

However, this understanding seemed to be built on her practical teaching experience of over 40 years rather than her knowledge of MI theory.

The teaching and childcare assistant had a childcare certificate and a qualification but not in education. Also she had relatively less work experience of ECEC and no training in relation to the MI programme. Thus, she unsurprisingly made less reference to individual differences than other staff.

She mainly expressed her understanding in relation to her practical experience:

*...One of the achievements is that children have learnt to clean up the classroom by themselves...the difficulty is that some children are very poor at functioning independently, so I have to take care and teach them differently according to their individual ability.*

It can be seen that different staff members expressed their understanding of individual differences variously. For the management team, both the headteacher and the deputy headteacher showed knowledge of the concept of individual differences and its importance in the MI framework for the kindergarten's curriculum and pedagogy. The 'trained' teachers like the lead teacher and the English teacher, on the other hand, had significant practical experience of respecting interests and differences of individual children. The 'untrained' staff members such as the preschool teacher and the teaching and care assistant were both unconsciously paying attention to child's individual need and development. Therefore, it can be argued that all participant practitioners in this kindergarten were aware of the importance of individual differences within the MI programme, though their understanding and practice suggests they had internalised this awareness to varying degrees.

#### 4.2.1.2 Areas of play provision

Another important element of the MI programme, according to the practitioners' responses, is the areas of play provision. As the headteacher claimed:

*Actually, the MI [curriculum and pedagogy] can be seen in the 'areas of play provision', and not in traditional whole class activities.*

Other 'trained' staff members including the deputy headteacher, the lead teacher and the English teacher expressed a similar view. For example, the lead teacher said:

*MI theory has mainly been applied in the activities that take place in the areas of play provision.*

Moreover, they all believed that the MI programme was able to acknowledge children's individual differences by providing a wide range of play areas with rich play materials, as the lead teacher told me in the interview:

*....and another important thing in the areas of play provision is that they work according to the monthly theme and aim which the kindergarten decides. Teachers also need to prepare relevant teaching materials and toys for different play areas in terms of the developmental level of the children in this class...*

These four 'trained' practitioners also emphasised that classrooms organised according to play areas provided 'an ideal site for teachers' observations'. By undertaking observations of children in these areas, they believed that teachers were able to individualise their curriculum and pedagogy. The course director, who was the deputy headteacher and a parent, reported that:

*Of course, children's interests are usually discovered by teacher's observations during play in areas of play provision. My daughter is an example. What her teacher observed is that my daughter really likes to play in the role play area. She enjoys cooking for her friends, as well as organising a party. So she has shown a great interest in the dolls house...*

The deputy headteacher also pointed out that, since the promulgation and implementation of the Guidance Outline on Kindergarten Education (China, Ministry of Education, 2001), ECEC in China was 'gradually being reformed'. As a consequence, the significance of play-based activity was gradually being recognised within the national kindergarten curriculum and pedagogy. She explained that this was because areas of play provision enable adults to 'fully respect a child's interests and individuality' in terms of each child's physical and mental development. Also, the activity of playing in the areas of play provision was one of the 'children's favourite activities'. This was because, within the MI



programme, the areas of play provision enabled children to develop their 'imagination and creativity', as well as having a 'positive effect on their development of cooperation, problem-solving and self-discipline'.

The lead teacher similarly regarded the areas of play provision as an effective way to support children's learning and development. Also, she highlighted a 'link' between the areas of play provision and the monthly teaching theme, both of which aimed to meet children's expectations and interests in learning:

*The link demonstrated the educational notion of modern curriculum integration and made the MI curriculum and pedagogy run throughout the whole teaching and learning routine.*

The deputy headteacher additionally pointed out that the most important aspect of the areas of play provision was to provide 'the best materials' for children to use in terms of their individual differences:

*After these years of exploration, I personally think the MI curriculum and pedagogy are appropriate for us...Taking into account individual differences, teachers play the role of...researcher into what the best materials are for children.*

She suggested that a teacher should be 'an observer' and 'a play partner' to know the 'best moment' for intervention, guidance and support of children, and the most appropriate degree, when children were playing in the areas of play provision. This viewpoint was also supported by two classroom teachers, the lead teacher and the English teacher. As the lead teacher said:

*Teachers should play the role of providing resources and being a play partner rather than a guide and teacher; they should also provide new interesting targets when children have lost interest in the original target within the area...These strategies will help children to develop their multiple intelligences as fully as possible.*

Generally, the four 'trained' staff members including the headteachers, the lead teacher and the English teacher had a deeper understanding of the importance of areas of play provision in the MI programme than other practitioners. In contrast, the areas of play provision were not used during periods focused on the preschool curriculum, and so the preschool teacher did not comment on or have an interest in them. The teaching and childcare assistant did not comment on play provision areas either, although she was aware that these were an element in the MI curriculum and pedagogy. In the main, my observations suggested that she did not often get involved in working with children during play.

#### **4.2.2 Views of traditional approaches**

The two headteachers strongly expressed their dissatisfaction with what they saw as the negative aspects of a traditional Chinese curriculum and pedagogy. At the same time, all practitioners advocated those aspects of the MI curriculum and pedagogy which primarily focused on 'individual differences', 'respecting children's interests', 'active learning', 'individualising instruction, 'play-based teaching and learning', and, as an over-arching term, 'humanistic education'. All of these terms were used frequently by the practitioners, especially the headteachers, the lead teacher and the English teacher, to justify the MI programme and to explain how it militated against the negative impact of traditional Chinese teaching.

##### **4.2.2.1 Criticism of traditional ways of teaching**

According to the headteacher, one of the key aspects of the traditional Chinese

approach to early childhood education is to be 'too strict' with children. However, she explained that some parents valued the traditional way of learning:

*Some parents...I mean the parents of this kindergarten...they think that we are not strict enough, and what we teach is too little and too superficial. For example, most parents are still used to having the child's developmental level assessed by how many poems the child can recite, how many extra-curricular activities the child does and how much knowledge the child has learned. Most parents still think this way and simply command their children in a harsh tone...*

In terms of the remaining influence of traditional approaches, the headteacher recalled her own negative experience of childhood:

*For example, we all grew up within the Chinese context of a traditional education system. It is common to see some young teachers say to children: 'Ah ~ if you don't do this well, you will be blah blah blah' [high strident tone]. [She meant that children would be punished, criticised or told off]. When we were young children, that's how our parents spoke to us: 'Ah ~ if you don't do this well, you will be blah blah blah' [harsh tone].*

The deputy headteacher complained about the 'adult-led' and 'over-controlled' teaching processes, and the 'didactic approaches' in some traditional kindergartens. All other staff members adopted a similar standpoint in criticising the traditional way of teaching in China, although to different degrees. For instance, in the lead teacher's opinion, the Chinese kindergarten curriculum was 'traditionally composed of isolated subjects, a kind of traditional separate subject curricula' and the pedagogy was 'teacher-centred'; she explained this as 'Maths that only focuses on Maths, and Chinese language that only focuses on Chinese language'. The English teacher thought that the traditional approach to teaching in China was 'to teach [children] just by dictating'. The teaching and childcare assistant also mentioned that "it was useless to educate children in the traditional way of 'sitting down and talking at the children'. In addition, the preschool teacher claimed that a "one-size-fits-all" approach easily leads to

children losing interest and confidence. In summary, the general thrust of these views was critical of the traditional Chinese approach to ECEC.

#### 4.2.2.2 Tensions

Although the staff members mostly criticised traditional teaching methods, four of them were aware that kindergarten education was torn between the pressures from a traditional examination-oriented education system and the innovative MI programme. The headteacher gave an example:

*Between this May and June [2012], there was a recruitment test at a primary school and many children took the test which comprised 23 questions. The children who were able to answer the most questions correctly in 3 minutes were admitted to the primary school.*

She felt that this put great pressure on children and their parents, as well as teachers, to get all the children up to the minimum standard in each key subject. She saw the kindergarten approach as a completely different programme in contrast to the approaches applied in primary education in China:

*However, when children go up to primary school, they will have to fit into the far more formal regime of traditional primary school education.*

In terms of the big contradiction between the kindergarten and primary approaches, she explained:

*At least, I am a parent, my feeling is... I hope I can play with my child as much as I can, and I don't want my child to do too many extra-curricular activities. So there is a big contradiction.*

As an ECEC practitioner and a parent, the headteacher saw the negative impact of traditional education. However, she explained that 'parents had no choice because they really wanted their children to secure a place at good primary school', and she understood that 'children in this kindergarten would be

assessed in the same way' in the future. Therefore, to some extent, she thought that 'compromise' was inevitable and that people would have to 'bow to traditional education and the Chinese educational system'. Accordingly, the headteacher claimed 'a big contradiction' for the whole educational system, for both private kindergartens and public kindergartens.

Not only the headteacher, but also the deputy headteacher, the lead teacher and the English teacher respectively expressed their similar concerns. For example, the English teacher claimed that 'most teachers and parents still held traditional beliefs and attitudes' about ECEC; and that these 'actually needed to be changed'. The lead teacher also argued that teachers need to change 'traditional beliefs and attitudes about education and teaching' in ECEC practice. The deputy headteacher commented that continuing traditional beliefs in teachers' minds impacted on their attitudes in practice:

*At present, however, in our kindergarten's classes, many teachers still pay more attention to children's weakness, and keep a tight grip on their weakness. As a result, this puts lots of pressure on children, causing their behaviour to become negative and resistant. For example, some children in the kindergarten class [5-6 years old] have started to show signs of resistance. So the conflict between children and teachers becomes prominent because these children are relatively rebellious and start to refuse to obey their teachers.*

The deputy headteacher further pointed out the challenges in changing the attitudes and beliefs of teachers who have been educated in the traditional way:

*Therefore, in my opinion, the teachers still need more relevant training and development. However, it should be said that it is difficult to change a person's belief because after all, we have grown up and been educated in this traditional way for several decades.*

Although the Newton kindergarten programme was based on a Western educational concept and theory, these practitioners commonly felt that there

was still a problem with implementing it within in a different cultural and educational context. They believed that there were still many difficulties for practitioners to overcome if educational quality was to improve.

The headteacher additionally highlighted the traditional emphasis on children's weakness as compared with a Western approach:

*The Chinese educational system makes us always focus on children's weakness. Then, we habitually make every possible attempt to help children overcome their weaknesses; in contrast, Western education focuses on children's strengths and then constantly builds on these strengths so as to help children build up their confidence in learning.*

This reflection shows awareness of the issue of whether practitioners should primarily attend to children's weaknesses or strengths in the promotion of children's learning and development.

This section has focused on findings relating to the practitioners' understanding of and views on the MI curriculum and pedagogy and it highlights that four of the six practitioners saw a contradiction between Western and traditional approaches as evident in the practices of this private Chinese kindergarten.

### **4.3 Discussion**

The findings in this chapter demonstrate some important commonalities and differences in practitioners' perspectives. Whilst all staff members in the kindergarten were aware of the MI programme and enthusiastic about developing a pedagogy based on individual differences and areas of play provision, views of MI theory, its curriculum, teaching approach and the daily

operation of the kindergarten varied across the management, teaching and care staff team. The roots of differences may be traced back to different educational, working and training experience, as well as participants' personal attitudes and beliefs in children's rights and ECEC.

Firstly, the six practitioners showed various levels in their understanding of MI theory and the MI programme. One obvious difference was between the management and operational staff. The management team members, including the headteacher and the deputy headteacher, demonstrated their relatively deep theoretical understandings; while the classroom teachers including the lead teacher and the English teacher expressed their perspectives on a more practical level. Zhou (2007) argues that headteachers are usually practitioners who have higher level educational qualifications, professional knowledge and skills. Thus, in general, they have a higher level of understanding of professional concepts, and a higher level of practical experience, communication and reflection than classroom staff. The findings of this study demonstrate similar results in this area. However, the classroom teachers deliver the curriculum directly, and their understanding and performance also have a direct impact on the implementation of the curriculum and pedagogy. As Feng, Wang and Liang (2011) argue, in recent years, Chinese society has attached increasing importance to improving kindergarten teachers' educational and professional levels by offering increasing opportunities for professional education and training. However, although, the overall level of kindergarten teacher's qualification has been enhanced, there is still a challenge for teachers to effectively apply the concepts, knowledge and skills learnt into practice (Feng and Cai, 2007; Zhu, 2008a; Feng, Wang and Liang, 2011). Similarly, all

practitioners in this study showed their understanding of MI theory and the MI programme although it was at different levels. This is because the awareness and understanding of new terms, new concepts, and new theory, such as MI, will not automatically bring a change in educational practice and, as Ang's (2008) study has shown, it takes a relatively long time to establish a new model of practice and beliefs. My study bears this out in demonstrating the tension that continues to exist between new classroom practices which emphasizes children's interest and individual differences and the well-established dominant and embedded traditional Chinese educational approach.

Secondly, depending upon their educational background and professional experience of ECEC, practitioners had different views about the implementation of the MI curriculum and pedagogy. As discussed previously, ECEC practitioners in Chinese kindergartens have a wide range of different roles depending on their varied levels of education and qualification (Zhou, 2007; Feng and Cai, 2007; Feng, Wang and Liang, 2011). Findings in this chapter show that the practitioners in this study had different levels and kinds of experiences, and it also shows that these differences impacted on their views and beliefs concerning the implementation of the MI curriculum and pedagogy. For example, the preschool teacher in this study, although having no training in MI theory and the MI programme, still recognised and paid attention to children's individual differences, identified as a key factor of the MI programme. This insight seemed to relate to her extensive work experience and her reflective approach. The English teacher, on the other hand, who had very limited work experience in ECEC, expressed his generally positive views on the MI curriculum and pedagogy probably due to the influence of his own Western



educational and cultural background. As Li, Wang and Wong (2011) argue, teachers' individual approaches and attitudes may positively or negatively impact on their delivery of curriculum, and thereby on children's learning. The findings of my study confirm the differences in practitioners' individual approaches, demonstrating the experiences of ECEC that these individuals have brought from their different cultural and educational backgrounds which shape their priorities and their approaches to pedagogy. For example, the preschool teacher with the background in primary education taught in a relatively traditional and formal style while the English teacher who received education in the West emphasised more active learning approaches.

Thirdly, four of the six practitioners expressed a strong sense of the contradiction between the MI programme and traditional Chinese teaching approaches in ECEC. They highlighted key elements of the MI programme, including respecting children's personal preferences and interests, and meeting their individual needs by encouraging and promoting the development of stronger aspects of development and learning instead of weaker aspects. They saw these elements as in conflict with the traditional Chinese educational model marked by a 'one-size-fits-all' approach and cramming methods in a teacher-led classroom without consideration of individual differences and personality development. As Zhu (2008b) argue, there has been an increasing awareness amongst Chinese educators and researchers that it is not easy to integrate educational models rooted in Western culture with the traditional model of kindergarten education in China. The findings in this study further confirm this challenge from the practitioners' perspective in the context of a private ECEC setting in China.

Fourthly, in spite of the challenges of the traditional Chinese approach in relation to the implementation of the MI programme, this study reveals a positive attitude of the ECEC practitioners towards Western theory in general and the MI programme in particular. This represents a changing concept of practitioner roles in early education settings. Since ancient times in China, the teacher has been seen as authoritative, and students as passive recipients of education, controlled by teachers (Gu, 2006; Zhao, 2006; Lin, 2009). Zhao (2006) explains that teacher traditionally considered themselves as leaders or even controllers of children, rather than guides and collaborators. Where children are highly controlled in traditional classrooms in order to keep order and follow the classroom schedule, children are given limited opportunities to show their individual strengths, and there are limited opportunities to promote the development of creativity and practical skills (Hadley, 2003). In contrast to the traditional role of the teacher as described in the existing literature, three practitioners in my study consciously repositioned themselves as observers and sometimes partners in relation to children's play and identified children's individual strengths in the areas of play provision, thereby planning to support children during the learning process, as Gardner's (1993;1999) MI theory advocates. This is evident in the way that these practitioners discussed and conceptualised their role as a 'play partner', an 'observer' and a 'researcher', in addition to the more traditional role of a teacher and guide. Even the teaching and childcare assistant perceived her role as 'to take care and teach children differently according to their individual ability'. Such emphasis on play, observation and individuality indicates a significant change, consciously or unconsciously, from traditional perceptions of the practitioner's role. Linking

back to their understanding of the MI theory and programme, it can be argued that the delivery of the MI programme itself has had a significant impact on the practitioners' understanding of their roles in this kindergarten.

To sum up, there are some inevitable areas of conflict between the MI programme and traditional Chinese approach to ECEC in this kindergarten. The conflict relates to the impact of a Western model on practice within a stage of education that, to some extent, has to prepare children for the next stage of their education, where traditional approaches are predominant. It also relates to the conflict between the Chinese practitioners' espoused valuing of Western approaches and the influence of their own educational experiences as children. However, whilst these practitioners were faced with this challenge, they were mostly enthusiastic and committed in the implementation of the MI programme. Their understandings and beliefs in relation to ECEC had changed during the delivery of the MI curriculum and pedagogy, though these had been internalised to varying degrees. Furthermore, their perceptions of themselves and their own roles, as well as their perceptions of children had been changed too, towards paying more attention and respect to children's individual abilities, interests and differences. Such changes indicate a break, to some degree, with the strict and authoritative educational approach seen in the traditional Chinese context.

## Chapter 5 Parental perspectives

This chapter explores parental views on the kindergarten's curriculum and pedagogy. Within the Chinese context, parents are often regarded as their children's first teachers (Liu, G.H., 2011; Wei, 2014) and, as such, have a direct and profound influence on their children's growth, learning experiences, and lifelong education. Parental perspectives and involvement in China have strong connections with not only children's learning outcomes (Chao,1996; Xu and Pang, 2001; Yang, Fang and Tu, 2006), but they also shape the development of a kindergarten's curriculum and pedagogy (Yu, 2006; Liu, Li and Song, 2006; Wang, L.W., 2008; Yu, Chen and Gao, 2014). Therefore, this study also examines parental understanding of and opinions on the kindergarten's curriculum and pedagogy. The data was primarily obtained from formal interviews and partly from informal conversations with the parents. The analysis here focuses on presenting parents' viewpoints on what and how their children learnt, and their children's experience of their kindergarten lives.

### 5.1. Background of parents

As introduced previously in Section 3.1.4.2, the parents were from fifteen middle-class families. Table 5.1 (see below) presents background information for nine parents who participated in formal interviews and informal conversations. They were all mothers, aged between 30 and 44 years old, and from four Chinese families, two non-Chinese (Singaporean and Malaysian)

families, and three mixed families (Italian Chinese and Chinese, Chinese and Singaporean, Canadian Chinese and Italian). Five of the nine families had two children and the others had one child. All the fathers of the nine families were in full-time employment. Four mothers (all Chinese) were in full-time employment; the others were all housewives. Before attending this Newton Chinese MI kindergarten, the children from these families were cared for by their parents, their grandparents, live-in nannies, elderly neighbours and in other private kindergartens. These parents had two to three years' experience of enrolling their children in the Newton MI Chinese kindergarten at the time of the study.

**Table 5.1 Background information of parental participants**

Children in study	Family composition	Parents' age group	Cultural background			Parental occupations		Non-parental childcare experiences	Newton MI Kindergarten chain attendance	
			Father	Mother	Child	Father	Mother		Chinese	Bilingual/International
<b>Tao</b>	Parents, 1 child	30-34	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese	Business company director (self-employed)	Housewife (used to be an Accountant)	Grandparents (mainly)	3 years	-
<b>Kai</b>	Parents, 1 child	35-39	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese	Company employee	Financial auditor	Live-in nanny (mainly); Elderly neighbours (mainly); Another private kindergarten	2.5 years	-
<b>Fei</b>	Parents, 1 Child Grandparents	30-34	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese	Doctor	Automobile company sales manager	Grandparents (mainly); Another private kindergarten;	2 years	-
<b>Susu</b>	Parents 2 Children	35-39	Chinese	Chinese	Chinese	Director of television programmes	Advertisement company Manager (self-employed)	Live-in nanny (mainly); Grandparents (mainly) Another private kindergarten	3 years	-
<b>Jing</b>	Parents, 2 children	30-34	Italian Chinese	Chinese	Italian Chinese	International trading company manager (self-employed)	International trading company accountant (self-employed)	Grandparents (mainly); Live-in nanny (mainly)	3 years	-
<b>Ming</b>	Parents, 2 children	40-44	Chinese	Singaporean Chinese	the US Chinese	Financial auditor	Housewife (previously a project manager)	-	2 years	1.5 year
<b>Nan</b>	Parents, 1 child	40-44	Singaporean Chinese	Singaporean Chinese	Singaporean Chinese	Company engineer	Housewife	-	2 years	1.5 years
<b>Qiqi</b>	Parents, 2 children	30-34	Singaporean Chinese	Malaysian Chinese	Singaporean Chinese	Company employee	Housewife (previously a flight attendant)	Grandparents (mainly) Live-in nanny (mainly)	3 years	-
<b>Lili</b>	Parents, 2 Children	35-39	Canadian Chinese	Italian	Italian Chinese	Canadian refrigeration company employee	Housewife	-	3 years	1 year

## **5.2. Choosing the Newton Multiple Intelligences Chinese kindergarten**

The parents were asked their reasons for choosing this particular type of preschool setting for their children. It was also interesting to understand why they chose this particular kindergarten rather than others in the Newton chain (see Section 3.1.3.2 about the chain). The main aspects highlighted by parents were 'a high-quality environment and facilities' providing 'bilingual teaching' through implementing 'the MI programme' with an emphasis on 'learning through play'. Parents also considered it important to choose a kindergarten focusing on 'children's all-round development' with 'kind and caring staff'. These key factors, as highlighted by parents, are illustrated in the following sections.

### **5.2.1 Choosing an international Multiple Intelligences programme**

One of the key features of the setting for all parents was a kindergarten implementing 'the MI programme'. All parents showed their awareness of the MI features of the kindergarten programme. Three parents directly referred to the MI programme as one of the main considerations in choosing this kindergarten for their children. Kai's mother, from a Chinese cultural background, said:

*Actually, when I came to Newton, the Multiple Intelligences feature attracted me...it was a consideration for me in choosing this kindergarten.*

Meanwhile, Nan's mother, who was from Singapore, and Lili's mother, who was from Italy, also explained,

*(Nan's mother)... because I like the concept of Multiple-Intelligences.*

*(Lili's mother) ...it is because I like the multiple intelligences programme here.*

The other six parents gave other reasons than the MI theory and/or programme for having chosen the kindergarten, as explained below.

### **5.2.2 Expectations of bilingual environment**

For some parents, the biggest attraction of the kindergarten was actually an expectation of a Chinese and English 'bilingual learning environment'. This Newton Chinese kindergarten provided a bilingual environment with a Chinese focused MI programme but it also had an English class taught by an English teacher whose first language was English. All parents in this study regarded such a programme at this Chinese MI kindergarten as a 'bilingual' programme (see Section 3.1.3.2 and 3.1.3.3 for different programmes of Newton chain). Five of nine parents considered the MI programme as an additional benefit. Also, there was a difference in this respect between the Chinese and non-Chinese parents.

Three Chinese parents without experience of studying, working or living abroad had high expectations of a bilingual (Chinese and English) programme. As Tao's mother emphasised:

*We considered the importance of providing a bilingual teaching and learning environment... we want our son to have many opportunities to learn English as early as possible...so that when he grows up he will be able to face the fierce competition he'll meet with in society.*

Also, Fei's mother said:

*...because within a bilingual kindergarten, my child can learn more English, and this will pave the way for his future education in an international context.*

And Susu's mother explained: 'I like the bilingual environment here, which helps



her to learn English'. These Chinese parents attached importance to the bilingual environment; and they believed it would develop their children's bilingual skills, especially their English language abilities, as early as at the kindergarten stage.

The bilingual environment was significant for not only the Chinese parents, but also for the non-Chinese parents whose children were speaking Chinese as a second language. In a mirror image of the Chinese parents discussed above, these parents chose this kindergarten for their children, highlighting the bilingual environment, because they wanted their children to 'learn more Chinese'. For example, Ming's mother, who was a Singaporean Chinese, and her Chinese husband could both speak Chinese and English. Therefore, they wanted their children to maintain a bilingual ability. However, Ming was born in the US and his first language was English, and also his family mostly spoke English at home. Ming had attended one of the international kindergartens (i.e. offering a pure English language environment) in the Newton chain for a year. His mother transferred Ming to this Chinese kindergarten, as it offered a 'bilingual' programme. As Ming's mother told me:

*We found Ming did not like speaking any Chinese because the daily activities at the international kindergarten of the chain were primarily led in English by the lead teacher whose first language is English although there was a Chinese language teaching assistant in the classroom.*

It is worth noting that Ming's mother was also concerned that:

*Actually, at the international kindergarten, it was common to see that Chinese speaking children always stayed together and played with the Chinese language teaching assistant, while the English speaking children always stayed together and played with the English lead teacher.*

Thus, this mother had growing concerns about her child only speaking English because:

*Such a situation caused a problem: whenever we tried to speak Chinese to Ming, he just cried. As we didn't think this was a good situation, we decided to transfer Ming to a local Chinese kindergarten. Fortunately, I had heard that Newton had just established a Chinese kindergarten in the MI kindergarten chain, targeting children mainly from Chinese families, and mainly speaking Chinese.*

Ming's mother summed up the rationale for wanting her child to improve his Chinese in the following words: 'because we are living in China now'. She felt that the bilingual programme of this Chinese kindergarten would meet her and her child's needs.

Learning more Chinese was a desire not confined to Ming's mother; more non-Chinese parents had the same consideration. For example, Lili's mother, who was from Italy, had also transferred her children from one of the Newton bilingual kindergartens that offered 'a 50/50 English and Chinese' programme to this Chinese kindergarten, which offered a programme 'with more focus on the Chinese language'. As Lili's mother explained in the interview, 'because we live in China, I want my daughter to improve her Chinese a lot'.

### **5.2.3 Wanting high quality private provision**

In addition to the MI features and the bilingual environment, all parents highlighted 'the high quality of private provision' as another main consideration in choosing this kindergarten.

During the interviews, the terms 'private' and 'high quality' were frequently

mentioned together by some parents. For Kai's mother, being able to enrol a child in a private kindergarten was a reflection of their family's economic status. This mother, as a Chinese citizen without any experience of studying, working or living abroad, stressed this during the interview:

*We chose a private one because...we can afford it...with our current income, this [a high income] is the precondition...This private kindergarten provides a relatively high-quality environment and education although the fees are expensive.*

However, two parents mentioned that, compared with the Newton MI international or bilingual kindergartens, the fees at this Chinese kindergarten were much lower and more reasonable. As Nan's mother, from a Singaporean Chinese background, said:

*It is also because of the cost... As you know, the cost of this type of private provision in this city is very high...the bilingual kindergartens are all expensive, of course, the quality is also good...but the cost of this [Newton MI] Chinese kindergarten is not too expensive, I mean, it's reasonable and affordable.*

All parents were clearly aware of the high fees of private kindergartens, but they still chose a private setting because they expected it to provide high-quality education and care for their children. As Susu's mother, from a Chinese background, mentioned in our conversation, 'We've paid more, so we should get more'. It is not difficult to understand that having paid high fees parents generally expect high quality provision in this type of private setting. This suggests that they consider the term 'private' to be synonymous with 'high quality'; and that, to some extent, in their minds, 'private equals expensive which equals high quality'. In this study, the perceived private provision of high-quality was, in the parents' minds, reflected in the following aspects.

#### 5.2.3.1 Physical environment and facilities

Eight out of nine parents considered the physical environment and facilities to be an important aspect of high-quality private provision. As Qiqi's mother, from a Malaysian Chinese background, said:

*Well, it is mainly because of the good environment and facilities of this setting. They have their own playground to ensure children's safety... Also the facilities are very good... actually we really care about the high-quality environment and facilities...*

Kai's mother, from a Chinese background, offered a similar explanation:

*I like the environment here. I mean the big playground... you know, some kindergartens do not have their own playground. But here, high-quality equipment and facilities make me feel good...*

The high-quality physical environment, such as 'their own big playground', 'safety' and 'high-quality equipment' was regarded as a priority by these parents; these things seemed to make a good impression on the parents.

#### 5.2.3.2 Convenience

Six parents pointed out that they considered convenience to be another important aspect of high-quality private provision. Two parents sent their children to a private kindergarten because of a shortage of public ECEC provision. In our interviews, Kai's mother and Susu's mother both mentioned that they were unable to enrol their children at public kindergartens. Kai's mother explained that:

*There are not many good public kindergartens in this area...and it is too far to go to those prestigious public kindergartens. Also, it is very difficult to enrol there because of the shortage of places at public kindergartens.*

For these parents, it seemed that it was much easier to access a place at a private setting than at a public one. In fact, it seems that there was no choice apart from a private one.

Three parents prized the proximity of the private provision to home. Qiqi's mother, Kai's mother and Susu's mother all said that this kindergarten was 'near' and 'convenient'. Qiqi's mother explained: 'I don't want my child to travel too far to get to school' and Susu's mother said: 'the kindergarten has a school bus, even for children living at a distance'.

Ming's mother highlighted the opening hours of the kindergarten:

*...I wanted to find a kindergarten with longer opening hours because I was in full time work and had to pick up the children after work...and this kindergarten is near to the company I worked at...and their summer and winter holidays are much shorter than at others.*

Private settings provide longer opening hours and have shorter holidays than public kindergartens; this seems to be an important aspect of the provision for professional working couples.

It can be seen that accessibility and other practical issues, including proximity and long opening hours, were deemed to be aspects that represented high-quality private provision in these parents' minds.

#### 5.2.3.3 Staff sense of 'customer service'

A sense of good 'customer service' from the staff was another aspect mentioned by most parents. Tao's mother said: 'I think the environment here is very good, also the teachers are very kind and caring...they have a good sense of customer service'. Qiqi's mother also stated that: 'I feel that members of staff are very caring and friendly in this kindergarten'. Jing's mother also highlighted that: 'the staff members here are very kind'. For these parents, after paying high fees, they expected to feel satisfied with the staff members' attitudes and

performance as regards customer service, owing to the market-driven and for-profit character of private settings. For instance, Kai's mother explained that:

*The fees of a private kindergarten are very expensive. But, as you know, usually, staff income and service quality are directly linked in private kindergartens. Thus... at least, children can get good care from caring and conscientious staff who have a strong sense of responsibility and customer service.*

Susu's mother also stated that:

*This kind of private kindergarten with an international background usually provides a quality service. So I feel the staff here are pleasant and caring, and have not only a high level of professionalism but also a strong sense of custom service.*

Thus, it can be seen that the parents in this study thought highly of 'kind and caring staff' and were satisfied with high-quality childcare provided by staff who had a 'good' sense of 'customer service' in this kindergarten.

#### 5.2.3.4 A non-traditional and Western approach

The ways in which the MI programme differed from traditional modes of teaching was regarded as another mark of the 'high-quality' of this provision by six out of nine parents. For example, Tao's mother stated:

*I don't have a lot of knowledge about the MI theory and the MI programme. However, I do know that it is an innovative educational model originally developed in the US, and has become well-known worldwide.*

She also pointed out the teaching method of 'play more' and 'learning through play' in this private kindergarten. In contrast, the mode of teaching employed in public kindergartens was criticised for 'treating children too strictly' and 'restricting children's potential for free development', as Tao's mother thought that 'children are too young to be treated too strictly'. This was a view held not only by Tao's mother, but also by Fei's mother, who said:

*...because public kindergartens probably teach too much academic knowledge in the traditional formal way, such as demanding that children sit up straight and keep their hands behind their backs at all times, I don't want my child to learn in that way...*

It seems that the mothers' original purpose of sending their children to this private kindergarten was simply to select a setting that provided non-traditional teaching methods. Such parental expectations suggest that these parents preferred the Western MI programme which they believed to be a 'less-strict' international programme to the traditional curriculum content and pedagogy delivered in public kindergartens.

#### 5.2.3.5 A middle way

It was interesting that Nan's mother, who was from Singapore, described the kindergarten as 'a middle way'. She stated in the interview that 'local Chinese kindergartens are too strict and international kindergartens are too free'. She thought that this Newton MI Chinese kindergarten was instead 'neither international style, nor local traditional style. It's in the middle'. She chose this kindergarten because she believed children would 'benefit from the bilingual environment', and also because the MI Chinese programme would have a 'balance' between the 'international' and the 'local Chinese' models. In fact, she 'initially preferred an international kindergarten for giving children more freedom'. However, she had a concern that:

*...Nan will have to attend a local Chinese primary school in the future, which fully employs the Chinese traditional curriculum and pedagogy...I was concerned that Nan would not adapt to the traditional environment if she got used to the Western style of teaching and learning at an international kindergarten.*

Therefore, Nan's mother had to compromise by choosing a kindergarten offering a 'balanced' programme and environment somewhere between a

'Western' and 'traditional Chinese' style, even though she was dissatisfied with the traditional ways of learning and teaching at local Chinese kindergartens and primary schools. The Chinese kindergarten within the Newton MI kindergarten chain seemed to meet her expectations ideally, and, in her mind, it also displayed the desired ethos.

#### 5.2.3.6 Transition from kindergarten to primary school

Four parents explained what lay behind their desire for this kindergarten was the preparation for the transition from kindergarten to primary school. For example, the preschool curriculum was highlighted in addition to its MI programme. Tao's mother explained that 'this kindergarten offers a final year 'kindergarten-school transition' class, which is very helpful for children's preparation for school.' Also, Kai's mother stated:

*Kai can't always play, especially in the final year before going up to primary school. So, it is important to have a connection between the kindergarten and primary stages. This kindergarten offers a preschool class...it is very good and helpful.*

Valuing these types of class indicates a parental view that the MI programme based on Western educational theory needs to be connected with China's mainstream education system.

For Susu's mother, there was an expectation of a smooth transition from kindergarten to an 'international' primary school. As she stated:

*My daughter attended a local [traditional] kindergarten before enrolling here. But as she is going to an international primary school which is near to this kindergarten, and I think that this MI kindergarten is more international in style, she will make a better transition from here to the international environment of the primary school, having gone to this MI kindergarten.*



Other parents, such as Nan's mother, believed that the kindergarten programme would help their children transfer smoothly from kindergarten to 'local traditional' primary schools. 'High-quality' therefore means a good learning environment with a mixed curriculum and pedagogy of both international and traditional Chinese style. Despite the fact that the parental participants in this study came from a range of different cultural backgrounds and consequently had a variety of different aspirations for their children, they were united in preferring 'a middle way', to use the words of Nan's mother.

#### 5.2.3.7 Positive adult-child ratios

Six parents spoke of how they expected a positive teacher-child ratio and this was one of the advantages of high quality private kindergartens. For instance, Tao's mother said: 'This kind of private kindergarten has a positive teacher-child ratio'. Fei's mother also told me: 'I like it here, also because the class size is small'. And Susu's mother explained it more specifically:

*I don't like those public kindergartens where one class has 30 to 40 children but only 3 to 4 staff. How crowded that is! It's difficult to ensure the quality of the provision with such a poor adult-child ratio. This private one ...each class has about 20 children and at least 4 adults...*

Ming's mother, who had read some books about the MI theory pointed out, from a relatively informed perspective, that MI kindergartens had 'a positive teacher - child ratio... 1 to 5 is ideal and practical. More than this would be problematic'.

#### 5.2.4 Respect for children's preferences

When discussing kindergarten selection, the parents mostly expressed their own concerns, which seemed to be more important to them than their children's

feelings in this area. However, it is important to note that five out of nine parents believed it important to listen to the children's voices on some issues relating to their daily lives. For example, the mothers of Ming, Lili and Susu all mentioned that they did not want to 'force' their children to do anything the children did not like or want to do. Susu's mother told me:

*I think it is important to discuss or negotiate with Susu although she is just a child; she also needs to be respected. Especially when it comes to something she does not really like or doesn't want to do, good communication works much better than compulsion.*

In contrast to the commonly believed traditional approach of 'adults say it and children do it', these parents in this study showed an understanding of the importance of respecting children's feelings and preferences and had started to attach real importance to doing so, although this understanding of respect was generally more theoretical than practical. In selecting a kindergarten most parents still followed their own concerns and preferences rather than their children's.

Nonetheless, there were a few distinctive cases in this study. Two parents pointed out that their choice of this private kindergarten for their children did not mean that they thought all private settings were good. Before sending their children to this Newton kindergarten, these two mothers had enrolled their children at other private kindergartens but they had come to feel those private kindergartens were not actually providing a high quality learning environment, facilities, teaching content and methods. For instance, Kai's mother explained that she and her child had bad experiences at their previous private kindergarten. One of her dissatisfactions concerned the 'high staff turnover':

*My child had been enrolled at the other private kindergarten from the*

*age of three...however, the lead teacher changed very frequently...a total of five times within a year! It is easy for a child to lose interest, and become unorganised and undisciplined without a consistent routine and discipline...*

Kai's mother complained that in order for the kindergarten to pass the kindergarten inspection, the former kindergarten had employed a 'very strict teacher from the public kindergarten sector as the fifth lead teacher' for her child's class. Kai reacted to this by becoming 'very rebellious due to the suddenly strict disciplinary demands made by the new teacher'. Kai's mother said that she could not deal with the problem very well when faced with the teacher's frequent complaints about her child, who she said 'just blamed and criticised' her son. As a consequence, Kai 'became more rebellious' and 'did not want to go to kindergarten'. Finally, Kai's mother decided to transfer Kai to this Newton MI kindergarten. She spoke explicitly about Kai's preferences when choosing a new kindergarten:

*Epecially, Kai also said he liked this kindergarten on our first visit...therefore, we decided to transfer him to this kindergarten.*

This was not an isolated case. Fei's mother also had negative experiences with a previous private kindergarten. She recounted:

*Fei felt unhappy at the former kindergarten. Once, I said to him: 'If you carry on behaving badly, I will send you to a new kindergarten!' You know what he replied? He unexpectedly said: 'Ok, it's all right! Then I will just go there'. So, you can image how badly he was treated at his previous kindergarten! ...The teachers there are strict... very strict although it too is a private setting...*

These responses suggest that although private kindergartens apply non-traditional education programmes, and claim to espouse a non-traditional approach, using methods influenced by Western theories, practitioners' educational beliefs and methods may remain traditional. As the parents stated

in this study, it was the teachers' harsh attitude and behaviour that directly led to rebellious behaviour from children and children becoming tired of learning and kindergarten. It seems that although mothers have paid the high fees of private provision they cannot always get the high quality education and service they want. Due to such negative previous experience, Fei's mother took Fei's feeling and preference into account when she chose this kindergarten for Fei. As she explicitly said:

*The first time I came to this kindergarten I came with my son. When we arrived, he liked it here immediately! Then, we decided to enrol him here.*

Although these are individual cases in this study, it can be seen that this small group of mothers had a relatively strong sense of respect for their children's feelings, preferences and rights.

In summary, the parents' preferences for this kindergarten were closely related to their interests in the MI programme and their belief in the relationship between the high cost and high-quality provision. Having a bilingual environment and a balanced programme in terms of traditional Chinese and Western models attracted parents who wanted to adopt a 'middle way' between the Western and Chinese approaches to ECEC in China. Two parents showed concerns about their children's negative experience of other private kindergartens, particularly the experience of strict teachers, and consequently they tended to listen to and respect their children's preferences in the selection of kindergartens.

### **5.3. Parental understanding of Multiple Intelligences theory and the programme**

This part presents findings related to what and how the parents as participants in this study understood MI theory and the Kindergarten's MI programme.

#### **5.3.1 Understanding Multiple Intelligences theory and the programme**

Regarding their understanding of MI theory, six parents said explicitly that they knew only 'a little bit' or 'not much' about it. For example, Lili's and Jing's mothers both had similar opinion. For example, Lili's mother said: 'I am not an expert, so I don't really know much about it'. The other four parents said they 'knew something about it'. For example, Kai's mother understood MI theory to be:

*...a test for fully getting to know the strengths and weaknesses of children's abilities in eight different areas...it emphasises overall development rather than one single area.*

By contrast, three parents, Tao's mother, Nan's mother and Ming's mother, gave almost accurate explanations. In particular, Ming's mother showed her relatively deep understanding of MI theory in discussing the high requirements of implementing the MI programme, such as 'positive teacher-child ratios', 'qualified and well-trained staff' with 'good skills in observation'. She said she had gained her knowledge and understanding because 'I have read some books about it before'. It seems that the parents' understanding of MI theory were at different levels. It is worth noting that, while six out of nine parents did not really know much about or understand MI theory, all parents highly praised its 'advantages' without identifying any criticisms.

As regards the MI programme, all parents were aware that the MI programme was based on MI theory although six of them did not know much about MI theory. For instance, Susu's mother said: 'I know the kindergarten's programme is based on MI theory'; and Lili's mother also said: 'I know their curriculum is underpinned by MI theory'. And the parents further explained their understanding of the programme. It was most clearly exemplified in the teaching model of areas of play provision (区域游戏) and 'theme-based' (主题活动) whole class activities (集体教学). As Tao's mother stated:

*The MI programme...um...it seems to be about... setting up different play areas for children to freely choose what they like...for example, each morning, Tao comes to classroom to choose the area he wants to play in...also, they have the monthly theme-based whole class activities...*

Nan's mother said: 'What I understood is that different play areas are set up in the classroom based on Multiple Intelligences theory'. Kai's mother explained:

*I think...it [the programme] is implemented by the means of classroom areas of play provision...and the whole class activities of teaching and learning...maybe, I am not very sure...*

Fei's mother similarly expressed the view:

*About the MI programme, what I basically know is that they set up different areas in the classroom for the children to play in. Then, they do different activities or play in different areas depending on children's interests.*

The nine parents displayed a range of understandings of the MI programme. Only three of them had detailed knowledge, but others did not. They mostly considered the areas of play provision to be the most important feature of the MI programme.

Additionally, five parents also emphasised that the MI programme paid

particular attention to respecting children and their interests. For example, Lili's mother stated:

*I think they respect children a lot... As regards discipline, there's a good balance and they also let the kids do what they prefer doing...So I do like the way they teach.*

Fei's mother made the same point: 'they do different activities or play in different areas depending on the children's interests'. Tao's mother also said 'the MI programme involved...setting up different play areas so that children could freely choose as they liked...' These parents all showed respect for their children's rights to make decisions and develop their interests.

### **5.3.2 Understanding the curriculum and pedagogy**

#### 5.3.2.1 Curriculum

Five parents elaborated on their understanding of the curriculum. For instance, Fei's mother thought the teaching content was 'rich and varied' and focused on 'all-round development':

*I think it helps my child's development in terms of intelligence, social skills, I mean good communication, and morals ...also the programme content is rich and varied...it emphasises all-round development.*

Tao's mother also highlighted that the MI programme placed emphasis on 'integrated and holistic teaching and learning...' of 'language, maths...games, sports and other various areas...' Similarly, Qiqi's mother pointed out:

*They teach children artwork, singing and dancing... pay attention not only to academic knowledge, but also... it's a kind of integrated and holistic learning.*

These parents understood and valued the curriculum as 'integrated and holistic

learning' involving not only 'learning academic knowledge', such as 'language' and 'maths', but also 'artwork, singing and dancing'.

### 5.3.2.2 Pedagogy

Regarding views about the pedagogy of the kindergarten, all parents highlighted 'learning through play'. For example, the mothers of Kai, Susu and Jing all mentioned that young children should 'play more' and kindergarten should be 'a place for play'. As Qiqi's mother stated:

*I knew this Newton kindergarten implements the MI programme, but I did not really understand it in the beginning. It felt strange. Why did the teacher not teach children academic knowledge? Then, I asked the teacher, and was told that children learn through play here...*

Tao's mother also mentioned that:

*It [the MI programme] provides children more opportunities to play...children learn by games, sports activities and various other activities in different play areas...*

She explained more in detail in relation to this issue:

*For example, in terms of the monthly theme, children learn by bringing their own toys related to the theme to show to each other, or drawing relevant pictures, or making artwork, or discussing related interesting things and so on, rather than just the teacher telling and the children listening...There are also kindergarten trips, this is another way of learning... In general, they learn in various ways. I think this is very good.*

It seemed that these parents all acknowledged the importance of 'play' in children's learning in the early years and were therefore satisfied with the play-based pedagogy of the MI programme.

Three parents also considered the teacher's role in the MI programme as an important aspect of pedagogy and to be that of 'inspiring' and 'guiding' the



children rather than 'forcing' them to do things. Tao's mother said:

*The teacher told me that she explained and guided children in what and how to play in the different play areas. However, if children really don't want to do something, the teacher won't force them. This is because children learn more when they are interested in something. If a teacher forces them to do it, they might just follow the teacher's instruction but without any real learning, which comes from the heart.*

She also highlighted that the MI programme made relatively high demands on teachers' professionalism. As she explained:

*This programme...I think it makes great demands on the teachers, their professional skills and abilities...for instance, instead of forcing children, teachers need to have very good skills and methods for helping children to increase their interest in the areas they don't like or are not good at ...otherwise, children won't have good overall development...*

Ming's mother who had read some books about MI theory also discussed the same issue, giving a more specific explanation. She thought that implementing the MI programme required teachers to have 'very good skills, especially in observation'. This was because a teacher needs to have 'a deep understanding of each child, such as his character, personality, interests' as the precondition to implementing the MI programme. She noted that such understanding was 'based on close contact with children and in-depth observation of them, but in ways that avoided too much intervention'. Therefore, she pointed out that 'the MI programme required much from teachers, especially their observation skills'. To some extent and unlike other parents, this mother displayed a professional level understanding of the MI programme. Such in-depth understanding shows how wide the range of parental, here mothers', understanding was about MI theory and the MI programme.

## **5.4. Views on the kindergarten curriculum and pedagogy**

In terms of parents' views on the kindergarten curriculum and pedagogy, these can be categorised into four types: being satisfied but with limited awareness of the programme; being satisfied with the programme's emphasis on children's happiness; becoming aware of the programme but concerned about some aspects of the programme; and being critically aware.

### **5.4.1 Being satisfied but with limited awareness**

Six out of nine parents in this study said they did not really know what and how children learn at kindergarten. For example, Jing's mother said she just knew 'a little bit [about the programme], but not specific details'. Kai's and Fei's mothers gave similar responses: 'I don't know much about these'; 'I just know a little'. Also, Qiqi's mother similarly stated that: 'I don't really know about them [teaching content and methods] '. However, these parents seemed to have no problem with their limited awareness about what and how their children learnt at kindergarten as none expressed concerns about 'just knowing a little bit' or even knowing nothing about it.

### **5.4.2 Being satisfied with the ethos of children's happiness**

Rather than paying attention to the kindergarten's curriculum and pedagogy, seven out of nine parents seemed more concerned about the ethos of the setting and focused on children's happiness. As Fei's mother said:

*I don't think there are any downsides [to teaching content and methods] because my child has been always very happy since him transfer here....I think that is all that I want, for him to be happy at*

*kindergarten.*

She explained further

*I don't really know about the teaching content and methods. To be frank, I don't really care much about such issues, as long as the teachers look after my child well and play with him, and that makes my child happy, that's enough.*

Similarly, Susu's mother admitted:

*I don't really know what and how Susu learns at kindergarten every day... I think the most important point is that my daughter feels happy...I mean has a happy childhood.*

Lili's mother also pointed out that 'it doesn't really matter how much Lili learns at the kindergarten stage, as long as she feels happy'. Qiqi's mother made the same point, commenting 'my children feel happy', several times during the interview. In fact, most parents voiced similar opinions, either directly or indirectly, during our informal conversations. It seemed that these parents did not have specific expectations of the kindergarten's curriculum and pedagogy. In the words of one parent, they 'did not really care what and how their children learnt' as long as children 'felt happy' at kindergarten.

#### **5.4.3 Becoming aware and concerned**

While four parents expressed that they were really unconcerned about what and how their children learnt at kindergarten, two other parents were becoming more aware and concerned about the kindergarten's curriculum and pedagogy. For example, Qiqi's mother, who said that she 'did not really know' about the curriculum and pedagogy, raised a question later on:

*One thing I really can't understand is why the lead teacher always asks children to learn to write numbers or Chinese characters by*

*simply copying them out 5 or 10 times as homework...I don't think it's really necessary if children have already mastered it.*

It seemed that this mother was concerned about how the teacher in this MI kindergarten sometimes still used traditional teaching methods.

Also, there was evidence of some change or inconsistencies in Kai's mother's views on the kindergarten curriculum and pedagogy. She contradicted herself during the interview and later conversations. She initially argued that:

*Kindergarten shouldn't be a place where children mainly learned academic knowledge, but one where children could learn about singing and dancing, as well as playing and making friends with peers...*

However, she complained later on that 'this kindergarten teaches much less academic knowledge than other private kindergartens'. She explained:

*My friend's child is enrolled at another private kindergarten. My child and he are the same age, but he started to learn to write Chinese characters when he was 3 years old, and 6 characters per day. By now, he knows a lot of Chinese characters, many more than my child; actually he can read a book now!*

She then went on to explain the reasons for expecting her child to learn more academic knowledge:

*We are still Chinese within a Chinese educational system. Most children do not attend international schools, but local schools; and these have very high requirements for the learning of academic knowledge ...many primary schools do not accept children who haven't learnt Pinyin or attended a preschool class...*

According to this mother, her main concern was about her child's transition from a MI kindergarten to a local primary school.

It seemed that traditional Chinese educational beliefs and ideologies, which

emphasise academic knowledge and the development of a narrow concept of intelligence, were shaping some parents' notions about their child's education, particularly for this age group in transition to primary school education.

#### **5.4.4 Being critically aware**

Three parents directly expressed critical views about the kindergarten curriculum and pedagogy. For example, Tao's mother praised the advantages of 'giving children the freedom to choose which play areas to play in according to their interests'. However, she was also concerned that 'children might only choose a few areas and play in these repeatedly, wanting to avoid others'; and that 'children wouldn't get appropriate guidance and support'. This, she feared, would not lead to the 'all-round development' advocated by MI theory and the MI programme. Therefore, she discussed her concerns with the lead teacher who reassured her that:

*Children are encouraged to play in different areas of play provision... Also, the monthly theme-based whole class activities ensure all children participate in a range of activities relating to the different aspects of their all-round development.*

However, Tao's mother emphasised that 'this made high demands of teacher's professional knowledge and skills' if they were to 'stimulate children to become interested in the areas which they don't like or to help children improve in the area in which they were weaker'. She expressed doubts that the teachers had sufficient professional knowledge and skill to ensure the practical implementation of the MI curriculum and pedagogy.

In addition, Nan's mother and Ming's mother, who had previous experience of enrolling children at bilingual or international kindergartens of the Newton chain,

also expressed critical views on the MI programme. For example, Nan's mother stated that:

*MI theory is still at a concept stage at this kindergarten so far. As you know, Newton has three types of kindergarten: international, bilingual and Chinese. What I know is that the international and bilingual kindergartens can truly implement the MI programme, but this Chinese kindergarten... (laughing). The MI programme seems to be still only a concept due to the teachers' lack of training and limited practical implementation. Some staff members don't really understand MI theory and still work in a traditional way.*

Ming's mother also pointed out some problems with the implementation of the MI programme at this kindergarten. Initially she stated:

*A particular teacher- child ratio of 1:5 is ideal and practical, more than this would be problematic...with qualified and well-trained staff including not just lead teachers, but also teaching and childcare assistants who have very good skills, especially in observation.*

She, however, also complained that it was impossible to truly implement the MI programme at this kindergarten because:

*The staff here have not had enough training... they are not skilled enough and not even qualified enough...teachers have to spend large amounts of time on meeting the requirements of the head office and parents, such as writing reports and other paperwork, otherwise, there might be complaints .... Under such pressure, the teachers are unable to pay enough attention to the children and their work of teaching and caring.*

She seemed to think that this problem was not confined to the teachers because, she said: 'the whole programme needed to be improved'.

The parents expressed a wide range of views on the kindergarten's curriculum and pedagogy. A minority of parents explained that they were satisfied with the programme's emphasis on children's happiness but had limited awareness of the programme details. More than half the parents were growing in awareness of the programme but some were concerned about continuing use of traditional

teaching methods in the play-based MI programme, and some were concerned about the potential difficulty of transition from a Western style kindergarten to a traditional style local primary school. Finally, a few parents were better informed about MI theory and showed a critical awareness of how kindergarten staff delivered the MI curriculum and pedagogy.

### **5.5. Making sense of children's views on their kindergarten experiences**

The main purpose of asking the parents about their children's views on their kindergarten experiences was to compare the children's own feelings with the views that parents had noted.

During the interviews with the parents, I asked: 'Do you think that your child enjoys her/his kindergarten experience or not?' In response, all parents explained that their children liked this kindergarten and enjoyed life there. For example, Fei's mother appreciatively stated:

*Since I enrolled my child at this kindergarten, he has been very happy... the most important thing is that he feels very happy here every day. I sometimes have a joke with him and say 'We are not going to kindergarten today' and he replies 'No, I want to go to kindergarten!' ...*

Kai's mother told a similar story:

*I assume my child likes this kindergarten very much because.... since enrolling here, he has been very happy. Once, when he was ill, and had to stay at home, he surprised me when on the third day he said 'Mom, I miss kindergarten, I want go back!' You can see how much he likes it...*

Even Tao's mother, whose child was regarded as the 'naughtiest' by the

classroom staff and other children in the class stated:

*Yes, sure, my son likes this kindergarten very much...Sometimes, at the weekend, I'll ask him, 'Where do you want to go to play?' He says, 'I want to go to kindergarten!' (laughing)...*

These comments suggest that it was not only the children, but also the mothers who felt happy with the kindergarten. This seemed to be because it met the demand that seven parents discussed previously (see Section 5.4.2), namely, treating their children's happiness as the priority.

Meeting children's social needs was also mentioned by four parents as the reason for children's positive response to kindergarten. For example, Tao's mother said that her son had come to increasingly like kindergarten because:

*He likes sharing with his peers and feels lonely playing on his own...he has become more grown up and likes playing with teachers and friends, for example, reading a book with other children and discussing it with them. Yes, I think he likes all these things.*

Qiqi's mother gave a similar response: 'I suppose my daughter likes the kindergarten because she can make many friends here'. As well as this, she pointed out that her daughter 'liked the way of learning through play in this kindergarten'. In addition, Nan's mother gave a further explanation for her daughter's enjoyment of kindergarten: 'she might feel that she is not too strictly controlled here and that she has more freedom'. This mother believed that it was the relatively relaxing and free learning environment of the kindergarten that shaped her child's preference.

### **5.5.1 Favourite activities and places**

In response to the question: 'What are your child's favourite activities?', the



parents identified a range of play activities and special events, including the 'role-play area', 'drawing and colouring', 'outdoor activities', 'special events' including 'sports days', 'the graduation ceremony', 'family fun days' and 'kindergarten trips'.

For example, Lili's mother stated that her daughter most liked:

*make-believe play, dressing up and everything...she enjoys it a lot! I think she also enjoys drawing and colouring, and that is maybe her favourite... also a lot of the outdoor activities...*

Likewise, Tao's mother explained Tao's preference for outdoor activities and kindergarten trips: 'As long as he's outside, he likes it very much!' she said, adding:

*Any activities in the playground...planting in the garden, catching grasshoppers and exploring the weasel hole in the back yard behind the building...and the kindergarten trips...*

Regarding the special event programme, Lili's mother was very clear of her daughter's feeling: 'Of course, she loves the special events! They are so much fun!' In relation to the upcoming graduation ceremony, she added:

*She's excited...um... this morning, actually, she told me, 'Ah, when is the graduation?' And I say, 'Okay, it's on Friday.' And then she said, 'Does that mean that I have to go on stage on Friday?' And I said, 'Yes!' 'Okay!' (laughing) I think she's kind of worried and excited at the same time.*

From the tone and manner of this mother's narrative, it is clear that the special events and activities were full of fun for both her child and herself.

Moreover, the classroom play areas and outdoor areas such as the playground and the garden were identified as children's favourite places by most parents.

For example, Qiqi's mother stated:

*I think all children like free play; also, I know that children are free to choose the area of play in which they want to play. So I suppose my child likes the play areas a great deal.*

Also, Lili's mother explained:

*She loves to draw and colour and the art area where she can do it maybe is her favourite place to go in the classroom...She also like to play ball in the open air as well.*

Tao's mother, like Kai's mother, emphasised her son's love of the outdoors:

*My son really likes everything outdoors...for example bouncing a basketball in the playground or catching grasshoppers in the garden.*

Another parent, Kai's mother, also mentioned that her son liked to play and enjoy physical activity outdoors.

Overall, these parents believed that the activities which took place in the play areas in the classroom and outdoors including special events and kindergarten trips were significant and favoured by the children, although they shared more critical views sometimes as discussed earlier in the section on critical awareness.

### **5.5.2 Favourite people**

In terms of favourite people at kindergarten, particular teachers were named as their child's favourite person by the parents, especially the English teacher and the preschool teacher. For example, Ming's mother explained that her son liked the English teacher:

*His favourite person is the English teacher, Mark, because he always choses to go with Mark... He [my son] doesn't like it when other teachers control or even tell off children, Mark allows children to talk freely in his class, and rarely tells them off or criticises them, even*

*when children make mistakes. So Mark's class is his favourite.*

Fei's mother stated that her son liked playing with other children and that he also liked his teachers. In particular, she explained that Fei always mentioned the English teacher because:

*He [the English teacher] usually arranges for the children to cook something, and Fei brings the food back to share and eat with me...This kind of behaviour is really warm and sweet!*

Besides the English teacher, the preschool teacher was also considered as one of the children's favourite people by five parents. For example, Tao's mother told me:

*Tao talks about the preschool teacher quite often at home. He always says 'today, the preschool teacher praised me again because my writing of Pinyin is neat' or something (laughing).*

Kai's mother mentioned that the preschool teacher was her child's favourite person:

*I suppose...his favourite person would be the preschool teacher because he's told me several times that the preschool teacher is very kind and likes him very much, so he likes the preschool very much as well...He sometimes likes to pretend to be the preschool teacher to teach us Pinyin, by writing it on his little blackboard at home. (laughing)*

Additionally, eight parents explained that their children liked other children in the peer group. For example, Tao's mother stated:

*He really likes to go to kindergarten because he wants to share with friends and play with friends and the teacher; he even likes discussing or debating with friends.*

Also, Qiqi's mother stated that her daughter liked her friends at kindergarten very much: 'She makes many friends here, and actually she really likes her friends at kindergarten'. The mothers of Fei, Kai, Ming, Nan, Lili and Jing also

directly explained that their children's favourite people included their 'peers'.

Overall, the English teacher, the preschool teacher and peers, were mostly mentioned as the children's favourite people at kindergarten by their parents; other staff members were, by contrast, only mentioned in a general way, and by only a few parents.

### **5.5.3 Dislikes**

When asked about their children's less happy experiences at the kindergarten, the parents explained that children disliked things such as 'a lack of freedom', 'an over-strict teacher', and 'homework'.

For example, Tao's mother stated that her son did not liked kindergarten in the past because 'the previous teachers always kept children under strict control'.

Ming's mother claimed the same:

*I think that, overall, my son enjoys kindergarten life. What he doesn't like...um I think, for example, is when the teachers treat him too strictly...if a strict teacher always criticises him, he feels unhappy and uncomfortable...*

Moreover, Qiqi's mother explained that her daughter 'did not like homework' and she expressed a real concern about it. She thought that her daughter did not like homework because the lead teacher asked children to 'simply copy out Chinese characters'; and also she 'did not think children should start to write at this early stage'.

Lili's mother also said that her daughter did not like homework:

*My daughter finds mathematics challenging, perhaps, and all this learning of Pinyin and Chinese characters, and she didn't really want to do the homework. And so at the beginning, maybe yes that was a big challenge for her, and she would say, 'Oh, I can't finish my homework; I don't want to go to school!'*

She then explained that her daughter had improved greatly with the help of teachers and other children and she had started to show a new willingness to do homework:

*But then, with the help of the teachers and the classmates, I think she has improved greatly ... when she has to do homework, and she does it, she doesn't complain too much, she's okay and she can do it! (laughing)*

This suggests that how both teachers and parents jointly dealt with the situation could impact on children's feelings about homework. Relationships between parents and staff are discussed further below.

## **5.6. Parents' relationship with the kindergarten**

The relationship between parents and kindergarten was explored from the parents' point of view in this part.

### **5.6.1 Tools and approaches**

The parents in this study were asked: 'How does the kindergarten share relevant information with you?' All parental participants stated that the 'Newton Online System' was the main tool the kindergarten used to share information with parents. Tao's mother told me: 'the online system is an internet platform where the teacher uploaded photos of children's daily life at kindergarten'. This enabled parents to learn about their child's daily experience. Moreover, the

online system included the 'weekly newspaper' and the 'term report', which showed children's experiences and other relevant information in text form. Besides this communication channel, the parents noted a range of other forms of communication including:

- the Parent-Teacher Contact Notebook 'since last year, kindergarten has provided a Parent-Teacher Contact Notebook supporting communication between us...' (Ming's mother)
- Children's Work Exhibition Wall '...then, we can see children's work, such as drawings from the children's work exhibition wall'. (Tao's mother)
- Phone calls 'Sometimes, teachers contact me by phone if there has been any problem with my child...' (Fei's mother)
- Face-to-face '...usually, if there is any problem or special issue, the teacher talks to me when I bring the children here in the morning or pick up them after school...' (Qiqi's mother)
- Parents Notice Board 'the board on which teachers post up the teaching or lesson plan, for parents' (Tao's mother)

However, Nan's mother complained that:

*Sometimes, the information from the online system cannot be updated in time. The teacher just puts it on the notice board outside the classroom. This is fine for the parents like me who take the children to school, and pick them up, by themselves. However, for those parents whose children take the school bus, they can't get the information on time. So, I think this need to be improved.*

Additionally, it is worth noting that all parents interviewed in this study strongly praised the positive way that 'open days' and 'special events' supported kindergarten-parent communication. For example, Kai's mother stated:

*The Open day and special events provide a window for parents to get to know and understand what the kindergarten does for children and how children learn and live at kindergarten.*

Jing's mother also stated that 'the open day is very good'.

### 5.6.2 Parental satisfaction

The parental participants in this study were generally satisfied with home-school communication and felt that they had a positive relationship with the kindergarten. For example, Qiqi's mother stated:

*I think their communication system is good...if a child has any problem, teachers always communicate immediately with us...so, this aspect is all right.*

Jing's mother also stated that 'the kindergarten has done a good job in parent-kindergarten communication and cooperation'. In particular, Ming's mother emphasised the positives:

*But I think, so far, what is really good in this kindergarten is that if parents have any problem, we can communicate with teachers at any time. For example, teachers are generally attentive if you tell them where a child needs extra care, and will inform parents straightaway if they find any problem. I really care about these kinds of issues, so I always communicate directly with the teachers.*

However, two parents also made negative comments about aspects of the communication between the kindergarten and parents. For example, Nan's mother complained that 'parents did not receive any report or feedback about the implementation of the MI programme in this Chinese kindergarten'. Also, she remarked that she had suggested that the teaching plan should be posted not only on the parent's notice board, but also the online system: 'However, the kindergarten did not take any further action'.

Additionally, Lili's mother who was from Italy pointed out: 'It can be a little bit difficult to communicate with kindergarten [where most staff members speak

only Chinese] due to limitations of language'. However, she thought this was not a big problem because Lilli's father, who could speak Chinese, sometimes helped her to communicate with staff members.

Overall, a range of approaches to communication between parents and kindergarten were identified in the discussions with nine parents. Whilst some approaches focused on general communication about the curriculum, some were more to do with communication about individual children. Seven out of nine parents interviewed had a relatively positive experience of communication with the kindergarten, whereas two parents were particularly concerned about the feedback reports, the teaching plans and communication with those who did not speak Chinese.

### **5.6.3 Parental involvement**

The parents generally believed parent-kindergarten co-operation was important. All parents explained that they participated in kindergarten activities as much as was practical when asked to participate. For instance, Tao's mother explained:

*I think parent-kindergarten cooperation is important...as long as the kindergarten asks parents to attend. I actively participate in activities as much as I can...*

However, this was not always possible for all the parents. Three parents stated that they could not attend the kindergarten activities due to their busy schedules including work commitments. For instance, Jing's mother mentioned the difficulty for her: 'I can't always attend due to a busy work schedule'.

Where the kindergarten needed the support and cooperation of parents, all



parents explained that they were keen to help regarding their children's behaviour and learning. However, five mothers were confused about how to do it. As Tao's mother stated:

*I have no idea what and how I can help. Maybe, the only thing I can do is to communicate with the teacher as much as I can about my child's performance. Then, if my child is praised by teachers today, I will give him a hug; but if he is criticised today, I will help him to think about what he has done.*

Similarly, Ming's mother pointed out that she did not fully know how to help, but she usually could help more practically:

*I am not involved in any teaching activities...Actually I can't see where parents can participate in anything relating to teaching except by supervising children to complete their homework, or helping children to prepare teaching and learning materials, such as collecting used milk cartons.*

In addition, four parents also mentioned that they would like to get more explicit guidance about how they could support the teachers.

Overall, what is reflected in the data is that it was mainly mothers who were involved in the kindergarten's activities and events, as Kai's mother stated:

*If I can attend, his Dad usually won't, because he is very busy with work, and he has only managed to come to the kindergarten once in two years. So, basically I am the main one to attend kindergarten activities.*

It seems that the parents generally recognised the importance of parent-kindergarten co-operation. All parents seemed to be willing to help regarding their children's behaviour and learning at kindergarten and two parents, including Ming's mother, stated that they could help in practical ways, such as collecting resources for arts and crafts activities. However, three parents

pointed out what hampered their involvement, such as busy schedules including work commitments, and five out of nine parents said that they were unclear about what they could do. Also four parents explained that they would have welcomed more explicit guidance about how they could work together with the kindergarten. Another key point, reflected in the data, is that it was mainly mothers who were involved rather than fathers.

## **5.7. Discussion**

The parents in this study are a unique group of mixed Chinese parents and families with international connections. This is not a typical sample of parents using private kindergartens, even as a middle class group. The discussion of class and reference to a middle class is a relatively recent development in China and acknowledging the distinctive viewpoint of a group of middle class parents is also new. However, it is indicative of social change in China to have a growing number of parents who come from abroad, who are involved in transnational relationships or who have worked across different countries, as well as Chinese parents with experience of studying abroad or working in foreign-owned companies in economically developed areas and large cities in China (Cheng, 2009). There is a small but growing group of such parents but no previous research into their views about early education. While there are previous studies of parental perspectives on kindergarten education in China (Liu, Li and Song, 2006; Chen and He, 2010; Yu, Chen and Gao, 2014), these have not focused on such a unique sample in terms of perspectives on young children's early education and care in private settings in China. Therefore, it is not possible to compare some aspects of the findings relating to the parents in

this study with previous literature. However, there are previous findings (Wang and Spodek, 2000; Zhu, 2008b) which indicate that people in China generally value Western influences in education.

A key finding of this study in relation to parents is that, in choosing the kindergarten, the parents were firstly driven by the desire for a high-quality physical environment as well as care for their children's health and well-being, and then by the teaching and learning environment. Eight out of nine parents emphasised the value they placed on the quality of the physical environment in terms of equipment, facilities and convenience, and the childcare or physical well-being aspects of the kindergarten in terms of children being safe, as well as having good nutrition and facilities for sleep. This indicates that these parents prioritised their children's childcare and well-being needs rather than their education. Yan and Li's (2012) study also indicates that health and safety issues are the most important consideration for parents in their selection of preschool provision. This is because in parents' minds their children are too young to look after themselves in terms of daily living. In Huang's (2014) study of parental concerns relating to kindergarten education and care, Chinese parents also considered the issues in health, safety and nutrition as everyday elements of a high quality ECEC provision.

In contrast, however, other studies (Tang, 2006; Liu, Li and Song; Yang, Fang and Tu, 2006; Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa, 2009; Yu, Chen and Gao, 2014) have shown that Chinese parents care strongly about their children's academic achievements, even at the kindergarten stage, because they know their children are subject to the pressures of strong social competition. However, my findings

suggest that seven out of nine parents, in this study mothers, were primarily concerned for their children to be happy at kindergarten. This difference may be because this group of parents were middle-class parents, and they had relatively high living standards. They primarily wanted their children to have a relaxed and happy childhood rather than having high expectations of academic achievement with negative stress affects, though some parents had concerns regarding their child's transition to a more competitive primary school system. This particular sample of entirely mothers may have impacted on the findings which will be discussed further in limitations of the research (see Section 7.4).

These findings overall challenge the established view that Chinese parents place academic achievement above all other issues when thinking about their young children's education. Previous understanding of Chinese parents, with the exception of a small number of studies where parents highlighted the care aspects of kindergarten education (Yan and Li, 2012; Huang, 2014), suggests that Chinese parents all have high expectations for their children. However, this study suggests a more complex picture.

MI theory has been introduced and developed in China as a relatively new and advanced educational theory in recent years. It contrasts strikingly with traditional Chinese educational approaches. New Western theories have gradually impacted on traditional beliefs and values in Chinese kindergarten education (Zhou and Wang, 2000; Zhu, 2008b; Hou and Li, 2010) especially following implementation of the Reform and Opening-up policy from the end of 1970s. However, the notions of "respecting children", "active learning", "individualising instruction", and "play-based" activity had been introduced into

China much earlier with the influence of Dewey's visit to China in 1920s (Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa 2009, p42). Such ideas have been renewed and become the core of reform in contemporary ECEC during the last two decades.

Research to date has focused on the views of educationalists (Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa, 2009) rather than those of parents. The parents in this study, as non-specialists had no professional and authoritative knowledge of MI theory and ECEC, and had mostly gained their initial understanding of MI theory from the implementation of the MI programme at the kindergarten. It seems likely that the kindergarten, for self-promotion purposes, would emphasise the advantages and benefits of MI theory and the MI programme. As a result, it is unsurprising that those parents talked mainly about the positive aspects rather than commenting critically. This can also explain why many parents identified the MI features of the kindergarten programme as a major attraction in choosing this kindergarten, although slightly less important for most than the aspects of care and high quality facilities as discussed above.

Regarding their views on the kindergarten curriculum and pedagogy, the parents were mostly satisfied with the focus on play and all-round development. While six out of nine parents had a limited understanding of MI theory, they had some knowledge of Western influences on ECEC generally. Four of them were not particularly concerned about the specific content of the curriculum, or the details of MI theory. What mattered more to them was that the kindergarten's programme was designed and developed from a Western model of practice which they saw as different to a traditional and strict teaching approach. Five parents, in particular mothers, acknowledged the idea within MI theory that

kindergarten education should 'pay attention to children's comprehensive and all-round development, rather than simply focusing on academic achievements'. They highly valued the pedagogy of 'learning through play'. The parents also valued the multiple ways in which the programme made assessments of children's learning outcomes. Above all seven parents wanted their children to have a relaxed and happy childhood. Five of these middle-class parents with their higher educational qualifications had experience of learning or living in European countries and/or the US, or of working at international companies within China. Thus, it is likely that they were influenced by Western cultural and educational theories. This makes sense in terms of Zhu's (2008b) study of the influence of Western ideas over recent decades on the development of ECEC in China.

The findings from interviews with parents in this study indicate that six parents gave limited thought to details of the kindergarten curriculum and pedagogy. On the one hand, four parents thought that once children were at kindergarten, what and how children learnt was the responsibility of kindergarten teachers. Therefore, they paid limited attention to this issue. On the other hand, there was a strong belief in the importance of an early start to an academic education held alongside belief in the importance of care rather than education for children in this age phase. Most parents in this study primarily expected children to 'feel happy at kindergarten', but they had to tailor their views due to the transition from kindergarten to primary school in traditional education system. This has been corroborated by other studies (Tang, 2008; Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa, 2009; Chen and He, 2010) of Chinese parents' views on ECEC issues in China in recent years.

However, it seems that whatever the parents' expectations of their children's experience in kindergarten were, they eventually had to tailor their views about a happy childhood with the knowledge that their child would move on to a local school with traditional teaching methods. Because they were still living in China, most of the parents had to follow the expectations of the local educational system and context. These parents expected their children to learn Pinyin and maths which represent primary school learning content introduced at the kindergarten stage, even though they primarily wanted children to 'just feel happy at kindergarten'. As Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa (2009, p39) argue Chinese parents remain influenced by the traditional Chinese saying: "not being left behind at the starting line". It seems that traditional educational beliefs and ideologies which emphasise academic knowledge and cognitive development inevitably affected these parents' ideas about their children's future education. Thus, the parents, in particular four parents from a Chinese background and those from a non-Chinese culture who planned to live in China in the longer term, experienced a tension between the Western influences and the traditional Chinese beliefs in a similar way to the kindergarten practitioners.

Turning to how parents made sense of their child's views on their kindergarten experience, the parents mostly demonstrated a good grasp of the things that their children liked at kindergarten, particularly their favourite places and their favourite activities. The parents' views of children, in this study, show a significant shift from those discussed in some previous studies. For example, Lin (2009) discussed how in feudal China children were traditionally regarded as the property of their families; later, in the People's Republic of China up until

the 1980s, children were considered to be the future of the communist society (see Section 2.2.5.1); nowadays, this has changed, and they are thought of in terms of their family's aspirational future (see Section 2.2.7). Yim, Lee and Ebbeck (2011) argue that the Chinese, including those from East Asian countries, are more or less influenced by Confucianism, which emphasises moral and academic learning. These parents commonly have high expectations of children's academic achievement. While this was not the only concern of the parents in Yim, Lee and Ebbeck's study at school transition, they had to arrange for their child to attend additional academic classes, as well as recreationally and culturally focused classes (physical /music, drama, singing and dancing classes) in the final year of kindergarten, to ensure their smooth transition to primary school. The findings from this study, however, demonstrated a previously unreported respect for children's rights from parents and showed that five of the nine parents had started to take account of their children's preferences, for example in choosing an early years setting. Also, those parents who had not directly sought their children's opinions mainly mirrored their children's responses when giving their views. This suggests that these parents had a relatively good understanding of their children's interests, showing respect for their preferences, and this is an interesting development in relation to respecting children's rights. This finding suggests a shift in the thinking of this particular group of Chinese parents about children and concepts of childhood, which echoes the Western notions of children being active social actors and holders of rights (Qvortrup, 1994; James and James, 2004; Qvortrup, Corsaro and Honig, 2009) and childhood being a unique social phenomenon of cultural and constructed meanings (Jenks, 2005; Corsaro, 2011; Morrow, 2011). This apparent shift in thinking has not been discussed in previous studies within the



Chinese context. It is important to note, however, that this shift in thinking comes from findings relating to a particular middle-class group of parents from a mixed international and Chinese background.

The demands and expectations relating to internationalisation articulated by the parents in this study are representative of those of increasing numbers of parents today in China. This argument also appears in Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa (2009), who claim that due to the impact of globalisation, Chinese parents increasingly want their children to study in an educational environment which promotes international culture rather than a single Chinese culture. The reason for this perspective is the desire of parents for their children to survive in a fiercely competitive globalised system. My study confirms that six out of nine these middle-class Chinese parents attach overriding importance to their children's bilingual ability (mostly Chinese and English) even at the kindergarten stage, as suggested by Luo and Lu (2003). The Newton kindergarten in this study offered such a bilingual environment and the parents from different cultural backgrounds all valued this provision, although it was a Chinese focused programme and only a small amount of curriculum time was given to English teaching.

Another key finding from the interviews with the parents was that relationship between the kindergarten and parents was an important issue for the parents. According to Chen and He's (2010) study of parent's involvement in kindergarten education, establishing positive cooperation between parents and kindergarten practitioners is one of the most vital tasks in early childhood education. This is equally valued within the English study, Researching

Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years (REPEY) (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002) and the early years curriculum framework (Great Britain, Department of Education, 2014) in England. In my study, all parents appeared keen to participate in the kindergarten's teaching and learning activities but five out of nine parents did not really know how to do this. In the main, the parents were quite passively involved in the activities to which they were invited by the kindergarten, such as the kindergarten open day and the family day. Parental involvement in children's learning and teaching mostly happened at home when they were helping children to complete homework or prepare recycled materials for class handcraft activities. Four parents felt that the kindergarten did not provide enough support and guidance on their involvement, and they thought their involvement was not enough. In general, this study shows that the middle-class parents, with international connections, were aware that the kindergarten had provided diverse methods for communication with parents. However, most parents did not really know how to participate in their children's kindergarten education or co-operate more effectively.

To sum up, the above discussion highlighted the parents' interpretations of their children's experiences of the MI curriculum and pedagogy, and their critical feeling of their own involvement with the kindergarten in terms of supporting their children's learning. It can be argued that firstly, the findings challenge the established view that parent place academic achievement above all other issues when thinking about young children's education. Secondly, the parents mostly appeared to be influenced by Western education theories as in this study MI theory thereby valuing Western ECEC programme. However, anticipating their children move to primary school, they experienced some tension in relation

to the traditional expectation of the Chinese system. These new findings are based on this unique sample of parents who, as defined previously, belong to the new middle-class in China and are from a mixed international and Chinese cultural background. This group represents a small but growing minority.

## **Chapter 6 Children's perspectives**

Following on from Chapters Four and Five, which explored the adults' perspectives on the kindergarten curriculum and pedagogy, this chapter focuses on children's perspectives. As discussed in Chapter Two, children are regarded as competent social actors from a sociological perspective (James and James, 2004; Jenks, 2005; Qvortrup, Corsaro and Honig, 2009) within a Western context. This means that they have the capacity not only to contribute to society but also to shape their own experiences (Brooker, 2002; Garrick et al., 2010) and create their own cultures (Corsaro, 1994; 2009) through daily interaction with adults and peers. This chapter presents findings relating to children's views and experience of their kindergarten lives within the specific context of a private kindergarten in contemporary China. Data was generated during a range of participatory activities and through the use of ethnographic field notes. The findings relate to children's feelings and experiences of their daily life at kindergarten, including issues of autonomy and authority, play and learning, and peer friendships.

### **6.1 Autonomy and authority**

#### **6.1.1. Attending kindergarten**

The findings from the adult participants, both practitioners and parents, generally supported the view that children were mostly happy to go to kindergarten and had positive experiences there, and this was widely supported

by the children who expressed the view that they 'like kindergarten' because they could 'play', 'learn' and 'make friends' there.

At the beginning of my ethnographic fieldwork, in order to build up a positive relationship and trust with children, I joined in their activities and games and played with them as 'a big friend' while engaging them in small group discussions. During an art activity involving colouring in shapes and cutting them out during an afternoon session, I joined a group of six children who were working around a table, and I posed the question: 'Why do you come to kindergarten?' The children all actively responded and shared their reasons for attending kindergarten:

*Fei: Because the kindergarten has a lot of toys and the magnetic building toy (磁力棒) is my favourite toy... oh! I also like the slide in the playground.*

*Yun: I like to come to kindergarten because I have many friends here.*

*Lili: Because I like to play with my friends at kindergarten.*

*Tao: Because I like kindergarten.*

*Researcher: Why?*

*Tao: Because I am too small (太小) and not clever (太笨). Attending kindergarten will help me learn more.*

*Ru: Because we need to learn (at kindergarten).*

*Mei: Because I want to learn knowledge.*

During the conversation, all children commented on their kindergarten experiences enthusiastically. These children regarded their kindergarten as a place where they could not only 'play' with 'a lot of toys' and 'friends', but also 'learn knowledge'.

Having conducted nonparticipant and participant observations for two weeks, my relationship with the children developed and they began to regard me more as a 'play partner' than a 'teacher'. Children began to speak more freely in front of me and expressed different opinions about the kindergarten. One morning

when children sat around two tables for registration, I was sitting beside Han. The lead teacher said 'Ru is absent this week because she has gone on holiday with her parents'. After hearing this, Han turned and spoke to me:

*Han: I won't be able to have a holiday because my Mum and Dad are very busy because they need to work. Nobody looks after me if I don't come to kindergarten.*

*Researcher: Do you always like coming to kindergarten?*

*Han: Er...No.*

*Researcher: When don't you like it?*

*Han: When the teacher asks us to write homework...it's boring to write [Chinese] characters over and over again.*

Han's response indicates that not all children liked all aspects of the kindergarten. In Han's case, he was clearly aware of the rationale for his kindergarten attendance as his parents both worked full-time and there were no other childcare options. He was also clear about what he disliked at kindergarten, including repeated writing of the same character which he saw as a kind of work.

Han was not the only child who expressed the feeling of 'having to' go to kindergarten. Yun, who originally explained that 'I like to come to kindergarten because I have many friends here', also expressed similar feelings to Han about the non-negotiable nature of attendance but she expressed this in a more indirect way. One morning Yun came to kindergarten late with tears running down her face. She could not stop crying and was still doing this when she was asked to hang her face towel up and wash her hands (the first thing children had to do on arrival at classroom was to hang up their face flannels and wash their hands). Mei saw that Yun was unhappy, and she went up to calm Yun down. Mei followed Yun to the toilet:

*Mei: What's wrong with you?*

*Yun: I don't want to come today, and want to play at home...but my Mum says [that] I must come because I can't always play; otherwise I will not grow up if I don't come to [kindergarten to] learn knowledge.*

*Mei: We need to learn to be clever. So, don't cry, let's go to play.*

Whilst Yun clearly articulated her unhappy feelings about attending kindergarten, Mei tried to persuade her to feel otherwise, reassuring her that kindergarten was a necessary experience and a place to 'learn to be clever'. Children's feelings of liking or disliking attendance at kindergarten is embedded in their perception and understanding of adult expectations for their futures and discourse about kindergarten education and childcare.

### **6.1.2. Rules and routines**

The need for clear rules is a fundamental issue for practitioners working in ECEC in China (Liang, 2014). The need for effective daily routines together with rules is reflected in the national guidance for kindergarten education (China MoE, 2001). Practitioners in this study concurred with this premise. The lead teacher explained:

*The purpose of establishing a routine and rules was to instill in children a sense of order, the concept of co-operation, cultivate positive habits, and ensure children's safety and well-being.*

Routines and rules were also a prominent feature of children's kindergarten experience. Through both verbal and non-verbal expression, they demonstrated their perceptions of boundaries in terms of kindergarten routines and rules.

#### **6.1.2.1. What are the rules?**

Children in this study were confident and keen to show their knowledge of the kindergarten's rules. For instance, during play in the areas of provision one

morning, Tao, an active boy, initially introduced as the 'naughtiest' child in the class by staff members and other children, was planning to join in a game with three girls in the music area. However, the girls refused to allow him to join them because 'no more than three children are allowed in each area', as the girls told him. When Tao insisted on playing with them, Yun became angry and shouted at Tao:

- Yun: Tao! What are you trying to do? When the teacher says no, then it means no!*
- Nan: Yes, children must do what the teacher tells them to do; otherwise you are not a good child!*
- Tao: It's possible for four children to play well together, though.*
- Qiqi: No! Rules are rules. It is always like this and cannot be changed!*

The notion that 'the teacher says and children do' was accepted by most of the children. They saw themselves as a relatively powerless group who should be obedient to a more senior group, the adults. Even the 'naughtiest' child, Tao, eventually had to give up his attempt to join in the girls because the girls were convinced that obeying the rules or a teacher's instruction was without doubt related to the notion of 'being a good child'. These children's attitude towards the kindergarten rules suggests that they cared deeply about the impression they made on adults and they were keen to meet adults' expectations and gain their approval.

Tao could not win the argument with the girls so he chose to play in the science area, where he played with Lego. I played and chatted with him:

- Researcher: What is a rule?*
- Tao: A rule is a rule, which means the things children are not allowed to do.*

It seems that Tao interpreted the rules solely in terms of constraints on



children's behaviour and actions. Later, when asked about who made the rules, the three girls, Yun, Qiqi and Nan, related rules to the roles of adults:

*Researcher: Who made the rules?*

*Nan: The teachers.*

*Researcher: Why the teachers, but not the children?*

*Nan: Because...I don't know.*

*Qiqi: Because teachers are adults. Adults are the people who are clever, and they are cleverer than children.*

In these children's views, there were two distinct groups at kindergarten, adults and children. These children regarded the teachers as the rule makers and themselves as the followers of rules. The rule makers were thought as having stronger abilities, the reason why they were more powerful.

The children were also aware of rules as non-negotiable and of lack of flexibility, as suggested in Qiqi's understanding that 'rules cannot be changed'. In another example during the break time between two indoor activities, children were expected to go to the toilet and drink water as part of the routine. Ming and Kai, two boys who were sitting next to each other, stood up, intending to leave the table. They talked to each other:

*Ming: I am going to drink water first.*

*Kai: Ming, you should wash your hands first, then drink water!*

*Ming: I didn't pee, so I can just drink the water!*

*Kai: Teacher says 'go to toilet, wash your hands and then drink some water!' We must listen to the teacher!*

Ming felt confident in following the rules but with some flexibility in regard to varying contexts. However, Kai felt that the teacher's instructions should be followed strictly to avoid breaking any rules in any situation.

In some contexts, children disobeyed the rules, despite a common desire to be seen as 'good children'. For example, one morning at break time, most of the

children were lining up in front of the water dispenser waiting for their turn to drink. Lei pushed into the queue. Mei said to Lei: 'Pushing in is not allowed! Stop it!' Although Lei had broken the rule, he complained: 'You always like to monitor others (你总是喜欢管别人)!' It is interesting to note that both Mei and Lei were clearly aware of the rules but they reacted in two different ways. Lei wanted to challenge the rules, whereas Mei tried to enforce them.

#### 6.1.2.2. Are rules useful?

Most children felt the rules were 'useful' and 'important'. They were knowledgeable about different kinds of rules and the rationale for rules. For example, the children stated that rules can 'help us to correct mistakes', 'learn good habits', 'make sure that we are not hurt'. This was particularly evident during the 'kindergarten guided tour' that I organised. I used a new toy, a teddy bear, as the tool to initiate discussion. The children were all curious and keen to join the game:

- Researcher: This little teddy is our new friend. He doesn't know any rules here. Who would like to take him on a tour and tell him something about the rules at kindergarten?*
- Children: Me! Me! Me!*
- Yun: When there are many children, we should not crowd round. We should queue.*
- Fei: We are not allowed to be rude. We should say 'Hello' when we see teachers and other children.*
- Qiqi: When teachers say 'Time is up', we should stop playing and quickly tidy up. We are not allowed to play with toys any longer. Children are not allowed to break toys either.*
- Lili: We are not allowed to run and chase each other indoors.*
- Researcher: Why?*
- Lili: Because we would fall over and bump our heads and hurt ourselves.*

Clearly, the children had remembered what they were not allowed to do as told by the practitioners, a consequence of likely repeated instructions by practitioners to reinforce the importance of these kindergarten rules.

Related to their knowledge of the rules, eight of the children talked about the consequences of rule-breaking. For example, 'We cannot learn to be clever if we keep interrupting in class'; 'We won't grow taller if we don't push ourselves at (outdoor) exercise and try our best'. The children showed particular awareness of the consequences of certain behaviours. They pointed out they would 'be punished' if they broke the rules. In some instances they told me: 'We will have to stop playing if we break the toys'; 'If somebody is naughty or disobedient (不听话), they will be asked to sit in the reflection corner'. In particular, Tao, who was seen as a 'naughty child' by adults and his peers, named various types of punishment:

*There are many different punishments, such as teachers confiscating our stuff, stopping us playing and taking part in activities; also the teacher blames us and gets cross with us.*

He seemed very familiar with the punishments that followed breaking the rules, and the willingness of other children to follow rules may have been shaped by understanding the consequences of not doing so. This raises the issue of children's motivation for obeying the rules at kindergarten.

In addition, the children frequently talked about the rule of 'being quick and quiet'. For example, 'We should stop playing and tidy up quickly when teachers say "Time is up" '(Mei); 'We are not allowed to do anything else or dawdle (磨蹭)' (Nan). In terms of being quiet, all children agreed that this was important at kindergarten. For example, six children discussed particular rules of quietness. Fei said: 'Children should be quiet indoors. We are not allowed to shout and scream in the classroom'. Han said: 'We should not chase others or run indoors, but walk quietly', while Lili emphasised '(we need to) eat quietly' and Kai said

'(we need to) go to the toilet quietly'. Lei and Qiqi also said that children should 'queue up quietly' (Lei) and 'listen to teacher quietly in class and don't interrupt' (Qiqi). These expressions and comments suggest that children understood adult expectations that they would always be 'quiet and quick' in a teaching environment and that they were 'not allowed to do' things to break the rules.

Although most children felt that rules were important across many contexts, there was some dissent. Some of the children expressed negative feelings about some rules. What they considered to be 'bad rules' included the following: 'We are not allowed to be picky-eaters (挑食)'(Lili); and 'We are not allowed to bring our own toys to play with at kindergarten'(Kai). In particular, Tao voiced unhappiness at the way the rules limited his play choices. For example, he argued: 'Four children can play together in a play area just as well as three'. Tao expanded on this when I was playing with him in the classroom's science area:

*Researcher: Are rules useful?*

*Tao: Sometimes [they are] useful, but sometimes [they are] not [useful].*

*Researcher: When are they useful? When not?*

*Tao: They are useful when we're playing a game. They are useless at all other times because rules have always stopped me doing what I want to do when I want to do it.*

Tao not only challenged the rules but was also able to articulate the reason why he disliked most rules.

In general, all children showed awareness of routines and rules and they acknowledged the importance of routines and rules at kindergarten. However, five children expressed negative feelings about some rules which they saw as being limiting of their choices or interests. Additionally, there was some

difference overall between the views of boys and girls. All girls showed their general willingness to comply with rules but three of the six boys had more complaints in comparison and were more likely to question rules.

### 6.1.3. Nutrition and health

Nutrition and health is one of five areas of priority in the national guidance for kindergarten education (China MoE, 2001). This is clearly prescribed that "the most important work for Kindergarten is to protect children's well-being and promote the improvement of children's health" (China MoE 2001). Children's care and well-being were also amongst parents' concerns when they selected the kindergarten for their children, as discussed in Chapter Five.

Children in this age group were accustomed to taking meals, drinking water, going to the toilet and hand-washing as a part of their daily routine, which was part of their kindergarten experience as much as the teaching and learning activities. However, when children talked about these matters, they often had different views, as displayed in the following dialogue. Ming was the first to finish lunch one day. As lunch time drew to a close, he was sitting alone. I asked him:

*Researcher: Have you had a nice lunch time?*

*Ming: No!*

*Researcher: Why?'*

*Ming: It's just eating quietly, boring!*

Just then, another child, Fei, also finished his lunch and joined in the conversation:

*Fei: No, lunch time is not boring!*

*Researcher: Why?*

*Fei: Kindergarten meals are yummy! I like eating with my friends at kindergarten! My mum says: 'eating more and eating well will make me grow up quickly'!*

Fei thought of mealtime as enjoyable, and he understood the rationale behind them, taking on the views of an adult, his mother. However, the same event was a distressing experience for Ming but at first he was unable to explain why eating quietly was boring. I asked Ming a further question: 'What is the difference between eating at kindergarten and eating elsewhere?' He explained:

*During mealtime at home, I like helping my Mum to cook... We like to eat the food we've cooked together and I like to tell my Dad and my younger brother how I cooked the food.*

Ming's explanation suggests that he sees a clear difference between eating at kindergarten and at home, and in particular he enjoyed the opportunities to participate actively in food preparation at home.

This view of the rule bound nature of mealtime was particularly evident when children were talking about table manners. However, they were also keen to demonstrate their knowledge about good table manners. For example, when I informally asked children about their experience of mealtime, Jing recalled that 'children are not allowed to talk during mealtime because they could choke'. While Ru knew that 'being quiet' and 'chewing carefully' were signs of good table manners. Qiqi was also aware that 'sitting properly' and 'eating food in the right order' were good table manners as well. My observations showed that, in the kindergarten context, children were expected to sit up straight at mealtime and avoid spilling food (sitting properly). They were also expected to eat a mouthful of vegetables followed by a mouthful of rice in strict sequence (eating food in the right order).

Also, children were encouraged to have a balanced diet, without being 'picky' and eating only certain foods. What and how children ate seemed shaped by the nutritional and health concerns of adults. For example, the menu was drawn up by the kindergarten's nutrition and healthcare manager. One lunch time, as I was helping the staff members serve the children's meals, I noticed that the teaching and childcare assistant gave every child their main course first, apart from Fei, who had soup instead.

*Researcher: Why do you have soup first?*

*Fei: Overweight children should eat soup first, then have their main course afterwards.*

Fei told me this calmly without any embarrassment. He did not seem to mind the special treatment. However, not every child was happy about this kind of special arrangement. When the lead teacher added some dried meat (肉松) supplement to Lili's plate, but not other children's, Lili appeared unhappy about this. The lead teacher explained afterwards that Lili had iron-deficiency anemia (缺铁性贫血), and the nutrition and healthcare manager had ordered the teaching and childcare assistant to give children a nutritional supplement when necessary. Although Lili seemed to dislike the dried meat supplement, the teaching and childcare assistant still encouraged her to eat it and Lily eventually ate it up.

Generally, all the children were given the same size portions of food and the same content. For nutritional purposes, adults expected children to eat things even though they might not like them. It was common to see Lili and Nan eating slowly, playing with their food and eating reluctantly. Often they could not finish their food but the staff always urged them to eat up. For these children, lunch and dinner times were upsetting. This may be one of the reasons why Lili was

quick to remember the rule 'we are not allowed to be picky-eaters (挑食)'. Children understood that what they ate and how they ate was prescribed by adults. While most children were satisfied with the arrangements and enjoyed mealtime, two girls and one boy felt unhappy with their lack of autonomy in the choice of foods and the strictly regulated approach to eating.

#### **6.1.4. Understanding of adult roles**

This section presents findings relating to how children understood adult's roles. Children had a lot to say about the adults at kindergarten, and gave many different reasons as to why they liked or did not like them.

Children mostly had a clear awareness of adult roles and expressed their perceptions in both verbal and non-verbal ways. In particular, some of them were able to identify precisely where in the staff hierarchy all kindergarten staff belonged, including me, as the researcher.

##### **6.1.4.1. The classroom staff**

Tao gave a general definition of an adult's role at the kindergarten:

*Tao: Adults are the people who take care of children and see whether or not children have done things correctly.*

His definition emphasised adult power in terms of approval or disapproval of children's behaviour. Mei was able to give a more lengthy explanation of different adult roles in the kindergarten, focusing on their teaching roles:

*Teacher Mai [the Lead teacher] is the person who teaches us Chinese language and characters...Mark [the English teacher] is the one who teaches us English language...Teacher Liang [the preschool teacher] is the one who teaches us [knowledge]...I don't*



*know what teacher Zhou [the teaching and childcare assistant] teaches...but she sometimes teaches us origami...Teacher Guo [the researcher] teaches us to play many games.*

The lead teacher was responsible not only for childcare and Chinese language teaching but also for classroom management. As the key person, she stayed with the children most of the time, from morning through to afternoon. However, only three children seemed keen to talk about the lead teacher during interviews. Tao, however, was able to explain the lead teacher's role as 'the person who manages us every day (每天管我们的人)...She is very powerful (很厉害)'.

The preschool teacher only taught children for Pinyin and maths for four sessions per week (see Section 4.1.2.2). However, the children were keen to comment on her: 'We like our preschool teacher...because she is very kind'; 'She treats us very well'.

The English teacher was from Canada and his first language was English. He was often referred to as the teacher who 'played with children' and was seen as a playmate by all children. 'The English teacher is my favourite person in kindergarten because he can play with us', Fei said during the research activity with cameras (see Figure 6.1):



Figure 6.1: Fei's photograph of his favourite person

My observations showed that children talked and moved about freely during the English teacher's class. For example, at the end of one English class, Tao did not wait for the teacher to say 'class is over' before he walked out to the toilet. He was already taking off his trousers as he walked out. Other children laughed loudly. The English teacher did not say anything. However, when the lead teacher saw this, she was cross with Tao, telling him to stop doing such 'silly things' and 'behaving so immaturely'. Tao replied: 'I am playing with Mark [the English teacher] ...just kidding'. It is noteworthy that I never saw Tao behave like this in the lead teacher's class. He was well aware of and sensitive to the different roles, different personalities and different expectations of different teachers. In his mind, the English teacher was not only there to teach him English, but was also a person to play with. The children felt that they had more freedom to talk, be active and even play as they wanted in the English class.

The children also had a clear understanding of the role of the teaching and childcare assistant. While Mei described her as the person who 'sometimes taught them origami', Ru and Lili also noted that:

*She does not teach children a lot... but she looks after the children ... and cleans our classroom tables and floors and washes our flannels and toys ... and helps us at mealtime.*

In their mind, the teaching and childcare assistant was not a typical classroom teacher. Instead, the children referred to her as the person who supported them in ways related to their practical well-being and care. Two children did not talk about this explicitly, but their behaviour showed their understanding. For example, near the end of one preschool class the classroom had become stuffy due to the hot weather. Yun looked and felt very bothered by the heat. Instead of reporting the problem to the preschool teacher, she asked the teaching and

childcare assistant for help: 'Teacher Zhou [the teaching and childcare assistant], I feel hot'. She clearly knew who could help her if she had this kind of practical problem.

Kai showed further evidence of children's understanding of the classroom staff hierarchy. It was the end of the day and children were waiting for their parents to pick them up and only the teaching and childcare assistant and I were in the classroom. The lead teacher meanwhile was talking with a parent outside. When Kai's grandmother came into the classroom to collect him, the teaching and childcare assistant reminded him to push his chair under the table. Kai obviously intended to avoid the task, replying 'you can ask my Nanna to do it!' Just then, the lead teacher came back and, overhearing the conversation, she asked Kai to push his chair under the table himself. Kai did so immediately without any argument. The examples suggest that, from the children's point of view, different adult roles meant different levels of authority in the kindergarten.

#### 6.1.4.2. The researcher

After working with the children and staff for approximately a week, I started to be regarded as a member of the class by the children. For example, during outdoor time, all the kindergarten children and staff went out into the playground at the same time for physical exercise. In the early weeks, some staff members from other classes did not know me. They asked the children who I was and they explained:

*Tao: This is teacher Guo from our class. Don't you know her?*

*Nan: Teacher Guo is from my class, she is the person who plays games with us.*

*Fei: This is teacher Guo, and she is a new teacher for my class.*

It seems that children had accepted me as a member of the class. However, although they still regarded me as a 'teacher', they also identified me as 'the person to play games with' rather than someone in a traditional teacher role. Children expressed such understanding in different ways.

At the beginning of my fieldwork, I successfully obtained most parents' consent to allow their children to be my participants straightaway (see Section 3.1.5). However, Ming's mother did not give her permission even after I gave further detailed explanation about myself and my research. Thus, I had to avoid involving Ming in research activities in the first week of my fieldwork. However, Ming showed great interest in the research activities when he saw I was 'playing games' with other children. After two weeks, Ming's mother told me that she had changed her mind because Ming told her that teacher Guo was very kind and she always played interesting games with the other children and he wanted to join in. In this child's mind, I was the teacher who played games with them. In fact, he made me a greeting card (see Figure 6.2) on which he wrote the words: 'Teacher Guo, thank you for playing with me. --- Ming'.



Figure 6.2: Ming's self-made greeting card for the researcher

A girl, Nan, wrote similar words on the card she made (see Figure 6.3): 'Teacher Guo, thank you for teaching me a lot of games to play --- Nan'.



Figure 6.3: Nan's self-made greeting card for the researcher

When I asked Nan why she had drawn a card and sent it to me as a gift, she said that I was one of her 'favourite people at the kindergarten' because I always taught her 'a lot of games to play'. Nan was not the only child to draw me as her favourite person. Ru also liked drawing me, saying that she liked to play with me. I invited children to have a drawing activity with a theme of 'My favourite...at kindergarten'. Yun drew her favourite activity (see Figure 6.4) which was 'Teacher Guo is skipping with me'.



Figure 6.4: Yun's drawing of her favourite activity and play partner

While children identified me as a teacher, they distinguished my role from that of other teachers. All children regarded me as the teacher they could play with and they were very positive about this.

#### 6.1.4.3. The headteacher

Although the headteacher was called 'headteacher mama (园长妈妈)' by the children, she was also identified as having a relatively distant role. During the 'kindergarten guided tour' activity, Susu pointed out that 'the headteacher mama does not teach children in the classroom. She works in her own office on the ground floor'. Qiqi also noted, 'She sometimes comes into our classroom to inspect the children and teachers...but I can always see her in the playground during outdoor time'.

The kindergarten building was set out on two floors. On the ground floor there was one classroom for children of two to three years and two classrooms for children of three to four years. The headteacher's office and the administration office were located just next to the entrance of the building, also on the ground floor. The remaining classrooms, three rooms for children of four to five years and one classroom for children of five to six years, were found on the first floor. Every day, the children needed to pass by the headteacher's office and the administration office when they left the building for outdoor activities. The children often displayed curiosity about the offices which they were not usually allowed to enter. One day, when the children were walking past the headteacher's office, Tao pointed out to me:

*Tao: That is the headteacher's office.*

*Researcher: What is a headteacher for?*

*Tao: A headteacher is the person who is in charge of all the teachers, which means the leader (就是领导的意思).*

*Researcher: What is a leader for?*

*Tao: She leads everyone here, you must follow her orders.*

Children clearly understood that the headteacher's role involved management, administration and leadership rather than teaching, and positioned it at the top of the hierarchy of the kindergarten.

#### 6.1.4.4. The parents

A small number of children talked about adult roles in the world beyond the kindergarten and expressed the affection they felt for their parents, particularly if parents played with them. For example, during the small group discussion of 'my favourite person', Tao said:

*My favourite person is my Daddy because he loves me very much and treats me very well...Although he is busy and has lots of work, he always plays with me when he has free time.*

I talked with Tao's mother several times when she was waiting for Tao who was attending the after-kindergarten drum performance class. Tao's mother told me that his father was very busy with work, running his own company, and usually did not have time to take care of their son. His father regretted this, rather doted on Tao, and played with him as much as he could. Obviously Tao understood that his father was very busy and, when he gave him time, Tao could feel his father's love for him.

## 6.2 Play and learning

Learning and developing through play in different areas of play provision was the core component of the MI curriculum and is an approach to pedagogy based on the work of Gardner (1993), whose theory conceives of children's intelligence as comprising eight equally valuable areas. In Chapter Four I discussed how the headteacher pointed out that, in contrast to traditional approaches, the main educational goal of the MI programme was to educate and inspire children through a systematic approach based on respecting children's individual needs and strengths, linked to the eight areas of

intelligence (see Section 4.2.1). She saw this as operationalised through children's free play in a classroom with specific play areas, linked to the intelligences of MI theory. This section explores children's experiences and views on their 'play' and 'learning' at the MI kindergarten.

### 6.2.1. Formal teaching and learning

As has been mentioned previously, one of the most significant reasons for attending kindergarten for the children was to 'learn' and 'play' with 'friends'. In their minds, formal learning was very important at kindergarten. For example, during a 'photograph taking' activity, Ming took a photograph of his kindergarten bag (see Figure 6.5):

*Ming:* This is a kindergarten bag.  
*Researcher:* Why are you taking a picture of it?  
*Ming:* This is very important for us. If you forget to bring it to the kindergarten, you won't be able to learn.



Figure 6.5: Ming's photograph of his important kindergarten bag

Ming clearly understood that the kindergarten bag contained his textbooks, exercise books, notebooks, and pencils, which were important tools for his learning, as well as part of the formal learning equipment at kindergarten. Another girl, Qiqi, took a photograph of some chalk sticks which were usually used by the teachers (see Figure 6.6). She said: 'I'm taking a photograph of



chalk because I like it. Teachers use it to teach us writing every day'.



Figure 6.6: Qiqi's photograph of her favourite chalk sticks

These examples demonstrate that children were aware of learning and teaching tools not only for themselves, but also for the teachers. The pictures of these tools were symbolic in terms of learning and teaching, which most children considered a very 'important' part of their kindergarten life. Mei had a similar opinion and she took a photograph of the kindergarten library (see Figure 6.7); she considered it to be an important place for 'learning'.



Figure 6.7: Mei's photograph of the kindergarten library

This confirms that children in this age group had a strong sense of learning, as a key part of the reason why they attended the kindergarten.

In the research activity of 'sorting pictures', responding to the question: 'What are your favourite and least favourite activities at kindergarten?', children sorted pictures of different activities into three groups, under three pictures, a 'Happy Face', a 'Normal Face' and a 'Sad Face', indicating the extent of their satisfaction (see Appendix G). The children demonstrated their preference for

various activities and routines. Table 6.1 shows the most and least popular activities from children's viewpoint.

**Table 6.1 Children's favourite activities and activities they disliked**

<b>Favourite activities</b>	<b>Number of children</b>	<b>Disliked activities</b>	<b>Number of children</b>
Outdoors	13	Homework	4
Areas of play provision	10	Washing hands	3
Special events	8	Using toilet	1
English class	6	Lunch/dinner time	2
Preschool class	6	English class	2
Chinese class	4	Chinese class	2

The most popular activities in the children's minds were outdoor activities, areas of play provision, special events, the English class, the preschool class and the Chinese class. By contrast, the activities that children disliked, with two or more in each case, were homework, washing hands, lunch/ dinner time, the English class and the Chinese class. It is worth noting that the children mostly sorted pictures under the 'happy face' and the 'normal face', while five children put none under the 'sad face', as they said, 'there is nothing I don't like [at kindergarten]'.

#### 6.2.1.1. The Chinese class

As explained previously (see Sections 3.1.3.2 and 3.1.3.3), this kindergarten mainly enrolled children from Chinese families and it provided a bilingual but Chinese-focused environment. The teaching and learning activities were undertaken mainly in Chinese. The Chinese class was conducted by the lead teacher, who was Chinese. During the activity of 'sorting pictures' with the children, I posted the question 'What do you do in the Chinese class?' The children were keen to talk about this. Fei said:

*I learn to read and write [Chinese characters] in the Chinese class...I*

*have made lots of progress, I didn't know anything when I was little, but now I do! So, I like the Chinese class very much.*

In Fei's mind, the class was for 'learning to read and write' and he expressed his pleasure at his learning experience, as well as his pride in his learning outcomes and progress in the Chinese class. When I interviewed Fei's mother, she told me that Fei had transferred to this kindergarten last year and he had a very bad experience when attending his previous kindergarten. Since Fei had enrolled at the new kindergarten, he had experienced a great change and felt happy. During my observations, Fei often showed his enjoyment by smiling at kindergarten. Another girl, Qiqi, rather than talking about liking the Chinese class, spoke of her pride in her achievements and progress in learning how to read and write Chinese characters. On one occasion, when she was drawing a picture (see Figure 6.8) about what she liked and disliked at kindergarten, she stated: 'This is what I like...I can read some books, and then I can write this down. I can write a very~ very~ long piece now'.



Figure 6.8: Qiqi's drawing of her long piece of writing

However, another child, Tao, expressed an opposite view, saying: 'I think the Chinese class is boring...I don't know why...' Tao was considered by staff to be a 'naughty boy' who liked 'freedom and adventure' as he himself put it. He explained himself as liking 'unusual things' and 'outdoor activities'. For example, he took photographs of a 'yellow weasel burrow' (a hole caused by subsidence)

in the back yard of the kindergarten, and a 'dead dragonfly' in the playground, referring to these as his favourite places at kindergarten (see Figures 6.9 and 6.10).



Figure 6.9: Tao's photograph of his favourite 'yellow weasel burrow'

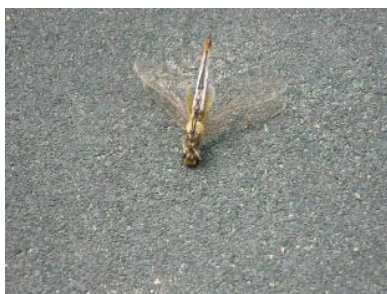


Figure 6.10: Tao's photograph of a dead dragonfly on the playground

Although Tao said he did not feel that the Chinese class was interesting, he said that he liked the Chinese lead teacher because 'she is very strong and brave!' He told me that when he took 'any dangerous or scary objects' into the classroom, everyone 'ran away' except the lead teacher. Tao seemed to see the lead teacher's attitude towards his behaviour as, if not an encouragement, at least acceptance of his favourite 'adventure', which was disapproved of by others. However, apart from a small number of children, such as Tao, who was openly negative about the more formal teaching and learning activities, most children showed more favourable attitudes towards such activities.

#### 6.2.1.2. The preschool class

As the headteacher and preschool teacher explained, the preschool class was

'an extra and separate part of the MI curriculum' for final year children with the purpose of 'supporting children's transition to primary schools'. The teaching content and methods were planned by the preschool teacher, and her teaching methods and content did not involve MI theory. There were only four sessions of the preschool class each week. The formal seating arrangements for the preschool class contrasted with the layout for play in the MI related areas (see Appendix H). All children mainly enjoyed the preschool class, and showed their strong preference for the preschool teacher: 'She is very kind', 'She treats us very well', and 'She is very nice to children'. During the drawing activities of 'my favourite...at kindergarten', nine children drew a picture of a preschool class, reflecting their positive feelings about the preschool class and the teacher. Ru said: 'I like the preschool class because the teacher is my favourite teacher'. Then she explained her drawing (see Figure 6.11): 'This is me in the preschool class, behind is my best friend, Yun...we all like this class'.



Figure 6.11: Ru's drawing of her favourite preschool class

In my observation, I noted that the preschool teacher always looked patient and encouraging when she worked with children. Thus, children were keen to receive her praise. Nan also drew a picture reflecting her preference for the preschool class (see Figure 6.12), and she said: 'I like having the preschool class and I like to answer questions [when the teacher invites me to stand up to answer her questions]'.



Figure 6.12: Nan's drawing of answering questions in the preschool class

Nan showed that she was keen to display her knowledge and enjoyed opportunities to answer questions, which subsequently provided opportunities to be praised by the preschool teacher.

Interestingly, all children showed positive enjoyment of the preschool class although the teaching approach was traditionally teacher-centred and the preschool teacher had not explicitly employed any aspects of MI theory in her teaching. I observed some of her classes and noted that she was skilled in using an approach that was made explicit in MI theory, in building on children's interests, here their interests in imaginative worlds. For example, Mei mentioned that 'learning math [in the preschool class] is like doing magic with numbers' and '...j, q, x [the alphabets of Pinyin] are family members in the Pinyin Kingdom'. The preschool teacher had invented a story of 'the Pinyin Kingdom' to help the children to learn and remember Pinyin. I also observed that even when she was marking one child's exercise, other children liked to gather round her. For example, when the preschool teacher was marking Han's piece of writing, she said to Kai:

*Preschool teacher: Han, look at this here, your writing is beautiful! There are just a few errors. I think you can do it better next time if you keep writing attentively.*

*Han: Yes, thank you, teacher!*

The preschool teacher talked to the child in a very friendly and encouraging manner. Han, accordingly, showed a positive attitude, accepting the teacher's corrections and suggestions. Meanwhile, other children were often around the teacher to watch and listen attentively.

#### 6.2.1.3. The English class

The children made different comments about the English teacher's class, such as 'I like Mark [the English teacher], and his class is very interesting. Mark plays games with us, and tells us stories' (Nan); 'Mark teaches us to cook, that's my favourite activity' (Ming). Children mostly showed how much they liked the English teacher and his class when talking about him.

However, although six children said they 'liked Mark and his class', their responses to research activities sometimes showed something different. For example, whilst Kai, a Chinese boy initially said he 'liked Mark and his class' he placed the picture of the English class under the 'Sad Face' during the research activity of 'sorting pictures'. He explained 'I don't understand what Mark says sometimes, so I think the English class is not always fun'. Qiqi also noticed the English teacher's limited Chinese when she was drawing a picture of her favourite person at kindergarten (see Figure 6.13). She said: 'This is Mark. He can't speak [in Chinese], so he shows a 'thumbs up' to me and this means I am brilliant...'



Figure 6.13: Qiqi's drawing of her favourite English teacher

The children whose first language was Chinese sometimes struggled to follow the English teacher's instructions due to their limited English language skills. On the other hand, the children whose first language was English mostly enjoyed the English class and gave positive comments.

#### 6.2.1.4. Homework

Usually the lead teacher and the preschool teacher gave children homework, whereas the English teacher did not. In Chapter Five, I discussed the parents' opinions about whether their children liked homework or not. In my research with children, I also found that four children explicitly complained about homework, saying, for example, 'I don't like homework' (Kai) and 'homework...is boring...'(Han), whilst other children expressed their enjoyment of homework. For example, Mei said:

*I still feel [that] the Chinese class and the preschool class are more interesting. I just like learning very much (我就是喜欢学习). So I think everything is interesting. Having the preschool class and doing homework are both fun.*

Mei demonstrated her strong interest in learning. Ru, too, drew a picture (see Figure 6.14) and explained: 'My friends and I all like the preschool class, and we like doing homework'.



Figure 6.14: Ru's drawing of the preschool class and doing homework



However, some children's views were complex. Qiqi drew a picture (see Figure 6.15) about likes and dislikes and she said: 'I don't like doing homework, but I can write it very quickly'.



Figure 6.15: Qiqi's drawing of doing homework.

Qiqi expressed negative feelings towards homework, but highlighted her competence in completing it, suggesting that difficulties were not the reason.

Taking an overview of the kindergarten's formal teaching and learning activities, it seems that children's enjoyment of different classes and homework activities depended on their individual interests. The children generally perceived the following as formal learning experiences: activities in the Chinese class, the preschool class and the English class such as reading and writing Chinese characters in books, reading and writing Pinyin, and doing maths, as well as doing homework.

### **6.2.2. Play**

As discussed in Section 6.1.1, when explaining why children attend kindergarten, two children explicitly stated that they could 'play' at kindergarten. Also, when asked about what they liked to do at kindergarten, most the children

stated they 'liked to play'. This suggests that play was one of the most significant aspects of their kindergarten lives. In order to access children's deeper feelings about kindergarten, I organised small group discussions with children. During these discussions, children were keen to share and discuss their play-based experiences.

Generally, the children most often used the word 'play' to mean the opportunity and time for 'free play', especially 'free play' in the areas of play provision in the classroom, as well as in the playground area outdoors. For example, I posed the question, 'What and where do you like to play at kindergarten?' Yun explained she liked 'drawing play' in the art area with her friends, adding 'to draw some stuff we want to draw'. Lili also said: 'I like to play dressing-up games with Ru as I like it in the role-play area'. Other children, like Fei and Lei, talked about only one kind of play, in this case playing together with Lego and magnetic toys in the science area. After noting that most children talked about play experiences linked with areas of play provision, I then asked: 'Besides playing in areas of play provision, what and where else do you play?' Tao, Han and Jing all shared the view that they enjoyed 'playing outdoor games'. Jing also explained that she enjoyed 'free play outside' which for her meant 'playing balls in the playground by ourselves [without teachers overseeing]'. However, it is worth noting that most children associated 'reading books' in the book corner with 'learning' instead of 'play'. It seemed that children mainly talked about 'play' linked with particular areas, toys and peers, and they considered play as the activities over which they had free choice in terms of space, materials and partners as these related to their own interests.

While undertaking fieldwork, it was rare to see children engaged in free play or to observe that teachers had scheduled and planned sessions in which children were able to play freely. Also, children were aware of changes in the time for 'learning' and 'play' in the final year of their kindergarten life. For example, Yun, when asked about opportunities for play commented, 'I have time to play, but just bits [of time]'. Lili similarly explained 'There is little time for us to play...' and Qiqi stated 'Occasionally, Mark takes us to the playground for free play'. Tao also explained that, 'I could play more when I was young [than at current stage]'. It seemed that children felt they had very limited time for free play in this particular class due to the impact of programme change in line with transition from kindergarten to primary school.

In addition to the limited time allocated for free play, some activities identified as play-based by the practitioners and parents, especially activities linked to formal teaching and learning, were considered to be 'learning (学习)' rather than 'play (玩)' by children. For example, during a teacher-led whole class activity of Action Jumping (in the lead teacher's words: 'an outdoor game'), Fei explained, 'we are not playing, we are learning jumping [skills] following teacher's instruction'. In line with this view, Ru also described the whole class drawing activity in the Chinese class as 'work for learning' rather than 'play' because 'I must draw what teacher tells us to draw'. These examples of children's interpretations of activities seemed to be reflecting the impact of cultural influences about the importance of 'learning' for this age group. For example, it was common to hear the practitioners highlight the value of learning during whole class activities.

Interestingly, four or more children initially reported that they came to kindergarten to 'learn', something they saw as related to academic achievement. This might be because children had taken on some adults' perceptions and expectations towards kindergarten education related to academic achievement. However, towards the later stages of the research, they became more open in expressing a desire to play at kindergarten. Generally, children wanted to play and they preferred to play freely, without adults overseeing their play.

### **6.2.3. Areas of play provision**

One of the key features of the MI programme was its implementation through areas of play provision. This was seen by four of the six practitioners as a key strategy for achieving the educational goals and aims of the MI programme (see Section 4.2.1). The children generally showed positive views of the play areas, while they also wanted to have more time in the play areas in their daily routine. For example, Lei told me:

*I like playing in play areas. We have little time to play there, because we have [to spend more time in] the preschool class.*

Susu also noticed that 'We could play for a longer time [in the areas of play provision] before, but now just for a while'. Both children's perception was that attending the preschool class had reduced their opportunities for 'play'.

In explaining what they liked to do in the classroom, all children stated they liked to 'play' in the different play areas and regarded it as an opportunity to follow their particular interests. For example, Fei drew a picture of his favourite activity at kindergarten (see Figure 6.16): 'I like to play with Lego with Lei in the science area'.

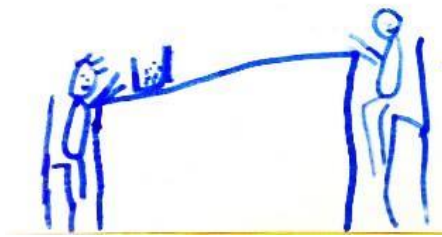


Figure 6.16: Fei's drawing of playing Lego with Lei in the science area

Another boy, Kai, stated: 'I would like to play in the construction area every day', whereas Ru said, 'Singing a song in the music area is my favourite activity'. Lili, on the other hand, liked the art area and the role-play area. She drew a picture (see Figure 6.17) of her preference for activities in the art area, and said: 'This is me. I am designing fashionable clothes on a flower'.



Figure 6.17: Lili's drawing of her design for fashionable clothes in the art area

Qiqi said her favourite area for play was the natural science area. She explained the details of her drawing of this preferred area (see Figure 6.18): 'I can play with an electromagnetic circle set (电磁圈), binoculars (望远镜), magnifying lens (放大镜), plant seeds (种子) and a little turtle'.



Figure 6.18: Qiqi's drawing of her play in the natural science area

Qiqi expressed not only her preference for the particular play area, but also her detailed knowledge about the resources provided in the area.

It was less common to hear children talk about the literacy area and the book corner as favourite areas. Ru explained: 'I don't like to play in the literacy area because writing a letter is too hard for me.' Moreover, Qiqi and Ru both considered the activities of 'reading and writing in the literacy area' to be a kind of 'learning', rather than 'play'.

#### **6.2.4. Outdoor activities**

Outdoor activities were sorted as the favourite activity at kindergarten by 13 children (see Table 6.1). Their favourite outdoor activities included 'doing aerobics', 'running', 'bouncing balls', 'skipping with a rope', 'climbing large scale equipment', 'slides and swings', as well as exploring 'unusual and hidden' spaces and the natural world'.

The children were keen to comment on outdoor activities and resources used for outdoor activities. Five children, including Nan, enjoyed teacher-led outdoor physical activities, such as 'doing aerobics [做操]' and 'running'. Nine children talked about how they enjoyed 'playing with others outside'. For example, Han explained: 'I like playing ball games with Lei'. Jing made a similar point when she was drawing a picture of her friend Ru (see Figure 6.19), saying: 'This is my friend, Ru. We like playing with skipping ropes outside together.'



Figure 6.19: Jing's drawing of playing outdoors with her best friend

However, three children, including Tao and Ming, also saw outside as a space where they could be free from adult control. As Tao and Ming said, they liked to 'get involved in [outdoor] adventures' and explore 'secret spaces' outdoors without adult supervision. They took photographs of some 'unusual' outdoor spaces (see Figure 6.20), for example, the 'back yard' and 'monster prints there'. The 'monster prints' were in fact made by cats and dogs.



Figure 6.20: Tao and Ming's photographs of their favourite outdoor spaces

Lei similarly expressed his preference for the outdoor space. He took photographs (see Figure 6.21) of the 'big tubes' where he 'could hide himself [from adult view]' in the front yard and the 'trap' which 'he and his friends made there'.



Figure 6.21: Lei's photographs of his favourite outdoor spaces

In addition, when Ming was drawing a picture of 'My favourite...at kindergarten', he explained not only his preference for outdoor play, but also his dislike of the lack of outdoor experiences in some weather conditions (see Figure 6.22):

*What I like very much is to play with Teacher Guo in the playground...What I don't like is...we can't go and play outside when it is raining.*



Figure 6.22: Ming's drawing of his outdoor play experiences

Six children talked about playground equipment supporting their outdoor physical play, including slides, swings and a climbing frame. For example, Han enjoyed 'free play' on the large scale equipment (大型玩具) in the playground, and he took photographs of it (see Figure 6.23): 'I like this [the large scale equipment] because children can play with the swings and slides'.



Figure 6.23: Han's photograph of his favourite outdoor equipment

In contrast, Kai did not like the slide. He drew a picture (see Figure 6.24), saying: 'I don't like to play on the slide. It is too short!' Kai was aware that the slide was no longer challenging for children of his age group.





Figure 6.24: Kai's drawing of the short slide on the playground

Five children set themselves challenges to practice their physical skills outdoors, such as 'jumping', 'balancing', 'climbing' and 'bouncing balls'. For example, Mei described the fun and shared her sense of competence when she was drawing a picture of playing with skipping ropes (Figure 6.25): 'I love the skipping ropes. I can jump 10 times without any break'.

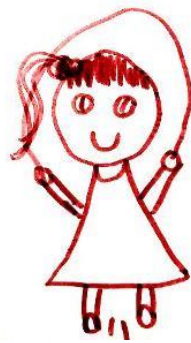


Figure 6.25: Mei's drawing of playing skipping ropes

Whilst six children preferred to play outdoors with manufactured outdoor play equipment, other children liked and described play with things from the natural world. For example, two children were keen to talk about the little vegetable garden at kindergarten that they were not allowed into very often. Mei and Nan took a photograph (see Figure 6.26) of the little garden as one of their favourite outdoor places at kindergarten: 'This is our little vegetable garden. We like here... (Mei)', and 'Look! the little calabash we sowed the seeds of has grown up! (Nan)'.



Figure 6.26: Mei and Nan's photographs of the little vegetable garden

Whilst almost all children spoke of the fun they had during outdoor activities, one child, Susu, was less enthusiastic about play outdoors. She explained her preference for less active indoor activities: 'I don't like playing outside...But I like colouring and drawing'. It may be relevant that Susu suffered from asthma, and her mother restricted her outdoor play opportunities. Susu was aware of her health problem and she was knowledgeable about it.

Overall, it seemed that 14 of 15 children were interested in outdoor activities. Although five children sometimes enjoyed teacher-led activities outdoors, nine children expressed stronger enjoyment of 'free' play with peers outdoors, and sometimes with a playful adult 'playmate' i.e. the English teacher and myself.

#### **6.2.5. Special events**

Along with participating in the MI programme, children were keen to comment on their engagement in special events and activities. These included kindergarten trips, sports days, family fun days, festival celebrations and a graduation celebration. Although these were relatively rare events at kindergarten, children mostly expressed a positive experience of such activities. These activities mostly took place outdoors, even outside the kindergarten site, and some of the activities involved parents.

Children showed their understanding and knowledge about these activities and all children showed a preference for kindergarten trips, sports days, and the family fun days. For example, Jing said: 'I like all the special events activities because my mum and younger brother come to cheer for me'. Tao also commented: 'There are a lot of games to play with adults as we like...sometimes we can go out [of kindergarten] .... a lot of fun!' Children expressed that they wanted to have out-of-classroom and out-of-kindergarten activities beyond the routine programme. Also they liked the involvement of adults, especially parents, in these kinds of activities, which provided opportunities for interactions with adults. However, three children expressed negative feelings about their parents' absence from special events. Kai told me: 'Sometimes I don't like special events because my mum and dad can't always attend.' He pulled a long face as he said this, sticking out his lower lip, expressing his sadness.

As regards the graduation ceremony, the children mostly looked forward to it. For example, Ru said: 'The graduation ceremony means that we have finished kindergarten and will soon go up to primary school'. Lili took a photograph (see Figure 6.27) of a kindergarten photograph showing a previous graduation ceremony, which was displayed in the corridor near the main entrance of the kindergarten building. She explained:

*I like this because we are going to have the graduation ceremony soon. I will dress up the same as them...because we are very grown up now.*



Figure 6.27: Lili's photograph of a graduation ceremony photograph

The children were very keen to attend the ceremony as it linked in with their sense of being grown-up, their self-affirmation and competence. Six girls showed a positive attitude towards rehearsing for the graduation ceremony: 'Rehearsals are fun. I like them'. However, others especially boys, thought the activity stressful and exhausting, saying: 'I feel tired...it's boring', and 'I don't want to rehearse now'.

It can be seen that children demonstrated knowledge and understanding of special events, and generally commented on them positively but sometimes negatively, linked to individual interests.

## **6.3 Children's peer cultures**

This section considers children's peer cultures, an important aspect of children's experiences of their kindergarten life.

### **6.3.1. Friendships and culture**

Children often showed that they enjoyed time and activities where they were able to play and do other things, sometimes with one friend or sometimes in a

small group of selected friends who shared similar interests. During the 'kindergarten guided tour' activity, Ru told me:

*Qiqi, Mei and Yun and me are good friends... we like to play together... And we also draw pictures and make paper handcrafts in the art area together...And that's what we do.*

It seems that Ru felt more comfortable and confident doing things with her friends, and this was very important for her. Similarly, Lei talked about the importance of playing collaboratively with Fei when they were playing with Lego in the science area:

*We are making a special sword together... we helped each other to complete it...because only we two know how to make it... then we [are going to] pretend to fight with it...*

Lei showed a positive attitude towards playing with a peer who shared the same interest with him and he seemed to gain a sense of achievement, making the 'special sword' with Fei. This was something which he might not have been able to do on his own. Moreover, Fei spoke about his sad feelings when playing alone: 'It is boring to play just by myself.... It is far more fun to play with friends'. Lei and Fei were both only children in their families. It seemed interaction with peers was particularly significant for them.

Three children expressed a preference for playing within a large group of peers, and they usually took a leading role among their peers. For example, Mei told me: 'I feel it is more interesting to play with lots of children at the same time'. I observed that it was often to see Mei tried to help other children when they had difficulties or sometimes to remind them of rules governing the different areas at kindergarten. As discussed in Section 6.1.2.1, in Lei's words, Mei 'always liked to monitor others (总是喜欢管别人)'. Mei's example suggests that child-led

group activities provided enjoyable opportunities for the children to develop their individuality as leaders.

Two children sought peer support when they were experiencing difficulties and other children were able to provide this. For example, Yun said: 'I like Mei because she is very kind and caring, and she always comforts me when I feel sad'. In fact, other children also showed their support and concern when Lili was accidentally injured during an art activity. One boy and four girls expressed their concern and were keen to help Lili dress the wound on her finger (see Appendix I). This again shows that children enjoyed giving and receiving peer support within the group.

All children showed positive feelings about playing with their peers. However, at times Susu enjoyed playing by herself. She had a health problem and said: 'I just want to do this puzzle on my own... they [other children] are noisy'. Susu showed her independence and ability to speak up for herself in asking for self-governed time and space. Although children mostly loved to play with friends, this does not mean they enjoyed it all the time.

In making friends at the kindergarten, children demonstrated that they had learned to be selective in their choice of friends and sometimes tried to exclude other children. Once, during the reading time after lunch, Lili brought a new book named 'The Little Princess'. Nan and Ru, who were usually thought of as 'best-friends' by Lili, wanted to read the book together with Lili. But Lili did not allow Nan to read with her:

*Nan: Lili, why won't you let me to read it?*  
*Lili: You didn't let me read yours last time.*

*Nan: (Speechless for a few seconds) ... But am I your best friend?  
Lili: We're not best friends with you anymore!*

Later that day I saw these two girls play well with each other and call each other 'my best friend' afterwards. I did not observe any evidence of the reason for Lili's change in feelings towards Nan. This suggests that children's experience of friendship and the peer group was dynamic that it could change for reasons not always clear to an adult observer.

Two children saw mealtime as another enjoyable and important occasion for them to spend time with their friends. For example, during the drawing activity of 'My favourite...at kindergarten', Jing drew a picture (see Figure 6.28) about having meals with her friends and said:

*These are Qiqi, Lei and Ru ... they are my best friends ... I like mealtime because I enjoy eating meals with them.*

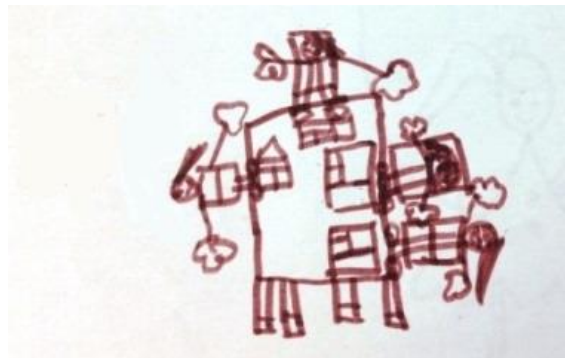


Figure 6.28: Jing's drawing of her preference for having meals with friends

Jing's experience of mealtime was different from that of Ming, who thought 'mealtime is boring and I just eat quietly', as discussed previously. Children also highlighted their preference for eating together outdoors. Without exception, all the children expressed the view that they liked picnic and snack times during kindergarten trips. As Yun said: 'It's a lot of fun to go to a park and have our

snacks there' (see Appendix I). Such mealtime appeared to be less formal than at the kindergarten and children enjoyed the time when they could talk and eat more freely.

At this kindergarten, the classes were divided in terms of age groups. There were not many opportunities to meet and build relationships with children in other age groups. However, the children demonstrated an understanding of the needs of younger children and talked about their caring responsibilities for 'younger sisters and brothers (小弟弟/小妹妹)' at the kindergarten. For example, Lili and Ming reminded other children to be quiet when they passed a junior classroom where children aged three to four years were sleeping during nap time. Also, it was common to see children, especially girls laugh when they saw younger children doing aerobics in the playground during outdoor time. They made remarks such as 'How cute these babies are!' As the top group at the kindergarten in terms of age, these children enjoyed feeling grown up in relation to the younger children.

Generally, there was a lack of opportunities for children to play outside their own age-group. However, some of children attended after-kindergarten classes and clubs (园内课外兴趣班) which provided extended recreationally and culturally-focused or physically-focused curricula. Extra payment was made for such classes and clubs. For example, Fei, Tao and Jing attended a drum performance class (架子鼓表演班) from 5.30-6.30pm on each Tuesday and Thursday in the kindergarten's multi-function room. Other younger children from younger age groups also attended the class. Thus, these children made friends with the younger children at drum class and Tao liked the wider friendship group



saying 'I like drum class...I have some younger friends there'.

Moreover, six children attended preschool classes outside of the kindergarten (园外学前班) and experienced daily setting transitions as part of their early years' experience. Han told me that he enjoyed the opportunity to learn and play with 'friends who are not my classmates from the same kindergarten.' In Han's mind, such classes provided him opportunities to make friends with children outside the kindergarten.

All children were also keen to talk about their upcoming transitions from kindergarten to primary school. Transitions seemed to be regarded in a positive way and lead to feelings of pride. Ru pointed to her drawing about her future school (see figure 6.29) and stated:

*This is my future primary school...I want to show you something that I will like there... this is a big classroom...this is a performance hall and there is a super big playground...I'll go to school soon...*



Figure 6.29: Ru's drawing of her future school

Ru had a clear understanding of what was going to happen when she went to school. Another girl, Lili, also showed positive feelings towards her future school and even made reference to university in talking about her drawing of a friend (see Figure 6.30):

*I will go to school and make new friends there soon...This is not me, it is Mei who will leave kindergarten and go to university soon.*



Figure 6.30: Lili's drawing of her friend going to school

Lili's drawing shows her warm feelings towards Mei and her expectation for the transition from kindergarten to future school.

Within a broader consideration of children's relationships, animals were also considered to be close friends in the children's minds. It was common to hear children talk about caring for pets and animals. There was a turtle in the nature and science area for children to care for and observe. Two children were very keen on this area. Han often watched the turtle and said: 'The turtle will hide in its shell if it is hurt'. Qiqi suggested: 'We can put more water in it; otherwise the turtle will die.' Tao also talked about his pet at home: 'I like dogs and I have one at home because my Dad says dogs are human's best friends.' These children expressed a sense of caring and friendship whilst they developed interests in animals.

### **6.3.2. Gender**

Peer friendships in early childhood are often linked to gender issues in terms of play preference. This section explores relevant gender issues from the

children's standpoint at the Chinese MI kindergarten.

In this study, friendships with children of the same gender were often apparent. The girls were less keen on playing with boys and the boys less keen on playing with girls. For example, Lei said: 'I don't like to play with girls...but only with boys.' Yun said: 'Boys are naughty, so I like to play with girls'. During the drawing activity of 'My favourite...at kindergarten', the children mostly drew peers of the same gender as their best friends. Qiqi was the most popular 'favourite friend' for five girls, but two boys drew her too. For example, when Han, a boy, was drawing a picture of Qiqi, a girl (Figure 6.31), he told me that Qiqi was his favourite child at kindergarten, and then he explained with a low voice: 'I tell you a secret. I like Qiqi because I think she is very pretty'.



Figure 6.31: Han's drawing of his favourite child

During the activity of 'My favourite...at kindergarten', the boys mostly told me that they liked 'cars', 'spaceships', 'dinosaurs', 'playing with construction toys', while the girls preferred 'soft toys', 'Barbie dolls', 'fashion designing', and 'dressing up as a princesses'. Children generally seemed to describe preferences for gendered toys and activities.

During my observation, I noticed that the boys and the girls often dominated different play areas, i.e. seven girls always dominated the role-play area and the

art area, whereas five boys dominated the science area and construction area. Sometime, children even refused to allow children of the other gender to join in and play with them. The example relating to Tao, Yun, Nan and Qiqi (see Section 6.1.2), to some extent, exemplifies this. However, the children did not all like to play in the same areas and three childrens' interests cut across gender stereotypes. As mentioned in Section 6.2.3, Qiqi said her favourite area for play was the natural science area, which was mentioned by most boys as favourite area.

An example of children being keenly aware of gender was that four children, especially boys, felt unhappy about being constrained in their choice of favourite activities owing to the limited number of children in each play area. They complained:

*Han: I don't like to play in any other area except the construction area.*  
*Lei: I don't feel interested to play in this [role-play] area.*

This seemed to be because the boys believed that the role-play area was 'for girls' and the construction area was 'for boys'.

I also observed that, even if the girls and boys sometimes participated in the same play areas, they often used them differently. For example, when they played within the art area the children generally assumed typical gendered roles, particularly in that girls often enjoyed drawing princesses, flowers or other girls, whilst boys often drew animals, cars and toy weapons. This difference in gender preferences could also be seen in how the girls played at activities like 'having babies' or 'making a cake' while boys were likely to play at 'being monsters' and 'racing cars' in various daily activities.

Moreover, I observed that the classroom staff often worked with children in different areas that linked to their own gender or to gender stereotypes. The children also showed awareness of this. For example, Tao said 'Teacher Mai [the lead teacher] often works with us in the art area, and does what girls do', while Yun noted: 'Teacher Zhou [the teaching and childcare assistant] helps us girls to brush our hair'. Also, Kai added: ' Mark [the English teacher] always likes to play with the Lego with us in the science area'.

These manifestations showed how these children understood the issues of gender relations, and what they thought girls and women could and should do, and what they believed boys and men could and should do. Children's clear preferences were often exhibited in their games, perhaps because this was one way in which children could create identities and begin to identify with their own gender.

## **6.4 Discussion**

This section will synthesise the findings from children's perspective with relevant literature. It will focus on children's understanding of authority and power within the kindergarten environment, their experiences of the kindergarten's curriculum and pedagogy, social experiences at kindergarten and the distinct experiences of being girls and boys.

Regarding children's views of authority and power, they were generally keen to talk about their understanding and feelings about the roles of different adults in

the kindergarten and the relationships between adults and children. They mostly understood adult roles as linked to an authoritative and supervisory mode of teaching and care. They recognised that adults wanted them to show autonomy at times while exerting authority over them at other times. Although the children felt some opportunities for autonomy in relation to making choices in the areas of play provision, they still felt that they were intensively directed and controlled by adults. This can be seen in the examples of children discussing how it was adults who decided that they needed to go to kindergarten, what they had to eat there, how they had to play and when they could rest. They indicated that there was almost no opportunity to avoid anything they disliked as all these areas of kindergarten life were prescribed by adults.

The children's views and experiences seem to have been influenced, to a greater or lesser extent for individuals, by the wider Chinese cultural and educational tradition, which is embedded in Confucianism. The Confucian tradition advocates that seniority should always be respected and obeyed by those who are younger, seen as inferiors (Hadley, 2003). Also, in terms of teachers, the traditional view is that their teaching doctrines should be followed by students without question (Liu, Pan and Sun, 2005). Children in this study always referred to adults as 'cleverer' and more capable and seven children considered themselves as 'not grown-up', as 'not clever' and 'less able'. Most children looked upon the kindergarten staff members as 'teachers' who always have a higher status, as taught in a Confucian society. In their minds, a child who plays could not have equal authority with a teacher. This view seemed to be reflected in their experience that teachers generally did not act as play partners, except for the English teacher and me, the researcher, both from a

Western educational background and appearing less authoritative than other staff in front of children. Whilst the contemporary and Western MI programme was considered by adults as the main guideline in relation to the kindergarten's curriculum and pedagogy, children's views suggest that roles and daily practices were embedded in the much older Chinese tradition. This finding highlights the inevitable interference of the traditional education ideology with the establishment of MI learning environment which prioritises children's abilities to make choices and exercise autonomy.

Whilst the children were keenly aware of adult authority within the kindergarten, they nevertheless expressed positive feelings about their relationships with the kindergarten staff. This also confirms Corsaro's (2009, p301) argument that young children construct their own cultural world, but "this does not mean that such cultures are separate from the adult world". The findings in this study evidence this as it was common to hear children comment on how kind a member of staff was and how well teachers had treated them. They mostly understood that the teachers loved children very much. They were also confident that staff members would deal with any problems and troubles which they would not be able to sort out themselves at kindergarten. For example, children had good knowledge as to who to go to if there was anything they could not do for themselves, for instance if anyone needed physical health support, they could ask for help from the teaching and childcare assistant, as Yun's case showed (see Section 6.1.4.1). Sometimes children enjoyed close physical contacts with adults and seemed confident that, in this respect, the adults at kindergarten could offer them a reliable and secure relationship. This kind of attachment and dependence on adults for emotional support reinforced their perception of the

benign but authoritative learning environment.

On the other hand, the children sometimes showed their independence from the adults. I often asked children: 'Do you need any help?' Six of them always responded 'I can do it' or 'Let me do it myself'. Such responses confirmed the argument that children wanted to see themselves as active agents independent of adults (James and James, 2004; Qvortrup, Corsaro and Honig, 2009; Corsaro, 2011), despite the experience of high levels of regulation by adults. Occasionally, if the lead teacher and the teaching and childcare assistant were out of the classroom, and I was the only adult (not a teacher in their mind) left with the children, they, especially three boys, would stop working and start to make a noise. Mei would remind them: 'Be quiet please! We should discipline ourselves and obey the rules all the time, even when the teachers are not here!' Mei's sense of managing other children by adopting an adult-like role was rooted in her independence and awareness of self-regulation and self-management, as suggested by Whitebread and Bingham (2011). In terms of MI theory, Mei demonstrated unusually high levels of intrapersonal intelligence. However, it could be argued that for most children the daily experience of being regulated by adults was particularly salient, often seeming to cut across their own sense of autonomy.

Turning to children's views and experience of the kindergarten programme, the children talked about their learning experiences of the Chinese class, English class and preschool class, and showed a variety of preferences linked to their different strengths and areas of weakness in terms of MI theory (Gardner, 1993; 1999). Four children, directly or indirectly, showed their enjoyment of and



confidence in having a Chinese class, and they felt especially proud to see their own academic learning outcomes and progress, whereas other children made negative comments, focusing on their experience of being criticised and controlled by the Chinese teacher which indicate that adult authority was experienced in a negative way by these children. The English class was associated with storytelling and cooking activities; and such teaching content was highly rated by children. However, two children also pointed out that there was a communication barrier in the English class due to the language limitation related to their lack of English or the teacher's lack of Chinese. The findings suggest the importance of bilingualism especially in learning English in the Chinese context at kindergarten level but also highlight challenges. These are in line with Yu's (2000) argument in his study of kindergarten's bilingual education and practice in China. In addition, it seems the children in this study found the expectation to communicate in English challenging although it was valued by the parents and society more generally.

All children showed a strong preference for the teaching approach and methods used by the preschool teacher who they saw as encouraging them rather than criticizing, although she had no knowledge and training in terms of MI theory and practice. Such diverse experiences suggest that, from the children's perspectives, the individual teaching approach and style of particular practitioners plays an important role in shaping children's feelings about the teaching and learning programme.

The children identified clear boundaries between what they categorised as 'learning' and 'play', as discussed in Section 6.2. They were aware that learning

usually involved tables, chairs, blackboard, chalks, pencils, notebooks, textbooks and a kindergarten bag, and was connected with words like 'grown up' and 'clever', with learning activities always adult initiated and led. In contrast, they saw 'play' as referring to activities which they could freely choose and lead, such as child-initiated activities in the areas of play provision, such as drawing, painting, role-play games, playing with intellectually challenging toys, and the free play outdoor activities. This evidences the argument of Wood (2004) and Rogers and Evans (2008) who suggest that 'play' in early years should be the activities that children can make free choice for the space, time, materials and play partners. The children in this study generally felt that they had opportunities to make free choices in areas of play provision and enjoyed child-led play despite a sense that opportunities were limited. It seems that for this age group where children are in the transition to primary school the implementation of the play-based elements of the MI programme were limited. This is also related to the wider pressures of society as discussed in Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa's (2009) and Lin's (2009) studies.

Homework, which was regarded by practitioners as an effective means of reviewing and consolidating children's knowledge of learning, was perceived by children differently depending on their individual interests. While two children primarily commented on their enjoyment of doing homework, four children expressed negative feelings about unnecessary and repetitive writing tasks. The children mostly described relatively limited experiences of reading for pleasure, and referred to reading as a formal learning activity. They also understand that they should give priority to learning by 'finishing homework first, and then go off to play'. As a result, the concept of homework is closely related

to the concept of learning which is distinguished from play by children. The children's perception of 'learning' and 'play' confirms the findings of Garrick et al.'s (2010) study where young children in reception classes identified a clear distinction between 'work' and 'play'.

All children commented in particular on their enjoyment of the play provision areas, which gave them the choice to play with what they liked. Their preference for a given area depended on their individual interests which were often gender related. They made a clear distinction between learning and play, and they did not regard those activities termed 'play' by adults as 'play' unless they could select what to play themselves. This confirms Liu, Pan and Sun's (2005) argument that what makes an activity something that children enjoy is their autonomy in making choices. The children in my research made a direct link between play and free choice. For example, drawing pictures and doing exercise with teacher were learning tasks if they were assigned by teachers. However, if children themselves decided to do these activities in the play area, they would be defined as play. This is where the conceptualisation of learning and play is similar within the Chinese context as compared with the Western context. Whilst there is a number of literature on the dichotomy of work and play for young children in English settings, such as Howard, Jenvey and Hill (2006), Rogers and Evans (2006; 2007) and Garrick et al. (2010), the children in my study perceived the dichotomy of learning and play, as demonstrated in the above examples.

With respect to children's social experiences and peer relationship, the study also finds that young children mostly enjoyed their peer relationships and social

experiences at the kindergarten. They were as keen to talk about their role within a group as they were about their individual interests. In particular, they valued social activities such as mealtime, and playing or working with friends, as well as opportunities to care for others. For example, they showed care and concern when other children were upset or injured. They also valued opportunities for cross-age group relationships as expressed in the older children's interest in caring for younger ones. It was also notable that they appeared to look forward to going up to primary school. Children's enthusiasm for peer relationships can be linked back to the earlier discussion about the One-child policy in China (see Section 2.2.7) which has created generations of one child families within which the only child often wants to have peer friendships (Gu, 2006; Xiao and Feng, 2010; Bao, 2011). One often cited reason of why children liked to go to the kindergarten was that it gave them the opportunity to play with other children. It is not surprising that most children expressed strong interests in playing with their peers at the kindergarten as they often felt lonely at home. This phenomenon has drawn the official attention as outlined in the latest national guideline for ECEC (China MoE, 2012) which emphasises the importance of supporting children in their personal, social and emotional development and providing rich opportunities for children to build positive relationship with peers and children from different age groups, as well as adults.

With respect to children's experience of gender issues mostly raised by play preference, most children were aware of gender differences amongst their peers. Girls and boys in this study spoke with 'different voices' in their experiences of kindergarten. There is a broad agreement in the Western

literature (Thorne, 1993; MacNaughton, 2000; Aydt and Corsaro, 2003; Bornstein and Suizzo, 2006; Cherny and Dempsey, 2010) that young children show different kinds of behaviour and preferences in their play, including play in educational settings. As noted by MacNaughton (2000), many teaching practices and strategies, including provision for free play, influence the development of children's gendered identities. In this study, boys and girls consistently expressed preferences for different areas of provision and demonstrated a range of ways of dominating the areas they chose, as in girls' domination of arts and role play areas and boys' control of the construction area. There was also evidence of children identifying with adult models of gendered interests, e.g. English teacher with the Lego, female teacher in the art area.

Three children, however, had challenged the gendered choices of other children when their access to particular areas of play was denied, such as the example discussed previously when Tao tried to join in three girls' game in the music area, but was refused by the girls. Another example is Qiqi whose favourite area for play was the natural science area, which was most boys' favourite area. This suggests that children's gendered play choices are likely to relate to patterns of strengths that can be reflected in later achievements. This is directly linked to the MI theory which emphasises the development of individual strengths. However, my findings indicate that whilst the MI theory talks about individual differences, it does not highlight how individual differences may be linked to the gendered choices that children make.

To sum up, the important themes such as children's dilemma of adult power and authority, their articulation of their interests and preferences, their

conceptualisation of play and learning, their fluid peer relationship, and their challenges to the gendered choices at kindergarten, all these findings emerged from this study suggest that children in my study perceived their MI kindergarten life as positive and enjoyable, although their perceptions and feelings may vary individually and change temporally. Since my study is the first research on children's perspectives in a private kindergarten in China, these original findings will significantly contribute to the existing literature on ECEC in both Chinese and Western contexts.

## **Chapter 7 Conclusion**

This concluding chapter is divided into six parts. It begins with a summary of the main findings from this study, addressing the research questions set out in Chapter One; firstly, this section summarises the main findings relating to children's views of their experiences at a private kindergarten in a Northern Chinese city; secondly, it summarises the key findings relating to adult participants, including practitioners and parents, about their perspectives on the MI curriculum and pedagogy at this Chinese kindergarten; thirdly, it summarises commonalities and differences between children's and adults' perspectives on the kindergarten curriculum and pedagogy. The second part of the chapter discusses the main issues raised in the research to inform the development of policy and practice in relation to the early years curriculum and pedagogy in private settings in China. The third part of the chapter outlines the main contribution that this study makes. Following this, the fourth part of the chapter identifies the limitations of this study and the fifth part makes recommendations for further research. The final part of the chapter provides some concluding remarks relating to the thesis.

### **7.1 Summary of the main findings**

This ethnographic study provides a comprehensive and in-depth account of practitioners', parents' and young children's views on the curriculum and pedagogy of a private kindergarten within the Chinese context. I argue that

exploring these different perspectives is significant in terms of informing the development of the early years curriculum and pedagogy in private settings in China and is significant more widely for the quality of ECEC provision in China. The main findings on the perspectives of practitioners, parents and children on the kindergarten's curriculum and pedagogy are set out below:

### **7.1.1 Play**

All practitioners and parents acknowledged the significance of play in children's learning in ECEC and valued play-based, and child-initiated activities within the MI programme. Children particularly liked the opportunities to play and initiate activities at kindergarten, such as 'drawing play' in the art area, 'playing balls in the playground' independently and 'free play on the large scale equipment' in the playground. However, despite the shared valuing of play amongst adult and children participants, play was conceptualised differently by adults and children. The practitioners and parents generally concurred with the company's official view that the kindergarten's MI programme was primarily focused on play as a vehicle for learning. However, most children viewed play differently because they saw 'play' and 'learning' as separate. For example, children identified some activities, such as the 'teacher-led whole class outdoor activity of Action Jumping' and the activities of 'reading and writing in the literacy area', as 'learning (学习)' rather than 'play (玩)', while these were believed to be play-based by the practitioners and parents. This was, especially the case for activities linked to formal teaching and learning, such as teacher-led 'storytelling' in the preschool class and the whole class 'drawing' activity in the Chinese class.



In terms of children's perception of 'learning' and 'play', the findings confirm that young children in this study made clear distinctions between 'learning' and 'play'. They understood 'learning' as involving artefacts such as tables, chairs, textbooks, exercise books, notebooks, pencils, kindergarten bags, blackboards and chalks. They saw these as connected with adult-led whole class activities like 'reading', 'writing' 'doing maths' and 'homework'. In contrast, the children conceptualised 'play' as taking place when they could make free choices in terms of what and where to play, especially the activities in the areas of play provision and outdoors, such as 'drawing play in the art area', 'dressing-up games in the role-play area', 'playing with toys in the science area', and 'free play outside'. Moreover, the children's perceptions were that 'play' comprised the activities where they could select whoever they wanted to play with, whenever they wanted to, and be free from adult supervision, although they sometimes welcomed the involvement of a playful adult.

All children enjoyed and looked forward to the opportunities for 'play' at kindergarten. They particularly enjoyed activities in their favourite areas of play provision, outdoor experiences and special events. However, children were aware that attending the preschool class had reduced their opportunities for 'play'. At the same time, children's perception and understanding of 'learning' was greatly shaped by adult expectations. The children mostly showed a clear awareness that 'learning' was an important activity in their kindergarten lives, and generally enjoyed the adult-led learning activities. This view of learning contradicts the view of adults who saw the MI curriculum as primarily play-based. However, practitioners and parents were still to some degree influenced by Chinese traditional ideas about the importance of 'learning' activities to

promote academic achievement as an important aspect of kindergarten education.

While the thinking of practitioners and parents was generally in line with the company's official view that the kindergarten's MI programme provided a wide range of opportunities for 'play', especially through the areas of play provision, children felt opportunities for 'play' at kindergarten were fairly limited. In particular, most children were clearly aware that their 'play' time was lessened during the daily routines and activities in the final year at kindergarten due to the influence of the transition from kindergarten to primary school.

### **7.1.2 Multiple Intelligences**

Although the adults, both practitioners and parents, showed different levels of understanding of MI theory and the MI programme, they were mostly positive about the underpinning idea of supporting children's learning through play in relation to their different patterns of intelligences. They generally believed that the MI programme, with its emphasis on children's individual differences, provided appropriate opportunities for child-initiated activities and various options for children to make independent choices in terms of their individual interests and strengths. At the same time, children primarily liked the opportunities to develop their individual interests in the areas of play provision linked to the specific intelligences. However, the children generally felt controlled and led by adults for most of their time at kindergarten, leaving insufficient time for child-led play.

The practitioners generally showed a positive attitude towards MI theory and the

MI programme, as can be seen in their enthusiasm for developing a pedagogy based on individual differences and in respecting children's interests. However, they showed varied levels of understanding of MI theory and the MI programme. Such differences were mainly shaped by their different educational, working and training experiences, as well as their personal attitudes to and beliefs about children and ECEC. Four of the six 'trained' practitioners saw themselves as consciously positioning themselves as observers and partners in children's play, with a role in identifying children's individual strengths in the areas of play provision. In this respect they saw themselves as following Gardner's (1993) MI theory and its approach to supporting children during the learning process. They highlighted the importance of providing rich materials and various areas of play provision to support children's learning. They also explained that they devised teaching plans and content in terms of children's interests, as well as valuing play-based activities in a child-initiated curriculum. These practitioners, however, experienced some challenges in trying to apply the MI concepts, knowledge and skills into practice for this age group. In particular, they highlighted a conflict between the core of the MI programme and traditional didactic and teacher-centred approaches, particularly in relation to the challenges of meeting parents' demands concerning their children's transition from an international MI kindergarten to primary schools within the exam-orientated educational system.

The parents, as non-specialists with no professional knowledge of MI theory and ECEC, had mostly gained their understanding of MI theory from what they had learnt about implementation of the MI programme at the kindergarten. Consequently, they mainly talked about the positive aspects of the programme

rather than commenting critically. The parents identified the MI features of the kindergarten programme as an attraction in choosing this kindergarten, although slightly less important than the aspects of high quality resources and provision for childcare or physical well-being. Although most parents had a limited knowledge of MI theory, they had some general knowledge of Western influences on ECEC. They were not particularly concerned about the specific content of the curriculum, or the details of MI theory. What mattered more to them was that the kindergarten's programme was designed and developed from a Western model of practice which they saw as different to a traditional and 'strict' teaching approach. The parents were mostly satisfied with the programme focusing on play and children's all-round development. They highly valued the pedagogy of 'learning through play' and the multiple ways in which the programme made assessments of children's learning outcomes.

While the children lacked any explicit awareness of attending an MI kindergarten, they showed some awareness that the kindergarten was organised in relation to the MI programme. Although they did not formally use the terminology 'MI', they used some relevant language for different areas of play provision which were labelled in terms of the MI programme structure. The children also showed awareness of their own strengths or weakness. For example, Ru said she did 'not like to play in the literacy area' because the activity of 'writing a letter was too hard' for her. Generally, the children liked the opportunities to play in different areas of play provision and built on their individual strengths. Moreover, while some children commented positively on the more Westernized aspects of the curriculum and pedagogy, including play, real life experiences such as cooking, and teaching content in line with their

interests and preferences, other children showed their enjoyment of learning academic knowledge. These children enjoyed participating in formal teaching classes such as Pinyin and maths, and in completing homework. They felt especially proud to see their learning outcomes and progress in these subjects which were not integral to the MI programme.

Whilst adults identified the MI programme as the main influence shaping the kindergarten's curriculum and pedagogy, children's views of their kindergarten experience suggest that they primarily enjoyed child-initiated play and liked the opportunities to develop their individual interests in the areas of play provision linked to the specific intelligences, which was regarded as the core of the MI programme by adults. However, the children felt that they had limited time for play in the areas of play provision and felt that the daily activities were mainly teacher-led. Such children's experience reflects that the daily practices actually had a more traditional academic focus than acknowledged by adults. This seems to mirror an unacknowledged tension between the Confucian influence, emphasising a teacher-centred educational approach, and implementation of a Western programme which prioritised child-initiated learning and children's autonomy.

### **7.1.3 Children's agency**

Practitioners and parents commonly recognised the importance of respecting children's rights in ECEC provision. Meanwhile, children's experience reflects their desire to be respected as individuals. The practitioners valued the aspects of the kindergarten MI programme that were about respecting children's rights, interests and individual differences, with their ideas likely to have been

influenced by Western sociological perspectives of children and childhood. Their views on children and ECEC revealed a significant shift away from a traditional Chinese emphasis on children's obedience to teachers, towards a more Western ECEC approach which provides for more freedom in terms of children's development of individuality.

Meanwhile, the parents demonstrated a good understanding of their children's interests and preferences at kindergarten, such as their favourite person and their favourite activities. They respected their children's preferences, although they did not explicitly use the term 'children's rights'. Most parents talked to their children about what they enjoyed doing at school every day, and they generally mirrored their children's responses when discussing their views during fieldwork. The parents, mainly mothers, mostly wanted their children to have a relaxed and happy childhood rather than having high expectations of academic achievement with potentially negative stress effects. Therefore, these parents were mainly concerned for their children to be happy at kindergarten. However, several mothers experienced a tension between a strong belief in the importance of an early start to an academic education alongside belief in the importance of high quality care rather than education for children in this age phase. This was particularly expressed by the parents who believed that eventually they had to tailor their views about a happy childhood with the knowledge that most children had to follow the expectations of the local educational system. Consequently, parents expected their children to learn Pinyin (the Chinese phonetic alphabet) and maths which represent primary school learning content introduced at the kindergarten stage.

Whilst the practitioners and parents did not fully recognise children as active social agents, children showed their competence in making meaning of their own experiences and contributing to the construction of their social world. All children showed their competent capacity as active agents, independent of adults at times, although the kindergarten provided limited opportunities for children's development of the autonomy and self-authority that is one of the key elements of the kindergarten MI programme. The findings suggest that for most children the experience of being regulated by adults was particularly salient, sometimes cutting across their own sense of autonomy.

Another significant finding is that the children participants were able to articulate very clearly their views of authority and power, as these related to their experiences of the kindergarten curriculum and pedagogy. Children were generally keen to talk about their understanding and feelings about the roles of different adults in the kindergarten and the relationships between adults and children. Firstly, most children understood adult roles as linked to an authoritative and supervisory mode of teaching and care. For example, although children felt they had some opportunities for autonomy in relation to making choices in the areas of play provision, they still felt that they were intensively directed and controlled by adults. Secondly, most children referred to adults as 'cleverer' and 'stronger and braver' than themselves, with a higher status, and they considered themselves as 'not grown-up', and as 'too small' and 'not clever'. Thirdly, most children expressed positive feelings about their relationships with the kindergarten staff, although aware of the authority and power of the practitioners. They were keen to look for help from staff members when they had any problems and troubles and generally had established

consistent and confident relationships with the staff members. This kind of attachment and dependence on adults for emotional support seemed to reinforce their perception of the benign but authoritative learning environment.

#### **7.1.4 Gender**

With respect to issue of gender, children's perceptions showed that this was an important aspect of their life at kindergarten. However, the adults, both practitioners and parents, seemed unaware of the gendered nature of children's experiences at kindergarten and its significance for children.

Children generally liked to play in groups with other children of the same gender and they commonly made gendered choices in their play. Generally, these were not challenged by practitioners. For example, boys and girls consistently preferred different areas of provision and demonstrated a range of ways of dominating the areas they chose, as in the girls' domination of arts and role play areas and boys' control of the construction area. Some children, however, challenged the gendered choices of other children, as in the cases of Tao when his access to particular areas of play was denied and Qiqi who showed a particular interest in the science area. Also, some children expressed an awareness of gender differences as in the view that 'boys are generally naughtier than girls'.

However, adults in the study seemed unaware of such views. The parents mostly mentioned the issue of gender such as having a daughter or a son when they introduced their family members but not related it to kindergarten curriculum and pedagogy. Only one mother expressed her concerns about her



son playing in certain areas only, but she did not link it to gender issues. The practitioners conceptualised children's choices as related to their stronger intrinsic intelligences in terms of MI theory. These may be shaped by children's wider social experiences of gender, including experience of adult roles at the kindergarten and practitioners grouping of children by gender during daily activities. Consequently, the gendered play choices of children in this study raise questions about the validity of MI theory. With the possibility that gender rather than intrinsic intelligence shapes children's choices within the areas of play provision. However, practitioners and parents showed limited awareness of such gender issues within the kindergarten.

#### **7.1.5 Peer culture**

While the children saw relationships with peers as a very important part of their daily lives at kindergarten, the adults, both practitioners and parents, did not attach the same importance to peer relationships or facilitate them. The parents were aware that their children mostly liked the opportunities to play with peers at kindergarten, and some parents also mentioned that peers were their children's favourite people at kindergarten. However, they did not seem to recognise the importance of peer relationship as much as their children. The practitioners mostly acknowledged the importance of children's social development. However, they rarely talked about issues of peer relationships during the interviews or conversations, and they did not facilitate children to develop their peer relationships during daily practice.

By contrast, the children were mostly keen to talk, work and play with peers. They mostly enjoyed playing or working with 'friends' at kindergarten and their

experience of positive relationships with peers helped children to gain a sense of enjoyment, confidence, achievement, caring, autonomy and independence. They commonly identified classmates as 'friends'. Children shared their perceptions and comments on peers in the class such as whom they thought of as the 'naughtiest' or as 'very pretty', and how these feelings impacted on their relationships. Some children were keen to support each other to build a shared sense of kindergarten rules and communal responsibility, and to shape appropriate social behaviour by their peers. Also, some children showed care for peers when they experienced difficulties or showed care for those who were younger than themselves. Additionally, children mostly valued and enjoyed social activities such as interacting and playing with peers and adults during the special events, such as kindergarten trips, family fun days, sports days, festival celebration, and the graduation ceremony. However, while adults seemed to attach limited importance to peer culture, the children desired more opportunities for developing their social and peer relationships during daily practice at kindergarten.

## **7.2 Implications of the study**

Following the above summary of main findings, this section highlights the implications of the study. This is in two parts: some principle recommendations for the development of ECEC in China, and some implications for future research into ECEC in China and beyond.

### **7.2.1 Recommendations for policy and practice**

Based on the findings from this study, there are key recommendations to be made concerning ECEC policy and practice regarding the development of curriculum and pedagogy in private kindergartens in China.

At the policy level, firstly, there is a need to value more explicitly young children's perspectives and consult with them at different levels of decision-making in relation to ECEC development and, in particular, issues relating to their daily life. Children's views, as well as those of practitioners and parents, should be recognised alongside the views of academic researchers and educational authorities. Secondly, continued efforts are needed for policymakers to increase funding to support research into the development of the curriculum and pedagogy of private kindergartens, in particular research into the adoption of Western educational theories and curriculum models. This should help to provide specific and effective guidance on practical applications of Western theories, such as MI theory and the related MI programme as examined in this study. Thirdly, there is a need to provide more opportunities for training and professional development for private kindergarten practitioners to develop their understanding of children, childhood and children's rights and put these into practice, as well as to improve their levels of professional knowledge and pedagogical skills in relation to ECEC. Fourthly, in terms of private kindergartens, there is a need to support children, practitioners and parents through the development of early years policy and guidance to reduce the tension between the implementation of international programmes and traditional educational influences. Fifthly, there is a need for policymakers, educational authorities, academic researchers and professionals to address transition issues in relation to the curriculum and pedagogy of kindergarten and primary

education. An important part of this would be reforming the exam-oriented entry system into primary education. Without such change, kindergartens come under undue pressure to focus on children's academic development at the expense of other aspects of kindergarten life. Addressing this issue would require acknowledging a wide range of stakeholder perspectives, including children's voices.

At the level of practice, firstly, practitioners need to take a more proactive approach to considering children's perspective and inviting their participation in the design and implementation of the kindergarten curriculum and pedagogy. Secondly, practitioners should give more opportunities for child-initiated activities, and also increase opportunities for children's free choice in relation to time, space, materials and selection of play partners. Thirdly, practitioners should attach importance to the development of peer relationships and peer culture; and provide more opportunities for not only adult-child interaction, but also child-child interaction in daily practice. This could be supported by an increase in small group activities instead of whole class activities. Fourthly, in order to support children to make smooth transitions from kindergarten to primary school, practitioners should balance adult-led and child-led activities as well as play-based and formal teaching activities, underpinned by recognition of children's interests and individual differences.

### **7.2.2 Implications for future research**

The following conclusion can be drawn from the findings of the present study. First of all, there is a need for further research in this area to include children participants from different kinds of private kindergartens as well as from public

kindergartens so as to compare children's perspectives in both private and public kindergartens. Secondly, there is a need for researchers to study children across different kindergarten age groups to provide a more representative picture of children's voices and experiences of Chinese kindergarten life. Thirdly, it would be useful to study a class over the full school year as with Brooker's (2002) study of children starting school in England. Fourthly, there is a need for researchers to cover different geographical regions, including kindergartens in both rural and urban areas of China, as development is uneven across areas. With respect to the issue of social class, it would be beneficial to conduct future studies with children whose parents are from different social and economic backgrounds. This would increase understanding of how both children and parents' views about ECEC generally also the implementation of Western educational programmes within the Chinese context are informed by their social class perspective.

### **7.3 Contribution of the study**

Whilst existing literature relating to ECEC in China mainly focuses on the general development of the ECEC curriculum and pedagogy from educators' and academic researchers' perspectives, this study is the first to gain in depth ethnographic data relating to three sets of perspectives, those of practitioners, parents and young children. It is also the first to take account of young children's perspectives in relation to a private kindergarten that fully employed an international programme, developed within a Western context and transplanted to China. This study is located in the specific cultural context of a private Chinese kindergarten, reflecting the significant increase of ECEC

provision within the private sector in China. Therefore, it makes a significant contribution to the current theory and practice of ECEC, not only in the Chinese context, but also in a comparative context of public and private kindergarten education as well as in relation to Chinese and Western approaches to ECEC. The significance of the study is further outlined below.

The study has furthered understanding of concepts of childhood within non-Western cultural contexts and in particular how concepts of childhood are changing in Chinese society. Within a Western context, children have been conceptualised by academics in the field of childhood studies as social actors and active participants in their everyday lives (James and James, 2004; Jenks, 2005; Qvortrup, Corsaro and Honig, 2009; Corsaro, 2011). Theorists have recognised how their roles in the social world contribute to its events and also to its reproduction and transformation (*ibid*). In the Chinese context, however, traditional ideas about childhood have been entrenched in the cultural values of Confucianism, with children seen as subordinate to adults and the private property of the family (Gu, 2006; Tang, 2006; Lin, 2009; Yim, Lee and Ebbeck, 2011; Luo, Tamis-Lemonda and Song, 2013). However, since the 1980s, contemporary understandings of children and childhood in China have gradually shifted under the impact of globalisation and other substantial changes to society, such as the One-child policy. It is against such a social and cultural background that my study demonstrates the significance and the extent of changing social and cultural constructions of childhood in the changing context of China, with a particular focus on the curriculum and pedagogy of a Chinese kindergarten.

The study contributes new understandings of how young children, in the context of a private Chinese kindergarten, demonstrate competence as active social agents and provide important views about their kindergarten lives. In this respect the study replicates findings from studies of young children within a Western context but extends these to children from a different cultural context.

Corsaro (2009) has highlighted the limited number of studies relating to the nature and complexity of children's friendships and peer cultures in non-Western societies and, in particular, there has been a lack of such studies in China where the One-child policy has implications for children's social experience. This thesis extends understanding of the importance for young children's friendships, particularly in the context of favourite play activities, and contributes new findings about the nature of peer culture for young children in the context of a Chinese kindergarten.

A further contribution arises from new findings about the complex nature of adult-child relationships in the context of a private Chinese kindergarten, indicating a change from traditional Confucian concepts of such relationships. The study highlights children's understanding of the authority and power of adults and the range of their feelings about this. At the same time, it shows how children appreciated adults' involvement in their learning and play at kindergarten, liking the personal, friendly and respectful approaches of several practitioners in the kindergarten and their friendly relationships with parents at home.

A further contribution is that the thesis provides new understanding of how

kindergarten children conceptualise play and work, a theme addressed in UK studies but not addressed in depth in most previous Chinese studies of kindergarten life. The official discourse of play in China, represented in the national guidance for kindergarten education (China MoE, 2001), is that the kindergarten educational activities should be play-based, with an emphasis on “learning through play”. This indicates that the kindergarten curriculum emphasises play as a part of the curriculum and proposes a play-based pedagogy. Within ECEC in China, play for children is now constructed as not only recreational but also learning and work (Yu, Yuan and Fang, 2011). However, children in this study viewed play in a different way. They made direct links between play and free choice, as in Ceglowski's (1997) and Wood's (2004) studies within a Western context, studies that highlight that what makes a favourite activity for a child is their free choice of the activity. This finding from studies of young children within a Western ECEC context is extended into the different cultural context of China.

The study makes a further contribution in terms of knowledge about changing parental views of childhood in China. Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa (2009, p39) argue that Chinese parents, even in contemporary China and against the background of globalisation, remain influenced by the traditional Chinese saying: "not being left behind at the starting line". This study however shows a shift from the traditional attention of parents to their children's academic achievements, under the pressures of strong academic competition at school, to respect for children and children's rights. This shift in thinking comes from findings relating to a unique middle-class group of parents from mixed international and Chinese backgrounds. This apparent shift of this particular



group of parents' views has not been discussed in previous studies within the Chinese context. A common belief of the parents in this study is that their children should have a happy childhood and needed time and places to play. Generally, they did not put pressure on their children to engage in the kinds of early formal learning which is linked to the future of the family and reported in previous literature. The parents in this study showed respect for their children's preferences for learning or play and their decision-making rights, although this group of parents may not be representative of wider parental attitudes due to their special economic and cultural background.

The study also contributes to understanding of changing practitioner views about children and childhood, evidencing previously unreported practitioner understandings of children and childhood, shaped by a belief that young children should have opportunities to learn through play and to feel happy at kindergarten, while adults should show respect for children's rights and preferences. To some extent, the study identifies these as espoused beliefs rather than beliefs that practitioners consistently acted upon. Nevertheless, this represents a shift in adult views about young children.

This study adopted an ethnographic approach to explore different perspectives on the ECEC curriculum and pedagogy in a private setting in China. This is innovative in terms of ethnographic studies of ECEC settings in China, with data generated through multiple methods and from different groups of participants. In particular, there has been very limited research previously involving children participants. The researcher's long-term engagement and immersion in a naturalistic setting during fieldwork is regarded as a vital element for obtaining

quality and in-depth data in ethnographic research (Creswell, 2007; Atkinson et al., 2001). In this study, the ethnographic fieldwork, including the pilot study, lasted approximately 6 months. Within such a relatively long period, I was able to develop my ethnographic research strategies for this research project aimed at understanding different perspectives. As an exploratory study, ethnographic methodology allowed me to employ multiple methods such as participant and non-participant observations and formal and informal interviews, generating different kinds of data from different dimensions and diverse sources so as to present a comprehensive picture of perspectives of the MI programme and wider aspects of kindergarten provision in a private early years setting. The relatively long term engagement with participants that is characteristic of ethnographic fieldwork also provided opportunities for me to establish closer research relationship with my participants, in particular children participants, than is found in most other Chinese studies of ECEC. Consequently, they became increasingly open to me during the long term research process, enabling me to understand the dynamics and changing perspectives of the different participant groups.

Additionally, as a researcher with a cross-cultural background of studying and working in Chinese and English educational systems, I was able to play both an insider and outsider role in the ethnographic fieldwork (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Gregory and Ruby, 2011). Therefore, this is also the first extensive and thorough ethnographic study that draws insights from both insider and outsider perspectives in ECEC research in China, and involves children's perspectives. Such positionality allows me to critically examine issues of both subjectivity and objectivity from a methodological perspective.

The existing literature provides no example of using multiple methods within an ethnographic study to research young children's experiences in the context of a private Chinese kindergarten. My research provided a range of research activities for children to voice their likes and dislikes about their kindergarten experience, including the use of visual images to articulate their feelings and experiences. The use of multiple methods was successful in capturing the perspectives of children from mixed cultural and family backgrounds on the MI curriculum and pedagogy and, in this respect, it highlights the potential for use of such participatory methods in the Chinese context.

## **7.4 Limitations of the study**

As with every research project, this study has some limitations. The main limitations of this study are as follows:

### **7.4.1 The sample**

Firstly, the parents and the children were mainly from middle-class families, which cannot represent Chinese families with young children more generally although the numbers of this group of middle-class families has been growing rapidly in recent years. Although other parents and children with different backgrounds may have different views, it is still important to draw attention to the voices of this particular group of parents and young children in terms of kindergarten education in China.

Secondly, the fact that this particular sample of parents was made up entirely of mothers may have impacted on the findings. It was a significant limitation that the study did not include any fathers, grandparents or nannies who were involved in some children's childcare provision at home. Invitations were sent to this wider group but they did not choose to participate. No fathers were available to participate in interviews due to their busy timetables although all parents initially gave their consent to be involved in the research. This has implications in terms of possible gender differences in perceptions of mothers and fathers of their children's experiences at kindergarten. In addition, grandparents have been involved in childcare in many Chinese families (Chen, Liu and Mair, 2011) and their views would open up new dimensions in researching children's kindergarten experiences. Furthermore, employing nannies in looking after the only child at home is an established phenomenon in China (Du and Dong, 2013). The inclusion of their views would certainly add relevant perspectives from non-family related understandings of children's experiences at a MI kindergarten.

Thirdly, the study only looked at five to six year old children. It would be interesting to know about the experiences of younger children at a stage where the pressures regarding primary school transition are likely to be more limited. A comparison of younger children's experiences and that of the group in the study would produce a more comprehensive picture of children's perspectives on an international programme delivered in a private kindergarten in China.

#### **7.4.2 Translation issues**

Another potential limitation of this study relates to issues of translation. The

fieldwork was conducted in China, with a Chinese speaking researcher, and the participants mainly spoke Chinese as a first or additional language. However, the findings are presented in English, involving translation-related decisions by the researcher. Although, as the researcher, I have relevant knowledge and experience of the culture and language of the participants in the study, there may have been some instances where I could not find the exact equivalent of the corresponding Chinese word when translating into English. However, the overall quality of the study was not significantly affected because I used techniques such as back-translation, consultation with supervisors, including one who is bilingual with English and Chinese, and comparing the English translation with the original Chinese quotations. These measures were taken to ensure the quality of translations used as a part of the methodology of the study.

#### **7.4.3 Limited scale of the research**

As an ethnographic study, this study was limited by its location and sample site. The nature of the study meant that there was no scope for a comparative study to investigate the differences between MI and non-MI kindergartens, private and public kindergartens, or rural and urban kindergartens in terms of the implementation of Western ECEC programmes. The sample of practitioners, parents and children on one site also meant it was not possible to compare the views of children and parents from more affluent family backgrounds with those from kindergartens charging lower fees. This has implications on the data collected from a social class perspective.

## 7.5 Concluding remarks

This study has explored different perspectives on curriculum and pedagogy in a private kindergarten in China, with a focus on children aged five to six years. It has considered the perspectives of practitioners, parents and children. My own professional perspectives have also been important in shaping and implementing this study.

As a Chinese kindergarten teacher, after studying in England for several years, I have gained professional knowledge of ECEC within a Western context. Going back to China as a researcher to study participant perspectives on a kindergarten which was similar to ones where I had worked has enabled me to obtain a deeper theoretical knowledge and practical experience of studying and working in ECEC within different cultural contexts. My personal views and beliefs in relation to children, childhood and ECEC have been significantly changed in my study and research. I no longer see myself as a good 'teacher to teach immature and innocent children', but as a friendly supporter to help competent and active young learners' in ECEC.

The conclusions of this thesis have been significant, with new findings relating to: changing understandings of childhood and children's rights in China; adult and child perceptions of the kindergarten MI curriculum and pedagogy; adult and child conceptualisations of learning and play; and children's perspectives on their kindergarten experiences including their likes and dislikes, relationship with adults, experience of peer culture, and their gendered experiences. The study has the potential to raise awareness in China of the significance and

benefits of involving young children in research relating to their everyday lives. It also raises questions about the challenges of transplanting Western models to a society with an education system so shaped by traditional Confucian ideas. To enhance young children's participation in their kindergarten lives and the quality of their daily experience of education and care, researchers and ECEC practitioners in China and in other social contexts should open up ECEC policy and practices to ongoing debate and development, as well as draw on this study to develop future research in this field.

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## Appendix A Sample of Participant Information Sheet

### 参与信息说明书

亲爱的家长朋友：

您好！

我是一名来自英国谢菲尔德哈莱姆大学早期教育专业的博士生。目前，我正在进行一项“对于一所中国的私立幼儿园的课程与教学方法的观点和看法”的课题研究。该研究的目的在于，探究不同视角下的（包括教师、家长、尤其是儿童）对于中国私立幼儿教育机构的课程和教学方法的观点及看法。具体的研究目标包括：在中国的一所私立幼儿园当中，1). 儿童对于课程及教学方法的体验和看法 2). 成人对于课程及教学方法的实践的观点和看法 3). 通过探究不同视角下的（尤其是儿童的）观点和看法，为中国早期教育政策的制定以及实践的发展提供相应的借鉴和参考。

该课题是受英国谢菲尔德哈莱姆大学资助的一项小规模、博士课程的研究项目。在本次研究的过程中，我将以研究者和班级助理的身份，在您的孩子所在的大班进行数据收集工作。为了收集相应的信息数据，我将在幼儿园的日常生活中对您的孩子进行观察，并且邀请您的孩子参与一些小组讨论活动。我将运用玩偶、绘画、游戏、照片及录像等工具的辅助来完成与您孩子的沟通。此外，我将诚邀一些家长朋友进行访谈，每个访谈大约需要 0.5 至 1 小时。

我将保持与您的联系和沟通。在整个的研究过程中，您将被告知研究的进展状况。如果课题研究得以顺利开展，我将为您提供一份研究成果的总结报告。我由衷地希望本项研究可以对您、您的孩子以及幼儿园产生有益的影响和作用，促进幼儿、教师以及家长更好地理解私立幼儿园的课程与教学方法，突出以此 幼儿园为代表的优秀私立幼儿园的课程及教学亮点，提升私立幼儿园的教育质量和声誉，为推动中国早期教育尤其是私立早期教育的发展做出贡献。

我的博士课程学习一直在英国谢菲尔德哈莱姆大学的导师的指导下进行。作为承担本项课题研究工作的先决条件，我已经通过了英国刑事记录科的“无犯罪记录”审核，同时也获得了中国公安部门出具的“无犯罪记录证明”。此外，作为博士课程的一部分，我需要为该项研究撰写论文，我将在论文中以匿名的方式，对您孩子所在的幼儿园、班级以及包括您和孩子在内的所有参与者所提供的数据信息进行严格的保密。您和您孩子有权在必要的情况下，对您所提供的信息有所保留，或退出本次研究并撤销你们所提供的未加工的数据。

希望您可以与您的孩子共同阅读并讨论本说明书中的内容。如果您和您的孩子都同意参与本项研究，请您签署附带的《知情同意书》并返还副本（一份为您自己签署，另外一份代表您的孩子签署）。

非常感谢您能在百忙中抽出时间阅读此信。如果您希望了解更多的信息，欢迎您到班级里与我面谈。如果您希望与我取得联系，请您参见页尾的联系信息。如果您有任何疑问，也可以直接联系我。我在谢菲尔德哈莱姆大学的导师 Ros Garrick（邮箱：[r.l.garrick@shu.ac.uk](mailto:r.l.garrick@shu.ac.uk)）

此致

敬礼

郭范

2012-02-08

### Participant Information Sheet (for parents)

08 Feb 2012

Dear Parents,

My name is Yuan GUO and I am in my second year at Sheffield Hallam University, UK studying for my PhD in Early Childhood Education. My research topic is '*Perspectives on curriculum and pedagogy in a private kindergarten in China*'. This study aims to explore curriculum and pedagogy from different perspectives in a private setting providing pre-school education in China. The objectives are: 1). to explore young children's perspectives on their experiences of Chinese curriculum and pedagogy; 2). to explore adults' perspectives on the implementation of Chinese curriculum and pedagogy; 3). to draw on a range of perspectives, including children's, to inform the development of Chinese policy and practice in early years education.

This is a small-scale PhD study project with support from Sheffield Hallam University in the UK. During the research process, my role would be as a researcher and a class helper in your child's class. To collect information for my topic, I would like to make some observations of your child during daily activities and invite him/her to participate in some small group discussion. I would also hope to work with your child by using puppets, drawings, games, photos and videos. Moreover, I would like to interview some parents. The interviews would take approximately 0.5-1 hour each.

I will keep you informed of how the research is going throughout the project and give you a copy of my summary findings upon completion of the project. I hope that the project would be of value to you, your child and the kindergarten in highlighting significant aspects of the curriculum and pedagogy in such a private kindergarten and in the development of China's private pre-school education.

My PhD study will be supervised by my University tutors. As a prerequisite for undertaking the research, I have had my Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) clearance in the UK and Crime Record clearance in China. As part of my PhD course, I have to carry out and write up a research thesis. The research will be kept confidential through anonymising the name of your child's class and kindergarten, as well as all research participants. This would not affect your right and your child's right to withhold information if you judge it is necessary or withdraw from the research requesting the possession of any unprocessed data.

Please read this letter with your child and discuss any questions that they may have. If you are happy for both you and your child to participate in this research, please sign and return the consent forms enclosed (one is for your own consent, another one is on behalf of your child).

I appreciate your time in reading this letter. If you would like to know more about this research, you can meet me to discuss the research further in the class. If you wish to get in contact with me at any time, please see the contact details as below. Should you want to contact my supervisor at Sheffield Hallam University, her details are: Dr Ros Garrick (Email: [r.l.garrick@shu.ac.uk](mailto:r.l.garrick@shu.ac.uk)).

Yours faithfully,

Yuan GUO  
Research Student Group, Faculty of Society and Development, Unit 9, Science Park, City

## Appendix B Sample of consent forms

### Informed Consent Form 知情同意书

Please confirm your agreement to participate by circling your responses to the following questions. 请您回答下列问题以确认您是否同意参与本次研究活动。

Have you read and understood the information sheet about this study? 您是否已经阅读并理解关于该项研究的《参与信息说明书》?	Yes 是	No 否
Have you been able to ask questions about this study? 您能否就该项研究进行提问?	Yes 是	No 否
Have received enough information about this study? 您已经获得了关于本项研究的足够信息吗?	Yes 是	No 否
Do you understand that you are free to withdraw from this study? 您是否明白您有权退出该项研究? • Any time? 任何时间? • Without giving a reason for your withdrawal? 无需理由?	Yes 是	No 否
Do you agree to take part in this study? 您是否同意参与本项研究?	Yes 是	No 否

Your signature will certify that you, on behalf of your child have voluntarily decided to take part in this research study having read and understood the information in the sheet for participants. It will also certify that you, on behalf of your child have had adequate opportunity to discuss the study with the researcher and that all questions have been answered to your satisfaction. 您的签署将确认您代表您的孩子已经阅读并理解《参与信息说明书》中的内容，并自愿同意参与本项研究。同时，您代表您的孩子已经获得了适当的机会与研究探讨相关的问题，而且研究者所给出的回答都令您满意。

I confirm that I have read the information provided. I am happy for my child to be invited to participate in the research outlined on the information sheet. 我确认，我已经阅读了《参与信息说明书》，并同意我的孩子参与研究。

Child's name 幼儿姓名: .....

Signature of parent/ guardian 家长/监护人签名: ..... Date 日期: .....

Name (block letters) 姓名(正楷): .....

(NB. Please sign both copies of this consent form and return one of them)  
(注意: 《知情同意书》一式两份, 请您签署后归还其中的一份)

Signature of researcher 研究者签名: ..... Date 日期: 2012/11/11

Yuan GUO 郭苑

Research Student Group, Faculty of Society and Development  
UNIT 9, Science Park, City Campus, Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield, S1 1WB, UK  
Tel: +85 18610310472(China) / +44 (0)7504757393 (UK) Email: yguo3@my.sbu.ac.uk

### Interview Consent Form 访谈同意书

I have been given information about Yuan's research and have agreed to take part in an interview. 我已经了解了本研究项目的相关信息, 并同意参与访谈。

Your signature will certify that you have voluntarily decided to take part in this interview and understood that the interview will be recorded on a digital audio recorder. Following the interview your identity will be protected by assigning pseudonyms to the transcription. The interview recording will be erased immediately after transcription. Any information provided by you in the interview will be kept strictly confidential and used solely for the purposes of research. You also understand you are still free to withdraw, but only two weeks after the interview date. After that date, the data will be anonymised and unfortunately withdrawal will no longer be possible. 您的签名将确认您是自愿参与本次访谈的, 并知道本次访谈会被录音的。访谈结束后的文字转录中, 您的身份会被化名身份所取代。访谈的录音记录在转录成文字之后也将被立即删除。您在访谈中所提供的任何信息将被严格地保密, 而且仅为研究目的使用。您也明白您有权撤销(您所提供的数据), 但仅限于访谈日期结束后的2周以内。一旦过期, 您所提供的数据将被以匿名的形式使用, 并将无法再撤销。

Signature of interviewee 被访问人签名: ..... Date 日期: .....

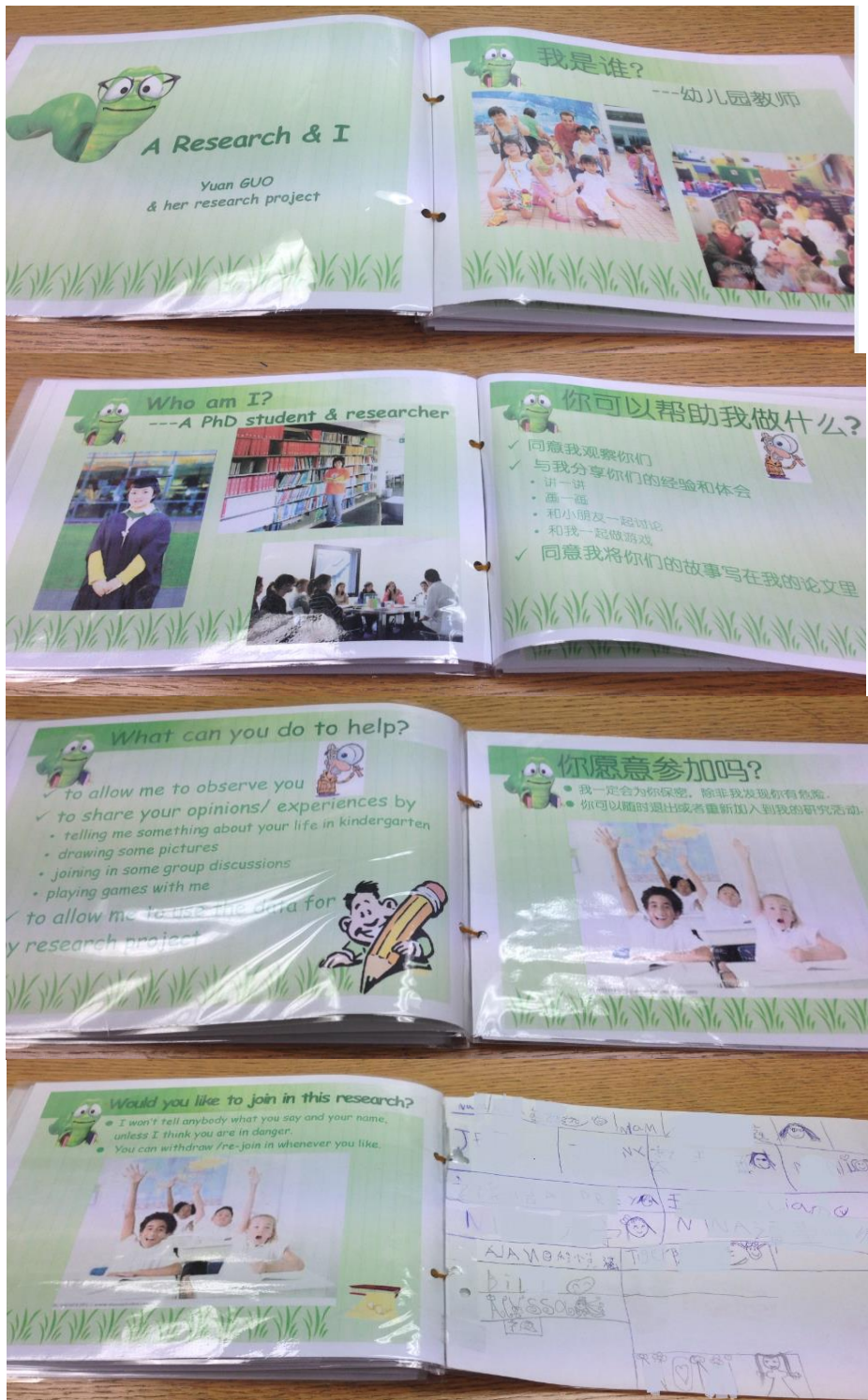
Name (block letters) 姓名(正楷): .....

Signature of interviewer 访问人签名: ..... Date 日期: .....

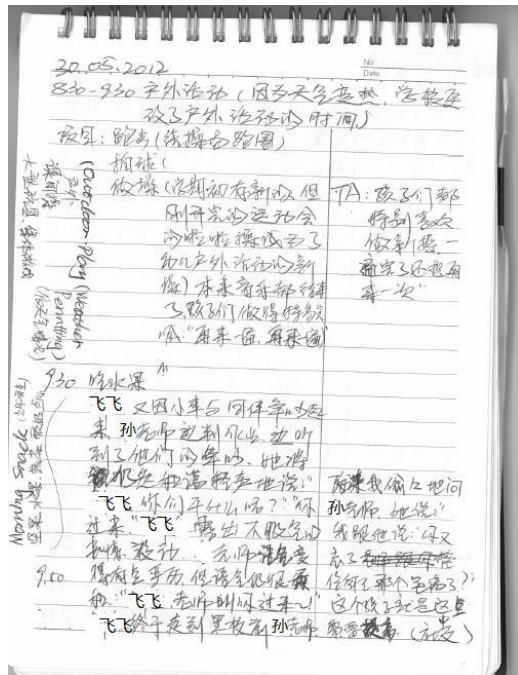
Yuan GUO 郭苑



# Appendix C Children assent book



## Appendix D Sample of field notes



Date: Wednesday, 11 April, 2012 Place: Senior Class, Newton Private Kindergarten

Observation	Observer's comments
<p><b>AM:</b></p> <p><b>8.35-8.55: Lego brick play</b> Children are sitting around tables and playing with Lego bricks in groups. Teachers are busy checking and classifying toys and teaching materials. Some children talk with each other very loudly. The lead teacher has to shout out: "Quiet!!!!!! You are too noisy! Who is shouting?! I will send him (/her) out (of the classroom) if you keep making noise!"</p> <p>Some children are very excited to talk to me and show me <del>what</del> what they have made. Girl A: "teacher, look, I have made a crown"; Girl B: "teacher, look, this is a flower"; Girl C: "I made a crown too!"; Boy A: "aha" look, this is my sword (with deep voice).</p> <p>At 5 to 9, lead teacher plays music with tape and ask children to tidy-up.</p> <p><b>9.00-9.20 Collective Activity</b> When children are ready for teaching, they are asked to sit together. The lead teacher starts to show children how to play with different toys and materials placed in different Areas.</p> <p>= Science Area - a toy Balance The teacher: "Children, listen carefully! Otherwise you won't know how to play this one". Then she instructs children with how to play with the balance. Some of children stand up from their chairs in order to see the Balance clearly. A girl tries to point out the difference of the two sides. Then, the teacher asks: "Any questions?" Children: "No!" Teacher: "ok, don't say "sorry, I don't know" to the official inspectors when they ask you how to play this, all right?!"</p> <p>= Natural Science Area- planet corner The lead teacher reminds children: "don't water the planets too much, otherwise they will die." to water them once a week is fine. All right? Children: "Yes, teacher".</p> <p>= Natural Science Area- Water-air Flour Milling Machine The lead teacher asks me to assemble a toy called Water-air Flour Milling Machine with English language instruction. Then I introduce this toy to children and show them how to play it. I invite some of them to have a try.</p>	<p>The children are requested to play with Lego bricks quietly. They are not even allowed to talk with each other. However, children start to shout out once the teachers' attention is distracted even for a while. It seems that children can't speak gently because everyone including the teachers speaks loudly, probably? because they can't be heard in such a noisy classroom. So the children always shout out what they want to say.</p> <p>This period is usually for Chinese course. However, the Annual Inspection of the Local Education Bureau will be on the following Monday. So the teachers and child carer are stressed and busy r decorating the classroom and supplying more toys and teaching materials. Instead of normal teaching, the lead teacher shows children how to play with the toys and materials from different areas.</p> <p>Children show their interests in learning how to play the Balance.</p> <p>Most children do not question, and just do what the teacher asked them to do.</p> <p>After I show children how to play it, they can play it very well without any problem.</p>

1/7

# Appendix E Sample of interview question list

## Interview Questions- Parents

First of all, thank you very much for being my research interviewee. You should have been given some information about me and my research project. Although we have known each other for a while, I would like to know more about you and your child.

### 1. So could you tell me more about yourself and your family?

Prompts:

- Where are you from?
- What do you do?
- How many people are there in your family?
- What do they do?
- Who takes care of your child mostly? Parents? Grandparents? Child-care?

### 2. Why did you choose this kindergarten for your child?

Prompts:

- Why a private one?
- Any specific reasons regarding their course and teaching method?

### 3. Do you know the kindergarten's courses and teaching methods? In other words, what and how your child learns at kindergarten?

Clarification:

- Do you know the course and teaching methods are based on the Multiple Intelligence Theory? If so, what do you think about it?
- Do you know how the theory has been applied in the kindergarten's course and teaching methods?

### 4. What are its strengths? What about any disadvantages? Could you give me any examples?

### 5. Do you think your child enjoys his/her kindergarten experience? Why is this? Are there any aspects that your child does not enjoy? What is this?

### 6. Does your child talk about his/her kindergarten experience with you? What aspect do you talk about frequently?

Prompts:

- Any particular times?
- Any particular places?
- Any particular people? person?
- Any particular activities?
- What did he/she say about this?

### 7. Do you think your child enjoys the kindergarten's Special Events? Does he/she talk about anything regarding the upcoming graduation ceremony? or

Prompts:

- Family Fun Day?
- Sports Meeting?
- Openness Day?
- School Trips (Train Museum, Bibo Park)

### 8. How does the kindergarten share relevant information with you? How much are you involved in the kindergarten's teaching and other activities?

### 9. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you very much indeed for your cooperation and support!

## 访谈问题-家长

首先,非常感谢您能参加此次访谈,那么,您应该对我 和我的研究项目 已经有了一定的了解,虽然我们已认识了一段时间,但我还想了解更多,关于您 和您孩子的一些情况。

### 1. 那么,可以先请您 对自己 和您的家庭 做一个介绍吗?

提示:

- 您来自哪里?
- 您做什么工作?
- 您家有几口人?
- 他们做什么工作?
- 谁主要照顾孩子? 父母? 祖父母? 托儿所?

### 2. 您当初为什么选择让孩子到该幼儿园?

提示:

- 为什么选私立?

### 3. 您了解该幼儿园的课程和教学方法吗? 换句话说,您了解孩子在幼儿园“学什么”和是“怎么学”的吗?

澄清:

- 您是否知道该幼儿园的理论和教学方法是建立在多元智能理论上的? 如果是,您如何看待这一理论?
- 您知道这个理论是怎样在该幼儿园的理论和教学方法中是如何应用的吗?

### 4. 您认为它的课程和教学方式, 有哪些 优点和 不足呢? 能举些例子吗?

### 5. 您觉得孩子享受在幼儿园的生活吗? 为什么? 有哪些方面是孩子不喜欢的? 为什么?

### 6. 孩子有跟您谈论他/她在幼儿园的生活吗? 最常谈的是哪些方面?

提示:

- 特定的时间?
- 特定的场所?
- 特定的人?
- 特定的活动?
- 孩子怎么说呢?

### 7. 您认为孩子喜欢幼儿园的大型活动吗? 比如, 他/她是否有谈到毕业的毕业典礼?

提示:

- 毕业典礼 (拓展)?
- 运动会?
- 儿童节?
- 其他的户外活动? (火车博物馆, 碧山公园)

### 8. 幼儿园是如何与您共享相关信息的? 对幼儿园的教学及其他活动, 您的参与程度如何?

### 9. 您还有什么 需要补充 的问题吗?

## Interview Questions- English teacher

First of all, thank you very much for being my research interviewee. You should have been given some information about me and my research project. Although we have known each other for a while, I would like to know more about you and your teaching.

### 1. So could you tell me more about yourself including your personal information, for example about your educational background and work experience?

Prompts:

- Where did you graduate? What's your major?
- Has kindergarten teacher been your only job? If not, what did you do before? How long have you been a kindergarten teacher?
- What qualification do you have? Have you had any relevant professional training for being a kindergarten teacher? What training have you had?

### 2. Could you tell me more about you and this kindergarten?

Prompts:

- When did you start to work here?
- Why did you choose to work here?
- What are your main responsibilities and your job content?

### 3. What training does the kindergarten provide for you and other English teachers? How?

### 4. Could you tell me more about the kindergarten's curriculum and pedagogy?

Prompts:

- What do you think about the MI theory?
- What are the curriculum components? (indoor & outdoor/formal/ informal)
- What subjects do you teach? What are your areas of responsibility?
- What are the aims, objectives, contents and the teaching methods? Who designs these (curriculum and pedagogy)? Is there anything which teachers can decide separately?
- How has the MI theory been applied and embodied in the curriculum and pedagogy? Could you give any examples?
- In your teaching, are there any methods or approaches which particularly increase children's interest in learning?

### 5. How do you feel about the curriculum and pedagogy? What are its strengths? What about any disadvantages? Could you give me any examples?

Clarification:

- E.g. when you implement the courses, have you found any aspects which indicate positive results; and have you found any aspects which indicate problems and difficulties? How do you deal with these?

### 6. The kindergarten has some special activities, such as, school trips, special events. What are the aims of such activities? What are outcomes? What do you think about these kinds of activities in terms of strengths and any areas of difficulty?

### 7. How do you think children feel about "what and how" they learn? Why is this? Could you give me any examples?

Prompts: do they indicate:

- Any particular times?
- Any particular places?
- Any particular people? person?
- Any particular activities?

### 8. How do you think parents feel about these? Why is this? Could you give me any examples?

### 9. How do you share relevant information with parents so as to achieve parent-kindergarten cooperation?

### 10. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you very much indeed for your cooperation and support!

## 访谈问题-老师 (英文)

非常感谢您能参加此次访谈,那么,您应该对我 和我的研究项目 已经有了一定的了解,虽然我们已认识了一段时间,但我还想了解更多,关于您 和您孩子的一些情况。

### 1. 首先,能否请您对自己的个人信息、教育背景和从业经历做一个介绍?

提示:

- 您毕业于哪里? 什么专业?
- 一直是幼儿园教师工作? 如果不是,都干过哪些工作? 多长时间? 从事幼儿园教师工作多久?
- 您目前持有的专业资质是怎样的? 参加过哪些幼儿园教师的专业培训吗?

### 2. 请您对您在该幼儿园的一些情况做一简单介绍:

提示:

- 何时开始在该园工作的?
- 您承担该园工作的哪些主要职责?
- 目前的主要职责和工作内容都有哪些?

### 3. 幼儿园会给您和其他老师提供相关的专业培训吗? 都通过哪些方式? 具体内容是怎样的?

### 4. 请您谈谈该幼儿园的课程和教学方法?

提示:

- 请谈谈您对 多元智能理论的理解?
- 幼儿园课程是怎样构建的? 主要集中在哪些方面? (室内/外, 室内/外)?
- 您主要承担哪些方面的教学?
- 课程目标、内容和教学方法分别是如何制定的? 这由谁制定? 老师自主制定的方面有哪些?
- 您认为 多元智能理论的课程和教学方法中 得到体现和落实的? 对教师的干预? 对教学的手段?
- 在课堂中, 您有采用特殊的方法和技巧来提高儿童的学习兴趣吗?

### 5. 您认为目前的课程和教学方法存在哪些优势与不足? 能举些例子吗?

提示:

- 比如您在课堂实施的过程中, 您觉得哪些方面做得不够好, 哪些方面存在困难? 您通常是如何处理这些困难的?

### 6. (除了我们刚才谈到的日常教学活动), 幼儿园还组织一些特别的园内外活动, 如: 园庆、节庆日对于组织这类活动的目的是什么? 成效如何? 您个人看待这类活动有何优势? 哪些方面存在困难或问题?

### 7. 如果从孩子的角度来看, 您觉得他们对于“学什么”和“怎么学”的感受应该是怎样的? 为什么是这样? 能举例说明吗?

提示: 比如:

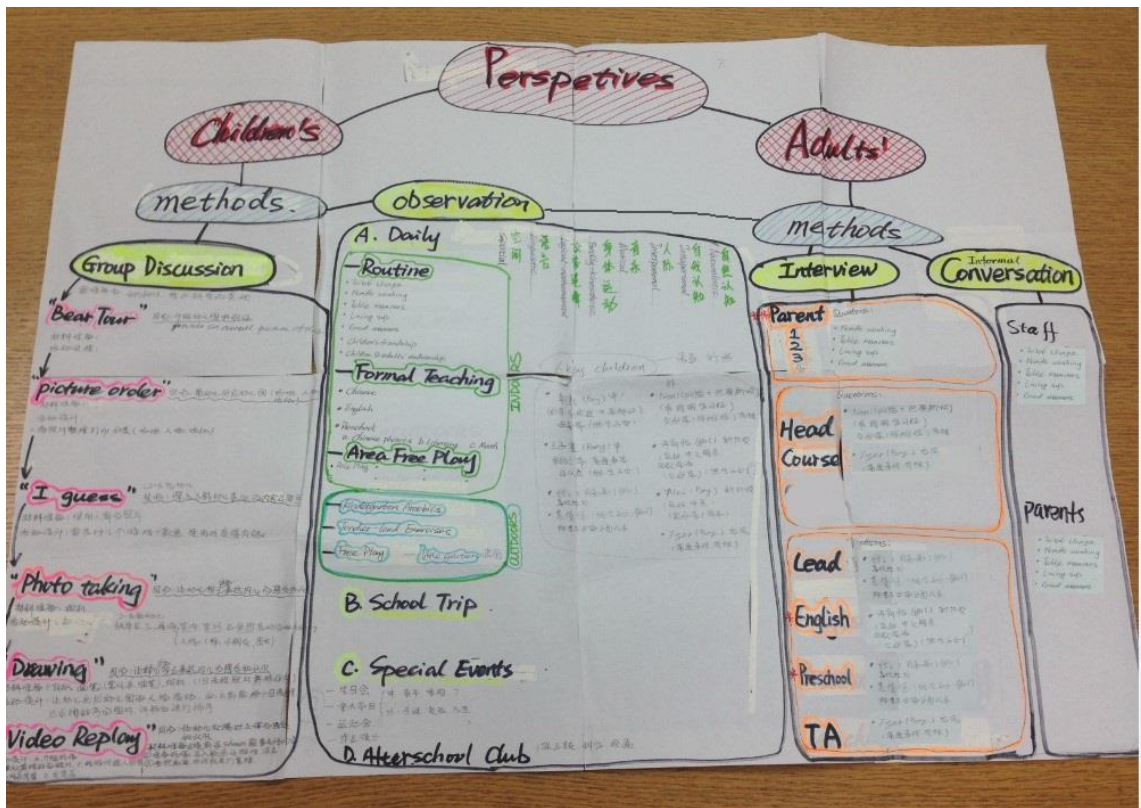
- 特定的时间? 喜欢/不喜欢的?
- 特定的场所? 喜欢/不喜欢的?
- 特定的人? 喜欢/不喜欢的?
- 特定的活动? 喜欢/不喜欢的?

### 8. 从家长的角度呢? 您觉得他们的感受会是怎样的? (“学什么”和“怎么学”)

### 9. 您的家园配合工作是如何开展的? 具体通过怎样的途径? 从哪些方面入手?



# Appendix F Sample of data collection matrix



**Appendix G Sample of children participation in research activities --- sorting pictures**



## Appendix I Children participation in activities with peers

↓ Children expressed their concerns and kindness to help injured Lili



↓ Children enjoyed play and learning with peers.





## Appendix H Daily teaching and learning activities

### ↓ Kindergarten Daily Schedule

Kindergarten Daily Schedule 大班一日流程					
Time 时间	Activities 活动				
	Mon 周一	Tue 周二	Wed 周三	Thu 周四	Fri 周五
8:00-8:30	Greeting Children and Families 迎接孩子 入园 晨检 早餐 (根据需要) 亲密交谈				
8:30-9:30	Corner Activities 区域主题探究活动 区域探索与分享	Chinese Circle Time 中文圆圈活动 主题创作活动 幼小衔接	Corner Activities 区域主题探究活动 区域探索与分享	Chinese Circle Time 中文圆圈活动 主题创作活动 幼小衔接	
9:30-9:50	Morning Snack 上午点心 坚果 水果 蔬菜 酸奶 点心				
9:50-10:50	Outdoor Play (Weather Permitting) 户外活动(依天气情况) 课内操 大型玩具 集体游戏				
10:50-11:40	Corner Activities 区域主题探究活动 区域探索与分享	Corner Activities 区域主题探究活动 区域探索与分享 多元智能主题探究活动	Corner Activities 区域主题探究活动 区域探索与分享	Chinese Circle Time 中文圆圈活动 主题创作活动 幼小衔接	
11:40-12:10	Lunch Time 午饭				
12:10-13:30	Corner Activities 区域主题探究活动 区域探索与分享				
13:30-14:10	English Circle Time 英文圆圈活动 英文活动及游戏				
14:10-14:30	Afternoon Snack 下午点心 坚果 水果 蔬菜 酸奶 点心				
14:30-15:10	Corner Activities 区域主题探究活动 多元智能主题探究活动 区域探索与分享	English Afternoon 英文半日 Music Art Physical Story	Corner Activities 区域主题探究活动 多元智能主题探究活动 区域探索与分享 Outdoor Play (Weather Permitting)	English Afternoon 英文半日 Music Art Physical Story Language	
15:10-16:10	Outdoor Play (Weather Permitting) 户外活动(依天气情况)	Music Art Physical Story Language	Outdoor Play (Weather Permitting)	Art Physical Story Language Music	

### ↓ The preschool class



### ↓ The Chinese class



### ↓ The English class



### ↓ Play time in areas of play provision



### ↑ Outdoor activities

## Appendix J Fieldwork Weekly Schedule and Records

Time-line	Objectives	Tasks
W* 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to obtain the consent from the headteachers and class staff</li> <li>to become familiar with the field location</li> <li>to get familiar with the daily routine</li> </ul> <p>to begin to the gain initial insight of the kindergarten and participants</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Meeting the kindergarten headteachers</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Meeting the class staff and getting their consent forms completed</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Sending the consent package to the parents</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Reading the kindergarten and classroom documentations including regulation, staff handbooks, teaching plan of the class (weekly, monthly, yearly) etc.</li> </ul>
W2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to obtain parents' consent</li> <li>to obtain children's assent</li> <li>to get familiar &amp; built trust with the staff and the children</li> <li>to uncover how staff use the spatial context and how they interact with each other and the children</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Meeting the parents and organising a meeting with them when necessary; and getting their consent forms completed</li> </ul> <p>Informing children about the research and encouraging them to participate; and getting their assent book completed</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Non-participant observation of staff -5 whole days</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with staff- 0.5-1hr (breaks &amp; lunch time) / day</li> </ul>
W3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to discover how staff performance related to the curriculum and pedagogy in different activities</li> <li>to unearth how children use the spatial context and how they interact with peers and adults</li> <li>to discover how children conceptualise and experience their daily kindergarten lives</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Non-participant observation of staff -5 whole day</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with staff - 0.5-1hr (breaks &amp; lunch time) / day</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Non-participant observation of children-5 whole day</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with children- casually</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with parents- 0.5-1hr (drop-off &amp; pick-up time) / day</li> </ul>
W4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to get familiar &amp; built trust with the parents</li> <li>to uncover children's family background</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of staff -5 half day</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Non-participant observation of staff -5 half day</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with staff - 0.5 -1hr (breaks &amp; lunch time) / day</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of children -5 half day</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Non-participant observation of children -5 half day</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with children -casually</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with parents - 0.5-1hr (drop-off &amp; pick-up time) / day</li> </ul>
W5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to further uncover how staff use the spatial context and how they interact with each other and the children</li> <li>to further unearth how staff conceptualise and operationalise the curriculum and pedagogy</li> <li>to further uncover how children use the spatial context and how they interact with peers and adults</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of staff, especially the <b>lead teacher</b> - 4 whole day</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with staff - 0.5-1hr (breaks &amp; lunch time) / day</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of children, especially <b>target children</b> - 4 whole day</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with children, especially <b>target children</b> - casually</li> <li><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Small group discussions with children -1 day (1 activity / day; 20 mins / activity)</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to further discover how children conceptualise and experience their daily kindergarten lives</li> </ul>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with parents- 0.5-1hr (drop-off & pick-up time) / day
W6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to further explore parents' views on children, staff, kindergarten curriculum and pedagogy</li> </ul>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of staff, especially the <b>English teacher</b> -4 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with staff - 0.5 -1hr (breaks & lunch time) / day  <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of children, especially <b>target children</b> - 4 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with children, especially <b>target children</b> - casually <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Small group discussions with children -2 day (1 activity /day ; 20 mins / activity)  <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with parents- 0.5-1hr (drop-off & pick-up time) / day
W7		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of staff, especially the <b>Preschool teacher</b> -4 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with staff - 0.5 hr (breaks & lunch time) / day  <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of children, especially target children - 4 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with children, especially <b>target children</b> - casually <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Small group discussions with children -4 day (1 activity / day; 20 mins / activity)  <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with parents - 0.5-1hr (drop-off & pick-up time) / day
W8		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of staff, especially the <b>Teaching and childcare assistant</b> -4 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with staff - 0.5-1hr (breaks & lunch time) / day  <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of children, especially target children - 4 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with children, especially <b>target children</b> - casually <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Small group discussions with children -4 day (1 activity /day ; 20 mins / activity)  <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with parents - 0.5-1hr (AM/PM) / day
W9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to further explore in more detail themes that has arisen in previous observation, conversation and small group discussion with children, and also gain fuller picture of their perspectives and experience</li> </ul>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of staff -3 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with staff - 0.5-1hr (breaks & lunch time) / day  <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of children - 3 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with children- casually <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Small group discussions with children- 3 day (1 activity / day; 20 mins / activity)  <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with parents- 0.5-1hr (drop-off & pick-up time) / day
W10		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of staff -3 whole day

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to obtain adults consent for interview</li> </ul>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of children -3 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with children- casually <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Small group discussions with children- 3 day (1 activity / day; 20 mins / activity) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Inviting staff and parents for interview and getting their consent form completed
<b>W11</b>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of staff -3 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with staff - 0.5-1hr (breaks & lunch time) / day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of children, especially target children - 3 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with children -casually <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Small group discussions with children- 3 day (1 activities / day; 20 mins / activity) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with parents- 0.5-1hr (drop-off & pick-up time) / day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Arranging and confirming the meeting time & place for adult formal interviews
<b>W12</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to further explore in more detail themes that has arisen in previous observation and conversation with the headteachers, and also gain fuller picture of their perspectives on curriculum and pedagogy</li> </ul>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Formal interview with 2 headteachers - 1 interview / day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of staff -3 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with staff - 0.5-1hr (breaks & lunch time) / day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of children -3 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with children- casually <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Small group discussions with children- 3 day (1 activity / day; 20 mins / activity) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with parents- 0.5-1hr (drop-off & pick-up time) / day
<b>W13</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to explore in more detail themes that has arisen in previous observation and conversation with classroom staff, and also gain fuller picture of their and also gain fuller picture of their perspectives on curriculum and pedagogy</li> </ul>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Formal interview with 3 classroom staff - 1 interview /day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of staff -3 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of children -3 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with children- casually <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Small group discussions with children- 3 day (1 activity / day; 20 mins / activity) <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with parents- 0.5-1hr (drop-off & pick-up time) / day
<b>W14</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to explore in more detail themes that has arisen in previous conversation with parents, and also gain fuller picture of their perspectives on curriculum and pedagogy</li> </ul>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Formal interview with 5 parents - 1 interview /day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of staff -3 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with staff - 0.5-1hr (breaks & lunch time) / day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of children -3 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with children- casually <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Small group discussions with children- 3 day (1 activity / day; 20 mins / activity)
<b>W15</b>		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Formal interview with 4 parents - 1 interview /day

		<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of staff -3 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with staff - 0.5-1hr (breaks & lunch time) / day  <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of children -3 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with children- casually <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Small group discussions with children- 3 day (1 activity / day; 20 mins / activity)
<b>W16</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to collect missing information / omitting data</li> </ul>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of staff -5 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with staff - 0.5-1hr (breaks & lunch time) / day  <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of children -5 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with children- casually <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Small group discussions with children- 5 day (1 activity / day; 20 mins / activity)  <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with parents- 0.5-1hr (drop-off & pick-up time) / day
<b>W17</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>to complete data collection</li> </ul>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of staff -5 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with staff - 0.5-1hr (breaks & lunch time) / day  <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Participant observation of children -5 whole day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with children- casually <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Small group discussions with children- 5 day (1 activity / day; 20 mins / activity)  <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Informal daily conversations with parents- 0.5-1hr (drop-off & pick-up time) / day <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Completion week

\* **W = Week**