

The same ... or different?
A comparative study of kindergarten
policy and practices in
China and England

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Abstract

This study is focused on examining the similarities and differences in early years policy and practices in China and England, using a small case study approach to support a more detailed analysis. An extensive literature review examines the impact of human capital theory on the development of early years strategies in both countries and the emerging neo-liberal policies which have resulted in the marketisation of early years provision in both England and China.

Primary evidence includes first-hand observations, informal discussions and semi-structured interviews undertaken during 25 visits to 15 different settings in China during a four year period. The case study, involving one English and one Chinese setting, provides an invaluable opportunity for a more informed comparison. Findings from the research identified three emerging themes: the impact of marketisation on early years provision; the effect of changing demographics and parental expectations as a result of China's one child policy; and the challenges facing both countries in developing a well-trained early years workforce.

Finally the study concludes by suggesting additional areas for research focused on further investigation into the impact of the one-child policy; exploration into the effectiveness of early bilingual experiences on children's learning of English and further examination into what lessons early years settings can learn from the Confucian approach

Introduction

My interest in this research stems from first-hand experience of having lived and worked in a number of countries, and an intrinsic awareness of being part of a global community. Having been involved in the early years sector for the past 18 years this has inevitably had an impact upon my research interests which, in recent years, have been informed through visits to a number of international settings. Most recently this has focused on early years provision in China as a result of 25 visits between 2009-2012.

With the ease of movement across country borders, early years practitioners are providing care and education for children from increasingly diverse cultures and, inherent within this, is the need to understand their prior experiences and the impact of society and culture on this in order to

“ ... inform our notions of what it means to be a child – and therefore how childhood is experienced within a particular society ... ” (Sharp 2009: 97).

In this growing global community, China has become an increasingly major participant where the rapid speed of growth in its economy has led to reviews of existing education practices with new policies recognising the key role that education plays in this (Jiabao 2010).

'In short, China is a developing country ...[with] an unbalanced economic and social development [which is faced with] the dual task of accelerating industrialization and meeting the challenges of the knowledge society' (Ministry of Education 2008).

Measures to promote globalisation introduced in the early 1980s have already had a positive impact (Cornia 2001) and have seen China's commitment to becoming a country with 'rich human resources' being reinforced with the acceleration of existing plans in order to achieve this 'modernised' society by 2020 (Ministry of Education (MOE) 2010b). A review of existing literature will provide an historical overview of preschool provision which, for the purposes of this research will focus on children aged three-to-five years and will be referred to as 'kindergarten'. This research will provide a general overview of the early years agenda within China, but specifically in the Beijing area. As a result of previous visits, professional discussion and reading and research, it is clear that China has a profound understanding of the key role that education plays in its continued growth and success, which has been recognised with the introduction of nine years of compulsory, free education in 2005 (Jiabao 2010). This preceded the 'National Plan for Medium and Long-Term Education Reform and Development 2010-2020' (MOE 2010b) with plans for China to focus on accelerating the education provision, '*... to become a country with rich human resources by promoting the scientific development of education...*' in order to achieve a 'modernised' society by 2020. There is also a recognition that this provision should focus on quality, as well as quantity and, as a result, the country is committed to developing a preschool provision that it sees as being developmentally and culturally appropriate for children (MOE 2001).

Increasingly, it is being recognised that young children represent a country's future and that advancement depends on investing in the youngest members of society. Ongoing neuro-scientific research into brain development, particularly during the early years of children's development, and the impact of early experiences on later life has focused policy makers on the importance of developing high quality early years care and education provision (Hackman et al 2010; Raizada and Kishiyam 2010; Shonkoff et al 2009).

The belief that investing in the early years of children's lives will be beneficial for children in future years when, as adults, they will contribute to the country's economic base is founded on the human capital theory and has played a significant role in the development of current education and welfare policies in many countries including China and the UK (OECD 2006a; Perkins et al 2004; UNICEF 2003). Such Welfare State reform is a global phenomenon occurring throughout the developed world (Penn 2011) as governments seek to provide a secure economic future for their people (Hall 2001; Walt 1998).

This concept of 'human capital' accepts that economic prosperity is contingent upon an effective national education policy (Olaniyan and Okemakinde 2008). Consequently China is working toward reforming existing early years provision with aspirations for a guarantee of universal access to preschool for all three year olds by the end of the decade (Tobin et al 2009). Such a commitment is built upon the market model that neoliberal governments, including the UK, have adopted (Penn 2011). In the UK, the Labour

government's National Childcare Strategy (1998) was key to the expansion of existing childcare services, with the government's commitment to eradicating child poverty by 2020 (Skinner 2006; DfEE 1998). Private, voluntary and independent providers were encouraged to develop new or existing provision, with the resulting marketisation of child care being intended to give parents greater choice and improved outcomes for children; although critics have argued that inequalities in access to early years provision, and differences in quality of provisions, have increased (Lloyd and Penn 2013).

This study sets out with the aim of providing a more informed view of early years practice in China to include a Case Study involving one Chinese and one English setting. This will be situated within a professional discussion that will be informed by the researcher's extensive experience of early years provision in England, together with reflections based on 25 visits over four years, to 15 different Chinese settings; these included seven government-run and eight private kindergartens. Three different urban areas of China were visited, including Qingdao in the north-east and Fuling in central China, but the significant focus was on Beijing. In contrast to many similar studies which have been carried out on a small number of preschool settings in China, the most well known being that of Tobin et al (1989; 2009), the range and time scale of this research has afforded the opportunity to develop a greater degree of confidence in reviewing the consistency of practice, providing an opportunity for thoughtful comparison and discussion based on: observed practice, semi-structured interviews and informal discussions with setting staff and representatives of non-governmental organisations.

Primary research includes personal observations and reflection supported by photographic and video evidence of the environment, and of children engaged in adult-led and child-chosen activities. Photographs, videos and notes made during visits have been analysed and supported an informed study of the similarities and differences observed. Four staff members from each setting were also involved in semi-structured interviews to provide a practitioner voice when analysing the findings. Interpreters, who were experienced in early years practice, were essential when translating both written and aural contributions.

Research has shown that there are a number of similarities between the Chinese and the English early years curricula (DfE 2012a; MOE 2001) (Appendix 1) and this will be explored within the study. Although China published national guidelines for the content of the early years curriculum in 2001 (MOE), these were only recommendations and different regions in China operate their own education hierarchies, similar to local governance within the UK, but on a significantly larger scale (MOE 2010b).

The Chinese curriculum is based upon Confucian ideology which has strong moral overtones with an emphasis on harmony, and respect for family and elders (Pang and Richey 2007; Chan 1999). Emphasis is placed on academic achievement and the learning of skills in order to become a productive member of society (Starr 2012; Tobin et al 1989; 2009; Chan 1999). This can be clearly seen in the guidance for the Chinese curriculum which includes a strong focus on promoting love and respect for parents, elders, teachers and country (MOE, 2001). In contrast the English curriculum, the Early Years Foundation

Stage (EYFS) (DfE 2012a) sees children as individuals and encourages staff to develop children's independence whilst planning for, and addressing, individual needs. Other significant differences between the two approaches are Chinese guidelines related to routine practices such as rest and physical exercise. Kindergarten staff interviewed from both Case Study settings show an understanding of the importance of play and a child-focused curriculum, although Chinese staff acknowledge the influence that parental expectations can have on the content and delivery of this, with requests for more academic input and homework, with more popular settings being over-subscribed. This '*... craze for choosing top schools ...*', was highlighted by the Chinese MOE in its 10 year plan, and the implementation of policies to narrow the gap between different settings (MOE, 2010b; 2010c).

In summary the study will provide a cognizant comparison of early years policy and practices in China and the UK, drawing upon a case study involving one English and one Chinese kindergarten, presenting an account of how the different curricula are implemented and the impact of cultural, political and social contexts on this. It is recognised that the results cannot be generalised due to the small sample involved in the case study, but this has been situated within a discussion that makes reference to a number of different settings visited during the period of the research and will therefore ensure a pragmatic analysis of existing practices in both countries.

Literature Review

Introduction

For the purposes of this research a review of existing literature was conducted in order to provide an insight into current provision for three-to-five year old children in China and the UK. This will be situated within a discussion on the political and historical contexts that have contributed to the emerging neoliberal policies and marketisation of childcare as parents lead the path in consumerism of kindergarten provision in both countries. This will then lead on to a review of the current curriculum and pedagogical approaches and the rationale for these.

The focus will be on provision for children between three to five years of age as formalised care for children in China, from birth to three years, is still very limited with current government intervention for this age range being focused on resources to improve the health and nutrition of the very youngest children (Wu et al 2012). Currently 90% of under two-year-olds are being cared for at home (ibid) which is in contrast to 20% of babies under one year old, 30% of one–two year olds and 60% of two–three year olds who currently attend some form of early years provision in the UK (OECD 2006b: 418).

For the purpose of consistency the term ‘kindergarten’ will be used when referring to any childcare provision for children between these ages.

Investing in Human Capital

To better appreciate the current early years agenda in both countries it is helpful to understand the impact that globalisation has had on the development of early year's policies and practices. Such an informed understanding of each other's people, culture and practices helps to promote more effective international partnerships and a better understanding of how best to meet the needs of our youngest children (Bijian 2005; Gardner 1989; House 2012; Sharp 2009; Tobin et al 1989).

The role of early childhood development and education (ECDE) has been identified as key to global competitiveness, with investment in ECDE being shown to result in far greater social returns than any other interventions at later stages (Heckman and Tremblay 2006). This has developed from Schultz's theory of Human Capital (1960) which identified the critical role that education plays in securing a country's future economic outlook; the more educated a nation's people are, the better placed it will be to support global competitiveness (OECD 1996). Ongoing research continues to provide strong evidence linking improved investment in education and training with the generation of higher economic returns in the future (Cornia 2011).

Existing bodies of literature reinforce the opinion that investment in ECDE is the most cost-effective strategy for governments looking to build upon their human capital, and is seen as an key strategy for breaking the cycle of disadvantage that children can be trapped in; with savings of between \$4 and \$7 being identified for every dollar invested in

high quality ECDE, international policy is focused on how best to build upon this premise (Heckman and Tremblay 2006; Heckman and Krueger 2003; UNICEF 2003). As a result both the Chinese and UK governments have sought to put ECDE at the forefront of educational reform (MoE 2010a; DfEE 1998); that has been reinforced by the publication of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) in the UK (DfCSF 2008; DfE 2012a), and the 'Outline of China's National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development' (2010-2020) which builds upon the tenet that

'A nation's enduring future hinges on education. ..[which] must be enhanced if a nation is to prosper' (MOE 2010a).

The positive impact that quality, early years provision can have on later life is hard to deny, but critics have argued that the measurements used to validate the impact of investment in human capital are being misrepresented. The original data is based on a narrow range of evidence that emerged from three studies; the Perry Preschool Programme which involved 123 children, the Abecedarian Project 111 children and the Chicago Project 1539 children (Campbell-Barr 2012; 2009). Questions have been raised as to the relevance of these results at an international level when considering the profile of the children involved in these studies, each of which was conducted on high-risk African American children living in the United States (Campbell-Barr 2012). More recent international studies, including those in Argentina, Bangladesh, Turkey and England have provided a more sustainable argument for the role of investing in education reform (Wu et al 2012; Sylva et al 2004).

One of the most significant studies to provide evidence of the impact of early years education is the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project (Sylva et al 2004), a longitudinal study carried out in England between 1997-2003, which followed the progress of over 3000 children between the ages of three and seven, from 141 different types of early years settings. The findings have reaffirmed the positive impact that quality early years experiences can have on children's later achievements, particularly for children from more disadvantaged backgrounds. As with previous research, critics argue that these findings are overly focused on testing children's cognitive ability, and that assessment should be looking at the child more holistically to identify added value to social skills and improved self-esteem (Heckman 2000, cited in Campbell-Barr 2012).

This criticism would appear to be upheld when examining the requirements of the revised Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE 2012a) in England and its focus on school readiness and the assessment of children against identified outcomes. Although this includes judgement against personal, social and emotional development, it is argued that testing should assess '*... more than just knowledge and cognitive ability*' (Campbell Barr 2012: 435) and that reliance on such market force strategies has resulted in the underfunding of the early years sector and concern over the impact this can have on meeting demand, maintaining affordability and ensuring the quality of provision in the long term (Campbell-Barr 2009).

Neoliberal policy and the marketisation of childcare China

Such irrefutable evidence has led to the review and development of early years policy in both the UK and China. As China is focused on transforming itself from a middle-income to a high-income country, its future development is seen to become increasingly dependent on developing its own scientific and technological capabilities as it develops a long-term strategy focused on improving its future human capital resources (Tisdell 2009). One impact of this has been the significance given to ECDE within the five-year plan issued by the Ministry of Education (MOE 2010a) where investment in the early years is seen as a key strategy to reducing child poverty (Zhu, 2009).

This growing awareness of the significance that a well-educated workforce can have on a country's future prosperity presented China with the challenge of how to ensure that all children had access to high quality basic education, including early years education. The size of China's population presented significant challenges and the response to this was the adoption of neoliberal policies and the legalisation of private education in 1997 with the publication of the 'Regulation on Education Run by Social Forces' (Ling 1999). The impact on early years provision has seen the move from kindergarten facilities which were originally operated by factories and revolutionary committees, to government-run and increasingly privately-run kindergartens (Kessen 1976). The development of such neo-liberal practices and the resulting marketisation of childcare provision, has seen significant increases in private sector growth, with 68% of kindergarten provision now

provided by private groups, compared with falling numbers in state-subsidised government run kindergartens (Wu et al 2012). The preference for the heavily subsidised state-run kindergartens has seen demand outstrip availability in the cities and towns; with parental choice being limited, dependent upon their income, to either expensive high-quality or cheaper low-quality provision (Vandenbroek 2006).

One of the key factors influencing emerging policy was the burgeoning population rate and the need to control this which resulted in one of the more controversial policies adopted by China in recent years; the adoption of the 'one child policy' in 1979 (Chen 1985). This 'temporary' one-child policy was introduced in urban areas of China in 1979 in an attempt to control the spiraling population and limit the impact of this on the country's fragile infrastructure (Zhu 2009). Its success cannot be denied, with significant decreases in annual birth rates being identified (1.5% to 1.1%) during the 1980s and 1990s (Cornia 2011). There is much continued discussion on the wide-ranging effects of this policy, not least China's rapidly ageing society and the expectations that by 2050 one in three Chinese are expected to be aged 60 years or over (Morelle 2013; Kanedo 2006); as a result there is the expectation that this policy will be reversed in the near future.

The impact of population size on early years provision is more clearly understood when considering most recent figures which show 26.58 million children enrolled in kindergarten provision in 2009, and the expectations that this will increase to 34 million by 2015, and 40 million by 2020 (Zhu 2009). Consequently, despite China's commitment to investing between 1.3-1.4% of the education budget on kindergarten provision, the

scale of providing sufficient places for the 23.49 million children of kindergarten age, would be difficult to realise without private investment (ibid).

Parents are also concerned by staffing ratios and the numbers of staff caring for children in kindergarten settings in China, which differs significantly across the country with ratios of 1 adult: 10 children observed in the large cities, but this contrasts significantly with average ratios in smaller towns of 1 adult: 20 children, and in the poorest provinces 1 adult: 94 children (Wu et al 2012: 45).

England

Similar to China, significant policy developments occurred in the UK with the election of a new Labour government and the introduction of the National Childcare Strategy (NCS), set out in the 1998 Green Paper 'Meeting the Childcare Challenge', which aimed to reduce the welfare bill and abolish childhood poverty by 2020 (DfEE 1998). Underpinning this strategy was the Sure Start initiative, modelled on the Perry Street Programme referred to earlier which, at a cost of £8.2 billion, was seen as an investment in human capital, intended to give children the best possible start in life (Skinner 2006). A similar expansion in private provision to that seen in China, saw the UK childcare market increase to provide places for approximately 1.1 million children in less than five years (Penn 2011); following government commitment to spend 1.1% of its budget on pre-primary places (OECD 2009b). The development of the Sure Start philosophy was a result of this (DfE 2012d; Penn 2008), with original Sure Start Children's Centres being built in

identified areas of deprivation. Their remit was to provide a central location for a range of services seen as necessary to support the holistic needs of children and their families, focusing on health, welfare and education, before being launched on a national scale (DfE 2012d). Key to the success of this initiative was removal of perceived barriers to parents, particularly women, who wished to return back into the workforce; most significant of these barriers was the availability of high quality, affordable and accessible childcare (Lloyd and Penn 2013). As a result there was a rapid expansion of childcare during this time, underpinned by the extension of free, part-time nursery provision for all four years olds, which was later extended to all three year olds in 2004 (Penn 2008). Such a demand-led expansion in childcare places is key to neo-liberal policy; but the outcome has been similar to China, with cutbacks in local authority provision whilst private, for-profit provision has seen a seven-fold increase in the availability of places (Penn 2008).

Such private expansion comes at a cost and, despite the availability of funded part-time provision in addition to government subsidies for families on low incomes (Working Families Tax Credits), families in the UK still pay the highest proportion of childcares costs (41%) than any other member country of the Organisation for Economic and Cultural Development (OECD), with the exception of Ireland (Penn 2011). This could account for criticism about the effectiveness of the Sure Start programme in failing to meet the needs of disadvantaged children, and suggest the failure of universal education provision to meet the intended objectives, although a report by the House of Commons (2010) suggests that universal coverage is the most effective way of ensuring that the majority of

the most disadvantaged children are reached, whilst the Sure Start evaluation summary refers repeatedly to the economic benefits of ECDE (DfE 2011).

Marketisation of early years in the UK would appear to be more advanced with parents having a range of settings to choose from, with access to a number of documents to support this choice; this includes reference to reports on the effectiveness of provision in meeting the statutory requirements of the early years curriculum (Ofsted 2013). With the exception of some private schools, there are no entry tests before starting formal education, although critics would suggest that assessment against the early learning goals identified within the EYFS are one step removed from this (DfE 2012: House 2011), whilst the British government is currently considering the introduction of more formalised national tests at five years of age (Watt 2013). Nevertheless, as with Chinese counterparts, access to some private settings could be compromised by the ability of parents to pay although Paull (2103, cited in Lloyd and Penn 2013) suggests parents may not always make the best choices

Staff qualifications: the development of a professional workforce China

Staffing qualifications and teacher ratios are particular areas that bear comparison. The Chinese government reviewed professional qualifications for teachers and teaching assistants, identifying three levels of kindergarten qualifications including elementary, middle and senior (Wu et al 2012). All early years teachers must be certified and have achieved a minimum B grade in Mandarin, in addition to passing examinations on child

psychology and education (Wu et al 2012; Pan and Block 2011; Chang 2006; Hu 2005; Pearson and Row, 2003; Jin and Cortazzi 2002).

Training can take place in a range of institutions including vocational high schools, specialised secondary schools, three-year tertiary education institutions and universities (Wu et al 2012). This can take between three and four years to achieve and the curriculum includes courses on childhood theory, health and psychology in addition to studying teaching methods specific to supporting: language, common knowledge, mathematics, arts and craft and physical education; Early years specialists will also learn to draw, dance and play a musical instrument and undergo a six-week work placement.

The proliferation of foreign language classes in many Chinese kindergartens also raises concerns about the qualifications of staff who teach these sessions, particularly when considering recent research suggesting that bilingual teaching could further marginalise poorer children who do not have opportunities to practise this outside of the setting. It is of particular note that being taught in an unfamiliar language is often too demanding for preschool children, in particular, to cope with (Pinnock 2010, cited in Brooker and Woodhead 2010).

England

The professionalisation of the early years workforce in England is more advanced. The publication of the EPPE report (Sylva et al 2004) mentioned earlier was key to recognising

the impact that a well-qualified workforce can have on securing good outcomes for children, particularly when staff held graduate qualifications (Pugh and Duffy 2005). This resulted in government initiatives to enable all full day care settings to be graduate-led by 2020 (DfES 2005). The emergence of specific early years graduate qualifications and the establishment of a new Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) was seen as significant in recognising the key role played by early years professionals and the development of a world-class early years workforce (DfES 2005). This was followed by considerable investment to support the upskilling of the existing workforce, but the economic turnaround saw the new coalition government (2010) having to rationalise this commitment with reduced investment resulting in the aim for a graduate-led workforce becoming aspirational rather than a statutory requirement. The EYFS (DfE 2012) sets in place the statutory requirements for staff qualifications with requirements for all staff to have, or be working towards, a Level 2 qualification, and senior staff to gain a Level 3 qualification in order to become Early Years Educators (DfE 2013c). These can be studied through part-time or full time courses and would generally involve at least one year of study, with minimum expectations for the knowledge and skills that staff will be expected to know and to demonstrate in order to meet the EYFS requirements.

Despite the reduction in funding the focus on qualifications retains a high profile with the government commissioning an independent review into the range of qualifications of all people working in the early years (Nutbrown 2012), and a reaffirmation of the importance of having a highly qualified workforce led by Early Years Teachers (DfE 2013c). The government response to this was the publication of the policy papers 'More great

childcare' (DfE 2013c) which was controversial in suggesting an increase in the number of children that staff could look after in an attempt to reduce the cost of childcare for parents, and was followed six months later by the paper 'More affordable childcare' (DfE 2013d) in which the recommendations for increased ratios had been removed.

Responsibility for kindergarten provision China

Responsibility for childcare provision in China is complicated by the number of government departments with differing duties and the range of laws, regulations and guidelines issued between 1985-2011 related to the protection and development of children (Wu et al 2012). For example, services for children under the age of three fall mainly within the remit of the health sector, whilst requirements related to people working with children under three years of age lie with the Ministry of Human Resources and Labor Security (ibid). At the same time the National Population and Family Planning Commission oversees young children's development up to three years of age, before the Ministry of Education takes over for the setting of policy and guidelines related to pre-compulsory education for children between three and six years of age. In addition, the influential All China Women's Federation has a key role in informing politics and policy, and is a leading advocate for the rights of young children and the elderly, particularly those living in the more deprived, rural areas (Wu et al 2012; Lister cited in Franklin 2005).

There are three distinct forms of childcare provision in China. Nurseries which are similar to crèches/day care centres in the UK and look after children under three-years old and provide basic care provision, some with boarding facilities; government settings and private facilities; most settings include dedicated health centres and school nurses with health being a priority when caring for very young children (Wu et al 2012). Public and private kindergartens cater for children between the ages of three and six years, prior to formal education, and focus on social skills, hygiene routines, physical development and communication, with a particular focus on socialisation due to the one-child policy and the implications for children who do not have siblings to learn from or play with (Zhu and Zhang 2008). A separate preschool year, for children between five and six years, is seen as preparation for the last year before children start formal education (Wu et al 2012), but in practice is simply '*a lighter version of first grade*' (Zhu and Zhang 2008: 178).

Currently there is no universal funding for nursery provision, although it is planned for this to be introduced for three year olds by 2020 (UNESCO 2008). Interim targets hope to increase existing enrolment from 51% (2009) to 60% by 2015 (Wu et al 2012: 51); a considerable task when taking into account the 1.1% birth rate which equates to approximately 16 million babies being born in China each year (ibid: xv).

England

In comparison the Department for Education (DfE) has responsibility for overseeing educational policy and practice in England, with early years being included within this.

The term 'early years' covers children between the ages of birth to eight years, with compulsory education beginning the term after children are five years old. Nursery funding for up to 15 hours per week is available for all three and four-year-old children, and this has recently been extended (2013) to include two-year-olds from less advantaged backgrounds (DfE 2012b).

Childcare provision that operates regularly for more than two and a half hours a day must be registered with the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) who have responsibility for ensuring that statutory welfare and education requirements are being met (Ofsted 2013). The range of settings includes home care (childminding), full day care (nursery provision), sessional care (preschool) and reception class (four to five years old), the latter fulfilling a similar function to that of the preschool year in Chinese settings.

The kindergarten experience and changing curriculum approaches China

In China, the period between 1949 and 1965 heralded the emergence of widespread on-site nursery provision as women were encouraged to return to the workforce; care practices during this time were characterised by basic care routines such as 'sandbag rearing' (where young babies spent the day laid on a bag of fine sand which acted as a nappy), and which was still in evidence until as recently as 1990 (Wu et al 2012). Other accounts described seeing young children standing in lines or sitting in rows, listening to teachers and following highly structured routines (Drummond 2000).

After being closed down during the Cultural Revolution (1965-1976), nurseries were re-established in 1978 as China began to implement economic reforms which would see the country open up to the international community; resulting in the exposure to, and consideration of, educational practices linked to Western approaches (Zhu 2009; Tisdell 2009). This exploration challenged the existing educational practices described by Gardner during a visit to China as embracing '... *'mimetic' modes in the most rigorous (and often rigid) way imaginable'* (1989: p71). Nevertheless, this era heralded a more experimental stage as settings began to experiment with a range of pedagogical approaches that were emerging as Chinese experts were inclined to view western approaches as the way forward to enabling effective competition in the global economy (Ye 1996, cited in Morley and Glazzard 2012).

To support a more cohesive approach, the Ministry of Education published the Kindergarten Education Guidance Program (Trial) in 1992 (MOE 2001). Strategic guidelines identified 22 learning outcomes to be achieved by each child, organised under five key headings: Health, Language, Social, Science and Art, with a specific focus on health, personal and social development, and national pride and respect for country, parents and adults (Appendix 1). The Health section includes developing healthy habits which builds upon key priorities of nursery provision identified earlier. It is worthwhile at this point to stop and consider some of the fundamental differences between Asian and Western expectations, with the former being built upon Confucian beliefs that people should learn to live in harmony, be cooperative, support social events and maintain respect for authority and elders; all key threads running throughout the guidance

document (Jandt 2004; MOE 2001). This is in direct contrast to more western goals which emphasise the importance of

' ... individual differences, individual needs, individual choices [and] individual expression [which] might pose a threat to the communist social order.' (Zhu 2009: 176).

Another interesting comparison is the minor reference to mathematics. In contrast to the English curriculum, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE 2012a), there is just one criterion, under the Science category, that is related to *' ... understand[ing] the importance of, and be[ing] interested in, mathematics,'* (MOE 2001). This is of particular note when considering the success of Chinese students in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) league table for mathematics (OECD 2010; PISA 2009). There is also no specific reference to the development of early writing skills, which could be as a result of the need for highly developed skills when reading and writing in Mandarin script; but this is situated within a changing environment where Pinyin, the system for converting written Chinese characters into the Roman alphabet, is gaining increasing prominence in everyday use.

At this point it would also be useful to review the impact that China's one-child policy is having on kindergarten provision with the emergence of the 'little emperor' phenomenon (Cameron et al 2012). With 90% of children in Chinese cities being only children (Jiao et al, 1996, cited in Rogoff 2003) this has narrowed considerably the social environment that most children are being brought up in, resulting in a '4-2-1' family structure where four

grandparents and two parents concentrate their hopes and aspirations for the future on the one child at the heart of the family group (Cameron et al 2012). It has been suggested that this has resulted in spoiled and over-indulged children who have limited opportunities to develop social skills and learn how to behave within peer groups resulting in distortion of their own social realities (Rogoff 2003).

More recent research has expressed concern about the legacy of this as children come of age and enter the workforce with compromised work ethics, resulting in employers being seen to discriminate against only children, despite earlier studies recognising the better academic outcomes that only children tend to achieve (Falbo and Paston 1993, cited in Cameron et al 2012). Consequently there is the anticipation that effective kindergarten provision will address these issues, alongside academic expectations, as they prepare children for successful entry into compulsory education and the school of their choice (MOE 2010c).

With parents leading the way as consumers of kindergarten provision, there is increasing competition amongst providers to address parental preferences, none more so than in China where a place at a school of their choice can be dependent upon a successful entrance test and parents will consequently favour settings which will include a more academic programme. With an international curriculum focus being preferred (Ye 1996, cited in Morley and Glazzard 2012), growing numbers of parents are favouring bilingual settings, since China's decision to choose English as the second official language and the implications of this for future career choices (Pan and Block 2011; Chang 2006; Hu 2005;

Pearson and Row 2003; Jin and Cortazzi 2002). This is seen as particularly important when government job roles require applicants to have a certain standard of English, and students are required to pass English exams in order to enter high school and university (Yan and Huizhong 2006).

England

Reading and research suggests a number of differences between the Chinese and English early years curricula, most significant of which is the statutory requirement for all English settings to follow the EYFS (DfE 2012a). The EYFS sets the standards that all early years providers must meet, identifying the learning and development requirements for children between the ages of birth and five years of age (ibid). Divided into three prime areas of learning: Personal, Social and Emotional Development, Communication and Language and Physical Development, and four core areas of learning: Literacy, Mathematics, Understanding the World and Expressive Arts and Design, it includes 17 early learning goals that most children are expected to have achieved by the time they reach the end of the EYFS (ibid). These goals are intended to provide children with a secure foundation from which to progress onto formal schooling, although there is a growing body of opinion which has expressed concerns about the appropriateness of some of these goals, particularly those linked to literacy, and the perceived focus on assessment at such an early age, a point alluded to earlier (Campbell-Barr 2012; House 2011; Early Childhood Action).

As with Chinese parenting styles there are concerns linked to the increase in behavioural issues presented by growing numbers of children, and the importance of a joint approach in addressing this but Maggi et al (2005) suggests that the ability of parents to provide positive parenting can be hindered by socio-economic or personal circumstances such as unemployment, stress and/or depression. Research has shown that long term outcomes are inextricably linked with the family environment and parental nurturing skills, with indications of future educational success being significantly linked to the degree that parents and children engage effectively (Pelto et al 1999, cited in Maggi et al 2005).

Other noteworthy differences between the two approaches include the Chinese guidelines related to daily routines, with a two-hour compulsory sleep time recommended for all children up to the age of seven, and the expectation that they will participate in two hours of outside activity each day (MOE 2001). In more recent years, different regions within China have begun developing their own educational guidelines, which mean that these recommendations may be interpreted differently at a local level (MOE 2010b). This is similar to local authority governance in the UK, and is indicative of the development of management structures as the early years agenda expands (Lloyd and Penn 2013).

Conclusion

Clear themes have emerged from this review of the literature most notably: the importance placed on developing effective early years policy, and early years education being seen as key to future economic development; the professionalisation of the early years workforce with both countries identifying minimum standards of qualifications; and the impact of marketisation and consumer choice on the emerging early curriculum, particularly in China. These themes will be explored further during the study.

Methodology

Type of Study

A phenomenological/interpretist perspective was identified as the chosen methodological approach to be followed, as the range of information to be gathered would be subject to interpretation by the researcher when comparing the similarities and differences between early years settings in China and England (Cohen et al 2011; Gillam 2000).

Such a study lends itself most obviously to a Case Study approach which supported the researcher's engagement in an intense, in-depth investigation that provided a unique opportunity to compare two settings with similar characteristics (Cohen et al 2011). This qualitative approach included informal discussions with staff from fifteen different Chinese settings, observations of children and semi-structured interviews with a total of eight staff; four from each of the Chinese and UK settings. It was felt that these were the best methods to use in order to provide a realistic picture of existing practices before analysing the similarities and differences of children's experiences in each of the settings. Travers (2001) refers to such an approach as ethnomethodology where observations, interviews and discourse analysis are used to investigate the social world.

Time, logistics and organisational constraints pointed to the small sample to be studied but, to provide a wider overview of kindergarten provision in China and so situate the data more securely within the national picture, additional information was collected from informal discussions and observations conducted during previous visits to China, between 2009 and 2012, evidence of which was recorded in a research journal. The researcher has

eighteen years of experience working within the early years field in the UK, including extensive occupational experience of observing children, and believed that this background would provide a secure basis for comparison. A number of previous visits to China had resulted in a familiarity with the Chinese curriculum and pedagogical approaches implemented by a number of Chinese early years settings, thereby ensuring that interpretation of the data would be situated within an informed perspective. The use of empirical evidence in the form of observations, together with interviews and discussions, would provide triangulation of evidence to support the validity of the findings and increase confidence in the interpretation (Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

The Case Study approach is also the most appropriate in this instance, meeting the three key characteristics for a case study identified by Hitchcock and Hughes (1995, cited in Cohen et al 2011); it will be carried out within the institutional context of early years settings, will be focused on examining the attitudes, behaviours and experiences of the children and staff in the chosen settings and will be reinforced by comparison of individual roles of staff in the settings.

Details of sample

The Chinese kindergarten upon which the Case Study is focused, opened in 2011 and is located on the outskirts of Beijing; when compared with traditional kindergartens in China it is relatively small but supports comparison with the setting in the UK which is a large children's nursery, of a similar size, located in an urban environment. A significant

number of parents at both settings are in employment and use the kindergartens as a form of childcare, whilst a number of Chinese families will also have additional expectations regarding educational content.

A professional relationship had already been established with the manager of the Chinese setting who was keen to develop a pedagogical approach that reflected a range of curriculum styles, most significant of which was the EYFS (DfCSF 2008; DfE 2012).

Comparisons were to be made of: the curriculum content of both settings and how this was planned for and delivered; the impact on practice in meeting parent expectations when considering the role of kindergarten in supporting children's developmental progress; and an examination of the effectiveness of existing training and qualifications available to the early years workforce.

A total of three days, over two separate visits, was spent at the Chinese setting and during this time the researcher was given free access to observe the daily routines of children, including both adult-directed and child-led activities. The observations were specifically focused on the 'Little Men' classroom, which was for children aged between 40-55 months. Semi-structured interviews were held with four members of staff; this included the manager (also the owner), the lead teacher and the assistant from the Little Men class, and the lead teacher for the 'Little Bobo' group (24-40 months).

The researcher was already very familiar with the UK setting, but also spent a similar amount of time observing comparable practices and completing the same interview

process with four members of staff; the manager, a senior practitioner with responsibility for preschool children (36-60 months), and two practitioners working with children aged 24-36 months and 36-60 months respectively.

Data collection methods

Primary data was collected via observations and interviews which '*... provide a unique example of real people in real situations*' (Cohen et al 2011: 289). Non-participatory observations were carried out within the institutional context of the early years settings and focused on examining and comparing the attitudes, behaviours and experiences of the children and staff in the chosen settings. The strengths of observation are '*... that they observe effects in real contexts ...*' (Cohen et al 2008: 289), which is further reinforced by Verschuren who states that, '*... direct observation is faithful to the real-life, in-situ and holistic nature of a case study,*' (cited in Cohen et al 2008: 298). Opportunities for both planned and spontaneous observations provided unequivocal evidence of the children's experiences in each setting and were particularly important in providing comparative evidence.

Such a phenomenological approach provided the opportunity to gather a wealth of rich data, examination of which will unavoidably include personal interpretation based on the researcher's own perspective, experience and culture. The number of settings visited, and opportunities to engage in repeat visits, supported confidence in the final analysis (Lester 1999). This, together with the opportunity to carry out interviews with both Chinese and

English peers, was seen as critical in providing an opportunity for the researcher to develop an understanding of, and acknowledge, diverse viewpoints.

In addition to both formal and informal observations that took place throughout the day in order to gain an insight/overview of the experience of children attending the setting, semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with practitioners from both settings. These included staff with differing roles and levels of responsibility which provided an opportunity to gain a clearer understanding, at a local level, of the impact that any cultural and social considerations could have on the provision offered.

Questions asked included information on individual roles, qualifications, training, childcare practices, daily routines, planning, observation and record keeping practices, reasons for parental choice and individual perception of changes to practice over the last ten years (Appendix 2). The need to be aware of such social contexts is supported by Abu-Lughod (1991) who states that that observation-based research will become increasingly focused on studying specific communities, 'the ethnography of the particular' as it is seen to be more accurate rather than

'... attempting to describe the composite culture of a group or to analyse the full range of institutions that supposedly constitute the society, the observational ethnographer will be able to provide a rounded account of the lives of particular people ...' (cited in Denzin and Lincoln 2005: 741).

During each trip the researcher has used the same interpreters who work with children in the early years and have a sound understanding of kindergarten practice. Interview questions were forwarded ahead of time and an interpreter accompanied the researcher

during the interviews. The responses from these interviews contributed to, and built upon, a detailed overview of preschool provision developed during four previous visits, although the researcher is aware that answers may reflect a 'corporate' reply rather than a candid response. Another issue to be considered was the impact of cultural reserve in answering openly the interview questions to be posed. Liu suggests that this response bias may see some cultures, '... *giv[ing] more weight to socially desirable responses that make the participation look good*' (cited in Cohen et al 2011: 192).

To mitigate this, the interviews focused on one UK nursery and a private kindergarten in Beijing with which the researcher had developed, and been able to maintain professional contact in-between visits; as a result there is a degree of confidence that this relationship resulted in honest and candid responses.

Thematic data analysis was used to analyse the interview responses, and support observations and discussion notes. Key themes arising from the responses were focused on: curriculum content and delivery, the involvement of parents and carers, and the professional training and qualifications of staff working within the early years sector. These formed the focus for the final discussion.

Primary data also included photographic and video evidence of the environment, and of children engaged in adult-led and child-chosen activities, providing a more objective approach when comparing the two settings. Analysis of photographs, videos and notes has supported an honest, consistent and rigorous interpretation of the similarities and

differences observed. Existing notes from previous visits supplemented interviews with kindergarten staff in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of children's experiences and the range of provision and curriculum content offered, with the researcher's interpretation of the possible rationale for this.

Alternative methodological approaches, including the use of questionnaires, were considered as a way of gathering a larger number of participant views but, on reflection, these could be even more problematic than interviews and observations when the interviewer is not there to clarify questions or address misunderstandings that might arise, particularly when given the language constraints (Cohen et al 2008).

It is recognised that the results of this research cannot be generalised but, nevertheless, it is believed that this is a valuable study that provides a deeper understanding of the differences and similarities in practice, and the underlying impact of culture and marketisation on this. The Chinese kindergarten is a clear example of the impact of neoliberal policies and the opening up of education to social enterprise. Such a research focus will support a better understanding of the early years experience of both Chinese and English children and the impact of national policy on both countries.

Ethics

An Ethics Protocol was devised for this study (Appendix 3) and ethical issues were addressed and followed the University of Plymouth guidelines. These included:

- Prior to commencing the study ethical clearance was sought. Each participant was provided with an explanation of, and rationale and audience for, the research that was being undertaken; this was interpreted for Chinese participants (Appendix 4).
- Ensuring that written, informed consent was received from all participants involved in the study. To this end a separate consent sheet (Appendix 5) was developed and sent to both settings. This included a space for participants to provide their signatures as evidence of written consent.
- A separate information sheet was developed for parents; this was given to the manager of the setting to disseminate (Appendix 6)
- Permission was sought from each setting to make observations, take photographs and record video evidence where appropriate. The observer was also aware of individual children and their predispositions before filming or photographing took place. If children appeared reluctant i.e. turned away, moved away from the recording environment, this was respected and those children were not pursued. Separate posters with 'smiling' and 'sad' faces, which included the English words, Chinese characters and pinyin words for 'yes' and 'no' were available for children to be able express their choice (Appendix 7)

- The opportunity to withdraw consent and use of photographs/videos was made explicit on the information sheet and a deadline was identified for this
- Confidentiality: No setting was to be identified without permission and reference to observations and interviews have been anonymised, names of individuals and identities of staff and settings remained confidential through the use of a coding system. Chinese settings were referred to by number i.e. Kindergarten 1 (K1) and individuals by their nationality (C for Chinese and E for English) and their sequence in the interview schedule eg the manager of the Chinese Kindergarten who was interviewed first is referred to as CK1 and the English manager as EK1. Reflective accounts from students who took part in a residential trip to China and visited a number of settings, including the CK will be identified as RA1, RA2 and RA3
- Participants were not knowingly harmed either physically or psychologically during the research and every effort was made to ensure that participants were not misled.
- The interview questions were piloted before being used to ensure clarity and so ensure their effectiveness and are referred to as Q1 - Q10.

Results and Discussion

The following section will first synthesise information gathered from observations and informal discussions with staff during a number of visits to different Chinese early years settings over the time scale, providing a synopsis of current provision and observed practices. This will be followed by a detailed analysis of the findings from the two case study kindergartens, drawing on additional evidence gained during semi-structured interviews with four members of staff from each setting. Similarities and differences in practices and approaches will be considered, with a specific focus on the three-to-five year old children. Emerging issues relating to the implementation of the curriculum provision, the effect of parental choice on this, and diversity in staff qualifications will be analysed, with reasons for any differences reflected upon. The impact of the marketisation of early years provision will also be considered.

In total, 25 visits to 15 different kindergartens across three different regions in China have informed the discussion and corroborated the experiences of previous researchers, with invitations to participate in conducted tours of the setting and observations of highly-organised adult-led activities (Moyle and Hua 1998; Gardner 1989; Tobin et al 1989; 2009). In contrast, the opportunity to spend four days as a candid observer in two separate Chinese kindergartens, one government and one privately run, together with a number of extended visits to the English kindergarten, enabled the researcher to freely observe children and staff over an extended period of time and so gain a true insight into the children's experiences. However, with such a small number of settings involved in the

Case Study, caution must be applied when considering the transferability of the findings to other settings.

General overview: China

The environment and resources

Discussions that draw upon findings from settings visited in China should be situated within an understanding of the wide range of regional disparity in provision and qualification, and that these findings would not be representative of more rural and semi-rural provision which is significantly underdeveloped (Wu et 2012). All of the settings were located in urban residential and commercial areas; very few were purpose-built but had adapted existing buildings which, in some instances, were located on the upper floors of high rise buildings. A significant difference between Chinese and UK settings is their size and, with the exception of the CK, the numbers of children on roll ranged from 130 to 1000. Following an early years residential trip one student reflected on this noting that,

'The largest centre I have come across in the UK is around 70 children – but in China most were ten times larger than this!' (RA3).

The structural environments ranged from modern and well-resourced to much older buildings which, with few exceptions, were used effectively to showcase impressive large and small-scale displays of children's work. Many of the settings included the use of external wall areas for these displays, ensuring that all children had the opportunity for their work to be displayed, and provided a bright and visual record of children's work and activities for parents and carers to look at as they dropped off or collected their children

at the beginning and end of the day. Large outdoor play areas tended to consist of artificial turf and concrete play surfaces, with children able to access climbing frames and slides in addition to other resources, such as balls and hoops, which were used to promote gross motor skills. Outdoor play observed in many of the settings visited was organised on a large scale, with several groups of children accessing this at the same time. A wide age range of children took part in adult-directed, large-group activities which encouraged children to take part in traditional Chinese dance movements or engage in team relay sports; even at such an early stage, many children were demonstrating bodily control and an early awareness of rhythm, movement and spatial awareness in which the Chinese are known to excel (Crabbe 1980; Galliher and Hessler 1979). These activities were highly directed and were being used at different times by staff to complete formative assessments of children's physical skills. Another reflective statement recognised the organisational skills needed for working with such large groups of children,

'The sight of 700 children arranged in class groups, all doing similar exercises was something to behold. It was clear in those centres where control started!'" (RA3).

Classrooms were furnished with child-sized tables and chairs arranged into small groups and there was a selection of resources for children to choose from. The range and amount of resources available was quite limited considering the number of children and would suggest that the opportunity for freely chosen play was limited. Again displays of children's work were a key feature of each classroom and provided evidence of the range

of activities that children engaged in, as well as highlighting individual responsibilities of children within the classroom, for example watering of plants.

Another difference was the limited range of reading materials which in general consisted of a small number of stylized comic-type books with few factual books. There was significant evidence of the use of recycling materials to produce more varied resources and was something that settings were very proud to showcase, indicative of the restricted resources available for such large numbers of children.

The cost of early years provision

China

A key difference between provision in England and China is the lack of nationally-funded early years provision which has a significant impact on the type of care and education that can be provided. Discussions with managers highlighted the funding differences between private and government-run settings; the former particularly concerned about the costs of running the provision whilst at the same time providing a quality service for parents, supporting the findings of Lloyd and Penn (2013). The needs of young children, both in terms of well-qualified staffing and minimum space requirements, has a considerable impact on the cost of kindergarten provision and is an issue that is challenging both countries as they promote the development of quality provision (Wu et al 2012; Lloyd and Penn 2013). As a result the quality of private provision is very mixed and supports the findings of Vandebroek (2006) with parent's options being defined by the amount they are able to pay.

As identified in the literature review there is no national funding for early years provision, with the costs of running the setting being met through fees, although government-run kindergartens are subsidised. Informal discussions (Chinese Settings 2009a; 2009b; 2010; 2012a; 2012b) highlighted the significant cost of renting premises with expenditure in excess of 200,000 Yuan (£20,000) per year being identified for some settings in Beijing. The variation in salaries was also considerable with managers of Beijing settings being paid significantly more than other regions, ranging between 2000-2500 Yuan per month (approximately £200-250) when compared with 600-700 Yuan (£60-70) in Fuling; as a result staff aspire to work in large cities.

This is ultimately reflected in the cost of day care which ranged from 500 Yuan per month (£50) in government settings in Beijing, to 3000 Yuan (£300) in private kindergartens. Fees charged by international settings were even more expensive, with some charging up to 12000 Yuan per month (£1200) (Chinese Settings 2009b2010; 2012a; 2012b). This would suggest agreement with one of the key concerns arising from the marketisation of early years provision and parental choice being contingent upon their ability to pay for child care (Lloyd and Penn 2013); a quandary for parents in China and England. This could be said to be further exacerbated by the requirement that only children who have non-Chinese passports are able to attend international settings (Chinese settings 2009b).

Fees charged by government-run settings are also determined by the grade the setting receives during its annual inspection, with Grade 1 settings being able to charge higher fees i.e. up to 1000 Yuan (£100) per month (Chinese Settings 2009b). As a result the

quality of private provision can be very mixed, supporting the findings of Vandebroek (2006). It could be suggested that there is some correlation with the UK requirement for settings to have successful inspection outcomes before being able to access additional subsidy for more specialised provision, such as the introduction of funding for two year old children (DfE 2012b).

England

As mentioned previously, all children in the UK who are aged between three and five years have a universal right to fifteen hours of free kindergarten provision per week, during term time only (Family Information Service 2013; DfE 2013b); parents can choose just to access the free care or to pay additional fees for extra hours. There is a range of child care provision to choose from, including childminders who care for children within a home environment, sessional based child care and full day care.

With the government setting the fees for the funded element of child-care, many settings argue that this free entitlement is underfunded and does not cover the costs of the provision (National Day Nurseries Association 2013). A consequence of this has been the significant increase in fees for the non-funded element in an effort to balance the subsidised provision, with the average cost for one week's childcare in England now having reached £109.23 (Day Care Trust 2013). As a result families in England face some of the highest childcare costs among the OECD countries, with childcare costs accounting for 25 percent of family income, compared to an average of 12 per cent amongst OECD countries (OECD 2012). Although this is not reflected in the salary of early years workers

who are among some of the lowest paid in Europe with average salaries between £13,300 and £16,850 in 2012 when compared to Denmark with average salaries between £20,350 and £32,800 (Patterson 2013).

As a result many parents are experiencing severe hardship, particularly during the long summer holidays when free provision is no longer available and working parents need to fund childcare from existing incomes. The government has acknowledged this with the publication of a report 'More Affordable Childcare' (DfE 2013b) although critics are cautious about the impact this will have on creating more affordable childcare (Longfield 2013; Tweed 2013).

General organisation and daily routine

China

The general organisation of children was in classes determined by chronological ages; in private settings these classes were generally smaller with 15-30 children per room, compared to larger numbers in the government settings where classes of 30-50 children were not unusual. Each classroom had two teachers and one assistant, the assistant's role being primarily that of care and cleaning; *'It was clear that the teacher 'taught' while other adults dealt with the care'* (RA3).

The nursery day is long, for example most nurseries are open from 7.30 am – 5.30 pm, with staff working early or late shifts. Children tend to remain within their specified classrooms for the adult-directed activities, but would come together during outdoor play. The daily routine tends to be highly organised with government regulations

requiring children to spend two hours per day in outside play, and two hours of sleep after lunch; when meal times are taken into account, there is limited time for any real child-led play once staff have implemented the planned, daily activity. It was interesting to note that these routines were not differentiated for the different developmental levels of the children; for example all children, regardless of their ages, were expected to go to sleep after lunch for the full two hours. This time was seen as an opportunity for staff to engage in meetings, planning and updating children's records (CK1, Q6; observed practice).

England

A significant difference already noted is the size of childcare settings in England, when compared with China, with average numbers between 20 and 50 children per setting, although larger provision can exceed 100 places. Most full daycare settings in England are open for similar time periods to meet the needs of working parents, for example 8.00 am - 6.00 pm. A similar grouping of children by age is followed, with babies (0-2 years), toddlers (2-3 years) and preschool (3-5 years) tending to be grouped together. The maximum numbers of children permitted in each room, together with minimum staffing levels, are determined nationally (DfE 2012a), with a minimum of two staff members per room, who will both have responsibility for the care and education of the children. In contrast with Chinese settings, there are no specific time requirements for children to sleep or spend time outdoor, although the EYFS (ibid) does stipulate that children should have regular access to the outside environment. This does mean that there is more

flexibility in the organisation of the daily routine and activities provided for children but it does mean that staff need to be creative when identifying time for planning and completing children's assessments.

Curriculum approaches followed in China

In contrast to English settings which must follow the EYFS framework (DfE 2012a) a range of curriculum models have been adopted by settings in China, including international approaches such as Montessori (2007), the Multiple Intelligence Approach (Gardner 1993) and the EYFS (DfE 2012a) which is indicative of the response of settings to the high regard parents have of Western approaches, and further evidence of the strength of market forces (Penn 2009; CK2, Q9). In some instances this appears to be a token approach, for example the availability of Montessori resources to support existing provision. Other settings demonstrated a commitment to the chosen curriculum approach, for example plans clearly identified those activities that would support each of Gardner's (1993) multiple intelligences.

There were rigorous expectations for planning in many of the settings visited; in addition to comprehensive long, medium and short-term planning with most using a theme-based approach, staff were expected to produce detailed individual activity plans. Adult-led activities were delivered with enthusiasm and, with a few exceptions, children appeared to be engaged and responded well to staff. One reflective comment noted the confidence and engagement of children as they participated in the activities and how reassuring it

was to know that ‘... *children are the same the world over*’ ... although it was also noted that

‘Some setting’s routines were very structured and maybe there could have been more of an allowance for children to play and learn for themselves’ (RA2)

Generally these activities were delivered to the whole class, rather than in small groups, and there was an absence of individualised planning in the settings that the study had access to. Regular observations were completed for each child and used to analyse the child’s level of achievement and progress within identified developmental norms, but this was not then used to inform planning to meet individual needs.

Ongoing discussions highlighted the significance of parental expectations, with curriculum plans on display and individual children’s files being freely accessible. Detailed records were maintained for each child which, in addition to observation evidence, included information on progress together with photographic evidence and information on personal care routines; in a number of private nurseries this information was regularly uploaded onto secure web-sites for parents to access from home.

A continuing theme emerging from each setting was the importance parents placed on homework with concern being expressed over the lack of homework and the impact this could have on their child’s achievement (CK4, Q4); evidence of the difficulties that settings have in managing parent expectations whilst providing appropriate experiences for young children attending the setting. Staff discussed the role of learning through play

and acknowledged the value of a child-centred approach, but also spoke of the tensions when parents expect the setting to successfully prepare their children to be able to pass entry exams for the schools of their choice. This was also highlighted within a reflective account which recognised that

'The amount of pressure on the children to achieve was enormous. If a good mark was not gained, the choice of next provision would be limited'
(RA3).

Further dialogue highlighted the role of kindergartens in providing opportunities to develop the social skills of children who have had few opportunities to interact with peers as a consequence of the one-child policy (Cameron et al 2012; MOE 2010c; Jiao et al 1996, cited in Rogoff 2003). Preparation for school was a recurring theme with settings organising visits to the schools that children would be moving onto or, where this was not possible, providing a specific area arranged in a formal classroom style which gave children the opportunity to become familiar with the expectations of a formal classroom environment before the transition to school.

Consumerism and the impact on quality

Another theme running through many discussions was the significance of promoting the kindergarten and the importance of reputation, with a significant feature of many of the Chinese settings visited being the display of local and national awards that had been achieved. There is no central site available for parents to gain information about the standards or quality of individual nurseries, with 'word-of-mouth' being the most

effective system in place. In contrast, parents in England have open access to lists of all registered childcare settings, in addition to be able to view inspection reports which comment upon the standards of care and education that children receive (Lloyd and Penn 2013; Ofsted 2013).

There are similar findings to China when comparing the quality of childcare in UK settings, with formal inspections suggesting that only two thirds of UK settings were recognised as providing 'good' or 'outstanding' provision; falling to fifty percent in more disadvantaged areas (Penn 2009). Penn and Lloyd (2013) suggest that the quality of provision is dependent upon having a well-trained and effectively managed workforce, progress towards which would appear to be more advanced in the UK with the introduction of the Early Years Professional Status, or Early Years Teacher Status (DfE 2013a). This initiative is seen as a key strategy for attracting and retaining staff working by raising the status of people who work with young children, an issue highlighted by staff from both countries. As mentioned earlier, early years workers in England are amongst some of the lowest paid in developed countries (Patterson 2013; OECD 2012).

The provision of extra-curricular activities offered by both government and private settings (generally linked to music, arts, crafts and sport), is another distinctive feature of Chinese kindergarten provision. But a key element of many private kindergartens was the employment of an English 'teacher' to support the development of children's English language, seen by many parents as key to future success (Chang 2006; Hu 2005; Pearson

and Row 2003; Jin and Cortazzi 2002), and an example of the market being led by consumers and parental choice (Ran 2001; CK2,Q9).

In most instances the English teachers possessed no formal Early Years or teaching qualifications, apart from having completed a recognised course for teaching (adults) English as a foreign language (TEFL), with little evidence of understanding how young children learn. The employment of a Western 'teacher' was seen as a selling point by many of the settings visited, although scrutiny of their qualifications in some instances raised concerns. These concerns were linked to their use of appropriate pedagogical approaches when teaching young children, and their qualifications for teaching English. It became clear in many of the settings that an expatriate, whose main language is English, was seen as an appropriate person to teach children English. For example, in one kindergarten the English teacher was a former taxi driver with no formal teaching qualifications. Most settings used a commercial, interactive language programme which involved pictures, accompanied by a computerized vocalisation of the word in English, before getting children to repeat what they had heard with little experiential learning being encouraged;

'In one kindergarten class, 30 two- to four-year-olds were trying to learn the phrase 'What is your name?' They watched puppets on a projected programme and then copied what the puppets were saying. At no time did the teacher ever ask the question to a child directly' (RA3).

Case Study

Rationale for Case Study participants

The settings involved in the case study were chosen because of their similarities which would support a more effective comparison. Both the Chinese Kindergarten (CK) and the English Kindergarten (EK) are located within an urban area, they are of comparable size and they follow the EYFS curriculum (DfE 2012a).

The following description of each setting will set the context for the comparative study; similarities will be highlighted and some of the key differences to arise will be explored in greater detail: specifically the curriculum provision for three- to five-year-old children, the impact of parental choice/engagement and staff qualifications. Observed practice is significantly focused on the 3-5 year old groups.

Description of the Case Study kindergartens

The CK, which is located within one of Beijing's public parks, opened at the beginning of 2012 and is able to provide care for 100 children. The building is a conversion of an existing single storey, traditional Chinese courtyard structure surrounding a central outdoor area. A large central corridor encircles the inner circumference and is divided into different play areas where children have access to a small range of different play activities such as building blocks and small world play. Four separate classroom areas are organised into different age groups: babies, two-to-three year olds, three-to-four years and five years and over. Each of these consists of two conjoined rooms, one of which is

converted into a sleep area that can be used for group activities at other times. A separate library is accessed during a weekly timetabled slot.

The outdoor area is accessed from the central corridor and is a particularly attractive feature when compared to many of the other settings that were visited. Children have access to a range of facilities including a large climbing frame and slide, a swing and trampoline, an expansive sand pit, a small grassed playing area, a large, circular wooden seating area where children were observed playing quietly by themselves and a chicken pen and vegetable area for children to learn to care for animals and grow their own food. To understand the significance of this it might be helpful to make reference to a visit to Beijing zoo which included a chicken enclosure as one of the animal exhibits, suggesting that the city inhabitants may be losing their historical awareness of the role of farming and where food comes from.

In contrast the EK, established since 1993, moved into a new, single-storey purpose-built premise in 2002. Located within the environs of a further education college, it is registered for a maximum of 71 children at any time. The main area consists of one large, open-plan room that is divided into sections for different age groups, to which mobile children have free access via children's gates. There is a separate sleeping area for the babies as well as room for quieter, one-to-one and sensory play sessions. There are two exits from the main room into the extensive garden area, which is a particular feature of the setting, and to which children have free access for a significant amount of the day. The garden has been specifically developed for children and includes a growing area, sand

and water play, forest school area, bike paths and a range of natural resources to support children’s physical play and exploration.

Both settings have an equal balance of boys and girls, which would contradict research referred to earlier (Cameron et al, 2012). This could be explained by the demographic features of families using the CK, the majority of who are Chinese professionals, although a significant number have American nationality; all children (except for one) understood and spoke Putonghua (Standard Chinese, Mandarin). In the EK most children are British but there is a sizeable contingent of Polish, Palestinian, Romanian and Portuguese families which is representative of the surrounding area. As a result, the local authority has recently introduced a new interpreter service to support families for whom English is an additional language (EAL); all children speak English, although there is a small minority who have limited understanding but whose needs are met through existing plans.

A more detailed comparison of both settings can be found at Appendix 9, but the following Table 2 gives a brief overview of numbers of staff and children who use the kindergartens:

Open: Monday -Friday	Number of staff employed	Hours of opening	Ages of children	Number of children on roll	Maximum number of children/day
Kindergarten (China)	18	08.00 - 18.00	0 – 5 years	52	100
Kindergarten (England)	19	08.00 - 17.30	0 – 5 years	123 families	71

Table 1 – Comparison of the Chinese and English Case Study kindergartens

Comparing the curriculum approach: planning, assessment and the daily routine

China

Both settings follow the English EYFS curriculum (DfE 2012a) when planning to meet children's needs and, as a new setting, the CK was keen to identify an appropriate international curriculum in order to influence Chinese parents when considering which kindergarten to send their children to; although there is little evidence to support this premise which appears largely anecdotal (CK1, Q1). Consequently, although parents are keen to access nursery provision their high expectations for more academic input can have a detrimental impact on delivering a more play-based curriculum (Vaughan 1993).

The adoption of an international curriculum approach which was viewed as being superior to national guidelines supports the neoliberal viewpoint with the customer being a driving force behind the type of provision available (Lloyd and Penn 2013). Although the government provides guidance for kindergarten provision (MoE 2001), the setting chose not to follow this clarifying that the

'... government never asks to follow the curriculum, [and] more and more parents know/like it [EYFS] ... and how it follows kids' (CK1, Q1).

Comparison between the Chinese government's guidance and the EYFS (Appendix 1) would suggest a number of similarities, although the absence of specific reference to the promotion of writing and number skills identified within the literature review is surprising. The most recent revision of the EYFS continues to identify specific goals for literacy and mathematics that young children should be working towards (DfE 2012a).

Although there has been much controversy in England about children being assessed against these goals at such an early age, Li and Rao (2005, cited in Corter et al, 2006) suggest that the lower literacy performances of Beijing kindergartens may be as a result of this omission.

Another key feature of the CK is the provision of English language classes which is again in response to market forces and parental choice being influenced by those settings that they believe will provide their children with secure foundations for future competence in the English language; an important aspect when considering future employability and the impact of globalisation (Cornia 2011).

Despite the extended day that children spend at the CK (08.00-18.00) the routine that is followed limits the scope to provide a diverse range of activities to support all areas of learning as can be seen in Table 2 below. When meal times, English and Chinese language classes, two hours of sleep time and two hours of outdoor play are taken into consideration, this leaves a 20-30 minute period for a teacher-directed group activity in the morning and one hour of free choice play in the afternoon. Outdoor play and free choice, which is interpreted pragmatically, gives children some freedom of opportunity to choose from the range of resources offered and lead their own play, but the available resources were inadequate to support meaningful play.

China Little Men (40 – 55+ months)		UK 36 – 48+ months	
08.00 – 09.00	Breakfast	08.00 – 09.15	Meet and Greet
09.00 – 09.30	English Class	09.15 – 09.30	Small group time
09.30 – 09.50	Group Activity/Circle Time	09.30 – 11.45	Garden open/Free flow
09.50 – 10.20	Chinese Class (Music on Friday)	09.45 – 11.00	Cafe open
10.20 – 11.20	Snack and outdoor play	11.45 – 11.55	Garden closed; tidy up time
11.20 – 12.00	Lunch	11.55 – 12.05	Singing/Nursery Rhymes
12.00 – 12.30	Prepare for snack	12.05 – 12.10	Wash hands for lunch
12.30 – 14.30	Sleep	12.10 – 12.45	Lunch
14.30 – 15.10	Snack	12.45 – 13.00	Quiet time; garden check
15.10 – 16.15	Free choice (Library on Friday; Roller skate on Tuesday)	13.00 – 15.30	Garden open/Free flow
16.15 – 16.20	Clean up	14.00 – 15.30	Cafe open
16.20 – 18.00	Dinner and Dismissal	15.30 – 15.40	Garden closed; tidy up time
		15.40 – 15.55	Small group time
		15.55 – 16.00	Wash hands for tea
		16.00 – 16.30	Tea
		16.30 – 17.30	Quiet time
		17.30 – 18.00	End of nursery day

Table 2
A comparison of the Daily Routines in the English and Chinese settings

In contrast to most other Chinese settings that were visited, the classrooms were quite bare, with few resources for children to choose from, although classrooms had interactive whiteboards which were used by staff to support observed teacher-led activities. Most resources were stored in the outside corridor but, with the exception of wooden blocks, musical instruments and a few smaller games, the storage spaces were characterised by empty shelves. A separate library room could not be freely accessed by children, except during a timetabled library session once a week.

The kindergarten provides breakfast, two snacks (morning and afternoon), lunch and an evening meal. These are prepared on site in a dedicated kitchen area and children will come together as a class at prescribed times. It should be noted that children have access to water at any time during the day. Healthy eating is a particular focus for Chinese

settings and follows on from the government commitment to improve the health of Chinese families (Wu et al 2012); another feature of most settings is the employment of a school nurse who carries out general health checks on children at the setting.

Informal discussions and interviews with the manager and staff provided a clearer picture of how the EYFS is used within the setting and this suggests that it is used most significantly as an assessment tool for identifying the level and stage of development that children are working at; staff use this information to update children's records and the manager reviews these on a regular basis to identify any gaps that are emerging.

'I need to plan my weekly/monthly activity according to the principal's direction after weekly meetings ... We need to observe children every single day by writing the Daily Report to their parent's (CK2, Q1).

Planning paperwork identified daily activities together with the resources and materials needed to support this. Space was included for evaluation of the activities and there was evidence of how these plans were adapted in responses to children's interests (CK1, Q6). Answers to questions related to how the EYFS is used to inform the planning were less clear. Individual room leaders take responsibility for planning, using a theme-based approach. Weekly plans identify general skills that children will be encouraged to develop, although this is not linked to any specific curriculum content, but more general areas of learning. Children's sleep times are used for planning, which takes place twice per week, and also the updating of children's records.

Taught sessions were very much teacher-led and, although professional dialogue confirmed the value of learning through play, observations showed activities being delivered using a significantly didactic approach with the teacher explaining the focus of the activity before getting all children to complete the same activity at the same time. For example, one observed lesson planned for four-year-old children to be introduced to the water cycle through the use of an interactive whiteboard which

'... projected [a] description of the water cycle [onto the wall]. This was followed by a pre drawn scene in which blue paint had to be finger printed onto the scene [to represent rainfall]. All children were expected to do the same thing at the same time ... Where intellectual development was concerned, the focus appeared to be very much on rote learning ...[] ... the teacher was very much in control and the children repeated what was being said/taught' (RA3).

Such pedagogical approaches were observed in each of the settings that were visited; lessons were delivered to the whole class, with children being expected to sit still, listen and answer questions; with the expectation that young children would maintain interest and focus during this time. Each of the observed science, English and Chinese language lessons followed a similar format, where it was clear that children had difficulty in remaining focused and their learning would appear to be limited to the ability to repeat words matched to pictorial representations.

England

In contrast to China, it is a mandatory requirement for every early years setting in England to register with the government agency Ofsted, and to follow the EYFS framework,

although there is freedom in how this is interpreted (Ofsted 2013). The large open plan room encourages older and younger children to mix freely, and the daily routine provides children with extended periods of child-directed play during which they are able to choose from an extensive selection of accessible resources/activities provided both in and outdoors (Table 2). In contrast to the CK, planning which is updated on a weekly basis, identifies specific areas of learning to be promoted in addition to highlighting individual children's learning needs that would be supported by the planned provision. These plans identify key observations to be carried out, signpost any specific focus for the week and language to be used/introduced, in addition to providing a space for evaluation and next steps to be noted. As a result the individual needs of children are being specifically planned for and is an example of the more personalised approach followed in the EK. A colour-coded system highlights activities which are part of the continuous provision of activities available, those which are child-led, those specifically focused on the outdoors and any that would support children with identified special educational needs (SEN). The EK has a number of children who are recognised as having SEN, this is in contrast to the CK which had no children with identified additional needs.

There are two more-formalised groups sessions of fifteen minutes, one in the morning and another in the afternoon, which bring children together for a more focused adult-led activity; this is similar to the CK practice but tends to focus on language development that has been identified in preparation for transition to formal education in the September term, rather than the 'blanket' approach adopted by the CK (EK4,Q4). In contrast to the English language classes observed at the CK these use a more developmentally-phased

approach model, Letters and Sounds, which is clearly structured to meet the learning needs of young children (DfES 2007). These sessions are delivered in small groups to children at similar levels of development and understanding, and use a range of practical approaches more suited to early children's developmental needs.

Snack time is run on a café-style with children being able to choose when to access this, supporting independence and individual needs, in comparison to the more structured snack-time approach followed in the CK although children were able to access water at all times of the day. As in the CK, all children come together at lunch time which is then followed by a quiet time where those children who may want to sleep can, but generally this is a time for children to engage in quieter activities.

Discussions with staff, and scrutiny of planning documents, provides clear evidence of how the activities are linked to the EYFS and the needs of the children, both individually and as a group. As with the CK, room leaders take responsibility for planning but in contrast, all staff are encouraged to contribute to this; the planning documents on display are viewed as a 'living' document which is constantly updated as the week progresses and different needs are identified from observations.

As in the CK the manager of the EK reviews children's individual profile documents, using a tracking system mapped against the EYFS learning goals and carries out biannual audits to identify any specific areas of learning that may need a greater focus or input (EK1,Q5). Each member of staff who was interviewed was very positive about the effectiveness of

the EYFS and how they use it to meet individual children's interests and developmental needs.

Parental engagement

The involvement of parents identifies some more interesting differences between both settings. When asked why they thought parents had chosen to send their children to the settings there were quite different reasons for this.

China

Families of the children attending the CK were mostly working families, with fathers working in traditional 'white collar' job roles whereas few mothers were in employment, most staying at home (CK1, Q1). As touched on earlier, more Chinese families appear to be increasingly influenced by settings which offer an international curriculum, a viewpoint that was reinforced through interviews.

'Parents choose to send their children to our setting because we are selling/we have EYFS international background and the children can receive intensive care by the teachers ...' (CK2, Q9).

Cost could also be a factor as the fees are relatively expensive when compared to other private kindergartens which offer an international curriculum and English speaking lessons; key factors that have already been identified in the Literature Review when Chinese families are considering which kindergarten provision to send their children to.

Personal recommendation, an appreciation of the environment and the opportunities for their children to develop social skills are all highlighted as reasons for parental choice (CK3 and CK6, Q4). This supports earlier findings that parents value the chance for their children to socialise with their peer groups, a consequence of the one-child policy which has resulted in limited opportunities for children to learn social skills outside of the setting (Rogoff, 2003).

'Most important [is] how to do things, how to talk with each other, how to act in society. Parents – most will acknowledge [as] very important – they want us to give them the opportunity to practise' (CK3, Q4).

The 'little emperor' phenomenon (Cameron et al 2012) does result in some inconsistencies in practice between home and the setting, particularly when considering the extended Chinese family and the role of grandparents in their grandchildren's lives,

'Parents are ok, they understand, but grandparents [often] pick up kids and they live with kids, always say yes' (CK3, Q4).

The engagement of parents in their children's learning/development is also a distinctive feature. Similar to many of the kindergartens visited in China, parents are able to access an on-line community forum (MSN) onto which the setting uploads videos and photographs of children together with descriptions of the activities that they are engaged in on a daily basis (CK1, Q7; CK3, Q6). In addition, staff complete daily reports on their children's experiences (CK2, Q7) and parents will also attend twice monthly seminars linked to topical issues that have been raised.

At the same time staff are aware that all children have to take exams before entering formal schooling, the results of which will depend upon getting into the school of their choice. Whilst parents accessing the CK in the case study appeared more relaxed about this, grandparents can be very vocal about the taught content and will ask the setting to focus more on language and mathematics, and try to influence parents in their choice of kindergarten (CK6, Q4). As yet, the setting is still very new and does not have historical data to identify its success in preparing children for the schools of their choice but consumer needs will ultimately have an impact on the curriculum and pedagogical approach followed if parents are to continue to choose that setting over others (Lloyd and Penn 2013).

England

In marked contrast to the CK parental involvement in the EK, which is located in one of the most deprived areas in the country, is less developed. Located on a college site there is a diverse range of families who access the setting including professional families, where one or both parents are in employment, unemployed families and single parents. Some parents have been identified as being illiterate and others have been told to send their children to the setting by local services. This is in response to current government initiatives with a particular focus on providing early intervention for the most disadvantaged two-year-old children in trying to arrest the cycle of disadvantage and so build upon future human capital (DfE 2012b). Similar to the CK, many of the children in receipt of such early intervention strategies have poor personal, social and emotional

skills (EK1, Q4) and the setting is seen as providing an environment to support the development of these skills. In contrast, the EK will work with many of these families, encouraging access to family support, further education and health services available through the local authority network; again this is in response to government initiatives to support families in moving out of the poverty trap. As identified earlier there are also a number of families for whom English is an additional language (EAL) and provision for this is at the developmental stage (EK4, Q3). Many parents will also choose to come to the kindergarten as a result of its reputation as they are becoming more aware of the formal inspection process and the grading awarded each setting (Reed and Canning 2012).

When children join the setting they complete an 'All about me' form which identifies interests and key information about the home and family which staff can then use to support transition. Parents are also encouraged to contribute to their children's personal profiles to which they have access to at any time, and there is a celebration day held at the end of the academic year. A digital photograph frame in the hallway provides parents with a visual commentary of their children's experience during the previous week. In contrast to the CK there is limited take-up of invitations to attend parents meetings, except for those children who will be starting school in September when formal meetings are planned in order to go through transition documents, before these are passed onto the child's school. In an attempt to redress this the manager has recently set up a parent forum which currently has eight members who are very proactive in what they want to see happening; prioritising children's preparation for school whilst, at the same time, ensuring that children enjoy their kindergarten experience within a safe environment

(EK1, Q9). Similar to the CK there are some parents who attempt to put pressure on the setting to provide more formal educational outcomes, but staff are more confident in using the EYFS, as a legal document, to support their curriculum approach (EK4, Q9).

Staff qualifications

China

The final area that will be considered in more detail is one that emerged during the scope of this study as key differences were revealed. The range of qualifications held by staff is diverse, including degrees in Journalism, Psychology and Business and Administration, whilst other members had studied for a BA in Preschool Education, BA in Administration and trained as an Art teacher but had been unsuccessful in achieving the full award, many as a result of failing to pass the English proficiency tests at the recognised level (Wu et al 2012). Table 3 provides a comparison of qualifications held by staff involved in the interview process.

China	Formal Qualifications held	UK	Formal Qualifications held
(CK1) Manager	BA Psychology	(EK1) Day Care Manager	BA (Hons) Early Years; PETALS;
(CK2) Room Leader (24-40 months)	BA Business & Administration		FdA Early Years; Early Years Professional; Childcare Certificate (L3)
(CK3) Room Assistant (24-40 months)	Art teacher – qualified 12-16 yrs	(EK2) Senior Early Years Practitioner	BA (Hons) Early Years Care and Education; FdA Early Years; NNEB (L3); Assessor Award;
(CK4) Room Leader (40-55+ months)	Early Years Teacher Certificate	(EK3) Early Years Educator (24 – 36 months)	NVQ L2 & L3 Early Years
		(EK4) Early Years Educator (36 - 48+ months)	FdA Early Years; NVQ L3

Table 3
Interview participants - Staff roles and qualifications

As identified in the Literature Review, every person who works with children should be certified (ibid), but this was only held by four of the staff team. This supports a recent study by Zhu (2009) which suggests that more than more than half of staff employed within kindergartens have either no, or limited, professional training. It was of note that the manager focuses more on the individual qualities of the practitioners, questioning the value of the recognised preschool qualification,

' Government rules are that every teacher to get certification; most don't have such certification. [I] don't think any use as more [about] theory, less practice. Government says [staff must have] but not followed by nurseries as it is very difficult to get' (CK1, Q2)

It was also of interest that the manager had in place an unofficial policy where she was reluctant to recruit anyone who had been working in the early years sector for more than three years; as she wanted staff who were fresh and, as a result, more willing to challenge existing practice (CK1, Q2). Reference was made to her own knowledge and understanding of early years practice, which suggested that this was generally self-taught through her own reading and research, and it was this that was used to inform her supervision of staff practice and the delivery of in-house training. When referring to the Early Years Certificate mention was made to its content which consisted of two parts, Education of Psychology and Principles of Education, which can be passed by reading text books, sitting an exam and demonstrating practice during a one hour prepared lesson. In some instances this could be completed in as short a time as two months (CK4, Q2).

In-house training, which occurs twice a week, is mostly in the form of a discussion about the EYFS (CK3, Q2) although this can also be an opportunity to raise concerns with the rest of the team (CK4, Q5). Reference was made to Montessori training that had been undertaken, and also the involvement of early years researchers from Beijing Normal University who have supported staff in the use of story books and thematic planning, although this did not appear to have filtered down to practice.

'On reflection with regards to the kindergarten style of teaching the teachers seemed to be lacking in ideas and inspiration to engage and interest the children to learn'(RA2).

Interviews with staff suggest a limited depth of knowledge and experience of working with young children which might account for some of the observed practice where children lost interest in the adult-led activities as a result of sitting,

'... for long periods of time without much participation/interaction from them. It appeared that the teachers were there to impart information rather than basing it on the child's interests, preferred style of learning and input from the parents' (RA1).

In some instances this resulted in incidences of *'... negative behaviour [which] was not always dealt with in a professional manner'* (RA2). This was recognised during interviews with one member of staff who reflected on the difference in practice experienced at her previous setting, attributing children's behaviour to the lack of routine,

'[They] don't have a strong sense of routine, don't know what they will do and what they have to follow and no discipline' (CK4, Q5).

Although another interviewee referred to the value of observation and how this had been used in partnership with parents and to inform planning which had resulted in a positive change to a child's behaviour (CK4,Q5). This is evidence of the changing practices within early years highlighted in the Literature Review, as settings move from the very formal approach that was stereotypical of Chinese provision, with

'... teachers more willing to listen to child's feedback in order to plan their activity rather than to in-put a lot of information and knowledge to the children'' (C2, Q10).

England

In contrast every member of staff involved in the direct care and education of the children in the EK had significantly more experience of working within the early years sector as well as a recognised early years qualification, the minimum being an early years National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) at Level 2. The NVQ is equivalent to Chinese vocational and adult education programmes of study (MOE 2008) and takes a year to complete and consists of written exercises to demonstrate an understanding of practice and the theory that supports this, together with several occasions of observed practice. The NVQ L3 is the minimum qualification for staff in a leadership role, but most senior staff have achieved a Foundation Degree in Early Years, equivalent to the first two years of study at degree level. The manager has a BA (Hons) in Early Years and has achieved Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) referred to previously and which is awarded to graduates who have demonstrated their practice against a set of professional standards

(DfE 2013a) and which is seen as a tool in raising the status of early years workers and quality of provision (DfE 2013a; Campbell-Barr 2009).

The large number of staff with graduate qualifications is not representative of settings in England as a whole, although is indicative of the push towards developing a graduate-led workforce (DfE 2013a) and a recognition of the impact that well-qualified staff can have of the quality of provision and ultimately improved outcomes for children, particularly for those children who start with a disadvantage (Campbell-Barr 2009; Sylva et al 2004).

General discussion with staff, and research into the different Chinese qualifications (Wu et al 2012) would suggest a greater depth and rigor of training undertaken by English staff, particularly when the time taken and the content of differing qualifications are taken into consideration. In contrast, continuing professional development would appear to be more extensive in the CK when comparing twice-weekly in-house training sessions with the minimum of three day required for English practitioners. But again, this should be seen in light of the content of such training sessions and it could be argued that the weekly planning sessions for staff in the EK could be compared favourably to the in-house training received by Chinese staff; it was reassuring to hear staff from both settings identify those skills demonstrated by effective teachers:

'The teacher should [] love the children, be flexible and [be] open-minded' (CK2, Q2) 'one who communicates with [children] effectively and plays with them' (CK4, Q2) ... and ... '[must] absolutely want to do something for the children, got to have the passion, focus on children' (E4,Q2).

Conclusion

The same ... *but* different

The intention of this research was to explore the rationale behind the development of current early years provision in China and England, and provide an opportunity to investigate similarities and differences of the two countries using a case study approach involving one English and one Chinese setting; three key themes emerged. These were: the impact of the growing marketisation of early years provision in both countries, as a result of government commitment to expanding early years provision; the emerging role of parents as consumers, and the impact of this on early years provision and practice; and the development of professionalism within the early years workforce, particularly when comparing the qualifications and professional practice of the different settings involved. These findings both support, and contribute to, the existing literature that has explored these issues.

Marketisation

Recognition by both countries of the key role that early years plays when considering the future of economic growth, and the implications of the human capital theory, has seen early childhood care and education being given a key role in ensuring the future successful development of both the English and Chinese economies; this has resulted in both countries committing to the development of universal early years provision.

Consideration for this must be situated within the country's ability to support this, both in terms of the numbers of eligible children, and also the impact of the current economic climate on fiscal policy and how to fund such collective provision. In both the UK and

China the need for rapid expansion is dependent upon private, voluntary and independent providers and, in an effort to address these issues, the emergence of neo-liberal policies has led to the marketisation of early years in both countries (Campbell-Barr 2009). Discussions with staff from a range of settings highlighted similar challenges being faced when working within such tight financial constraints whilst ensuring the quality of provision, confirming earlier findings and contributing additional evidence to the research of Wu et al (2012) and Lloyd and Penn (2013).

The UK early years market is more advanced in developing private provision, with subsidised places available for all three-to-five year old children and the recent introduction of free nursery places for disadvantaged two-year-olds (DfE 2012b). The implementation of a statutory curriculum, the EYFS (DfE 2012), and the expectation for settings to assess children's progress towards identified goals by the time they start formal education at five years of age has resulted in criticism that has focused on the appropriateness of such formal assessment (Campbell-Barr 2012; House 2011); particularly when contrasted with the limited intervention of the Chinese government.

Guidance on appropriate provision (MOE 2001) has been published but this is not a statutory requirement. In some ways this could be suggested that it has resulted in greater freedom for Chinese settings resulting in the ability to respond to parental expectations related to curriculum provision, although there were requirements linked to the number of hours spent on outdoor play and daily sleep routines which had a significant impact on the depth of the curriculum being offered.

UK settings are also subject to national standardisation through government inspections with reports identifying individual strengths and weaknesses of the educational care and provisions being freely accessible to parents (Ofsted 2013); in contrast the inspection of Chinese settings was predominantly based on health and safety requirements rather than the effectiveness of the provision on children's learning, making it more difficult for parents to make an informed decision about which kindergarten to send their children to. This lends support for concerns voiced about the impact that such outcome-driven practices can have on the standards of privatised, for-profit organisations, and the potential to focus on meeting minimum standards at the expense of developing a quality provision (Penn 2011; 2009).

Parental influence

This study has also contributed to developing our awareness of the influence that families can have when choosing a setting for their children; this is of particular significance in China. This has been shown to be linked to the one child policy, and the '4-2-1' syndrome, with parents and grandparents focusing their hopes and aspirations on the future achievements of the one child at the heart of the family (Cameron et al 2012; Rogoff 2003). Both Chinese and English parents see kindergarten as an opportunity to support the social development of their children, which is of particular relevance in China where most children will not have siblings to play with or learn from. It is recognised that parental views on quality often differ with those of professionals (Penn 2011) and this is demonstrated keenly in China. A determining factor for Chinese parents when choosing a

kindergarten is how effective the setting is in preparing children for entry examinations for the school of their choice; places at popular schools are contingent upon children's success in these examinations and will inevitably impact upon parental expectations for a more formal curriculum approach (MOE 2010b; 2010c).

China's adoption of English as the second language and the implication for state employees to achieve minimum levels of English language has also had implications for kindergarten settings. Anecdotal evidence supports existing research that suggests that parents choose settings that offer an international curriculum which includes a bilingual element, seeing this as crucial to future employment opportunities (Chen 1985; Ye 1996, cited in Morley and Glazzard, 2012); consequently many of the private settings visited in China include English lessons and is evidence of the impact of consumerism on provision (Penn and Lloyd 2013; Cornia 2011; MOE 2010b; 2010c). Discussions with practitioners at the English settings identify that their parents also recognise preschool as being key in preparing their children for formal schooling, but with most seeing this in more holistic terms with a particular emphasis on their emotional and social readiness, rather than academic ability.

Access to kindergarten provision of choice is clearly dependent upon the ability of parents to pay for more popular, private settings, impacting on parent's choice (Vandenbroek 2006); particularly in China where fees in Beijing ranged between £50 a month at a government setting, to £1200 at a popular private, international kindergarten; the average monthly Beijing salary in 2013 being £522 (Mayer Brown JSM 2013). The quality

of the environment was also quite diverse as evidenced during first-hand visits to both government and private settings, a number of which did not have access to basic heating and had limited resources.

Both the UK and China have the expectation that parents will subsidise kindergarten care (OECD 2006a; 2006b), but there are concerns of accessibility and affordability for children from disadvantaged families, particularly when universal access is implemented. As Sylva et al (2010) has demonstrated through the EPPE research, high quality provision has been shown to have an impact on children's social and intellectual development, especially where children come from disadvantaged backgrounds. If the human capital approach is to be effective, this will depend upon a successful national education policy which should be informed by national needs when planning for universal provision (Campbell-Barr 2012; 2009; Olaniyan and Okemakinde 2008).

Professionalism and qualifications

One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study resulted from the comparison of early years qualifications in both countries. The literature, supported by discussions, identified the requirement for staff in China to have a recognised qualification (Wu et al 2012, Pan and Block 2011), yet of the six teaching staff employed at the Chinese setting to support children's development, only three had early years qualifications (Table 3) which corroborated the findings of Zhu (2009) who suggested that less than half of those who work in the early years have achieved an appropriate

qualification. The manager of the Chinese setting had also been dismissive of the certificate, questioning the value of learning about theory, when compared with practical experience and also commented upon the difficulty in gaining the qualification. This contrasted quite significantly with the UK settings, where each member of the teaching team held a number of recognised early years qualifications, including one of whom had completed undergraduate study, and two who held an early years degree.

As with China, the UK requires at least half of all staff working directly with children, to have achieved a minimum level of qualification, or to be actively working towards this. Such requirements are statutory, and form part of the EYFS (DfE 2012a) framework, and is an aspect that informs the inspection process referred to earlier and could impact on a final judgement on the quality of provision (Ofsted 2013). A manager of the setting must also have a higher qualification and a minimum of two years experience; in contrast the manager of the Chinese setting had a non-related degree and no experience prior to opening the kindergarten one year earlier. The number of highly-qualified staff in the UK setting is an exception but is a model for the government's aspiration that early years settings should be graduate-led (DfE 2013a).

Great emphasis, in both settings, was placed on ongoing staff training; staff from the Chinese settings attending twice-weekly meetings and the expectation that they would attend weekend workshops. Further analysis of the Chinese certificate confirmed the focus on theory with one session of observed practice, and could be achieved in a relatively short period of time; in contrast the minimum UK qualification generally

involving a year of study, including theory and observation of practice to ensure a minimum standard of competence.

The research did identify some concerns about the appropriate pedagogic practice of some staff delivering extra-curricular activities in the Chinese setting, most specifically those supporting English language, highlighting the importance of qualified staff who understand the theory behind how children learn and are able to engage children in developmentally appropriate practice. The experience of UK staff was an obvious strength in their relationships with children but the study reinforced the commitment of practitioners in both countries to continuous learning and professional development.

Limitations

Finally a number of important limitations need to be considered. Firstly, the most important limitation was the small number of settings involved in the case study and caution must be applied to the generalisability of the findings which may not be transferable when considering early years provision across China; although many of the findings have supported previous results identified in the literature review. Secondly, the current study has focused significantly on settings in Beijing where staff have more opportunities for training and tend to be better trained than those in more rural areas, therefore care must be taken when generalising the findings beyond the settings that were involved in this study. Nevertheless, reflection and analysis has been situated within the researcher's experience of visiting settings over a four year period and would suggest

a certain confidence in the interpretation of the results and have gone some way to enhancing our understanding of current practice in urban China.

Thirdly, the study acknowledges that answers from Chinese subjects are subject to interpretation and as such could be misinterpreted, although the researcher's familiarity with the setting did support greater confidence in this. A better study would have examined a large sample which included comparison of rural provision, and it should also be noted that the English setting is well-established with an experienced work-force, in comparison with the Chinese setting which had only been open for one year and therefore was in the early stages of developing its practice and staff expertise.

Recommendations

There are a number of recommendations/suggestions for future research that have arisen from this study. Further research might explore the impact of inappropriate pedagogical teaching styles on young children's emerging language skills. A further study could investigate the appropriateness of the Chinese qualifications and how these are achieved and it would be interesting to investigate further the impact of the one child policy on children's future outcomes, following recent research which has suggested that children born after the introduction of the one-child policy are not developing the skills necessary for economic and social attainment (Cameron et al 2012). Several practitioners also expressed concern that over-indulgence has prevented children from learning some

of the basic social and independence skills, although this was not something that was observed during the study.

The findings of the study can be used to develop a better understanding of the Chinese education system and any lessons that can be learned from this; particularly as the latest Programme for International Student Assessment results (OECD 2010; PISA 2009) show continued success of the Asian countries in the core curriculum areas. Further investigation into the impact of the Confucian practice that guides the Chinese curriculum, and its focus on promoting collective harmony (Jandt 2009), would be useful for comparison with the UK focus on highlighting individual differences and needs (DfE 2012a).

This study has served to highlight the many similarities and differences in policy and practice of kindergarten provision in China and England, stimulating discussion on the challenges that each country faces. With the integration of economies and the spread of globalisation there will be few early years professionals who will not come into contact with families from different backgrounds and cultures. We can only benefit from developing our awareness of international and national priorities and challenges and the impact of these on early years care and education, to better understand the experiences of young children and their families that we might care for; understanding that our own practices are not the only way of doing things. This study provides a starting point for further exploration and this final quote, following an early years residential to China,

reflects on personal and professional development as a result of engaging in professional dialogue with peers:

*'It was a fantastic opportunity to meet fellow professionals and gain an insight into their settings, how they are managed and the challenges they face. Although all settings were different they [...] were keen to hear about our places of work and the practices and planning methods we adopt. ... Overall, although we noticed many differences between us, it was also very reassuring to know that children are the same the world over.
(RA3)*

'The same ... but different'

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Appendix 1

Kindergarten Education Guidance Programme - (MOE – 2001)	EYFS – (DfE, 2012)
<p>Health:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emotional stability; to be happy • Develop good health habits; basic self care capacity • Awareness of basic health knowledge and learn to protect themselves • Enjoy participating in sports activities, develop motor coordination and be flexibility <p>Language:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be happy to talk to people; be polite • Listen to others; understand everyday language • Be able to express themselves and say what they would like to do • Enjoy listening to stories and read books • Be able to understand and speak standard Mandarin (By 6 years – 200 characters) <p>Social</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be able to actively participate in various activities with self confidence • Be happy with people, help each other, co-operate, share and be compassionate • Understand and comply with basic social rules of conduct • Strive to do things; not afraid of difficulties; a developing sense of responsibility • Love parents, elders, teachers and companions, group, home and the motherland <p>Science</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop interest in surroundings, create a thirst for knowledge • Can use a range of sensory and hands-on experiences, together with developing cognition to explore issues • Use science to express and exchange, to explore the process and results • Live and gain experience from quantitative relationship between things and experiences; understand importance of, and be interested in, mathematics • Care for animals and plants, the environment, be close to nature, respect natural resources, begin to develop environment awareness <p>Art</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Love the life and art of the country • Enjoy participating in artistic activities and confidently show their feelings and experiences • Can use their favourite way of expressing themselves artistically 	<p>Core Areas of Learning:</p> <p>Personal, Social and Emotional Development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making relationships • Self-confidence and self-awareness • Managing feelings and behaviour <p>Physical development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moving and handling • Health and self-care <p>Communication and Language</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening and attention • Understanding • Speaking <p>Specific Areas of Learning:</p> <p>Literacy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading • Writing <p>Mathematics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Numbers • Shape, space and measure <p>Understanding the World</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People and communities • The world • Technology <p>Expressive Arts and Design</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exploring and using media and materials • Being imaginative

Comparison of Chinese and English Curricula

