MATERNAL PERCEPTION OF CHANGES IN THE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA

A Thesis in

Educational Theory and Policy

by

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ABSTRACT

The latest early childhood reform, initiated by the Chinese government in 2010 emphasized the three key concepts—“respecting children,” “active learning” and “play-based activity”--based on western theories of child development with specific instructional suggestions for implementation. This qualitative study explores the maternal perception of changes in preschools in Tanggu district, the center part of Bin Hai New area in Tianjin province. Findings show that mothers perceived both changes and challenges when preschool adopted western ideologies, which is consistent with the literature. The interviewees indicated positive attitudes towards changes adhering to Western theories while expressed their concerns regarding the challenges. In particular, mothers hold divided opinions towards the cancellation of literacy classes, implying potential conflict between western-style paradigm and specific domestic context.
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INTRODUCTION

Due to the Chinese Reform and Opening-Up Policy of 1978, the Chinese government became more open to embracing early education theories from other countries; a myriad of innovative ideas concerning early childhood education from Western countries continue to enter China.

A great part of these are theories of child development and related educational pedagogies. From the initial Chinese document, “Kindergarten Work Regulations and Procedures” in 1989, to its revised guidelines in 2001, to the Chinese State Council-issued “Several Suggestions on Development of Early Childhood Education” in 2010, the significant influence of Western theories of child development and related pedagogies is reflected in education in Chinese preschools. Accordingly, scholars in the academic field of early childhood education pay particular attention to the process of Chinese preschools adopting Western theories of child development and related curriculum models. The impact of Western theories of child development on Chinese preschools is comprehensively studied regarding philosophical and practical aspects, in which policy-belief inconsistency and belief-practice gap has been pointed out. While experts were dedicated to exploring
efficient pathways for absorbing Western ideas, they may fail to consider an essential question: do “revised” preschools influenced by Western ideas and practices fit Chinese young children? This is an important issue to consider because the educational and social context in China is distinctive from situations in western countries. Among different stakeholders, Chinese parents can have a significant voice in this discussion. Therefore, this paper aims to understand how Chinese parents perceive and more importantly, value “revised” preschools under the influence of western theories of child development and related pedagogies.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Early childhood education in China experienced dramatic changes in the last century and was influenced by Confucian values, philosophy from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), and western approaches successively over time. Beginning from the 1980s, the Reform and Opening-Up Policy imported western theories of child development and educational pedagogies into China. Since then, Chinese preschools have been experiencing significant transformations. These remarkable changes guide scholars in the academic field of early childhood education study through the process of adoption of western models among Chinese preschools.

Firstly, the most common western theories of child development and educational pedagogies will be described. The most famous and profound theory of child development is Jean Piaget’s theory of children’s cognitive development, which argues that children have the inherent potential to construct concepts towards the world around them through experiencing discrepancies between what they already learned and what they explore in the environment (McLeod, 2012). Urie Bronfenbrenner followed Jean Piaget to make further contributions by explaining how the outer environment influences a child’s development through the ecological systems theory, which emphasized the critical role of
surroundings, such as practitioners, on child development (Bronfenbrenner & Bronfenbrenner, 2009). Moreover, B.F. Skinner and Jerome Seymour Bruner made a more accurate contribution to understanding children’s behavior and learning stages respectively, and both of them were convinced of the importance of instructions towards children (Bruner et al., 1966; Smith & Woodward, 1996).

Subsequently, world-renowned pedagogies, such as Project Learning and the High Scope Curriculum Model, were developed grounded in these theories of child development (Markham, 2011; Schweinhart & Weikart, 1993). Meanwhile, the Reggio Emilia Approach and the Montessori preschool behaved as models to perform these approaches within a “prepared environment”, and further establish more scientific teaching standards and reformatory philosophies (Edwards, 1993; Montessori, 1966).

The most prominent influence of Western theories of child development on Chinese early childhood education is the publication of regulations related to early childhood education issued by the Chinese government over the last three decades. These include, but are not limited to, the Kindergarten Education Practice (trial version) in 1989 by the National Education Commission; Guidance for Kindergarten Education in 2001 by the Ministry of
Education; and The National Education Reform and Development of Long-Term Planning Programs (2010–2020) in 2010 (Liu & Feng, 2005; Pan & Liu, 2008; Rao et al., 2010). In the same year, the Chinese State Council published an individual document of “Several Suggestions on the Development of Early Childhood Education” and “Specific Guidelines for the Development of Early Childhood Education”.

In these documents, scholars agreed that respecting children, active learning, and play-based preschool life are three main ideas that are advocated in new governmental documents (Fees et al., 2014; Liu & Feng, 2005; Rao et al., 2010; Zhu and Wang 2005; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). Specifically, B. S. Fees et al. (2014) indicated that the aim of early education reform in China are developing young children’s autonomy, independence, and creativity. These themes are presented in mainland China’s publications and mirror the prevailing thoughts in Western theories of child development and related pedagogies on early childhood education precisely, which reflect the dominate impact of Western theories of child development on reforming the philosophy of Chinese early childhood education.

As for influence on teaching instruction, the most visible change is on classroom organization. Smaller class sizes are replacing larger classes, and small group tasks are
preferable to large group teaching styles in most preschools presently (Li et al., 2011). More substantially, teachers are beginning to pay particular attention to respecting children’s rights and their choices and interests, which creates more opportunities for children to prioritize their favored activities () and carry out theme-based explorations (B. S. Fees et al., 2014; Li et al., 2011; Li et al., 2012; Pan & Liu, 2008; Pui-Wah, 2006). Significantly, teachers are now spending more time considering individual differences and needs when preparing daily activities. These changes indicate China’s adoption of Western early childhood education theories, especially three important notions on which scholars agree: “respecting children,” “active learning” and “play-based activities.”

Beyond the impact of Western theories of child development on Chinese early childhood education, many challenges and difficulties are also found in the process of accepting innovative philosophies, implementing new philosophical ideas into effective practices, and adopting Western pedagogies into local contexts (Cheng, 2001; Li et al., 2002; Li & Li, 2003; Liu & Feng, 2005; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). The first problem can be defined as the policy-belief gap. Despite the enforcement of regulations, many teachers cannot change their traditional viewpoints of the purpose of preschools as institutions to instill knowledge versus an avenue to facilitate developmental growth. In other cases, some teachers did give
up outdated ideology, but they took up a superficial and distorted comprehension of Western theories of child development (Hou, 2010; Pan & Liu, 2008). The second issue is embedded in the belief-practice gap. On one hand, the policy-belief gap, as illustrated above, could lead to policy-practice inconsistency. For instance, the original teaching skills, such as copying exercises and rote memorization, are still used frequently by teachers (Li et al., 2011), and Western pedagogies, such as Project Learning, were transformed into teacher-directed, memorizing-emphasized activities (Pui-Wah, 2006; Li, 2002; Li et al., 2012; Pan & Liu, 2008; Rao et al., 2010). On the other hand, many scholars are concerned that even if teachers can fully interpret and embrace Western theories and pedagogies, the actual teaching behaviors observed in the classrooms are still stuck in the prior teaching model. (Pui-Wah, 2006; Li et al., 2011; Ng & Rao, 2008; Pan & Liu, 2008; Rao et al., 2010).

Furthermore, causes of perceived inconsistencies are discussed. Scholars primarily attributed the policy-belief gap to traditional ideology towards children and previous teaching instruction adopted from the USSR for more than 30 years (Li et al., 2012; Rao et al., 2010; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). Additionally, Western theories and pedagogies have always been tailored arbitrarily under the utilitarianism effect to require teachers to meet urgent
educational demands, causing teachers to maintain a distorted and superficial understanding of the original theories (Hou, 2010). In response to the belief-practice gap, Li (2011) considered that Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems theory could help to understand this gap thoroughly, and Li summarized local contextual constraints that impede the efficient implementation of the reformed curriculum. The traditional teaching model itself and perception towards children still exist as significant contextual hindrances to conducting revised practice effectively (Pui-Wah, 2006; Li et al., 2011; Li et al., 2012; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). Also, the top-down governmental system not only caused policymakers’ indifference towards Chinese local contexts when formulating new policies, but it also left teachers in blank to apply advanced theories and related models unconfidently when practical guidelines were lacking (Li et al., 2011; Liu & Feng, 2005; Rao et al., 2010; Zhu & Wang, 2005). Beyond inadequate considerations, other contextual factors inside the classroom may also limit teachers’ consistent performance with advanced ideologies. Low teacher-student ratio, increased workload and insufficient resources of high-quality toys or textbooks are all severe constraints on implementation (B. S. Fees et al., 2014; Pui-Wah, 2006; Hu 2002; Li et al., 2011; Li et al., 2012; Pan & Liu, 2008; Zhu & Zhang, 2010) On the other hand, the macro factor of an examination-oriented system places an implicit hindrance to efficient implementation of Western-derived educational
theories and instructions (Pui-Wah, 2006; Hu 2002; Li et al., 2012; Pong & Chow, 2002). Additionally, internal factors could play a significant role on disapproving streamlined pedagogies. Pui-Wah’s (2006) study indicated that students’ non-cooperation toward innovative teaching methods forced teachers to give up advocated ideas and curriculum models, while the distinctive orthography of the Chinese language demands teachers to keep rote memorization and rigid copying practices (Hu, 2002; Li et al., 2012).

Recommended policy implications and practical solutions are as follows: In response to the issue of the policy-belief gap, scholars suggested that it is urgent to improve practitioners’ total quality through effective teacher-training programs (Hou, 2010). Pui-Wah (2006) further advised that involving teachers in the policy-making process of curriculum reform could be another way to facilitate teachers’ understanding and acceptance of Western theories of child development and pedagogy. As for the problem of the belief-practice gap, researchers’ implications are more diverse and complicated. A team of scholars was convinced that Western-originated ideology and curriculum models should undergo localized transformation, taking into consideration socio-contextual factors in China (Li et al., 2011; Li et al., 2012; Li and Li 2003; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). In contrast, scholars believed that some contextual limitations should be solved to promote
the accomplishment of reformatory practices. For instance, many scholars advocated the necessity of sufficient facilities and high teacher-student ratios as a fundamental force to improve western-driven pedagogies (Pui-Wah, 2006; Liu and Feng, 2005; Pan & Liu, 2008; Rao et al, 2010; Zhu & Zhang, 2008).

Admittedly, researchers made significant contributions to clarifying the influence of Western philosophies and pedagogies on Chinese preschools. In particular, scholars in the domain of early childhood education did an excellent job on probing into issues during the process of adoption and putting forward appropriate suggestions accordingly. However, an essential question remains unresolved: Is a revised early childhood education system in China, influenced by Western theories of child development and educational pedagogies, suitable for Chinese preschoolers? Further, how is this revised system perceived? Each social group or individual would have a unique answer and explanation to this question. Parents, who are an influential social group, have a distinct relationship with their children, which makes parents’ perceptions of revised preschools an important part of the social truth that deserves close study. Besides, subjects in previous studies only involved preschool practitioners and observation only took place inside classrooms. The lack of parent participation on this topic could be a
methodological gap. Moreover, conducting qualitative studies inside Chinese preschools may cause a validity threat because teachers may only reveal good aspects by making false statements during interviews and pretending positive scene during observations to sustain the institution’s reputation. Choosing parents as subjects will fill the methodological gap and reduce the validity threat. Parents who are separated from the preschools are likely, to tell the truth for the sake of the children’s well-being. As for the contextual gap, previous research only chose preschools in the first-tier cities to study, such as Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Hong Kong, without considering town-level places. The context for this paper will take place in Tanggu, a town located in the Binhai New Area within Tianjin Province. Conducting the research in a local site can contribute to narrowing the contextual gap on this topic. Therefore, the theme of this paper aims to understand maternal Chinese perception of revised early childhood education under the influence of Western theories of child development with two distinct research questions: to what extent, according to mothers, are Chinese local preschools influenced by Western ideas and practices, and how do mothers perceive changes in those reformed preschools?
CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Drawing on researches discussed in the previous section, a conceptual map was developed to depict core concepts in this study and how they connect with each other (See Appendix).

In the center of the conceptual map is preschool reform, which occurred in both public and private institutions. At the top of the map are Western theories of child development and related pedagogies because of their effect on Chinese preschools. In particular, these ideologies could encourage the public preschool to experience changes through government-regulated policies firstly, while playing a direct and continuous impact on private preschools’ development over the years. Equally important in the project of preschool reform is maternal expectation towards the children and preschool. The expectation is shaped by interactive factors, including external ones, such as the exam-oriented system and the traditional values, which affects subjective factors of parental upbringing. The examination-oriented system in the educational field forces the elementary school to produce high-score pupils. Accordingly, it is reasonable for mothers to expect that preschools should sustain their efforts in teaching literacy to support the pupils in elementary school. On the other hand, traditional values may drive maternal expectations of having children, who are cultivated with traditional virtues, such as politeness and collectivism, while new ideologies of focusing on children’s individuality and fully
respecting children may counteract maternal wishes. Parental upbringing, which plays multiple roles, is affected by both the educational system and traditional ideologies, but it also acts as an independent agent to influence maternal expectation towards preschools. If mothers put too much stake on the role that family could play in education, this can further affect their attitudes towards preschool reform. Nonetheless, parental practices could be an active agent to address maternal expectation of children’s education. When considering maternal expectation as an individual element, it is key to understand how particular components, like training children with self-care capacity or building up confidence, Family Socioeconomic Status (SES), or other experiences shape the maternal perception of preschool reform. Moreover, maternal expectation does not necessarily adhere to external factors. On the contrary, it has the potential power to go against, even change, the surrounding environment, and protect reform from unfair judgments.
METHOD

For this qualitative study, 19 subjects were recruited to complete interviews of studying maternal perception towards revised preschools. All the interviews were conducted between February 15th, 2016 and April 8th, 2016, through the Facetime function in remote devices. Given the limitation of time, a convenience sampling strategy was used, and subjects were recruited through acquaintances or family members’ recommendation. Given that, the data presents different educational experiences of the children of the mothers in the sample, as well as a variety of maternal opinions.

Among these subjects, 8 are middle-school teachers, 2 are high-school teachers, 2 are elementary teachers, one is a doctor, and one is a civil servant in Tanggu District, 2 are employed as instructors in private preschools, and 3 work in companies in Tianjin Economic-Technological Developmental Area (TEDA), which is included in Tanggu District but has autonomy. As the controlling element, all the subjects have relatively high SES, and their families belong to upper-middle class. Twelve subjects have sons, while 7 have daughters. None of the children in this study had siblings. Children’s ages are ranging from 4 to 11. This study covers 12 public preschools, 9 in Tanggu District, the other 3 in TEDA, and 5 private preschools, 4 in TEDA and 1 in Tanggu District. All interviews were
semi-structured and lasted around 30 minutes in Mandarin Chinese, which were then translated into English. No compensation was offered for participants.

All the children of subjects finished preschool after 2010 when the latest Chinese State Council document of “Several Suggestions on Development of Early Childhood Education” and affiliated “Guidelines” were issued. Subjects were expected to perceive and value the newest changes among preschools accordingly.
FINDINGS

First of all, mothers captured preschools’ efforts on shifting their function from teaching cultural knowledge to cultivating children with capacity and personality as the primary transformation on ideology. Based on that, mothers perceived that children are gradually involved in play-based daily life and supported by appropriate instructors for active learning. Mothers also pointed out that individual preschools did not make effective actions according to new guidelines. Meanwhile, challenges in implementation still exist from maternal viewpoints. Traditional thoughts in education, inappropriate environment, and insufficient training programs as significant obstacles impede teachers’ endeavors on achieving advanced instructions accurately. As for attitudes towards preschool reform, subjects appreciate advanced ideology and pedagogies borrowed from Western countries, while worrying about potential harms of inconsistent instructions on child development.

Mothers hold distinctive attitudes towards the most remarkable change in recent reform—the cancellation of literacy classes—when considering the reaction between Western-style ideology and educational system within the domestic context.
PERCEPTION OF CHANGES

Revised Public Preschools

The first change capturing maternal attention is the transformation of ideology among public preschools according to governmental suggestion. The focus of preschool is shifting from teaching literacy knowledge to boosting physical development, cultivating life capacities and habits, promoting sound personality and building up confidence, and ultimately enhancing critical thinking and active learning. As for life capacities, preschools are especially interested in helping children to obtain self-care capacity, such as how to wash hands, wear clothes, or fold blankets through children’s efforts so that children can form healthy habits in the process. Preschool also emphasize the ability for children to communicate with instructors and peers, such as making friends or expressing individual opinions understandably.

With the acceptance of advanced ideologies and reformed goals, mothers perceived more appropriate adjustments made for children’s daily participation in preschool. The most remarkable adaptation according to governmental regulation is the cancellation of literacy classes, followed by the termination of extra curriculum and supporting textbooks. For mothers who were experiencing these changes with their children, they could clearly
remember that all the literacy courses, including Chinese, PINYIN, Math, English and minor counterparts, such as science, were abandoned overnight at a certain point after new documents were delivered. Soon after, extra curriculums, like mental abacus calculation or chess, were no longer provided as after-school activities at many preschools. On the other hand, play-based activities within appropriate facilities refilled the vacancy left by cultural classes. In every public preschool, children are surrounded by all kinds of activities, from indoor crafts to outdoor sporting games and daily exercises, to foster manual development and overall physical health. Preschoolers in certain schools have access to an “activity castle” which is composed of a dollhouse, kitchen, hospital, and building block section. Children are able to play roles in multiple settings and create intellectual games within the environment. Also, role-playing is a beneficial activity for children with and without props or toys. As one mother indicated, her son play-acted characters from popular cartoons at preschool, and learned to distinguish immoral roles from righteous counterparts and establish ethical values during the process. Besides activities arranged at preschools, some activities are extended to home. A key preschool in Tanggu District held an event called “Books in the Bottle,” through which children could borrow books from each other and read at home, and then they could set up a discussion club at preschools.
In a few preschools, Pinyin and Math classes are maintained and instructors combined play-based activities into teaching classes to minimize rote learning. For instance, as a mother indicated, children were inspired to learn numbers through “picking up fruit cards on the tree.” In addition, traditional games, like “Chinese string-up puzzle” are used to help children memorize Chinese words. Intellectual games or pilot scientist experiments are becoming popular among preschools for exercising critical thinking. Beyond these “prepared” activities, preschools began to involve children in event preparation and planning as a part of favorable activities for children. For example, children are encouraged to decorate classrooms according to their tastes and design innovative games with their wisdom.

Furthermore, play-based events on holidays give a colorful tune to daily activities.

During holidays showing appreciation, like Mother’s Day or Thanksgiving Day, mothers believe that children are more likely to sense parental hardship and treasure the virtue of respecting elders through engaging activities. One mother was impressed by a Mother’s Day activity; “Every child had the mission to protect an egg as his/her baby on that day, and of course, many children broke their egg before the end of that day, but I think it is an impressive activity because it gives children a vivid idea of how hard and how important
being a mother could be. ” Making artwork, like “holiday cards”, is another common activity during holiday seasons, which could be a platform for children to express gratitude and exercise physical capabilities simultaneously. In preparation for holidays, such as Christmas and Spring Festival, children are engaged in decorating Christmas trees and making dumplings respectively, through which their manual capacity and imaginative thinking are greatly enhanced. In preschools, flag-raising ceremonies and commencements could be regarded as special “holidays”, when performance and artwork exhibitions are held for children to perform talents and display pieces. All the play-based activities and holiday events mirror the essential notion of embedding children into play-based daily life in Western pedagogies and provide an unmistakable stage for preschools to realize newly embraced ideologies (Li, 2011; Liu & Feng, 2005; Rao & Pearson, 2010)

Along with play-based activities, mothers noticed that preschool teachers are changing instructions for the purpose of creating a happy and meaningful preschool experience for children. Consequently, the idea of “respecting children” is on its way to becoming the new Bible for instructors after the latest policy announcement. According to mothers, preschool instructors were and are doing a great job on respecting children as individuals to appreciate their differences, interests, and thoughts. Firstly, the teacher-children
relationship has changed from a teacher-dominated type to an equal form of treating children as individuals. Teachers always hold a kind and careful attitude while communicating with children, without punishing children physically or criticizing them with offensive words, even under circumstances in which children made mistakes.

Moreover, two mothers expressed their sincere gratitude towards teachers’ dedication and patience on their children’s daily care. They gave similar examples of how teachers cleaned up everything, changed new clothes for their kids, and soothed children’s emotion after children wet their pants.

Secondly, mothers are convinced that the ideology of respecting children’s differences regarding personality, habit, or condition, is cherished in teachers’ hearts, and is manifested in different forms. Many preschools are beginning to set up personal tracking files for children, where teachers can find all the details about children for personalized instructions. One preschool strived to make a digital document for every child with an introduction-DVD shot at the beginning of preschool life, which assured mothers of school’s efforts on emphasizing children’s differences. Specifically, teachers are making significant improvements on respecting children’s personalities. One mother, whose boy was very introverted, was pleased to find that his teacher recognizes his characteristics,
and therefore give him more space and time to adapt preschool life at his pace and provide him more opportunities to strengthen social capacity. This mother said, “His teacher encouraged him to join the drum club and be a flag raiser in the ceremony, which I think is very good because these activities could exercise his capacity, and more importantly, make him outgoing and confident.” Teachers also pay equal attention to children who have outgoing personalities. Teachers always advise children with moral principles and good habits if the children acted inappropriately, instead of forcing them with strict demands. What made mothers happier is that teachers are more inclusive towards children’s different behaviors along with characteristics. As a mother said, “you know, those naughty boys, when they are happy, they wish to roll on the ground, not sit still on chairs, but teachers are totally fine with it and even protect their differences, which could not be tolerated in the previous time.” Another subject felt surprised but grateful for what she saw on the Open Day of Preschool: a teacher encouraged a boy’s curiosity towards an outside activity when a story-telling activity was going on inside. Mothers find that current preschool instructors are more likely to protect children’s “unsatisfactory” personality traits and offer specific guidance to help children improve, rather than controlling children within rigid regulation. A mother gave high praise for teachers’ efforts on cultivating her son with wholesome personality by respecting his
“unique characteristic” in the first place. “He (my son), sometimes, is easily influenced by others’ comments, and he would be in a good mood with compliments while depressed with criticism. However, what made me happy is his teachers’ instruction. They embraced his “deficiency” (maybe I think in this way) in the beginning and guided him with all patience and encouragement whenever he encountered difficulties. It turned out; he becomes more confident and happier, and more stable with his moods.”

Moreover, differences are not limited to individual characteristics, but also include children’s particular situations. One mother expressed high gratitude for teachers’ patient guidance when her daughter was newly transferred. “They assured that my daughter and I would adapt new environment slowly without any anxiety, and they encouraged her all the time for everything she tried, and informed me of every progress she made.” Another mother found it “marvelous” when every child is invited to perform during holiday events and present their art pieces regardless of their actual skill level. In addition, mothers acknowledge that teachers try to respect children’s dining habits without forcing them to eat anything they dislike, to keep their cheerful emotion at preschool.

Finally, respecting children’s choices and interests could be another important aspect. As
mothers recalled, their children could freely choose playmates in games, preferred sections in the “activity castle”, and video clips on multimedia devices. Sometimes, teachers would recognize preschoolers’ interests through observation, and gather children who have similar interests, like singing or painting, to provide further guidance.

Moreover, teachers always respect children’s ideas with a consulting tone rather than bluntly interrupt during daily activities. One mother was impressed during the Open Day when children were playing in the activity sections. “My son was playing in the building-block section, but their pieces kept falling. Although teachers encouraged children to offer suggestions for a stable building, they did not make any judgment on children’s advice but only inspire them to give another try.” More excitingly, children can freely express and discuss their thoughts with instructors and peers during story telling.

Ultimately, every effort that instructors aim to achieve with appropriate activities turns out to be a beneficial practice to promote children’s active thinking and construct their understandings towards the surrounding world.

In addition, subjects also perceived the improvement of physical equipment as another major attempt on preparing an appropriate environment. Some preschools made large-scale building renovations in recent years, and most of them set up more child-friendly
facilities, such as soft playgrounds, painted steps to mark stairs, and furniture without sharp corners. Adding to refined multimedia and “activity castle,” some preschools developed a piece of farmland or an aquatic place, where children could observe plants or fish’ growing trajectory closely.
Challenges in Implementing New Preschools

During the process of adopting advanced ideology and instruction, problems inevitably appeared along with progress in most cases, and this applies to the preschool reform. The most recognizable problem for mothers is the late and inconsistent implementation among public preschools according to new documents. The Chinese government published the document about the State Council’s suggestions on the development of early childhood education in 2010 and added relevant guidance in 2012 that includes detailed instructions on promoting preschoolers’ health, language development, social communication, science, and arts individually. However, one subject, whose daughter was in a TEDA public preschool from 2009 to 2012, perceived no attractive change and felt pity that her daughter was still struggling with literacy-dominated classes and rigid practitioners who instructed as elementary teachers. Additionally, more than one subject found that teachers still strictly control children and regulate them without a sign of respecting children. “There is no real change happening in teaching instruction or ideology I suppose. Teachers still manage children with authority significantly, and always force children to do tasks with threatening tone regardless of children’s wishes or criticize rudely when children were making troubles. They (instructors) even spilled bad emotion on children sometimes, which I could not accept at all.” This quote is from a
mother whose child was in a Tanggu preschool from 2012 to 2014 and also stands for another subject’ disappointment on preschools’ indifference to the new policy.

For preschools that made considerable adjustments according to new documents, implementations varied in time and content. Two key preschools in Tanggu responded once documents were settled in 2010 by canceling all literacy and extra curriculum, and targeting children’s overall development with high-quality teaching instruction. On the other hand, most preschools in Tanggu and TEDA district stopped teaching literacy classes after 2012 without forbidding after-school activities and the usage of textbooks. Furthermore, individual preschools in TEDA district still keep the core subjects in literacy education, PINYIN and Math, though teachers are more flexible with appropriate instruction and play-based activities.

The decision of adhering to new policy and canceling literacy classes is the challenge that preschool administrators face, while on the other hand, preschool teachers encounter the significant difficulty of acquiring consistent instructions and preparing play-based activities according to accepted ideologies, due to the challenging environment of limited resources and the lack of teacher training programs. One of the most noticeable
challenges in the natural setting is the large-scale air pollution in Mainland China in recent year, which brings significant impact on children’s outdoor activities. A mother expressed her concern on its effect: “it is impossible for children to play a lot on the playground because of the air pollution, so they get an increasing time to watch cartoon indoor, which is bad for eye health and overall development I am afraid.” However, compared to external environments, limited resources within classrooms could be a more severe obstacle that needs to be cleared. Even though many mothers captured teachers’ attempts on meeting children’s differences, they showed doubts on the real achievement of this point when considering the large class size. “It is amazingly but almost impossible for teachers to respect everyone’s interest and promote active learning individually in a classroom up to 30 children. I believe that the low teacher-children ratio gave teachers no choices but set up some regulations, or the classroom could be out of control.” This mother’s words not only reflect the difficulty of achieving personalized education within the social context in China but also indicate another deficiency during the changing process: children still have very limited free spaces to explore themselves and construct active learning. In several preschools, play-based activities are still scheduled in the class form, and children are asked to experience activities in order and have no choice to do their preference in the first place. In preschools where the advanced environment was
built, such as activity “castle”, children could not access their favorite sections under teachers’ arrangements, let alone undertaking Project Learning with children’s efforts.

The limitation could make children feel controlled with a hint of gloom and washes away their enthusiasm for active learning to a great extent.

Given the important role that surrounding environment plays (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), instructors’ experiences and personalities could cause inappropriate behaviors if they did not receive sufficient training program, which would further negatively influence child development. For senior teachers who have taught in the traditional pedagogy for decades, it could be frustrating and arduous for them to abandon the familiar approach and embrace the new one at once. What’s worse, according to subjects’ words, the actual condition is that these teachers only dropped their believed instruction but have no clue to instruct children according to the new ideology. “They (teachers) just give toys to children every morning and ask them to play without telling children how to play wisely. Play-based activities turn out to be ‘silly’ playing.” Plenty of subjects are also convinced that teachers’ individual characteristics could lead to deviant instruction with too strong personality, though they are intended to achieve new pedagogy. A mother said, “Her teacher is really nice and love these children very much, but she is too passionate
sometimes, to speak loud or shout at children at high emotion, which I could not regard as respectful.”

According to maternal perception, teachers who learned the advanced instruction quickly are doing a better job than those trapped in an outdated world. Nevertheless, mothers mention that they did not make a perfect performance, especially with “the naughty ones”. Unfortunately, in mothers’ opinions, teachers still treat extroverted children as misbehaved ones, and lose patience to respect their differences but suppress their actions rudely, which could be detrimental to children’s wholesome development. Besides, certain teachers even judge preschoolers’ goodness depending on “academic” performance and treated children unfairly. One mother was shocked by a teacher’s odd behavior at her son’s preschool. “She (the teacher) always asks children to answer basic math questions before nap time. If children failed to give right answers, they could not take a nap. Once, I picked up my son early, and I saw two girls standing in front of that teacher and answering questions. However, they always made it wrong, and the teacher did not let them go. I was shocked by this teacher’s instruction, and I could not think of any association between math and rest.”
Varied Changes among Private Preschools

The main difference of private preschools from public preschool is freedom from governmental regulations. Therefore, it is not regulatory reform but private preschools themselves that actively brought Western ideologies and pedagogies into domestic practices. In this study, five subjects have their children in private preschools, and five preschools are included. Owing to the autonomy of private preschools, they absorbed the quintessence of focusing on children’s life capacities and active knowledge-acquisition from Western countries at an earlier stage, compared to public preschools. The condition of being initiative also led to various ideology and instruction among private preschools.

On one hand, according to mothers’ perception, all the private schools made an improvement on three essential notions of respecting children on every aspect, preparing a play-based daily life, and inspiring active learning as the ultimate goal, as public preschools grew. On the other hand, private preschools divided their roads into other aspects. Some are proud of each kid’s unique cultivation within a small-size classroom, while others pay more attention to orderliness and collectivism with strict regulations, as mothers indicated.

Even though private preschools are free from governmental reform, they have to raise
money to keep their schools running. Under this mechanism, national policies in 2010 and 2012 made a considerable difference to private schools, particularly on the issue of literacy classes. Since public preschools are forbidden to teach cultural knowledge, private ones see it as an opportunity to attract parents by intensifying literacy classes. Beginning from 2010, literacy classes returned as the core of private preschools, though private preschools sustained their performance of respecting children, utilizing play-based activities and fostering active learning.
ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE CHANGE

When Meeting Maternal Expectation

When asking for opinions on revised preschools, subjects give an affirmative idea towards these changes with new policies in the first place, especially on the advanced ideologies borrowed from Western countries. Each mother appreciates the fundamental idea of respecting children’s developmental stages and embracing preschoolers in a relaxing atmosphere, which matches mothers’ ultimate focus on children’s happiness. Also, the shifting goal from impartment of specific knowledge to the cultivation of life capacity, personality, and active learning adheres to maternal wishes for children to develop stronger abilities, bright characters, and learning motivation during preschool years. Thanks to the consensus on ideology, mothers show gratefulness towards revised instruction of respecting children and increasing activities based on playing.

 Influenced by traditional values, cultivating children with the sense of politeness, collectivism, and virtues of respecting the old and protecting the young, for instance, is still an important component in maternal expectation. However, the appreciation towards traditional values did not make mothers devalue the significance of newly changing educational policies but enhance their appreciation of teachers’ efforts to establish a
proper adult-children relationship, which could discard the dross of treating children with authority but instill children with the concept of politeness as a vivid model. As for collectivism, children still have many chances to play together as a team, especially on sporting activities, which do not conflict with advanced ideology and pedagogies, but rather provide more opportunities for social communication. In addition, mothers stated that they would not feel troubled even if traditional virtues were neglected in preschool since family education could take a major responsibility on this part. Overall, new changes did not eliminate the cultivation of traditional values, while mothers’ traditional expectation would not impede the reform among preschools but evolve together.
When Changes Are Going Against Maternal Hope

Although the discussion on changes in policy always refers to innovative ideology and instruction imported from Western countries, problems appearing during the process of adoption are also unavoidable among preschools, from the maternal perspective. Therefore, this lack of achievement according to new policies caused maternal dissatisfaction towards recent changes. Certain preschools’ indifferences towards reform to teachers’ inappropriate and biased instruction or unwise and dominant guidance of play-based activities aroused mothers’ negative attitudes towards reformed preschools. Several mothers strongly advocate that preschools should pay particular attention to creating more free-playing time and holding more outdoor trips as further improvements.
Literacy Classes: Keep or Discard?

Although subjects reached a considerable agreement of distinguishing positive from negative parts on revised preschools, they divided opinions towards the change on the issue of literacy classes. Some mothers, who highly complimented new ideologies and instructions, could not understand the point of canceling literacy classes among preschools. Apparently, the maternal expectation of having children study cultural knowledge is widely influenced by the examination-oriented system in China. According to mothers’ arguments, the cancellation of literacy classes among preschools caused an unsuccessful transition to elementary school, where children are struggling with the adaptation of scheduled classes and the acquisition of cultural knowledge all at once. At the same time, subjects disclosed that parents feel the burden of ensuring that their children do not fall behind or lose faith along the long road of studying. Therefore, private supplementary tutoring, also recognized as Shadow school, becomes the primary strategy for mothers to solve this issue. Some children are transferred to specialized shadow schools for the transitional purpose before kindergarten year while others are sent to shadow program during summer break. Even though shadow education could be an effective assistance, mothers still raise concerns about its potential disadvantages relevant to child development. “We have to send him to shadow school during the break, or he is
going to the “foolish” student in the elementary school. However, I do not prefer shadow education because it always teaches rigidly that does not suit for kids at such a young age, so my kid always feels very tired after that. What’s worse, teachers in shadow school have varied quality. For example, some English teachers pronounce words mistakably, which could cast an irreversible effect on children’s learning.” Another mother also pointed out that the usage of shadow school could become an economic burden on family expenses.

However, another group of mothers believes that the cancellation of literacy classes would not affect their positive attitude towards newly changing educational policies, but rather appreciates this dramatic movement in the history of Chinese preschools for several reasons. Firstly, a few mothers explicitly clarified that the transitional difficulty is caused by elementary schools since the duty of passing on cultural knowledge should be taken by teachers from elementary school rather than preschool. Nevertheless, elementary teachers consider that it is unarguable for children to be equipped with basic knowledge of PINYIN, Math and English from preschool so that they could teach fast and speed up their teaching progress in the elementary stage. Hence, parents have the illusion that if children are unable to catch up properly, preschool is always the one to be blamed.
Additionally, even if elementary preschools did not make adjustments accordingly, mothers are convinced that the acquisition of adequate capacities, healthy habits, and wholesome personality is more valuable and has more profound impact on further studying than the grasp of specific knowledge. Moreover, subjects’ experiences prove that parental upbringing could be a significant factor in this transition by helping children to learn in advance or catch up. Most importantly, the change happening among preschools brings mothers energy to expect revolution among elementary and middle schools, and finally the transformation of the educational system in China.
Family Education: A Helper or Replacement?

Many subjects regard family education as an efficient helper to remedy preschools’ neglected points or enhance preschools’ efforts on revised essential parts. In response in the significant change on literacy classes, family education becomes the main support for the acquisition of literacy knowledge and the cultivation of studying habit. Meanwhile, family education plays a vital role in inspiring active learning with respecting children distinctively at home to counteract teachers’ struggle in a large classroom at preschools. Moreover, many mothers hold the idea that family education should take the crucial role in cultivating children with traditional virtues and instilling them with positive attitudes towards the world. Thanks to family education, mothers saw inconveniences along with changes as little weaknesses and are happy to grant preschools more time to improve instruction according to the new policy.

However, for certain subjects, family education is so important that it could replace the status of preschool education, and any changes among preschools would become insignificant in their minds.
DISCUSSION

In this study, maternal perception on the cancellation of literacy classes is divided but not contradictory in essence. Regardless of maternal disapproval towards literacy classes’ cancellation, mothers understand that intensive life of elementary school forces preschool to take the responsibility of teaching literacy knowledge that should not be, and leads them to blame preschool on the transitional issue. Hence, grounded in maternal reaction to preschool reform of canceling literacy classes, education at elementary stage should be modified according to developmental stages so that children could transit from preschool to elementary school smoothly. Moreover, the modification in elementary schools could enhance the positive influence that revised preschools bring to young children. If pupils were still taught rigidly under a stressful atmosphere at elementary schools, preschools’ efforts on protecting children’s natural development could be counteracted to nothing. Therefore, the government should make subsequent guidelines towards elementary schools connecting with preschool reform, to sustain children’s healthy development.

Being consistent with previous studies, this study suggests that teacher training programs are still needed for guiding appropriate instructions in accordance with advanced ideology. Furthermore, air pollution arises in recent years, may not draw much attention
in the last decade but should be considered as a serious and influential issue on
preschools at this time. Meanwhile, preschools should intentionally enrich indoor
activities including more interesting content in more diversified forms, and arrange more
field trips to remedy the shortage of daily outdoor activities.

In this study, maternal expectation and parental upbringing are identified as important
factors to affect the maternal perception of preschool reform. It is worth noting that these
are subjective factors, which are susceptible to change under the influence of advanced
pedagogy. If Chinese mothers’ expectation of cultivating children with life capacity,
bright personality and learning initiation are influenced by Western theories and practices
of early childhood education has no way to be answered in this study, but can be a
promising topic for further research. On the other hand, as a mother referred, upbringing
practices also experienced tremendous changes along with instructions in preschools
under the influence of western ideologies. More significantly, when being exposed to
advanced ideas in the first place, parents may lose themselves in searching for
appropriate instructions as preschool teachers did. For example, mothers could
misunderstand Western theories and behave inappropriately, which could impede
children’s healthy development significantly. One subject confirmed this point, “Some
*parents are ‘cherishing’ the term of ‘freedom’ so much that they actually indulge their children without any regulation. They would say that freedom is good for child development, so just let them do whatever they want.*”

 Mothers expressed their wishes of including essences from Western and Chinese educational traditions at early childhood and further stages. Although mother-preferred educational elements from Western countries and China can be recognized in this study, it may not include all ideas from different educations. Therefore, more studies are encouraged to illustrate every educational essence from these two cultures, and how to combine all valuable thoughts in an effective manner could be a more significant question to answer. The information about a Western-operated preschool was collected in the sample but excluded from data analysis because western-operated preschools are the western education in essence. They are operated directly by educational institutions from Western countries and are equipped with experienced teachers who are familiar with Western pedagogies to sustain the original western-style early childhood education in Chinese social context. Those external factors that impede the normal operation of western-operated preschools in Chinese context could be identified as obstacles that hinder preschools from implementing new policies based on western theories.
APPENDIX

Conceptual Framework

Western Theories

Governmental Policies on respecting children, Play-based activities, Active learning

Public

Private

Preschool Reform

Advanced changes

Affiliated Problems

Child characteristics

Maternal Expectation

SES

Exam-oriented System

Parental Upbringing

Traditional Values

Primary School Pressure
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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