

A Qualitative Study of Teachers' Involvement in Children's Play

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Abstract

This study aims to explore Chinese kindergarten teachers' perspectives and practice of their roles and interactions with children in play. A qualitative research design with in-depth, open-ended interviews and persistent class observation was employed. Two teachers from each of nine classes of three different Chinese kindergartens, in total eighteen teachers were interviewed and the interactions between the teachers and individual children were video-recorded during playtime. Findings revealed that teachers played more roles in practice than they reported. They adopted eight different roles which consist of play planner, supporter, organizer, facilitator, monitor, co-player, mediator, and uninvolved role. Nine intentions were identified to explain the teacher-initiated interactions, including directing play and learning; managing behaviors; taking care; asking for help; playing; offering help and support; asking for information; praising and encouraging; and comforting. Eight purposes of child-initiated interactions were also identified, which included asking for teacher's attention; telling on someone who broke rules; involving a teacher in play; asking for teacher's help; stating and expressing personal ideas; requesting; asking for information and permission; and expressing personal emotion.

1. Introduction

Play has long been recognized as a valuable contributor to children's overall development and well-being. Increasing research has provided substantial evidence to support the idea that play has a critical role in the optimal growth, learning and development of children. Evidence from research has shown that high-quality play contributes to a wide range of positive outcomes for children in the cognitive, social, physical and emotional domains [1]. *The Association for Childhood Education International* advocates that play is essential for children of all ages, domains and cultures.

Research indicated that adults' support has a crucial role in developing children's play and learning experiences [2]. Kontos' pointed out that teachers' involvement and teacher-child interaction in play are critical elements of high quality early childhood education which lead to children's optimal development and early school success [3]. Vygotsky

laid stress on the importance of the catalyst role of adults in the process of children's learning and play. He argued that the realization of educational value and development of children's play largely depends on the guidance of adults. His view of early childhood education suggested that it is necessary for adults to take active roles in children's play if its learning potential is to be maximized [4].

The Chinese Kindergarten Educational Guideline emphasizes that kindergartens should arrange play as the basic activity in daily routine and play is expected to 'permeate all activities, in each and every aspect of the lives of kindergarten children' [5]. However, the accessibility of Chinese kindergarten teachers to young children during play and the extent to which children's play is appropriately supported to promote their holistic development are not clear yet. The current study is designed to shed light on this issue.

2. Literature review

2.1. The value of play to children's development

Literature contains a wide range of references, which state the value and importance of play in young children's learning and development. There is a broad consensus that play is a natural ability, basic activity and a valuable means through which children learn. Through play, children explore the environment around them; master their emotion; control their actions; develop their cognition, creative thinking, problem-solving ability, as well as social and linguistic competence [6]. Play also helps children acquire literacy, cope with tensions and anxieties, practice adult roles, handle challenges, and engage fully and joyfully in childhood imagination and passion. It is regarded as a mirror in which children's developmental level, personality and the social and cultural context within which they live can be reflected entirely [7].

Early childhood education is underpinned by the ideology of play-based learning based on the ideas of educationists such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, John Dewey, Friedrich Froebel, and Margaret MacMillan. These education pioneers recognized that play has a powerful influence on children's learning and advocated that play should be adopted as an essential and integral part of early childhood education.

2.2. Teachers' roles in play

Vygotsky argued that play creates the zone of proximal development and skillful teachers could identify the ZDP and lead children to develop towards their potential within it. Teachers need to know which roles they should play and how to interact with children to support their learning and development in play [8]. However, Wood stated that even though early childhood practitioners recognize the many benefits of play, they continue to 'struggle with their provision and, in particular, with their role' in play (p.10) [9]. Wood and Attfield proposed eight important roles as a tenet to guide teachers' behaviour in an integrated play pedagogical approach in very detail. They suggested that the first role teachers should play is flexible planners who plan for either child-initiated or teacher-initiated activities according to the dynamic flow of classroom activities, children's age and abilities. Second, teachers are expected to act as skilled observers through which they can identify possible dangers, ensure safety, ensure that all children receive attention, alert to problems, new patterns and themes in play, identify ways to support and extend play, identify opportunities for challenge, learn about children's interaction, interests, dispositions, meaning and intentions, inform later planning for individuals and groups. Third, teachers need to be good listeners who respect and engage with children emotionally and be alert to children's different ways of communication. Forth, teachers should play as communicators who can communicate with children in many different ways, such as gesture, body language and facial expressions. Fifth, teachers are expected to infect children with enthusiasm. Sixth, teachers should supervise children's safety, access, equal opportunities, and well-being in play in terms of the physical, social and emotional environment. Seventh, teachers should be sensitive co-players who help children to become master player. Eighth, teachers are expected to be researchers who have an enquiry-based approach to improve the quality of their provision (p.160-179) [10].

Researchers have identified various roles of teachers in children's play, although they labeled teachers' role differently, many of them were interrelated and overlapped rather than conflicted. For instance, Johnson et al. [11] categorized six different roles that teachers played in children's play, from 'minimal to maximal involvement: uninvolved, onlooker, stage manager, co-player, play leader, and director or instructor' (p. 209), while Bennett et al. [12] defined three major roles that acted by teachers in play: provider, observer, and participant. Enz and Christie [13] classified six roles of teachers in children's play and analyzed the influence different roles brought to children. They further concluded that the teachers' roles of stage-manager, co-player,

and play leader appeared to have a positive effect on children's pretend play, while the roles of uninvolved, interviewer, and director tended to have negative impact on children's play. Based on these findings, Cheng [14] identified five roles of teachers in children's play which include stage manager, mediator, task leader, supporter or information facilitator, communicator and planner. Shen's [15] findings of a Taiwanese public kindergarten showed that both experienced teachers and student-teachers in the kindergarten held a positive view towards children's play. She identified seven roles of teachers in children's play: onlooker, integrator, assessor, stage manager, play leader, co-player, and peacemaker. Roskos and Neuman [16] classified teachers' roles within literacy-based play centres into three categories, including onlooker, player, and leader.

In discussion of teachers' role in children's play, two main different opinions held by researchers have been identified through viewing a great body of relevant literature: intervention and non-intervention [17]. One of the main views held by many researchers is that teachers are expected not to intervene or only intervene on the gentlest level in children's play as play is defined as a voluntary, intrinsically motivated activity which is initiated by children [18]. Opposite to the non-intervention role of teachers, many researchers recommend that it is essential for teachers to intervene in children's play for they are 'knowledgeable others' who can facilitate the realization of the potential value of play [19]. In line with this opinion, teachers are expected to adopt several roles in children's play. The first role is to act as a provider or supporter. As a provider, the teacher should support children's play by providing resources, such as, time, space, materials and preparatory experiences. In order to be a supporter, the teacher need the most fundamental skill---observation through which she/ he senses when is the most appropriate time to enter in children's play and when children need to be provided with extra time, space and materials for further exploration [20].

2.3. Teacher-child interaction in play

Vygotsky believed that children's cognitive development is promoted and facilitated through interactions with more knowledgeable and capable individuals such as parents, teachers and peers. He attached great importance on the teacher-child communication and interaction to children's construction of knowledge on many levels [21]. Based on the Vygotskian perspectives, Wood and Attfield argued that teachers as more knowledgeable others can scaffold children's learning through play by 'joint problem-solving' and 'intersubjectivity' which means children and teachers 'establish mutual

understanding of motivation, abilities, goals, interests and dispositions' (p.94) [22]. There is evidence that simply a teacher interacts with individual children in play is not enough, the quality of teacher-child interactions impacts upon children's experience and early learning outcomes. Researchers have further indicated that well-intentioned adult intervention in children's play could promote develop complex play abilities which enhance social, cognitive, and language development while inappropriate adult-initiated interactions which impose on children a single, defined way to play that may be incongruous with children's interests, needs, and cultural traditions, and impede play behavior [23]. Wood and Attfield suggested tenets for teacher-child interactions. They states that the interactions employed by practitioners 'should simultaneously support and respond to children's needs and potential; support children's skills as player and learner; enrich the context of children's play; support children's own ideas and provide additional idea and stimuli; enable children to elaborate and develop their own themes; be responsive to the level of play development; and remain sensitive to the ideas that children are trying to express' (p.46) [24].

Kontos' research [25] showed that teacher-child interaction in the classroom was an important indicator of the degree of environment stimulation and related to children's learning and development. Her quantitative study of 40 Head Start teachers in America revealed that teachers spent most time to play the role of stage manager and play enhancer. Their talk with children mainly focused on objects in play, assisting children with obtaining materials and self-help, and socializing with children. However, she suggested that there was room for growth in the quality of teacher-child interaction in play.

Furthermore, research showed that two main teacher-child interaction styles were found in children's play: extending style and redirecting style. The former was often adopted by teachers as a means to create more ways to stimulate children to generate themes in play, while the latter was usually employed by teachers to guide children from play to other learning activities [26].

This literature shows that the teacher-child interaction is one of critical processes in early childhood education. However, research relate to the quality of teacher-child interaction imply that it seems that many early childhood practitioners are not very clear about the appropriate ways that they need to interact with children to ensure the interactions are of good quality, and many teacher-initiated interactions are documented inappropriate. For example, the study of Bennett, et al. revealed that the contents and frequency of teacher-child interaction during play seems of low quality and 'unlikely to provide the substance of high cognitive challenge' (p.7) [27].

Research on role-play in early childhood settings also showed inappropriate interventions of teachers. Findings revealed that teacher-initiated interactions serve the purpose of providing adult instruction or control, but undermined or interrupted the play [28].

2.4. Play within the Chinese context

In 1989, the Chinese Education Commission issued "*The Regulations on Kindergarten Education Practice*". Play was stated officially as a basic component of children's learning and a developmentally appropriate teaching approach in kindergarten for the first time. However, since the idea was grounded on western society, it was not completely integrated with Chinese cultural traditions. Consequently, it encountered some difficulties in practice. Later, in the early childhood educational policy documents which issued respectively in 1990, 1996, and 2001, the importance of play in kindergarten education has been reiterated. As a result, play-based teaching and learning has been advocated as an important principle and pedagogy of early childhood education in China and teachers have been encouraged to adopt play-based teaching approach [29].

It seems that extant studies primarily focus on western society and limit to the roles that teachers adopt in social dramatic, role or literacy-based play settings. Although there were research which carried out in Chinese context, such as Cheng's case study in Hong Kong revealed that teachers encountered great difficulties in putting play into real practice and Rao and Li [29] conducted a case study to find out teachers' and parents' beliefs relate to play and learning in Chinese kindergartens. They noted that kindergarten teachers and parents believed the relationship between play and learning was very close and regarded play as the main vehicle for learning. They emphasized that children 'playing to learn' (p.114). However, these studies did not pay attention to teachers' roles and teacher-child interactions in play.

The current study aims to investigate teachers' roles and teacher-child interactions across a full range of play settings and to address the following questions:

1. What are the Chinese kindergarten teachers' perceptions of their roles in children's play?
2. What are the teachers' roles in children's play in practice?
3. Why teachers initiate interaction with individual children in play?
4. Why individual child interacts with teachers in play?

3. Methods

This study is designed as a qualitative piece of research which combines two research methods---- interview and observation to collect data. It was carried out from September 2011 to January 2012 in Guangzhou China in three Chinese kindergartens which include a government-run kindergarten (public kindergarten), a community-run kindergarten, and a private-owned kindergarten based on their representativeness and typicality.

Six teachers from each kindergarten were chosen in terms of age and the type of classes they teach (kindergarten stage 1, 2 and 3). In total, eighteen teachers constitute the key informants of the research.

All of the 18 participating teachers are female. They age between 20 and 42 with their teaching experience varies from 2 years to 23 years in early childhood education. As to their educational qualification, eight participants hold associate degree (AD) while six participants have bachelor degree (BD), and four participants have finished the Qualified Kindergarten Teacher Education Course (KTEC) which is obtained after three years full-time kindergarten teacher training following secondary school.

3.1. Teacher interview

During the study, all of the 18 teachers were interviewed three times: before, during and after the classroom observation. Pre- and post-observation interview were designed as semi-structured ones and were conducted respectively before and after the observations of classroom practice with the teacher.

Pre-observation interview allows the researcher to gain a general understanding of teachers' background information, teaching experience, teaching style, daily arrangement, class management, educational pedagogy and perception of play. Stimulated recall interview was designed as an unstructured interview for it has great flexibility and freedom. It was carried out as informal conversations with the observed teacher immediately after the researcher observed certain play activity in classroom, allowing the teacher to explain in some depth what had taken place in the class. Post-observation interview enables the teachers' to account for their interpretation of play in practice.

3.2. Observation

Observation was carried out respectively in nine classes. Observation of one class lasts for an average of eight working days, and covers the full-day programs. It enables the researcher to collect data to catch the dynamic nature of play in kindergarten

practice, especially different play contexts, teachers' roles and their interactions with children in play. During the observation in each class, in the first three or two days, the researcher conducted general observation which served as a 'warm up' time for her to get familiar with the teachers, children, class schedule and the daily routines. Then in the next five working days, the formal observation took place and focused on play activities.

During class observation, each participating teacher was video-recorded for about 1 hour on each of the five working days during playtime when she interacted naturally with children. All the videos were recorded with both teacher and children's permission. Meanwhile, the researcher also took field notes to record the settings, time duration of play, conversation between teachers and children and their behaviors.

3.4 Data analysis

Firstly, by listening the audio-recorded interviews repeatedly, and making notes of important concepts and overlapped ideas, some irrelevant information of the interview data was reduced according to the research questions. Following this step, the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and the researcher read them repeatedly to make herself thoroughly familiar with the contents and make the initial codes to emerge. Then codes for analysis generated gradually, and then they were expanded, decided, and refined carefully. Interview guide was applied as a framework for analyzing the interview data. The transcripts were then coded several times and broke into parts to identify conceptual categories.

In the next phase of data analysis, the researcher viewed the video clips of play activities, identified the teacher-child interactions and transcribed all of them verbatim. The procedure of transcribing is consisted of two steps. First, the contexts and contents of play activity were described based on the video, and then checked and compared with the field notes. Following that, the interactions which include talks, gestures and facial expressions between the teacher and individual children were transcribed carefully and put into the contexts to offer a holistic picture.

Transcripts of interview and video clips together with the field notes from observation were analyzed by using thematic coding approach and constant comparison and taking a bottom up approach to generate sub-categories, categories and themes. After all the data were coded and labeled, the codes with the same label were grouped together to generate a theme. Different pieces of data were constantly compared with each other to generate categories. Each category was again compared and contrasted in order to find any links between them. Data were also compared across interview and observation to find

their similarities and differences. Finally, the data was re-aggregated according to different research questions.

4. Findings

4.1 Teachers' perspectives of their roles in play

All the teachers were asked to explain their roles in play. In response to this, the teachers described multiple roles they took in children's play using different terms. Their description of their roles in play can be sorted into five main categories: planner, supporter, facilitator, monitor and co-player. Teachers stated that they normally play different roles in a play by changing from one role to another rather than play a single role in a play activity.

Findings reveal that there is a prevalent view amongst teachers which stresses the role of planner in play. Most teachers elaborated that as planners, they plan play intentionally by linking it to a current learning topic or theme and plan specific learning objectives of play. Instead of emphasizing children's free and independent play, teachers prefer to provide teacher-organized and teacher-guided structured play in which they stress their role as planners to make plan to ensure fulfillment of potential learning outcomes of play.

Almost all the teachers share the view that they need to offer support to children in play in terms of materials and related experience. The supporter role, as teachers described that involves the responsibility of preparing children with relevant experience which needed for play, periodically enriching and supplying play resource and materials according to different themes, offering help when children encounter difficulties during play, providing emotional support when children are unable to play independently.

According to the teachers' perceptions, the role of facilitator involves the responsibilities of teaching children how to play, helping them understand the rules, reminding children when they were not following the play rules, helping children allocate play materials and roles, questioning them to stimulate and scaffold learning, thinking and imagination, involving children in play, encouraging, leading and extending play. As facilitators, they are more involved in play as they need to 'keep eyes on the progress', interpret what was occurred, and even enter into play to 'offer suggestions to direct play'.

All the teachers shared the view that the role of monitor is essential for the success of a play. They indicated that the main aims of monitoring include maintaining discipline, managing children's behaviors to ensure play on the right track; identifying possible safety dangers and avoiding accidents; discovering children's innovative and

creative way of playing then sharing and communicating it with other children; observing children's performance in play in order to identify their needs and offer appropriate support; observing the flow of children's interest to make adjustment timely.

Findings show that co-player is another role valued by the participating teachers. It is clear that most teachers hold a positive view concerning their participation in children's play. Sixteen of the teachers elucidated that as co-players, they participate in play either invited by children or actively join in by themselves. Their explanation revealed that there are various motivations for them to adopt the co-player role. Some teachers mentioned that although they are adults, they are playful individuals, and they like play as children do, while others pointed out that they utilize the co-player role as a strategy to model certain action or skill for children, boost the atmosphere, elicit children's interest, and establish a close teacher-children relationship.

The interview data unveiled teachers' belief of many benefits of their high level of involvement in play. A few teachers held the view that they prefer to step back and provide the opportunity for children themselves to lead and control play as they concern that their participation may interrupt children's play, distract their attention and destroy their improvisation. However, it appears that most teachers share a similar view that they believe their active involvement may enhance children's learning through play. They are more likely to get involved in play by 'showing their strong curiosity and interest', 'competing with children', 'acting as a role within the play', and 'asking questions' to 'communicate', with children and guide their learning. It is their commonly shared view that only with teachers' involvement and interaction with children in play, the learning outcomes of play could be realized.

4.2 Teachers' roles in play in practice

However, findings from observation showed that teachers play more roles in practice than they reported. It appears that the teachers from different kindergartens, which adopted different educational approaches, interpret their roles differently in practice. The similarity between their roles in play is that all the teachers from the three kindergartens play multiple roles in play. These roles include play planner, supporter, facilitator, monitor, co-player, organizer, mediator, and uninvolved role.

The five roles teachers reported in interview were evident in classroom observation. However, in teachers' interview, the roles of mediator, organizer and uninvolved were not mentioned by them but identified in their practice.

As mediators, the teachers not only resolve conflicts and disputes between children, but also model for them the problem-solving abilities and interpersonal skills of interacting with peers. In the observation, mediator is also a very important role that played frequently by the teachers. In some of the situations, children fight over materials and roles in play, the teachers worked as mediators by offering new accessories or by suggesting alternatives for disputed roles.

As organizers, teachers normally control the whole play process. For example, they may start with lining up children to the play area, then introduce them about the play, and demonstrate how to play. The teachers further explain that it is their essential responsibility to 'teach children how to play', 'make sure that all the children are involved in play', and 'control the pace of the play'.

Moreover, in the observation, some teachers did not involve in children's play. They neither participated in nor observed children's play. Instead, they sometimes prepared paper works including materials which needed to be distributed to parents or made monthly teaching plans and termly working reviews or prepared teaching aids or materials for the next bout of formal teaching activities.

4.3 Teacher-child interactions in play

Findings of observation reveals that during play, the teachers initiate more interactions than individual children do and they are more often ignore or have no response to child-initiated interactions than children response to teacher-initiated interactions.

Nine intentions are identified to explain teacher-initiated interactions, including directing and guiding a child's play and learning; managing a child's behaviors; taking care of a child; asking a child for help; playing with a child; offering help and support; asking for information; praising and encouraging a child; and comforting a child.

Eight intentions of child-initiated interactions are also identified from the observation data, which include asking for teacher's attention; telling on someone who broke rules; involving a teacher in play; asking for teacher's help; stating and expressing personal ideas; requesting; asking for information and permission; and expressing one's emotion.

By analyzing teacher-child interactions in play, it seems that the teachers are less sensitive to interactions than children do, and they assume more power in interaction with children. The teacher-initiated interactions reflect a prevalent desire of teachers to direct children's learning in play, manage their behavior to control risk and ensure their physical safety. From the teacher-initiated interactions, it seems that the teachers prefer to guide children directly rather than questioning, challenging

and communicating with children to give them room to fortify their competence.

It appears that risk control is the key motivation of teacher-initiated interactions as the teachers pay great attention to manage the children's behavior, organize them and make them in order to prevent children from potential dangers. However, the strong desire of the teachers to take care of children and protect them from hidden dangers leads to their frequent interruption of children's play, thus influences children's level of concentration and hinders children to explore and take adventures.

Compared to the teacher-initiated interactions, the child-initiated interactions show that a strong desire of children is to be considered as important and competent individuals since most of child-initiated interactions is to draw teachers' attention. Findings imply that the teachers show their understanding of children's need in this aspect as they positively response to all the child-initiated interactions which aim to ask for teachers' attention. Moreover, the teachers actively initiate interaction to praise and encourage children in play.

Findings also reveal that children want to make the teachers understand that they know the right things to do as the second most of child-initiated interactions aim to inform the teachers that someone break the class conventions or play rules. However, the teachers tend to ignore those interactions which children initiate to tell on peers. The children and the teachers show an agreement on understanding of the multiple roles of teachers in play. However, the emotional communication is not obvious in teacher-child interactions in play.

5. Conclusion

The current study reveals Chinese early childhood practitioners' perceptions and practice of their involvement in children's play. It provides the voice of Chinese kindergarten teachers concerning their roles in play and the intentions of their interactions with children during playtime. It shows that the teachers from different kindergartens interpreted their roles in children's play differently. It seems that compared to the private-owned and government-run kindergartens, the 'elementary error' tends to be a major concern of the teachers in the community-run kindergarten as their foci of their role and interactions with children in play emphasize more on achieving learning outcomes. In contrary to the community-run kindergarten, the 'early childhood error' is more likely to be the main concern of teachers in the private-owned and public kindergartens, as they stress more on preparing a stimulating environment for the children but then standing back. They are less likely to follow up with guidance, scaffolding interactions with the children

than their colleagues in the community-run kindergarten.

The finding also suggest that the teachers' roles and teacher-child interactions in play are largely determined by the play settings as teachers show quite different interaction patterns in various play activities.

From the roles that teachers perceived and employed in children's play, the researcher argue that in general, the participating teachers' roles still present some didactic features. Through detailed planning, organizing, and monitoring, teachers exercise their control in children's play. They pay more attention to 'teach children how to play', make sure children 'play on the right track', and use play to fulfill specific learning objectives, in their practice, most play are structured, and children have less opportunity to be empowered to play freely by themselves. Although the didactic features are evident in observation, one thing highlighted by the teachers in the current research is that the pattern of teacher-child interactions is changing from an inclination teacher-child relationship to a parallel relationship.

Although the teachers believed that a high level of their involvement in play could contribute to children's learning through play, the contents of the teacher-child interactions are distributed on managing behaviours; taking care; asking for help; playing; asking for information; praising, encouraging; and comforting which are not necessarily relate to play. It seems that those kind of teacher-initiated interactions are less likely to be considered as quality guidance which may effectively scaffold learning in play. Therefore, this research suggests that teacher-child interactions in play in the participating Chinese kindergartens are less likely to scaffold children's learning.

Moreover, even though the teachers initiate some interactions to directing, guiding, and offering help to children during play, the interactions between individual teacher and individual child normally take several turns and are not filled with inspiring and stimulating contents. In play, teachers preferred to guide children directly, such as giving them direct instructions or information of what to do and to learn, rather than questioning, challenging, inspiring and communicating with children, and let them to explore freely to enhance their competence.

The current research reveals that there is a tension between teachers' concerns and children's need in play. It shows that teachers' main concerns in play involve taking care of children's body and health, controlling risk and ensuring physical safety which are not necessarily related to play itself. In these interactions, teachers keep interrupting and disturbing children when they are playing. However, their concerns are likely to conflict with children's need of exploring and engrossing in play without

disturbing, and playing in the ways they want which may lead to mess of their body and cloths. In this sense, some of teacher-initiated interactions are inappropriate and may influence the quality of play.

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