Abstract

Research Findings: Western ideas and progressive pedagogies have been introduced to China (including Shenzhen), Hong Kong, and Singapore to replace Chinese traditional pedagogy. But these "imported" ideas are not congruent with traditional Chinese culture thus have encountered resistance from Chinese teachers. The present study observed and analyzed 18 early childhood classrooms in the three localities and questioned the class teachers about their respective teaching practices, to see how those ideas were actually turned into practice. Whole-class direct instruction was found to be the predominant Chinese pedagogical mode. It indicated that Chinese traditional pedagogy was still dominating those Chinese preschool classrooms. Slight societal differences in classroom practice were also found, reflecting the spectrum of openness and "westernization" of the three cities.

Practice or Policy: The findings reflect that we should adapt rather than adopt those pedagogical innovations developed in other sociocultural milieu, as different societies have different social, cultural, and educational traditions. Cultural appropriateness should be seriously considered when choosing the pedagogies to be adapted. And the influences from the culture, language, teachers, parents, resources available, and the prevailing education system should also be taken into consideration when planning for pedagogical reforms.

Adapting Western Pedagogies into Chinese Literacy Instruction: Case Studies of

Hong Kong, Shenzhen and Singapore Preschools

There is a trend around the world to emulate American culture and quality

standards in many respects including early childhood education (Perry, 2001; Rogoff,

2003; Tobin, 2007). Some of these adoptions are constructive, whereas others are

needless or even inappropriate, as the pedagogies or programs favoured in one context

might not be suitable in others (Tobin, 2007). It is not rare that these "imported" ideas

and practices might be in conflict with those indigenous cultures, beliefs, education

systems and languages (Rogoff, 2003; Tobin, 2007). For example, Chinese parents

with a Confucian heritage highly value discipline, self-control, hardworking, early

learning and academic achievement and Chinese language has a very demanding

orthography to learn (Li, Corrie & Wong, 2008; Li & Rao, 2000, 2005). These

differences are so prominent that demand a very careful consideration of local culture

and tradition when incorporating western pedagogies into Chinese classrooms.

Further, cultural differences have been found very vital in shaping the norms of

teaching and learning (Tobin, 2007) as well as the trajectories of literacy development

in the early years (Aram & Korat, 2010). All these new understandings urged

systematic reviews and empirical studies of the phenomenon of adopting or adapting

western pedagogies into Chinese societies. The present study, thus, sets out to

investigate how western pedagogies are adopted or adapted and how early literacy is

actually taught in three Chinese cities: monolingual Shenzhen, trilingual Hong Kong,

and multilingual Singapore. We specifically examined pedagogical practices of early

literacy in a number of carefully selected classrooms. As the first endeavour to

compare a range of Chinese classrooms with contrasting socio-lingual environments,

this study will provide empirical evidence to reflect on the importation of educational

ideas from one context into another, which is likely to become even more pronounced in this global era.

Traditional Chinese Pedagogy versus Western Pedagogy

Pedagogy is the method and practice of teaching (New Oxford English Dictionary, 2009), which generally refers to the strategies or style of instruction. There is no uniformed western pedagogy in the literature. Western pedagogy in this paper refers to those developed and used widely in 'western' countries (relative to China and Asia) that emphasizes children's individuality and initiated activities, and learning through play. It prefers child-centered approach (teaching philosophy), integrated teaching (teaching strategy), inquiry-based learning and learning through play (learning approach), small class or group learning (classroom organization), child-initiated and process-oriented activities (teaching activities), and so on. The Project Approach, Reggio Emilia, High/Scope, and emergent literacy are a few well-known examples of this kind of pedagogy/program. Contrary to them, traditional Chinese pedagogy in ECE often emphasizes conformity, discipline, behavioural control and academic achievement (Rao, Ng, & Pearson, 2010). It features teacher-directed approach (teaching philosophy), direct instruction and subject teaching (teaching strategy), content-based learning and learning through exercising (learning approach), whole class teaching (classroom organization), achievement-oriented and teacher-directed activities (teaching activities) and so on. Most classroom activities are carried out in whole class, with all children involved in the same activity (Pearson & Rao, 2003).

The central difference between these two approaches lies in the emphasis that each philosophy places on the children's freedom with respect to their learning initiatives, and the nature of the teacher's control over them (Tzuo, 2007). The child-

centered western pedagogy focuses more on the importance of children's individual interests and their freedom to create their own learning through choosing from various classroom activities. In contrast, teacher-directed Chinese pedagogy places more stress on the teacher's control over children's exploration of learning.

Pedagogical reforms have recently been conducted in many Chinese societies to incorporate the child-centred western pedagogy into early childhood classrooms. Among these societies, Hong Kong, Shenzhen, and Singapore are comparable in sociolinguistic and economic-geographic aspects (please refer to Li & Rao, 2000, 2005, for more details). Since the turn of the new millennium, similar reforms have been conducted in all three societies (Li & Rao, 2005; Liu & Feng, 2005; Rao & Li, 2009). In China, reforms of early childhood pedagogy and curriculum have been facilitated through issuing the *Guidance for Kindergarten Education* (GOC, 2001). In order to bridge the gap between borrowed Western ideas and traditional Chinese practice in preschools, the document provides detailed suggestions about the content of five learning domains (health, language, society, science and art) and advocates integrated theme-based teaching. Various imported pedagogies and programs, including the Montessori Method, project approach, Reggio Emilia, and High/Scope have been highly promoted in China. Kindergarten teachers are, thus, in a transitional period of implementing Western pedagogies and amending current approaches to accommodate new innovations in curriculum (Liu & Feng, 2005). Early childhood education in Shenzhen, a city in mainland China neighbouring Hong Kong, is going through such a transitional period.

In Hong Kong, child-centred approach, integrated curriculum, and all-round development have been advocated since the 1990s. To stop teachers from overusing 'inappropriate' teaching skills (judged based on the favoured European-American

pedagogies) in Chinese classrooms, the educational authorities issued a list of "Do's and Don'ts" (Education Department, 1999). The list reflects the Hong Kong context: don't ask children in nursery class (aged three to four years) to write; don't ask children to do mechanical copying exercises; and don't adopt a one-way, lecturing form of teaching. Later, the *Guide to the Pre-Primary Curriculum* (Education Department, 2006) was issued to incorporate the best Western pedagogies into practices (i.e. child-centred approach, project approach, whole language approach).

Singapore launched a new round of educational reforms at the turn of the millennium targeting teaching literacy as a vehicle for learning in the everyday classroom (Luke, Freebody, Shun, & Gopinathan, 2005). Guidelines on pre-school English and Chinese curricula were issued in 2005 to establish the six '*iTeach*' principles for early childhood education: (i) integrated learning; (T) teachers as supporters of learning; (e) engaging children in learning through play; (a) ample opportunities for interaction; (c) children as active learners; and (h) holistic development. Accordingly, some Western pedagogical approaches such as whole language approach, project approach, and Reggio Emilia have been advocated in Singapore.

Western Pedagogies in Chinese Classrooms

As shown in the above review, a remarkable paradigm shift from traditional Chinese pedagogy to Western pedagogy has occurred in the ECE reforms in China, Hong Kong, and Singapore (Ng & Rao, 2008; Rao & Li, 2009; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). Most of the recommended practices are rooted in Western views of early pedagogy and many are not congruent with traditional Chinese beliefs about early learning. With little guidance about how to best incorporate Western ideas into their daily teaching practices, Chinese teachers found many challenges and difficulties in directly

adopting these borrowed approaches (Cheng, 2001; Li, 2002; Li & Li, 2003; Liu & Feng, 2005; Zhu & Zhang, 2008).

Cheng (2006) interviewed three Hong Kong kindergarten teachers who had tried adopting High/Scope and project approaches and found that their school-based pedagogical reforms were not successful. She highlighted the difficulties of making pedagogical shifts and took stock of local contextual constraints: the examination-oriented education system, parental expectation of academic achievement, the tradition of direct instruction and rote learning, and the overloaded curriculum. These constraints are difficult—if not impossible—to eliminate in Hong Kong just by using pedagogical alterations (Cheng, 2006). Thus, researchers urge reflection on how to incorporate the 'new' approaches into Chinese societies (Li, 2002) and what are the factors impeding the process (Hu, 2002).

In Hong Kong, for example, Western pedagogical models such as High/Scope, Project Approach and Reggio Emilia have been adopted with great passion by local preschools (Rao, Ng, & Pearson, 2010). However, classroom observations found that the Project Approach was transformed into a kind of teacher-directed "project work" rather than a child-centered exploration (Li, 2002; Rao, Ng, & Pearson, 2010). This finding suggests that as long as there is a discrepancy between the tenets of these Western pedagogies and those of traditional Chinese pedagogy, the efforts of transplanting or direct adopting will not be successful; instead, adapting or localized implementation might be more workable.

In fact, there are many discrepancies between Western and Chinese pedagogies regarding their ideas about teaching philosophy, teacher-student relationships, the learning strategies, good student characteristics, and teacher qualities (Hu, 2002; Wong, 2008; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). And these pedagogical differences have been

shaped by the distinct cultural values and social beliefs which might have their own definitions of the best teaching practice (Wong, 2008). And the socio-contextual factors have further constrained the adaption of Western practices: overcrowded and cramped classrooms, very large class sizes, untrained teachers, unrealistic parental expectations (of early trilingual education) , exam-oriented systems, and social competition for survival arising from commercialization pressures (Hu, 2002; Li et al., 2008; Tang & Maxwell, 2007). All these influences have made the introduction of Western methods not as straightforward in Chinese societies as many reformers presumed (Li, 2007a; Rao et al., 2009; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). Thus, a number of researchers have called for thorough examination of the 'westernized reforms' in Chinese societies (Lee & Tseng, 2008; Li, 2002; Tobin, 2007; Zhu & Zhang, 2008).

Meanwhile, many Western educators have also begun to rethink their pedagogies and to ponder the value of direct instruction in early literacy learning (Evans, Shaw, & Bell, 2000; Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2002; Whitehurst, 2001). The most effective early pedagogy is now defined as a blend of direct instruction and a holistic, independent learning approach (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Muttock, Gilden, & Bell, 2002). This is especially true in Chinese contexts (Li et al., 2008; Tan, Spinks, Eden, Perfetti, & Siok, 2005) where classroom practice is intensely influenced by Chinese traditions alongside distinctive features of Chinese language learning. McBride-Chang (2004) found that children's learning of reading skills was more rapid when they received direct instruction; and, Tan et al., (2005) found that Chinese reading development profited from writing skills training, rote learning, and copying exercises. However, McBride-Chang (2004) concluded that it is hard to draw general conclusions about the effectiveness of different Chinese literacy pedagogies as language, character script, and teaching systems vary across Chinese societal groups. It is suggested that

classroom-based studies of varying Chinese contexts are urgently needed if the relative effectiveness of different pedagogies are to be evaluated.

Therefore, the present study sets out to investigate actual practices in three Chinese societies that have different socio-lingual and educational contexts. These three cities form a spectrum of cultural openness and 'westernization' (from the most open Singapore to the least Shenzhen), although they share the same 'westernized reform' in early childhood education (Li, 2007a). The case study of these three societies provides an ideal opportunity for understanding the complicated dynamics involved in assimilating or adapting Western ideas into traditional Chinese classrooms. Our specific research questions for this study were: (1) how is Chinese literacy taught in early childhood classrooms in Shenzhen, Hong Kong and Singapore? And (2) how were Western pedagogies that have been promoted through curriculum reform in all three cities actually turned into practice?

<div align="center">Method</div>

Sample

Stratified random sampling was applied to recruit three kindergartens catering to middle-class families located in three representative communities in Hong Kong (*Lam Tin, Sheung Shui,* and *Tsueng Kwan O*); Shenzhen (*Futian, Luohu,* and *Nanshan*); and Singapore (*Tampines, Jurang West* and *Woodlands*). One kindergarten class of 4-year-olds (K2) and one of 5-year-olds (K3) were randomly selected from each participating school so that 6 classes were selected in each society, resulting in 18 classes in all.

The 18 Chinese teachers of the participating classes were interviewed individually after their teaching practice were observed and videotaped for a full week, with the focus being on literacy teaching and teacher-child interactions. The Hong Kong teachers had completed Year 11; the Shenzhen teacher had completed Year 15; and the

Singapore teachers had completed Year 13 of formal education. This difference in educational level is not associated with sampling bias but reflects societal differences in teacher qualifications in Chinese regions (Li & Rao, 2005). Statistically significant differences, $F (1, 3) = 12.1, p < .01$, were found in terms of years of teaching experience among the teachers from Hong Kong (range: 6-20 years; Mean = 12), Shenzhen (range: 1-15 years; Mean = 7.5), and Singapore (range: 1-15 years; Mean = 9.5). In effect, the Hong Kong teachers were less well educated but more experienced than their counterparts in Shenzhen and Singapore.

Measures

Videotaped classroom observations. Classroom observations were conducted in the participating classes for one week in the first semester. A familiarization period was scheduled before formal videotaping to enable the teacher and young children to adjust to the presence of the camera and observer. Each classroom was observed for a maximum of three hours over the course of the observation day, beginning at the start of the school day and focusing on instruction time. The entire observation lasted approximately 15 hours for each class, resulting in a total of 270 observation hours with an equal number from K2 (four-year-olds class) and K3 (five-year-olds class) classrooms.

Surveys. All the participating teachers completed the *Classroom Literacy Environment Index* (CLEI) (Li & Rao, 2005) to report and summarize their beliefs and practices related to Chinese literacy pedagogy. The CLEI consists of 27 questions that ascertain teachers' beliefs and practices about Chinese reading, classroom literacy activities, reading resources, and teaching strategies. Each item is rated on a 5-point scale, developed and modified for studying in Beijing, Hong Kong and Singapore (Li & Rao, 2005). Teachers completed the questionnaire after the videotaped lesson to

help assemble information on lesson planning and to identify atypical events during videotaping.

Interviews. All the Chinese teachers were interviewed individually after the 15-hour videotaping of their classes. Semi-structured interview protocols were developed using responses to questionnaire items as prompts and the observational reports to elicit thinking and to focus on reflection. The interview data could provide insights into the relationship between teachers' thinking and their classroom practice and could help establish a triangulation of multiple data resources. The interviewer used the observational reports as stimuli for post hoc recall of associated feelings and thoughts because: (1) the report could show the whole picture of their teaching; (2) the limited interview time did not allow us to replay the videotapes; and, (3) it was technically difficult to use another digital video camera (DV) while replaying the videotapes with a DV.

Data management

Observational data. The videotaped observations were transcribed and analyzed using a coding scheme (see the appendix) based on the systems for Chinese literacy classroom observation developed by Liu, Kotov, Rahim, and Goh (2005) and Wu, Li, and Anderson (1999). The scheme is a comprehensive framework allowing researchers to analyze pedagogical practice in Chinese language classrooms. To evaluate whether the coding system was realistic and exhaustive, it was piloted with two cases and minor modifications were made.

The research assistants responsible for data coding had majored in psychology and practiced using the coding system until an inter-observer agreement of 94% was obtained. The *Observer XT* (www.noldus.com) was used to note the time duration or occurring frequency of classroom activities such as classroom organization, teaching

strategies, teacher talk, and teacher-students interactions.

Survey and interview data. The survey data were analyzed using SPSS, and the recorded interviews were also transcribed and analyzed. NVivo 8 (http://www.qsrinternational.com) was used for data coding and codes for the CLEI were applied to the text. The findings generated from the interview data were used as a cross-check against the survey and observational data. Coherence and consistencies at a high level were present in the participants' responses in the survey and interviews.

Results

Quantitative as well as qualitative anayses were conducted on the 270-hour observational data to understand how Chinese literacy was taught and how Western pedagogies were turned into pracice, respectively. The quantitative analysis could establish some broader patterns of the teaching approaches and curriculum models used in these classrooms. Qualitative analysis of the video data helps provide a more nuanced picture of these classroom practices. As shown in Table 1, Chi-square with Fisher's exact tests found statistically significant societal differences on 17 classroom variables, whereas no significant differences were found on the other 31 variables. This comparison reveals more pedagogical similarities than differences in the three localities. The following section presents the common pattern found in the three societies, and a summary of the case studies of three selected classrooms. We will then discuss how the results answer each of our research questions in the Discussion section.

Quantitative Analysis of Chinese Literacy Classrooms

To understand pedagogical similarities and to examine how the western pedagogies were actually turned into practice, we further analyzed the performance of 18 early childhood classrooms in classroom organization, teaching strategies, teacher-

student interaction, teacher talk, learning outcome, and teaching aids.

Classroom Organization. Whole class teaching was the most frequently used mode in Hong Kong (54.9%), Shenzhen (68.6%), and Singapore (91.1%); small-group teaching was the second choice. Some instructional time was spent on large group (8-15 students) teaching in Hong Kong (14.5%) and Shenzhen (9.3%), but very little time was spent on individual and paired teaching.

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Insert Table 1 about here

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Teaching strategies. Teacher-directed explicit instruction was the prevailing teaching strategy in the Chinese classrooms (Hong Kong: 59.8 %; Shenzhen: 63.5%; Singapore: 73.5%). The most frequently observed teaching behaviours were: (1) questioning (Hong Kong: 21.6%; Shenzhen: 35.5%; Singapore: 43.9%); (2) lecturing (Hong Kong: 35.4%; Shenzhen: 28%; Singapore: 38.4%); and (3) managing (Hong Kong: 39.1%; Shenzhen: 34.3%; Singapore: 16.9%).

Teacher-student interaction. Over half of the teacher-student interactions occurred in whole-class mode (Hong Kong: 52.7 %; Shenzhen: 55.9%; Singapore: 76.4 %). Interaction with individuals occurred less frequently (Hong Kong: 36.7%; Shenzhen: 23.9%; Singapore: 20.2%). Group-based interaction was the third interaction mode (Hong Kong: 8.9%; Shenzhen: 13.4%; Singapore: 3.3%).

Teacher's feedback. Neutral feedback was the most frequently used technique to probe children's thinking and learning (Hong Kong: 82.3%; Shenzhen: 55.9%; Singapore: 79.3%). Positive feedback was also evident (Hong Kong: 17.6%; Shenzhen: 42.6%; Singapore: 19.9%), while negative feedback was rarely used (Hong Kong: 0.1%; Shenzhen: 1.5%; Singapore: 0.8%).

Teacher talk. The majority of teacher talk was about curriculum and learning content (Hong Kong, 86.9%; Shenzhen, 86.3%; Singapore, 90.4%). Only 6.7% of the talk time was about procedures and only 5% was spent on discipline (see Table 1). The foci of instruction were commonly on language knowledge (Hong Kong: 56.5%; Shenzhen: 47.5%; Singapore: 18.9%); content knowledge (Hong Kong: 25.7%; Shenzhen: 37.8%; Singapore: 32.4%); and theme-related knowledge (Hong Kong: 17.8%; Shenzhen: 20.1%; Singapore: 42.9%).

Learning outcomes. Short oral answers were the most common response from the children (Hong Kong: 69.8%; Shenzhen: 54.5%; Singapore: 73.5%), and sustained oral text was also fairly common (Hong Kong: 22.4%; Shenzhen: 40.3%; Singapore: 21%). Short written answers (Hong Kong: 3.6%; Shenzhen: 0; Singapore: 1.3%) and "others" such as extended theme-related activities (Hong Kong: 3.6%; Shenzhen: 4.3%; Singapore: 3.5%) were not frequently used.

Teaching aids. The most frequently used teaching materials included big books, pictures, flashcards, puppets, and toys related to themes and topics (Hong Kong: 66.4%; Shenzhen: 44.3%; Singapore: 62.2%). Textbooks were used in Singapore (23.7%) and Shenzhen (17.8%); chalk/whiteboard (Hong Kong: 6.2%; Shenzhen: 15.5%; Singapore: 7.2%); worksheets (Hong Kong: 9.5%; Shenzhen: 6.9%; Singapore: 0.7%); and pencils and paper (Hong Kong: 13%; Shenzhen: 3.3%; Singapore: 6.2%) were also used. PowerPoint presentations and overhead projectors were seldom used.

The above findings described a common pattern of Chinese literacy classroom: whole class teaching, teacher-directed explicit instruction, teacher's talk focusing on curriculum, product-oriented learning, and so on. According to our definition in this paper, this pattern could be regarded as the traditional Chinese pedagogy.

Qualitative Analysis of Chinese Literacy Classrooms

Qualitative analysis of the video data found that two kindergartens in Hong Kong employed the Story Approach to Integrated Learning (SAIL) (Li, 2007b) to teach Chinese literacy; one used theme-based approach. In Shenzhen, all the three kindergartens used the theme/unit approach. In Singapore, two kindergartens used the theme-based approach and one was trying the project approaches to promote emergent literacy. The observations indicated that, although a similar pattern of theme-based and teacher-directed literacy teaching was seen in the three localities, societal differences were found in the teaching methods the teachers had selected. Practice in Singapore was most western-like and that in Shenzhen, the least. The following excerpts from transcripts of video observations in three K3 classes of the same week provide an illustration of such societal differences.

Case 1: Story Approach to Integrated Learning (SAIL).

Scenario: Class K3 (5-6 years), Hong Kong Kindergarten # 3. Duration: 32 minutes. The children sit in the chair while the teacher (T2) stands beside the screen. The PowerPoint of the story, *The Lion's Hair*, is shown on the screen.

T2: Hello, children! Today I will read a very interesting story to you.

[The cover page of the story is shown on the screen. The teacher points at the title using the pointer, and reads the story aloud, slide by slide.]

T2: [after completing the reading] *Could you tell me the name of this story?*

All: *The Lion's Hair!*

T2: *What is it talking about? S3, could you tell us?*

S3: *The lion had thick hair before. But one day his hair was burned so he has no hair.*

T2: *What happened next? S5, could you help us?*

S5: *Later, the crocodile helped the lion with his tears.*

T2: *What was the result?*

All: *Lion's hair has grown long.*

T2: *Great! Now could we read aloud the whole story?* [All: Yes!] *Do you have confidence?* [All: Yes!]

[The students read aloud the story on the screen.]

T2: *Very good! Which animal in the story is your most favorite? Now let's do   a vote!*

[The teaching assistant sticks a chart on the blackboard, which presents the Chinese names of all the animals in the story. The children take a sticker as the vote and come up to the blackboard one by one to choose their favorite character. The teacher and teaching assistant count the votes.]

T2: *Let's look at it! The election result is: our most favorite animal is---*

All: *Crocodile!*

T2: *Yes! How many votes has he got?*

All: *11 votes!*

T2: *Kids! This story tells us, although he looks very ugly, the crocodile likes very much to help others. Without his tears, the Lion could not get his hair back. If you are willing to help others, you will be welcome. Right?*

SAIL is a Hong Kong style narrative curriculum, as well as pedagogy, which is widely used by local kindergartens (Li, 2007b). Every theme starts with a special story which provides a meaningful learning context and interesting storyline to help integrate the various learning content and activities into a story journey. Each story provides an open framework to maximize teacher and children engagement in the theme-based exploration. The vote result in this case indicates that the young children

have some naïve but sensible value judgments about the characters, and the teacher

respects children's decisions although the activity is still teacher-directed.

Nevertheless, the above excerpt shows a scenario of whole class teaching, direct

instruction, content-based learning and teacher-directed activities and so on, which is

still a good example of traditional Chinese pedagogy.

Case 2: Big-book Approach to Direct Instruction.

Scenario: Class K3 (5-6 years), Shenzhen Kindergarten # 2. Duration: 33

minutes. The children sit in the chair while the teacher (T2) sits in the front, holding a

big book and facing the children.

T2: *Look at the cover of this book! What is the topic?*

All: *Birthday Balloon*. [The students read aloud the title of the book]

T2: *Yes! It is about birthday and balloon*.

S1: *Birthday present!*

T2: *How did you know? You didn't raise your hands. I will invite those who*

raised their hands. S2, Tell me whose birthday it is!

S2: *The mouse's birthday!*

T2: *Look at this! [*All: *Front cover!]And this?*[All: *Back cover!] And this?* [All:

Head page!]

T2: *Yes, what is the necessary information on the head page? Tell me! Hands up!*

S3!

S3: *Birthday Balloon.*

T2: *You mean the title of the book. Yes, right. And more? S4!*

S4: *The name of the author.*

T2: *Very good! Yes, the author. And more? S5！*

S5: *The name of the company who made this book.*

T2: *It is called "Publisher"! Look at here! It says "All rights reserved". It means that they own the copyright. If somebody makes illegal copy, they must be punished. Ok, let's get to know the character of this story. The first one is—*

Ss: *Kangaroo!*

[The teacher then goes through the story book, page by page, with many questions and explanations. The students follow the teacher and answer all her questions, in large group, with occasional hot discussion about some uncertain answers.]

This excerpt shows that the teacher is teaching reading skills through a big-book. Although the teacher is successful in involving all the children in question-and-answer interactions and the literacy learning activities, it is nevertheless using traditional Chinese pedagogy, as the activities in the above scenario are carried out in whole class, with all the children answering the same questions and being involved in the same activity directed by the teacher. The teacher is transmitting the literacy knowledge to the whole class through direct instruction and questioning.

Case 3: Project approach and emergent literacy.

Scenario: Class K3 (5-6 years), Singapore Kindergarten # 3. Duration: 56 minutes. The children sit in rows on the floor. The teacher (T5) sits beside the whiteboard, facing the children.

T5: *Today we will talk about the story of "seeds". There are many kinds of seeds. Most of the fruits we eat have seeds. You can eat them, plant them, and even cook them. For example, some beans are food. There are many stories about seeds. So, our project today is to make your own storybook about seeds. You can work individually or in pairs to work out a storybook. First, you need to discuss with your group mate to conceive your story of seeds. Second, you need to draw the story on the*

paper. Third, I will come to help you write down the Chinese words for the storybook. Alright? Please come to pick up white papers. No more than two kids in one group, please.

[The children come up to take the papers and pencils and go to work in groups. The teacher walks around to help the children work on their projects. Most of the children are talking about their stories. Two boys go to toilet.]

T5: [20 minutes later, the teacher starts to work with a girl who has completed her storybook.] *S11, please tell me your story and let me write it down for you. Hmm, let's start from this picture.*

S11: *I am an apple seed. My home is in a garden.*

T5: *I am an apple seed. My home is in an Australian garden.*

S11: *My home is in an Australian garden.*

T5: *And then?* [The teacher writes the Chinese words for the girl.]

[During the following 11 minutes, the teacher helps the girl to write and reorganize her own story about an apple seed. The teacher reads aloud the entire story to the girl, who seems very happy with the work co-authored by her Chinese teacher.]

This excerpt indicates that the teacher is using project approach to conduct emergent literacy activities, in a teacher-directed way. Although time-consuming, the children work out their own story books with the teacher's help. But, the teacher is soon tired as she has to help 18 children to complete 10 storybooks within an hour. It is important to note that this project was initiated, planned, implemented, and completed by the Chinese teacher. This is not in line with the definition by Katz and Chard (1989): a project is an in-depth investigation of a topic which is posed either by the children, the teacher, or the teacher working with the children. The key feature of a project is that it is a research effort deliberately focused on finding answers to

questions about a topic and undertaken by a group of children within a class. No student research efforts could be found in this teacher-directed, content-based, product-oriented and whole-class involved learning activity. Instead, a fusion of western pedagogy (project approach) and traditional Chinese pedagogy (all children involved in the same activity directed by teacher) is found in this scenario.

In summary, qualitative studies found that Hong Kong and Singapore teachers used SAIL, story approach, and project approach, whereas Shenzhen teachers were very comfortably conducting the direct teaching. Although some innovations were observed in their teaching, a common pattern was also found in the qualitative analyses: whole-class teaching, teacher-directed activities, product-oriented learning, and more didactic teaching. This indicated that traditional Chinese pedagogy was still evident in their classrooms.

Teachers Reported Practice

There were more similarities than differences in teachers' reported practices across the three locations. All of the teachers said they taught 3- and 4- year-olds to read Chinese characters. Hong Kong and Singapore teachers usually taught writing skills to 4-year-olds. The children in Shenzhen learned to write when they were five years old, although this is officially prohibited by the educational authorities (Li & Rao, 2005). The major literacy teaching activities reported were direct teaching of Chinese characters (Hong Kong, Shenzhen, Singapore); copying exercise (Hong Kong, Singapore); and reading aloud (Hong Kong, Shenzhen). Chinese nursery rhymes and storybooks were the most frequently used learning materials used by all the teachers in Hong Kong, Shenzhen and Singapore. All the teachers from Hong Kong and half from Shenzhen had teaching plans and used specific teaching approaches, whereas one-third of Singapore teachers (33%) planned their Chinese

teaching and the others used the project approach and emerging curriculum.

Again, this survey found that Hong Kong and Singapore teachers used the theme/SAIL and TPR/project approach to teach Chinese literacy, respectively, whereas Shenzhen teachers preferred theme-based direct teaching. This finding was verified by the interview of the 18 Chinese teachers. It found that theme-based approach, whole language approach, project approach, TPR approach were widely used in Singapore; SAIL, theme-based integrated teaching, emergent literacy, project approach were implemented in Hong Kong; and the Listen-and-Play approach, shared-reading approach, and theme-based integrated teaching were used in Shenzhen. These reported practices are, by and large, the traditional Chinese pedagogy, with some elements borrowed from the western pedagogies.

Discussion

The present study found a common pattern of Chinese literacy pedagogy in Hong Kong, Shenzhen and Singapore preschools through quantitative and qualitative analysis. Some Western pedagogies were also found in the classrooms observed. This section will discuss how these results could answer the two research questions that guided the present study.

How Chinese Literacy Were Taught in the Preschools

A common pattern of Chinese literacy pedagogy was found in the preschool classrooms: whole class theme-based teaching predominated, with lots of direct instruction, lecturing, and questioning. Teacher's talk centred on curriculum content, using theme and students' progress as guidelines to instruction. Grouping of students into ability was absent; there was little student indiscipline in lessons, and short oral answers were the order of the day. The teachers' comments in interview reflected their priorities in teaching practice: the early teaching of Chinese reading and writing

(Shenzhen teachers also wanted this); the use of direct instruction; the regular setting of copying exercises; and the high incidence of choral reading aloud. The teachers kept to specific teaching approaches and lesson plans and set homework that would involve parents. Similar practices were reported in other primary literacy classrooms in Mainland China (Wu et al., 1999) and in Singapore (Liu et al., 2005) and in preschool mathematic classrooms in Hong Kong (Rao et al., 2009). Although progressive ideas and a balanced approach have been advocated and were known to the Chinese practitioners, the fact remains that in all three locations, the teachers implemented traditional teaching methods, to varying degrees.

Why is the traditional Chinese pedagogy dominating the preschool classrooms despite the concerted efforts in ECE policy and reform that promoting western pedagogies and curricula? This could be explained with the framework derived from Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory. First, at the macrosystem level, Confucianism is the cornerstone of Chinese culture and is exerted on the thinking, learning and teaching life of Chinese people. Confucianism emphasizes imposing in young children a sense of conformity, discipline, self-control, love of hard work, and academic achievement (Rao, Ng, & Pearson, 2010). This is why Chinese parents traditionally have high expectations on children's early learning and academic achievement (Li & Rao, 2000). The influence of this culture has been noted by Ng and Rao (2008) and Pearson and Rao (2006) and was clearly apparent in the present study. Furthermore, such culture and values are so omnipresent that, although the teachers said they had accepted the ideological and philosophical bases of Western reading pedagogy, these are overridden by Confucian views ingrained within them by society itself (Hu, 2002; Wang & Spodek, 2000; Zhu & Wang, 2005).

Second, at microsystem level, the teaching of Chinese literacy is profoundly

shaped by the psycholinguistic features of the Chinese language itself. Since Chinese language features logographic characters denoting meaning rather than phonology, teaching for its mastery needs a different pedagogy. For instance, Tan et al., (2005) claim that Chinese reading development depends to a large extent on writing skills training. They suggest two interacting mechanisms to explain the central role of logograph writing: the first being orthographic awareness, which facilitates the development of coherent, effective links among visual symbols, phonology, and semantics; the second involves the establishment of motor programs that lead to the formation of long-term motor memory images of individual Chinese characters. These two mechanisms both require large amounts of rote learning and copying exercises. The need for such intensive practice helps explain why the preschool teachers were reluctant to abandon direct instruction, rote learning, copying exercises, and homework. Such teacher-directed activities are considered to be crucial for the successful learning of Chinese reading, but it is important to note that they can still be accommodated within teaching methods that are child-initiated and offer students opportunities for a degree of self-directed learning.

Third, the finding of a common teaching practice pattern across all three locations reflects a sense within teachers that there are few realistic alternatives available given the existing social climate and teaching situation. Class sizes are large; pre-determined classroom layouts place the teacher in front of the children; there is an examination-oriented system; and parental expectations and demands are very high (Hu, 2002; Li, et.al., 2008; Tang & Maxwell, 2007). As a consequence, Chinese teachers were cognizant of the importance of child-initiated learning and enlightened approaches, yet found it impossible to impose these at the expense of those traditional methods. Furthermore, such traditionalism does not offend parental expectations and

is comfortably housed in the Chinese exam-oriented education system (Lee & Tseng, 2008; Li & Rao, 2000, 2005; Rao et al. 2009; Tang & Maxwell, 2007). Trying to balance pressure from society and from curriculum reformers, teachers tread carefully along the path of "transition." Teachers remain positioned towards the exam-focused method which reflects their insecurity regarding change. Last but not least, few Chinese teachers are versed in modern literacy teaching techniques and, hence, have to rely on familiar traditional teaching approaches (Li & Rao, 2005). This implies that teacher education and in-service training might be very important elements of education reform.

How Western Pedagogies Were Put into Practice

The present study did find some changes in the Chinese classrooms, reflecting that some Western ideas or even pedagogies were put into practice in the three localities. Teachers in all three locations raised more open questions to engage more children in question-and-answer interactions, as shown in the the above excerpt of Case 2 (Shenzhen classroom). Children were encouraged to offer their own views and to vote for their favorite story characters, attention was given to the ways individual students were progressing, and positive feedback was given to show teacher's respect and appreciation (please refer to the above excerpt of Case 1, Hong Kong classroom). Although the pace of change is slow, and possibly cautious, there are signs that Chinese literacy teaching in Hong Kong and Singapore has progressed in the past decade (Li and Rao, 2005). The qualitative evidence indicated that, in addition to theme-based direct teaching, there was evidence of Western pedagogical practice such as project approach in Hong Kong and Singapore. For example, the excerpt of Case 3 indicated that the Singapore teacher was leading a project to conduct some emergent literacy activities, although it was transformed into a teacher-

directed learning activity.

Yet, the adaptation of Western pedagogies was uneven across Shenzhen, Hong Kong and Singapore. For instance, some child-initiated activities, theme-based explorations, and tailor-made school curricula were evident in classrooms in Hong Kong and Singapore. Strategic questioning of group children was frequently observed in Hong Kong; individual interactions and feedback were also preferred. The project and whole language approaches were employed in Singapore but not in Shenzhen. This supports the contention that societal differences in Chinese communities influence the degrees of openness to outside educational practices. And, this finding reflects the central tenet that teaching and learning differ across socio-cultural contexts.

This is in line with the socio-cultural perspectives which view that teaching activities take place in cultural contexts and are mediated by language and values and can be best understood when investigated in their cultural-historical contexts (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Classrooms are part of a wider community (of school and beyond) which has cultural practices and social norms, where teaching activities are socially embedded and culturally shaped. The custom of using direct instruction might be seen as part of the cultural practice of traditional Chinese teaching. The wider cultures in which schools are situated impinge on classrooms in ways often unnoticed by participants too familiar with the culture (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). It is, thus, understandable that reform leaders tend to overlook the cultural conflicts when proposing the transplantation of Western pedagogies into their cultures. And this makes the present study very critical in understanding the sociocultural differences in early childhood classrooms.

The study has several limitations. The sample size was small and large-scale

studies using more diverse and representative samples need to be conducted. Whilst every effort was made to ensure reliability and validity of the data, the evidence at best only applies to a particular point in time. In addition, future studies might cast the sampling net more widely and the views of parents, school inspectors, curriculum reformers and educational theorists should be taken into account.

Conclusion

The present study found a common pattern of Chinese pedagogy and some evidence of a gradual change in early literacy classrooms. The findings suggest that the direct transplanting of Western pedagogies into Chinese classrooms should be avoided because culture, language, parents, teachers, resources, education system, and other sociocontextual factors play very important roles in shaping Chinese literacy pedagogy. The distinctive orthography of the Chinese language, for example, determines to an extent the boundaries of pedagogical reforms. Cultural values, teacher and parent expectations, and the established educational system should never be overlooked when seeking to change the literacy practices in the early years. Cultural tradition and social values are both resources and limits, and such awareness is important for improving pedagogy in the age of globalization (Tobin, 2007). Early childhood educators around the world should seek to learn from and influence each other but the trans-national circulation of best practice should not be one-way. And the questions such as whether the adaptation of west pedagogies is needed and what are the potential merits of these pedagogies in different cultures should be carefully addressed before making the decision to change.

There are clear implications from the results of this study. Cultural appropriateness should be seriously considered when nations engage in importing pedagogical innovations developed in other sociocultural milieu. The prerequisites

advocated by Zhu and Zhang (2008) can be used to judge cultural appropriateness: it should be sensitive to social ecology and culture, perceptive to social problems and their current stage of resolution, and should suit the practitioners' professional competence. The pedagogical reforms in these Chinese societies, so far, are not culturally appropriate according to the criteria. Additionally, this study highlights that sociocultural perspectives can help educators provide early childhood teaching that recognizes and empowers linguistically and culturally diverse young learners. In fact, there are multiple realities of early childhood, multiple perspectives on early learning, and multiple learners in the early years. Using European-American norms to unify the learning of young children under varying contexts is absolutely an impossible mission. Successful early childhood pedagogy should be culturally, contextually and linguistically appropriate. Best pedagogies could be adapted or assimilated into another society, but could never be directly transplanted.

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Table 1

A Comparison of Preschool Chinese Classrooms in Hong Kong, Shenzhen and Singapore

	Hong Kong (%)	Singapore (%)	Shenzhen (%)	χ^2
Total observation time	90 hours	90 hours	90 hours	
Social Organization				
Individual learning	0.7	0	**7.6**	13.1[**]
Paired learning	0.3	1.4	2.2	2.1
Small group (2-7)	**29.8**	6.4	12.4	23.2[***]
Large group (8-15)	14.5	**1.0**	9.3	12.9[**]
Whole class	54.9	**91.1**	68.6	32.4[***]
Teaching Behavior				
Caring	1.8	0.2	0.0	4.0
Managing	39.1	**16.9**	34.3	12.7[**]
Questioning	**21.6**	43.9	35.5	11.1[**]
Lecturing	35.4	38.4	28.0	2.4
Playing	2.2	0.7	2.2	.4
Teacher-as-instructor				
Direct instruction	59.8	73.5	63.5	4.6
Teacher reading	**4.7**	17.6	22.7	13.3[**]
Demonstration	0.5	0.7	1.2	.1
Shared reading and writing	34.9	8.2	12.6	27.2[***]
Feedback				
Positive	17.6	19.9	**42.6**	19.6[***]
Neutral	82.3	79.3	**55.9**	21.1[***]
Negative	0.1	0.8	1.5	1.9
Teacher-student interaction				
Observing without action	1.7	0.1	1.3	2.0
Individual interaction	36.7	20.2	23.9	8.0
Group interaction	8.9	3.3	13.4	6.6
Whole class interaction	52.7	**76.4**	55.9	13.2[**]
Teacher's Talk				
About curriculum	86.9	86.3	90.4	.8
About discipline	4.9	4.3	4.9	.2
About procedure	6.0	6.7	3.2	1.7
Informal talk	2.1	2.6	1.5	.3
Focus of instruction				
Language knowledge	56.5	**18.9**	47.5	32.5[***]
Content knowledge	25.7	37.8	32.4	3.1
Culture/value	0	0.3	0	0

Others	17.8	**42.9**	20.1	19.6***
Student's resistance (frequency)	*0*	*6*	*0*	
Disruptive behavior	0	2	0	4.1
Passive resistance	0	**4**	0	8.1
Open resistance	0	0	0	--
Student's products				
Short oral answers	69.8	73.5	54.5	8.9
Short written answers	3.6	1.3	0.0	5.3
Sustained oral text	22.4	21	**40.3**	11.3**
Sustained written text	0.1	0	0.2	.2
Multi-modal text	0.3	0	0	.3
Worksheet	0.2	0.7	0.7	.2
Others	3.6	3.5	4.3	0
Teaching aids				
black/whiteboard	6.2	7.2	16.5	8.2
OHP	0	0	**8.9**	18.5***
PowerPoint	1.2	0	2.2	2.0
Textbook	**3.7**	23.7	17.8	16.2***
Worksheet	9.5	0.7	6.9	7.4
Internet	0	0	0	--
Apparatus	0	0	0	--
Pencil and Paper	13.0	6.2	3.3	7.8
Others	66.4	62.2	**44.3**	11.2**

Note. $^{*}p < .01$. $^{**}p < .005$. $^{***}p < .001$.

Appendix

Classroom Observation Protocol

Code	Target Behavior	Operational Definition
Teacher's classroom behaviors (TCB)		
TC	Taking care	Physical caring by teacher.
TM	Managing activities	The management of activities includes the allocation of tasks and resources to groups of children, classroom discipline, and routine supervision.
TQ	Questioning	This refers to the teacher questioning the students.
TL	Lecturing	Teacher lecturing to a class (group) of students.
TP	Playing	Teacher playing with children
Teacher-as-instructor (TAI)		
TDI	Direct Instruction (in a didactic manner)	Didactic teaching which formed part of the guided reading and big book sessions. It was also characterized by the explicit teaching of phonemes through flashcards.
TDIR	Teacher reading	This was typically a whole class activity in which the teacher read a story.
TTD	Demonstration by Teacher	Teacher demonstrating a procedure to the class (e.g., how to safely use lab equipment).
TSW	Shared reading and writing	This refers to the teacher modeling the reading or writing process for the children. It is interactive in nature and includes the teacher and child scribing on a small board or in the air. Often it would form the starting point for subsequent independent work.
Nature of Feedback (NOF)		
TFP	Teacher praising students	Examples would include the teacher responding positively, for example, 'well done, good boy, that's nice'.
TFF	Teacher giving neutral feedback	Examples would include the teacher responding neutrally, for example, 'I know, I got it."
TFN	Teacher giving negative feedback	Examples would include the teacher responding negatively, for example, 'Naughty boy, you are wrong, terrible."
Nature of teacher-children interaction (TCI)		
TOC	Teacher observing children without action	This refers to the teacher observing the various classroom activities.
TIS	Teacher interacting with individual student	Teacher working with/talking to/helping individual student.
TIG	Teacher interacting with small group	Teacher working with/talking to/helping small group of students.
TIW	Teacher interacting with whole class	Teacher working with/talking to/helping a class of students.
Teacher's Talk time (TT) (definition: All the talk time used by the teacher.)		

TTC	talking about curriculum	all the time related to learning and teaching context
TTM	behavior management talk	all the time related to classroom management
TTP	Procedural talk	all the time used for transition
TTI	informal talk	the time used for unplanned talk, off-task talk, or private talk

Focus of instruction (FI) (definition: The focused content of teacher's instruction)

FIL	linguistic knowledge	instruction and activities focus on vocabulary (word formation/usage), text comprehension (through teacher explanation), textual structure (composition), text types, and pronunciation
FIC	content knowledge	instruction and activities focus on the text content itself
FIV	focus on the traditional cultural values	Instruction and activities focus on the cultural values related to the text such as Chinese customs, rituals, history, and literature
FIO	Focus on other things	Other content not defined in this list.

Student resistance (SR) (definition: this category deals with the instances of open resistance to learning.)

SRD	Disruptive behavior	any behavior that distracts a teacher and other pupils from learning
SRP	passive resistance	any behavior indicating a student is uncooperative and does not follow teacher's instruction
SRO	open resistance	the act or an instance of resisting to learning and teaching

Type of students' products (TP) (definition: this category classifies the nature and complexity of students' learning production.)

TPO	Short oral answers	one or two words answers
TPW	Short written answers:	writing some words or phrases to answer the question
TPS	Sustained oral text	meaningful oral productions to sustain the text
TPT	Sustained written text	meaningful written productions to sustain the text
TPM	Multi-modal text	Longer answers and well-rounded responses
TPW	Worksheet	a piece of paper recording the work planned or done by students
TPN	Others	Other products not defined by this list