

Project Approach: Is It Feasible in Chinese Preschool?

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ABSTRACT

The Ministry of Education China has promoted child-centred pedagogies in preschools since the 1990s, project approach is one such pedagogies. However, how Chinese preschool teachers implement the project approach has not yet been fully investigated. This study of two preschool teachers in one typical preschool in Chengdu China documented how the two teachers implemented the project approach and the factors that influenced their teaching. This study was of the qualitative paradigm and exploratory in nature. Videotapes of long-term classroom observations, audiotaped in-depth interviews and document analysis were the three main methods of data collection. In the process of implementing the project approach, the two teachers were found to largely adhere to the child-centred aspect and practice constructive learning, especially towards the second month of implementation. Both teachers and children learn constructively in this study. The outcome of this study also revealed that the two teachers have undergone conflicts of thought to gradually shift from traditionally teacher-centred, whole-class Eastern pedagogy into child-centred, individual-oriented Western pedagogy. The emerged factors influencing the teachers' implementation of the project approach are time constraints, perceived curriculum demands, parental expectations of knowledge acquisition and academic achievements, lack of support, professional development, and conflict of thoughts between adhering to traditional Chinese-based and Western-based pedagogical beliefs. The findings suggested that though frontline teachers faced some difficulties in implementing an 'imported' pedagogy, both teachers and children were able to adapt the project approach to fulfill their needs. For policymakers and preschool administrators, it is necessary to encourage cooperation and provide professional development opportunities to help teachers practice constructivist child-centred teaching in the early childhood education field in a more sustainable manner.

Keywords: Project approach; Teaching; Teaching methods; Localisation

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INTRODUCTION

Since the 1990s, the Ministry of Education China has endeavoured to promote child-centred pedagogies in preschools nationwide. However, as one such pedagogies, how Chinese preschool teachers implement project approach have not yet been fully investigated. The project approach, a central part of the Progressive Education Movement (notably John Dewey's work advocating "learning by doing") was developed in the 1910s (Kilpatrick, 1918). A project approach is a pedagogical approach that enables the teacher to guide the children's learning and development through project work, which is defined as in-depth investigations of a concrete, real-life, interest-oriented topic worthy of children's attention, time and energy (Helm & Katz, 2016). Characteristics of the project approach include constructivist, child-centred, inquiry-driven, and process-oriented, all of which respond to the children's innate intellectual dispositions, arousing their natural curiosity about their surroundings and helping them to make sense of their experience (Helm & Katz, 2016; Katz, 2010). This research adopted constructivist theory as the project approach has been influenced by a number of theorists such as Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky and John Dewey and has evolved with practice (Mueller & File, 2019). These theorists supported the children's

growth and development that occurred when adopting the project approach (Wellen, 2018). This approach has many educational benefits, such as enhancing and advancing children's critical and creative thinking ability as well as their literacy, numeracy, and communication skills (Beneke & Ostrosky, 2009; Helm & Katz, 2016; Clark, 2006); yet teachers face challenges in implementation of such an approach, especially those who are novice to use it (Clark, 2006). For many teachers, the major hurdle they are facing is the difficulty to shift away from their traditional transmission model of instruction to conducting this constructivist-based approach (Chen, 2017; Clark, 2006).

Nonetheless, the many benefits yielded by project approach encouraged education reformers to adopt this approach enthusiastically, beyond the United States where it was originated. For instance, since the reform and opening-up policy took effect, preschool educators in China have been attempting to adopt the project approach and other western-derived pedagogies including Reggio Emilia, Montessori, and High Scope. However, sociocultural differences between Chinese and Western contexts led the actual implementation of these 'imported' pedagogical methods in China yield little success (Cheng, 2006; Li, 2012). As an example, in a survey study of 51 preschool teachers' views towards their implementation of the project approach in 10 preschools in Hong Kong, Li (2012) found that the teachers struggled to forsake their familiar and traditional instruction-based teaching methods in favour of the new pedagogical strategy. Although the teachers embraced pedagogical change as they endeavoured to plan and implement projects in practice, they were not able to fully shift toward child-centred teaching, due to a lack of systematic training and a lack of firm understanding about project implementation processes coupled with the influence from deeply entrenched traditional beliefs about early childhood education (Chen, 2017; Zhang & Zhu, 2017; Li, 2012). Though there are cases of successful project approach execution in Hong Kong and Taiwan; they are not representative of the general reality in mainland China, as project approach is not a typical scenario in mainland China preschools.

In mainland China, preschool teachers are generally new to plan and implement project approach. To fully implement this approach, the teacher needs to develop an understanding of the underlying dynamics of the processes involved in project work. Yet there is not enough research conducted on the dynamic processes involved in and the mechanisms underlying mainland China preschool teachers' implementation of project approach. In this research, the authors have undertaken to understand how Chinese preschool teachers in one typical preschool in mainland China implement project approach in their school and what are the factors influencing implementation of project approach; insights obtained yielded valuable lessons for other early childhood educators in China or other Eastern countries with similar sociocultural background.

Against the background of the local sociocultural contexts where traditional educational practices have been operative in China, the author selected one preschool in Chengdu China and worked with two teachers in implementing project approach for six months. The study aimed to address two interwoven questions:

- (1) How do Chinese preschool teachers implement the project approach?
- (2) What are the factors influencing Chinese preschool teachers implement project approach?

METHOD

Research Site

The preschool involved in this study is a typical Chinese preschool in Chengdu, China fulfilling the following two common characteristics: (1) is a non-profit-making preschool and under the supervision of local Education Bureau; and (2) Mandarin was used as the main medium of daily instruction. In China, preschools are either funded by the government or privately operated. The participating preschool is run by the local government (thus, it is non-profit making) and located in a bustling district in Shuang Liu district, Chengdu, China. It enrolled 260 children in twelve (12) classes with twenty-three (23) teachers. According to the school documents, the children came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, with most of them (55%) from the middle socioeconomic class, 30% from the middle to lower socioeconomic class, and 15% from the lower socioeconomic class. All the children attend a full-day (from 9:00 am to 17:10 pm) program in one of the three grade levels: Juniors for children ages 3 to 4, middle for children ages 4 to 5, and seniors for children ages 5 to 6.

Participating Teachers

The two participating teachers are qualified to teach, both possess college degree in early childhood education, and hold a Certificate of Education in Early Childhood Education, which is an official requirement to teach in preschool in China. Moreover, each of these teachers have had more than 5 years of teaching experience. This study is the first time these two teachers got involved in project approach. The topic of this project work was 'tree'

selected through discussions between teachers and the children. As the project started in the autumn season when the children observed leaves change colors and start to drop, it became a practical and attractive topic for project work. Twenty-eight (28) children aged 5 to 6 years old (with approximately an equal distribution of genders) involved in this study with permission from all their parents. The two participating teachers (Lisa and Annie) implemented the tree project work in one class according to the three phases of Lilian Katz' project approach. Pseudonyms was adopted to protect the identities of teacher participants. These two teachers were recruited as they were passionate about provide child-centred teaching for their children and were willing to implement project approach in their teaching practice. Both teacher participants signed consent form which clearly introduced this research, their responsibility, their right to withdraw from this research as well as confidentiality of research data.

DATA COLLECTION

Qualitative research methodology was chosen as the authors intended to explore in-depth the experience of the two preschool teachers planning and executing project approach. This "tree" project was conducted according to the three phases of project approach that Lilian Katz's proposed. In phase one, the topic was decided by children, teachers discussed with the children on what the children know, and the direction of the investigation was determined based on what children want to know. In phase two, children investigated the topic through field trips and interactions with experts and found the answers to their questions. In phase three, teachers and children reflected on what had been learnt and then completed the project with a culminating activities. Methods of data collection included audiotaped individual interviews with the teachers, group interview with student participants, videotaped observation of participants' teaching and analysis of documents (i.e. teaching-related materials, teachers' project journal, children's work). Videotaped long term classroom observations captured the "how" aspect of instructional interactions and behaviours in the teaching and learning process as well as the dynamics of the local sociocultural context in which the learning occurred. Audiotaped in-depth interviews with the two teachers helped to elucidate the "why" aspect of their teaching practices of the implementation of the project approach. Data collection phase ended only when saturation of data was observed. This took about 3 months. Multiple sources of data was collected as it is necessary to ensure "methodological triangulation" (Denzin, 2017).

Videotaped long term classroom observations

Each teacher participant was observed nine times, and the purpose is to explore how the teachers implemented the project approach. Each class observation was conducted on one lesson lasting about 45 minutes to 1 hour (depending on the time of project-related activities that day). Each lesson was videotaped. Prior to formal videotaping, an introduction visit was conducted to familiarize the researcher with the teachers and children to establish a comfortable rapport. Except for a few days' suspension due to Covid-19 lockdown, observations were generally conducted twice a week in the morning. The total videotaped observations reached 24 hours.

Audiotaped in-depth interviews

The author interviewed both teachers individually before, during and after the project had completed in order to capture their thoughts on why they implemented project approach the ways they did. Two categories of interview were conducted. The first category of semi-structured interview was carried out before the project was implemented concentrating on participants' understanding of the project approach and other related issues raised through participants' responses. Two semi-structured interviews of approximately 1 hour each were conducted for each of the teacher participants. The second category of interview was unstructured and occurred after each classroom observation focused on teachers' teaching. These interviews lasted an average of half an hour each either after each classroom observation or later when the participants were available. The "interview guide approach" was employed to develop a semi-structured interview protocol (Patton, 2002). The two categories of interviews yielded data related to (1) knowledge and experiences with the project approach, (2) pedagogical beliefs and practices, and (3) project implementation. The author also interviewed the school teaching director for an hour to gain a contextual understanding of the background and educational principles adopted by the preschool, its philosophy, mission, impetus for project work, and curriculum development. The interviews were conducted and audiotaped in the participants' native language of Mandarin, all interviews were subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Documents collected and examined

Field notes and artifacts collected included lesson plans, project documentations, project reports, school and curriculum records, and student work. Participants were also requested to keep a project journal to record their planning, implementation, and reflection of the project work during the data collection period. Response from this

project journal was not satisfactory. Participants preferred to talk verbally to the author, partly due to time constraint as they are very busy in their school work.

DATA ANALYSIS

The qualitative data was analysed using the three stages of open coding, axial coding and selective coding strategies (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Constant comparative method was used as analytical technique throughout the three stages of data analysis. Open coding was used in examining the interview transcripts, observation notes and documents. Open coding yielded core categories, subcategories and ultimately themes. Then axial coding was employed to discover and identify potential relationships among these categories. Selective coding was conducted to identify core ideas that can connect the categories in answering the research questions. This paper present mainly the open coding.

Validity and reliability of study were ensured through triangulation, long term observation, member's check, peer examination and keeping an audit trail. Members' check took place in three phases with the participants at different stages of the study. Transcripts, categories, and results of axial and selective coding were discussed and checked with the participants. Peer examination took place through presentation of findings in seminars, and individual consultation with experts in the early childhood education field including frontline teachers and lecturers. Audit trail kept track of steps of the study such as process and standards of identifying participants, collection of data, derivation of categories and synthesis of data which was duly recorded for the study.

The translation from Chinese to English was read and validated by Translator A, an English professor who majored in English and Chinese translation. Peer review was conducted by Expert A, a professor specializing in qualitative research at Chengdu University China; Expert B, an associate professor in early childhood education at Chengdu University; and Expert C, an associate professor of early science education at Teacher College of Sichuan Normal University.

RESULTS AND DISSCUSSIONS

In this study, two themes related to the implementation of project approach emerged, they are child-centred teaching and constructivist learning. These themes have been validated by the participants themselves and three experts mentioned above in the field.

Child-centered Teaching

Classroom observations revealed that both the teachers implemented project approach closely guided by the three phases of the project approach suggested by Lilian Katz (2006). During these three phases, the two teachers adhered to child-centred teaching, which Lilian Katz (2006) described as key to authentic project work, including giving children autonomy to leading their learning by making decisions as shown through the following quotes:

"I intended to provide kids opportunities to decide their learning activities. It was not easy to surrender autonomy to them. But it turned out that children had their voice heard, such as choosing to do multi-task group work and they really have the ability to lead and decide their learning."

The two teachers obediently followed Lilian Katz's steps of Project Approach in eliciting ideas from children, probed them to establish common ground, engaged them in raising their own questions for investigation, built the project based on their interests, guided them to vote for the leader of their group works. For instance, in Lesson 5, under teacher Lisa's guidance, children did hands-on tasks as recalled by teacher Lisa as below:

They (children) used different kinds of real leaves to make the products (design girl's winter dresses) they chose to do in group work. They observe, compare, contrast, and classify those leaves and communicate how to design the dresses. Finally, they worked to reach consensus and presented their products.

The children had different views on how to classify the leaves among their group members, teachers encouraged them to freely set the classification criteria. Notes taken in classroom observation in Lesson 5 are as follows:

I (the author) noticed that teacher Lisa guided and encouraged the children to vote for their group leader. The voted group leaders helped their members to discuss, and listened to group members' ideas. This constructive communication process contributed to the reach of a consensus on classification in groups.

Classroom observations and teachers' interviews also demonstrated that the roles of the teachers have gradually shifted from knowledge disseminators in their previous traditional teaching experiences to facilitators, probers, and co-learners in this project-based learning. For instance, by practicing the new approach, teachers recognized the importance of knowledge-construction by children themselves. As a result, the teachers learned to guide or work with children to find answers to children's questions rather than giving answers directly to them as they usually do in their previous teaching, and this can be seen from Teacher Annie's response in the following interview transcript:

I usually give answers to children directly previously. As I went through the project approach step by step, I gradually intended to invite and encourage children to seek answers through investigation on their own. (IAnnie).

Similarly, Teacher Lisa expressed that:

I paid more attention to children's conversations, reactions, and problems. I encouraged them to find and solve problems and guided them to think independently rather than transmitting knowledge and directly giving answers (ILisa)

It was evident that the two teachers interpreted and implemented Lilian Katz's project approach as child-centered, inquiry-based, and process-oriented. Table 1 gives a summary of how the two teachers implemented the child-centered learning in this study.

Table 1 A summary of the child-centered learning in this study

Activity	Indicators of Child-Centred Learning
Topic selection	Based on children's interests, with consideration of curriculum goals
Initiation of project	Initiated by children under teachers' guidance
Duration of project	Determined by the development of the project
Instructional strategies	Whole group, small group, individual work, and multi-task group work
Decision making	Children under the guidance of the teacher
Decisions for next step	Decisions made by children with teachers' guidance and support
Knowledge Acquisition	Children find answers to questions posed by themselves, and conduct investigation
Project activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Investigate and find answers to posed questions by using available resources ● Teachers web to assess children's prior knowledge ● Project led by children, acquisition and integration of new knowledge facilitated by teachers
Representation of learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Representation activities (e.g., drawing, constructing, writing) enhances and documented learning ● Representation to demonstrate acquisition of knowledge and skill
Roles of teacher	Facilitator, scaffolder, co-learner, prober
Project resource sources	Resources from teachers, children, and visiting experts, field trips and parents

Constructivist Learning

Though the two teachers initially showed some reservations as shown through quotes: “Because PBL is all fresh to my children, yesterday *I was still worried about this way*”, they gradually embraced the practice of project approach. They encouraged children to select topic based on their interests, giving autonomy to children in the form of investigation. Towards the second month of the implementation of project approach, the teachers were seen to be more rigorous in prompting children to generate ideas, to clarify their thoughts and provide evidence to their opinions and reasons for their comments. Children were also given the opportunity to conduct investigations and find answers to their posed questions as shown in inquiry-based learning discussed by Pedaste et al. (2015) and Gormally et al. (2009). In doing so, the teachers have intentionally established genuine learning communities among the children as done by Konzal (2001), Mitchell and Sackney (2011) and Rogoff (1994). Schwarz and Gwekwerere (2007) and Admawati et al. (2018, July) argued that children’s love of investigation, their sense of inquiry, and open-mindedness could be gradually achieved throughout the process of engaging in inquiry-based and project-based learning. This was evident among the 28 children participated in this study.

By facilitating children’s learning through project approach, the two teachers were also engaged themselves in constructive learning as they learn to implement the project approach by learning it in this study. Both teachers regarded this ‘learning by doing’ experience crucial for their own internalization of the project approach. Both teachers and children conducted constructive learning as the teachers implemented the project approach in this study. In implementing the project approach, the teachers have placed the children as the center of learning while established a constructive learning environment. These interactions produced inquiry learning, autonomous learning, and peer learning.

What are the factors influencing Chinese preschool teachers’ implement project approach?

In this study, three external factors emerged to influence the way the two teachers implemented the project approach: (1) time constraint and perceived curriculum demands, (2) parental expectations for knowledge acquisition and academic achievement, (3) teacher professional development.

Time constraints, perceived curriculum demands

The two teachers, Lisa and Annie, candidly spoke about time constraint and perceived curriculum demands as a salient factor influencing their project practice. Due to the large amount of predetermined, fixed material to cover in the curriculum of the preschool, the two teachers felt that they could not implement the project approach as entirely child-centered that Lilian Katz suggested. They also reported that the already onerous curriculum demands made them unable to integrate the project approach in their regular teaching and learning process. Also, the two teachers perceived that just as they needed support to make pedagogical adjustments, their children also needed time to adapt their learning strategies and in-class interactions to do project work. For instance, teacher Lisa reflected that:

We have to consider our children’s background and learning style. If we jump right into the project approach from the outset, I think we may not see good results. Our children may not have the skills to start and lead a project because they are not accustomed to this new learning approach. (RN3)

Recognizing the learning curve related to adjusting to the project approach, the two teachers took initiatives to consider several practical issues, including what teacher Lisa described as not “just start the project approach from the outset” and instead “providing ample guidance” and “take it slow”. Time limitation was a challenge when the two teachers made pedagogical adaptations, including teachers’ negotiation with the children in selecting project topic, planning field trip, guiding children’s exploration. This point was aptly captured by teacher Annie in this way:

I wish I could have more time to allocate for children’s field trip visit. They really like it. Due to Covid-19, children could only do field trip visit within their preschool, they were also enthusiastic to explore the topic. If there were more time, children would have been able to make more products themselves and exploring learning about more kind of leaf.

Parental expectations of knowledge acquisition and academic achievements

This study revealed that parental expectations for academically oriented learning was another factor affecting the two teachers’ approach to project work as well as the preschool’s choice of curriculum. The two teachers were

concerned that adopting the child-centered project approach would lead to discontinuity in China's traditional, didactic teaching method and examination-based assessment practiced by most schools. Also, it was evident that parents' expectations for their children to acquire a large quantity of knowledge and achieve academic success drove the two teachers to view the practice of the project approach only as a short-term research project. For instance, teacher Lisa and Annie explained:

Parents thought knowledge acquisition is important. As the children will enter primary one the next semester, we focused more on bridging course to get them prepared for formal learning. If we use the project approach the whole school year, I am sure parents would be unsatisfied. After all, children are assessed through tests. You know, the whole educational system is heavily focused on the acquisition of knowledge. (Lisa)

The way we teach has something to do with being responsible to the parents. Actually, our parents all welcome their children to learn more knowledge to get ready for primary school. I think parents would not be satisfied with project approach that having their children do investigative learning throughout the academic semester. I understand our parents. Our educational system is just too focused on the acquisition of knowledge. (Annie)

Lack of support

As this study was not a school-wide study, the two teachers reported 'isolation' as one of the influencing factors on how they implemented project approach. This study initially included four teachers but finally the school management only approved two as they argued that they have a full schedule and could not spare other teachers. The minimal number of teacher participants made the teachers felt that it was difficult to use the project approach as an integrated part of their daily practice as they experienced a lack of support from colleagues and the preschool. The tree project was implemented on top of the participating children's packed learning schedule. Teacher Lisa and Annie said that:

It would be better if a teaching and research team on project approach was set up. Communication with teammates (colleagues who share the teaching) and school's administrative support are also important. We can learn and practice the project approach collectively so that the use of this pedagogy is no longer being isolated. (Lisa)

Only two of us were totally involved in this tree project. If we form a team, we can turn this project into a grade or school project. This would promote cooperation and support. In fact, other colleagues are willing to get involved if time allows. (Annie)

Professional Development

The two teachers reported that they were exposed briefly to the project approach and other progressive, Western-derived pedagogies and contemporary conceptions of early childhood education during their respective teacher education programs, but they rarely applied them. They lamented that time and experience would help them acquire the requisite the knowledge and skills to use the project approach competently, just as teacher Annie stated below:

This approach (project approach) needs to be implemented more often. To acquire relevant knowledge and skills needs time and experiences. After the completion of this tree project, there is a high possibility that I will go back to the traditional thematic approach of teaching. If the preschool can give us more opportunities to carry out this teaching approach and engage more teachers in using it, I will be more determined to continue doing projects. (Annie)

Although this study provided the two teachers opportunity to venture outside of their comfort zone and learn to practice a new mode of teaching (project approach), they did not feel fully equipped with the knowledge and skills essential to competently use the project approach. They explicitly uttered that they would have benefited from relevant professional development. For instance, teacher Annie pointed out that

"It would be better if there are long-term and systematic training on implementation of project Approach." (Annie)

Similar to teacher Annie, teacher Lisa pointed out that

“Training on project approach is not enough for us. I have little teaching experience with cases adopting the project approach” (Lisa).”

The two teachers also perceived that they need expert guidance to guide their practice of the project approach. For instance, teacher Annie informed that

“We should have experts guiding us to use the project approach. They were experienced and easy to find our strength and weakness.” (Annie).”

Conflict of Thoughts

The two participating teachers were found to be occasionally struggling between practicing their own Chinese-based traditional pedagogical belief and adopting the project approach which they considered as more Western-based contemporary early education pedagogy. Chinese-based traditional pedagogy refers to an instructional model to teaching and learning that is profoundly influenced by traditional Chinese cultural values. This Chinese pedagogy is extensively practiced in early childhood education classrooms in China, and it is more didactic and autocratic. On the other hand, Western-based contemporary early education pedagogy refers to the instructional approaches originally derived and believed to be more widely adopted in the classrooms of Western countries, which is more child-centered and child-driven. The two teachers were found to have progressively harmonize both these two pedagogical approaches as they attempt to implement project approach.

Both teachers emphasized the importance of behavioral control, discipline, and conformity. They reiterated the importance of being quiet and listening attentively to the teacher as a method to help children develop ‘proper behavior’. Classroom observation notes provided a large amount of evidence to this. For instance, in Lesson 4, Teacher Annie invited some children to present what they had drawn on the field trip. She then got angry and reiterated the class rule when children were excited and chatty to get their observational drawings.

She asked loudly, “Why can’t you learn to listen to others when they are talking? You are going to primary school soon. Don’t you know keeping quiet is a way to show respect to the presenter?” (OM5)

Teacher Annie emphasized the importance of proper behavior in the classroom during the discussion after implementing Lesson 4. The excerpts of what Teacher Annie said during the interview is:

“I hope they could listen attentively while others were presenting. I think it is a good way to learn from others. Instead, they just kept talking without paying attention to the presenters. Argh”. (Annie).

Teachers’ interviews and classroom observations indicated that the teachers were practicing a combination of teacher-directed [Chinese-based pedagogy] and child-centred [Western-based pedagogy]. Teacher-directed is more in classroom control, while child-centered is through Lilian Katz’s project-based learning approach. They believed that this approach is beneficial to both teaching and student learning. For example, Teacher Lisa said;

This [the tree-themed project] is a good try. It [the project approach] is worth exploring in our future teaching practice. To implement STEM through project approach, I need to learn to maintain a better balance between classroom control, surrendering teacher guidance and granting children autonomy. (Lisa).

Through this research project, the two participating teachers began to realize that the project approach is conducive to developing children's independent thinking, which they think is necessary. The two teachers faced conflict of thoughts as they strive to implement the early childhood curriculum framework given by the authority and this new more child-centered Project Approach introduced to them by the author. Teacher Lisa expressed her view as follows:

For the thematic approach [promoted in the China National Early Childhood Curriculum Guideline], the frame of the learning activity is pre-set [predetermined]

framework given]. What we [teachers] need to do is to implement the teaching according to the frame given. However, this project approach [Lilian Katz] is child-centered and is implemented according to the development of children's interests, following children's voices. (ILisa)

Echoing this viewpoint, Teacher Annie uttered during the interview,

"children's ability to investigate and ability to think of ways to find answers to their questions can be developed"(IAnnie)

The two participating teachers sought to shift to a more child-centered pedagogy as they recognized the advantages of the project approach and the limitations of traditional Chinese-based pedagogy they often practiced in the thematic approach. This can be seen from the quote below, as Teacher Lisa reflected her traditional teaching in the interview:

"Currently, our teaching and learning approach is relatively a knowledge transmission-based model. The teacher give lecture, and the children listen. This teaching and learning approaches are passive. Compared to the project approach, opportunities for small group activities and idea sharing are rare. I think if you really hope to increase children's participation, you need to liberate teaching. That is, you need to get the children to participate, do what the children are interested in and discover knowledge with them." (ILisa)

A synthesis of the global knowledge based on early childhood education revealed that Western-derived theories of child development are universally recognized as valid and thus are becoming the foundation for teacher education courses pervasively (Cleghorn & Prochner, 2010; Nsamenang, 2007). Thus Western theory-derived, child-centered pedagogical approaches, such as the project approach, Montessori, and Reggio Emilia, are zealously imported and introduced in ECE teacher preparation programs in non-Western cultural contexts, including China (Li et al., 2011). Yet to implement a globalized Western pedagogy is not a direct and seamless paradigm shift, as the incongruence of cultural values between the two societies (Western and Eastern) has challenged the universal applicability of Western-derived pedagogies to suit local teaching and learning situations in other cultures (Li, 2012; Tobin, 2007). Notably, when considering such differences between traditional Chinese pedagogy and contemporary early childhood pedagogy, Chinese teachers face many challenges in implementing these imported pedagogical approaches in a child-centered manner (Li, 2012).

Research found that Chinese teachers who espouse traditional, behaviorist, knowledge-transmission views are likely to practice teaching characterized as didactic, teacher directed, content focused and academically driven, whereas teachers who endorse contemporary, constructivist perspectives tend to practice child-centered, inquired-focused and learning-oriented pedagogical strategies (Lee et al., 2013; Li et al., 2012; Sing & Khine, 2008). This is consistent with the findings of this study that the two teachers who espouse constructivist views took initiatives to provide child-centered inquiry learning by implementing project approach. Yet research also discovered that some Chinese teachers merged traditional and contemporary views and correspondingly involve in practices combine teacher-directed and child-centered teaching (Chan, 2010; Chan, 2008; NG & RAO, 2005; Ng & Rao, 2008).

As the two teachers learnt to conduct constructivist teaching by practicing the project approach in this study, it is natural that their teaching is not a totally change from traditional, behaviorist, knowledge-transmission to contemporary, constructivist, knowledge-construction pedagogy. This study yield that the two Chinese teachers teaching adhered to the key elements of project approach, that is, child-centered teaching while also emphasized on inculcation in children Confucian-inspired, collectivist-oriented Chinese cultural values, such as discipline, conformity and academic competence.

CONCLUSION

This study added to the literature of frontline preschool teachers' experience of implementation of project approach a Chinese preschool in Chengdu. The findings of this empirical study revealed that project approach can

be carried out in the preschool amidst the seemingly incompatibility between the more authoritative and didactic traditional Chinese teaching pedagogies compared to the more Western-derived more child-centred project approach. The teachers in this study undergone a shift of pedagogical belief, however, they managed to harmonise both Chinese and Western philosophy of teaching in this project approach. What is more captivating is the excitement of children and the ‘aha’ learning moments discovered by the teachers. Overall, though faced with some challenges including time constraint, perceived curriculum demands, parental expectations for knowledge acquisition and academic achievement, the stories of these two teachers have proven that project approach is feasible in preschool in China. However, what is more pressing is the sustainability of this project approach if insufficient support is given. Will teacher Anne and teacher Lisa continue to do project approach without the prompting and motivation by the researchers?

IMPLICATION OF FINDINGS AND FUTURE STUDIES

As progressive pedagogies including the project approach are being promoted in preschools throughout China, the findings of this study in one typical preschool in Chengdu, China provides valuable implications for how these ‘imported’ Western-derived pedagogies may be implemented in an Eastern context. For instance, it is plausible that other preschool teachers could adapt the project approach in a way similar to the two teachers in this study. It may be taken as an example of what could transpire when preschool teachers in China and other parts of the world attempted to implement an imported pedagogy in similar circumstances. It is not the intention to present these examples as the best practice, just sharing of experiences. Implementing the project approach has triggered particular challenges to preschool frontline teachers as they are faced with the responsibility of translating imported pedagogies into action, especially in the context of not enough professional training.

Although it seems simple to transplant a pedagogical model from one culture to another, it is rather complicated for the model to thrive in different educational tradition. Thus, it begs the question, “Project Approach: Is it feasible in Chinese preschool?” Considering the finding of this study, it is believed that pedagogical change can be made possible as teachers changed their pedagogical beliefs. This study suggested that the internationally embraced pedagogy, project approach, could be used to suit children’s needs in Chinese preschool.

The two teachers in this study faced with barriers in implementing the project approach in their preschool. They were in-service teachers with a minimum of 5 years’ teaching experiences. This study did not involve new teachers. Therefore, future research could investigate the challenges and supports new preschool teachers needed to implement project approach. In addition, the two teachers emphasized that they hope to learn about more examples of project work done in other countries, thus, desk reviews or content analysis could be conducted in future research. Moreover, future research could also be done to compare the implication of the project approach implemented across different regions or countries.

DECLARATION STATEMENT

The lead author affirms that this manuscript is an honest, accurate, and transparent account of the study being reported; that no important aspects of the study have been omitted; and that any discrepancies from the study as planned (and, if relevant, registered) have been explained.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors hereby declare that they have no conflict of interest in this study.

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