Chapter 5
"Eduplay": Beliefs and Practices Related to Play and Learning in Chinese Kindergartens

Nirmala Rao and Hui Li

Introduction

This chapter, like others in this volume, considers the role and meaning of play in early childhood settings. It is concerned with the following questions: (i) What is the status of play in national early childhood curriculum guidelines and to what extent are these followed in early childhood programs?; (ii) How do early childhood teachers arrange the day to support children's play and learning?; (iii) How do children play?; (iv) How do teachers support children's meaning making in play? and (v) What is the meaning of play and learning for children ranging in age from birth to 3 years, according to their teachers and parents? Information about play and learning in China was garnered through analyses of videotaped observations of how four toddlers spent 1 day in different early childhood settings and through interviews with their teachers and parents. In interpreting the interview and observational data, we considered the relationship between curriculum guidelines about play and what was observed, but particular attention was given to the relationship between play and learning. This was because we assumed that the beliefs and practices of parents and teachers would reveal cultural beliefs about play and learning and that children's play would be influenced by the physical and social environments arranged by adults for their charges.

We begin with an overview of the context of early childhood education in Mainland China. Next, we address notions of play in kindergarten curriculum guidelines that have been issued by the state. We then turn to our empirical study and outline its methodology and discuss the main findings. Finally, we present the term "eduplay" as one that aptly reflects the relationship between play and learning evident in our findings.

N. Rao
The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China
e-mail: nirmalarao.is@gmail.com

I. Pramling-Samuelsson, M. Fleer (eds.), *Play and Learning in Early Childhood Settings*, DOI 10.1007/978-1-4020-8498-0_5,

The Context of Early Childhood Education

At the outset, it is necessary to operationally define the term "early childhood education" in the context of this chapter as there are numerous terms used in the literature to describe services that are aimed at meeting the needs of young children. The difference in the usage of terms arises from the age group that is covered and the content of the services. There are three main types of early childhood centers in China: *nurseries*, which provide care for children from birth to 3 years; *kindergartens*, which provide care and education to children between 3 and 6 or 7 years; and *preprimary classes*, which cater to the needs of children from 5 to 6 or 7 years. These classes are typically attached to rural primary schools. Nurseries come under the jurisdiction of the Department of Public Health, while kindergartens and preprimary classes are regulated by the Department of Education. However, as nurseries have begun to focus on education as well as care, the Department of Education has taken the responsibility of overseeing their "education" curriculum (Wong & Pang, 2002).

Preschool Educational Institutions

While the term "early childhood education" is used to refer to services for children from birth to 6 or 7 years, official documents refer to kindergartens and preprimary classes as *preschool educational institutions* (GOC, 2000). School entry age varies across regions and is either 6 or 7 years. It should be pointed out that in China, official figures about access and enrolment are only provided for children above 3 years who are enrolled in different types of kindergartens or in preprimary classes in rural primary schools. Kindergartens are managed by the government, private individuals, or local communities. Local Education Departments typically run "model" programmes. As in other countries, the state issues regulations for kindergartens.

Coverage and Provision

The following population statistics are based on statistics provided by the United Nations Population Division (Population Division, UN, 2004). In 2005, China's population exceeded an estimated 1.3 billion, and there were 84 million children (44 million boys and 40 million girls) below 4 years of age and about 95 million children (50 million boys and 45 million girls) ranging in age from 5 to 14 years. The number of preschool children in China far exceeds the total population of many countries, and given the size of the population and the diversity of needs of children living in different regions, making provisions for services and ensuring their quality is a challenging endeavor.

Over the past decade, the crude birth rate in China has declined[1] (Population Division, UN, 2004). This has meant that the number of kindergartens (and consequently enrolment levels) has declined since 1997 when there were 192,000 kindergartens (GOC, 2000). Yet, the gross enrolment ratio (GER) for preschool

[1] From 18.3 in 1990–1995 to 13.6 in 2000–2005.

educational institutions increased markedly from 29.9% in 1991 to 47% in 1996 (GOC, 2000). In 2003, there were 116,390 kindergartens and 973,000 kindergarten heads and teachers (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2005).

It should be noted that there are very wide disparities in GER between rural and urban areas (36.1% vs 83.4%) and that enrolment figures only include children above 3 years. By 2002, preschool education was almost universal in cities, and preschool services were rapidly developing in rural areas (MOE, 2003).

Teacher Qualifications

In 2000, there were about 946,448 kindergarten heads and teachers. In terms of their highest educational qualification, 12% were graduates of 2-year or 4-year colleges, 45% were graduates of normal schools,[2] 27% were graduates of vocational schools, and 17% and 10% were senior secondary school and junior secondary school graduates, respectively (Wong & Pang, 2002). The academic and professional qualifications of kindergarten teachers have increased in recent years, with teachers in major cities having higher qualifications than those in rural areas. Furthermore, a recent study of teachers' qualifications in South-west China found that teachers in government-linked (public) kindergartens had attained higher educational and professional qualifications than those employed by private enterprises (Du, 2005).

Family Size

The one-child policy has affected early childhood development and education in China. The majority of urban preschool children do not have siblings, and as a result, parents give ample attention to the care and education of their only child. However, there have also been concerns that the single child is overindulged, self-centerd and lazy, and experiences what is called the 4-2-1 syndrome (four grandparents and two parents focusing their attention on one child). Early childhood educators have to take into account children's family experiences when planning educational activities. For example, more effort may be exerted in providing opportunities for play with peers in kindergartens than for solitary, constructive play, which can be supported in the home.

Play in the Early Childhood Curriculum

Early childhood education has gone through three major waves of curriculum reform in the past century (Zhu and Wang, 2005). The first wave occurred between 1920 and 1930 when a Japanese version of kindergarten education was imported

[2] A normal school or university is one which offers teacher-training programs. The term normal school is derived from the French term, *Ecole Normale*. Normal schools were the first ones to establish teaching standards or *norms* which were to be emulated by other educational institutions. The term "Normal University" is still used in English translation of the Chinese term for teacher training institutions (Pinyin: shīfàn dàxué). In China, Teachers Colleges have lower entrance requirements than normal universities.

into China. As a result, child-centerd philosophies and practices were evident in kindergartens. The second major reform occurred in the 1950s after China became a socialist state. The Soviet model of early childhood education was adopted, and the child-centerd approach was replaced by a more teacher-directed, subject-based approach. The third wave of curriculum reform began with the open-door policy in the 1980s and is on-going (Zhu and Wang, 2005). The importance of play in the early childhood curriculum has been reiterated in relevant policy documents since the 1980s.

The State Education Commission issued the very influential *Regulations on Kindergarten Education Practice* in 1989. This was a watershed for early childhood education as the concepts of developmental appropriateness and individual needs were deemed key principles in preschool education. Wong & Pang (2002, p. 63) state that "play became an important means of promoting holistic development. Appropriate guidelines were to be given to children while respecting their choice in play. Teachers should create a warm psychological environment in which children can learn. Integrated learning should replace subject-segregated teaching and it should permeate throughout the daily activities." The document was circulated throughout the country, and the reform was widely implemented. However, some of these reform ideas were based on Western, democratic, and scientific ideals, which are not totally congruent with Chinese cultural traditions. This led to some difficulties in implementation. Furthermore, teachers were not given enough practical suggestions on how to implement the new regulations (Li & Li, 2001; Zhu, 2005; Zhu and Wang, 2005). This led to the issuance of more detailed guidelines, in *Guidelines for Kindergarten Education Practice*, in 2001 (State Educational Commission, 2001).

The kindergarten educational reforms have led to changes in views about children and learning. As Liu and Feng (2005, p. 94) assert, "the 'revolution' which occurred in kindergartens is no longer one of curricular reform but an ideas revolution, through which phrases such as 'respecting children', 'active learning', 'teaching for individual learning needs', 'play-based teaching and learning', 'teaching and learning through daily life in kindergartens' emerged and are now often heard in kindergartens." In a similar vein, Zhu and Wang (2005) argue that the varied curriculum approaches followed in China today are reflective of the openness and diversity now evident in the country. Despite changes, early childhood curriculum in China has retained some distinctively Chinese characteristics and reflects Chinese beliefs and values. For example, various official documents emphasize the cultivation of good habits, self-discipline, emotional control, and moral development (Wong & Pang, 2002). Indeed, early childhood education in China has been characterized as a hybrid of traditional Chinese, Western, and communist cultures (Wang & Spodek, 2000).

Cross-cultural Equivalence of Meanings

Two Chinese words can be considered equivalent to the English word, "play." They are "wan" (play) and "youxi" (play with rules or games). "Wan" is the equivalent

of free-choice play, whereas the term "youxi" denotes the existence of rules which should be followed.

Children's Perceptions of Play

Liu (1995) examined young children's perspectives on play and the type of play prevalent in kindergartens in China in the 1990s. She found that large group lessons were the most common indoor activity in kindergartens and that there was little time assigned for indoor free play. When asked to choose their favorite activity among group lessons, "wan" and "youxi," 98% of the 5- to 6-year-old children reported that their favorite activity was the group lesson because this enabled them to gain knowledge and skills, whereas "wan" was simply free play. Liu (1995) asserts that children's choices reflect cultural values transmitted by teachers. For example, teachers emphasize learning in groups and speak highly of the value of group lesson for garnering knowledge and skills. Further, teachers allocated comparatively little time for indoor free play and seldom paid attention to children when they were engaged in free play. Children's responses may reflect their own beliefs or a social desirability bias.

Liu, Pan, & Sun (2005) conducted another study in 2004 to examine the influence of the *Regulations on Kindergarten Education Practice* (1989) on children's perceptions of play. As mentioned earlier, the *Regulations* accorded importance to play in the early childhood curriculum and teachers were expected to make play the basic activity in kindergartens and emphasize "learning through play" over "learning through group lessons." Liu et al. (2005) interviewed 150 children, ranging in age from 5 to 6 years, enrolled in 15 kindergartens in Beijing. Among other questions, children were asked whether they preferred "play or group lessons," 57% of the children responded that they preferred play, compared to 98% in 1995. About 29% of the children said they preferred free play to group lessons, while 14% of the children said they liked both play and group lessons and did not indicate a preference for either activity.

Liu and her colleagues found that group lessons were the main activity in kindergartens in 1995 and 2004 (Liu, 1995; Liu et al., 2005). However, there were interest and activity corners in all 15 kindergartens and children spent an average of 49 min engaging in free play in an interest corner and 20.8% of children regarded activities in an interest/activity corner as play. Liu believes that the educational reforms have led to positive changes in educational practice in the early years as more time is allocated to free play and there is a corresponding decrease in time spent in group lessons.

It is clear that early childhood education policy including contemporary curriculum documents promote child-centerd early education and emphasize play as the major means of learning. However, to what extent is play evident in early childhood centres? What are teachers' and parents' perceptions of play? How is play used for meaning making by children? These questions are considered in the following sections.

Method

Location

The case studies are drawn from Shenzhen, a city in Southern China, which is adjacent to Hong Kong. Shenzhen has a population of about 10 million and is among the most developed and prosperous cities in China. The city has six districts, of which four form part of a Special Economic Zone. The case studies are drawn from Futian district, which is the center for administration and commerce in the Special Economic Zone (Shenzhen Government, 2005).

Participants

To obtain a range of kindergartens, the principals of four kindergartens (two public and two private) with a prekindergarten class were invited to participate in the study. All agreed. The public kindergartens are operated by the local education authority. One of them has won numerous awards and is considered a model programme. Similarly, one of the private kindergartens is a highly regarded, award-winning programme, while the other is considered average by early childhood professionals in the area. We chose to include one boy and one girl from each type of kindergarten. Hence, we randomly selected one child of a predetermined gender from the prekindergarten class in each of the four kindergartens. Information about the selected children, their kindergartens, teachers, and parents is provided in Table 5.1.

The kindergartens varied in physical size and in the number of enrolled children. The class size of the target children ranged from 14 to 29 children, and most of the prekindergarten classes had two teachers and one assistant. All teachers had professional qualifications in education but their academic qualifications varied, and the interviewed teachers were either graduates of normal schools (a 3-year preservice teacher-training course after junior secondary school graduation), teacher-training colleges (3-year in-service or preservice professional-training course after senior secondary school), or normal universities (4-year degree in education). The mothers of the target children were very well educated and all of them had completed tertiary education. Hence, our population was not representative of kindergartens in China, but of those in major cities in China.

Procedure

Observations of the four children were conducted in April 2005. All of the children attended full-day programmes and were videotaped from the start to the end of a typical day. The child was the focus of the observation, and particular attention was given to observing the child at activity times (as opposed to nap times).

After the observations were conducted, a few video clips of the target child “at play” were selected. The child’s teachers and mother were interviewed in individual

Table 5.1 Background information about target children

Child's name/age/gender	Type of kindergarten (date established)	No. of children in kindergarten (size of kindergarten)	No. of staff in kindergarten	"Quality of kindergarten"* teacher qualifications	No. of children/staff in child's class	Mothers'/ interviewed teachers' educational levels**
Dou Dou/30 months/Female	Public (1992)	374 (189 boys and 185 girls) (4,000 m^2)	29 teachers/26 support staff	"Excellent quality" all teachers are college graduates or degree holders	29 (10 boys and 19 girls)/3	College graduate/college graduate
Yu Qiang/30 months/Male	Public (1997)	270 (138 boys and 132 girls) (3,572 m^2)	18 teachers/22 support staff	"Average quality" majority are college graduates	26 (20 boys and 6 girls)/3	University degree/college graduate
Zi Zhen/36 months/Female	Private (1994)	295 (177 boys and 118 girls) (3,298 m^2)	26 teachers/28 support staff	"High quality" all teachers are college graduates	25 (12 boys and 13 girls)/3	University degrees/ university degree
Ye Hao/28 months/Male	Private (2001)	99 (62 boys and 37 girls) (900 m^2)	8 teachers/9 support staff	"Average quality" most are graduates of normal schools	14 (11 boys and 3 girls)/3	University degree/ normal school graduate

* Rated by educational authorities or based on views of early childhood experts in Shenzhen/China.

** University graduates have completed a 4-year degree in education from a Normal University. College graduates have completed a 3-year in-service or preservice professional-training course after senior secondary school. Normal and vocational school graduates have completed a 3-year preservice teacher-training course after junior secondary school graduation.

Table 5.2 Analytical framework

Focus of analysis	Summary
Personal focus of analysis	Teachers' knowledge of Vygotsky's theory, particularly the insights gained from understanding the concept "scaffolding"
Interpersonal focus of analysis	The role of adults in children's play, as: leading play, supporting play, providing free play opportunities, or interacting to maximise direct teaching
Institutional or cultural focus of analysis	Teacher beliefs about the importance of play as a pedagogical approach for learning was framed from an instructional perspective

sessions and shown these clips at the beginning of the session. The interviews, which were videotaped, took place on the same day as the observation. They were conducted by an experienced early childhood professional. All respondents were probed on their beliefs about play and learning in early childhood. In addition, the child's teacher was asked about her professional training and experience and about her role in children's play in kindergartens. The mothers were asked about their educational background, employment history, and about who took responsibility for the child when he or she was not in the kindergarten.

Data Management

Each child was videotaped for about 8 hours, which generated a considerable amount of data. The videotapes were viewed by the two authors, and clips were transcribed and translated into English by an experienced teacher who is currently completing a Ph.D. in Education. Based on the transcripts and videotapes, the authors independently generated categories related to play and learning. These were discussed and a list of categories that were appropriate to characterize the observation and interview data were agreed up on.

In drawing upon cultural – historical theory, the study sought to analyse the play in relation to Rogoff's three foci of analysis. In particular, the analysis featured an examination of teachers' personal knowledge about play, their interpersonal enactments of play, and the institutional or cultural factors which directed how play was organized or conceptualized by professionals, as noted in the summary in Table 5.2.

Results and Discussion

The main objective of this study was to consider the role and meaning of play in kindergartens in Mainland China. In the following section, information garnered through our observation and interviews is presented and analyzed under the following headings: The physical context for learning; The structuring of the day; Children's play; and Parents' and Teachers' views on the meaning of play and learning.

The Physical Context for Learning

Notwithstanding their age and gender, children's play is affected by circumstances, including the physical environment, the material available (toys and books), peers, the psychological atmosphere, and the degree of structure in the day. The four kindergartens were very pleasant. They were all brightly lit, well-ventilated and had a variety of materials for play. The classrooms were arranged with learning corners and desks were in small groups. According to western standards these classrooms would be considered "developmentally appropriate" (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997).

The Structuring of the Day

How did teachers arrange the day? In some Asian countries, free play is used as a reward for children who complete their assigned tasks or worksheets rather than treated as a learning activity in itself. This was certainly not the case in the kindergartens we observed, where "learning by playing" seemed to be very important in curriculum design.

The degree of structuring during the day has a very important influence on the time and space in which children engage in free play. The four kindergartens all opened at about 7:30 a.m. and closed at 5:30 p.m. The timetable for one of the kindergartens is shown in Table 5.3. Similar schedules existed in the other three kindergartens. As the table shows, many activities and transition points punctuate the day.

Notwithstanding the fact that children are "playing" as they participate in other activities, the degree of structure may indeed limit the extent that a child can pursue a free-choice activity or interest. However, children did pursue an area of interest in

Table 5.3 A typical day in the kindergarten for Dou Dou

Time period	Activities
7.30–8.00 a.m.	Greeting and free play
8.00–8.30 a.m.	Breakfast
8.30–8.45 a.m.	Free play, reading, and chatting
8.45–9.30 a.m.	Learning corner activities
9.30–9.45 a.m.	Tea break
9.45–10.10 a.m.	Theme activities
10.10–11.10 a.m.	Outdoor activities
11.10–11.30 a.m.	Story time
11.30–12.00 a.m.	Lunch
12.00–12.10 p.m.	After-lunch walk
12.10–2.30 p.m.	Nap
2.30–3.30 p.m.	Clean up, outdoor activities, and snack
3.30–4.30 p.m.	Subject activities (language/music/math/arts)
4.30–5.00 p.m.	Free play and packing up
5.00–5.30 p.m.	Farewell routine

successive activities. For example, Yu Qiang was quite taken by superheroes such as Ultraman, a popular Japanese cartoon hero. He engaged in imaginative play involving superheroes during free play and pursued his interest in drawing activities and in outdoor sand play.

(The whole class was divided into two groups. One group was doing mathematics activities and the others were given the choice of playing in any of the interest corners in the classroom. The teacher and a few children including Yu Qiang are in a corridor outside the classroom.)

Teacher: Yu Qiang, what do you want to play?
Yu Qiang: I want to play with a gun.
Teacher: Then go to the Construction corner and play on your own.
Yu Qiang: Later on, I can play with the gun! (*speaking to the Observer*)

(Yu Qiang runs to the Block Area, where he sits at the table. Within two minutes, he constructs a gun with plastic cogs.)

Yu Qiang: What a beautiful gun! (*talking to himself*)

(Yu Qiang begins to enjoy playing with his gun. He points the gun in different directions with no clear target. He also makes gunshot sounds.)

(After a while, Yu Qiang goes back to the table, and takes off one cog from the gun thus decreasing the length of the body. He then constructs a similar structure with some other cogs so that he has two "guns" and holds one in each hand. In the meantime two other boys also come to the construction corner and Yu Qiang and one of the boys engage in parallel play for some of the time.)

Yu Qiang: I have two guns. (*Turns around and shows them to the researcher*)
Teacher: Who are you shooting at?
Yu Qiang: Baddies.
The teacher leaves. Yu Qiang and another boy continue to play with their weapons.
The teacher returns.
Teacher: Who are you shooting at?
Yu Qiang/classmate: Shooting the "Baddies."
Teacher: Then let us draw the "baddies."

(*Yu Qiang Clip 0207*)

The teacher sticks another piece of paper on the wall for the children to draw Baddies whom they would like to shoot. One boy draws a Monster.

Yu Qiang: I want to draw Ultraman.
Teacher: Do you want to shoot Ultraman?
Yu Qiang: NO. I will draw him next to the "Baddie."
Teacher: OK.

(Yu Qiang draws something in the corner of the paper.)

Teacher: Good. When you shoot the Monster, be careful not to hurt Ultraman. You begin to do your work, later on please tell me how many Monsters or Baddies you have destroyed.

(*Yu Qiang Clip 0209*)

These clips suggest several things of note about Yu Qiang's play and the context which supports it. First, despite the highly structured day in the kindergarten, Yu Qiang is able to pursue his interest in Ultraman and the teacher allows him to do so. Superhero play is common in preschools in the Western world and is common in more developed Asian cities. Our observations of kindergartens in cities in China show that this is true. Japanese cartoons are particularly popular in China.

There has been a debate in the literature as to whether superhero play should be allowed in preschools. On one hand, teachers are concerned about classroom safety, the messages children learn when this type of play is permitted in preschools, and the fact that children tend to consistently engage in superhero play, which precludes engagement in other types of play that may be more beneficial to child development. On the other hand, teachers report that superhero war play is so appealing to young children that it is hard to prevent children from participating in such play (Levin, 2003).

Yu Qiang's teacher did not prohibit "gun play" but sent him to a quieter area of the classroom where there were few children when he stated he wanted to play with guns. The teacher also suggested that Yu Qiang draw "baddies" when he had been engaged in shooting for about 15 min so as to redirect his attention to what could be considered a more positive activity. The theme of good versus evil was also evident in Yu Qiang's play. This theme is common in the play of children all over the world and Yu Qiang's teacher reinforced the idea of good versus evil in her interactions with him.

How Do Children "Play"?

To answer this question, we developed a typology of children's activities during the school day based on our classroom observations and previous studies of play in kindergartens in China (Liu et al., 2005). Four categories, which involved play but varied in terms of the level of teacher-imposed regulation, were developed. The categories, in order of decreasing structure, are:

(a) Teacher *leads* and participates in games, activity, or play: This includes teacher planned, initiated, or arranged activities that may be part of the current teaching theme;
(b) Teacher *supports* games, activity, or play: Teacher provides structure and supports activities that are initiated by children;
(c) Child engages in games or activities *chosen by the teacher*: Child, either independently or with peers, engages in tasks and activities chosen by the teacher; and
(d) Child engages in *free play*: This is genuinely free-choice play, and children engage in solitary, parallel, or cooperative play.

Teachers are active participants in children's activities/play in (a) and (b), but are observers (and do sometimes intervene) in (c) and (d). Another category, direct

Table 5.4 Types of activities observed in the four kindergartens

Types of activity	Description	Examples
Teacher **leads and participates** in games, activity or play	This includes teacher planned, initiated, or arranged activities that may be part of the current teaching theme.	• The teachers and children are playing a game that involves singing, holding hands, and standing in circle. The latter increases or decreases in size depending on the words in the song, "Blowing, blowing a small/big bubble."
Teacher **supports** games, activity, or play	Teacher provides structure and supports activities that are initiated by children.	• The children decide to act out the story of "The Rabbit and the Wolf." The teacher helps them with their planning, reframes their ideas, and supports their choice of activity.
Child engages in games or activities, **arranged by the teacher**	Child, either independently or with peers, engages in tasks and activities chosen by the teacher.	• The teacher has arranged a game where children take turns to throw an object at a target. This physical activity is not related to the teaching theme.
Free play	This is genuinely free choice play, and children engage in solitary, parallel, or cooperative play.	• A child plays with plastic toys and puppets.
Direct teaching	The teacher engages in either small or large group instruction.	• The teacher reviews the English names of animals with which the children are familiar. She then mimics the actions of an animal and asks them to name the animal. After they do so, she teaches the children the English name for the animal.

instruction, which did not involve play, was also used to code the observational data. Table 5.4 gives examples of the various categories.

The time that each of the four target children spent in each of the four different types of activity is depicted in Table 5.5 and Fig. 5.1. Children engaged in these four different activities for about 1.5 hours during the day. There were, of course, individual differences, but children spent the most time in teacher-led activities. Children spent an average of about 62 min in activities developed or supported by the teacher, compared to about 21 min in genuinely free-play activities. Given the children's age and Chinese beliefs about play and learning (Liu et al., 2005), this is not surprising.

As shown in Fig. 5.1, play-based learning was the major activity in the kindergartens, and the children spent 65.5% of their total activity time (excluding mealtimes and naps) in learning by playing. The award-winning public kindergartens allocated about 70% of the total activity time to play-based learning activities, while the "average" quality private kindergarten only allocated about 49% of total activity time for this. This may be because public kindergartens are expected to fully and effectively implement government guidelines. However, there were appropriate materials in the private kindergartens and the teachers in these settings had a lower level of professional qualification. Therefore, the private kindergartens allocated more time to formal instruction, which requires fewer play-related resources, and this left less time for play-based learning.

It should be pointed out that some private kindergartens have highly qualified staff, ample educational resources, and adhere to government recommendations. However, not all parents can afford the fees charged by these "high" quality kindergartens, and preschools may not be able to afford the salaries for highly qualified

Table 5.5 Time spent in different types of activities by target children

	Dou Dou	Yu Qiang	Zi Zhen	Ye Hao	Average
Teacher leads and participates in activity*	41′29″ (28.6%)	47′25″ (33%)	34′04″ (30.6%)	24′21″ (23.9%)	36′32″ (29.0%)
Teacher supports activity*	27′13″ (18.7%)	18′14″ (12.6%)	19′29″ (17.5%)	0 (0%)	16′13″ (12.2%)
Teacher chooses "free play" activity*	20′ (13.8%)	13′06″ (9%)	6′28″ (5.8%)	0 (0%)	9′53″ (7.15%)
Free play*	23′34″ (16.2%)	22′53″ (16%)	12′49″ (11.7%)	25′04″ (24.5%)	21′05″ (17.1%)
Direct teaching	(22.5%)	(29.4%)	(34.4%)	(51.6%)	(34.5%)
Total activity time**	145′	144′	111′	102′	125′30″

* A form of play-based learning.

** Does not include meal or nap times.

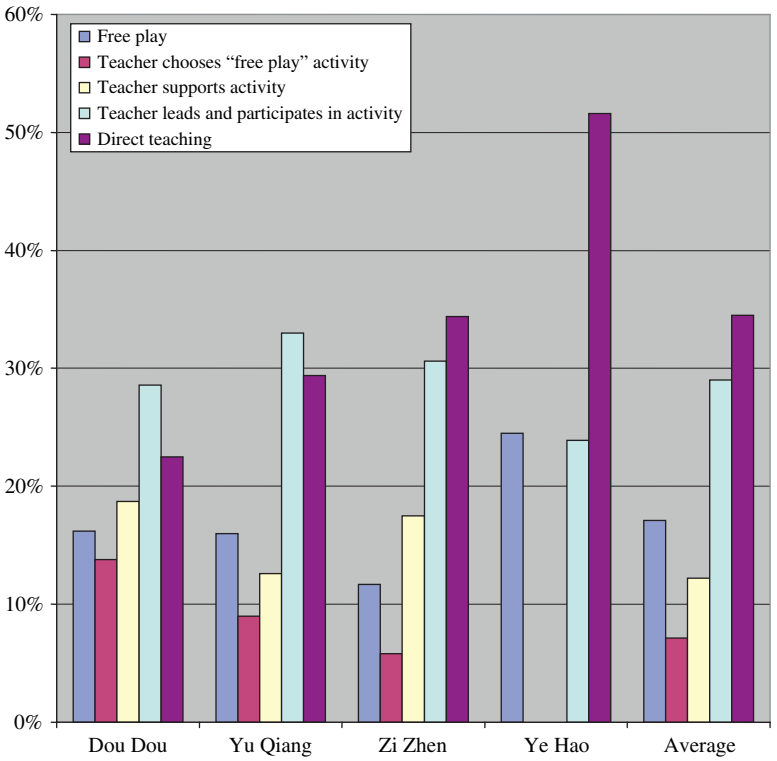

Fig. 5.1 Time spent in different types of activities by target children

teachers command. Progressive guidelines require high-quality teachers and adequate resources, and unfortunately many private preschools do not have these.

During the course of the day, as shown in Fig. 5.1, Dou Dou, Yu Qiang, Zi Zhen and Ye Hao spent about 24, 23, 12, and 25 min, respectively, engaged in genuinely free-choice play. What was the subject of their attention during this period? What did teachers do?

How Do Teachers Support Children's Meaning Making in Free Play?

As mentioned earlier, children engage in "learning by playing" throughout the school day. However, we are particularly interested in what children did during free play and what their teachers did when the children were at play.

The children engaged in pretend play when they had a free choice of activities. Certain themes were evident in this type of play. For example, like children in other parts of the world, these children engaged in superhero play (for example, Yu Qiang) and played "mummies and daddies" using puppets (Dou Dou and Zi Zhen).

The target children pursued their interests through the course of the day when they had free-choice activities and teachers allowed them to do so. For example, Dou Dou played with "rabbits" made of plastic cogs for much of the morning and Yu Qiang continued his "superhero" play. He constructed a gun to shoot the "baddies," drew the "baddies" and made Ultraman-like movements when dancing in music class. Another example comes from Zi Zhen's class. The story of "The Rabbits and the Wolf" was discussed, and then performed during circle time. During free play, Zi Zhen then drew rabbits.

The teachers repeatedly intervened in the free play of the children to reinforce basic concepts and learning experiences. The following excerpts illustrate this assertion.

Teacher: *T*: What is the colour of your little rabbit? What colour is this?
Dou Dou A: Blue. There are three colours.
Teacher: T: Oh, there are three colours. What are they?
Dou Dou A: Blue, white, and green.
Teacher: T: Good (*Thumb-up*.)

(Dou Dou Clip 0104)

Teacher: T: What colour is the bird?
Zi Zhen C: It is blue.

(*Zi Zhen Clip 0039*)

(*The boys inform the teacher how many targets they have shot down with their guns.)*

Teacher: How many?
Yu Qiang: Puts five fingers up using his left hand
Teacher: One, two, three, four, five. Oh, I see. You shot five Monsters. How about you?
*C*1: Four. (*but shows 5 fingers*)
Teacher: This is four. (*Reshaping the boy's fingers by putting one down*)
Yu Qiang: I shot two.
Teacher: Two is like this. (*teacher shows Yu Qiang how to denote the number 2 with his fingers*)

(*Yu Qiang Clip 0209*)

Teachers often scaffolded the children's learning and helped them to make meaning of their experiences. Early childhood teacher preparation in China today embraces Vygotsky's ideas and encourages teachers to scaffold children's learning. An example comes from the interaction of one teacher with Dou Dou during free play. Dou Dou was making a picture of rabbits with pieces of paper and the teacher led her to think about different aspects of the rabbit through the use of questions.

The teachers not only helped the children to understand their experiences, but their practices reflected fundamental cultural beliefs about the role of early childhood education in children's development. For example, there was an emphasis on hygiene and the formation of good habits. Consistent with the findings of Liu and Elicker (2005) and Liu et al. (2005), we found that the teachers did focus on transmitting knowledge and skills, although this was often done in play-like situations. Liu and Elicker (2005) observed teacher–child interactions in Chinese kindergartens. They found that teachers initiated 69.1% of the interactions, while the rest were initiated by children. Of the interactions initiated by teachers, the most common involved maintaining discipline (28%) and directing (37%). The latter was coded when teachers instructed, guided, or coached the children to help them acquire new knowledge or skills, including how to play with a new toy.

What is the Meaning of Play and Learning According to the Teachers and Parents?

All the teachers and parents were asked about the role of early childhood education and the relationship between play and learning. The extent of similarities in their responses is remarkable. All the respondents alluded to the close relationship between play and learning and that play was a vehicle of learning. Many of them also equated play with early childhood education. Excerpts from the interviews are given below.

Dou Dou

"Early childhood education is very important, and habit and routine training is critical. Play is part of early childhood education; it is a *means of training routine and discipline*. . .Play can facilitate children's development. Play is when children have *fun* with toys. A child *learns through play*, the child's learning is quite different from an adult's learning." (Dou Dou's teacher)

"Play is to *have fun* with toys. . . (Play and learning) *are very close to each other*. For example, Montessori work in the classroom is by nature a kind of play." (Dou Dou's mother)

Yu Qiang

"*Play is a means for children learning* in preschool; for example, Montessori work is a kind of learning. *Early childhood education is very important* to child development. Play facilitates child development, and scaffolds the child's learning. Learning in play is very natural." (Yu Qiang's teacher)

"Play can enhance children's IQs, so I have bought many construction toys . . .and he can develop his intelligence from playing with these construction toys. Play is *linked with learning*. Play is the first kind of learning from birth. Children's play is a *kind of early childhood education*." (Yu Qiang's mother)

Zi Zhen

"Play is the major content of children's daily life; the majority of their time is occupied by playing. Play is the most *natural, happy and favourite activity* for young children. Children like playing. *They explore this world, gain experience, and understand concepts through*

playing. Play is the most important activity in preschool years. Every activity should be *play-oriented in early childhood*." (Zi Zhen's teacher)
"Early childhood education is very important. . ., can change the structure of your brain. . . . Play is the *means of early childhood education*. You cannot force a child to learn, so you need to pleasant the learning to make it like a play. *Play is the means of learning.*" (Zi Zhen's mother)

Ye Hao

"Play is a kind of teacher-organized activity involving children with some roles. . .There is a kind of *reciprocal relationship between play and learning*. . .Play can make children more active and behave better." (Ye Hao's teacher)

"Children of his age *should learn through playing*. Play means making sentences, kicking balls and group activities." (Ye Hao's mother)

Why are all these responses so remarkably similar? Are teachers' practices consistent with their stated beliefs? The reasons for the consistency between teachers' beliefs are straightforward. All these teachers had professional training, in which they would have learned about the importance of play. Furthermore, in cities like Shenzhen, there are ample opportunities for continued professional development, and these teachers would have taken advantage of them. Two of the kindergartens are highly regarded and one is a model programme. Hence, the teachers were likely to know how to implement the *Regulations on Kindergarten Education Practice* fairly well. However, the responses of the four mothers were very similar to those of the early childhood professionals, possibly because they were very educated and well informed. None of the target children had siblings, and educated parents of single children tend to exert much effort in finding out about early development because they want their child to succeed in life.

Conclusions

This chapter set out to answer questions related to play and learning in early childhood settings in China. Documentary analyses and case studies suggest that adults believe that the relationship between play and learning in the early years is very close. We believe that the term "*eduplay*" connotes what is expected by the government, teachers, and parents in early childhood settings and is an appropriate term to conceptualise teacher practices in Chinese preschools.

Beliefs About Play and Learning

The most influential early childhood curriculum mandate in the past two decades, *The Regulations on Kindergarten Education Practice,* put forward new principles for kindergarten education. Among these was the notion that play is a fundamental activity that should be integrated into all other activities in preschools (State

Educational Commission, 1989). However, it has been difficult for practitioners to fully adopt the ideas advocated in the *Regulations* due to inconsistencies between philosophies outlined in the regulations and powerful and deep-rooted cultural beliefs about learning (Wang & Mao, 1996; Zhu and Wang, 2005). For example, the *Regulations* emphasized play over formal instruction and recommended that a harmonious democratic relationship between the teacher and the child be established (Liu et al., 2005). This is not consistent with the traditional idea of obeying the teacher without arguing, and Confucian view that learning is beneficial to human development but play is not. Furthermore, the *Regulations* suggested that teachers move from being transmitters of knowledge to facilitators of learning and creativity. However, in the past, the teacher was characterized as a fountain of knowledge who force-fed Peking ducks.[3] Nonetheless, our observations suggest that play-based learning was prevalent in the kindergartens and accounted for over 65% of the activity, in comparison to direct teaching, which occurred 34.5% of the activity time. It appears that traditional cultural beliefs about learning in China have taken a back seat to what is considered as good educational practice (Rao, Cheng, & Narain, 2003).

The kindergarten teachers and parents who we interviewed believed that the relationship between play and learning was very close and regarded play as the main vehicle for learning. The emphasis was on "playing to learn." These beliefs reflect the influence of curriculum reforms on early childhood, teacher education, and the mass media, but are also a function of the age of the children for whom teachers have responsibility.

In line with curriculum guidelines, teachers and parents recognize the educational value of play. Indeed, the focus is on *early education* and the instructional value of various "playful" activities. Only two of the interviewees (Dou Dou's mother and Zi Zhen's teacher) spoke of play as a leisure activity, or spoke of the value of play in its own right. In general, play was considered the means to educate a young child.

The relationship between play and learning was very close for both teachers and parents. Because of this and the focus on the educational value of play, we feel that the term "eduplay" captures the beliefs of teachers and parents about what should happen and indeed occurs in Chinese early childhood settings.

Teacher Practices

The children participated in play-like activities throughout the day. However, much of that time was spent engaging in activities that were arranged by the teacher, who was often an active participant. There was less time allocated to genuinely free play where the children could pursue their own interests. The highly structured day is partly due to children's age, but also a reflection of Chinese cultural beliefs about the

[3] This refers to forcing food into the mouth of the duck by holding its throat.

early years being a time for training young children (Liu et al., 2005; Rao, McHale, & Pearson, 2003).

The teachers intervened in free play to help the children master some basic preacademic concepts such as size and shape, number and colour, etc. We believe that it was appropriate for them to do so. In some countries, early childhood teacher preparation programmes appear to present only a constructivist "children will learn for themselves" perspective, resulting in the concept of "developmentally appropriate practice" being interpreted by the teachers as unstructured play and minimal adult intervention. Li (2005) has suggested that early childhood educators in China keep an appropriate balance between education and play in implementing the reform proposals. Our observations suggest that the curriculum is underpinned by a developmentalist philosophy, and appropriate teaching approaches are used to facilitate young children's acquisition of basic skills.

Pramling-Samuelsson (this volume) considers play and learning as being two sides of the same coin in early education. Our findings suggest that the relation between education and play is also very close in China. While traditional Confucian values emphasize academic achievement and learning, curriculum regulations have empowered kindergartens to make play the basis of early childhood education. However, as mentioned earlier, this ideology is not consistent with traditional Chinese beliefs about education. Several decades on, our observations suggest that direct teaching is evident and genuinely free play accounts for only about 17% of activity time in kindergarten. Eduplay, a form of play-based education with "Chinese characteristics," appears to be prevalent in Chinese preschools, and it is in the context of eduplay that teachers help children to make meaning out of their experiences.

Acknowledgements Thanks go to Wu Yunxia and Pei Miao for their help with the data collection and analyses. Correspondence concerning this chapter should be addressed to Nirmala Rao, Faculty of Education, The University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China. E-mail may be sent to nrao@hku.hk

References

Bredekamp, S., & Copple, C. (Eds.). (1997). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs* (Rev. ed.). Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.

Bureau of Statistics of Shenzhen. (2005). *Census 2004*. Retrieved on October 28, 2005 from http://www.sztj.com/pub/sztjpublic/

Du, L. L. (2005). The investigation and research on preschool teachers' quality. *Journal of Zunyi Normal College, 7*(2), 47–49.

GOC, Government of the People's Republic of China. (2000). *Education for all: the year 2000 assessment final country report of China*. Beijing: Government of the People's Republic of China.

Levin, D. E. (2003). Beyond banning war and superhero play: Meeting children's needs in violent times. *Young Children, 58*(3), 46–51.

Li, H. (2005). Developing school-based curriculum in Hong Kong *Kindergartens: Insights, challenges and solutions*. Hong Kong: The Hong Kong Institute of Education.

Li, H., & Li, P. M. (2001). A Dialogue on the ways of reforming early childhood education in China. *Early Childhood Education*, No. 7, 8, 9 (serial paper).

Liu, J., & Elicker, J. (2005). Teacher-child interaction in Chinese kindergartens: An observational analysis. *International Journal of Early Years Education, 13*(2), 129–143.

Liu, Y. (1995). *Research on young children's perceptions of play: questions and reflections*. In the 5th academic conference of the chinese association of early childhood education (in Chinese). Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press.

Liu, Y. (2004). *The multi-perspectives of cultural, psychological, and pedagogical research on children's play*. Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press.

Liu, Y., & Feng, X. (2005). Kindergarten educational reform during the past two decades in Mainland China: Achievements and problems. *International Journal of Early Years Education, 13*(2), 93–99.

Liu, Y., Pan, Y. J., & Sun, H. F. (2005). Comparative research on young children's perceptions of play: An approach to observing the effects of kindergarten educational reform. *International Journal of Early Years Education, 13*(2), 101–112.

MOE, Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China (2003). *Basic education in China*. Retrieved on October 28, 2005 http://www.moe.edu.cn/english/basic_b.htm

National Bureau of Statistics of China. (2005). *Census 2004*. Retrieved on October 28, 2005 from http://www.stats.gov.cn/

Population Division, UN, Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the United Nations Secretariat. (2004). *World population prospects: The 2004 revision* and *world urbanization prospects: The 2003 revision.* Retrieved October 28 2005 from http://esa.un.org/unpp

Pramling-Samuelsson, I. (2008). Play and learning in Swedish early childhood education. In I. Pramling-Samuelsson & M. Fleer (Eds.), *Play and learning in early childhood settings: International perspectives* (Chapter 7, this volume). Springer.

Rao, N., Cheng, K. M., & Narain, K. (2003). Primary schooling in China and India: Understanding how sociocontextual factors moderate the role of the State. *International Review of Education, 49*, 151–174.

Rao, N., McHale, J. P., & Pearson, E. (2003). Links between socialization goals and child-rearing practices in Chinese and Indian mothers. *Infant and Child Development, 12*, 475–492.

Shenzhen Government Online. (2005). *Administrative division*. Retrieved on October 30, 2005 from http://english.sz.gov.cn/

State Educational Commission. (1989). *Regulations on kindergarten education practice.* Beijing: Government of the People's Republic of China.

State Educational Commission. (2001). *Guidelines for kindergarten education practice.* Beijing: Government of the People's Republic of China.

Wang, J., & Mao, S. (1996). Culture and the kindergarten curriculum in the People's Republic of China. *Early Child Development and Care, 123*, 143–156.

Wang, X. C., & Spodek, B. (2000). *Early childhood education in China: A hybrid of traditional, communist, and western culture*. Paper presented at the meeting of the annual meeting of the National Association of Young Children, Atlanta, GA.

Wong, M., & Pang, L. (2002). Early childhood education in China: Issues and development. In L. K. S. Chan & E. Mellor (Eds.), *International developments in early childhood services* (pp. 53–69). New York: Peter Lang.

Zhu, J. (2005). Reflection on two decades of reform in early childhood curriculum in Mainland China. *Hong Kong Journal of Early Childhood, 3*(2), 5–8.

Zhu, J., & Wang, C. (2005). Contemporary early childhood education research in China. In B. Spodek & O. N. Saracho (Eds.), *International perspectives on research in early childhood education* (pp. 55–77). Greenwich, CT, US: Information Age Publishers.