Chapter 8
'What Is Finger Knitting?' Chinese Pre-service Teachers' Initial Professional Experience in Australian Early Childhood Education

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Abstract Professional experience in teacher education programmes is being reframed due to the growing intake of international students over the last decade. Early Childhood Education (ECE), as one of the favoured options of many international students, witnesses increasing enrolment from international students, especially those from China. However, due to the philosophical and pedagogical differences between Early Childhood Education in Australia and China, Chinese pre-service teachers can encounter multiple and complex challenges during their professional experiences in the Australian ECE context. This chapter presents the initial professional experience of one first-year undergraduate Chinese student studying in ECE, through a narrative lens. Bourdieu's *field*, *habitus* and *capital* are employed to understand how pre-service teachers' perceptions towards the field and different cultural and linguistic capitals that they possess, can inform international pre-service teachers' success and self-confidence during their professional experiences.

Introduction

In Australia, over the last decade, the population of higher education is diversifying with the intake of international students. According to the Department of Education (2017), compared to the previous year, in July 2017, there was a 17% increase in the number of international students in higher education in Australia. The majority of international students are from the 'big five' Asian countries (China, India, Republic of Korea, Thailand and Vietnam) with Chinese students forming the largest cohort (36.8%) across a number of degrees and disciplines (Department of Education and Training 2016). Since 2012, China has become the largest source country of international students studying Australia with 28% of the total international student cohort being Chinese Nationals (Department of Education and Training 2017). To be more specific, in 2017, there are 150,393 Chinese international students studying

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in Australia and 108,620 members of this student cohort are enrolled in Australian universities (Department of Education and Training 2017).

Similarly, the higher education area of teacher education is also witnessing this trend as Australia has proactively attracted a large number of international students. This is even more particularly the case for Early Childhood Education (ECE), which has both coursework and mandatory professional experience components, aiming to prepare pre-service teachers adequately for their future profession. For example, in the authors' institution, Monash University, Chinese international students account for 52.2% of the total student number in undergraduate ECE (Monash University 2017). Moreover, due to the immigration policies, ECE is also a qualifying degree for Permanent Residency in Australia. According to DET (2014), 24,936 permanent independent migrant visas from international Early Childhood (EC) pre-service or graduate teachers were granted in 2013–2014.

This chapter argues, along with Arkoudis et al. (2013), that the intake of international students can enhance both domestic and international students' cultural awareness and intercultural engagement. Given this growing phenomenon and its implications for those involved, this chapter will discuss Chinese international pre-service teachers' initial experiences and perspectives on ECE in an Australian context. The title of this chapter ('What is finger knitting?' Chinese pre-service teachers' initial professional experience in Australian Early Childhood Education) refers to finger-knitting, an Australian handicraft, which is a process of looping and weaving with the yarn and used as an activity in some childhood centres. Here, we use 'finger-knitting' not just because it is an activity experienced by our pre-service teachers, but also how it acts as a metaphor for the ways Chinese pre-service teachers construct themselves and are constructed by competing discourses and resources. These include course work and professional experience expectations, professional standards for graduate teachers and ways that they draw on Bourdieusian concepts such as cultural capital.

We frame our exploration with Bourdieu's concepts: *field, habitus and capital*. Due to the pedagogical, philosophical and sociocultural differences between ECE in China and Australia, we found that participants experienced significant challenges in adjusting to an Australia ECE culture during their initial professional experience. Although research has been conducted in the exploration of international and Chinese students' academic experiences in Australia, the field of international students' professional experience is under-researched, especially in Early Childhood Education. Further, it is timely to re-imagine professional experience from pre-service teachers' perspectives, especially from the growing number of Chinese pre-service teachers' perspectives, so that relational dimensions can be better understood.

Contextual Dimensions: ECE in Australia

The Australian ECE curriculum framework, *Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF)* for Australia is the first national framework developed from knowledge and practices about children's learning and development

(DEEWR, 2009). In this framework, play-based learning is a major focus and significant pedagogy, as it is seen to generate a number of benefits such as cognitive development, language and literacy learning, emotional development and relationship with others, fostering creativity and divergent thinking (Barblett, 2010; Fleer & Samuelsson, 2008). Therefore, it is strongly emphasised and employed in Australia ECE professional experience. In contrast, in China, it is challenging to implement a play-based learning approach due to the deep-rooted cultural beliefs about formal learning instruction and lack of play-based experience of teachers (Rao & Li, 2008). Parents also reinforce a preference towards formal teaching and learning over play in the Chinese context (Hu, Zhou, & Li, 2017).

In Early Childhood (EC) teacher education, the combination of theoretical and practical learning experiences is believed to support the consolidation of knowledge and practices in real learning contexts (Starkey & Rawlins, 2011). There are many advantages of integrating professional experience into teacher education, such as improving academic and professional knowledge and applying pedagogical strategies within the future professional context (Allen & Peach, 2007; Cochran-Smith, 2016; Darling-Hammond, 2006). The rationale for this integration can be traced back to John Dewey over a century ago, who initiated the idea of consolidating learning (Dewey, 1904).

Professional experience usually commences at the beginning of pre-service teachers' degrees. The early inclusion of professional placement aims to reconstruct understanding of the young learners and the teaching community as well as to enable beginning pre-service teachers to develop understanding of the demands of the profession. To illustrate, the number of ECE professional placement days ranges from 60 to 80 days: 60 days for a postgraduate teaching qualification and 80 days for undergraduate degrees (ACECQA, 2016). In Victoria, since 30 September 2015, all Early Childhood teachers need to be registered with Victorian Institute of Teaching which echoes the quality enhancement needs in ECE (Fenech, Sumsion, & Shepherd, 2010).

Early Childhood Education in China

In total, there are 223,683 early childhood services in China, which positions the nation as having the largest ECE system in the world (Feng, 2017). The recognition of the importance of ECE has risen in China in recent years, especially after the development of a detailed *Framework for 3–6-Year-Old Children's Development Criteria*, which responds to the National Plan for Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development for 2010–2020 (Ministry of Education of China, 2012). The development of these policy documents means that ECE is marked as one of the education development priorities for the first time in China (Feng, 2017).

Influenced by the culturally rooted philosophies towards ECE, kindergartens in China provide services that are designed to fulfil two purposes: child care and educational preparation (Liu et al., 2012). The Chinese education system is influenced

by the Confucian culture and academic achievement in the forms of examinations, which can be regarded as a means to upward social mobility (Ho & Hao, 2014; Sun & Rao, 2017).

Notably, in many cities in China, there are entrance examinations for primary schools, especially in higher quality primary schools, with the subjects in the entrance examinations being more diverse and questions more difficult than those from other schools. Hu and Li (2012) found that Chinese parents with higher educational levels prefer to send their children to centres where children can engage in formal learning which prepares them for school study and pressure from schools and society. For example, Li and Liu (2016) point out that some kindergartens require children to be able to use multiplication tables fluently, solve addition and subtraction problems under 100, and recognise one thousand characters.

In China, there are more than two million EC professionals working in the field. However, EC professionals' positioning in the society is less advantaged compared to their peers in other education sectors. One reason for this may be the shortage of university-qualified professionals in the field and that the majority of the teachers graduate from normal schools and normal colleges (Zhu & Han, 2006). Normal schools enrol students from lower secondary schools and after three years of study graduates can be qualified EC teachers while similarly normal colleges offer 3-year courses to upper secondary students. Currently, there are in total 252,113 full-time EC teachers working in China with approximately 18% having an undergraduate and postgraduate degrees (376,025 undergraduate degrees and 3278 with masters' degrees) (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2015).

International Pre-service Teachers in Australia

International pre-service teachers studying primary and secondary education in the Australian context can encounter a number of challenges and constraints in these settings, according to research (Ashman, Short, Muir, Jales, & Myhill, 2013; Barton, Hartwig, & Cain, 2015; Nallaya, 2016). For instance, research shows that Asian international pre-service teachers often lack the English proficiency to support the satisfactory completion of their professional placement and university study and that their unfamiliarity with Australian culture can cause difficulties in the placement (Spooner-Lane, Tangen, & Campbell, 2009). Similarly, Allen and Peach (2007) point out that overseas-born pre-service teachers might experience cultural issues such as unfamiliarity with Australian school cultures, different pedagogies and teaching beliefs, as well as classroom management skills. This in turn can affect international pre-service teachers' wellbeing, leading to negative emotions such as frustration and anxiety (Nguyen, 2014). The intercultural differences can sometimes reflect different educational philosophies, perspectives and practices between international pre-service teachers' home countries and Australia (Ashman et al., 2013). Hadley, De Goia, and Highfield (2011) found that international pre-service teachers were surprised to discover that children's voices were valued and heard during the

professional placement, which contradicted their own primary school learning experiences where children sat in rows while listening to the teacher.

To further explore the ideas from existing research, we interviewed a number of Chinese international ECE pre-service teachers. We wanted to capture their responses early in their experience of their degree, when the cultural dissonance was arguably at its most pronounced. In this study particularly, culturally influenced perceptions and practices towards children and ECE teaching and learning can contribute to the understanding of Chinese pre-service teachers' initial interactions with the Australian ECE context.

We draw on Bourdieu's field, habitus and capital, to understand some of the complexities of individual pre-service teachers' transitions to different cultural and learning settings such as China to Australia and university coursework study to professional experience sites (Blackmore, Gribble, & Rahimi, 2015; Clark, Zukas, & Lent, 2011; Marginson, 2008). Briefly, Bourdieu believes that the interaction between field, habitus and cultural capital generates action and logic of practice (Bourdieu, 1990b). 'Field' refers to the relational social space where there are complex positioning, struggles and power relations (Harker, Mahar, & Wilkes, 1990). It can be seen as a field of force and a field of struggle and every field shares its own laws or 'feel for the game' (Bourdieu, 1990a, 1993a). The particularity of a field can produce 'habitus', which denotes transferable dispositions that are shaped by previous experiences and structuring constantly, which can generate different practices (Bourdieu, 1977a, b). Reay (2004) conveys the complexity of habitus by explaining that habitus is embodied and it can encompass speaking, feeling and thinking, which can be the 'products of opportunities and constraints' (p. 433). The third thinking tool, capital, is 'accumulated labour' and there are basically three forms of capital: economic capital, cultural capital and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986). In this chapter, we focus on cultural capital in the form of linguistic capital. Cultural capital can be acquired but it cannot be acquired instantly nor through other people without any personal effort (Bourdieu, 1979). Bourdieu's concepts offer capacity to understand how Chinese pre-service teachers' transferrable dispositions and capital are shaped and informed in the professional experience field in ECE.

Narrative-Based Case Studies

Incorporating narrative interpretations of the participants' stories, or cases in this study, provides us with powerful insights to understand participants' aptitudes and experiences in a particular historical context. According to Yin (2014) a case study is 'an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident' (p. 18). In other words, case studies are employed to generate in-depth understandings towards a phenomenon in a contextualised situation. Although single case and multiple case designs share similar methodological frameworks and little difference, we believe using a multiple case design can create a more compelling

and robust data collection and analysis phase which, in turn, contributes to more powerful interpretation (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

We employed a multiple case study design to explore the experiences and responses of a cohort of first-year Chinese international pre-service teachers undertaking a Bachelor of Education (Honours) degree in Early Childhood Education at a university in Victoria, Australia. Data consisted of one focus group interview and two in-depth individual interviews, in addition to document analysis of EC policies in both countries and reflective professional experience journal entries. Eleven first-year undergraduate Chinese ECE pre-service teachers participated in this study and every one of them is a single case. With ethics approval, participants were invited to participate in one focus group conducted at the beginning of their first semester and they were then individually interviewed prior to and after their first ten days of professional placement experience in different urban EC centres. Access to their professional experience journals was requested and granted. During the focus group and individual interviews, discussion focused on previous study experience, study motivation, practicum expectation and outcome, as well as participants' overall perspectives of ECE in Australia. The intent was to explore the changes in Chinese pre-service teachers' perspectives towards ECE in their first year of study and how these changes impacted on their experience of and adjustment to Australian ECE expectations. This reflection on their experiences 'interweaves between different layers of personal, interpersonal, and institutional demands that lend to both present and future implications of pre-service teachers' identity as EC professionals' (Monk & Phillipson, 2016).

In this chapter, we present findings from one particular case: Sue's story, which offers a glimpse of the cultural and linguistic challenges that one Chinese pre-service teacher encountered in their first professional experience as well as the capital and contribution that she brings to the Australian ECE field. We believe that positioning and repositioning the ways that this participant speaks of her professional experience provides useful understanding for teacher educators into broader intercultural encounters with an Australian ECE context.

Sue's Story

Sue is 18 years old and a first-year student studying Early Childhood Education in an Australian university located in Melbourne, a large culturally diverse city in Victoria. Originally from Shanghai, China, Sue previously studied at an international school in China. In this non-traditional Chinese school, Sue studied all subjects in English and was taught by non-Chinese teachers. In comparison to her friends who studied at public schools in China, Sue's English, especially her spoken English, is proficient as she was required to complete her academic study in English. Sue's family planned to send her to England to undertake tertiary education. However, they then realised this would mean Sue would be required to sit university entrance exams. Sue's family explored other options and found that Sue could take multiple tests and

formative assessments throughout the foundation programmes to meet the university requirements if she moved to the State of Victoria in Australia. Therefore, Sue's family chose Melbourne for Sue's higher education study and Sue did not complete her secondary school study in China. Instead, Sue transitioned to one foundation course programme in Melbourne and studied two years in the programme prior to university.

There were varying motivation factors for Sue's enrolment in an ECE degree. Sue took a test in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and achieved 6.5 in total with 7 in speaking and listening. Her IELTS score met university requirements and therefore, she was not required to undertake further English language studies. Sue remarked that she loves children and her grandmother used to work in ECE in China. Being able to migrate to Australia further influenced Sue's decision.

The following section presents Sue's perspectives on and experiences of ECE. The transcript excerpts are from the focus group discussion and her individual interview.

English Language Confidence Before and After Professional Experience

When asked whether she encountered English language challenges at the beginning of the semester, Sue commented that she was fairly confident with her English language proficiency:

> For daily English, maybe because I have been here for a while, I don't have many English language issues during daily conversations with others. In class, however, I feel that I lack academic vocabulary. When I write an essay, I always need to use the dictionaries. And before I started my study in Australia, I was very confident about my English level and I achieved satisfactory academic IELTS score (with 7 in reading and speaking; 6 in writing and speaking).

Attending an international school and studying in Australia for more than two years contributed to Sue's self-confidence with conversational English. According to Bourdieu (1986), cultural capital accumulation depends on length of time, social class and society, with the amount of one's cultural capital being marked by their previous circumstances and condition. From a middle-class background, Sue was able attend a private school in China and spent more than 10 years learning English in both China and Australia. These earlier conditions and experiences helped Sue to acquire linguistic capital in the context. As can be seen from the above quote, Sue's ability to converse freely demonstrates her self-assuredness with the everyday communicative aspects of English (Yang, 2001). Sue outlined her struggles with academic writing and provided the example of using dictionaries to support her essay writing. Sue referred to her satisfactory IELTS scores as testimony to her sound expressive and receptive English language abilities. Due to the immigration laws and English language requirement for university entrance in Australia, IELTS

as one of the most employed English tests is a signifier of linguistic evidence of one's English competence (Blackmore et al., 2015).

Sue's perception and language confidence can be discussed in terms of the findings from a number of studies conducted on how international students communicate and study in English in Australia (Arkoudis & Doughney, 2016; Borland & Pearce, 2002) and studies regarding English language challenges of Chinese international students' studying overseas (Zhu, 2016). These studies argue that international students experience difficulties and challenges with academic and daily language usage and this reflects their previous language learning experiences which tend to be grammar-focused rather than taught through a communicative teaching approach. The research suggests such difficulties adds stress to their English language practice (Sawir, 2005). In Sue's case, her previous language learning experience boosted her confidence to maintain conversations in English. However, she required assistance from dictionaries for her academic essay writing. It appeared that her satisfactory IELTS scores gave her almost a sense of competence with her English language ability in an academic context.

One week before Sue started her first practicum, she was interviewed and asked about her English ability again. Sue's response was now quite different to her previous reaction:

> Sometimes when I read, I understand every individual word. However, when they are in a sentence, I don't understand the meanings of the sentence. For the weekly readings, I told my friends that if the readings were in Chinese, I would definitely be able to finish all readings before my classes. As the readings were in English, I felt less motivated.

Sue's confidence towards her academic English appeared to have diminished. She reported her poor reading comprehension even though she was able to understand the meanings of each word. Sue's confusion about understanding the vocabulary but not comprehending the meaning echoes the current trends in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) that linguistic knowledge such as decoding and vocabulary size plays a minor role in second language reading (Cobb & Horst, 2001).

Moreover, Sue inferred that she might well experience difficulties with the English levels required of a practicum experience, acknowledging 'After all, I'm not an English native speaker and it will be challenging during my practicum'. Sue's concern about her English in professional experience not only reflects the lingua franca role of English but also discloses her unfamiliarity with EC field-specific expressions and words involved, such as the names of activities in the centre and children's songs. Bourdieu (1992) asserts that the linguistic habitus and dispositions of a field implies linguistic capacity to produce grammatically correct discourse and the use of these discourses in specific field. In other words, social conditions play an important role in determining the legitimacy of linguistic capacity. Even before the first professional experience, Sue's unfamiliarity with the Australian context due to her different sociocultural background is influencing her perceptions towards her linguistic capacity in professional experience.

On completion of her first professional experience, Sue was invited to participate in another interview to reflect on her first professional experience. She was very

excited to share her thoughts on the challenges she had experienced and the new ECE knowledge she had acquired. Sue identified 'English difficulty' as an area of concern whilst on placement:

> [My] English was not enough for the practicum, especially I lacked the basic daily vocabulary. Many times in this practicum, I couldn't understand much when the children talked to me. I didn't know what they wanted and I didn't know the names of the toys. One day, a girl told me that she wanted to do finger-knitting. At the beginning, I didn't understand the word 'finger-knitting'. Then she taught me about finger-knitting.

Sue elaborated: 'Sometimes, I feel quite upset and frustrated as my English is worse than a three-year-old's English.' Even though Sue has been learning English for a number of years and she was relatively confident about her English, she had difficulties communicating with the young children during her placement. She implied she lacked the linguistic as well as cultural knowledge (or capital) required for placement experience in an Australian ECE context. According to Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), the role of language is not simply as an instrument of communication, and one's linguistic capital is closely related to the their given social background and previous academic experience. According to Bourdieu (1992), linguistic capital is defined as the capacity to produce expressions for a specific context. For example, accent, vocabulary and grammar can be elements of linguistic capital (Bourdieu, 1992). Growing up in China and learning English in an international educational setting and studying in Australia for more than 2 years did not provide adequate linguistic and cultural preparation for Sue to manage her coursework and professional placement without a struggle. Sue explained how she lacked the EC vocabulary associated with names of toys. This impacted on her language and communicative capacity to interact with the young children in her care whilst on placement. In turn this affected her self-confidence regarding professional communication in English in an Australian EC context.

Bourdieu (1992) asserts that the more linguistic capital that one has, the more likely that he or she can maintain a profit of distinction which is related to power. Linguistic capital in a Bourdieusian sense is not about the question of meaning; instead it is the question of value and power (Grenfell, 1998). In a group, the ones who possess the competence have more power (Bourdieu, 1977b). Even though there was nobody commenting on Sue's language competency during her professional experience, her confidence fell as she could not access the same linguistic value and power as her Australian peers or the children in the centre.

Furthermore, finger-knitting as one of Australian early childhood centre activities can be perceived as a cultural practice echoing the habitus of the EC field. In order to understand the field, one might need to develop the realisation of the schemes of perception and appreciation of the habitus and also, proactively accumulate the required capitals (Bourdieu, 1990a, b). Habitus, a product of history, acts as the principles generating and organising practices which can be those 'reasonable' or 'common sense' behaviours (Bourdieu, 1990a, b). As the recognition process and accumulation of the required cultural capital takes time, in this respect, Sue's learning finger-knitting experience can also be understood as an opportunity and a strategy

regarding learning how to negotiate unfamiliarity to help her with accumulating cultural capital in the Australian ECE context.

Tensions in ECE Professional Experience

After her professional experience we questioned Sue over whether additional support needed to be provided to her as this was her initial contact with the Australian EC settings. Sue replied

> Not much. When I participated in the meeting with my mentor and my university officer, I told them that I was from China and English was not my first language. Also, I said that I might experience difficulties. But they both said "No no, this is not your excuse." They argued that my experience should be the same with Australian students. However, the Australian students grew up here and they could understand the children's English way more easily than me.

Sue engaged in this meeting with University professional staff because on the first day of her practicum, she focused on observing children in their play. However, her mentor assumed Sue demonstrated a lack of interest and motivation and that was the reason why Sue was invited to participate in this meeting. To our understanding, Sue struggled to understand how she should engage in the professional experience context as she was reluctant to talk to children and help her mentor. According to Bourdieu (1992), misrecognition is generated from one's previous experiences and their current situation in the field. As a new entrant in the ECE field, Sue had limited knowledge about the functioning of the centre as well as the partnership with her mentor. In Sue's previous experience which was mostly structured in China, Sue's practice (by observing solely) did not meet her mentor's expectations. Both of their expectations and practices were framed from their previous experiences as parts of their own habitus and the habitus differences became visible during the first interaction between Sue and her mentor.

Examining the learning characteristics of Chinese students, Li (2010) points out that Chinese students take time in imitating actions in a new learning field until one thoroughly understands or masters the field. Learning under the Confucian influence is not just constrained to learning the knowledge or theories per se; instead, it is a self-perfecting process. This process can be understood as a capital accumulation experience under Bourdieu's theory.

Similar findings also appear in the study conducted by Hadley et al. (2011) that, as a form of respect, international pre-service teachers did not wish to ask mentors questions, while mentor teachers, on the other hand, thought pre-service teachers were less engaged. Sue's narrative suggests there was also a misunderstanding and miscommunication between her mentor and herself about the purpose of the placement and the expectations of pre-service teachers. According to the university handbook, for the first professional placement, pre-service teachers are supposed to observe and document the EC teacher's planning and teachings, observe and document children's learning as well as support their mentor teachers. Therefore, upon arrival, Sue

assumed that observation and documentation were the priorities of her professional placement while her mentor teacher might be looking for engagement in activities to demonstrate Sue's motivation and interest. Tensions between Sue and her mentor arose through misinterpretation of Sue's role in the professional placement.

There is a university assumption that international pre-service (Chinese, in this case) teachers and domestic Australian pre-service teachers are able to adapt to the professional placement activities in a similar way. Sue's additional challenges and needs as an international pre-service teacher to some extent were insufficiently addressed during her first encounter of the professional experience. Her mentor's comments about comparing Sue with an Australian student reflected doxa or 'natural attitude'. Doxa is related to power and the dominant agents assess the value and characteristics through the application of their own schemes of perception and agents tend to disagree with differences (Bourdieu, 1984). In the case of Sue, her lack of cultural capital as a first-year international student is not recognised by her mentor, as her mentor commented Sue encounters the same types of challenges experienced by her Australian domestic peers and being a first-year international pre-service teacher should not be Sue's excuse. Sayer (2005) argues that one's previous dispositions as a part of their habitus can help them cope more effectively in a familiar context and this also strengthens their 'feel for the game' (p. 25). In contrast, entering the Australian EC centre for the first time does not give Sue the 'feel for the game', especially when her mentor expected her to achieve the same professional experience outcomes as her Australian peers. Sue's mentor may not have previously experienced working with international pre-service teachers and when Sue argued that she experienced challenges, her mentor assessed the reasons as not valid. Without the field-appropriate cultural and linguistic capital to succeed when her performance was evaluated on the first day of her professional experience, Sue felt that she should be responsible for her own lack of competence. As a result, Sue felt frustrated and worried. Individual students or pre-service teachers can have very different social trajectories and mentor teachers play critical roles in recognising their additional needs and providing support to them through the professional experiences.

Sue's Constructive Participation in the Context

When we asked Sue if there was any aspect of her practicum that she was proud of, she responded

> There was a Chinese boy in my class and I noticed that he was quite different from Australian kids. He couldn't speak English well and at home, he only speaks Chinese. He couldn't talk to other children and the teachers/staff cannot understand him either. He cried every day and he didn't listen to teachers. So the teachers and staff always came to me to comfort him and talk to him.

Sue believed her role as a Chinese pre-service teacher is not always 'deficit' but rather allowed her to connect with a lonely, also marginalised child. Literature in

the field indicates that in studies of international pre-service teachers' professional experiences (Spooner-Lane, Tangen, & Campbell 2009), there is often a focus on their lack of English competence, or lack of linguistic capital, which is also evident through responses in this study.

However, Sue's interview transcripts reflect that the issues and challenges for international students studying in Australia are more complex. Difficulties with initial professional placement were a consequence of insufficient preparation in terms of specialised EC as well as professional language requirements, in addition to cultural understandings that would have better supported the pre-service teachers' placement. Lack of vocabulary understanding in higher education or school contexts can affect international pre-service teachers' teaching experiences as well as their confidence to teach a cohort in the future (Hadley et al., 2011).

Yet, Sue brought her own linguistic and cultural capital to the EC field in her story about comforting the crying boy. Her Chinese cultural and linguistic capital provided her with the means to establish meaningful communication. Moreover, since the child's English language competence was relatively low compared to his Australian peers, Sue's linguistic capacity acted as a bridge to lessen the communication gap. This experience helped Sue with her own confidence construction in the professional experience and it also earned her mentor teacher's appreciation.

Sue's Developing Perspectives on Early Childhood Education

After her coursework and professional placement, Sue developed new perspectives towards the field and more specifically to the ECE context in Australia. Prior to undertaking professional placement, Sue's perspectives on ECE were framed in relation to the theoretical knowledge and her experiences of ECE in China. The Australian ECE context was a new field for Sue and it was structured with its own attributes (Bourdieu, 1993b). For example, as previously mentioned, Australian ECE field is structured by policies and frameworks, such as the national ECE curriculum framework, Belonging, Being and Becoming: The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) and, National Quality Standard (NQS) in the National Quality Framework. In this field, play-based learning as a pedagogy is significantly encouraged. In relation to cross-cultural perspectives in ECE, Sue reflected

> I did lots of activities with children …. read stories for children and played with children. I think there is more freedom for children in the Australian ECE. In China, I have a five-year-old cousin who is going to primary school this year. Every family member is worried nowadays and she needs to go to different extra-curriculum classes every day. I think this goes too far and [is] too strict for children. Children couldn't enjoy their childhood. In comparison, I think children in Australia are too relaxed and they should engage in some formal learning. They shouldn't play all the time. I know my thoughts and ideas are still influenced by the Chinese context.

In her new field of study—ECE—in Australia, Sue began to realise the importance of play-based learning. She played with the children and participated in their

finger-knitting activity. In other words, the field of Australian ECE together with the knowledge, conditions and experiences, were shaping Sue's habitus and structuring her perceptions and action. When habitus is conditioned in an unfamiliar field, the differences or disjuncture can initiate change and transformation (Reay 2004). As a result, the transformation of Sue's habitus occurred along with her attitude and action change. Meanwhile, her habitus also predisposes her to adjusting to the Australian ECE context while she retains some of her earlier enculturation.

It can be seen that Sue's thoughts and practice towards ECE still reflect her earlier life experiences. Habitus is linked to an individual's history where there is particular socialisation with one's families (Reay 2004). In the practicum, Sue believed that children should be engaged in more formal learning and that may also be why she stressed that she read stories for children. Her cousin's learning experience in China to some extent could be an extreme example but Sue believed that learning curriculum knowledge is important for children when they attend EC centres. In China, one role of ECE is to prepare children for primary school learning and the trend of ECE curriculum assimilation into primary school learning is prevalent in China. For example, Cheng (2014) writes that in a number of EC centres in China, in order to improve the teaching and learning quality, there are a variety of activities and classes everyday such as English, computer science, primary school mathematics and children are also given a great of homework. Sue's habitus in this respect is partially responsible for her thoughts and relates to ECE in general and her previous experiences, whilst her recent encounters with her cousin's experience are internalised, adding another layer to her habitus.

Concluding Thoughts

Given the burgeoning numbers of Chinese international students in ECE degrees and the value of this growth area to Australian universities, we felt it vital to investigate the academic and professional experience needs of this cohort. Moreover, interviews conducted with these students over the period of one semester offer an evolving lens through which to examine initial tensions they experience regarding Early Childhood Education The preliminary findings from one Chinese international pre-service teacher's academic and professional experiences are very limited but highlight a number of issues from the literature. Since one purpose of professional placement is to support pre-service teachers' consolidation of knowledge and practices, supplementary support is needed for international pre-service teachers to transition smoothly to professional placement (Fan & Le, 2009). In Sue's case, although Sue officially passed her professional experience, this professional placement was a frustrating and de-motivating experience and served to disempower and disenfranchise her as a first-year pre-service teacher. One conclusion is that additional support is needed to prepare international pre-service teachers prior and during their initial professional placement. This echoes one of the themes of this book that, to us, professional experience is more than just a short-term practicum which can

capture rapidly increasing diversity and complexity in the teacher education field. More education for Australian mentor teachers on first-year international students' needs is required as this can help them to provide support to pre-service teachers to construct their professional understandings and move ahead to experience success in ECE settings. Meanwhile, international pre-service teachers should also proactively accumulate their understanding and skills during their professional experience. In the unfamiliar EC centre setting, international pre-service teachers can lack a 'feel for the game' and they can encounter additional challenges and difficulties due to the differences between their habitus and the field habitus. In this case, conscious planning and being proactive can enhance the confidence of international pre-service teachers.

In our study, the tensions underpinning ECE in Australia and China clearly influenced Sue's overall perspectives on ECE. Additional support provided to this cohort can help them with transitions and benefit their initial professional experiences. For instance, prior to professional placement, facilitating communication between universities and EC centres, including clear guidelines in advance, would enable mentors teachers to help international student cohorts who may need additional support. Confident, well-prepared pre-service teachers could then enjoy an optimal learning environment once out in the field.

Previous studies demonstrate that there is a strong link between international students' cultural and linguistic capital and their academic or even employment outcomes (Arkoudis et al., 2009; Arkoudis et al., 2013; Blackmore et al., 2017). Pre-service teachers are encouraged to explore roles through different boundaries and their habitus can be continually structured and restructured. As a result, the same pre-service teachers can become confident educators who are able to work with different mentors and different school contexts.

EC centres and universities as social fields are encouraged to recognise the contributions and cultural capital that these international pre-service teachers can bring to the ECE context, especially in relation to professional experience. To reiterate, research in exploring international pre-service teachers' experiences usually focuses on a deficit perspective, or on the difficulties that they encounter. As Sue's case reflects, there are indeed challenges associated with Chinese international students' professional experience in western Early Childhood degrees due to different cultural standpoints. However, a deeper analysis suggests that more strategic mobilisation of capital from Chinese pre-service teachers brings valuable and diverse resources to the Australian ECE context, and can considerably benefit intercultural understandings in a globalised environment.

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