Implementing the Project Approach: A Case Study of Hybrid Pedagogy in a Hong Kong Kindergarten

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Abstract

The Project Approach has been promoted in Hong Kong kindergartens since the 1990s. However, the dynamic processes and underlying mechanisms involved in the teachers' implementation of this pedagogical method there have not yet been fully investigated. This case study of a typical kindergarten in Hong Kong documented *how* and *why* eight teachers implemented the Project Approach the way they did. Methodological triangulation was established through videotaped classroom observations, audiotaped interviews with the teachers and school principal, and analysis of documents (e.g., artifacts, reports). The study revealed that instead of uncritically *adopting* the Project Approach, the teachers responsively *adapted* it into hybrid pedagogy between Chinese pedagogy and contemporary early childhood pedagogy. Such paradigm shift reflected the teachers': (a) cultural hybridity in pedagogical beliefs; and (b) practical considerations of contextual realities (e.g., time limitation and curriculum demands, parental expectations, professional and emotional comfortability). The findings suggest that considering cultural incompatibilities, when implementing pedagogies cross-culturally, a sensible, viable, and potentially sustainable solution is not a radical, direct transformation from a traditional pedagogy to an imported one, but an alternative, hybrid pedagogy that infuses unique characteristics of the two.

Keywords: Chinese pedagogy; contemporary early childhood pedagogy; education policy; globalization; Hong Kong kindergarten; localization; teaching; teaching methods; the Project Approach.

Introduction

The Project Approach was developed in the 1910s, as an integral part of the Progressive Education Movement (notably John Dewey's work advocating the idea of "learning by doing") that peaked in the 20th century in the United States (Kilpatrick, 1918). Falling under the umbrella of project-based learning, the Project Approach is a specific pedagogical strategy that enables the teacher to guide the children's learning and development through a project, which is defined as an in-depth study of a worthwhile concrete, real-life topic of their interest (Helm & Katz, 2010). According to Helm and Katz (2010), a project is structured in three phases: During Phase I ("Beginning the Project"), the children and their teacher identify, discuss, and select a feasible, investigable topic initiated by the teacher or emerged from child interest, and then the children (with or without the teacher's assistance) formulate a set of questions for investigation; During Phase II ("Developing the Project"), the children conduct the actual investigation including engaging in fieldwork, seeking answers to original questions, developing new questions, collecting relevant data and artifacts, and constructing representations of their learning (e.g., drawing, writing, building a model); Finally, during Phase III ("Concluding the Project"), the children conclude the project with a debriefing and culminating event or activities to showcase their products, during which they present what they have learned among themselves and with invited visitors.

The Project Approach is characterized as constructivist, child-centered, inquiry-driven, process-oriented, and small- or whole-group based, all of which capitalize on the children's innate intellectual dispositions, including their natural propensity to be curious about their surroundings and make sense of their experience (Helm & Katz, 2010; Katz & Chard, 2000). This pedagogical approach yields numerous educational benefits, including advancing children's

critical thinking skills, and enhancing their literacy, numeracy, and communication skills (Clark, 2006; Helm & Katz, 2010). Yet, the implementation of such approach poses significant challenges to even teachers in the United States where it was originated. A major hurtle facing many teachers, wishing to change their practices by adopting the Project Approach, lies in the difficulty of shifting away from the traditional, transmission model of instruction (Clark, 2006).

Nonetheless, for its many benefits, the Project Approach has been enthusiastically embraced by education reformers beyond the United States. For instance, since the 1990s, Chinese societies, including Hong Kong, have been attempting to adopt the Project Approach along with other Western-derived pedagogies, such as Montessori, Reggio Emilia, and High/Scope. However, due to sociocultural incompatibilities between the Chinese and Western contexts, the actual implementation of these pedagogical methods in Hong Kong kindergartens has yielded little success (Cheng, 2006; Li, 2012). For example, in a survey study of the views of teachers in 51 Hong Kong kindergartens about the implementation of project-based learning coupled with videotaped classroom observations in 10 schools, Li (2012) found that the teachers struggled to forsake familiar teaching styles in favor of a new pedagogical approach. While the teachers welcomed pedagogical changes as they diligently planned and implemented projects, they were unable to make the pedagogical shift toward child-centeredness, due to a lack of training and a firm understanding about the processes of project implementation coupled with the influence from deeply-held traditional beliefs about early education (Li, 2012). Yuen (2010) did document a case of successful project execution in one Hong Kong kindergarten; however, she was actually the consultant for the school on an improvement project that incorporated the Project Approach to promote student learning. As such, this success case is not representative of the general reality, as having a consultant is not a typical scenario in Hong Kong kindergartens.

After one week of classroom observations in Hong Kong kindergartens, Lilian Katz (personal communication with the second author, June 15, 2001) suggested that "the Project Approach" as implemented there should be retitled, "the Hong Kong Style of the Project Approach," as it was best characterized as the Hong Kong rendition of what project work was purported to be conducted (e.g., child-initiated, inquiry-based). Yet, the dynamic processes involved in and the mechanisms underlying Hong Kong kindergarten teachers' transformation of the Project Approach into a localized version have not been fully investigated. To contribute knowledge to the international literature on early childhood education, this study endeavored to understand *how* and *why* Chinese teachers in one typical kindergarten in Hong Kong implemented the Project Approach the way they did. Insights gained may potentially yield important implications for pedagogy and policy relevant to early childhood education in the local as well as global context.

The Influence of Globalization on Localization of Early Childhood Pedagogy

A synthesis of current global knowledge base concerning early childhood education reveals that Western theories of child development are assumed to be universally valid, and thus are becoming pervasively cemented as the foundation on which teacher preparation courses are built (Cleghorn & Prochner, 2010; Nsamenang, 2007). Correspondingly, specific Western theory-driven, child-centered pedagogies including the Project Approach and others, such as Montessori and Reggio Emilia, are introduced in early childhood teacher education programs in non-Western cultural contexts, including Hong Kong (Li, Rao, & Tse, 2011, 2012). However, a paradigm shift from a traditional to globalized pedagogy is not a seamless transformation as the incongruence of cultural values between Western and Eastern societies has challenged the universal applicability of Western pedagogies to teaching and learning situations in other

cultures (Li et al., 2012; Tobin, 2007). Given the differences between traditional Chinese pedagogy and contemporary early childhood pedagogy, Hong Kong teachers face enormous challenges in implementing child-centered pedagogical approaches (Li et al., 2012).

Differences between Chinese Pedagogy and Contemporary Early Childhood Pedagogy

By *Chinese pedagogy*, we mean a specific instructional model to teaching and learning that is profoundly influenced by traditional Chinese cultural values and extensively practiced in classrooms in Chinese societies, including Hong Kong (Li, Rao, & Tse, 2012). However, as there is no distinctively identifiable Western pedagogy, by *contemporary early childhood pedagogy*, we mean instructional approaches originally developed and widely adopted in early childhood classrooms in Western countries, albeit actual practices may vary. In contrast to Chinese pedagogy, contemporary early childhood pedagogy embodies characteristics including being constructivist-oriented, child-centered, play-based, and inquiry-driven. Due to their starkly unique cultural roots and characteristics, the "Chinese-ness" and "Western-ness" of pedagogy have been conceptualized as distinct in terms of philosophy (didacticism vs. constructivism), epistemological beliefs (knowledge transmission vs. knowledge construction), theory (behaviorist vs. constructivist), and practice (teacher-directedness vs. child-centeredness).

Specifically, Chinese pedagogy is associated with the philosophical view of teaching as didactic/instructive in nature, involving imparting "correct" academic and moral knowledge from the teacher to the learners (Biggs, 1996; Chan & Elliott, 2004; Rao, Ng, & Pearson, 2009). This perspective aligns with the epistemological belief concerning the traditional transmission model of knowledge acquisition, ascribing the teacher (the expert) as the transmitter of knowledge to the learners (the novice) (Chan & Elliott, 2004; Lee, Zhang, Song, & Huang, 2013). Similarly, Chinese pedagogy reflects the behaviorist theory, viewing the child as essentially a passive

recipient of environmental stimuli, and his/her mind as a tabula rasa (blank slate) to be filled with knowledge (perspectives that are representative of the work of Skinner and Locke, respectively) (Rao et al, 2009; Trawick-Smith, 2006). Furthermore, influenced by enduring Chinese cultural beliefs that the early years are a critical time for moral and behavioral development, the teachers conceive teaching as involving teacher authority and child training for positive outcomes, such as discipline, propriety, behavioral control, conformity, and academic achievement, which are highly valued in the collectivist-oriented Chinese culture (Rao, McHale, & Pearson, 2003; Rao et al., 2009). Reflecting these philosophical, epistemological, and theoretical perspectives, Chinese pedagogy is characteristically teacher-directed. Whereas, sharing seemingly contrastive views, contemporary early childhood pedagogy is child-centered, rooted in constructivist perspectives, notably Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural theory. From a sociocultural stance, a key constructivist, instructional strategy for buttressing the children's potential learning and development is *scaffolding*, a concept that is referred to as tailored guidance that an adult/teacher or a more competent peer provides to the child, and gradually diminishes such guidance as the child becomes more independent and competent at achieving a target learning task (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976).

Of particular relevance to teaching practice in early childhood education, classroom observations have documented that the dominant mode of instruction in Chinese preschool classrooms is the traditional Chinese pedagogy cast as teacher-directed, whole-class instructed, content-based, academically-focused, and product-oriented (Li et al., 2012). These characteristics are also prevalent in a thematic approach to teaching and learning in Hong Kong and other countries. However, what makes these characteristics central features of Chinese pedagogy lies in its cultural impetus. Concomitant with Chinese pedagogy, there is an emphasis

on inculcating in children Confucian-inspired, collectivist-oriented Chinese culturally valued behaviors (e.g., conformity, discipline, academic competence) (Rao et al., 2009). In contrast, aimed at fostering in children individualist values (e.g., individuality, autonomy, critical thinking) favored in Western countries, contemporary early childhood pedagogical approaches, including the Project Approach, demonstratively embody constructivist, individualist-oriented characteristics (e.g., child-centered, inquiry-focused, play-based) (Li et al., 2012; Rao et al., 2009).

Furthermore, it has been reported that Chinese teachers' theories of teaching and learning play a pivotal role in their instructional practices (e.g., Chan & Elliott, 2004; Lee et al., 2013). Specifically, Chinese teachers who endorse traditional, behaviorist, knowledge-transmissionist views tend to engage in practices that are didactic, teacher-directed, academically-driven, and content-focused, whereas teachers who espouse contemporary, constructivist perspectives are likely to practice student-centered and learning-oriented strategies (Chai & Khine, 2008; Lee et al., 2013; Li et al., 2012). Yet, there are teachers who hold a merged traditional and contemporary theory, and correspondingly engage in both teacher-directed and child-centered practices (Chan, 2008, 2009; Ng & Rao, 2005, 2008). Premised on the idea that the teachers' classroom practices are inextricably ingrained in, and mediated by, their pedagogical beliefs (Lee et al., 2013), one aspect of this investigation entailed identifying what pedagogical theories were developed by Hong Kong kindergarten teachers and how these theories affected the way in which they implemented the Project Approach.

Challenges in Implementing Contemporary Early Childhood Pedagogy in Hong Kong

Influenced by the global discourse on early childhood education, Hong Kong has been constantly reforming its pre-primary education system with an effort to promote constructivism

and child-centeredness in the curriculum and resultant pedagogy. All of these curricular and pedagogical changes are reflected in the *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum,* which was first issued by Hong Kong Curriculum Development Institute in 1996 and later revised by Hong Kong Curriculum Development Council in 2006. Furthering these efforts, a new edition is about to be released in 2016, that incorporates all the new curricular and pedagogical changes occurred during the decade 2006-2016. However, a number of sociocultural and contextual realities have rendered efforts to implement constructivist-based pedagogical ideals formidable. These realities can be subsumed under three major areas: (1) the incongruence between top-down early childhood education reform and cultural emphasis on academic success, and relatedly the close alignment in curriculum and resultant pedagogy between pre-primary and primary education; (2) the dissonance between traditional ethno-theories and contemporary conceptions of early learning and development; and (3) contextual factors impeding pedagogical shifts.

First, the top-down education reform in Hong Kong has been promoting constructivist, child-centered ideologies as guiding principles for making curriculum and pedagogical modifications at the pre-primary level. Yet, situated within the prevailing examination-oriented education system and cultural emphasis on academic success that thrive on didactic pedagogy, the realization of such education reform ideals is like riding against the wind. Furthermore, given this pervasive educational climate, both parents and teachers tend to regard the close alignment in learning experience between the pre-primary and primary levels of education as vital to the children's academic success (Chan & Chan, 2003; Li et al., 2011). This belief is further fueled by the implicit "push-down effect" of the primary school curriculum on pedagogical practices at the pre-primary level, leading early childhood teachers to adopt formal, didactic strategies as necessary to prepare children for the highly-structured and performance-

oriented education at the primary level (Chan & Chan, 2003; Li et al., 2011).

Second, variations in cultural emphases have led to differences in ideology and practice between Chinese pedagogy and contemporary early childhood pedagogy. The main distinction between the two lies in the degree of child freedom and teacher control in deciding the children's learning, with the Chinese pedagogy being teacher-directed and contemporary early childhood pedagogy child-centered (Tzuo, 2007). As contemporary early childhood pedagogical approaches including the Project Approach exact Western values, they thus are culturally compatible with the Western context (Li et al., 2012). However, these Western pedagogies are generally considered challenging and even inappropriate to implement in the Hong Kong context that espouses contrasting cultural ideas about early education (Li et al., 2012).

In addition to sociocultural incompatibilities, another set of undercurrents seemingly militating against Chinese teachers from adopting Western pedagogies involves contextual factors, such as their states of professional competence and emotional security derived from their own personal and professional experience. Research evidence has suggested that Chinese kindergarten teachers do not feel that they have sufficient professional knowledge to implement imported pedagogies competently (Li & Rao, 2005), neither do they feel confident enough to make the pedagogical shift toward child-centered, project-based instruction (Li et al., 2012).

The afore-discussed major impediments converge to suggest that Hong Kong has not yet rendered an educational environment conducive for the implementation of contemporary early childhood pedagogy advocated fervently by its current pre-primary education reform. Unfortunately, the sociocultural tradition and contextual constraints exhibited in Hong Kong seemingly run antithetical to the very ideals that its education reformers are promoting, making them too lofty, if not impossible, for early childhood educators to reach. It begs the question:

how can teachers reconcile the complex dynamic between education reform, and pedagogical conceptions and practices so ingrained in and constrained by sociocultural as well as contextual realities? Early childhood scholars (e.g., Li et al., 2012; Ng & Rao, 2008) have recommended that, instead of instinctively following global trends and developmental theories to directly *adopt* imported pedagogies, it is culturally more appropriate to *adapt* them in ways that befit the local context. Previous research has demonstrated that some forms of pedagogical adaption are at work in Hong Kong schools, such as in what Chan (2009) termed "transformed pedagogy" integrating Chinese and Western pedagogy, and in what Ng and Rao (2008) described as a "fusion" of "constructivist and instructivist pedagogies." This study further explored whether Chinese teachers in a Hong Kong kindergarten would adapt rather than adopt the Project Approach, and if so, *how* and *why*. By investigating the implementation of the Project Approach as an example of progressive pedagogical approaches vigorously advocated by education reformers in Hong Kong, we hope to shed light on the complex dynamics involved in how teachers may reconcile the tensions between globalization (Westernized pedagogical trends) and localization (sociocultural influences).

The Goal of this Study

Against the backdrop of the sociocultural and contextual dynamics within which educational practices have traditionally been operative in Hong Kong, this study endeavored to address two interwoven research questions: (1) *How do Hong Kong kindergarten teachers implement the Project Approach?* and (2) *Why do these teachers implement the Project Approach the way they do?* To this end, we conducted a qualitative, in-depth case study of the processes involved and the mechanisms underlying the way in which the teachers implemented project work in one typical Hong Kong kindergarten.

Method

Procedure for Selecting the Kindergarten and Participants

The main criterion for selecting the kindergarten as our case study was that it needed to be a typical Chinese kindergarten in Hong Kong by exhibiting two common characteristics: (1) is non-profit-making, and accepts fee subsidy issued to eligible families in the form of vouchers from the government under the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme; and (2) implements Cantonese Chinese as the main medium of instruction. Cantonese Chinese is the language spoken by 89.5% of the population in Hong Kong (2011 Population Census Office). On the basis of the kindergarten profiles provided by the Education Bureau (http://www.chsc.hk/kindergarten/) and in consultation with Hong Kong educators, a pool of kindergartens deemed meeting the criterion of typicality was identified, from which one kindergarten was ultimately selected for participation.

Background Information about the School, Participants, and Project Implementation

In Hong Kong, all kindergartens are privately operated (Education Bureau, 2015). In this study, the participating kindergarten was run by a religious organization and located in a bustling district on the Hong Kong Island, enrolling 260 children in 13 classes with 23 teachers. School documents on socio-demographics of families indicated that, the children came from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, with most (60%) from middle-class families, 30% from middle- to lower-class families, and least (10%) from lower-class families. Approximately half of the children attended half day and the rest full day in one of the three grade levels: Nursery (K1) for children ages 3-4, lower kindergarten (K2) for children ages 4-5, and upper kindergarten (K3) for children ages 5-6. One third of the teachers possessed a college degree in Early Childhood Education, and two third of them held a Certificate in Early Childhood Education. Furthermore,

half of the teachers have had at least 10 years of teaching experience.

As deemed developmentally appropriate for the children in K2 and K3, this kindergarten has been implementing the Project Approach but only in these two grades: in all of the four K2 classes (two half-day and two full-day) for the first time, and all of the four K3 classes (two half-day and two full-day) for five years. Thus, while K2 teachers were new to the Project Approach, K3 teachers were not. For the purpose of consistency, we focused solely on all full-day classes conducting projects, leading to only four classes (two K2s and two K3s) for this investigation. According to the school curriculum, once every academic semester, K2 and K3 classes would conduct projects within a predetermined thematic unit. At the time of this research, both K2 and K3 classes were conducting projects that aligned with the curriculum unit on "food," which was considered concrete and practical enough for projects to derive from.

Each participating class comprised two female team teachers and 20 children (with approximately an equal distribution of genders). Those few children, whose parents did not consent to their participation, were subsequently excluded from all videotaped observations. Although the team teachers worked in tandem, the main teacher with the most teaching experience led the Project Approach. All Hong Kong natives aged between 23-38 years (averaging 31 years), the teachers had been teaching at this kindergarten for a range of one to 13 years (averaging four years). Among the participating teachers, only one possessed a college degree, but all held a Hong Kong Certificate in Early Childhood Education needed to teach at this kindergarten.

Data Collection

To establish "methodological triangulation" using multiple sources of data (Denzin, 2009), we obtained data from three sources: (1) videotaped classroom observations, (2)

audiotaped interviews with the teachers and school principal, and (3) analysis of collected documents. Increasingly, educational researchers (e.g., Li, 2013; Li et al., 2011, 2012) have employed videotaped classroom observations and often complemented or supplemented with subsequent audiotaped interviews with teachers as effective data collection strategies in such a way that, videotaped classroom observations help to capture specific instructional interactions and behaviors in the classroom as well as the dynamics of the sociocultural context in which they occur, and audiotaped interviews with the teachers help to elucidate their meaning making of their teaching practices. For instance, Li et al. (2012) employed these two methods of data collection to compare pedagogical practices in three Chinese societies (Hong Kong, Singapore, and China), revealing rich findings embedded in the videotaped classroom observations and audiotaped interviews with teachers that could not have otherwise been captured.

Videotaped observations

To capture practice in action, two trained observers (the first and third authors) videotaped how the teachers implemented the entire Project Approach during the designated four weeks. Prior to formal videotaping, a familiarization, introduction visit was done in each classroom to establish a comfort level among the teachers, children, and the two trained observers. Except for a few days under special circumstances (e.g., events at the school during which typical project work was suspended), daily observations were videotaped in each classroom by one observer in the morning for half an hour to two hours (depending on the duration of project-related activities that day). Videotaped observations totaled approximately 48 hours in the four classrooms.

Audiotaped interviews

All eight teachers were interviewed individually by the first author after project work had concluded. The lead teachers were interviewed for 45-60 minutes, and their partner teachers for 30-40 minutes. Employing the "interview guide approach" (Patton, 1990), we developed a semi-structured interview protocol, drawing on insights from classroom observations and documents, to encourage the teachers to reflect on four main areas: (1) professional training, knowledge, and experience with the Project Approach; (2) pedagogical beliefs and associated source(s); (3) pedagogical practices; and (4) project process and outcomes. To gain a contextual understanding of the kindergarten, the first author also interviewed the school principal for an hour to learn about the school's operation, including its mission, educational philosophy, curriculum development, and impetus for project work. All interviews were conducted and audiotaped in the participants' native language of Cantonese Chinese. They were then transcribed in Chinese.

Documents

Documents, such as fieldnotes and artifacts (e.g., project documentations, lesson plans, school and curriculum records, project reports, student work) were collected as supplementary data.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the qualitative data using open coding and axial coding strategies (Strauss & Corbin, 2015). The interview transcripts were analyzed using open coding, which led to the formation of core categories and concepts as well as subcategories. Next, axial coding was conducted to discover potential relationships among categories and concepts. Each interview transcript was also examined for material pertaining to the research questions, and once that paragraph or segment had been identified, a "microanalysis" entailing a detailed examination of

the data "line-by-line" was subsequently conducted (Strauss & Corbin, 2015). Salient themes were categorized from the analysis of interview data, and in addition, general patterns were identified from the analysis of observation data. An analysis of documents was also conducted to help clarify, complement, and even supplement analyses from both the interview and observation data.

Findings

How the Project Approach was Implemented

All eight participating teachers, regardless of their educational background or teaching experience, implemented the Project Approach similarly as supported by the school principal and aligned with the pre-primary education reform in Hong Kong. As shown in Table 1, while adhering to some aspects of the Project Approach (Helm & Katz, 2010), the teachers' practices revealed distinct features that made project work for the children both a teacher-directed and child-centered learning experience. Following the school curriculum on the "food" unit, the teachers started off by providing direct instruction on related concepts, including food pyramid and nutrition, through which they also taught the children to conform to societal expectations of collective values (e.g., protecting the environment[1] by ways, such as reducing food waste and utilizing reusable rather than disposable materials). To cultivate healthy eating habits, the children were taught and asked to memorize and recite poems, for instance, about the importance of a balanced diet.

The teachers gradually proceeded to implement what Helm and Katz (2010) described as the three phases of project work, from discussing and negotiating with the children to select a

[1] Hong Kong has been vigorously advocating for environmental protection. Visible signs of "environmental protection" in both Chinese and English can be found throughout Hong Kong to raise such awareness to the public. Actions taken include banning the provision of free plastic shopping bags by retail outlets, notably supermarkets.

topic of their interest for investigation in Phase I, engaging the children in conducting the project in Phase II, and to finally concluding the project in Phase III with a culminating "show and tell" event about their learning. However, while progressing through these processes, the teachers did not completely adhere to the child-centered aspect of what Clark (2006) described as key to successful project work, including engaging the children in developing their own questions for inquiry, proposing their own hypotheses, and finding ways to test them. Yet, classroom observations and teacher interviews revealed that the teachers did shift their roles from knowledge transmitters to guides, tutors, and facilitators, as they orchestrated the project processes to consist of both teacher-directed and child-centered learning explorations. Within this teaching-learning dynamic, a unique instructional pattern was consistently observed in all of the classrooms involving a four-step scaffolding process: (1) teacher instruction/facilitation, (2) teacher demonstration/modeling, (3) child demonstration, and (4) group participation.

For instance, in one K3 class conducting their project on Dim Sum[2] restaurant, the four-step scaffolding process of instruction was observed. The classroom teacher began by facilitating a lively discussion with the whole group about Dim Sum. First, the teacher accessed the children's prior knowledge and experience with different types of Dim Sum by asking various levels of questions (low-order as well as follow-up, high-order questions) such as: What types of Dim Sum have you eaten? What do they look like? What do you think they were made of? How were they being prepared and cooked? Why? She subsequently webbed the children's answers to gauge what they already knew and what they would still need to learn from the investigation. Second, following the class discussion, the teacher demonstrated how to make a pretend *siu mai* (pork dumplings, which is one of the most typical types of Dim Sum) with craft

[2] Ubiquitous in Hong Kong, Dim Sum is a style of traditional, beloved Cantonese food, typically cooked as bite-sized portions and served in small steamer baskets or on small plates.

supplies, while explaining the procedure step-by-step. Third, the teacher invited a more capable child volunteer to make a pretend *siu mai* to not only demonstrate her understanding, but "teach" and scaffold her peers, especially those who needed help, in grasping the steps. Finally, during small-group activities, grouped by interest, children were assigned to collaboratively make *siu mai* and other types of Dim Sum for their restaurant, modeled after their teacher and peer volunteer. The teacher circulated around the classroom to assess the children's learning and progress, providing assistance as needed. Similar to all other learning experiences that are both teacher-directed and child-centered, this session demonstrated high levels of student engagement, discipline, and conformity: The children participated actively by listening quietly, watching intently, and raising their hands to offer ideas. The children were also acquiring meaningful vocabulary to analyze and understand the process of making a Dim Sum, thereby promoting their development of autonomous, critical thinking skills.

Why the Chinese Teachers Implemented the Project Approach the Way They Did

This study revealed the confluence of five major factors on the way in which the teachers implemented the Project Approach: (1) "time pressure" and curriculum demands, (2) parental expectations for academic achievement, (3) professional competence, (4) emotional tensions, and (5) pedagogical beliefs.

"Time pressure" and curriculum demands

The teachers spoke candidly about "time pressure" and curriculum demands as a reason underlying the way in which they implemented the Project Approach. For one, given the fixed timeframe of four weeks for project work and a large amount of material to cover in the specified curriculum, the teachers believed that they just could not simply structure the learning experience entirely as child-led. For another, recognizing that just like how they needed time and space to

make pedagogical adjustments, the teachers perceived that the children also needed support to adapt their learning strategies and classroom interactions to project work. This awareness has subsequently compelled the teachers to attend to a number of practical considerations, including not "jumping right into the project from the outset" and instead "taking it slow" and "providing ample guidance." Time limitation was also a source of challenge, necessitating the teachers to make pedagogical adaptations (e.g., negotiating with the children in selecting a doable project, skipping field trips, restricting their exploration).

Parental expectations for academic achievement and knowledge acquisition

This study revealed that parental expectations for academically-oriented learning constituted another salient factor affecting the school's choice of curriculum and the teachers' approach to project work. For instance, as reflected by one K3 teacher, their decision to adapt rather than adopt the Project Approach was driven by their perception of the parents' expectations for their children's academic success and "acquisition of a large quantity of knowledge." Furthermore, the teachers also realized that using the Project Approach in the child-centered way solely would engender a discontinuity in pedagogical practice and associated educational experience for the children, from the pre-primary to the primary level, which was dominated by the traditional, didactic teaching method and examination-based assessments.

Professional knowledge

The teachers indicated that they had only formally learned about the Project Approach and other progressive, Western pedagogies along with contemporary conceptions about early education through courses in their respective teacher education programs. They recognized that while their pedagogical knowledge and skills with the Project Approach had advanced with time and experience, they were still in the learning stage and would need to improve with support of

professional development. Nonetheless, they believed that by having the freedom to balance the Project Approach with Chinese pedagogy, they were able to engage in a transitional phase from teacher-directedness to child-centeredness in practice. It also provided them with the opportunity to venture outside of their comfort zone and experiment with a different mode of teaching yet with appropriate adaptations, especially as they did not feel fully equipped with the requisite knowledge and skills to competently implement the Project Approach the way it was purported.

Emotional comfortability

Teacher interviews revealed that while embracing the values of project work for promoting student learning, the teachers approached it with trepidation and caution. Particularly, two teachers invoked the emic concept of *fongsau* (which literally means letting go of one's hands) to describe the dialectic tension between surrendering teacher control and granting student autonomy. As reasoned by one K2 teacher:

> Actually it is about *fongsau* to let the children take on an active role to an appropriate extent because there are many children who have good self-control, and all you need to do is let go a little to see good results…Actually, letting go [in terms of teacher control] more is better. If you don't let go, how can they learn independently?

Yet, this same teacher was also adamant about the need to pull the children back if they digressed from the project direction, thus advocating for the importance of "providing the children with an appropriate [but not excessive] amount of freedom," while retaining a certain level of teacher control. These sentiments also similarly resonated with other teachers.

Hybridization of pedagogical beliefs

This study also demonstrated that the way in which the teachers implemented the Project Approach aptly reflected a paradigm shift toward a convergence of Chinese ethno-theories and

Western-based contemporary conceptions of early education. For instance, the teachers internalized the Chinese cultural emphasis on early teaching and learning as involving training children for moral development including discipline, conformity, and behavioral control. An example referenced often by the teachers was about how being quiet and listening attentively were considered key to both their knowledge acquisition from the teacher as well as their development of moral virtues. Interviews further revealed that the teachers subscribed to the view that a balance of teacher-directedness and child-centeredness would be optimal for promoting learning and development in meeting the demands of both the local and global context.

Discussion

The Implementation of the Project Approach

Situated within the broader context of pre-primary education reform advocating for Western-derived constructivist, child-centered pedagogies, this study illuminated the processes and underlying mechanisms associated with the teachers' implementation of the Project Approach in situ. It is worth noting that, if judged by the strict standards of the Project Approach (Helm & Katz, 2010), the ways in which it was conducted at this participating kindergarten would not have been considered authentic. However, our study was not about implementation fidelity. Instead, it endeavored to uncover authentically *how* and *why* the Chinese teachers conducted project work the way they did.

First, this study revealed that the unique underlying dynamics of the processes involved in the teachers' implementation of the Project Approach seemed to characteristically represent a negotiation of values between the Chinese and Western cultures, and of educational practices between Chinese pedagogy and contemporary early childhood pedagogy, leading to their

adoption of hybrid pedagogy. This study revealed that the instructional processes were both teacher-orchestrated and child-centered as evident in the application of a four-step scaffolding strategy during which the teachers shifted their roles from instructor to ultimately facilitator in supporting the children's learning, demonstrating a progression toward embracing the constructivist framework of contemporary early childhood pedagogy. Although previous research has long identified the varied nature, types, and processes of scaffolding during adult-child interactions focusing particularly on how the adult helps the child acquire the knowledge and skills needed to ultimately be able to perform a target task competently and independently (e.g., Bruner & Sherwood, 1975; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976), our investigation further revealed a unique pattern of four sequential, interrelated steps of a scaffolding process that the teachers adopted during the Project Approach involving: (1) teacher instruction/facilitation, (2) teacher demonstration/modeling, (3) child demonstration, and (4) group participation. This scaffolding process is an example of possible fluidity in the teachers' adaptation in shifting their role from knowledge transmitter to facilitator, reflecting their tenable transition toward embracing a constructivist approach to teaching.

This finding supports Biggs and Watkins' (2001) general conclusion about the nature of teaching and learning in the Chinese classroom as being *both* "teacher-centered" *and* "student-centered." It is also consistent with Chan's (2009) discovery of expert teachers as being *both* "didactic" *and* "constructivist" in a "transformed pedagogy," and with Ng and Rao's (2008) observation of Hong Kong teachers' "fusion" of "constructivist and instructivist pedagogies" in early mathematics instruction. Thus, in the context of Hong Kong, pedagogical hybridization as practiced by the teachers in this study may be interpreted as culturally appropriate and socially situated. It also supports Katz's (personal communication with the second author, June 15,

2001) observation that the way in which Hong Kong kindergarten teachers implemented the Project Approach may be more aptly described as the "Hong Kong style" of project work. In this study, the Hong Kong style may be interpreted more specifically as the way in which the teachers uniformly localized the child-centered Project Approach in assimilation with the teacher-directed Chinese pedagogy into hybrid pedagogy, an adaptation that was conducted with practical considerations of cultural beliefs about early education and contextual constraints (e.g., predetermined curriculum, predetermined timeframe for project).

Furthermore, the idea of hybrid pedagogy is also consistent with the observation that, direct *adoption* of Western-derived pedagogies in the non-Western context of Hong Kong is largely futile (Cheng, 2006; Rao et al., 2009), whereas pedagogical *adaptation* or *localization* is more culturally sensible and productive (Li et al., 2012). Our research findings demonstrated that the way in which the teachers implemented the Project Approach was in the form of *adaptation* rather than *adoption*. More specifically, in the process of adaption, the teachers engaged in a pedagogical negotiation ultimately favoring *pedagogical assimilation* over *pedagogical accommodation* to reflect their appraisal of implementing the Project Approach in a purely child-led manner as not being realistic in Hong Kong, given its prevailing sociocultural and contextual constraints. That is, instead of superseding their customary practice of Chinese pedagogy with the Project Approach by accommodating to the way in which this contemporary early childhood pedagogy was purported to be implemented (child-centered), the teachers assimilated their professional knowledge of progressive pedagogies (learned through their respective teacher education programs as well as education reform promulgations) into their pre-existing schema of the traditional Chinese way of teaching (teacher-directed). This interpretation suggests that the teachers' approach to the Project Approach may well reflect "good teaching,"

which 'is about making the best use of contextual information and dynamics and aligning pedagogy and innovation with cultural contexts and conditions' (Chan, 2008, p. 249). In the context of "good teaching," the teachers carefully designed, structured, crafted, and orchestracted project learning activities in ways that infused unique characteristics of both teacher-directed Chinese pedagogy and child-centered contemporary early childhood pedagogy.

Mechanisms Undergirding the Implementation of the Project Approach

This study reveals that the mechanisms underpinning the teachers' adaptation of the Project Approach in the form of hybrid pedagogy were contextually and philosophically driven. First, corroborating with the finding of previous research that there are sociocultural and contextual factors hampering the successful implementation of imported Western pedagogies in Chinese contexts (e.g., Cheng, 2006; Tang & Maxwell, 2007), this study revealed several such challenges as perceived by the teachers, including "time pressure" and curriculum demands, parental expectations for academic achievement, professional competence, and emotional tensions. Similar obstacles have also been reported by research in the United States (e.g., Clark, 2006; Mitchelle, Foulger, Wetzel, & Rathkey, 2009). However, what characterizes the contextual challenges facing the teachers in this study as unique of the Hong Kong's educational situation is the fact that for these teachers, such challenges were confounded by a qualitatively different set of cultural beliefs about early education and a long-held tradition of practicing Chinese pedagogy.

Second, corroborating with the findings of previous research (e.g., Ng & Rao, 2005, 2008), this study revealed that the teachers' engagement in pedagogical assimilation may have reflected a paradigm shift in educational beliefs toward adopting an amalgam of two seemingly contrasting belief systems about early education, with one being the Chinese cultural set of

ideologies (acquired through socialization experiences) and the other Western and globally promoted conceptions (learned through teacher training courses and education reform promulgations). The possible convergence of these two pedagogical belief systems may encourage the teachers to harmonize their understanding of the differences between collectivist-oriented, Chinese cultural values (e.g., discipline, conformity, academic success), and individualist-oriented, Western cultural values (e.g., autonomy, critical thinking). It may be that, in mediating the dialectical tensions between two contrasting set of ideologies that galvanized the different pedagogies, the teachers might have catalytically created a happy medium between the two, possibly driven by the strong emphasis on "harmony" as supported by the culture of the school and that of the larger society. The finding may also be interpreted from the Chinese philosophical noton of the "Doctrine of the Mean" (Chan & Rao, 2009; Li, 2005). It has been observed that Chinese pepole are more inclined to find a middle ground when resolving divergent approaches and lifestyles to maintain harmony, a Chinese cultural virtue that is reflective of Confucian philosophy (Lee, 1996, Li, 2005).

It is also possible that hybrid pedagogy serves as an example of how teachers may transcend philosophical and pedagogical dichotomies (i.e., didacticism vs. constructivism, knowledge transmission vs. knowledge construction, behaviorist vs. constructivist, teacher-directedness vs. child-centeredness) that have largely polarized Chinese pedagogy and contemporary early childhood pedagogy. This finding supports the assertion that dichotomies are too simplistic and not useful in capturing the full extent and complexity of pedagogical practices (Biggs, 1996). Furthermore, hybrid pedagogy may also be interpreted as a negotiated approach in which the teachers process and make sense of imported ideologies and pedagogies. The "negotiated approach" to adapting the Project Approach as befitting the sociocultural and

contextual dynamics was also evident in other studies conducted in Hong Kong (Li, 2012) and even in the United States (Mitchell et al., 2009). In the context of understanding how and why the Chinese teachers in one typical kindergarten in Hong Kong implemented the Project Approach, this study has provided a case for considering hybridization as a possibly operable educational solution to contextual tensions emerged from cross-cultural pedagogic pollination.

Educational Implications

As the Project Approach and other progressive pedagogies are being implemented in many kindergartens throughout Hong Kong, the findings of this investigation on one typical kindergarten there provide important educational implications for how these Western-derived pedagogies may be enacted in a non-Western context. For instance, teachers in other kindergartens may also adapt the Project Approach in a similar manner as did those in our study. Furthermore, although this was just one case study of a typical Hong Kong kindergarten, it may be considered as an example of what could transpire when teachers in Hong Kong and other parts of the world facing similar circumstances attempted to implement an imported pedagogy.

The pre-primary education reform in Hong Kong seems well-meaning and anchored in a globally promoted Western stance concerning how children best learn and develop, and thus should be taught. Yet, it has triggered particular challenges to frontline teachers who are directly shouldered with the responsibility of translating Westernized reform ideals into action. While it appears simple and straightforward to transplant a pedagogical model from one culture to another as part of an education reform, it is a whole heap more complicated or even insurmountable for the model to survive and thrive in a diametrically divergent sociocultural environment with a radically different educational tradition. Within the recent pre-primary education reform in Hong Kong, there lies seemingly a conspicuous disjunction between

idealism (contemporary early childhood pedagogy) and realism (incompatible sociocultural and contextual dynamics). It begs the question, *Can this disjunction be reconciled?* Considering the findings of this study and others (e.g., Cheng, 2006; Li et al., 2012; Ng & Rao, 2005, 2008), we believe that for the moment, what seems culturally sensible, viable, and potentially sustainable is not a radical, direct transformation from a traditional pedagogy to an imported pedagogy (be it the Project Approach or other approaches), but an alternative, hybrid pedagogy that infuses unique characteristics of the two. Similarly, when promoting pedagogical changes, educational policymakers should consider sociocultural and contextual influences as those reported in this study. Taken together, this case study suggests that even an internationally embraced pedagogy, like the Project Approach, could be adapted to best fit local needs. Such a transformation epitomizes what may be called "global pedagogy, localized practice."

Limitations of the Study

A methodological strength of this study was that it gathered data from multiple sources (interviews, classroom observations, and documents), yielding consistent, complementary findings. Nevertheless, this study has methodological limitations. Notably, the small sample size from one Hong Kong kindergarten precludes generalizations of findings to dissimilar populations. Studying a larger and more diverse sample may provide additional insights and/or further validate our findings. Future research might include quantitative measures of the teachers' pedagogical beliefs and practices to complement and supplement qualitative findings.

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Table 1. Similarities and Differences between the Project Approach and the Hong Kong Style of the Project Approach.

	The Project Approach[1] (Child-Centered)	Hong Kong Style of the Project Approach (Teacher-Directed + Child-Centered)
Decision Making	Mostly children with guidance from teacher.	Mostly teacher with input from children.
Determination of Next Step of the Project	Guided by teacher's observations of children's investigation and interest.	• Sometimes preplanned by teacher. • Sometimes guided by teacher's observations of children's investigation and interest.
Topic Selection	• Negotiated between teacher and children with consideration to curriculum goals. • Derived from children's interest.	• Driven by curriculum goals/syllabus. • Negotiated between teacher and children, with consideration to children's interest.
Duration of Project	Determined by project development.	Predetermined by curriculum/teaching plan.
Initiation of Project	Emerged from children's interest or initiated by teacher.	Guided by teacher incorporating children's interest.
Instructional Organization	Whole-group and small-group.	Mostly whole-group.
Knowledge Acquisition	• Through answers to posed questions or investigation by children. • Children participate in determining activities for learning or finding answers to posed questions or investigation.	• Through mostly answers to questions posed by teacher with input from children. • Both teacher and children participate in determining activities for learning or finding answers to questions posed by the teacher. • Some activities are preplanned by teacher to learn specific concepts.
Project Activities	• Focus on investigating and finding answers to questions using available resources by children. • Teacher webs to assess children's prior knowledge. • Project led by children, but teacher facilitates acquisition and integration of new knowledge. • Teacher integrates curriculum goals and objectives.	• Focus on investigating and finding answers to questions posed by teacher. • Teacher webs to assess children's prior knowledge. • Teacher orchestrates project to facilitate acquisition and integration of new knowledge. • Teacher integrates curriculum goals and objectives. • Involve a four-step scaffolding process: 1. Teacher instruction/facilitation 2. Teacher demonstrating/modeling 3. Child demonstration 4. Group participation

[1] Helm & Katz (2010).

Project Integration	Project is integrated throughout the day, the classroom, and curriculum areas and skills.	• Conducted at a specific predetermined time in the day, the project is visible in the classroom and is related to curriculum goals and objectives.
Project Product	• Representation (e.g., drawing, writing, constructing) enhances children's integration of concepts and documents project learning. • Representation activities are repeated to demonstrate acquisition of knowledge and skills.	Representation is related to specific activities. For example, drawing a picture of food found in a particular type of restaurant.
Role of Teacher	Facilitator	Instructor, guide, tutor, and facilitator
Sources of Resources for Project	• Resources from teacher, children, guest experts, and field-site visits. • Field trips are an integral part of project process.	• Resources from teacher, children, and families. • No field trips due to time limitation, curriculum demands, and other contextual constraints.