

The Development and Characters of Early Childhood Education in China and the United States

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ABSTRACT. *In order to improve competition in the global economy, China needs the next generation to be more creative, risk taking and independent, which promoted the shift of Chinese Early Childhood Education (ECE) curriculum towards more children-centered, playful and less controlling and academic-oriented. Unlike China, in order to improve childrens' readiness which is considered as a key factors of future academic performance, the US government is striving to shift American ECE curriculum towards more academic-oriented.*

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of social and economic globalization, both China and the US experienced a lot of changes in terms of the reform of ECE in the past decades. In 1980s, the goals and practices of ECE between China and the US were dramatically unlike, with China focusing control and regimentation and the US play and Choice; however, China's goal shifted towards child-initiation and creativity while the US shifted towards more emphasize on academic outcome thirty years later (Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa, 2009)⁹.

2. Development and Characters of ECE in China

In 1980s, the Open Door Policy was just released, and many Chinese preschools still followed the old ways in which the teachers based their teaching on the elementary model (Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa, 2009)⁹. At that time, academic-oriented teaching method was promoted by Chinese education system, and teachers focused on students' academic outcome instead of emotional and social development, creativity and individualism (Pang and Richey, 2007)⁸. In 1989, the society and economy in China has developed rapidly, thus in order to cultivate a new generation with the ability of gaining successfully in the new context, The Rules on Kindergarten Routines was released by Chinese government, which shifted the goals of ECE towards the understanding of childhood, respecting individual differences and emphasizing the importance of creativity (Zhu, 2009)¹⁰.

However, it is very difficult for teachers to full embrace these progressive ideas

from western cultural context, since the deep-rooted Chinese cultural values and traditions are so different with modern scientific and democratic ideology at that time (Wang and Mao, 1996)⁷. In 2001, MOEC issued *The Guidance for Kindergarten Education* (trial version) to deal with the gap between progressive ideas and practical teaching by providing specific requirements and content (Zhu, 2009)¹⁰. However, the contradictory between the Chinese traditional cultures and the western progressive ideologies still remain as a major challenge in Chinese ECE curriculum, and teachers still follow the teacher-directed method with a lots of group activities.

Although Chinese ECE curriculum has been influenced much by Western countries in the past decades, many Chinese cultural characteristics still remained in Chinese preschools. For example, in order to cultivate children's spirit of patriotism, almost every preschool in China have their patriotism education, such as sing the national anthem, and being taught to respect teachers and elders, to love family members and friends and to help people around them (Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa, 2009)⁹. Moreover, children are required to attend a range of group activities to develop their sense of pride being a part of group. Thus, although the curriculum seems to shift towards more western way, the core spirit of Chinese communism cultures and values still rooted deeply in Chinese early childhood education.

3. Developments and Characters of ECE in America

Unlike China, there is no coherent national ECE policy in America, and the primary responsibility for ECE is at level of the states, which is one of the major barrier for the US to develop a national ECE system (Kamerman and Gatenio-Gabel, 2007)⁵. In 1965, president Johnson created the first publicly funded program: Head Start - a half-day program for children from poor families. Head Start was populated, but it couldn't provide enough opportunity due to the lack of funding. Thus, many states established their own program for poor children. In 1994, president Clinton signed *Goals 2000: Educate America Act* which specifies the development of ECE is the head of the eight American national educational goals. In 2001, president George W. Bush signed *No Child Left Behind (NCLB)* policy requiring each state to establish clear assessment and report achievement to promote children with better academic performance. However, many scholars argued that this policy focused much on the learning outcome which would cause negative impacts on children (Coppie and Bredekamp, 2009)³. In 2002, *Good Start, Good Smart* was released by the Bush Administration aiming to ensure that young children enter kindergarten with the skills they will need to succeed at reading and other early learning activities.

Unlike the preschool education in China, the ECE in the US is always more concerned with Children's emotional and social development, individualism, liberty and creativity (Church, 2004)². One of the important feature of American preschool education is the respecting of children's rights. Choice as one of the core factors of American cultural belief remains as a significant feature in the US ECE curriculum and pedagogy; moreover, giving children the choice is also considered as a way of

showing democracy, which reflects the western culture of individualism (Lee and Walsh, 2005)⁶. Another important features in American ECE is the focus of children-centered activities. In American preschools, teachers also respect the children's self-expression and try to cultivate children's creativity because they believe that it is very important to provide opportunity for children to express their idea loudly (Pang and Richey, 2007)⁸.

However, since 2000s, both American government and many experts has increased their interest on the academic outcome of children and trying to shift the preschool curriculum towards formal and academic focus. A growing number of researches reported that early childhood learning experiences is closely linking with later school achievement, especially the school readiness (Brooks-Gunn, 2003; Hechman and Masterov, 2007)^{1&4}. Thus, under the pressure from both government and parents, many preschools decrease the physical activities in order to enhance children's academic readiness, even the teacher's believes and the activities almost remain unchanged (Tobin, Hsueh and Karasawa, 2009)⁹. Just like China, even the US ECE curriculum has shifting towards more academic focus, there are still many features rooted in American early childhood education reflecting the key beliefs of American individualism cultures.

4. Conclusion

Nowadays both China and the US ECE hope to produce children with abilities needed in the rapid changing and globalized society, and at the same time, to function as a sites of cultural continuity. Although China and the US have many differences in terms of the ECE teachers' beliefs, teaching methods and classroom activities due to their cultural differences, their ECE curriculum are shifting towards each other, which can balance children's social, emotional as well as academic development and cultivate their children to succeed in the global context.

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