# PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF PLAY IN THE CONTEXT OF CURRICULUM REFORM IN CHINA: A CASE STUDY IN GUANGXI ZHUANG AUTONOMOUS REGION

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**by**

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| | |
|---|---|
| ECE | Early childhood education |
| BSK | Blue Sky Kindergarten |
| HHK | Happy Hippo Kindergarten |
| MOE | Ministry of Education |
| PB | Pedagogical belief |
| RQ | Research question |
| USM | Universiti Sains Malaysia |

## LIST OF APPENDICES

**KEPERCAYAAN DAN AMALAN AKTIVITI BERMAIN GURU PRASEKOLAH DALAM KONTEKS REFORMASI KURIKULUM DI NEGARA CHINA: SATU KAJIAN KES DI WILAYAH AUTONOMI GUANGXI ZHUANG**

## ABSTRAK

Penyelidikan berbentul kajian kes ini mengkaji tentang kepercayaan dan amalan guru prasekolah di negara Cina mengenai pendekatan bermain berikutan reformasi kurikulum pendidikan awal kanak-kanak 1980. Reformasi tersebut menyokong peralihan daripada pengajaran berpusatkan guru kepada pedagogi berpusatkan kanak-kanak dan berasaskan bermain. Kajian lepas menunjukkan ketegangan antara pendekatan bermain yang dipengaruhi oleh budaya Barat dengan norma budaya dan amalan sedia ada Masyarakat negara Cina. Kajian ini menemuduga dua belas orang guru dari dua tadika awam di Guangxi, selatan Cina, untuk memahami tentang pelaksanaan pendekatan bermain dalam konteks penerapan teori pedagogi Barat dan nilai tradisional Cina. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa guru-guru mengamalkan pendekatan bermain hibrid, yang berciri integrasi autonomi kanak-kanak dengan perancahan guru (scaffolding) yang bermatlamat. Penekanan diberikan terhadap bimbingan orang dewasa untuk kanak-kanak yang kekurangan sumber bermain dan sokongan ibu bapa. Guru-guru berpendapat bahawa bermain dan pembelajaran formal saling berkaitan. Namun, mereka menyatakan kekurangan kejelasan mengenai definisi bermain dan rasional di sebalik penggunaannya sebagai kaedah utama penyampaian kurikulum. Amalan yang diperhatikan menunjukkan kira-kira tiga jam waktu bermain setiap hari, dengan pelbagai tahap kebebasan yang dialami oleh kanak-kanak merentasi aktiviti bermain yang berbeza. Analisis bahan

pembelajaran mencadangkan penekanan pedagogi pada matlamat akademik di samping matlamat perkembangan. Lapan peranan guru yang berbeza semasa bermain dikenal pasti, menunjukkan keselarasan antara kepercayaan yang dinyatakan dan amalan yang diperhatikan. Dapatan ini berbeza dengan kajian terdahulu. Tambahan pula, pelaksanaan bermain dipengaruhi oleh interaksi kompleks antara faktor struktur, ekologi sekolah, harapan ibu bapa, dan profil guru individu. Kajian ini mengenal pasti tiga ciri utama pedagogi berasaskan bermain dalam konteks negara: kewujudan bersama elemen pembelajaran kolektif dan individu, rundingan antara autoriti guru dan kebebasan kanak-kanak, dan integrasi objektif akademik dan perkembangan. Dapatan ini mencadangkan bahawa guru prasekolah Cina terlibat dalam menggabungkan nilai-nilai Konfusianisme tradisional dengan pendekatan pedagogi Barat kontemporari untuk mencapai keseimbangan antara kesinambungan budaya dan keperluan pendidikan moden. Kajian ini menyumbang kepada pengetahuan sedia ada mengenai PAKK dalam konteks budaya bukan Barat di mana pendekatan bermain secara amnya bukanlah prinsip utama PAKK. Dapatan kajian ini dapat membantu tadika-tadika Cina, terutamanya yang mempunyai sumber terhad atau berfokus pada populasi kurang kemampuan. Ia juga berfungsi sebagai titik rujukan bagi pendidik PAKK dari masyarakat yang mempunyai budaya serupa dengan negara Cina dari segi pertimbangan tentang kesesuaian dasar pendidikan Barat.

**PRESCHOOL TEACHERS' BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF PLAY IN THE CONTEXT OF CURRICULUM REFORM IN CHINA: A CASE STUDY IN GUANGXI ZHUANG AUTONOMOUS REGION**

## ABSTRACT

This case study investigates the beliefs and practices of mainland Chinese preschool teachers regarding play following the 1980 early childhood education (ECE) curriculum reform, which advocated a shift from teacher-led instruction to child-centered, play-based pedagogy. Recognizing prior research highlighting tensions between this Western-influenced approach and Chinese cultural norms alongside existing practices, this study examines how twelve teachers from two public kindergartens in Guangxi, southern China, perceive and implement play by negotiating Western pedagogical theories and Chinese traditional values. The findings reveal that teachers adopted a hybrid approach to play, characterized by the integration of child autonomy with intentional teacher scaffolding, and a prioritization of adult guidance for disadvantaged children lacking adequate play resources and parental support. While participants viewed play and formal learning as interconnected, they expressed a notable lack of clarity regarding the definition of play and the rationale behind its mandated use as the primary method for curriculum delivery. Observed practice indicated approximately three hours of daily playtime, with varying degrees of child-led freedom across different play activities. Analysis of learning materials suggested a pedagogical emphasis on academic goals alongside developmental aims. Eight distinct teacher roles during play were identified, demonstrating a congruence between stated beliefs and observed practices, contrasting with earlier studies. Furthermore, the implementation of play was influenced by a complex interplay of structural factors,

school ecology, parental expectations, and individual teacher profiles. The study identifies three key characteristics of play-based pedagogy in the mainland Chinese context: the co-existence of collective and individual learning elements, the negotiation between teacher authority and child freedom, and the integration of academic and developmental objectives. These findings suggest that Chinese preschool teachers are actively engaged in blending traditional Confucian values with contemporary Western pedagogical approaches to achieve a balance between cultural continuity and the demands of modern education. This research contributes to the scholarly discourse on play-based ECE by providing an in-depth analysis of its implementation in a non-Western cultural context where play has not historically been a central tenet of early childhood education. The findings offer valuable insights for Chinese kindergartens, particularly those with limited resources or serving vulnerable populations, and may also serve as a reference point for educators in culturally similar societies navigating the adoption and adaptation of Western educational policies.

# CHAPTER 1

# INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Introduction

Play-based learning has been widely embraced and adopted by early childhood education (ECE) educators during the past few decades. An international report highlights that learning through play is a core feature of successful curricula (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2004). Play significantly contributes to quality early childhood education by fostering children's development in developmentally appropriate ways (Fung & Cheng, 2012). A literature review has shown that play can promote both academic and non-academic learning (Golinkoff et al., 2006). Unsurprisingly, play and play-related notions such as child-centeredness, active learning, participation, constructivism are promoted worldwide through influential ECE documents (DEEWR, 2009; Department for Education of UK, 2024; Ministry of Education of Singapore, 2022). In China, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has explicitly incorporated play into the national curriculum and positioned it as the fundamental approach for delivering curriculum (MOE, 2001, 2012a, 2016).

This study aims to explore how Chinese preschool teachers perceive play and implement a play-based approach within the context of curriculum reform, in which borrowed educational ideas are the key tenets. This chapter provides an overview of this study. The first section focuses on the significance of the play-based approach in early childhood education. The second part outlines the background of the study, followed by problem statement and research objectives and research questions. The significances and limitations of the study, along with operational definitions of key words will be discussed at the end.

## 1.2 Background of the study

Early childhood education, also known as preschool or kindergarten education (*xue qian jiao yu*) in China, refers to the education and care for children between three and six years before they enter primary school. The institution for early childhood education is called "*you er yuan*" in Chinese language. The overall goal of preschool education is to promote children's holistic development—physical, cognitive, moral, and aesthetic—while also supporting parents with parenting advice (MOE, 2016).

Amid the societal transformations brought about by the Reform and Opening-up policy (*gai ge kai fang*) in 1978, the Chinese government launched a curriculum reform in early childhood education in 1980, aiming to replace the teacher-centred, subject-based approach with child-centred, play-based pedagogies (Liu & Feng, 2005; Xu & Liu, 2014). With this reform, various educational theories and curriculum models from the West—such as Montessori, Project, and High Scope—flooded into China (Zhu & Zhang, 2008).

Before this reform, Chinese kindergartens were characterized and dominated by teacher-directed group instruction, imported from the former Soviet Union. Teachers delivered the curriculum of six subjects—physical education, language, environment, arts and craft, music and arithmetic—through whole-class instruction and homework (*zuo ye*) (China National Society of Early Childhood Education [CNSECE], 1999). Under this approach, children's play was either neglected or merely used as a tool to capture children's interests (Liu & Feng, 2005).

During the first two decades after the start of the reform, the government focused more on disseminating reformed ideas and reshaping practitioners' pedagogical beliefs (Liu et al., 2005). It was anticipated that the transformation of practitioners' educational beliefs would naturally lead to changes in classroom practices. Consequently, some researchers described the curriculum reform as "an ideas revolution" (Liu & Feng, 2005, p. 94). Concepts such as "respecting children," "active learning," "play-based teaching and learning" were incorporated into the national curriculum (MOE, 2001) and promoted nationwide (Tobin et al., 2009). Even teachers from rural and remote areas were aware of these reformed ideas, despite their limited access to professional development needed to understand and implement the promoted practice (Tobin et al., 2009).

To further advance the reform, the central government issued the national curriculum framework in 2001 (MOE, 2001) and a supplementary document in 2012 (MOE, 2012a). The national curriculum framework defines the ECE curriculum as consisting of five interrelated areas[1] and outlines overall objectives for each area, along with recommended pedagogies for teachers. The 2012 document categorizes objectives in each area into three age groups. These two policy documents were promoted nationwide to ECE educators and have become the guidelines for their daily practices. In both documents, the government positioned the role and status of play as the fundamental activity for delivering the curriculum (Bautista et al., 2021). Several studies examined play practices in rural areas (Che & Yan, 2008; Luo et al., 2009; Meng & He, 2005; Wang, 2009; Zeng et al., 2007) and identified challenges for teachers in rural kindergartens, including issues related to play materials (Liu, 2011; Luo et al., 2009; Yang & Cao, 2010), the prevalence of teacher-led group instruction (Hu & Yang, 2010; Wang, 2010; Xu, 2010; Yang & Cao, 2010), and limited play opportunities for children (Pan, 2003; Xiao, 2004).

[1] Language, health, social education, arts, and science

From 2010 onwards, the Chinese government has intensified its efforts to solve the "3A" issues in early education, namely, accessibility, affordability, and accountability (The State Council of China, 2010a, 2010b). Several key measures have been introduced to help practitioners implement the promoted play-based approach. These measures include, but are not limited to, raising teacher qualifications (MOE, 2012b), increasing financial subsidies to ECE (Ministry of Finance, 2011), and launching a national teacher training program (MOE, 2011). At the same time, the government has been working to eliminate schoolification in Chinese kindergartens. Regulations to kindergartens, primary schools, and private tutoring centers are introduced. According to these policies, kindergartens are prohibited from teaching primary school curriculum content, and primary schools are banned from conducting any forms of admission exams (MOE, 2018, 2021; The State Council of China, 2021). The recent issued quality evaluation document reiterates the significance of play in kindergarten education and requires a minimum of two hours of outdoor daily playtime (MOE, 2022). During this period, the shortage of play materials persisted as a significant issue in many kindergartens, particularly in rural and undeveloped areas (Liu, 2015; Zhang, 2014). In many rural classrooms, children had access to few or no play materials (Liu, 2015; Zhang, 2014).

## 1.3 Statement of problem

Importing educational ideas from abroad has been a potential source of change for many countries (Tobin et al., 2009). A persistent challenge, however, lies in the compatibility between these imported ideas and local educational values and practices. Numerous studies have highlighted the tensions between Western theories and preschool teachers' indigenous values and contextual realities in both Chinese societies and other Asian contexts (Fung & Cheng, 2012; Kheioh & Low, 2022; Liu et al., 2005; Rashid & Jahan, 2021; Vong, 2012; Yang et al., 2022). This conflict is especially apparent in the ongoing struggle between the promoted play-based approach and the deeply rooted tradition of teacher-directed group instruction (Hu, 2012; Li & Chen, 2017; Li et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2005; Rao et al., 2010; Tang & Maxwell, 2007; Yang et al., 2022; Zhu & Zhou, 2005).

Historically, learning has been prioritized over play in Chinese culture, resulting in a long-standing play-learning dichotomy (He, 2018). Although national policies emphasize and promote the significance of play (MOE, 2001, 2016, 2022), they often lack clear and practical guidance on how to translate these ideas into practice (Bautista et al., 2021; Fan & Nyland, 2020). As a result, the practical "how to" implement play-based approach has largely been left to individual teachers to interpret and navigate (Liu & Feng, 2005). Without concrete guidance, teachers often rely on personal experiences and their own [mis]understandings of policy. Some have used play merely as a break or reward (Che & Yan, 2008), while others attempted to direct child-initiated play towards academic learning (Rao & Li, 2009).Consequently, learning and play often exist as parallel, rather than integrated, activities in many kindergartens (Vong, 2012; Zhou & Hedges, 2020). Previous studies have repeatedly identified a policy-practice gap and a discrepancy between teachers' beliefs and practices (R. Huang et al., 2019; Li & Chen, 2017; Li et al., 2012; Liu & Elicker, 2005; Liu et al., 2005; Zhu & Zhang, 2008).

For the play-based approach to be meaningfully implemented, teachers must not only truly understand the value of play but also possess the knowledge and skills necessary to enact play-based pedagogies. Given the introduction of post-2010 policies and more concrete governmental initiatives, it is timely to explore how teachers perceive and implement play in response to their contextual realities. While earlier studies largely focused on the challenges teachers faced in implementing play (R. Huang et al., 2019; Li & Chen, 2017; Li et al., 2012; Liu & Elicker, 2005; Liu et al., 2005; Zhu & Zhang, 2008), relatively few have explored how teachers adjust, adapt, and modify their practices according to the reform advocacy (Li et al., 2022; Rao & Li, 2009; Vong, 2012).

Moreover, while the majority of the existing research has concentrated on coastal, developed regions, such as Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Beijing (Fees et al., 2014; R. Huang et al., 2019; Lin et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2005; Pan & Liu, 2008; Rao & Li, 2009; Yang & Li, 2019, 2022; Q. Zhang et al., 2023; Zhu et al., 2021), comparatively few studies have examined teachers' play beliefs and practices in undeveloped regions (Fleer & Li, 2020; Vong, 2012), particularly in remote ethnic minority[2] areas. Therefore, there is an urgent need to examine preschool teachers' play beliefs and practices in these understudied contexts to better understand how national policy is interpreted and enacted on the ground. This study seeks to fill that gap by exploring how preschool teachers from a remote and underdeveloped region understand and implement play in their everyday practices.

## 1.4 Objectives of the study

[2] In China, apart from the Han majority, which composes 91.11% of the whole population, there are 55 ethnic minority groups. The Chinese government has established five autonomous regions for five major minority groups whose population exceed one million, namely Tibetans, Uyghurs, Chinese Muslims, Zhuang, and Mongolians. Among these, the Zhuang people constitute the largest ethnic minority, with a population exceeding 16 million. Economically, all these autonomous regions are located within undeveloped areas.

1. To explore Chinese preschool teachers' beliefs of play and its relationship with formal learning.

2. To examine teachers' implementation of play in their daily practice.

3. To identify the key characteristics of play-based approach in Chinese kindergartens.

### 1.5 Research questions

1. How do Chinese preschool teachers perceive play and its relationship with formal learning?

2. How do Chinese preschool teachers implement play in their daily practice?

3. What are the key characteristics of play-based approach in Chinese kindergartens?

### 1.6 Significance of the study

By exploring preschool teachers' beliefs and practices regarding the play-based approach, this study will shed light on how play as a pedagogy is implemented in an Asian context, where play has not traditionally been a core component of ECE (Pan et al., 2018). The findings of this research will be of significance to stakeholders both within the country and abroad.

First, the findings of this study will provide timely feedback to policymakers on the effects of recent policies aimed at promoting play-based approach. Previous research identified a discrepancy between policy texts and teachers' interpretations caused by dissemination distortion or teachers' misunderstanding (Liu & Liu, 2008).

Research also identified a policy-practice gap at the classroom level (Li et al., 2017; Li et al., 2012; Tang & Maxwell, 2007). Under official initiatives and measures in recent years, it is expected that teachers will have a clearer and better understanding of the policy texts. The findings of this study will provide empirical evidence regarding how teachers perceive and implement play, and how they align their practices with the new mandates.

Second, this study will be beneficial for teacher educators. Previous research found that teacher training programs in China often fail to equip teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills needed to implement the reformed ideas (Liu & Feng, 2005; Tang, 2006; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). Moreover, teacher training programs continue to be dominated by instruction-based pedagogy (R. Huang et al., 2019; Wang & Mao, 1996). Scholars and kindergarten practitioners have called for more context-responsive training programs (Fan & Nyland, 2020). By revealing how teachers implement play and what challenges and difficulties they face, this study will help teacher educators better understand practitioners' needs and struggles.

Third, insights from this study may be applicable to a broader context in Aisa, particularly in societies with Chinese cultural heritage. Since 2000, many Asian countries have launched ECE reforms to introduce child-centered, progressive theories (Grieshaber, 2016), but have encountered challenges in their implementation (Kheioh & Low, 2022; Lee et al., 2023). Teachers in similar contexts may find inspiration in the experiences of Chinese teachers implementing play-based pedagogy.

Finally, this research will contribute to the theoretical discourse on play. Most existing studies on play are derived from Western settings (Zosh et al., 2017). While play is universally recognized, it is often described as being child-initiated and child-directed, a view rooted in Western perspectives. This view, widely accepted and promoted in many non-Western contexts, is sometimes considered as the sole appropriate approach. Scholars have cautioned against merely imitating Western education models and called for greater contextual adaptation (Gupta, 2018; Tobin et al., 2009; Zhu & Zhang, 2008). Play is universal, but also deeply shaped by cultural and contextual factors (Brooker & Edwards, 2010; Wu & Rao, 2011). Different cultures interpret and practice play in various ways (Rogoff, 2003).

In summary, play is fundamental to children's development; thus, finding a culturally and contextually appropriate play-based pedagogy is vital for all ECE educators. Beyond informing policy and teacher training, this study may also be valuable in raising parental awareness, offering practical strategies for bridging play with structured learning, and providing a comparative lens that enriches global ECE discourse. Understanding how play manifests in different sociocultural contexts will help ensure that pedagogical reforms are not only theoretically sound but also practically sustainable and feasible.

## 1.7 Operational definitions

### 1.7.1 Chinese preschool teachers

In this study, unless specified, “Chinese preschool teachers” or “Chinese kindergarten teachers” are used interchangeably, referring to teachers working in kindergartens in mainland China. For teachers in out-of-mainland contexts, the researcher will specify (e.g., Chinese teachers from Hong Kong). In most urban kindergartens in mainland China, every class is equipped with two class teachers and one assistant or carer who is responsible for daily life routines such as meals and cleaning (MOE, 2016). The carers may also participate, to varying degrees, daily activities depending on their cooperation with the class teachers. Typically, the two class teachers take turns to organize daily activities. In some kindergartens with sufficient teachers, each class may have three teachers who rotate in the role of carer. To be eligible to work as a class teacher in Chinese kindergarten, one must have a teaching certificate issued by the government (Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, 2024).

### 1.7.2 Kindergartens

A kindergarten in China, also known as *you er yuan* (幼儿园), refers to an early childhood education institution providing education and care to children aged three to six years (MOE, 2016). In this study, the terms “kindergarten” and “preschool” are used interchangeably; the same applies to “kindergarten teachers” and “preschool teachers”. Although kindergartens may choose to provide either half-day or full-day program, the majority opt for full-day programs.

In most kindergartens, children are grouped according to their ages into three categories: *xiao ban* (or K1) for three to four years old, *zhong ban* (or K2) for four to five years old, and *da ban* (or K3) for five to six years old. The government regulates the number of children in each age group class: *xiao ban*—no more than 25 children, *zhong ban*—no more than 30 children, *da ban*—no more than 35 children (MOE, 2016). In most urban kindergartens, there are two class teachers and one carer. Regarding adult-child ratio, it is officially regulated as 1:7 or 1:9 for full-day programs, and 1:11 to 1:13 for half-day programs (MOE, 2016).

### 1.7.3 Teachers’ beliefs

In this study, teachers’ beliefs are defined as individual teachers’ personal, held-to-be-true propositions about teaching, learning or knowledge, self, and students

(Richardson, 2003). These beliefs encompass a range of perspectives and attitudes that teachers hold concerning various aspects of their professional practice. Specifically, teachers' beliefs about teaching include their personal convictions about effective teaching methods, instructional strategies, and classroom management techniques. Beliefs about learning and knowledge include teachers' views on children's learning processes, the nature of knowledge, and the role of play and structured activities in the learning process. Beliefs about self involve teachers' self-perceptions, such as their confidence, efficacy, and professional identity. Finally, beliefs about students encompass teachers' attitudes and assumptions about students' abilities, needs, and the importance of fostering a supportive and inclusive learning environment.

### 1.7.4 Teacher practice

The term of "teacher practice" covers a wide range of teachers' work and responsibilities within an educational setting (Klein, 2012). Teacher practice may include lesson planning, curriculum delivery, instruction methods, and class assessment, and it can be influenced by their beliefs (Anderman & Anderman, 2020; Denessen et al., 2022). Researchers have summarized teacher practice as reflected in three aspects: the content coverage (what teachers teach), teaching quality (how teachers deliver the content), and assessment practice (how teachers assess students' learning outcomes) (Teig et al., 2024). This study only focuses on teaching quality—how teachers deliver the curriculum through play-based approaches. Klieme et al. (2009) identified three essential dimensions of teaching quality: classroom management, supportive climate, and cognitive activation. In this study, the researcher primarily focuses on how preschool teachers create an engaging and stimulating play environment for children and support children's learning in play.

### 1.7.5 Play

In the context of this study, play refers to a form of pedagogy that consists of playful activities with varying degrees of children's autonomy and teachers' involvement ranging from child-initiated free play to guided play with proactive adult involvement (Pyle & Danniels, 2017; Weisberg et al., 2013). Free Play refers child-initiated and child-directed play, which allows children to explore, discover, and construct knowledge with complete autonomy and little or no adult involvement. It emphasizes spontaneous, self-motivated activities that foster creativity and independence. Guided play, on the other hand, refers play that is initiated by the child but scaffolded by the teacher using various strategies.

## 1.8 Limitation

This research is a qualitative case study involving twelve preschool teachers from two urban public kindergartens in a less-developed, ethnic region of China—Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. The sample size is small; thus, generalization of findings should be cautioned. Regarding data collection, a total of 4,800 minutes of classroom observations were obtained, providing a rich dataset on kindergarten play practices. However, extending the observation period further could have yielded richer data, providing deeper insights into teachers' play practices. In addition, this study did not examine the perspectives of other two key stakeholders: parents and children, both may shape how play is perceived and implemented in the educational settings. According to ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 2000), individual's growth and development is influenced by all people around, including those may not have direct interactions with them. In this study, the researcher only examined class teachers' play beliefs and practice, excluding other kindergarten staff—such as the carer of the class, principals, administrative personnel, gardeners, and security guards, who may also influence how play is perceived and implemented.

## 1.9 Summary

This chapter establishes the foundation of the study by outlining its core elements and articulating the rationale. It starts with a concise overview of current trends in the broader Asian region and China. Next, it details the study's background—covering recent curriculum reforms and newly issued policies—before moving to the problem statement, which drives the research objectives and questions. The chapter also specifies the study's theoretical and practical significance, both domestically and internationally. Finally, key phrases are defined and the study's limitations are acknowledged.

# CHAPTER 2

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## 2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this study is to examine how preschool teachers perceive and implement the play-based approach in the Chinese context. This chapter provides a literature review on related topics. It begins with a concise overview of the definitions of teachers' beliefs and pedagogical beliefs, followed by a review of play theories and practices in Western contexts. Next, it offers an in-depth review of play research in mainland China, including Confucian perceptions of play and previous empirical studies previous studies. Finally, the chapter outlines the theoretical and conceptual frameworks underpinning this study.

## 2.2 Studies on teachers' beliefs

### 2.2.1 Definitions of belief and teachers' belief

It is widely accepted that teachers' beliefs influence their perceptions and judgements, which, in turn, affect their classroom decisions and actions (Pajares, 1992). Beliefs also affect how and why teachers may or may not adopt a new curriculum, new instructional strategies, and new initiatives (Biesta et al., 2015; Levin, 2015). Research on teachers' beliefs dates back to over 60 years and interest in this topic has grown significantly during the past two decades (Ashton, 2015). However, psychological literature offers no universally accepted definition on beliefs, which often appear under labels such as perceptions, practical theories, judgement, attitudes, opinions, perspectives, implicit theories, internal mental processes (Hofer & Pintrich, 1997; Pajares, 1992). Previous studies identified three core characteristics of beliefs: they are personal philosophies, they consist of propositions felt to be true, and they include affective and evaluative components (Liljedahl et al., 2021; Richardson, 2003). Accordingly, this study adopts the definition of Richardson (2003) and defines beliefs as an individual's personal, held-to-be-true propositions about the world.

In educational contexts, researchers applied these characteristics to define teacher beliefs. For instance, Kagan (1992) described them as tacit, often unconscious assumptions about students, classroom, and the academic material to be taught. Chinese scholars defined teachers' beliefs as personal, held-to-be-true perceptions about teaching, curriculum, students, learning, and teacher roles (Gao & Pang, 2006; Xin & Shen, 1999), or as judgments about educational theories and practice (Yu & Xin, 2000). Pang and Ye (2003) characterize preschool teachers' beliefs as foundational opinions shaped by knowledge of child development, which influence teachers' behaviors and, in turn, children's learning. Hence, this study conceptualizes teacher beliefs as personal, held-to-be-true propositions concerning teaching, learning, classroom environments, students, curriculum content, and the self.

This study focuses on teachers' beliefs about play, a subset of their broader pedagogical beliefs on teaching and learning. Pedagogical beliefs generally fall into two categories: knowledge transmission and knowledge construction (Lee et al., 2013). Transmission-oriented teachers view themselves as information givers, prioritizing content coverage and pacing (Brooks & Brooks, 1999). Constructivist teachers act as facilitators, adapting to learners' needs and fostering interactive, student-centered environments (Sing & Khine, 2008). These teachers tend to promote learning by allowing students to construct new knowledge based on their prior understanding (Yilmaz & Sahin, 2011) and engage in intentional interactions that encourage children's preferences and ideas (Cornelius-White, 2007). In contrast, traditional teachers rely on didactic, adult-directed teaching practices (Lee et al., 2013), expecting children to follow their lead and participate in highly structured group activities (Cornelius-White, 2007).

The binary classification of teachers' pedagogical beliefs has been criticized as being overly simplistic, since teachers may hold both traditional and progressive beliefs. Empirical studies in both Asian and Western contexts support the notion that individuals can simultaneously maintain conflicting beliefs (Sang et al., 2009; Tondeur et al., 2009). Critics of the "anti-transmission" stance argue that effective learning often requires some degree of initial direct instruction before students can construct their own understandings (Rowlands & Carson, 2001). Acquiring knowledge from a teacher does not preclude students from actively constructing their own meanings. On the contrary, successful learning outcomes depend on teachers' role in clarifying goals, shaping activities, and assessing learning outcomes (Abd-El-Fattah, 2010). Lin (2011) further argued that the teaching cannot be entirely student-centered, as teachers must still transmit knowledge, provide guidance, and conduct assessment.

### 2.2.2 Factors that impact teachers' implementation of their beliefs

Based on existing literature and drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, Buehl and Beck (2015) proposed a model with factors that may support or impede teachers' implementation of their beliefs (see Figure 2.1). This model classifies the influencing elements into internal and external factors. The internal factors include teachers' other beliefs, knowledge, experience, and their level of self-reflection and self-awareness. External factors, organized into four levels based on ecological systems theory, encompass influences at the classroom, school, district, and national or state levels.

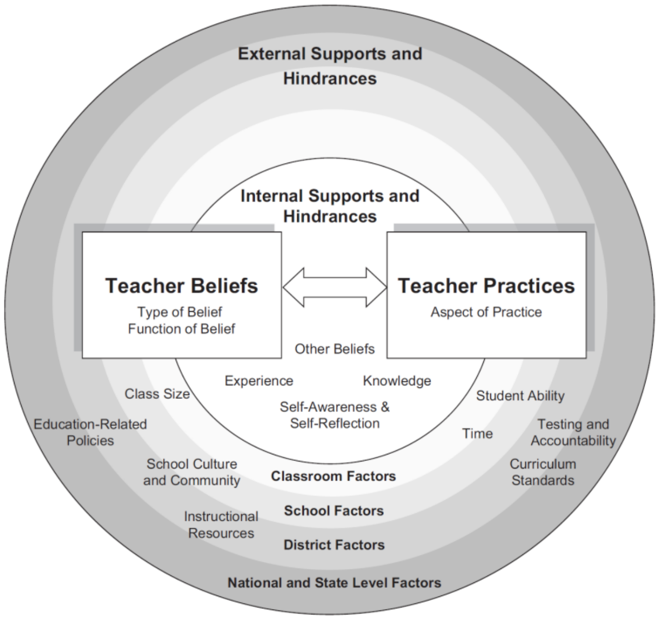


Figure 2.1 Factors that influence teachers' implementation of their beliefs

Teachers' beliefs exist in a complex, multidimensional system where some beliefs are more central than others (Ogan-Bekiroglu & Akkoç, 2009) and teachers may simultaneously hold contradictory beliefs (Cross, 2009). Thus, different beliefs within this system can influence each other. For instance, epistemological beliefs, considered fundamental in the belief system, affect teachers' pedagogical beliefs and classroom practices. In addition, beliefs about ability and self-efficacy can explain the misalignment between beliefs and practices (Ogan-Bekiroglu & Akkoç, 2009). This means that teachers are more likely to apply their beliefs about content and instructional approaches when they feel capable of doing so. To enact their beliefs, teachers need subject and pedagogical knowledge consistent with their beliefs (Buehl & Beck, 2015). This may help explain why some Chinese preschool teachers who value play-based learning continue to rely on didactic methods.

Another internal factor is teachers' self-awareness and capacity for self-reflection, which can allow them to recognize and address contradictions between their beliefs and practices. Reflective practice is essential for aligning beliefs with instructional decisions and applies to both preservice and in-service teachers (Potari & Georgiadou–Kabouridis, 2009). Finally, teaching experience has also been shown to shape belief systems. Levin et al. (2013) found that less experienced teachers tend to hold more teacher-centered beliefs, whereas more experienced teachers often adopt more student-centered perspectives.

In early childhood education, two review studies (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019; Pyle et al., 2017) have identified several key challenges and barriers influencing preschool teachers' implementation of play-based pedagogy. Pyle et al. (2017) outlined five primary factors: (1) lack of professional development or training for teachers on the subject of play-based learning; (2) pressure from parents; (3) pressure for school readiness; (4) large teacher-child ratios; (5) lack of materials, time, or space to support play. Bubikova-Moan et al. (2019) provided a more comprehensive review by incorporating structural challenges—such as time constraints, large class sizes, understaffing, limited funding, and inadequate play-based learning resources—and adding two further factors: peer pressure from colleagues and children's characteristics, including limited language ability and special needs.

In a related context, Rogan and Grayson (2003) examined the implementation of a new curriculum, also identified similar factors that can support or hinder the implementation of new ideas or practices in a school. They categorized possible indicators of the capacity to support innovation into four groups: physical resources, teacher factors, learner factors, and school ecology and management (Rogan & Grayson, 2003).

Research in Chinese societies (mainland China, Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, Singapore) identified similar influential factors in teachers' implementation of their beliefs. These factors identified from previous research (Cheng, 2006; Lim & Torr, 2007; Tang & Maxwell, 2007; Zhu & Zhang, 2008) correspond closely to Buehl and Beck's ecological model. Internal influences include teachers' educational background (e.g., degree, major), teaching experience, teacher quality, teachers' other beliefs, attitude, teaching skills, personality. External influences are categorized across the classroom, school, and broader national or societal levels. Classroom-level influences include class size, teacher-child ratio, time, classroom resources, characteristics of children, grade. School-level influences encompass parental academic expectation, school funding and resources, institutional culture, in-service training and professional development, collaboration with colleagues and leadership support. At the district, national, and societal levels, influential factors include ECE policies, curriculum requirements, state support (e.g., financial subsidy and teacher training), media discourses, prevailing social values, and broader cultural norms—such as performance-oriented philosophy, values of unity and collectiveness, respect for authority and teachers, and exam-driven educational systems.

## 2.3 Play in the West: perspectives and practices

### 2.3.1 Definitions of play

Although play is widely recognized and encouraged as a vital aspect of children's learning and development, there is no universal definition of play. Since play is a broad concept that can be observed and interpreted in many different ways, it is extremely difficult to define. Besides, the boundaries among play, work, and academic learning are not always clear and vary depending on personal beliefs. Thus, many researchers have sought to describe how play looks instead of defining what play is. Rubin et al. (1983) identified five key characteristics of play: (1) freely chosen; (2) nonliteral (i.e., children create their own reality during play); (3) intrinsically self-motivated; (4) pleasurable to children; (5) process-oriented. Huizinga (1955) regarded pleasurable as an essential feature of play, as it offers children a sense of freedom. Drawing from existing literature, the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (2018) described play with five characteristics: meaningful, joyful, iterative, actively engaging, socially interactive.

### 2.3.2 Perspectives of play in the West: from classic to contemporary theories

Historically, early childhood education in the West has been rooted in a strong ideology of child-centred approaches, emphasizing self-directed learning through free play, independent choice, active discovery, exploration, and hands-on experiences (Wood, 2010). To support this form of child-initiated learning, teachers are expected to create an enriched and stimulating environment and to support children's choices. In many cultures, adult involvement in play is not well understood, and it is often viewed as an intrusion (Bertram & Pascal, 2022). The concept of child-initiated learning assumes that children intuitively know their needs and interests, guiding their learning through self-directed play and exploration (Wood, 2009).

To gain a better understanding of the perception and practice of play in the Western context, it is essential to explore its evolution of play through the perspectives of classical and contemporary play theories.

As a classical play theorist, Rousseau's proposed that early education should engage all senses (Krogh & Slentz, 2010). He emphasized that teachers should allow children to explore and experience through play by following their natural interests instead of giving lessons or following a prescribed curriculum (Krogh & Slentz, 2010). Teachers should give assistance only when necessary. The foundational principles of many early childhood philosophies and child-centered policies can be traced back to Rousseau's theory (Hedges et al., 2011).

Another influential play theorist is Froebel who founded the first kindergarten and whose influences are evident in many preschool classrooms (Krogh & Slentz, 2010). Froebel believed that children's self-directed play was an expression of their imagination, creativity, and understanding. He argued that children's development, learning, and wellbeing are best served through self-directed play (Bruce, 2021). Froebel attached great importance on first-hand experiences and self-chosen activities. He advised that adults should "begin where the learner is" and sensitively intervene (Wood & Attfield, 2005, p. 29). Since the power was innately within the children, teachers' role was to provide proper materials so that the inner power of children would be released (Dennis, 1970).

The third influential figure is Piaget, who developed a play theory based on the idea that children's cognitive development requires appropriate environmental stimuli and experiences. Piaget believed that biological maturity is a precondition for learning (Wineberg & Chicquette, 2009): only when a child has the necessary mental capacity to make use of new experiences can genuine learning occur (Ginsburg & Opper, 1988). Conversely, if a child is not ready to learn due to a lack of the necessary cognitive structure, she cannot achieve genuine learning even if forced to (Ginsburg & Opper, 1988). Piaget outlined three stages of play in children's development: practice play, symbolic play, and games with rules. According to Piaget, cognitive construction takes place primarily through interaction with physical objects (Ginsburg & Opper, 1988), and discovery is the foundation of learning (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969a). Regarding the experience presented to children, Piaget stated that a moderately novel experience is most appropriate to arouse children's interest. In contrast, a radically novel experience may hinder assimilation, while an overly familiar one may fail to engage the child (Ginsburg & Opper, 1988). In terms of teachers' role, Piaget insisted that teachers should not impose rules on children. Instead, "he should be an elder collaborator, and, if he has it in him, a simple comrade to the children." (Piaget, 2013, p. 367) Thus, in a Piagetian-oriented curriculum, the role of the teacher is limited to being a supporter, such as following children's leads and initiatives (Patt & Göncü, 2015).

### 2.3.3 Practices of play in the West: from free play to guided play

Under the influences of classical play theories and developmental theory, the open-ended, child-directed, exploratory free play has become the advocated and dominant pedagogy in Western cultures (Grieshaber, 2016). Learning, on the other hand, has been placed on the opposite side of play, traditionally perceived as a teacher-led, formal activity (Nilsson et al., 2017). This dichotomized perception of play and learning has led to a separation of these two activities in kindergarten practice: learning usually occurs inside classroom under teachers' direction, whereas play takes place out of classroom and is free of teachers' intervention (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). Empirical studies confirmed this separation and teachers' difficulty in integrating play and learning (Baker, 2014; Lynch, 2014; Pyle & Danniels, 2017).

However, during the past few decades, there has been a shift from traditional, open-ended play with little adult involvement toward guided play, which sits between free play and learning (or a "middle ground") and incorporates elements of free play, discovery learning, and traditional teacher-centered pedagogy (Weisberg et al., 2013). The change or the shift is reflected in official policies, scholars' discourse, and practitioners' practice.

First, official early learning frameworks across contexts have increasingly emphasized academic standards and adult involvement (DEEWR, 2009; Department for Education of UK, 2024). These policies mandate ECE educators to shift their practices towards teaching academics through play (Wallerstedt & Pramling, 2012). For example, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) of UK include both developmental and academic standards for preschoolers. Educators are required to prepare children for formal schooling by helping them achieve mandated learning goals (Department for Education of UK, 2024). In Australia, the Australian Government Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) explicitly lists "intentional teaching" and "learning through play" as parallel principles (DEEWR, 2009). Similarly, in New Zealand, preschool teachers are expected to "integrate domain knowledge (for example, science and arts knowledge) into the curriculum" (Ministry of Education of New Zealand, 2017). The bifurcation of play and learning in policy documents has been linked to ECE teachers' reports that they feel uncertain about how to deliver curriculum through play (Bubikova-Moan et al., 2019).

Early childhood education scholars also expressed their concerns about the adequacy and efficiency of open-ended play. They criticized the play-learning dichotomy and argued that this dichotomy negates the view that play itself is educational (Nilsson et al., 2017). Unlike play at home, play in an educational institution must teach children something to be of value (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). Moreover, some researchers have questioned the extent to which children can construct knowledge without appropriate adult involvement (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008; Wood, 2007). Empirical research has demonstrated that without adequate and appropriate adult involvement, many play experiences are impoverished, superficial, and lack depth and challenge (Bodrova, 2008; Hunter & Walsh, 2014; Stephen, 2012;

Walsh et al., 2010; Wood, 2014). Teachers' non-participatory stance or 'laissez-faire' attitude often results in repetitive play (Grieshaber, 2008). Furthermore, an overemphasis on free play may lead to children missing out on essential conceptual knowledge (Bergen & Mauer, 2000; Cutter-Mackenzie et al., 2014) and prevent teachers from maximizing children's learning (Hedges et al., 2011). Moreover, certain play activities, such as socio-dramatic play, require high cognitive and social competence, making adult support essential for children to fully benefit (Wood, 2013). The critiques of open-ended play have led to integrated pedagogical play such as guided play (Weisberg et al., 2013), intentional teaching (Epstein, 2007), integrated pedagogies (Wood, 2010), sustained shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009), play-based learning (Pyle & Danniels, 2017), and playful learning (Hassinger-Das et al., 2017). In this study, the researcher adopts the notion of "guided play" to represent all these pedagogies that view play as a continuum with varying degrees of children's autonomy and adult involvement. Some scholars argued that guided play is a solution to the long-lasting play-learning dichotomy (Toub et al., 2016).

Several empirical studies have confirmed that children gain more from guided play than from free play or direct instruction. Research supports that adult active involvement facilitates children's play and learning in various areas including literacy play (Enz & Christie, 1993), physical activity (Tortella et al., 2019), vocabulary acquisition (Dickinson et al., 2013), shape recognition (Fisher et al., 2013), understanding novel toy functions (Bonawitz et al., 2011) and independent play (Trawick-Smith & Dziurgot, 2011) .

Fisher et al. (2013) compared the impact of guided play, free play, and didactic instruction on children's learning of geometric shapes. The researchers found that guided play led to the greatest gains as children had a better understanding of shape