Teacher accounts of parent involvement in children's education in China

Karen Guo a, *, Anna Kilderry b

a School of Education, Faculty of Arts and Education, Deakin University, Burwood Campus, 221 Burwood Highway, Victoria 3125, Australia
b School of Education, Faculty of Arts and Education, Deakin University, Geelong Waurn Ponds Campus, Locked Bag 20000, Geelong, Victoria 3220, Australia

HIGHLIGHTS

- Early childhood teacher views on parenting in China.
- Parenting and the role of parents in children's education.
- Teacher discourse is located within the context of 'glocalization'.
- Parent modelling and parent learning are important for children's education.
- Early childhood teacher-parent partnerships in China are changing.

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ABSTRACT

Discursive insights into early childhood teacher views of parenting in a Chinese context is the focus of this paper. A critical discourse analysis was conducted on teachers' professional accounts captured on an online discussion forum uncovering how parenting and the role of parents in children's education were represented. Emphasized in the analysis is the importance of situating teacher discourse within the context of 'glocalization', acknowledging the influence of Confucian ideology on their professional stance, and recognizing the position of Western approaches in early childhood education. The findings reveal a tenuous place for teacher-parent partnerships in teachers' dialogic space and practice.

1. Introduction

Calls to reframe teacher-parent partnerships have intensified in early childhood literature. Existing studies have highlighted the importance of parents in children's learning and development (Goodall & Ghent, 2014), placing emphasis on children's experiences in the home (Wang, 2014), and recognizing the capacity of parent-teacher relationships in combining their efforts to support children's learning (Murray, Mereoiu, & Handyside, 2013). It is evident however, that there is limited research relating to early childhood teacher perceptions of the role of parents in children's education in the Chinese context, and their working relationships with parents. China has a long history of separate and discrete working relationships between teachers and parents. More recently however, an emphasis on teacher-parent partnerships has emerged in early childhood policies and practices. As such, teacher-parent partnerships from the perspective of teachers is a timely issue to investigate. The study presented here provides a close analysis of Chinese parenting and teacher-parent relationships, found in Chinese early childhood teachers' professional dialogue captured on an online professional forum. The paper takes the view that the development of parent-teacher partnerships is inextricably linked with how teachers understand parents and parenting, including the roles of parents in their child's learning. A teacher-parent partnership according to Murray et al. (2013) is a collective endeavour between teachers and parents with the main aim to support children's learning in a way where parents are actively involved in their child's education. The focus on teacher perceptions of teacher-parent partnerships and the role of parents in their child's education in China has ramifications for early childhood...
education across the globe. Given the current focus on global citizens in early childhood education, and the fact that “the Chinese population comprises approximately 20% of the world’s population, and is unique in its customs, values, and social, economic and political contexts” (Luo, Tamis-LeMonda, & Song, 2013, p. 844), it is both timely and important to conduct the present research because Chinese discourse makes a significant part of the global discourse.

The concept of ‘glocalization’ (Schröttner, 2010), or the combination of globalization and localization shapes the gaze of the research. We attempt to sketch a discursive framework for understanding the contextual basis of Chinese teachers’ accounts of parenting. As stated by Schröttner, “both the volume and the speed of global flow have intensified the entanglement of the local and the global, thus many local developments have enormous global consequences and vice versa” (p. 51). To provide a contextual understanding for the study, the literature review will therefore commence with traditional views of parenting and teacher-parent partnerships and then move to more contemporary understandings.

2. The changing nature of parenting in China

Theories and perspectives about parenting in China have a long history dating back to the beginning of 500BCE, when Confucius provided moral and ethical guidelines governing how people should relate to others and the world (Huang & Gove, 2015; Ng, Pomerantz, & Deng, 2014; Wang, 2014; Wee, 2014). Confucius has been acknowledged as the leading philosopher in Chinese history and his ideas have significantly influenced many aspects of Chinese people’s lives, including social interactions in school settings (Liu, Hallinger, & Feng, 2016), parenting and the role of parents in children’s education (Huang & Gove, 2015; Ng et al., 2014; Wang, 2014). Confucius maintained that parents have the following responsibilities and roles: to be the authority, to manage family assets and provide resources, to enhance social status of the family, to govern and manage children’s behaviour, to ensure that children adhere to norms of social morality and to establish children’s obligations towards the family (Confucius, 1979; Huang & Gove, 2015; Ng et al., 2014; Wang, 2014). The underlying premise of Confucianism is the conditions of parent authority and responsibility and how to ‘produce’ successful children, who academically achieve (Guo, 2013). For those who embrace Confucianism, children’s upbringing and education is viewed as a family obligation (Huang & Gove, 2015).

Although child rearing in China is traditionally believed to be a parent responsibility and under parent ‘control’, contemporary researchers advocate that “Chinese child-rearing items [aspects] involve the concept of training” (Chao, 1994, p. 1111). For Chao, discussing Chinese parenting in English is a great challenge because “these concepts [such as love, care, devotion] are embedded in a cultural tradition and they may have very different implications when considered in light of the culture” (Chao, 1994, p. 1111). The introduction of training is an attempt to offer an alternative concept which not only expresses the ideas of Chinese parenting, but also involves a relatively meaningful term to speakers of other languages because “training means teaching or educating” (p. 1112). The introduction of the concept of training has recognized the contextual demands for understanding Chinese parenting at the present time. Luo et al. (2013) claim that contemporary Chinese parenting needs to go beyond the framework of Confucianism because of the changes in social and cultural contexts in contemporary society.

Current understandings of Chinese parenting can be found in the work of Way et al. (2013), Luo et al. (2013) and within Wang’s (2014) study with parents and their middle school children in Guangzhou, China. According to these scholars the changes in the social, political and economic contexts in China, especially in the last few decades, have reshaped parenting practices and beliefs. For example, in her interviews with Chinese parents and children, Wang (2014) reported that parents have been strongly influenced by the Western values of autonomy, respect, choice and independence. As a consequence, she argues that a new generation of parents in China are adopting a myriad of modern and often westernised approaches (Wang, 2014).

3. Parent-teacher partnerships in China

Central to traditional Chinese education has been the view of teachers as knowledgeable, and that education and learning in schools is different from the type of learning that takes place in the home. The image of teachers is captured in a statement by Huntsinger, Huntsinger, Ching, and Lee (2000, p. 11), where it is noted that: “the traditional Chinese view of education portrays teachers as repositories of knowledge”. Traditionally, Chinese parents respect teachers and believe that with their professional expertise they are best equipped to teach children knowledge and skills in a school setting.

The traditional view of the parent-teacher relationship rests on the image of teachers as experts, as well as the belief that it is the parents’ responsibility for children within their families and life at home. Therefore, the roles of parents and teachers in traditional Chinese culture are quite distinct, where “Chinese teachers tend to view themselves as more professional with respect to educational matters and expect parents to assist teachers in supporting children’s education” (Lau, Li, & Rao, 2012, p. 417).

The real task of parents and parenting arises in educating children within their own families to assist children with their learning at school, but this typically does not include parents working ‘with’ teachers on school matters. This relationship distinguishes the role of teachers from that of the role of parents. Notably, parent involvement with teachers is conceptualized as a remedial force, meaning that something must have gone astray if parents are required to work alongside teachers to assist with their child’s education. In much the same way, traditionally Chinese teachers “prefer parents to be involved at home” (Ng, 2003, p. 60). Ng’s study on Chinese teacher and parent cooperation clearly identified that “both parents and teachers were not ready to cooperate inside school”.

Since 2000 China has embraced an “ambitious series of curriculum reforms that have required teachers to adapt to new system goals and learn new methods of teaching” (Liu et al., 2016, p. 80). As part of the curriculum reform the Chinese national early childhood curriculum, the Kindergarten Teaching Guidelines [幼儿园教育指导纲要] was implemented (Ministry of Education China, 2001). This presented a noticeable shift in teaching practice, from separate and distinct roles within a teacher-parent partnerships to that where teacher-parent partnerships are viewed as more reciprocal. The Kindergarten Teaching Guidelines include the role of parents in schools and this is clearly acknowledged as an important part of teaching practice (Ministry of Education China, 2001). According to the Kindergarten Teaching Guidelines, early childhood education in contemporary China gives attention to “making good use of surrounding learning contexts of children” so that children’s learning experiences can be extended (p. 27). As such, the document includes statements about establishing “close partnerships between kindergartens and families” and “cooperating with parents to establish needed life routines for children” and “treating families as the most important partner” (p. 30). At the centre of teacher-parent partnership is the notion of “respect”, “equity” and “collaboration” with the aim of assisting parents to improve parenting, thereby supporting children’s learning (p. 31).
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