



# Profiles of teacher-child interactions in Chinese kindergarten classrooms and the associated teacher and program features

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined the quality of teacher-child classroom interactions in Chinese kindergartens and associated program- and teacher-related features. In examining 180 classrooms from randomly selected kindergartens in a southern China province, latent profile analysis (LPA) identified four distinctive profiles of teacher-child interactions. Significant associations were found between teacher-child interaction quality profiles, teacher and program features. Lower teacher-child interaction quality profiles were associated with less desirable program- and teacher-related features, suggesting that programs serving communities where families were most socioeconomically disadvantaged were least likely to receive them.

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## 1. Introduction

Both intervention and observational studies show that children benefit from high quality early school experiences (Campbell et al., 2014; Campbell, Ramey, Pungello, Sparling, & Miller-Johnson, 2002; Loeb, Fuller, Kagan, & Carrol, 2004; Magnuson, Ruhm, & Waldfogel, 2007; Yoshikawa et al., 2015). A growing body of international research literature points specifically to the importance of teacher-child interaction quality as a key ingredient for improving children's outcomes (Araujo, Carneiro, Cruz-Aguayo, & Schady, 2014; Cadima, Leal & Burchinal, 2010; Leyva et al., 2015), but this has yet to be systematically studied in the Chinese cultural and social context (Rao, Sun, Zhou, & Zhang, 2012; Wong, Luo, Zhang, & Rozelle, 2013). Given that the Chinese government is currently initiating and implementing multiple reform agendas intended to create an equitable early childhood education (ECE) system in which high quality classroom experiences are provided to all children aged three to six (Hu & Li, 2012), such research is needed. This study, then, aims to contribute to the field by examining patterns of teacher-child interactions in Chinese kindergartens, and how these patterns are associated with structural quality features that

are the current main targets of reform in Chinese ECE. Specifically, this study examines teacher-child interaction patterns and their association with specific teacher (e.g., teaching experience, highest educational level, major of first/highest educational level, mode of education for highest educational level, tenure, certification, and ranking) and program (e.g., economic property of location, funding agency, current government-rated quality levels, and annual government funding) features as they are the most significant cultural and socioeconomics influences on the current ECE system in China.

## 2. Current Chinese kindergarten context

In 2010, the central Chinese government committed to make ECE available to all age-qualifying children across the nation. Local governments responded by opening more public or semipublic kindergartens in rural areas. Semipublic kindergartens and private kindergartens make up over two thirds of the total number of kindergartens; they are alike in the sense that both are operated by individuals, however in most semipublic kindergartens, the local governments might invest in the facility and/or furnishing in addition to staff training (Hu & Roberts, 2013). Therefore, the location of a kindergarten program (i.e., urban, suburban, rural) is closely associated with the kindergarten program features (Hu, Zhou, Li, & Roberts, 2014; Pan, Liu, & Hu, 2008). In economically challenged rural areas, however, local governments often lack adequate finan-

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cial resources to fund for public or semipublic kindergartens. The majority of rural children, then, attend private kindergartens that lack adequate staffing and resources (Hu et al., 2014).

Since 1995, the State Council has required all teachers working in educational entities to be certified professionals as a way to improve the quality of the ECE teaching. To qualify for the certification, applicants must have an associate degree or above in ECE or a related field. In addition to education and certification, Chinese teachers also strive for *bianzhi*, an official post with the government, and *zhicheng*, a professional ranking. Assigned by local governments to the kindergarten, *bianzhi* is nearly equivalent to tenure in the U.S. education system. Teachers who have *bianzhi*, for example, receive a stable salary in addition to benefits such as reliable medical insurance and public housing allowances/subsidies. Teachers with *zhicheng* and *bianzhi* certification and higher education are more typical in public kindergartens in urban areas (Hu et al., 2014).

Recently, the State Council (2010) targeted improving quality among programs serving disadvantaged rural children as a primary reform goal to close the widening disparity between urban and rural children (Hu et al., 2014). Since then, Chinese scholars have opened such a debate: What constitutes a quality ECE in the Chinese sociocultural context and how can it be effectively measured? Most scholars agree that the traditional Chinese culture has far-reaching impact on the conceptualization of quality kindergartens. In a traditional collectivism culture, under strong influence of the Confucius principles, students must obey the authoritarian figure of the teacher and respect the harmonious relationship. Even in modern Chinese kindergarten, Tobin, Hsueh, and Karasawa (2009) stressed that, although many changes have occurred and the Chinese ECE curriculum is moving toward a more child-centered approach, the core cultural features of Chinese kindergarten has not changed, which emphasizes routines and disciplines and teacher-led group lessons which stress the mastery of knowledge and skills. This explains why in current quality evaluation systems, teachers are evaluated on their competencies in successful delivery of lesson goals and objectives to all students while effectively managing a large class. Since the early 1980s, Chinese scholars have been trying to infuse the concept of child-centered practice into ECE curriculum and evaluation systems, which were adopted and detailed in the new *Guideline for Kindergarten Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2001). Chinese early childhood teachers are frequently observed implementing teacher-directed group lessons accompanied by play-based, learner-centered curriculum and teaching (Hu & Roberts, 2013). Other researchers also reported that in Chinese kindergartens that traditional teaching beliefs and contemporary notions of learner-centered practice actually coexist (Rao, Ng, & Pearson, 2010).

Chinese scholars have called for the development of quality measures with a focus on process quality, taking in careful consideration of the aforementioned social and cultural context of Chinese ECE (Dai & Liu, 2003; Hu & Li, 2012; Li, 2010; Liu, 2009; Pan, Liu, & Lau, 2010). Recent work suggests that measures used in other contexts might be applicable to understanding the Chinese schooling context as well. For instance, Li, Hu, Pan, Qin, & Fan (2014) adapted the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (Harms, Clifford, & Cryer, 2005) by adding a subscale to measure the quality of whole-group teaching. Factor analysis revealed two factors: *teaching and interaction* (i.e., process quality) and *provision for teaching* (i.e., structural quality). Further analysis showed that the *teaching and interaction* component was associated with Chinese children's outcomes. Thus, this research shows promise in further understanding of what happens within classrooms as an important avenue of study in Chinese kindergarten classroom quality.

### 3. Teacher-child interaction quality, measurement, and application

Over the past two decades, a promising line of U.S. research has focused on a specific element of classroom quality: the daily teacher-child interactions that promote children's positive development. The widely known observation tool, the *Classroom Assessment Scoring System* (CLASS; Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008) has been used in much of this research. The CLASS focuses on three domains of interactions: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support. The CLASS captures the moment-to-moment learning experiences that children have with their teacher and peers in their everyday classroom interactions. Multiple studies show that the quality of teacher-child interactions are measured by CLASS predict children's social, behavioral, emotional and academic development (Burchinal, Lee, & Ramey, 1989; Campbell & Ramey, 1995; Greenberg, Domitrovich, & Bumbarger, 2001; Hamre & Pianta, 2007; Helburn, 1995; Howes & Hamilton, 1993; Kisker, Hofferth, Phillips, & Farguhar, 1991; Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog, 1997; Phillips, Mekos, Scarr, McCartney, & Abbott-Shim, 2000; Yoshikawa et al., 2015).

Increasingly, the CLASS has been used in multiple international contexts of different cultures and societies, ranging from Finland (Pakarinen et al., 2010), Germany (Suchodoletz, Fäsche, Gunzenhauser, & Hamre, 2014), to Chile (Leyva et al., 2015). Combining the U.S. findings with the recent international studies suggest that the behaviors observed with the CLASS may be predictive of children's learning and developmental outcomes across different cultural contexts. For example, Leyva et al. (2015) used a sample of 1868 children from 91 public prekindergarten classrooms in Chile to examine the associations between the quality of teacher-child interactions and child outcomes. Children in classrooms with higher level of emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support as measured by the CLASS had more gains in language, academic and cognitive inhibitory control. Similarly, Araujo et al. (2014) found that in 450 kindergartens in Ecuador, the children performed better in language, math, and executive functioning in the classrooms with higher CLASS scores. And, in a study conducted in Portugal, Cadima, Leal, and Burchinal (2010) found teacher-child interaction quality related to first graders' learning outcomes, especially for those with identified risk factors. Thus, these studies using the CLASS outside the U.S. context provide initial evidence that CLASS may be an applicable measure of important classroom interactions related to children's development across cultures.

Though children learn and develop more in classrooms with higher quality teacher-child interactions, few children actually experience them. For example, in the U.S., emotional support and classroom organization are typically of only moderate quality, whereas instructional support is typically low (Hamre et al., 2013; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007). The studies in the international contexts showed slightly different but still similar patterns. For example, in a recent study of 137 classrooms in Finland, emotional support and classroom organization were moderately high, while instructional support was in the mid-range of quality, slightly higher than what has been shown in U.S. studies (Pakarinen et al., 2010). On the other hand, in the Ecuador and Chile studies, the emotional support and classroom organization scores were on the low end of the moderate range, and instructional support was in the low range (Araujo et al., 2014; Leyva et al., 2015). Studies suggest that these low levels of teacher-child interactions are not sufficient to support children's development and learning (Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta, & Mashburn, 2010; Leyva et al., 2015).

Motivated by the multiple studies of teacher-child interaction quality involving the CLASS in international contexts, researchers began examining the applicability of the CLASS in the Chinese socio-

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