



## Chinese preschool teachers' knowledge and practice of teacher-child interactions: The mediating role of teachers' beliefs about children



Bi Ying Hu <sup>a</sup>, Xitao Fan <sup>a</sup>, Yi Yang <sup>a,\*</sup>, Jennifer Neitzel <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Macau, China

<sup>b</sup> FPG Child Development Institute, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA

### HIGHLIGHTS

- Teacher knowledge, beliefs, and practice are correlated.
- Teacher beliefs mediate the relationship between knowledge and practice.
- Teaching degree and years of teaching experience are predictors for teacher beliefs.

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### ABSTRACT

This study contributes to the discussion regarding the relationship between teachers' knowledge about effective teacher-child interactions, beliefs about children, and observed teacher-child interaction practice in Chinese kindergartens. Data were collected among 164 Chinese kindergarten teachers through questionnaires and classroom observations. Findings revealed: (a) the significant association between teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and emotional/instructional practice; (b) the mediating role of teachers' beliefs on the relationship between knowledge and behavioral/instructional practice; (c) that years of teaching experience and degree are predictors for teachers' beliefs. The results offer important implications about how to prepare teachers and foster their child-centered beliefs through professional development.

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A key component of high-quality early childhood education (ECE) is having professionals who provide curriculum and instruction that is aligned with developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) and promotes optimal child outcomes (Coppole & Bredekamp, 2009; Zaslow, Tout, Halle, Whittaker, & Lavelle, 2010). Teachers' knowledge about children's development and related teaching strategies, as well as their beliefs about how children, learn influences how they interact with children in early childhood classrooms (Baum & King, 2006; Oliver, 1953; Pianta et al., 2005). Teachers who engage in positive interactions with young children are more likely to be knowledgeable about DAP and hold child-centered beliefs (Hamre, Downer, Jamil, & Pianta, 2012).

Despite this, research suggests that there is often a tension between teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and practice (Hamre, Pianta,

et al., 2012; Stipek & Byler, 1997). Numerous studies have found that teachers often report believing in child-centered practices, but apply more traditional, teacher-centered practices (Hu, 2011; Hatch & Freeman, 1988; Wen, Elicker, & McMullen, 2011; Wilcox-Herzog, 2002). One possible explanation is that even though teachers are knowledgeable about DAP guidelines, they have not transferred this awareness into their core beliefs about how to interact with children (Schaefer & Edgerton, 1985).

Teachers' beliefs often are influenced by their personal and professional experiences (Vartuli, 1999; Williams, 1996). More importantly, such beliefs often influence teachers' classroom practices (Pajares, 1992; Wang, Elicker, McMullen, & Mao, 2008). Teachers who believe they should take a more child-centric role are likely to engage in intentional teacher-child interactions that solicit children's preferences, ideas, and perspectives; whereas, teachers who hold teacher-centric beliefs tend to expect children to follow their lead and participate in structured group activities that are largely adult-directed (Cornelius-White, 2007; Stipek & Byler,

\* Corresponding author. Faculty of Education, University of Macau, Avenida da Universidade, Taipa, Macau, China.

E-mail address: [maxzdy@hotmail.com](mailto:maxzdy@hotmail.com) (Y. Yang).

2004; Stipek, 2004). Research suggests that Chinese teachers often adopt teacher-centered beliefs and practices even though they are knowledgeable about child-centered practices (Hu, 2011; Rao, Ng, & Pearson, 2010). More research is needed to fully understand the relationship between teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and current teaching practices in China. Having a better understanding about the relationship between these factors will provide further insight into how teacher training programs can be adapted to promote more child-centered beliefs and teaching practices.

The purpose of this paper is to examine how teachers' knowledge influences their practices. Specifically, we sought to understand whether teachers' knowledge about effective teacher-child interactions is related to their beliefs about child-centered pedagogy and the observed teacher-child interaction quality in classrooms. We also examined whether teachers' child-centered beliefs act as a mediator between teachers' knowledge about interactive teaching and the observed teacher-child interaction quality in Chinese preschool classrooms.

## 1. The teaching through interactions (TTI) framework for measuring quality ECE

Developmentally appropriate practice (DAP), as defined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), is widely regarded as the gold standard for ECE curriculum and instruction, and influences how professionals perceive and define quality throughout the world (McMullen et al., 2005; NAEYC, 2009). According to the NAEYC position statement, DAP favors a child-centered approach in which teachers are actively involved in children's learning; however, it does not theoretically preclude group teaching, or highly structured, teacher-directed activities (Huffman & Speer, 2000). Early childhood teachers can use the approach that is best for children's learning as long as they implement curriculum that is sensitive to children's developmental capabilities and backgrounds, provide effective teaching that optimizes children's learning opportunities, use ongoing assessment, and build positive teacher-child relationships for children's school success (NAEYC, 2009). Research suggests that sensitive, positive, and responsive teacher-child interactions are particularly important and that learning is more likely to occur when teachers skillfully promote children's higher-order thinking during direct instruction and throughout daily interactions with children (Burchinal et al., 2008).

These types of teacher-child interactions are measured primarily through classroom observational instruments (Burchinal et al., 2008; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Pianta, 2003; Yoshikawa et al., 2013). In this study, the *Classroom Assessment Scoring System* (CLASS; Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008) was used to measure the quality of teacher-child interaction in Chinese ECE programs. Similar to the DAP framework which suggests the importance of teachers' active involvement in teaching and children's active engagement in learning (NAEYC, 2009), the CLASS' theoretical framework – *Teaching through Interactions* (TTI; Hamre & Pianta, 2007) emphasizes teachers' moment-to-moment interactions with children during academic and social exchanges. The TTI framework and its observational tool, the CLASS, categorize active interactions between teachers and children into three distinctive domains: emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support.

### 1.1. Emotional support

Emotional support is measured through four dimensions: positive climate, negative climate, teacher sensitivity, and regard for student perspective. In classrooms with high levels of emotional

support, teachers have positive relationships with young children and are aware of and responsive to children's needs. They also engage in interactions that place an emphasis on children's interests (Pianta, La Paro, et al., 2008). Multiple studies in the U.S. have shown a positive association between teachers' provision of emotionally supportive interactions in the classroom and child outcomes, including social-emotional development and standardized achievement (Buisse, Verschueren, Doumen, Van Damme, & Maes, 2008; Hamre & Pianta, 2007; James & Blair, 2002; Reyes, Brackett, River, White, & Salovey, 2012).

### 1.2. Classroom organization

Classroom organization is measured through three dimensions: behavior management, productivity, and instructional learning formats. Classrooms that are high in organization have teachers who are proactive in managing behaviors by setting clear expectations, establishing clear classroom routines, and promoting engagement in learning activities. When teachers manage behaviors and attention proactively, children spend more time on-task, are better able to regulate their attention, and show gains in cognitive development (Downer, Booren, Lima, Luckner, & Pianta, 2010; Ponitz, McClelland, Matthews, & Morrison, 2009; Rimm-Kaufman, Curby, Grimm, Nathanson, & Brock, 2009).

### 1.3. Instructional support

Instructional support is measured through three dimensions: concept development, quality of feedback, and language modeling. In classrooms where instructional support is high, teachers promote higher-order thinking and provide quality feedback to extend children's learning. The quality of instructional support is most consistently linked to children's positive academic outcomes (Burchinal, Vandergrift, Pianta, & Mashburn, 2010; Burchinal et al., 2008; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Mashburn et al., 2008).

The CLASS, although originally designed in the United States, has recently been used to capture the quality of teacher-child interactions across cultures. Researchers have been cautioned about applying Western quality standards in international contexts, particularly in Asian cultures; however, emerging empirical findings have supported the construct and predictive validity of the CLASS in many countries (Cadima, Leal, & Burchinal, 2010; Leyva et al., 2015; Pakarinen et al., 2010; Suchodoletz, Fäschea, Gunzenhausera, & Hamre, 2014). Most recently, Hu, Fan, Gu, and Yang (2016) examined the applicability of the CLASS and its TTI framework in Chinese kindergarten classrooms. A similar pattern of scores has been observed in a Chinese sample, compared to other cultures (e.g., U.S., Finland, Germany, and Chile) despite the fact that Chinese teachers scored lower in the majority of the CLASS dimensions (except for positive climate and behavior management). This is likely due to different cultural norms and socioeconomic status (Hu et al., 2016). Despite this, these findings suggest that the CLASS and its TTI framework are sensitive enough to assess the quality of teacher-child interactions during more teacher-directed group teaching and child-centered free play activities in Chinese preschool classrooms. Moreover, Chinese scholars also consider the quality concepts featured in the CLASS as important when evaluating teaching activities in Chinese preschools (Huang & Tian, 2012; Liu & Pan, 2008; Yu, 2005). The above-mentioned evidence altogether supports the applicability of the CLASS and its TTI framework in Chinese sociocultural context.

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