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## A qualitative case study of Instructional Support practices in Chinese preschool classrooms

Yi Yang<sup>a</sup>, Bi Ying Hu<sup>b,\*</sup>, Shulin Yu<sup>b</sup>, Sherron Killingsworth Roberts<sup>c</sup>, Sylvia S.L. Ieong<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> China Women's University, Beijing, China

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

<sup>c</sup> University of Central Florida, Orlando, FL, United States

### 1. Introduction

The moment-to-moment social and academic interactions between adults and children appear to drive children's learning and development (Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg, 2009; Sabol, Hong, Pianta, & Burchinal, 2013). According to Hamre and Pianta (2007), three domains of teacher–child interactions matter most to children's social and academic development in early childhood settings: Emotional Support (ES), Classroom Organization (CO), and Instructional Support (IS). Among the three domains, Instructional Support, which focuses on how teachers use effective strategies to improve children's cognitive and language development, shows the strongest predictive power of children's short- and long-term cognitive and language development (Pianta et al., 2009; Sabol et al., 2013). As an important domain of teacher–child interactions, Instructional Support, provides children with different opportunities to develop their cognitive and language skills (Hamre & Pianta, 2007; Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008). Further, Instructional Support is divided into three dimensions of effective teaching strategies: (1) engaging children in knowledge acquisition and transforming processes to develop their higher-order thinking skills (Mayer, 2002; Peterson & French, 2008); (2) increasing children's understanding and participation by providing specific information on their performance or effort (Barnett et al., 2008; LaParo, Pianta, & Stuhlman, 2004); and (3) encouraging children to converse with teachers and peers to enrich and extend their use of vocabulary and to develop their language skills (Catts, Fey, Zhang, & Tomblin, 1999; Hamre, Downer, Jamil, & Pianta, 2012; Justice, 2002). However, preschool teachers coming from a variety of cultures have shown lower Instructional Support quality when compared to their scores in the domain of ES and CO (Hu, Dieker, Yang, & Yang, 2016; Pakarinen et al., 2010; Pianta et al., 2008; von Suchodoletz, Fäsche, Gunzenhauser, & Hamre, 2014).

To gain insights into the possibility of low quality of Instructional Support practices, and whether variations exist among different preschool teachers in a Chinese sociocultural context, this study used a qualitative case study approach to examine Instructional Support practices during a typical morning in four preschool classrooms. Specifically, based on the teacher–child interaction quality profiles identified by a previous study (Hu, Fan, LoCasale-Crouch, Chen, & Yang, 2016), the researchers selected the ‘most typical case’ from each profile to provide illustrations and in-depth analysis. The following research supports the importance of Instructional Support practices in preschool classrooms.

### 2. Effective teacher–child interactions: the importance of Instructional Support practices

Prominently, the theoretical and empirical based framework for effective teacher–child interactions, the *Classroom Assessment Scoring System* (CLASS; Pianta et al., 2008), has been applied in many studies to examine the effect of early childhood education (ECE) on child outcomes. The overall findings suggest that higher teacher–child interaction quality as measured by the CLASS is correlated to children's social, emotional, behavioral, and academic development (Burchinal et al., 2008; Hamre, Hatfield, Pianta, & Jamil,

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

E-mail addresses: [maxzdy@hotmail.com](mailto:maxzdy@hotmail.com) (Y. Yang), [hubiyiing@umac.mo](mailto:hubiyiing@umac.mo) (B.Y. Hu), [ShulinYu@umac.mo](mailto:ShulinYu@umac.mo) (S. Yu), [sherron.roberts@ucf.edu](mailto:sherron.roberts@ucf.edu) (S.K. Roberts), [slieong@umac.mo](mailto:slieong@umac.mo) (S.S.L. Ieong).

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2014; Hamre & Pianta, 2005). In particular, the quality of Instructional Support is most consistently linked to children's gains in cognitive and academic outcomes (e.g., Burchinal et al., 2008; Mashburn et al., 2008). For example, the higher the quality of observed Instructional Support in classrooms, the more children increased in language and academic skills (Mashburn et al., 2008), the less task-avoidant behavior children exhibited, which led to improved math skills (Pakarinen et al., 2011).

In China, ECE professionals and policymakers have shown a growing interest in understanding process quality in Chinese kindergarten classrooms (Li, Hu, Pan, Qin, & Fan, 2014). Recently, Chinese researchers' attempts to validate the CLASS tool in Chinese sociocultural context afforded initial psychometric evidence with good reliability and validity in Chinese kindergarten samples (Hu, Fan, Gu, & Yang, 2016). Moreover, Instructional Support was the only aspect of teacher–child interaction quality measured by the CLASS that could positively predict children's pre-academic skills, including individually tested outcomes in mathematics, receptive vocabulary, and science knowledge, in Chinese preschools (Hu et al., 2017).

### 3. Teachers' Instructional Support practices

Despite the importance of Instructional Support in child development, the quality of Instructional Support was reported to reach only a lower-middle level – for example, 3.14 out of 7 in a U.S. sample (LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007), 3.97 in Finland (Pakarinen et al., 2010), and 2.12 in China (Hu, Fan, Gu et al., 2016). Children's Instructional Support experiences might also vary across different classrooms. Researchers have therefore conducted further studies to understand teachers' teaching practices in terms of Instructional Support.

According to the CLASS manual, quality Instructional Support entails teachers' instructionally supportive practices on three dimensions (Pianta et al., 2008): (1) how teachers encourage children's conceptual understanding (Concept Development); (2) how teachers provide rich feedback on children's behavioral and verbal actions (Quality of Feedback); and (3) how teachers offer stimulating conversational language to children (Language Modeling). However, researchers have consistently reported a limited use and varied intensity of these instructions in different activity settings, particularly in language and literacy-related activities (e.g., Dickinson, McCabe, & Anastasopoulos, 2003; Mashburn et al., 2008).

For example, Concept Development values teachers' use of instructional discussions and activities (i.e., analyzing and reasoning, creating, integrating, and making connections to the real world) to promote children's higher-order thinking skills (Pianta et al., 2008). However, researchers found that teachers tend to ask lower-order and literal questions and tend not to engage children in discussions that relate to their experiences or concept knowledge (Dickinson et al., 2003; Gonzalez et al., 2014; Hindman, Connor, Jewkes, & Morrison, 2008; Walsh & Hodge, 2016). Quality of Feedback requires teachers to engage children in thinking and learning processes through scaffolding, providing feedback, prompting their thought processes, providing additional information and encouraging them. Yet, teachers were observed to use more general and less behavior-specific praise (Floress & Jenkins, 2015), to make less effort to engage children in explanations of story development or character motivations (Dickinson et al., 2003) and to fail to provide sufficiently effective feedback (Salminen, Hännikäinen, Poikonen, & Rasku-Puttonen, 2013). Language Modeling captures the extent and quality of teachers' use of conversations, open-ended questions, repetition and extension, self- and parallel talk, and advanced language to stimulate and facilitate children's language use. Similarly, sparse amounts of dialogic teaching were observed in preschool classrooms (Muhonen, Rasku-Puttonen, Pakarinen, Poikkeus, & Lerkkanen, 2016). Overall, the conversations in preschool classrooms were teacher directed (Muhonen et al., 2016; Salminen et al., 2013). Teachers did not engage children in educational activities and discussions by consistently asking open-ended questions (Lee & Kinzie, 2012; Salminen et al., 2013); they frequently repeated but seldom extended children's responses (Dickinson, Darrow, & Tinubu, 2008), and tended to simply label new words rather than analyze their meanings (Dickinson et al., 2003; Gonzalez et al., 2014).

The studies on teachers' specific Instructional Support practices reviewed above were conducted separately, with no comprehensive framework (such as the CLASS) to systematically organize them. Current researchers have recently taken a person-centered approach based on the CLASS to identify different patterns of teacher–child interactions, which have provided insights into the variances in teachers' interactions with children.

### 4. Profiles of CLASS quality and their differences in Instructional Support

Researchers have used person-centered analytical approaches (i.e., cluster analysis and latent profile analysis) to successfully identify subgroups that display similar patterns of teacher–child interaction quality as measured by the CLASS (Hu, Fan, LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2016; LoCasale-Crouch et al., 2007; Salminen et al., 2012). Using cluster analysis, LoCasale-Crouch et al. (2007) classified 692 American pre-K teachers into five distinct quality profiles according to the overall differences in interactional quality in terms of the social, emotional, and instructional climates. The three mid-range profiles differed significantly in terms of Concept Development and Quality of Feedback quality. Salminen et al. (2012) used latent profile analysis to classify 49 Finnish kindergarten teachers into four latent profiles of teacher–child interaction quality, with one extremely high quality profile, one extremely low quality profile and two profiles between the two extremes. Despite the traditional homogeneity of Finnish preschool classrooms, researchers identified variances among teachers' teaching practices in terms of Language Modeling (Salminen et al., 2012).

The recent profiling study conducted by Hu, Fan, LoCasale-Crouch and colleagues (2016) in a socioeconomically diverse region of China found four distinct profiles among 180 Chinese preschool teachers. Similar to the profiling studies conducted in the U.S. and Finland, two extreme quality profiles were identified, with one representing the overall lowest quality (Profile 1, about 24.4% of the classrooms) and the other representing the overall highest quality (Profile 4, about 14.1% of the classrooms). The two remaining profiles represented medium quality with lower Instructional Support (Profile 2, about 47.1% of the classrooms) and higher

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