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How Preschool Children Learn in Hong Kong and Canada: A Cross-Cultural Study

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Abstract

This paper reviews literacy learning conducted in two laboratory preschools in Hong Kong and Canada, and examines the link between cultural values and educational practices. Both preschools maintain that a constructivist view of child learning underpins their practice. However, the author's experience in these two settings illustrates how similarities and differences are identified in the scope, focus, implementation strategies and learning outcomes of the activities observed. Reasons for these findings are explored from the perspectives of cultural values and societal beliefs in education of the East and the West, and how the constructivist ideology is espoused in these settings. Implications of this cross-cultural comparison on the issue of "best practice" in early childhood education are discussed.

Key Words:

1. Socio-cultural beliefs
2. East/West
3. Constructivist pedagogy
4. Literacy learning

Constructivism has been the guiding principle of early childhood practices in many different contexts for several decades. A key principle of constructivism is that knowledge arises through actions on the world, which differs from the traditional Western view that knowledge is separate and independent from the knower. In the traditional view, children learn when they are engaged in drill, practice and rote. By contrast, constructivism promotes learner-centred practices where children are actively engaged in constructing their own understandings of the world. However, there is much debate concerning the theory of constructivism and different interpretations have been discussed widely (Rogoff, 1990; Vadeboncoeur, 1997). In essence, the arguments are about the nature of knowledge and how it is acquired. One view is that knowledge is constructed when an individual interacts with the environment while another considers knowledge as socially constructed. However, it is generally agreed that learning should be a process of searching for the “best”, not the “right” answer to a problem situated in a relative context, and that knowledge comes from active participation in problem solving (Ebbeck, 1996). It is held that meaningful learning occurs when children are actively engaged in making sense of the world, and the emphasis must be on the process of learning rather than the product. It is also asserted that concept of development and deep understanding should be an instructional goal rather than particular behaviours or skills (Fosnot, 1996). The teacher needs to understand the

conceptual structure in students' answers and lead them to find the most appropriate ones (von Glasersfeld, 1995). Therefore, in constructivist contexts, teachers strive to create learning environments that are realistic and relevant to learners, and support learning through multiple roles.

This paper reports observations of literacy learning in two preschools to examine how socio-cultural beliefs shape their practice. A class of five year olds in Canada and a class of five year olds in Hong Kong were observed, and similarities and differences concerning the children's experiences in writing are discussed. The children in both contexts were attending preschool (also known as kindergarten) in the year before they made the transition to the primary or elementary school.

In the spring of 2004, I spent nearly eight weeks in the Institute of Child Study (ICS) Lab School of The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (OISE) of the University of Toronto in Canada, to observe how young children learn in the preschool classes. For three weeks, I was in the Senior Kindergarten (SK) class every morning to audio-tape and make notes of the dialogues between the teacher and the children and among the children themselves. Children's work samples were collected to complement the learning episodes captured. The ICS Lab School views children as unique individuals with diverse needs and talents. Their programme aims to facilitate children's construction of knowledge through imagery, analysis and problem-solving. Teachers and children are

partners in a learning community, and this partnership extends beyond the school to include a role for parents in supporting children's learning.

Immediately prior to my visit to Canada, I made regular visits to a class of five year olds in the Early Childhood Learning Centre (ECLC), laboratory preschool of The Hong Kong Institute of Education to study how children learn. For four weeks, the interactions between the class teacher and the children were videotaped for about one hour every morning and children's work samples were collected. In Hong Kong, kindergartens are preschools for children of age three to five, which is the same in Toronto. The ECLC operates with the mission of optimizing the potential of every child. It has a curriculum model of "Questioning, Exploration and Experience" that emphasizes children's interactions with materials and people in the learning environment. Like the ICS programme, the ECLC also promotes a culture of family-school-community collaboration.

Both institutions have strong constructivist underpinnings. In both settings, I witnessed many examples of children being active learners in generating their own answers to problems identified. The process of learning is cherished more than the outcome and adults are facilitators and partners in children's learning.

Despite similarities between the two programmes, it is interesting to observe certain dissimilarities. Studies have established that cultural beliefs and values strongly

influence educational practice and parenting, and differences between East and West have been the focus of research attention (Gardner, 1989; Biggs, 1996; Freeman, 1998; Forman, 2003). Therefore it was of immense interest for me to note some very different perspectives being taken in the literacy programme in these two settings, in spite of the strong commonalities in their understanding of the basis of children's learning. Here, I present some examples of writing activities from both settings to illustrate how theories of learning and development are shaped by cultural values and societal beliefs, and discuss what best practice in early childhood education means within and outside of these two settings.

Print, the “basics” in literacy?

Popular periodicals for parents in Hong Kong have presented the ECLC as a quality preschool “without examinations, writing and textbooks.” Writing in the Hong Kong context means the practising and copying of Chinese characters. Children in Hong Kong start the practice of character copying when they begin preschool at three (Cheng, 1989). Today, the writing of Chinese characters is still an essential part of the preschool curriculum although the idea of developmental appropriateness has enlightened many preschools to start formal writing at a later stage. The Education and Manpower Bureau (EMB) of Hong Kong in their Quality Assurance Inspections, has criticised preschools regularly for the use of excessive copying and writing as major

learning activities, and for using pen and pencil tests and examinations for assessment (Education and Manpower Bureau, 2005). The ECLC is therefore an exemplar in the eyes of early childhood professionals and the general public of Hong Kong for rejecting these practices.

Chinese characters are made up of strokes and stroke-patterns which are combined to form symbols of a logographic nature (Chan, 1993). Some characters are simple and have only a few strokes. However, the majority of characters are quite complex, including from 4 up to 35 strokes in a single character. The writing of these characters requires a combination of competencies, including fine motor skills and eye-hand co-ordination to produce the strokes, along with cognitive capabilities to remember the sequencing and spatial relationship of the patterns. Given the complexity of the architecture of the Chinese characters, why is writing so heavily emphasized in Hong Kong preschools? To answer this question, we need to examine the issue across both the cultural and social dimensions.

Wang, Bernas & Eberhard (2002), in their study of Chinese and American-Indian mothers' support for children's early literacy, found that Chinese mothers favoured print-based activities more than the American-Indian mothers, and this was attributed to the long history of print literacy in Chinese culture. Traditionally, being literate is analogous to being educated. Confucianism, which is the core ethical and social

statement of Chinese culture, was codified in four classical Confucian books.

Knowledge and understanding of these Four Books, along with certain other classical scrolls, was the primary subject of testing in civil service examinations running from the Xu to the Ching Dynasty (605-1905 A. D.). Only by successfully mastering these classical works could a young Chinese student gain entrance into the powerful positions of the state bureaucracy. Success in these examinations would enable an individual to become a government official at various rankings according to the results of the tests, which would, in turn, bring fame and glory to oneself and the family. Although this “bureaucratic scholarship” (Lee, 1996) deviated drastically from the Confucian ethos of education, it did provide a channel of social mobility for all, regardless of breed and clan.

Chinese people have conceptualized literacy, learning, education and achievement as an integral whole for centuries. Nowadays, although the traditional civil examination no longer exists, public examinations are still looked upon by many people with similar high regard. As Wang, Bernas & Eberhard (2002, p.19) commented, “when literacy is valued as a measure of achievement in a culture, adults will work hard to ensure the success of their children.” Learning to print at age three is, for many parents, a “sure start” for their children in the long journey of literate accomplishment.

The Chinese view of learning places heavy emphasis on orthographic literacy.

The Chinese term for “learning” is composed of two characters: “to study” and “to practise repeatedly” (Dahlgaard-Park, 2006). This traditional idea of learning as repeated practice is reinforced by the Confucian saying that acquired knowledge should be repeated and practised endlessly in order to have it sustained. ‘Practice makes perfect’ is another reason why learning to write starts so early in the preschools and with such vigour. The belief is that repetition will eventually lead to fluency and mastery of the correct form of the Chinese characters. Further, the Chinese culture, among other Asian cultures, claims that effort is the way to success (Biggs, 1996), and that diligence can counteract any shortfalls in intelligence. Okagaki and Sternberg (1993) have found that Asian-American parents see hard work as part of being intelligent but that Anglo-American parents do not. Chao (1994) also found that Chinese mothers believe that children can improve in almost anything if they work hard, but that Euro-American mothers do not share this belief. Based on the traditional thinking that adults should have a specific role to play in children’s learning, and that learning happens through repeated shaping and modeling, Chinese teachers make use of a unique method of “teaching by holding his hand” (Gardner, 1989) to help children learn. The teacher or parent can be seen holding a child’s hand to help him print, let go of his hand every now and then and hold on to his hand again and again. It is not surprising that some teachers consider learning to write is appropriate and will be

effective as long as both child and adult apply enough effort.

The problem of transition from the preschool to primary school also reinforces the emphasis on orthography in the preschools. Hong Kong primary schools place a heavy emphasis on written tests and examinations (Wong, 2003). Teachers in primary schools are very concerned with the “school-readiness” of young children. Some of the indicators of this readiness are pre-academic achievements such as holding pencils correctly and knowing the correct stroke sequence of Chinese characters (Chow, 1993). Since children are expected to finish many written assignments every day, and to complete endless tests and examinations during the primary school years, some preschools are forced to deal with these pressures from primary schools by adopting an academic-focused curriculum. Writing at three and extensive print practice is seen as a way to help children adapt to the primary curriculum (Wong, 2003).

Learning to print at the ECLC

When parents decide to send their children to study at the ECLC, they need to understand why there is no formal writing in the first year of the programme, and how their children will gradually be taught to write in a systematic and child-centred way. The “writing” programme in the ECLC consists of three major components firmly grounded in constructivist theory.

The first component emphasizes the acquisition of manual dexterity in order to

produce the logographic form of the Chinese characters. At age three, children have ample opportunities to practise pre-writing skills including fine motor skills, eye-hand co-ordination and spatial concepts. Activities such as brush and finger painting, playdough, building with blocks, finger puppets, gross-motor exercises and games that help children to build up their sense of orientation are part of the daily routine. Later in the year, children will begin to practise the basic strokes of the Chinese characters in some interesting ways like drawing raindrops falling from the clouds, which resembles the “dot”. At age four, most children who have the physical readiness to print will practise the correct way of holding a pencil and keeping a good posture. Printing of simple Chinese characters is introduced and embedded into meaningful learning activities such as putting words of greeting in a birthday card. At age 5, usually in the second semester, most children are able to print neatly and correctly when given a sample, or even without one.

The second component of the programme emphasizes the ways in which print and printing can bring pleasure to the children. Contrary to the mainstream preschools in Hong Kong, the ECLC does not assign copying of Chinese characters as homework for the children. Instead, children take home a book every day to read together with their parents, and paired-reading is also part of the preschool routine. Being able to recognise the Chinese characters in the story books gives children a sense of

achievement that often motivates them to copy and reproduce some of the characters.

The third element of the print programme aims to help children expand their repertoire of vocabulary through a cognitive approach so that they will be more motivated to write Chinese characters. One of the unique features of the Chinese writing system is the use of radicals to categorise the thousands of characters. A radical is a “section header” under which a character is listed in a dictionary, often reflecting some common semantic or phonetic characteristics (Wikipedia, 2008). Therefore, in the ECLC classrooms, children make dictionaries explaining the sequencing of the strokes of the Chinese characters, and examples of characters with the same radicals. At home, children will be asked to work with their parents to look for words with the same radicals they learnt in class. Grasping the concept of character building based on graphical decomposition helps children to print and write more easily than memorizing each character as a whole. Unlike many preschools in Hong Kong that make children learn by extensive copying of characters, the ECLC print programme is a “hands-on” as well as “minds-on” exercise that observes the constructivist conception of learning, the cultural characteristic of print, the societal needs and the development of the children. Writing is no longer a lone exercise based solely on modelling, endless practice and tears!

Print at the ICS

I came to the ICS two months before children finished their preschool education and I was both amused and amazed to find a letter written to the parents from the class teacher (see Appendix A). I found it paradoxical that in Canada, a teacher has to explain to the parents why she is asking their children, who have almost finished preschool, to start to print whereas in Hong Kong, teachers have to explain to the parents why there is no print exercise for the three year olds who have just started preschool! It is evident that at ICS learning to print is not part of the literacy programme. Most children in the ICS will go to their own elementary school where the “Handwriting Without Tears” programme will be used in grades 1 and 2 to help them acquire fluency and legibility in print. Unlike Hong Kong, in Canada, the society at large, the school, the parents and teachers do not expect children at preschool age to be able to print properly. There is no cultural legacy or societal need attached to learning to print at such a young age. The teacher introduces the print programme for pragmatic reasons as it enables children to better record what they have learned if they can print.

The last sentence of the letter “Not the most exciting homework, I know,” with its apologetic tone, illustrates vividly the learning theory of the West. The ICS teacher, like many Western educators, believes that repetition means rote learning that will kill children’s curiosity and impede their learning (Forman, 2003). Young children are brought up to be independent and are encouraged to explore on their own. They are not

ready to engage in repetitive activities which are considered boring, unless they are fully motivated (Hess and Azuma, 1991). Print is seen primarily as a skill acquired by repetition which is secondary to the more creative components of the literacy programme.

At ICS the teacher reminds parents that children should write with care, use a proper writing tool, and that messier attempts should be erased. In essence, she suggests that children should write with effort, and that this effort will pay off. The class teacher at ICS is concerned that children should have a broad vocabulary, much like the teachers at ECLC. Children at ICS pay attention to the sound components in each word rather than focusing on the graphic components of characters, which is central to the ECLC children's experience. At ICS, children often work in groups of 4 with the teacher who helps them relate letters to the vowel sounds they have learnt and to put the correct spellings into worksheets. Work charts called "SK words" consisting of the phonetic components that the class is learning are put up to serve as a reminder for the children. Each day, a letter is written to the children from the teacher on happenings of the class. Children are asked to identify the SK words in the letter, which is posted on a little whiteboard, during circle time. The ICS teacher uses almost the same "hands-on" plus "minds-on" method in helping children to build up their vocabulary, in oral and visual form, as the teachers in the ECLC. The activities and

pedagogy used by children and teachers in both classrooms when they are engaged in vocabulary learning are parallel in many regards.

Writing for information

At the ICS, from time to time, children will be given worksheets as homework to consolidate or expand on what they have learnt in class. They need to work with parents to search for the information required and to write the answers in complete sentences. This is viewed as a way to help them to acquire sentence structures. During these exercises, it is evident that correct spelling and legibility is not a major concern for these parents. Most of the worksheets were returned filled with information, but written in barely legible handwriting with many spelling errors (see Appendix B). In some cases, it was the parents who wrote for the children. This shows clearly that parents and teachers do not expect children to be able to print accurately at this age. What is more important is the process of knowledge construction in which children engage with the adults. It is learning per se, not its representation that matters.

The English language relies on the alphabet to represent the sounds of the words. Unlike Chinese which relies on thousands of complex characters, English can be written with only 26 alphabetic characters. Although the rules of English spelling are rather inconsistent, the basic phonemic principle underlying the English alphabet is remarkably simple when compared to a system such as Chinese. Because of this

alphabetic structure of the printed form, children are expected to develop phonemic awareness through experience with oral language, and to use this awareness to build up their ability to read and write words gradually. In the ICS classrooms, children are motivated to explore writing using “approximate spelling” based on their knowledge of the connections between letters and sounds and their ability to identify and manipulate sounds. Children’s attempts are encouraged and valued by teachers and parents as demonstrations of their creative use of the alphabetic principle and the practice of phonemic analysis. The result of this encouragement of early spelling attempts is that the worksheets had a large number of incorrect and approximate spellings. This practice is common to preschools in Canada (Ministry of Education, 2006). Writing includes using pictures and symbols when children are beginning to write, approximate spellings based on phonemic awareness and finally familiar and frequently used words. It corresponds with the learning approach advocated in the West that children should learn through exploration and independent discovery, and echoes the constructivist theory that process, not product is the main concern. The approximate spellings, in various forms and shapes, are documentations of children’s effort to conceptualise the written form of the oral language. These are steps towards “correct” spelling.

Similarly, in the ECLC, parents are asked to work with their children on worksheets that report and extend the learning experiences they have had in school.

Unlike the worksheets of ICS children, all the work returned to the ECLC is in neat, tidy and correct form, and finished by the children themselves (see Appendix C).

Parental input is apparent and their focus is not only on the content but also the presentation, so that any misprint or messier form of character writing or wrong sentence structure will be rectified before the work is returned to school. This attention to orthographic detail reflects the parents' views that print is a fundamental part of the literacy programme and their belief that children should secure this skill at a very young age.

The emphasis on early printing shows how much parents in the East endorse the virtues of precision and concentration (Jose et al., 2000). Deep-rooted in the heart of Chinese parents is the Confucian belief that continuous learning and education are crucial to human development (Dahlgaard-Park, 2006). Teaching a child to work hard to finish a piece of homework is in the eyes of Chinese parents, an educational process for academic achievement as well as a way of nurturing a better person. Above all, the respect that Chinese people have for print will not allow them to present it in any other form than the "proper" way. However, it is true that in the ECLC, approximate writing and even pictorial representations are encouraged when children begin to learn the Chinese characters. Chinese children can form incorrect characters by misplacing radicals, drawing strokes incorrectly, combining the wrong stroke-patterns, or by using

the correct stroke-patterns in the wrong characters. All of these errors occur in the writing exercises in the ECLC. However, these approximate forms are only for children's self-reference and seldom appear in any of their finished work.

Approximate writing is not accepted in Hong Kong preschools, not just because of the specific nature of the Chinese language, but rather because of the great value placed by the community on accuracy in the printed form as a visible product of learning.

Creative writing, the ICS practice

At ICS, every child has a storybook to record personal experiences and stories they have created. Once a fortnight, the teacher sits down with a child in a quiet corner and helps to put down, almost word-by-word, the stories told by the child. These stories are then matched with the child's own illustrations, and later shared with the whole class. The content of these stories ranges from daily events such as outings in the March break to familiar stories retold by the child. Most of the stories have a complete narrative structure with characters, events, goals, themes and morals. The writing uses a variety of sentence patterns, sometimes with grammatical errors.

Amongst the stories I have read, I have been most impressed by the one shown in Appendix D. This story, called the Wolf and the Stars, was written by a 5-year-old girl. The story was accompanied by an illustration, and against the illustration was a splash of black with stars scattered around. Here she put the caption, "You see? It's not in a

shape anymore.” This story was written at the time when the class was working on Greek mythology and astronomy. The story links together the child’s knowledge, imagination and even intuition regarding these two domains to explain why there are stars in the sky. It contains many elements that may or may not be connected, but somehow they all join together in the child’s thinking, making the story beautiful and witty.

A boy in the class also wrote a story called “The girl and the teleporter” (see Appendix E). Again, this story demonstrates how the child links his knowledge of astronomy together with his childhood wit and daily experience to create a story that touches every other child.

Canadian preschool children are expected to communicate ideas in some written form (Ministry of Education, Ontario, 2006). The practice in the ICS, as in other preschools in Canada, is to make sure that children’s creativity and self-expression in story writing is not impeded by their lack of skill in print, nor their limited pool of vocabulary. Compared with the worksheet exercise, this is a more relaxed activity for the children, one which they could focus on their feelings and experiences without having to laboriously print the story for themselves or struggle with the correct grammar or spelling. This approach is in accord with the principles that “oral language must be the foundation of literacy development in kindergarten” (Ministry of Education,

2006, p. 33) and the belief that creativity is more important than skills (Biggs, 1996).

It embodies respect for personal freedom and individuality, which are constituents of creativity.

Creative writing, the ECLC practice

At the ECLC, story writing is integrated into learning units that may run from two weeks to two months instead of being set apart as a separate activity. Stories are written either individually or collectively, and presented in the form of a book. A typical example is the story written by a boy, called “The tiger that likes the lion”.

The book has six pages including the cover. All the writing was finished by the boy himself, in correct Chinese characters, sentence patterns and punctuation. The story is shown in Appendix F.

The child has a sense of story writing and has done a satisfactory job. However, compared with the work of the ICS children, his work lacked the richness of imagination and literal forms and the sophistication of a good story. On the other hand, I was very impressed by the illustration attached to every page. The child has used a mix of paper cuts and crayons to create some joyful images of the animals, a lively forest in simple shapes and lines, and altogether, a fabulous, colourful story book! Another example is a story, called “Nature’s Wind and Water”, written by a group of 13 children as a documentation of what they had learnt about water and wind. Each child

was responsible for the writing and illustration of one page. Teacher input is more apparent as most sentences are written in complete and correct literal forms, such as: “Besides cleaning the inside of the body, water can also clean a lot of things”; “When there is fire, water can put out the flame. Do you think water is very important?”; “Wind is essential for mankind. If there is no air, we cannot survive. Therefore wind and water are of equal importance.” Again, the Chinese writing was neat and tidy, with precise strokes and punctuations. Again, I was amazed by the artistic components of the book. Each piece of writing is placed inside a white bubble overlaid onto a blue one, strongly reminiscent of the wind and water. The illustrations display the diversity of thirteen artists each creating in their own preferred colours and style.

At the ECLC, there is a strong teacher belief that story writing is to be regarded as seriously as any other form of literary work. Story writing is an exercise that encompasses semantic and syntactic knowledge and printing skills. During the writing process, instead of recording children’s oral expressions as in ICS, the ECLC teacher provided other types of support by challenging children on their ideas and their writing, acting as a resource person for correct character printing, diction and sentence formation, and praising children every now and then for their good work. She adopted the multiple roles of facilitator, guide, tutor and consultant, which are characteristic of

constructivist teaching and learning. Chinese writing in the literacy form is based on Putonghua which originates from the Beijing dialect, whereas the social language of Hong Kong is the Cantonese dialect. This means that children in ECLC have to spend twice as much effort as their ICS counterparts by first “translating” the oral language into the written language and then, printing it in a clear and correct way. The stories are expected to be presented in the form of a printed book, and to be as flawless as possible. Everyone in the class understood this and was happy to work towards achieving flawless quality.

It seems reasonable to conclude that teachers in the two laboratory schools have different priorities regarding the role of creativity and skills in story writing. Western culture conceptualises creativity as something to be captured as early as possible or else it might get lost, and skills can wait. Chinese culture believes that mastery of skills enhances creativity. Repeated practice will help children to internalise structure and prepare them to then depart on variations from this structure (Forman, 2003). Until the fundamentals are secure, the learners cannot transform and create. Put simply, the belief is that ‘you cannot run before you walk’, and there is an evolutionary pathway to observe and follow. The ICS teacher is a true follower of “creativity first” as demonstrated in the story-writing episode. By contrast, the belief in constructivist learning has resulted in the ECLC teacher trying to position both skills and creativity in

as much equilibrium as possible. However, the outcomes were skewed toward an emphasis on “skills” by the pull of the Chinese value system that emphasizes precision as the benchmark of learning. Meanwhile, we see a window open for creativity in the art work of the ECLC children. Compared with the written work, there seemed fewer boundaries set for the illustrations, and children enjoyed as much freedom and flexibility as they wished in creating their own image to match the story-line. This artistic freedom can partly be attributed to the artistic ambiance the kindergarten has created within its learning environment. The ECLC has turned the walkways outside the classrooms into a “Creativity Corridor” where children can explore and experience art as part of their daily activity. Most importantly, this segment of curriculum is not so heavily loaded with cultural and societal demands as the literacy programme, and a better balance between creativity and skills is thus maintained.

Comparison in context

Tobin (1999) once commented that preschools are cultural institutions where parenting and education meet to reveal core cultural values and concerns. Laboratory preschools take this a step further by including educational practice and theory in the cultural interplay. The two lab schools studied provide examples of how culture shapes what happens in the classroom. This interplay can be understood most fully by examining cross-cultural variations in the time, place and social structure of educational

experiences (Tobin, 1999).

The ICS lab school is situated in Toronto, a modern and pluralistic city with a large population of immigrants from all over the world. One of the goals set by the school is to help the students to understand the values and tradition in this global society and to assume personal and community responsibilities (Institute of Child Study Laboratory School, 2003). The values and traditions here are of a predominantly Western origin that could be traced back to the Greek civilisation when personal freedom, individuality and objective thought were endorsed (Nisbett, 2003). Recent findings also indicated that European American parents place greater emphasis on individualism than Chinese Americans or Taiwanese Chinese (Freeman, 1998; Jose et al, 2000). Dewey's educational philosophy reflects this same value system. For Dewey, learning begins with an inquiry regarding a problem in the environment, followed by the process of experimentation and reflection until an answer is found.

Constructivism follows the lead of Dewey and other American pragmatists by promulgating the concept of viability, which claims that there is no one ultimate answer to any problem, and hence no answer that can simply be copied. Based on this view, constructivists value change and inventiveness, and assign little importance to repetition and effort (Forman, 2003). In constructivist preschools, meaningful learning comes from giving children problems to solve in a real world context.

Exploration and creation are honoured and take priority over the development of skills.

Teaching is child-centred and teachers are the facilitators. The process, not the product is the main concern. All these ideas are consistently expressed in the ICS literacy programme. In this way, the ICS curriculum coexists seamlessly with the cultural values, parental practice and societal expectations in which it is situated. Children at the ICS learn and grow happily and are able to successfully move on to elementary schools later.

Hong Kong is a cosmopolitan city where Western and Eastern cultures met a century and a half ago when it became a British colony. This mix of East and West has changed some of the core values of the people in Hong Kong over time, but Chinese culture is still predominant. Confucianism remains as the overarching belief system of most of the Chinese population. The Confucian ideal of a harmonious world entails a social system with a hierarchy of relationships to be followed. Within this system, elders are honored, and teachers are respected as informed professionals to be entrusted with the education of one's children. Deference to the social group or work group is part of the blueprint of harmony and collectivist personality traits that are cherished include perseverance, concentration, politeness, calmness, respect, neatness, precision and obedience (Jose et al., 2000). Confucius believed that everyone is educable and that, through education, human nature will continually improve. Asian

parents therefore place great importance on the education of their children because of the internal perspective of personal development inherited from Confucius, and the external perception of the need for social mobility (Lee, 1996).

The ECLC is a product of Hong Kong. It embraces the contemporary educational ideologies of the West while preserving the best of the traditional Chinese rules. Adopting constructivism as the philosophical underpinning of its programme, the Centre has to explore how to make this work in the context of a predominantly Chinese culture. The literacy programme explains how such a balance is maintained and how the Western approach of learning is borrowed and reformulated. In general, the basic tenets of constructivism are observed and applied in the literacy programme, even in the teaching of print which contrasts so clearly with the practices of the ICS lab school. The teachers and parents of ECLC are at the same time upholding, consciously or subconsciously, the traditional Chinese belief that intellectual learning should combine with character building for children. Virtues such as concentration, precision and hard work should be nurtured at a young age. These personal qualities when observed in the learning process usually relate to some tangible learning outcomes, such as the worksheets and story books discussed earlier. Hence the “process” and “product” of learning are regarded with equal importance in this Hong Kong version of constructivism. The children in the ECLC are by no means

discouraged or overwhelmed by the expectations of the adults. They appear to be as happy as the ICS children when engaged in literacy learning, and are equally proud of their achievements in producing storybooks by themselves.

Conclusion

This cross-cultural comparison of two preschools has examined the factors that contribute to 'best' practice in early childhood programmes. Besides the structural and pedagogical perspectives, social and cultural values are important determinants of programme quality (Sheridan and Schuster, 2001). The primary consideration here is context. Each programme must resonate with the multiple environmental contexts in which it is situated in order to achieve a proper expression of goals, objectives and pedagogy. Enabling children to print is important for the Hong Kong preschools, but not for the schools in Toronto. Context can also influence learning priorities, such as the timing for learning basic skills versus creativity in the Western preschools and the Asian ones.

Alexander (1999) claimed that one reason for making cross-cultural comparisons in pedagogy is to differentiate the aspects of teaching that are generic from those which are culture-specific. Tobin (1999) asserted that comparative classroom ethnography will lead us to reflect on assumptions that are taken for granted in our own culture.

Similarly LeVine and White (1986) saw the cultural inventions of other countries as mirrors that can help us look for new possibilities in our children. Woolons (2000, p.4) noted that “Cultural borrowing is both common and complex” and indeed striving to retain one’s national identity in the process of educational diffusion is an issue that many educators are trying to resolve.

Instead of looking at the ways children in different cultures learn as dichotomous, more and more academics are wondering if an optimal balance can be reached between them. Gardner (1989) asked how to balance between creativity and basic skills. Later, Freeman (1998) asked how to achieve a balance between an exploratory approach to art activities and a disciplined and scheduled approach. Still later, Forman (2003) asked whether the image of the child as an inventor could be balanced with the image of the child as a competent listener. All these queries were raised after their visits to preschools in China, when they were confronted with cultural-specific practices that were radically different from their own, and yet were equally successful. However, none of these observers proposed how this balance should be achieved.

Reviewing the literacy programmes of the two lab preschools against the suggested dimensions of “best” practice, what kind of wisdom can they borrow from each other? Perhaps the ECLC children can benefit from a more justified balance between basic skills and creativity. Children here have demonstrated an amazing

originality in their illustrations for the storybooks. But this originality was not matched with the same depth and breadth in their writing. Perhaps the teachers should view story-writing more in the light of the activities in the Creativity Corridor, that it could be a mean to nurture creativity, not necessarily an end by itself. Perhaps children could benefit from having some space dedicated for creative verbal expression. Perhaps a one-on-one story time like those of ICS, in which the child tells the story and teacher records should be scheduled, alongside those that require the child to both create and write. Perhaps the teachers' experience in supporting children's creativity in artwork should best inform them of the way to nurture creativity in writing.

The ICS children, on the other hand, might benefit from a more balanced emphasis on effort and precision. From time to time, some children could be encouraged to commit their stories to writing, be it approximate or full, and some could be encouraged to print in a proper way in their written work. The SK class teacher has already made such a move in asking children to print, and could move a bit further in future to match with each child's capability.

Globalisation has become an irresistible tide that has made the world fully interconnected. This vibrant exchange will continue to flourish in a world that is becoming increasingly multi-dimensional. Through accommodating and assimilating the nutrients of cultural interflow, one's own culture can be synergized and revitalised.

The two laboratory preschools, each striving to nurture their children in the best possible way, will continue to be similar and unique, because of their shared vision in early childhood education and because of the contrasts between societies in which they are embedded.

(Total Word Count: 6534)

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Appendix A

The Letter from the SK Teacher to the Parents

Dear SK Parents,

April 6, 2004

Today your children are bringing home the printing books that we have begun working with in class. The “Handwriting Without Tears” programme is being used in many of the classrooms at ICS. We have found that a small amount of time devoted to fluency and legibility in the shaping of letters leaves children better able to concentrate on content when recording their own ideas.

We will begin focusing on lower case letters this Monday. As a warm-up, please have your child complete pages 6 and 77. (I also ask that even most inspired writer not move on to other pages.)

Care, not speed, is the main concern when practicing our printing. Pencils should be used, and I encourage erasing messier attempts. Not the most exciting homework, I know, but well worth the effort.

Please ensure your child's book is returned on Monday.

Thanks, Cathy

Appendix B

A Sample Worksheet of an ICS Child

SK Homework

Friday April 30, 2004

We have now finished our calendar work in class but would like you to discover some important dates in your family.

1. What is the date of your birthday?

~~MAY BIRTHDAY~~ ~~ISON~~ ~~JENUWIRE~~
 12, 1990
 (Please write the whole calendar sentence.
 Example: My birthday is **October 17, 1964.**)

2. What is your mother's birthday?

MAMA'S BIRTHDAY ~~ISON~~ APRIL
 1, 1969

3. What is your father's birthday?

PAPA'S BIRTHDAY ~~ISON~~ FEBRUARY 22,
 1970.

4. Bonus question!

Using a calendar, can you find out what day of the week each birthday falls on in 2004?

Your's: ~~MONDAY~~

Mother's: ~~THURSDAY~~

Father's: ~~FRIDAY~~

★ Please return by Wednesday May 5, 2004

Appendix C

A Sample Worksheet of an ECLC Child

(Recording How a Pattern is Ironed onto the T-shirt)

香港教育學院滙豐幼兒發展中心

姓名：_____ 班別：全日臨班 日期：3-3-2004

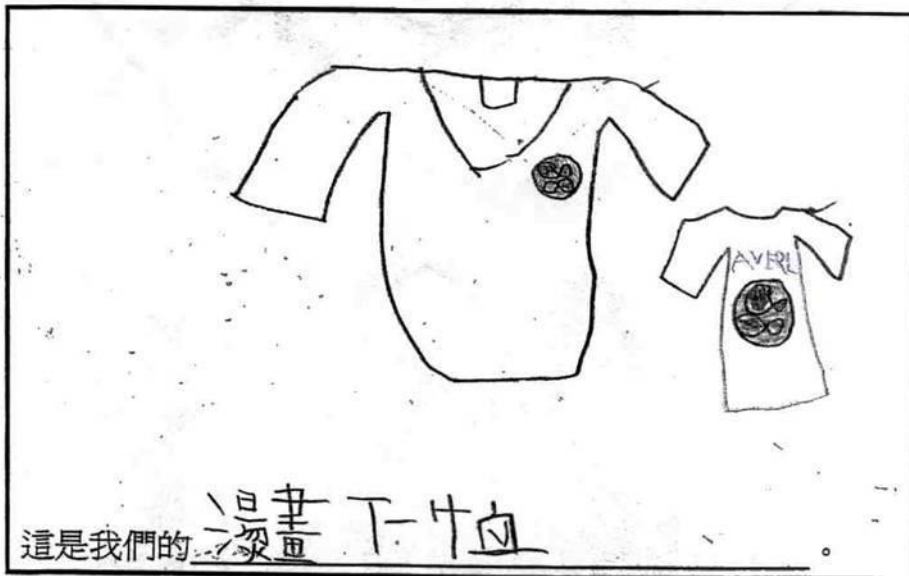
今天我們製作了展覽會的工作人員制服，請你和爸爸媽媽分享燙畫的經驗，並記錄下來。

燙畫在還沒有燙上衣服前它的圖和字是白雪雪的反面

把燙畫燙上衣服時，便現出正面圖案

我覺得自己製作燙畫衣服是很開心的。

我希望可以再做多一次。



Appendix D

The Wolf and The Stars

Once there was a wolf, and on his way to his home he saw a woman. The wolf didn't know what the woman was putting up, and so he went closer and closer. The wolf asked "What are you putting up?" The woman said "I am putting up stars."

The wolf wanted to help. So the woman said "No, you can't because you won't put it in the right order." Then the wolf asks "Please, please." But she still says "no."

And he keeps saying "Please" but then she just ignores him.

So then the wolf goes back to his home. And he was angry! He goes back and asks the woman one more time, and she says "Oh, okay."

The wolf started helping. Then it was taking a long time and he wanted to stop but the woman said "You're not finished yet." Then the wolf thought of a faster way, and he threw the stars up into the sky all at once. Now no one can see the star pictures when they look up, because the wolf didn't put them up in the right shapes he just threw them up.

You have to try to get the stars back and do it all over again.

The end

Appendix E

The Girl and the Teleporter

Once there was a girl and she lived on Earth. Then, she saw this teleporter and she went inside. It teleported her to the sun! Then she said, “Where am I?” Then an alien came and said “You are in space.” The girl said, “Which planet should I go to?” She jumped to Mercury, then jumped to Earth, then jumped to Venus, then jumped to Mars, then jumped to Saturn, then jumped to Uranus, then jump to Neptune. Then she had to take a long, long jump to Pluto. She was tired so an alien came. He saw the girl and threw her back to Earth. Her mom and Dad saw her in her room sleeping. When she woke up she was so happy to be back on Earth in her room! Then, she never went into the teleporter again.

End

Appendix F

(The Original version in Chinese)

(The Translated Version)



One day, a lion saw a tiger.



The lion felt happy and the tiger felt happy, too.



In the following day, the lion disappeared. The tiger was not happy. Suddenly, the lion saw the tiger (and the lion was) very happy.

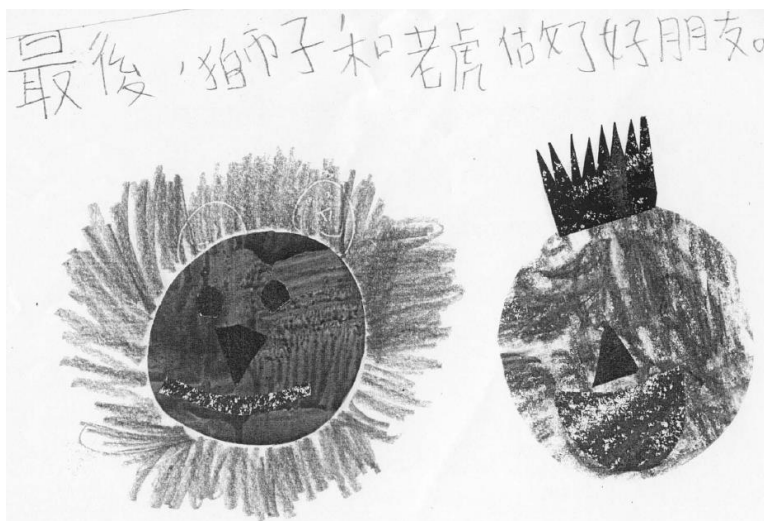
(Continued Appendix F)



The third day, the tiger disappeared (because he) was eating grass. The lion went to eat grass, too.



The tiger and the lion went to the forest to play (and) they were very happy.



Finally, the lion and the tiger became good friends.