Navigating a complex pedagogical landscape: Case study of a progressive early years model in Hong Kong

'Those who wish to change the educational climate have a huge task ahead of them.'

Howard Gardner (2004, p. 257)

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Abstract

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Hong Kong, which has a rich Eastern culture infused with Confucian values and a long tradition of formal academic, didactic pedagogy in pre-primary education, is keen to adopt an approach that advocates play-based, child-centred learning (Hong Kong Government News, 2017; Curriculum Development Council, 2006). However, the transition has to date not been easy for the practitioners, who are finding it a challenge to put the theory of such learning into practice (Chen *et al*., 2017; Cheng *et al*., 2015) against the constraints of the widely accepted parent-driven policy discourse that exists within the early years sector (Cheung *et al.*, 2017; Hong Kong Government News, 2017). Further exacerbating the situation is the lack of government support for professional development and training (Cheung, 2017; Chan *et al.*, 2009).

The aims of this case study was to identify what aspects of a play-based, child-centred approach practitioners are finding a challenge to put into practice; how practitioners are able to navigate high parental expectations; and how they can best be supported in their practice within their Hong Kong setting to feel confident and well-equipped in their role as practitioner. A further aim was to determine how practitioners who have not experienced the pedagogy of play, as part of their own childhood education or during their teacher training, are able to adapt to teaching a play- and child-centred approach.

The case study looked through a qualitative lens at one Hong Kong early years institute that has adopted Western play-based, child-centred approaches. The main research methods employed were informal, semi-structured, one-to-one interviews with eight practitioners and the head of school, classroom observations, and the collection/analysis of documentary evidence.

The study's findings suggest that a pivotal prerequisite for feeling supported and well-equipped in their role is for practitioners to have shared values and pedagogical beliefs with their peers, managers and the institute as a whole. The implementation of practitioner support and learning tools within the institute, including provisions for collaboration amongst practitioners to navigate the challenges they face, is crucial.

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It has been an inspirational journey, and I can honestly say that I have loved every moment of the process, other than a few small wobbles early on and perhaps a couple more towards the end!

Key Words: Early Years Setting, Pedagogy, Early Years Practitioners, Progressive Education, Play-Based and Child-Centred Approach

Definition of Key Terminology

I would here like to clarify what I mean by some of the key terminology used in the thesis:

- **Early Years Settings** - Institutions that offer either accompanied or unaccompanied playgroup or nursery classes for children of pre-primary age (under 6). In many countries, including Hong Kong, such settings/institutions are also referred to as kindergartens, nurseries or pre-schools.

- **Pedagogy** - The practice and method of teaching.

- **Early Years Practitioners -** Adults who are employed to work with children between the ages of 0 and 6. They may also be referred to as teachers, nursery nurses or kindergarten teachers in other contexts.

- **Progressive Education -** An inclusive, integrated, experiential approach to teaching and learning, as opposed to more traditional whole-class teaching approaches. A progressive education practitioner typically facilitates children's learning through conversations, questioning, observations and scaffolding by using creative means of teaching.

- **Play-Based & Child-Centred Approach** - An approach that engages children in learning through materials and equipment that are often self-chosen and of personal interest, and where the practitioners act as facilitators and are responsive in their interactions with the children.

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Introduction

1.1 Introduction

The early years education system in Hong Kong, which focuses on the education and care of children up to the age of 6, has experienced significant change in recent years and looks to the West for inspiration in policy and practice. Most early years settings in Hong Kong offer adult-accompanied playgroups and half-day unaccompanied nursery/kindergarten classes, although some offer full-day classes for children from the age of 2.

The process of globalisation has allowed education research, policies, ideas and experiences to be shared rapidly amongst, and accepted or rejected by, governments, educators, students and consumers around the world. The challenge is ensuring that desired changes or adaptations 'fit' the new locality and context. Previous studies have documented the Hong Kong government's desire to embrace different teaching approaches by swapping or complimenting their current, more traditional, didactic teaching methods for aspects of child-centred, play-based approaches influenced by the West (Fung and Cheng, 2012). The transition has not proved an easy one to date, however (Hong Kong Government News, 2017). Practitioners have found it a challenge to put the theory of play-based, child-centred pedagogy into practice (Chen _et al_., 2017; Cheng _et al_., 2015), especially against the constraints of a widely accepted parent-driven policy discourse that exists within early years institutions (Cheung _et al._, 2017; Hong Kong Government News, 2017). With little or no professional development training available to practitioners in Hong Kong (Cheung, 2017; Chan _et al._, 2009), a question of interest is how they can be supported in their everyday practice to infuse the desired approaches that the government advocates (Curriculum Development Council, 2017).

The aims of the qualitative case study carried out for this thesis were to identify what aspects of a play-based, child-centred approach early years practitioners in a Hong Kong early years setting catering to children aged 6 months to 6 years are finding a challenge to put into practice; to determine how these practitioners are able to navigate high parental

expectations and gain practice support; and to understand how practitioners who have not experienced the pedagogy of play either as part of their own childhood education or teacher training are able to adapt to teaching a play- and child-centred approach.

This introductory chapter is divided into seven subsections, each chosen carefully to add depth and context to understanding the rationale of the research study presented herein: *Navigating a complex pedagogical landscape: Case study of a progressive early years model in Hong Kong*. The subchapters cover the following topics: background to the problem; context of and rationale for the study; Hong Kong; progressive education; the impact of globalisation; the research questions; and organisation of the thesis.

1.2 Background to the Problem

The impact that early childhood education can have on a child's development and well-being is taken seriously by government and key non-government officials around the world, who have 'taken on board the significant impact of early childhood experience upon later growth and development for *all* children across a range of social-cultural contexts' (Pearson, 2011, p. 212). In Hong Kong, an early years child-centred approach which advocates that children learn through play and by following their own interests is gaining recognition (Cheng *et al.*, 2015), and was first introduced in formal curriculum documents in Hong Kong's *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* in 1991 and further revised in 2006 (Curriculum Development Council, 2006). There is also more recent evidence of such recognition. For example, in February 2017 the Hong Kong Education Bureau (EDB) announced the release of a new early years guide for practitioners for the 2017-18 academic year: *Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide – Joyful Learning through Play, Balanced Development All the Way* (Curriculum Development Council, 2017). With the issuance of this guide, the EDB is once again imploring all early years institutions to begin implementing a school-based curriculum that focuses on whole child development by adopting aspects of a play-based approach that allows children to explore and develop a love for learning rather than being taught primary curriculum content prematurely. There are concerns that being exposed to formal academics too soon may 'damage [a child's]

confidence, leading to their loss of drive to learn' (Curriculum Development Council, 2017, p. 88).

Despite the EDB's advocacy of less formal approaches in early years institutions, the literature suggests that the adoption of Western-style early years approaches can be a challenge for practitioners in practice, even for those who desire to implement them (Cheng *et al.*, 2015; Fung and Cheng, 2012; Honig and Lim, 2003). The situation is perhaps understandable given that early years education in Hong Kong has a long tradition of formal, didactic teaching methods spanning thousands of years rather than the less traditionally rooted, child-centred, play-based pedagogies more commonly practised in Western cultures. The challenge for the territory's early years settings has been to find a 'balance between change and tradition, East and West, the local and the global [which] can be achieved and maintained' (Yang and Li, 2018a, p. 33).

According to Lau (2012), one of the reasons the transition has not been easy for Hong Kong is that such teaching/learning constitutes a 'reverse of the traditional Confuci[an] form of pedagogy that stresses rote learning and direct teaching' (p. 12). Hong Kong may also be one of the few places in the world where children as young as 2 are required to compete for places at international – and many local – primary schools by attending formal interviews and assessments (Humpage, 2016). Because all early years institutions in Hong Kong are currently privately run and categorised as non-profit or private independent (Wu, 2014), they are afforded a large degree of autonomy, but with little or no support from the government. The Hong Kong *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* states, 'pre-primary institutions now have greater room to design their own curriculum and free children from unnecessary drilling and pressure' (Curriculum Development Council, 2006, p. 7).

There can be advantages to having autonomy over curriculum design, but it can be problematic in practice because institutions and practitioners alike have their own interpretations of what constitutes a child-centred, inquiry- and play-based model (Yang and Li, 2018a). Because all early years institutions in Hong Kong are privately funded and pay some of the highest rents in the world, fee-paying parents are considered a main policy driver of curriculum outcomes and delivery, which often constitute the introduction of formal academics, homework and skills at a young age (Fung and Cheng, 2012; Ebbeck, 1995). Chan and Chan (2003) argue that the curriculum and approaches adopted in early

years settings are 'unduly influenced by what they think parents want and are prepared to pay for' (p. 11). Such tensions have recently been acknowledged by the government. In a 2017 EDB video press release, for example, Dr Anna Hui, Chairperson of the Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide Committee, acknowledges that institutions and practitioners often feel pressured by parents and market forces to implement approaches other than those being recommended, but expresses the EDB's hopes that the new support guide will help them:

> [A]ctually, teachers, they are professional, so they know it, but they often say it's the requirement of the parents and the market [that] is moving them towards doing something that they may not like to do. But now I think there is a good chance that we have a common goal and will put it back onto more theory based as we look for the best practice in the field; and we hope that we can be successful this time. (Hong Kong Government News, 2017)

Under the influence of globalisation and the transmission of ideas between the Western and Eastern hemispheres, the world has become a more competitive place in general, and Hong Kong is under immense pressure to compete in the global market and become a leader in the global race for academic success (Pearson, 2011). Despite Hong Kong being in an enviable position in such global rankings as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the Hong Kong government is the driver of reforms in primary and secondary education that represent a genuine attempt to broaden the curriculum, to make it more relevant to the new century and to refocus Hong Kong away from rote learning and exam-based assessment to incorporate more child-centred content and pedagogies (Yelland and Leung, 2018, p. 104).

Hong Kong has in recent years been looking towards the West for inspiration in early years practice (Tan, 2016; Forestier and Crossley, 2015). The aforementioned pre-primary curriculum guide (Curriculum Development Council, 2006) was released as guidance for early year practitioners in response to reforms for older children and to 'seem more progressive by embracing western pedagogies and practices' (Yelland and Leung, 2018, p. 114). This was with the objective 'to become, or continue as, [a] competitive econom[y] in the twenty-first century' (Yelland and Leung, 2018, p. 103). A further catalyst for the guide's release was a desire to place stronger emphasis on providing for the more rounded

development of young children amid concerns 'that some kindergartens went too far in presenting formal academic curricula' (Wong and Rao, 2015, p. 5). However, Yelland and Leung (2018) argue that despite the government's quest to 'be regarded as progressive and at the cutting edge of international pedagogies … in reality the Hong Kong kindergarten is very different from [its counterparts] in western countries' (p. 114), a reality, they further argue, that is not always reflected in the curriculum guide.

Ng (2012) suggests that the demand for international education in Hong Kong in response to the process of globalisation 'has been notably redefined by the socio-political changes that have occurred over time' (p. 121), particularly since the handover of sovereignty in 1997. In his opinion, international schools have gone from 'serving exclusively an expatriate community in the beginning to now broadly accepting local students' (Ng, 2012, p. 259). There are currently 56 international primary schools in Hong Kong (Education Post, 2018), in contrast to approximately 12 in the 1970s, which is indicative of a population that is beginning to seek alternative educational platforms to the traditional, didactic platforms that have been deeply rooted in Chinese culture for thousands of years. There are also increasing numbers of early years institutes in Hong Kong that boast an 'international approach', but in many of them there are misunderstandings about how to incorporate a play-based, child-centred pedagogy (Vong, 2013). It is perhaps those very misunderstandings that are responsible for parents' trust or lack thereof in whether a play-based, child-centred approach will prepare their children adequately for primary school assessments, explaining why parents are still considered the main policy drivers for the implementation of early academics in Hong Kong early years settings (Cheung *et al.*, 2017; Hong Kong Government News, 2017).

1.3 Context and Rationale for the Study

Following a formal announcement in 2017 by the EDB (Hong Kong Government News, 2017) and the issuance of a draft of the *Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide* (Curriculum Development Council, 2017) imploring *all* early years institutions in Hong Kong to begin adopting Western-inspired approaches comprising play-based, child-centred learning, these institutions are under considerable pressure to reflect on, and where

necessary adapt, their current pedagogical trajectory. Taking on board the assertions of Steer *et al.* (2007) and Tan (2016) that it is not always possible to simply transfer an educational model or policy from one country to another and expect a perfect fit, it could be argued that without examples in similar contexts to draw upon, adopting the desired Western approaches will indeed prove challenging for many practitioners in Hong Kong.

The application of Western-style educational models is not a new topic of discussion in research or practice internationally, but it remains in its infancy in Hong Kong. Given the autonomy that early years institutions in Hong Kong enjoy, it would be possible for them to incorporate a fusion of pedagogical theories and practices into independent, bespoke models, affording them an opportunity to adapt a combination of approaches to meet the needs of individual settings within particular cultural contexts (Wood, 2013). Wood (2013) further suggests that such 'models [could] continue to evolve in response to research, theory and wider social change, [and] so they are not set in stone, but are open to skilful adaptation' (p. 57). They are thus far likelier to achieve success than models simply lifted from one context and dropped into another, as evidenced by the failure in the early twentieth century of a number of curriculum models imported from the West to match the sociocultural conditions of China (Zhu and Zhang, 2008). However, without sufficient guidance, training and support, and in the absence of early years models or beacon schools in Hong Kong for practitioners to draw upon, such bespoke models would arguably be challenging indeed to implement. It is therefore unsurprising that practitioners are struggling in practice, particularly those with limited experience to build on.

The literature has widely reported the desire of the Hong Kong Government and practitioners alike to implement a play-based, child-centred approach (Cheng *et al.*, 2015; Vu *et al.*, 2015; Luo *et al.*, 2013; Chan, 2010). However, there is a limited body of literature examining the specific challenges that practitioners in Hong Kong are experiencing, how they are navigating high parental expectations and the support they require to be successful within their own settings. Few would argue against the pivotal role that classroom practitioners play in the education and development of children, and yet without appropriate support I question how newly adopted approaches can be effectively implemented within their given contexts. It would be unfair to assume that any particular early years model in Hong Kong could or should look the same as those found in other

countries, as highlighted in a recent exploratory study conducted by Faas *et al.* (2017), which looked at the pedagogy of play in two contrasting cultural contexts: Germany and Hong Kong. Cheung (2018) contends that 'when importing educational theories and practices from elsewhere … they should be culturally and contextually appropriate … whilst having an awareness of teachers' professional competencies' (p. 14). This is a view shared by Yang and Li (2018a), who argue that it is not easy for practitioners to transfer practice from one setting to another and that 'teachers in a new context may not thoroughly understand the principles or put the correct practices in place' (p. 28).

The case study reported herein examines in depth, through the analysis of interviews, observations and documentary evidence the aspects of play-based, child-centred pedagogy that the practitioners in one early years setting find challenging; the strategies they use to navigate high parental expectations; and the processes that have been put in place within the setting to support them in practice. The study illuminates some of the complexities with which all practitioners in Hong Kong must deal, not just those who are born and raised within a Confucian culture. Of course, it is not only Hong Kong teachers who are experiencing challenges. So, too, are practitioners around the globe who are working in today's competitive landscape, regardless of their qualifications or experience.

There have been new and significant insights afforded by this study. Despite the challenges associated with implementing a play-based, child-centred approach in a Hong Kong early years setting, the findings from this study have illuminated that it is possible, through shared values, collaboration, and clear and supportive processes, for those challenges to be either eased or in some cases overcome. It has been helpful to draw upon Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capital to understand the positionality of the practitioners and to articulate the complex relationships of capital or power that exist in Hong Kong early years settings. The findings from this study have highlighted the importance for practitioners to develop a shared professional habitus within a field which is dominated by the capital or power of the parents (Hong Kong Government News, 2017) and perhaps primary schools, too.

Although it is widely accepted that it is difficult if not impossible to generalise from a single case study, Wellington (2015) argues that such studies are not necessarily so unique that it is not possible to learn from them. The findings of the case study discussed in this

thesis have the potential to shape and inform future action, policy and practice within Hong Kong. The study comes at an apt time, given that the Hong Kong government is more determined than ever to 'get it right' for families seeking a good pre-primary education for their children and is offering encouragement to practitioners (Hong Kong Government News, 2017). Whilst the findings will certainly be of interest to scholars and practitioners working in local early years settings, they are anticipated to be of particular interest to the government and academe in reflecting on the future design of policy and teacher training programmes in Hong Kong.

1.4 Hong Kong

Hong Kong is located in southern East Asia and, until 1997, was under British sovereignty. It is now a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China (the HKSAR), operates under the framework of 'one country, two systems' and enjoys the freedom to operate its own education system (Government of the People's Republic of China, 1984). The HKSAR is densely populated and 'has one of the most competitive education systems in the world [and] elitism is socially and culturally encouraged, and education is perceived as a means for upward mobility' (Wong and Rao, 2015, p. 2). The Hong Kong population is approx. 7.4 million and the two official languages are English and Cantonese.

Hong Kong is a market-driven economy with a Western-style infrastructure (Luo *et al.*, 2013) and a distinct fusion of East and West. It is one of the most expensive cities in the world in which to live, with very high residential and business rents and property prices in comparison to other countries. It is not unusual for rents to increase by 10-50% every two years, which often results in families and businesses having to relocate on a regular basis. Such uncertainty can create tensions for families as well as business owners, including those of educational institutes. Examples of both extreme wealth and extreme poverty can

be found in Hong Kong, and, according to Ebbeck (1995), it is 'known as a place where making money is of great importance to a large [part of the] population' (p. 4). She also notes that '[i]n many ways Hong Kong is a unique place for children to grow up' (Ebbeck, 1995, p. 4), likely referring to its high population density and the fact that most children live in compact flats in high-rise buildings with limited access to parks, playgrounds or open space owing to the scarcity of land (Wang *et al*., 2017). Most families in Hong Kong either employ a live-in domestic helper to assist with child care and domestic duties or have grandparents living in the family home or close by.

Hong Kong is a popular destination for overseas teachers, given its proximity to other desirable destinations for convenient weekend and term-time travel, vibrant lifestyle and fascinating culture, with many staying for two years or longer. It also attracts highly educated executives from overseas, many of them specialising in finance, law and business. The expatriate (or expat) families who come to Hong Kong are generally in search of a high-quality, international education for their children. However, it is not only expats who seek such an education. Grimshaw and Sears (2008) note that 'the fact so many parents choose to provide their children with an international education is testimony to the enriching effects of a life on the move' (p. 259). Accordingly, Hong Kong, and China more widely, has undergone 'numerous transformations to better meet the changing demands of society and the global market' (Li and Chen, 2016, p. 1), including significant growth in the establishment of international schools in the past two decades (Ng, 2012).

Hong Kong is particularly competitive in terms of work and education and has been described by Wong (2006) as a 'competition-driven society embracing the philosophy of survival of the fittest' (p. 280). At the heart of Chinese culture lies Confucianism, which originated over two thousand years ago, and is still embedded in the culture of the Chinese people and permeates their lives (Forestier and Crossley, 2015; Luo *et al.*, 2013; Sun, 2008). Confucius (551-479 BC) was a politician, teacher and philosopher who, according to Sun (2008), 'set a high standard for coming generations in learning and gaining knowledge with great eagerness' (p. 563). One aspect of Confucian belief is that teachers are seen as authority figures in the classroom (Cheung, 2017). Ebbeck (1995) notes that '[t]he Chinese work long hours and very hard and are very achievement oriented in their life goals,

particularly for their children' (p. 4), which accords with the Confucian belief that 'knowledge is acquired through diligence and persistence' (Luo *et al.*, 2013).

With the presence of such deeply rooted cultural values that place a strong emphasis on education for lifelong learning (Sun, 2008), change cannot be expected to happen immediately. The Hong Kong government took the decision to look to the West for alternative approaches to the traditional didactic teaching and learning approaches inspired by those values, but practitioners have found it a challenge to adapt to the changes suggested (Chen *et al.*, 2017; Cheng *et al.*, 2015). Such adaptation is arguably also an ongoing challenge for many Hong Kong parents, who desire their children to excel academically and are unsure of how Western play-based, child-centred approaches can help them to do so.

1.5 Progressive Education

I am aware that the term 'progressive education' can have various interpretations to different audiences globally. In Hong Kong, however, it is used most frequently amongst educators and academics to describe a move towards adopting aspects of Western-rooted child-centred pedagogy as opposed to the formal teacher-directed approaches traditionally used [see, for example, Yelland and Leung, 2018]. I refer to progressive education throughout the thesis and provide a definition in the key terminology section. In sum, I define progressive education as *an inclusive, integrated, experiential approach to teaching and learning as opposed to more traditional whole class teaching approaches. The progressive practitioner typically facilitates child learning through conversations, questioning, observations and scaffolding, that is, by using more creative means of teaching.*

The progressive education movement in the United States and Europe at the end of the 19th century was a reaction to the more didactic, formal approach to education that was common practice at the time (Garhart Mooney, 2013). John Dewey (1859-1952), an American educator, philosopher and educational reformer, developed some of the early ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and John Locke. In 1894, Dewey established the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, which quickly became known as 'the centre of thought on progressive education, the movement toward a more democratic and child-centred

education' (Garhart Mooney, 2013, p. 14). The common pedagogical characteristics of the progressive movement included authentic learning experiences, learning by doing, following children's interests, collaboration, and play- and child-centred learning (Dewey, 2010). These Western-influenced characteristics of a progressive approach are considered a non-prescriptive style of education as opposed to the traditional Chinese pedagogy long practised in Hong Kong. Chen *et al.* (2017) suggest that

> … due to their unique cultural roots, traditional Chinese pedagogy and contemporary early childhood pedagogy can be conceptualized as distinct in terms of philosophy (didacticism vs. constructivism), epistemological beliefs (knowledge vs. construction), theory (behaviourist vs. constructivist) and practice (teacher directedness vs. child centeredness). (p. 326)

Aspects of a progressive approach position the child at the centre of learning activities and lend themselves to such modern-day pedagogical frameworks as the Project Approach, International Baccalaureate (IB) and emergent curricula that, according to Cheng *et al*. (2015), are garnering growing interest in Hong Kong, with increasing numbers of settings choosing to adopt them. Such approaches focus on the process of learning and on allowing children to explore and co-construct their own knowledge based on their individual interests through projects, working either independently or collaboratively, in contrast to a more standardised approach in which 'the less [that] children's individual needs are met … the more likely it is that many children will fall behind' (Jones, 2012, p. 68).

Further inspiration can be drawn from a range of other progressive movement theorists, visionaries and advocates. For example, Italian teacher and educational psychologist Loris Maluguzzi is well known as the founder of and visionary behind the Reggio Emilia approach, a play- and child-centred, inquiry-based learning approach that also places value on the environment as the 'third teacher' (Edwards *et al.*, 2012). It is a value-laden approach that has evolved over time since its inception just after the Second World War (Dahlberg *et al.*, 2002). Although there is no textbook or prescribed method with guidelines or rules for other countries to adopt, it is still possible to learn from and be inspired by elements of the Reggio approach and to fit those elements into the progressive classroom. Such inspiration and incorporation can be called 'policy referencing', which can 'involve genuine interest in learning from others, or mere rhetoric to justify policy decisions'

(Forestier *et al.*, 2016, p. 150). The Reggio approach has been an inspiration to many educators around the world, including educators in Hong Kong and in the setting under study, and has been the focus of local studies (Li, 2012). Progressive education advocate Howard Gardner is known for his theory of multiple intelligences, which posits that children learn in different ways, and advocacy of authentic learning and child learning through doing and active participation (Gardner, 2004). Although Gardner's multiple intelligences theory has been subjected to criticism in the academic arena, not least for its lack of empirical evidence (Perry, 1997), his ideas have exposed educators, including myself, to the need to adapt alternative teaching approaches such as moving away from whole-class teaching.

Opposed to such progressive approaches are more traditional, theme-based, didactic approaches that feature a framework focused on a rigid theme or topic, limited room for play, and knowledge content that has been solely planned and prepped by the classroom teacher or another authoritative source (Garhart Mooney, 2013). Although such approaches are firmly embedded in the Hong Kong pedagogical landscape, according to Lau (2012), Dewey's ideas have had an influence on Hong Kong and China, gradually inspiring practitioners to turn away from teaching formal lessons. Richie and Buzzelli (2012) argue that whilst a non-prescriptive approach to education is empowering for well-qualified staff, it can be problematic for their less-experienced, less-qualified counterparts.

The notion of adopting progressive approaches has drawn the interest of both practitioners and the Hong Kong government (Chen *et al*., 2017, Curriculum Development Council, 2017), given that integrated, child-centred practices are thought to facilitate whole child development. However, as noted, there are significant gaps in the former's knowledge of how to put theory into practice (Thao and Boyd, 2014). Vong (2013) cites numerous examples of teachers in China reverting back to didactic forms of teaching and formal lesson plans, suggesting a lack of understanding about how to adapt current teaching strategies to accommodate new knowledge. This pattern was also highlighted in a recent case study of a Hong Kong kindergarten in which practitioners struggled to implement a child-centred project approach (Chen *et al*., 2017).

Defining the notion of a play-based, child-centred approach and what it looks like in practice is a challenge because it will look and mean something different from person to

person and within different early years settings. To address what can be considered a messy construct, I discuss the topic further in the literature review chapter.

1.6 The Impact of Globalisation on Education in Hong Kong

Owing to globalisation and the ease with which research and practice are widely disseminated, Hong Kong and the rapidly growing large cities of mainland China are increasingly 'seen as "windows to the world" and, education-wise, are more likely to integrate Western ideas into their school systems' (Vong, 2013, p. 181). However, globalisation comes with both benefits and tensions, as Rao *et al.* (2009) state:

> Globalisation has affected early childhood practice in both positive and less desirable ways. Improved communications and knowledge of what is happening in other countries have led to preschool education reform in different parts of the world. However, globalisation has also led to the devaluing of traditional values. In many regions of the world, there is tension between a culture promoted by globalisation and that of traditional values. For example, there is a dissonance between progressive views of how early learning should come about (such as learning through play) and more teacher directed approaches, still prevalent in some kindergartens in Hong Kong. (p. 257)

Early years pedagogy is constantly evolving, and, in the opinion of Moss (2013), early childhood education 'has expanded in almost all parts of the world … [but] it is only recently [that] it has been generally recognised as an important educational player' (p. 3). Children are often viewed as an investment in the future, and thus quality early childhood education is beginning to be seen as a government priority globally (Wong and Rao, 2015; Dahlberg *et al.*, 2002). There is certainly evidence of this in Hong Kong, for example, the recent implementation announcement of the aforementioned *Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide* (Curriculum Development Council, 2017). As a growing number of families move around the globe for work opportunities, demand for high-quality education has increased, and Haug (2013) further posits that 'a global and deregulated market-place has increased international competition' (p. 119). A possible consequence is the exertion of significantly more pressure on education institutions and practitioners to produce measurable results and targets. A case in point is PISA, which tests the competency of 15-

year-olds in four subjects and ranks countries against one another. Such pressure means that educators worldwide may soon face calls, as in Hong Kong, to expose young children to formal academic programmes prematurely (Bodrova, 2008).

Driven by globalisation and the speed at which information can be shared, it is not uncommon for pedagogical ideas and practice to move from country to country, thus rendering policy transfer, policy borrowing and referencing increasingly common practices (Forestier *et al.*, 2016; Vong, 2013); practices that, according to Burdett and O'Donnell (2016), 'can be constructive and effective in some circumstances' (p. 113). According to Rao *et al*. (2009), such educational exchanges can be beneficial, but can also create tension 'between a culture promoted by globalisation and that of traditional culture' (p. 257). Huggins (2013) suggests that globalisation is forcing practitioners out of their comfort zones in regard to changing their practice, ideas and approaches to early years pedagogy, and I therefore suggest that unless practitioners are effectively supported in implementing new teaching strategies within the contexts in which they work, it will be very difficult for them to achieve any kind of success regardless of the pressure for change. Here, I define success as a practitioner feeling confident and secure in implementing a play- and child-centred approach within the context of their setting.

Early years settings, both in Hong Kong and worldwide, are being confronted with numerous hurdles in adopting and adapting to new pedagogical ideas and skills, as can be seen in studies conducted in countries as diverse as Vietnam (Thao and Boyd, 2014), Israel (Tal, 2014), India (Gupta, 2011) and China (Farrell, 2004). Faas *et al.* (2017) suggest that many countries undertaking educational reform have used the findings of international research to 'create new pedagogy to meet [new] trends' (p. 75), as evidenced by such global models as New Zealand's Te Whāriki framework (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2017) and the aforementioned Reggio Emilia approach in Italy (Edwards *et al.*, 2012). However, it is not only Hong Kong and China that are looking to other countries and systems for inspiration; governments in the West are eyeing Chinese pedagogy with particular interest (Tan, 2016; Forestier and Crossley, 2015), as evidenced by the 2010 white paper in which former UK Secretary of State for Education Michael Gove declared that the country was looking to Hong Kong for ideas on raising educational standards (Department for Education, 2010). According to research, however, it is neither a simple

nor effective process to transfer policy from one country and implant it in another. Burdett and O'Donnell (2016), for example, caution that

> … there is no ideal solution or blueprint to policy borrowing as, like the policies themselves, the reasons for policy borrowing are highly complex, dynamic and very much embedded in the context within which they exist. This is further complicated by the impetus for educational policy change not always being linked solely to educational reasons and outcomes, but instead being heavily influenced by the strong currents of the surrounding political milieu. (p. 113)

They further suggest that education systems are complex, 'involv[ing] a wide range of players and a diverse range of direct and indirect influencers on their outcomes' (Burdett and O'Donnell, 2016, p. 113). These sentiments accord with the Hong Kong context, where, as discussed earlier in the chapter, the educational landscape is particularly complex owing to local, cultural and ecological drivers that exert a strong influence on the policy levers within individual institutions despite the certain amount of autonomy they are afforded with respect to their curriculum. It could be argued that the autonomy that early year settings in Hong Kong are afforded offers the potential to create positive outcomes for all actors (i.e. practitioners, management, parents and children) by developing a tailored model that fits into the local context in a more relevant, considered way. Achieving such a model requires careful adaptation with a fusion of local values and context and Western imported practices and ideas (Wood, 2013).

1.7 The Research Questions

As this introduction has made clear, the early years system in Hong Kong is going through some exciting, but complex, changes to policy and practice. Globalisation has allowed ideas, policy, research and practice to be easily shared amongst countries. Without respect for, adaptation to and careful thought about the local context in which change is being effected, the task of implementing it can be daunting indeed for practitioners, particularly in the absence of appropriate support. Hong Kong early years settings have been given the autonomy to create a model that incorporates play- and child-centred approaches, (Curriculum Development Council, 2006), although the degree of autonomy is likely to

vary from setting to setting in practice, and they thus have the potential to create new and innovative interpretations of traditional versus progressive approaches and practices.

The case study discussed herein, whilst not representative of all early years settings in Hong Kong, was conducted at one early years institute that has responded to the government's proposed changes to create a paradigm of change in early years education (Hong Kong Government News, 2017; Curriculum Development Council, 2006). The setting under study has been operational and implementing a play- and child-centred approach since April 2013. The four research questions I sought to answer are:

1. What aspects of implementing a play-based, child-centred approach are practitioners finding challenging?
2. How do practitioners navigate parental expectations?
3. How can practitioners be best supported in their practice within their own setting?
4. How can practitioners who have not experienced the pedagogy of play as part of their own childhood education or teacher training adapt to teaching a play- and child-centred approach?

1.8 Organisation of the Thesis

Chapter 1: Introduction

This introduction provides the background, context and rationale for the study. Also included in the chapter are definitions of key terms, background information on Hong Kong and progressive education in general, and an explanation of the impact that globalisation has had on Hong Kong's pedagogical landscape. Finally, it presents the four research questions underpinning the study that provide the thread running throughout the thesis.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter begins with an introduction, followed by an overview of Bourdieu's conceptual tools, most notably field, habitus, and capital, which I draw on in the literature review. I continue with a critical analysis of the literature related to my research questions, which is organised into the following subject areas: the pedagogical landscape of Hong

Kong, a play-based and child-centred approach as a complex construct, the positionality of parents and of practitioners in Hong Kong and practitioner knowledge and training. The chapter concludes with a summary and a review of the research questions.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, I begin by addressing my positionality, including my epistemological and ontological stance, and then proceed to discuss my research approach and methods, insider researcher reflexivity, the study timeframe and constraints, the pilot, sample group, ethical considerations, and participant interviews, before concluding with my means of analysis and limitations.

Chapter 4: The Case

In this chapter, I provide a detailed description of the setting under study and its general structure and present short biographies of the participants.

Chapter 5: Findings and Discussion

In this chapter, I begin by providing an overview of the aims of the study and the research questions. To add context to the findings I sought information from the participants on the cultural and educational context in which the focal setting is positioned. I then follow on with the findings and discussion of each research question which are organised into separate subchapters.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this chapter I provide an overview of the key findings and contributions from this study, including the introduction of a Practitioner Success Pyramid model and a Practitioner Support and Learning Cycle model. Following a review of my insights and limitations, I conclude with recommendations for future research and final reflections and thoughts for moving forward.

Chapter 2

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Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

As stated in the introduction, the Hong Kong government advocates a move away from formal, traditional didactic early childhood pedagogical practices towards more child-centred, play-based approaches (Hong Kong Government News, 2017; Curriculum Development Council, 2006). That transition has to date been problematic for practitioners, who have a desire to adopt new approaches, but find it a challenge to put theory into practice (Chen *et al*., 2017; Cheng *et al*., 2015). Hong Kong is part of a fast-paced globalised world in which information and research can be shared in a matter of seconds and it is not unusual for families to move frequently between countries for work. The city's high living costs and highly competitive nature not only make living and working there a challenge, but Hong Kong also presents a complex pedagogical landscape in which early childhood practitioners must navigate the constraints of a rich Confucian culture spanning thousands of years (Sun, 2008), as well as a parent-driven policy discourse (Cheung *et al.*, 2017; Hong Kong Government News, 2017) and a lack of government support for professional development training (Cheung, 2017; Chan *et al.*, 2009).

The aims of this study were to identify the aspects of a play-based, child-centred approach early years practitioners in Hong Kong are finding a challenge to put into practice; to determine how these practitioners are able to navigate high parental expectations and gain practice support; and to understand how practitioners who have not experienced the pedagogy of play either as part of their own childhood education or teacher training are able to adapt to teaching a play- and child-centred approach. The review of the literature in this chapter thus reflects these issues.

This chapter provides a close, critical analysis of the literature related to these issues and is organised into the following subchapters:

2.2 Bourdieu's Conceptual Tools: This subchapter provides an overview of the following of Bourdieu's conceptual tools, or 'thinking tools': field, habitus, and capital and how they fit into the context of this study.

2.3 The Hong Kong Pedagogical Landscape: This subchapter provides a background to early years policy and practice within the context of Hong Kong.

2.4 A Play-Based, Child-Centred Approach – A Complex Construct: Throughout the thesis, I refer to the notion of a play-based, child-centred approach, and yet the literature suggests that it can be a complex notion to define and ascertain how to put into practice. This subchapter identifies some of the reasons why this is the case.

2.5 The Positionality of Parents in Hong Kong: It is well documented that parents drive the policy discourse within Hong Kong early years settings and have high expectations for their children. This subchapter looks critically at the literature that has been written within this Hong Kong context.

2.6 The Positionality of Practitioners in Hong Kong: Situated within this complex pedagogical landscape are the practitioners struggling against cultural, policy and capital constraints. This subchapter explores the values and beliefs of practitioners and the impact they have on their practice.

2.7 Professional Knowledge and Training: It is well documented that practitioners in Hong Kong are finding it a challenge to adapt to Western-influenced play-based, child-centred teaching models, which often results in a reversion back to what they know and feel comfortable with (Fung and Cheng, 2012). This subchapter discusses some of the relevant knowledge gaps and training constraints.

2.8 A Summary: This final subchapter provides an overview of the key points illuminated in the literature review and restates the research questions.

2.2 Bourdieu's Conceptual Tools

Theory in educational research 'has a multitude of meanings' (Adams *et al.*, 2012, p. 1) depending on the context and purpose, and a theory can provide a platform that allows 'educational research to be argued, and developed' (p. 2). The theories used in educational research can be used as a tool to help us make sense of and articulate our findings and to 'explain *why* specific events and patterns occur as they do' (Wellington, 2015, p. 37). When I embarked on this research, it was initially unclear to me at what point in my own research process a relevant theoretical lens would make its entry, that is, whether it would emerge at the beginning of the process to guide the research (i.e. a priori) or whether it would emerge organically from the data (i.e. a posteriori). Wellington (2015) suggests that this is not an uncommon scenario for researchers. Instead of being concerned about identifying a theoretical lens early on in the process in this study, it seemed to me more appropriate to allow such identification to happen organically, as I worked between the literature and the interview data. Conducting and writing up this study has not been the linear process I had originally expected it to be. Once I began organising and analysing the data, it became clear to me that Bourdieu's conceptual tools of habitus, capital and field were going to be useful for making sense of the findings and helping me to articulate them (Wellington, 2015).

When I reflected back on the literature in response, I realised that drawing on the ideas of Bourdieu's conceptual tools would enable me to look more closely at the context of the practitioners' positionality in what I refer to throughout this thesis as a 'complex pedagogical landscape'. In particular, his concepts of field, habitus and capital helped me to articulate the powers that exist in the early childhood arena in Hong Kong and illuminated the fact that perhaps practitioners do not have to feel as powerless as the literature suggests (Cheung *et al.*, 2017; Hong Kong Government News, 2017), especially if they are able to develop a shared professional habitus. The light-bulb moment for me was when, during the one-to-one interviews conducted early on in the research process, the participants began talking about the importance of feeling a sense of belonging and having shared values with and collaborating with colleagues. Some of the participants had suggested that these aspects were missing in previous Hong Kong settings they had worked in and thus affected their desire or ability to either continue or succeed in that particular field. Drawing on the study of Gunter (2002) which focuses on field members in higher education institutes it would seem that entering the field with shared values could be beneficial when co-creating a

shared professional habitus. Gunter (2002) draws on Bourdieu's conceptual tools as she suggests the following:

> To enter a field, to play the game, one must possess the habitus which predisposes one to enter that field, that game and not another. One must also possess at least the minimum amount of knowledge, or skill, or 'talent' to be accepted as a legitimate player. (p. 11)

There are numerous studies conducted in the educational arena which have used Bourdieu's conceptual tools of field, habitus and capital as a theoretical template. A recent study by Betteney, *et al*, (2018) used Bourdieu as a lens to see how mentors of newly qualified teachers 'see themselves professionally within that process' (p. 435). Other work that I have drawn on in this thesis includes the following: Huggins (2013), O'Donoghue, (2012) and Gunter (2002).

Pierre Bourdieu was a French thinker and writer whose ideas and concepts have, over the years, influenced researchers and research in a multitude of disciplines. According to Bourdieu, the way we act or behave in social situations can be determined by the way in which our habitus and the field we inhibit interact, leading him to develop the equation: Habitus + Field = Practice. Practice is what is happening in the field, and is 'the result of the relationship between an individual's habitus, different forms of capital and the field of action' (Power, 1999, p. 48). A more detailed account of Bourdieu's conceptual tools I refer to within this thesis is as follows:

Field

Within the context of this study I at times refer to the early years setting under study as 'the field'. In doing so, I am using it in the Bourdieusian sense: a 'field is spatial, albeit notional; an abstract space, with often veiled consequences, linked to how that space is occupied' (O'Donoghue, 2012, p. 195). For example, there are fields in the arts, health, politics, education and law. A field can be complex, with its own set of rules, knowledge and organised forms of capital (power), positions and practices. Gunter (2002) describes the field as a 'social arena within which struggles or manoeuvres take place over specific resources or stakes and access to them' (p. 11). Therefore, it is not always easily understood by outsiders or indeed those entering the field for the first time. Entrants to a field need to

learn what the rules and norms are, and understand them, so that they can then articulate them, for example, the rules/norms of professional practice and conduct, routines, dress, and shared experiences (Betteney *et al*., 2018). Each field in the Hong Kong early years context is unique (Yang and Li, 2018a), and therefore operates slightly differently from others given the autonomy that the early years sector is afforded (Curriculum Development Council, 2006). A field can be full of forces and power struggles amongst 'people who dominate and who are dominated' (O'Donoghue, 2012, p. 191), such as, in the context of this study, practitioners, management and parents. In the Hong Kong early years context, it is parents rather than practitioners who are reported to hold power, and thus dominance, over teaching and learning policy (Cheung *et al.*, 2017; Hong Kong Government News, 2017).

Habitus

Bourdieu defines 'habitus' as a person's unique experiences, background, values and knowledge, which together shape the way in which he or she thinks and behaves in a particular field (O'Donoghue, 2012). Bourdieu, in his research has identified different types of habitus to include, 'class habitus, status-group habitus, gender habitus, and more specialized types of professional habitus' (Swartz, 2002, p. 65s). When people join a field, they bring their habitus with them, and it may or may not fit in with the habitus of others in the field owing to differences in life and professional experience (Maton, 2014). In the Hong Kong educational context, some practitioners are native to Hong Kong and were educated there, whereas others have lived and/or been educated abroad and are returning after many years away, and others still are new to Hong Kong and therefore entering an entirely unfamiliar field. It is, however, possible for a person's habitus to evolve (Maton, 2014), making it possible for practitioners to adapt and learn new skills, thereby creating a shared professional habitus within their field. If practitioners are unable to co-create such a shared habitus, they are likely to find themselves working in isolation of other actors in the field, as demonstrated by Wang and Lam (2017).

Capital

Finally, Bourdieu uses the term 'capital' in a broad sense and suggests that different types of capital exist within a given field (Wellington, 2015). Economic capital refers to money

and wealth, whilst social capital refers to the 'network of relationships or family links that a person can possess in a field' (Wellington, 2015, p. 52), and cultural capital refers to assets that might be considered part of one's cultural upbringing, such as language, style of speech, dress, values, heritage, education and intellect. Different types of capital hold dominant and subordinate positions within a field (Power, 1999). Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) argue that 'a field is simultaneously a space of conflict and competition … in which participants vie to establish [a] monopoly over the species of capital effective in it' (p. 17). Within the context of Hong Kong, parents can be seen as holding capital power because they pay the fees and seem to have strong values on what they expect of their child's education, potentially placing them in an influential and powerful position within the field.

Being able to use the aforementioned conceptual tools have enabled me to articulate the complex relationships of capital or power that exist within Hong Kong early years settings, involving not only parents and practitioners, but primary schools too. By using Bourdieu's concepts as a theoretical lens I have been able to contextualise the practitioner's positionality and the importance of developing a professional habitus within the field.

2.3 The Hong Kong Pedagogical Landscape

Early childhood education and care fall under the licensing of the EDB, which was harmonised with the Social Welfare Department in 2005. Early years institutions in Hong Kong are privately run and are categorised by the EDB as being non-profit-making (NPM), kindergartens (KGs) or private independent (PI), and can be either voluntary agencies or private enterprises (Hong Education Bureau, 2020a). The settings are not publicly funded, which makes it difficult for the government to monitor and maintain general standards and quality across schools. This situation is in stark contrast to that in the UK, where there are strong central policy levers that allow for more consistency amongst early childhood institutions. The EDB oversees all academic institutions in Hong Kong and conducts school inspections that focus on ensuring correct teacher/child ratios, the physical conditions of the school and the correct quota of qualified teachers. The EDB checks schools' paperwork periodically to ensure that basic curriculum guidelines are being followed, but formal classroom observations are rare. It is unclear whether the lack of observations is due to the

relevant government department being overstretched or because, as Pearson (2011) argues, Hong Kong's reforms of early childhood education have been neither 'received nor implemented with ease' (p. 216).

Inconsistencies have been reported between government guidelines and what is actually being taught in the classroom (Chan, 2010). Concerns have been expressed that the lack of quality and consistency across early years institutions could be 'due to minimal criteria for initial registration and insufficient quality assurance strategies' (Cheuk and Hatch, 2007, p. 418). Early childhood teachers are now generally required to have a certificate in early childhood education that incorporates two to three years of training (Wu, 2014).

It should be noted however that in 2006 the government did have the vision that all children between the ages of 3 years and 6 year should have the opportunity to receive affordable, quality pre-primary education. In 2007 the EDB introduced a pre-primary voucher scheme (PVS) (Hong Education Bureau, 2020b) which provided a fee subsidy to parents if they enrolled in a registered NPM or PI kindergarten. To be eligible for the scheme kindergartens could not charge more than HK $24,000 per year for half day classes or HK $48,000 for whole day classes (Fung and Lam, 2007) and must deliver programmes that follow the *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* (Curriculum Development Council, 2006) and 'meet government standards for quality' (Wong and Rao, 2020, p. 2). Early years settings who were eligible for this scheme also had the opportunity to apply for financial assistance and one off grant for school improvement (Hong Education Bureau, 2020b). It was hoped that by offering a fee subsidy to parents they would be empowered to choose an early years setting that not only is a right fit for their child, but a setting that meets the minimum standards (Wong and Rao, 2020). The PVS was replaced in 2017 with the Free Quality Kindergarten Education Scheme (FQKES) (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2016).

As previously stated, the notion of play for young children was first highlighted in formal curriculum documents in Hong Kong's *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* in 1991 and further revised in 2006 (Curriculum Development Council, 2006). These documents advocate a child-friendly, learning-through-play approach and the use of small groups for instruction. Along with incorporating these concepts, early years institutions were advised that they can remain independent in their curricula and policies as long as they offer a well-balanced curriculum:

Pre-primary institutions are encouraged to adopt the recommendations set out in this Curriculum Guide, where appropriate and with due consideration of their own circumstances and needs, to achieve the pre-primary education objectives. (Curriculum Development Council, 2006, p. 105)

It seems apt to apply Bourdieu's notion of the field to this situation, as each field or setting within the Hong Kong early years arena is unique (Yang and Li, 2018a). Each field is implored to operate with its own set of rules, routines, positions, practices and capital (O'Donoghue, 2013) while being guided by the recommendations in the curriculum guide (Curriculum Development Council, 2006).

The Hong Kong curriculum framework contains four main developmental objectives, Physical Development, Cognitive and Language Development, Affective and Social Development, and Aesthetic Development, which can be integrated into six learning areas: Physical Fitness and Health, Language, Early Mathematics, Science and Technology, Self and Society, and the Arts. Such flexibility over curriculum design could be considered a positive aspect of Hong Kong's early years settings, and perhaps even the envy of other countries, such as England, where the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum (Department of Education, 2017) has been repeatedly revised and adapted over the years, driven by a succession of national political agendas via government policy. Alternatively, it could be argued that autonomy over the curriculum is not always straightforward unless there is a clear vision and guidance with respect to policy and procedures within the organisation to ensure consistency between classes and programmes. Furthermore, pedagogical autonomy is not exclusive to Hong Kong. In New Zealand, for example, teachers and educators have a voice and can offer input on the national early years curriculum called the Te Whāriki (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2017). Recent revisions of the curriculum were led by Margaret Carr, a university lecturer and renowned early years researcher, rather than politicians. It is therefore possible for various settings to differ in their operations and practice and still do 'what is right' for their own school communities.

The Reggio Emilia approach (Edwards *et al.*, 2012) is another example of teachers having autonomy over their pedagogical frameworks and adapting and fitting them to the local context. Although Hong Kong has been attempting to adopt these and other global play-

based, child-centred models for some time (Yelland and Leung, 2018), Li (2001) suggests that such attempts have little relevance to what is happening in classrooms, where the priority is always on academic outcomes. Chen *et al.* (2017) recently investigated the attempts of one early years setting to implement the Project Approach for a full year, and found that the practitioners concerned were worried that by 'teaching solely in [a] child-centered way [they] would engender a discontinuity in pedagogical practice, and associated educational experience for the children' (p. 334). These practitioners were concerned about being accountable to parental expectations and pre-primary objectives. One of them expressed the following views:

> [A]ctually, parents in Hong Kong all hope that their children acquire more knowledge to prepare them for primary school. If we used the Project Approach the entire school year, I think the parents would not have been satisfied. Hong Kong is heavily focused on knowledge acquisition. (Chen *et al.*, 2017, p. 334)

To alleviate practitioners' concerns about justifying or explaining the benefits of a play-based, child-centred approach such as the Project Approach, Vu *et al.* (2015) suggest that it may be helpful for educators to 'learn how play can be used as a teaching tool to embed and contextualize both academic and non-academic information' (p. 452). However, it is not always easy for practitioners to facilitate a balance in the classroom and Walsh*, et al* (2011) suggest the following:

> The challenge for practitioners is to strike an appropriate balance between allowing children to express their autonomy and creativity through play, with the attendant social and emotional benefits and providing enough challenge and structure in the process to ensure genuine progression in their cognitive skills. (p. 109)

In some countries, education policy is driven by the government, but in Hong Kong the government admits that parents are in the driver's seat (Hong Kong Government News, 2017), an admission backed up by a case study conducted by Campbell-Barr *et al.* (2013). One of the kindergarten principals in their case study research shared her personal views during an interview:

> The ecology of early childhood education in Hong Kong is complex and has many paradoxical aspects. Free competition among schools promotes parental choice and

diversity of service provision. The advantage of this situation is that schools have autonomy in making decisions on curriculum design and its implementation. On the other hand, schools also have to consider parental preferences and adjust the curriculum to attract pupils in order to ensure that schools are viable. (Campbell-Barr *et al.*, 2013, p. 107)

The policy and practice decisions that management and practitioners make within the context of their given setting potentially exert an impact on both teaching and learning methods and the quality and standards of teaching and learning. Ball (2015) and Hyatt (2013) posit that policy is concerned with raising standards, and it is possible that because of the flexibility that early years settings enjoy in Hong Kong, each has its own priorities and ideologies in this regard. Such a possibility also offers an answer to why inconsistences in practice and quality across institutes have historically been observed (Chan, 2016; Cheuk and Hatch, 2007). Since the 1997 handover, Hong Kong has seen some international education policy transference (Forestier and Crossley, 2015), which is evident in pre-primary guidelines promoting a play-based, child-centred approach (Curriculum Development Council, 2006). Hyatt (2013) posits that

> … engagement with drivers and levers is central to understanding the evolution of a policy – how it develops and is interpreted in different contexts through the nuanced interaction of various actors – at different times, at different levels, within local ecologies or context – leading to its interpretation and recontextualisations by and within institutions. (p. 838)

In Hong Kong, formal schooling starts at the age of 5 years, 8 months. Children are not required to attend an early years institution, but, according to the 2017 population census, 96.7% of all 3- to 5-year-olds in the territory do so, which is indicative of a culture that values academic achievement from a very early age. There are limited day care institutions or full-day nurseries in Hong Kong, probably owing to the highly popular live-in domestic helper culture, which affords full-time working parents the luxury of in-home child care. Early years settings tend to offer half-day morning or afternoon classes, although some also offer afternoon enrichment or special interest activities. Adult-accompanied playgroups are popular, and it is not uncommon for early years settings to offer programmes for children

from the age of 6 months. These are generally one- or two-hour classes led by a practitioner.

Because early years education currently lacks any formal, official status in Hong Kong education policy, Rao *et al.* (2009) argue that it 'continues to be closely aligned with primary schooling by both parents and teachers' (p. 259), and primary schools in Hong Kong do not typically value or advocate play. Historically, there is little evidence to suggest that early childhood education is considered as important as primary and secondary education (Honig and Lim, 2003) despite the early childhood educational reforms implemented following Hong Kong's 1997 handover to Chinese sovereignty. Surprisingly, although Hong Kong was under British rule for 156 years, Faas *et al.* (2017) suggest that even in the colonial era the government took a 'laissez-faire attitude toward kindergarten education, and thus neglected its development' (p. 81).

This lack of government commitment has created tensions for practitioners who desire to follow the Hong Kong *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* (Curriculum Development Council, 2006) by adopting a child-centred, inquiry- and play-based approach, but lack the training or support to do so. Practitioners therefore naturally revert to teaching what they know and what parents expect, which is the introduction of formal academics and skills at a young age (Fung and Cheng, 2012; Ebbeck, 1995). According to Fung and Cheng (2012), this 'gap between rhetoric and [the] reality of implementation has repeatedly been identified' in the government's quality assurance inspection reports (p. 18). One of the questions that arise within this context is what constitutes high-quality education? In response, Woodhead (1998) cautions against 'applying universal quality standards in early childhood' (p. 9) and Cheng (2015) posits that it is the 'values and priorities of society' (p. 848) that constitute quality practices. The notion of quality can be subjective and contextually situated. For example, Campbell-Barr *et al* (2013) suggest that those providing early childhood services in both Hong Kong and England 'are expected to respond to quality criteria as laid out by governments, but also to respond to the needs of their consumers – that is, parents' (p. 104). This is seen in the market-driven context of Hong Kong where early years institutions are under financial pressure to fill spaces and 'meet the expectations of ... parents who see academic excellence as the most significant achievement in early schooling' (Cheng, 2011, p. 106). The results of a case study conducted in Hong

Kong by Ho (2008) suggest that the 'potential criteria of quality are learning motivation and effectiveness, staff-child relationship, communication with parents, and school's support given to families' (p. 233). This is an area that Chan (2016) singles out as requiring government support for 'teach[ing] parents what constitutes a high-quality learning environment for young children' (p. 418). A lack of external support from the government can arguably create added tensions for early years settings. However, the ability to provide effective, high-quality early childhood pedagogy is not the concern of the government alone; it is also 'a central concern' for many educators (Fung and Cheng, 2012, p. 17).

Pearson (2011) argues that in a society 'that deeply values conformity, structure and early academic achievement' (p. 216), it is not easy to either accept or implement practices and theories exhibiting European/North American influences, making Hong Kong a complex pedagogical landscape to navigate for all actors involved, practitioners in particular.

2.4 A Play-Based, Child-Centred Approach – A Complex Construct

Defining the notion of a play-based, child-centred approach and what it looks like in practice is a challenge because of its plethora of meanings to different actors and early years settings within Hong Kong and globally. According to Sandberg and Vuorinen (2010), 'there are numerous definitions of play' (p. 63), and Brooker (2010a) suggests that such differences in definition are of both a cultural and generational nature, being influenced by knowledge constructed through individual life experiences and values. Within the Hong Kong context, Grieshaber (2016) states the following:

> Confuci[an] philosophy and its associated practices are quite different from the value often ascribed to play in early childhood education in many European heritage societies. Thus there are likely to be different understandings of what play is and how it might be incorporated into learning and teaching in early childhood settings in Confuci[an] heritage cultures. (p. 11)

It could be argued then that each practitioner will initially bring into the classroom and setting his or her own 'habitus', which includes different interpretations of what

incorporating a play-based, child-centred approach might look like in theory and practice (Izumi-Taylor *et al.*, 2014).

In this thesis I refer to the approaches being adopted by the setting under study and other Hong Kong early years settings as Western notions of play. I am referring to play-based, child-centred approaches which have for some time been common practice in Western cultures, such as the United States, the UK, Australasian nations and Europe where the belief in play as a learning platform for early years has been widely accepted (Brooker, 2010a). This same belief is not so common in Confucian heritage cultures, such as Hong Kong (Grieshaber, 2016). In the key terminology section at the beginning of the thesis, I define a play-based, child-centred approach as one in which children are engaged with learning through materials that are often self-chosen and of interest to them and where the practitioners act as facilitators and are responsive in their interactions with the children. Yelland and Leung (2018) suggest that whilst terms such as '"child-centred" [and] "play"… have specific meanings in western contexts, and are all fundamental to an approach to early learning, they have different interpretations in practice in Hong Kong' (p. 114). They further suggest that alternative terms may be warranted in the Hong Kong context, for example,

> [P]lay-based activities being regarded as (hands on) experiences, child centred being described as the teachers' professional knowledge about topics that are of interest to the children and projects being referred to as investigations. (p. 114)

It has been suggested that, until recently, play in the early years has been 'located at either end of a continuum'; through free-choice play which requires no input from the teacher as the children develop their experiences, or 'adult-led' didactic teaching which is much more structured and focused around the formal teaching of knowledge (Hedges and Cooper, 2018, p.37). Walsh, *et al,* (2011) posits that 'there is an emerging acceptance that high-quality early years pedagogy is associated with a balance between child- and adult-initiated activities and mixed pedagogies to suit curriculum content and topics' (p. 108). They further suggest the following:

> New thinking has emerged concerning the role of play in early childhood education, prompted by shifts in theoretical perspectives away from an overemphasis on a

Piagetian 'ages and stages' approach, towards a more Vygotskian appreciation of the social and cultural context for young children's learning and the adult's role as 'scaffolder' and 'co-constructor' of children's knowledge. (Walsh, *et al,* 2011, p. 108)

By practitioners being responsive in their interactions with the children and acting as 'scaffolder' and 'co-constructor' as Walsh, *et al*, (2011) suggests, it gives the practitioners the opportunity to 'deepen children's thinking and understandings related to children's own interests and motivations during thoughtful pedagogical play interactions' (Hedges and Cooper, 2018, P. 369). Hedges and Cooper, (2018) further posit that at the core of relational pedagogy, that is the blending of teaching, learning and play, is responsive pedagogy which includes the 'reciprocal relationships and the involvement of families and communities in assessment and pedagogy' (p. 372). However, what this looks like in practice will vary considerably from setting to setting, and possibly from classroom to classroom, as demonstrated in the studies conducted by Izumi-Taylor *et al*. (2014) and Wu (2014).

It has been suggested that one of the 'mistrusts' in play in educational programmes is the 'lack of [a] precise operational definition of play' (Wood, 2013, p. 42). Some of the complexity of defining what play-based, child-centred learning looks like within a particular setting stems from practitioners establishing their own roles in setting up the environment for and facilitating such learning. For example, in Wu's (2014) cross-cultural study, the Hong Kong kindergarten teachers did not engage with the children involved in 'free play', but continued to mark assignments that had just been completed or that other children were still working on. In this context, the option of self-chosen play activities arose only once the children had completed their assignments. The German kindergarten teachers, in contrast, placed priority on arranging self-chosen play activities that involved taking on the role of both observer of the children at play and participant in that play (Wu, 2014). The recent guidelines in Hong Kong's *Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide – Joyful Learning through Play, Balanced Development All the Way* (*Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide* hereafter), reflect the notion of relational approaches and responsive interactions with the children. They describe the role of the teacher as follows:

The Role of Teachers
Not only are teachers the "providers" who arrange the place, time and materials necessary for play, but also the "participants" and "inspirers" of play. Teachers' participation in play enhances its enjoyableness and helps children develop imagination and engage in play. Being simultaneously "interveners" in and "observers" of play, teachers should solve problems for children during play at an appropriate time. They can understand and interpret the performance of children in play and analyse their progress in learning and development. After play, teachers should invite children to share their experiences and feelings, help them organise and consolidate the new knowledge and skills acquired, and provide them with timely and positive feedback. (Curriculum Development Council, 2017, p. 67)

The way in which different settings allocate the time or duration of play also varies, as documented by Wu (2014), although most early years programmes allocate time for child-initiated activities and teacher-initiated activities; such as group or circle time, formal games and/or snack time. The Hong Kong guidelines for the structure and timing of half-day nursery sessions in the *Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide* (Curriculum Development Council, 2017, p. 58) include time for both child-initiated or 'free-choice activities, as well as teacher-initiated activities and are as follows:

Content of Activities	Allocation
Morning assembly or whole-group activities (health inspections, conversation and sharing of life experiences)	15-20 mins
Learning activities & free choice activities (e.g., play involving construction, creation, exploration, social interaction and language)	75-95 mins
Physical activities, music activities and art activities	45-60 mins
Toilet time	20-30 mins
Snack time	15-20 mins
Tidying up activities and getting ready to go home (conclusion and sharing of the morning activities, conversations and nursery rhymes)	10-15 mins

A play-based, child-centred approach in early years settings is by no means a new concept in many parts of the world, although, as previously noted, interpretations and understanding of the educational value of play often differ not only from country to country, but also from person to person. A cross-cultural study conducted to examine the similarities and differences in the perspectives on play of Japanese, American and Taiwanese pre-service practitioners suggested that 'theories and research on play are multifaceted, and teachers' perceptions of what constitutes play in early childhood vary widely' (Izumi-Taylor *et al.*, 2014, p. 213), with practitioners found to make their own connections and interpretations concerning play and its values in educating children. Anning (2015) believes it is a 'source of confusion how play can be shaped in educational contexts into [a] curriculum that accommodates both the deep learning potential of young children and the imperatives of schooling' (p. 10). The notion of play can become complex when it is seen as having 'multiple meanings[s] [for different] players' such as being 'regarded as deeply serious and purposeful, or trivial and purposeless … characterized by high levels of motivation, creativity and learning or perceived as aimless messing about' (Wood, 2013, p. 5). Wood (2013) argues that 'whilst many play activities do support learning and development, the "outcomes" are often not visible or measurable' (p. 13), which is likely to be one of the reasons that parents in Hong Kong might underestimate the value of play for learning, prompting them to request measurable learning outcomes in the form of homework, testing and workbooks/worksheets (Wong and Rao, 2015). Although assigning homework is not entirely discouraged in the *Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide*, the guide does offer the following advice to early years practitioners:

> [D]o not require children in lower and upper kindergarten classes (K2 and K3) to do mechanical copying and calculation, and do not arrange homework that is excessive, frequent and too difficult, so as not to cause unnecessary pressure and drilling. (Curriculum Development Council, 2017, p. 72)

This advice seems to support the government's desire to alleviate unnecessary pressure on young children by ensuring that they are not assigned homework or other age-inappropriate tasks that may be demotivating or damage their confidence (Curriculum Development Council, 2017).

As noted in the introductory chapter, Chinese culture has not historically valued, understood or recognised play as a formal learning tool, which is perhaps why some practitioners in Hong Kong tend to separate formal learning activities from play, as evidenced by Wu (2014). Hui *et al*. (2015) report that, traditionally,

> Chinese culture has viewed play as an unproductive activity, one that fails to develop diligence in schoolwork, rarely enhances individuals' abilities and reduces the time available to acquire knowledge. For many parents, play means less time on academic work and less support for intellectual development which serves as the core goal of education. (p. 396)

It is thus unsurprising that play-based, child-centred approaches are not always valued as a learning tool in the territory's early years classrooms, despite the recommendations of the *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* (Curriculum Development Council, 2006) and numerous positive global validations of the benefits of play for development and learning (Wood, 2010). According to Wood (2015), 'understanding the intersection of play and learning in different cultures' (p. 191) is complex, which could be one of the reasons Hong Kong has found it a challenge to implement play-based approaches. Cheng's (2011) words are particularly apt in this regard:

> [W]ith such a marked clash of cultures, between the ideologies of the people on the one hand and the notion of 'play as learning' as stated by the government on the other, it is perhaps no surprise that implementation of a play-based pedagogy has been difficult to establish in Hong Kong. (p. 106)

Such a cultural clash is prevalent within the early years arena in Hong Kong, which is not only home to a large Chinese population, but also to a diverse group of overseas families, all living and working under the umbrella of a Confucian value-laden culture, a situation that exerts a significant impact on the education system (Luo *et al.*, 2013). With so many interpretations of play-based, child-centred learning in operation, it seems sensible for early years institutions to engage their staff in conversation and ask them to 'question [their] assumptions about play, by considering educational discourses and practices as well as personal beliefs and values in determining what play is …' (Wood, 2010, p. 11), therefore enabling them to make firm decisions about what such learning should look

like in practice within their particular setting. Gaining such clarity would arguably be beneficial for all actors involved, including parents.

2.5 The Positionality of Parents in Hong Kong

As suggested by the title of this thesis, Hong Kong can be a complex pedagogical landscape to navigate, not just for practitioners, but for the parents of young children too. The education arena in general is competitive, and much of the population has been raised in Hong Kong, which has a long and rich history of Confucian culture, placing a high value on hard work and high standards of education from an early age (Sun, 2008). With the rapid development of globalisation, policy and information sharing, change in the early years arena is being forced upon families living in Hong Kong, whether they are ready for change or have any desire for it. It is easy to sympathise with the dilemma many parents must perceive, feeling themselves caught between doing what the government and research suggest is right for their children and sticking to what they believe and value in making educational decisions for their children.

Hong Kong's status as a major global business and financial hub means it attracts high-achieving families from all over the world, perhaps adding to the diversity and complexity of parental expectations. As previously noted, it is not just expat families who seek international early years and primary education for their children; there is now greater interest, and thus demand for places, in international schools amongst Chinese parents than ever before (Ng, 2012). Katz (2003) suggests that parents' 'level of income may be a [greater] determinant of child rearing practices than ethnic or cultural group', indicating that 'parent[ing] practices are more similar among the wealthy across cultures than between [the] wealthy and poor [within] cultures' (p. 20). This certainly seems to be the case in Hong Kong, where international and Chinese parents are seeking similar educational opportunities for their children, and concurs with Hayden's (2013) description of the typical parent body at international schools as comprising 'well-educated, professional people who value education and have … high expectations of their children and their children's school' (p. 21).

Competition for school places, and therefore the pressure on families, is fiercer than ever. As noted in the introduction, children as young as 2 are required to compete for places at international and many local primary schools by attending formal interviews and assessments (Humpage, 2016). Primary schools generally set their own admissions criteria; often requiring parents to be interviewed too, to ensure that their values align with those of the school. Parental fears over whether their children will be able to pass the formal assessments and interviews necessary to gain entry to desirable primary schools are understandable, particularly because local Cantonese-medium schools are not considered an option for non-Cantonese-speaking children. Sadly, if expatriate children in Hong Kong are not offered a place at an international primary school, their families generally choose to return to their native countries (Humpage, 2016). The education situation thus has significant implications for expatriate families who are committed to remaining in Hong Kong for a set amount of time, regardless of whether they are on a short- or long-term contract. This could be just one of the reasons why parents are considered as holding the capital or power by driving the policy discourse within the field (Cheung *et al.*, 2017; Hong Kong Government News, 2017). The primary school admissions expectations perhaps also has an impact on early years settings, as recently suggested by Yang and Li (2018b), who contend that kindergartens are not only trying to satisfy parental demands by facilitating writing exercises and other academic learning activities, but also feel a need to 'adapt to the Hong Kong social environment' (p. 580).

Drawing on Bourdieu's 'thinking tools', I suggest that it is not only parents who hold significant capital or power within the field in question; primary schools, too, exert a certain amount of dominance. Within the spaces of each field, hidden power relationships exist (Wellington, 2015), and in the context under study, I argue, one of those relationships is that between pre-primary and primary schools. The latter are seemingly driving the high expectations of entrance and interview criteria down to families, which in turn place pressure on early years practitioners to place priority on delivering academic, results-oriented programmes rather than play-based, child-centred programmes. The literature, however, contends that it is parents who are currently more powerfully positioned within the field, and are thus placing constraints on practitioners who wish to adopt the alternative approaches recommended (Hong Kong Government

News, 2017; Fung and Cheng, 2012).

Many parents are concerned about whether their children will achieve what they need to for primary school success if they learn via a play-based approach, even if they consider such an approach to be ideal (Chan, 2016). Limited places are available at the most desirable schools, whether public or private, especially once places have been allocated by sibling priority and million dollar debentures. One reason children are interviewed so young is that many international primary schools also have a pre-primary section, acceptance at which ensures children a 'through train'. The pressure on families can translate to pressure on early childhood settings to prepare children for admission interviews, very often by 'implement[ing] a Primary One curriculum in the last year of preschool' (Chan and Chan, 2003, p. 13). Many consider such practice to be inappropriate, as it places young children under pressure to perform. However, because early years settings have autonomy over their curriculum and curriculum delivery, they are in a strong position to conform to parental wishes and deliver what parents want for their children, even if that includes homework, exams and early academics (Wong and Rao, 2015; Chan and Chan, 2003). These are elements that clearly do not work for every child, particularly those with special educational needs or who are not culturally used to formal approaches to learning at such a young age.

Owing to the values of elitism that Wong and Rao (2015) suggest are embedded in the Hong Kong educational culture, institutions are in general highly selective and rarely cater for children with individual needs. However, the *Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide* does state that early years settings should 'strive to create an inclusive learning environment for children and offer them pleasant and rewarding learning' (Curriculum Development Council, 2017, p 77). The lack of inclusive support in Hong Kong schools was acknowledged by the practitioners in a study conducted by Cheuk and Hatch (2007) who felt that 'society rejects individuals with disabilities and that the educational rights of the children with disabilities are fundamentally ignored' (p. 429). This non-inclusive approach to education can be an added constraint for Hong Kong families, and also exerts a potentially negative impact on the educational experience of children who are unable to receive appropriate support. With no funding from the government, provisions for inclusive support are at the discretion of individual early

years settings and depend on whether they have the financial wherewithal and in-house expertise to equip practitioners with the strategies and resources they need to cater for children with individual needs (Zhu *et al.*, 2019).

Ball (2003) argues that schools with a performative culture are 'unlikely to "invest" in work with children with special needs where the margins for improved performance are limited' (p. 223) and therefore often choose to accept only children who demonstrate both academic prowess and all-roundness, as is the case in Hong Kong. Schools in demand can afford the luxury of being selective, of accepting only the highest achieving students. Is it unclear whether it is the high academic expectations of parents that are driving schools to raise their academic levels (Cheng, 2011), and so make themselves more selective and thus more desirable, or whether the schools themselves are so overwhelmed by selection criteria that formal testing is the only way to differentiate between the children they accept and those they reject. An alternative would be to be inclusive and offer places on a first-come, first-served basis. However, that alternative risks a school being undervalued by some parents for not being sufficiently academic, for not conforming to parents' wishes for homework, testing and/or formal academic work (Fung and Cheng, 2012).

It raises the question whether some parents feel themselves to be caught between naturally wanting their children to achieve and keep up with their peers and worrying about them being pushed into formal learning before they are developmentally ready. Parents new to the Hong Kong education culture are particularly likely to perceive such a dichotomous choice. As I explained in a previous paper,

> [c]hildren who would ordinarily be raised with North American/European educational values that equate to a more play-based, child-centred, inquiry-based approach are now competing with academically driven peers raised without those values, thereby driving parents in Hong Kong to choose a more formal early years education for their children despite their actual desire to enroll them in an environment with a less formal approach. (Humpage, 2016, p. 12)

One solution implemented in Hong Kong and elsewhere is to send children to tutorial centres, which can fill the pedagogical gap between a non-academic early years

programme and one that focuses on the 3R's (Opper, 1994) and school interview preparation. For example, Sriprakash *et al.* (2016) report that some Asian parents in Australia are 'seeking more explicit, visible forms of instruction through using private tutoring to compensate for the perceived "invisible", pedagogically progressive approach' (p. 426). Wong and Rao (2015) suggest that these types of 'cram schools' in Hong Kong 'have become a popular standard in addition to regular education' (p. 2) and that it is not uncommon for children as young as 6 months to attend them. It is understandable that for some parents there is a conflict between what they believe to be right for their child and what they need to do to keep the family together and remain employed, that is, to ensure that the child is accepted by a desirable primary school. However, Chan and Chan (2003) and Cheng *et al.* (2015) argue that it 'may be time to rethink the dangers of early academic pressure on children in Hong Kong, especially by Hong Kong parents who place a strong value on schooling' (p. 1841). Drilling for entrance assessments may seem effective in the short term, but Chan and Chan (2003) found that 'drill and practice type activities and rote learning do not lead to meaningful learning or understanding' (p. 14). When it comes to the education and well-being of the whole child, including his or her social, emotional and physical development, Opper (1994) argues that these are not always high-priority goals for Hong Kong parents. However, Chan and Chan (2003) caution that by not providing young children with an opportunity to discover, experiment and explore by playing and constructing their own knowledge, parents are depriving them of an opportunity to 'achieve optimal development' in all areas (p. 14).

A major aspect of a play-based, child-centred approach is a focus on the interests of the child, thus helping to motivate children to learn. However, it is not just the school culture that has an impact on children's learning, but the home culture and family values too. In a study conducted by Hedges *et al.* (2011) of two early childhood settings in New Zealand, they documented evidence showing that 'children's interests [are] stimulated by their "intent participation" in family and community experiences and encapsulated in the notion of "funds of knowledge"' (p. 185). Their findings highlight the powerful impact that children's home experiences exert on the 'funds of knowledge' they bring into the classroom, and it is these experiences and knowledge many practitioners are attempting to use as a starting point to the learning that takes place in the classroom. Both Anning

(2015) and Brooker (2010a) acknowledge the cultural challenges associated with the role of play at school, noting that not all cultures value the notion of learning through play in the same way. Hence, if a child is being raised in a home culture that places no educational value on play in relation to learning, then it is possible that he or she will initially struggle to adapt to an educational setting in which play plays a pivotal role in the curriculum and instead feel more comfortable in an academically focused setting. It has also been suggested that children may have predetermined assumptions based on their parents' views concerning the value of play for learning, and, according to Brooker (2010b), 'children construct their own hybrid cultures, which incorporate the values of their families, peers and school' (p. 51). However, it can initially take time for young children to adapt to their new school environment given they are arriving with their own 'habitus' with their own values, beliefs and experiences (Brooker, 2010b), for which it is important for practitioners to be sensitive to.

The notion of a child-centred, play-based learning approach as an effective learning tool is often misunderstood by parents, particularly in Hong Kong, and therefore not considered a guaranteed trajectory towards academic success. Brooker (2010a) points out in her cross-cultural study, 'parents can sometimes find it difficult to differentiate between learning and play' (p. 32). One parent in her study expressed the following: 'If I don't see a book or some writing, then I wonder if he [her son] is learning' (Brooker, 2010a, p. 32). Luo *et al.* (2013) suggest that the 'Chinese living in Hong Kong may have more exposure to Western cultural values through processes of acculturation and globalisation than other subgroups', although they argue that such exposure may either weaken or strengthen their 'Confucian developmental goals for [their] children' (p. 853). The aforementioned studies suggest that greater support for play-based, child-centred approaches, as well as in-depth discussions of how play can be used as a mode for learning within formal learning contexts, what such approaches look like in practice and the benefits they confer, would be beneficial for everyone involved in the education of young children in Hong Kong. If this is indeed the case, then it follows that parents in Hong Kong would likely benefit from government or institutional support to help them to understand what learning through play looks like in practice, thereby enabling them to make informed decisions about their educational choices for their children. Indeed, it would arguably be beneficial for all actors involved in the education of young children in

Hong Kong to embrace the differences in children's play and to reflect on what the relationship between play and learning looks like in different home, school and cultural contexts. It is through developing these shared understandings about play and learning, as well as 'exploring what [is] really mean[t] when we refer to 'culture' or to the 'home cultures' of young children' that are critical for all actors (Brooker, 2010a, p. 28). Landeros (2011) posit that one of the most important factors for a child's educational success' is the parent-teacher partnership (p. 247) and it is a practice which is now being advocated in Hong Kong (Curriculum Development Council, 2017).

It is evident from the literature that parents in Hong Kong face an array of complexities that can result in high expectations of their children's early years settings, which raises the question of how practitioners are currently navigating those expectations and of what strategies and/or processes such settings can put in place to aid such navigation.

2.6 The Positionality of Practitioners in Hong Kong

The literature suggests longstanding tension between teachers' existing practices and the concept of teaching and learning through play (Cheng *et al.*, 2015; Fung and Cheng, 2012; Chan, 2010) and highlights the difficulties practitioners face in implementing Western-inspired pedagogical approaches, the pedagogy of play in particular (Luo *et al.*, 2013; Vong, 2013; Chan, 2010). However, those difficulties are not exclusive to Hong Kong, with similar issues reported in countries as diverse as India (Gupta, 2011), Vietnam (Thao and Boyd, 2014), Israel (Tal, 2014) and China (Farrell, 2004). Huggins (2013) has suggested that globalisation in general is forcing practitioners out of their comfort zones in regard to changing their practice, ideas and approaches to early years pedagogy. I therefore argue that unless practitioners are effectively supported, it will be difficult for them to feel confident and secure with implementing any desired changes. In short, it is not only parents who are struggling to understand how pre-primary objectives can be achieved through play-based, child-centred approaches, but also practitioners themselves.

In Hong Kong, the educational landscape is clearly a challenge for practitioners given the

constraints of the parent-driven policy discourse (Cheung *et al.*, 2017; Hong Kong Government News, 2017) and Confucian culture (Sun, 2008), which afford them limited opportunities to put their professional values into play. As new research and ideas are introduced into the education arena, practitioners are expected to assimilate increasing amounts of information. One small-scale exploratory study conducted in the US, for example, found that early childhood practitioners are expected to have a broad range of skills, experience and content knowledge necessary to work with a range of ages and stages, which can be 'daunting' (Recchia and Beck, 2014, p. 203). Some of the added expectations of practitioners in Hong Kong are documented in the *Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide*, which posits that practitioners have 'multiple identities and roles such as curriculum designers, knowledge providers, learning facilitators, behaviour models and caregivers' (Curriculum Development Council, 2017, p. 71). The guide also provides broad guidance on what practitioners should avoid in the classroom. For example, they should 'avoid [the] drilling of skills and rote learning and allow children to enjoy [the] pleasure of participation in the activities' (p. 54), and, further, 'as children begin to develop their concentration, uninteresting and repetitive drilling or prolonged periods of one way teaching should be avoided' (Curriculum Development Council, 2017, p. 29). Yelland and Leung (2018) question how useful 'policy documents [that] reflect an uncanny similarity in terms of their content and ethos to so many others across the globe' are in guiding practice and instigating change at the school level (p. 116). It is easy to understand why practitioners could easily find it challenging adapting to the guidelines depicted in the guide. Without explicit guidance and support from the government or their own institution on what recommended practices look like within their own cultural and institutional context, it is no surprise that practitioners are struggling to adapt to the guidelines outlined in the *Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide*. Another challenge to the attainment of high-level teaching in Hong Kong is arguably the fact that parents hold the power, or 'cultural capital' to use Bourdieu's term, in the education field and drive the education policy discourse (Wong and Rao, 2015), thus leaving practitioners powerless to make desired changes despite having autonomy over the curriculum. I question how it is possible for practitioners to own any degree of cultural capital within their own distinct settings or 'fields' (Wellington, 2015) or to feel successful, confident and in control when it is clear from the literature that parents and

primary schools are the dominant holders of cultural capital and drivers of how learning is achieved (Wong and Rao, 2015). However, Li (2001) argues that high-quality teaching and what is taught and learnt in the classroom ultimately remain the responsibility of practitioners and are driven by the 'quality and motivation of … teachers irrespective of the framework within which they operate' (p. 60). Although, Anning (2015) points out that the educational 'context and societal expectations have a profound impact on how people behave' (p. 9), and thus teachers cannot be held solely responsible for changes within particular settings.

Given the strong performative pressure that seems to exist in Hong Kong, I wonder whether Ball's (2003) notion of practitioners as 'lost soul[s]' who have lost their identities and sense of motivation and purpose come into play. It is not unusual for practitioners in Hong Kong to be the 'silent voice' of policy implementation, an image that accords with Ball's (2003) description of practitioners as 'actors of silence'. It is easy to sympathise with practitioners who are possibly 'ontological[ly] insecure' (Ball, 2003, p. 220) and unsure of what is expected of them. Such uncertainty is by no means exclusive to the Hong Kong early years arena. Roberts-Holmes (2015) has suggested that since the election in the UK of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010, that country's 'early years teacher[s'] pedagogy is increasingly being drawn into the wider school performativity culture' (p. 302), with these practitioners openly discussing their job dissatisfaction when working in systems in which they are measured from the top down and have no voice in policy decisions.

It could be argued that practitioners are more likely to be motivated, actively involved actors if they feel they are part of the policy discourse, as is the case under New Zealand's Te Whāriki framework (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2017). That is certainly the case with parents, as we have seen. As noted, parents are the main policy drivers of early years pedagogy in Hong Kong (Wong and Rao, 2015), giving them ownership of the 'cultural capital' that exists within individual early years settings and the wider early years field. Such parental power/capital, however, leaves many practitioners feeling powerless and prone to reverting back to the traditional approach by which they themselves were taught (Cheng, 2011) and that many parents expect. It is thus easy to understand the challenges for practitioners of making changes within their

classrooms even when they are open to change, as Luo *et al.* (2013) and Chan (2010) suggest many practitioners are. Further complicating the picture is that each practitioner brings his or her own unique 'habitus', which Bourdieu defines as an individual's unique background, experiences, qualifications, values and knowledge (O'Donoghue, 2013). The notion of habitus is particularly apt to Hong Kong, which boasts practitioners of various nationalities and educational backgrounds in addition to those raised and educated in Hong Kong. It is not uncommon for early years institutions in Hong Kong to employ practitioners from both the East and West (Yang and Li, 2018a) and for Hong Kong-born practitioners to have received a portion of their education abroad. There are distinct advantages to 'feeling competent, knowledgeable and secure' (Huggins, 2013, p. 13), and arguably one of the steps towards feeling such attributes is to develop a shared professional habitus with mutual understanding of company values, practices and conduct with peers and management.

O'Leary (2015) cautions that 'as we reflect on the legacies of modernization, globalization and industrialization, many are asking if we need to re-examine the cultural ethos that has dictated our current path' (p. 10). It has been argued that 'asking a teacher to change his or her educational ideology would mean asking [that] teacher to change his or her religious belief from the traditional religious faith to a new form of religiosity' (Lau, 2012, p. 19) and that 'beliefs about academic learning may become a constraint [to] fully adopting a play-based pedagogy' (Wu, 2014, p. 63). I argue that the situation is particularly fraught for Hong Kong practitioners who often feel caught between preserving their own values and beliefs and conforming to new pedagogical practices that go against everything they know and believe, as documented by Cheung *et al.* (2017) in a recent study collecting the opinions of 275 Hong Kong pre-service practitioners:

> [B]eliefs about the goals of education, the needs and capabilities of children as learners and their roles and competence as teachers might affect their [perceptions of the] effectiveness of different pedagogical approaches, and thus their classroom practices. (p. 233)

Wong and Rao (2015) also suggest that 'teachers' own cultural values about early development and learning might also hinder reform in schools, even if they have relatively high academic and professional qualifications' (p. 9), which concurs with

Recchia and Beck's (2014) finding that 'practices which teachers value highly are practices which they are more likely to give high priority' (p. 543). These observations raise the question of whether it is possible for early years settings to change its practices if doing so would run contrary to the beliefs of the practitioners it employs. In Barr and Borkett's (2015) view, practitioners should be open to new research and practice and to others' 'lived experiences' (p.276).

In Hong Kong, there is often a disconnect between amongst practitioners about what constitutes learning and what constitutes learning through play, as observed by Wu (2014) in her study which examined play in Hong Kong and German kindergartens:

> Chinese teachers' beliefs about academic learning may become a constraint for fully adopting a play-based pedagogy. A play-based pedagogy focusing on children is not congruent with Chinese culture, which emphasizes academic success and knowledge transmission, and thus may be difficult to implement. (p. 63)

If the Chinese children in Wu's study did have time for 'free play', she noted, it was only because they had completed their assigned tasks (Wu, 2014, p. 54), which is certainly indicative of an education culture that does not value or understand the notion of play. The German kindergarten practitioners, in contrast, valued free play as part of child learning.

As suggested in the introduction, having autonomy over and designing and implementing a bespoke curriculum framework can be problematic in practice, as the different actors involved will have their own interpretations of what constitutes a child-centred, play-based model, which has the potential to cause inconsistences in practice both within and across early years settings. A recent qualitative case study in China highlighted the differences in expectations and understanding of a play-based curriculum between two early years practitioners in a single setting, differences that proved problematic for all stakeholders concerned (i.e. practitioners, parents, children and management) (Wang and Lam, 2017). Although practitioners clearly bear responsibility for adhering to recommended practices, it is arguably also the responsibility of early years institutions, and more specifically their management, to

ensure that they are conveying clear and consistent messages concerning their ethos and guiding principles and providing appropriate support to practitioners. Otherwise, practitioners may feel they are working in isolation. In my view, working in conditions without appropriate support and effective communication has the potential to exert a negative impact on practitioners' 'soul' and confidence rather than to help them 'feel competent, knowledgeable and secure in [their] professional identity' (Huggins, 2013, p. 13). Hong Kong early years settings are dealing not only with newly qualified practitioners entering the field, but also with practitioners who have been working with more formal didactic approaches for many years and those arriving from overseas equipped with a diverse array of experience and beliefs.

An important question is how practitioners who have not experienced the pedagogy of play either as part of their own childhood education or teacher training adapt to teaching a play- and child-centred approach; and whether they require additional strategies and support to feel confident and secure in practice.

2.7 Professional Knowledge and Training

Few would argue against the pivotal role that classroom practitioners play in the education and development of young children. Yuen (2011) identifies professional development as a 'critical factor in improving professional practice and student outcomes' (p. 72), and Chan (2016) posits that 'professional training in professional growth [has a] significant influence on the development of a school's curriculum and teaching' (p. 426). However, Pedder and Opfer (2013) claim that 'professional development appears not to be meeting teachers' needs in most countries' (p. 539). Such deficiencies have been observed in China and Hong Kong alike, where practitioners, in the absence of theoretical or practical guidance, have been forced to 'ride a blind horse when developing [the] curriculum' (Yang and Li, 2018a, p. 17). Hargreaves and Fullan (2000) contend that it isn't just the 'social geographies' of schools that are changing under the sway of globalisation; the 'social geographies of professional learning are also changing' (p. 52). In their view, it is becoming increasingly challenging for practitioners to keep abreast of evolving pedagogies whilst

learning to deal with a diverse range of clientele, a situation that could very well affect a practitioner's confidence and professional identity, as Huggins (2013) suggests. These challenges are certainly being felt in the highly competitive Hong Kong education arena, where families of a diversity of cultures and nationalities are in pursuit of a high-quality education, for which they are willing and able to pay large sums to attain, thus placing pressure on early years settings and the practitioners delivering the curricula in such settings.

Despite the traditional didactic and formal learning approaches that have dominated Chinese educational discourse for thousands of years (Sun, 2008), Luo *et al.* (2013) and Chan (2010) both present evidence showing that many Chinese teachers are keen to adopt progressive teaching that encompasses a play-based, child-centred approach. However, because they lack the necessary training and support to implement such an approach, they naturally revert back to the methods they experienced in their own schooling. Vu *et al.* (2015) argue that practitioners in Hong Kong often lack 'aware [ness] of how play can support both academic and social learning and what their own roles can be in children's play' (p. 444), as revealed by the aforementioned comparative study conducted by Wu (2014). She found Chinese practitioners in Hong Kong to place greater importance on academic learning than play, whereas their German counterparts viewed play as the best learning method. However, Wu (2014) contends that the challenge for practitioners is not only how to put theory into practice, but also 'how [to] adjust their thinking from a teacher-directed pedagogy to a child-centred one' (p. 63) and how adults fit into such pedagogy.

Whilst it is clear that practitioners in Hong Kong do not always put into practice the government's recommendations for early years practice for a variety of reasons, I must re-emphasise here that a major factor is the limited government support they receive and the lack of teacher training aimed at translating theories into practice (Chan *et al.*, 2009). Historically, there has been limited training support offered in Hong Kong to support early years practitioners with the transition to progressive approaches (Chan *et al.*, 2009), leaving the responsibility for professional development to early years institutes themselves, which is problematic for those that lack the financial means to hire external trainers and/or lack in-house expertise. One exception is the innovative

workshops organised by the EDB and Social and Welfare Department in the 1980s and 1990s to train early years practitioners in how to implement new progressive approaches (Chan *et al.*, 2009). However, despite the interest expressed by practitioners, government funding for such training has not continued (Cheung, 2017). It seems clear that without sufficient training/support or an in-house expert with firm understanding or experience of play-based, child-centred approaches, early years settings will struggle to adopt new theoretical frameworks, practical guidelines, and models and practices (Yang and Li, 2018b). Under the circumstances, it is little wonder that many practitioners find it an easier and more comfortable option to revert back to what they know (Luo *et al.*, 2013).

Preparing early years teachers to enter the field is challenging for all concerned (Recchia and Beck, 2014). Cheuk and Hatch (2007) argue 'that despite teacher training institutes in Hong Kong having appropriate content in their programmes, they do not prepare practitioners once they get into the classroom' (p. 430). A similar sentiment was expressed by a small sample of newly graduated teachers in the US, who said they lacked the proper teaching 'toolbox' after university, and therefore did not feel fully prepared for classroom practice. They had hoped to gain more experience working and collaborating with others in the field, especially in 'diverse environments' (Recchia and Beck, 2014, p. 220). Within the Hong Kong context, Cheung *et al.* (2017) identified the following – arguably few – skills that should be a feature of teacher training programmes if they are to equip teachers for a child-centred environment:

> [T]eachers not only have to learn how to provide a wide range of materials for exploration, [but] they also have to [be aware] of the way they communicate with children and the way they organise the daily schedule. Being flexible, responsive to children's interests and open to children's ideas should be the key spirit when arranging the classroom environment, interacting with children for their learning and managing the time for different classroom tasks and activities. (p. 241)

Aspects of a play-based, child-centred approach require practitioners to be spontaneous, and therefore creative in their planning because it is the observations they make of the children and the children's interests that inform their planning and the

questions they ask of children (Chesworth, 2016), in contrast to more formal approaches, which involve using lesson plans taken from a text book written months in advance by practitioners themselves or someone else. Cheung (2018) suggests that the West considers 'play as extremely important for optimizing children's creativity' (p. 3). However, creativity in the classroom is not generally a priority in the Hong Kong classroom (Cheung, 2017; Chan, 2016) despite curricular and pedagogical reforms aimed at 'foster[ing] the development of creative thinking and collaboration' (Law *et al.*, 2009, p. 97) first being advocated more than 17 years ago. Chan (2016) reports the struggles of one practitioner to engage with children and ask them questions as part of the Project Approach, noting that she quickly reverted to what she felt comfortable with, which was 'didactic rote learning, taking up the traditional "teacher" role and expecting the children to be obedient, follow the rules and remain silent' (p. 421). Within the Chinese context, developing creativity requires a change in practice from practitioners, and, as Cheung *et al.* (2013) note, teacher development and training courses do 'not adequately cover the topic of creativity' (p. 130). Learning any new skill or constructing new knowledge requires adequate time, not just for practitioners, but for children too. Child-centred, play-based approaches are relatively new to Hong Kong, and very different culturally from what children are used to. Accordingly, it can take time for them to adapt (Anning 2015; Brooker, 2010a). The lack of time afforded to both the practitioner and children to come to any in-depth understanding of the material in the Project Approach was identified as a barrier in the aforementioned study conducted by Chen *et al.* (2017):

> We need to consider the background and learning style of the children because in the past, they were not exposed to the Project Approach. If we just started the Project Approach from the outset, we would not see good results. The children do not have the skills to start a project and search information on their own because they are not accustomed to this method of learning. (p. 334)

Although Cheung (2017) posits that it is easier to train new practitioners in pedagogical changes, the situation is more complex in Hong Kong, where there is a range of teacher learners. It is not only newly qualified graduates who may lack field experience; it is also potentially the case for practitioners who taught in Hong Kong for

many years prior to implementation of the *Guide to the Pre-Primary Kindergarten Curriculum* (Curriculum Development Council, 2006) and for Western-educated overseas practitioners who have come to Hong Kong to work, often on short-term contracts. In the absence of appropriate pre-service training being offered externally, in-house training becomes even more important for newly hired teachers. According to Vu *et al.* (2015), 'in-service professional development opportunities also allow for an application and a connection to practice that pre-service professional development or training sometimes lacks' (p. 445). These researchers found that following in-service training practitioners were more engaged with their students during play-based activities, suggesting that in-house training is beneficial to teachers' confidence and knowledge. The aforementioned practitioner attempting to implement the Project Approach felt that she lacked the necessary knowledge and competence to teach it in the way intended, particularly because she was offered no in-house training (Chen *et al.*, 2017). This returns us again to the question of whose responsibility it is to ensure that practitioners are well-equipped to manage the teaching and learning expected in a given setting: practitioners themselves or managers? Yang and Li (2018a) remind us that each early years setting operates differently with regard to its teaching and curriculum approach, and hence

> … it is not easy to transfer a curriculum from one school to another, as teachers in a new context may not thoroughly understand the underlying principles or put the correct practices in place. In other words it is difficult to digest everything done in another kindergarten. (p. 28)

For this reason, it is imperative that provisions are made to support and guide practitioners within individual settings to ensure that consistency and standards are maintained. According to Betteney *et al.* (2018), such provisions 'should begin with successful completion of induction training for new teachers' (p. 436). In Hong Kong, such induction would afford new practitioners an opportunity to develop a stronger position of power, by creating a shared professional habitus with their colleagues. This could offer a shared empowerment over the pedagogy within their setting, rather than forcing practitioners to work in isolation against the constraints of the prevailing parent-driven policy discourse. However, I would argue that induction training should

be extended to all teachers, regardless of qualifications and experience. In the absence of ongoing formal training workshops, once situated in their 'field', practitioners will benefit from collaboration with others, as 'co-experienced practice lead[s] to [the] reproduction and re-creation of shared professional understandings' (Betteney, 2018, p. 437). Yuen (2011) concurs, suggesting that mentoring and working alongside skilled colleagues helps to boost knowledge and improve classroom skills. The two practices could thus be highly effective components of a professional training plan, with the latter particularly crucial to quality pedagogy.

Farrell's (2004) study, which, although limited in scope, discusses the challenges and rewards of a pilot curriculum approach in a kindergarten in Shenyang, China in which Western-trained teachers work alongside their Chinese-trained counterparts. This study supports the view of Luo *et al.* (2013) that Chinese teachers are open to changing their pedagogy, but lack the support, experience and knowledge to implement such change independently. Given the autonomy over curriculum design afforded early years settings in Hong Kong (Curriculum Development Council, 2006), it seems a particularly good idea for such settings to consider how they can facilitate collaboration between colleagues. Such collaboration could help to redress the disconnect between practitioners and classroom practice within settings highlighted by Izumi-Taylor *et al*. (2014).

Between-colleague collaboration and learning are also likely to be useful within the Hong Kong early years setting because of the multitude of challenges and constraints practitioners face, not only in assimilating new pedagogical practices but also in helping children and parents to adapt to those practices. Every child is different and learns in a distinct way (Gardner, 2011), which becomes increasingly evident when a move is made away from whole-class, didactic, teacher-directed teaching to a more child-centred, integrated approach that allows children to work at their own pace individually while playing with other children or while working on projects as part of a small group. Such an approach undoubtedly imposes further challenges on practitioners, such as managing classroom behaviour (Cheung *et al.*, 2017) and supporting children with special needs who may require additional help (Li and Hsieh, 2019; Lee *et al.*, 2014).

In my experience as head of curriculum and formally as a practitioner, it is not unusual to have students with a variety of additional needs, such as speech and language disorders, sensory processing challenges, mild autism or behavioural challenges, in the same classroom. Unfortunately, university training rarely prepares pre-service practitioners with strategies to support such children, particularly in Hong Kong, where there is a performative focus in classroom teaching and learning (Cheuk and Hatch, 2007). Cheuk and Hatch (2007) recommend that university teacher training departments merge their special education and early childhood departments, which could help to equip pre-service teachers with the tools they need to achieve success in the modern classroom. Without such tools, practitioners are likely to feel helpless, isolated and under immense pressure, and thus to develop a negative attitude towards inclusivity in general (Lee *et al.*, 2014). Another solution would be in-house training for all practitioners to raise their awareness of various types of learning difficulties and of the in-house policies for dealing with them, as well as equip them with skills and strategies for working with children with various needs (Li and Hsieh, 2019; Lee *et al.*, 2014). An added bonus would be to boost practitioners' confidence levels and help them to achieve success within their classroom.

2.8 Summary

The literature review in this chapter has identified some of the constraints and challenges that practitioners are experiencing within Hong Kong's complex pedagogical landscape as they work towards integrating play-based, child-centred practices and move away from traditional didactic practices (Hong Kong Government News, 2017; Curriculum Development Council, 2006). Many practitioners have found it difficult to adapt to the new style of teaching. Notable challenges include the complexity of classroom management (Cheung, 2018), the implementation of creativity (Cheung, 2017; Chan, 2016), supporting children as they adapt to a different way of being taught (Chen *et al.*, 2017) and accommodating inclusivity (Lee *et al.*, 2014).

Navigating the high expectations of parents has also been a challenge for many

practitioners, who often revert back to what the parent wants, which is to see measurable results through formal academic activities (Wong and Rao, 2015; Chan and Chan, 2003). Whilst it is easy to understand the pressure that parents must be under to secure a primary school placement for their children, I do sympathise with practitioners and wonder what strategies they have for navigating parental expectations rather than reverting to out-of-date methods (Luo *et al.*, 2013).

Adapting to a play-based, child-centred teaching model requires skills that practitioners have not necessarily been equipped with, and preparing practitioners for the field in general can be challenging (Recchia and Beck, 2014). Numerous studies over the years have demonstrated that pre-service teachers are not fully equipped to enter the classroom (Li and Hsieh, 2019, Cheung *et al.*, 2016; Lee *et al.*, 2014; Cheuk and Hatch, 2007) and require additional training once they begin working. Owing to the limited support from the government for training (Cheung, 2017; Chan *et al*., 2009), most training in Hong Kong is conducted in-house. In addition to formal training, collaboration – allowing practitioners to learn from one another – has also been identified as a valuable resource (Yuen, 2011).

If, as Yang and Li (2018b) argue, professional competence plays a big role in success and every kindergarten is different, then it seems crucial for early years settings to have a firm practitioner support and training structure in place. It must be acknowledged, however, that establishing such a support/training structure is no easy matter in practice, as such settings are likely to employ recent graduates, and more experienced teachers who may lack experience in play-based, child-centred settings, and practitioners who have either worked or been educated overseas. Nevertheless, as Gardner (2004) asserts, progressive education requires practitioners 'who are well trained, dedicated and absorbed in their work' (p. 195).

To investigate the complex range of issues that early years practitioners face in Hong Kong, and thus to contribute new knowledge to the early years arena, I sought answers to the following questions in the case study conducted for this thesis

1. What aspects of implementing a play-based, child-centred approach are practitioners finding challenging?

2. How do practitioners navigate parental expectations?

3. How can practitioners be best supported in their practice within their own setting?

4. How can practitioners who have not experienced the pedagogy of play as part of their own childhood education or teacher training adapt to teaching a play- and child-centred approach?

Chapter 3

Methodology

3.1 Introduction

As discussed in previous chapters, there is a large pool of literature documenting the struggles that Hong Kong practitioners face in putting theory into practice within the play-based, child-centred context (Chen *et al*., 2017; Cheng *et al*., 2015) under the constraints of a widely acknowledged parent-driven policy discourse (Cheung *et al.*, 2017; Hong Kong Government News, 2017) and little or no support from the government (Cheung, 2017; Chan *et al.*, 2009).

The aims of this case study was to identify, from the perspective of practitioners themselves, what aspects of a play-based, child-centred approach they are finding a challenge to put into practice; how they navigate high parental expectations; and how they can be best supported in their practice within their particular Hong Kong setting. A further aim of the study was to determine how practitioners who have not experienced the pedagogy of play either as part of their own childhood education or teacher training are able to adapt to teaching a play- and child-centred approach.

Owing to the subjective nature of research, it is widely accepted that a pivotal aspect of the research process is for researchers themselves to be clear about their values, beliefs, epistemology and ontological position from the outset to enable informed decisions to be made in choosing a methodology and appropriate research methods (Hamilton *et al.*, 2013; Jackson, 2013;). For example, Sikes (2004) posits that 'it is impossible to engage in research and not be concerned with epistemology and ontology questions and issues' (p. 21). Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2013) discuss the significance of building audience trust from the outset of a case study by being reflexive and engaging the audience through detailed descriptions of the participants, setting, methods and experiences. I have made every effort to adhere to this notion while being ethically committed to the participants, literature, and findings and reflective of my position as both researcher and manager within the study site. I begin the chapter with an outline of the topics it addresses:

3.2 My Positionality: In this subchapter, I provide information on my journey from being a student in the United States to my current position as head of curriculum in a Hong Kong early years setting. It is this journey, and the experiences and opportunities on the way that has brought me to my current position as an EdD student and influenced some of the decisions I have made throughout the research process.

3.3 Insider Researcher Positionality: In this subchapter, I discuss my role as an insider, and at times outsider, researcher within the setting under study, as well as the advantages and disadvantages such a position entails.

3.4 Research Approach: I begin this subchapter with a review of my research questions, followed by my rationale for choosing a case study approach to seek answers to and insight into those questions.

3.5 Research Methods: Here, I provide my reasons for choosing the following data collection tools for this study: face-to-face, one-to-one, semi-structured interviews with eight classroom practitioners and the head of school; two separate classroom observations of two classes; and documentary evidence.

3.6 Timeframe and Constraints: I faced several time, environmental and work constraints while planning the data collection schedule, which I explain in detail in this section.

3.7 Sample Group: This subchapter offers an explanation of my considerations in choosing a sample group.

3.8 Pilot and Lessons Learnt: Going through a piloting process afforded valuable experience to reflect on, thus allowing me the opportunity to refine the final interview questions and approach. I discuss the process and lessons learnt in this subchapter.

3.9 Ethical Considerations: Here, I provide a detailed account of the strict ethical guidelines and procedures maintained throughout the study.

3.10 Participant Interviews: Playing the role of interviewer is a privilege, and it was important that I establish 'a good interviewing partnership' with my participants (Weiss, 1994, p. 61) and implement the same consistent process with everyone I interviewed, as explained in this subchapter.

3.11 Means of Analysis: I adopted a mainly inductive approach to analysing the data and drew on Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework to guide me through a systematic process of analysing the data. My approach is detailed in this final subchapter.

3.12 Limitations: In this section I discuss the limitations that may have had an impact on the data collected.

A more in-depth discussion of the case setting chosen for this study, including the profiles and biographies of the participants, can be found in Chapter 5.

3.2 My Positionality

My desire to conduct this particular study stems from my long career in the early years arena, first in the US and then, for the past 17 years, in Hong Kong. Over the years, I have been in the privileged position of working with and learning from hundreds of students, parents and colleagues, as well as studying for postgraduate degrees in the UK. Each of these experiences and people has in a multitude of ways shaped me into the person I am today. While engaging in the process of thinking about my own values, beliefs, and epistemological and ontological positions and how they relate to this study, I have had cause to reflect on my own childhood and professional experience to date, both of which I believe to have had a significant impact on my position today as researcher, manager and practitioner.

I am a British citizen who has been working in the early years arena for more than 27 years. My career began when I moved to the US at the age of 20 to work as a live-in au pair for a two-lawyer family who specialised in civil rights and children's education. I had full-time childcare responsibility for the couple's three young sons. It was during this time that I became inspired by the notion of early years education in general. Not only did I enjoy taking care of the three children, but I was able to get involved in some of the volunteer projects their parents were leading, such as setting up a local pre-school for low-income families and visiting prisons to help incarcerated men and women learn how to interact with their children through literacy-based activities. This experience was the catalyst for enrolling in an early childhood degree programme that allowed me to attend classes in the

evening and weekends, thus affording me an opportunity to continue living with the family and looking after the children during the day.

During the three years of the degree programme, my knowledge in the area of early childhood education grew, and upon graduation I began working for a child development centre associated with a global banking organisation in Washington, DC. The children enrolled in the centre thus represented a wide range of nationalities and cultures. Although I had acquired theoretical knowledge of child development as part of my degree, I leaned on my co-teacher greatly during my first two years with the centre. Although I was confident about my abilities concerning the children, I was always concerned that I would be asked a question by parents whose answer I was unsure of, and I therefore left that aspect of the role to my co-teacher, although I learnt a lot by listening intently to her responses. The centre followed a play-based, child-centred approach, but we were not given any specific framework to follow or learning objectives or milestones for the children to work towards. Any formal learning was left to the primary schools that the children would join at the age of 5.

Four years later, in 2008, I accepted a position as a founding early years teacher at the first British School to open in the United States. This was the same year the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework (Department of Education, 2017) was first introduced in England, although it has been updated numerous times since then. This newly developed framework provided a formal play-based, child-centred approach for practitioners to follow and had specific learning objectives and milestones for young children. I can still recall the difficulties of adopting an unfamiliar framework and working alongside colleagues who had been imported from England to set up the school. Despite being British myself, I had been living in the US for eight years at that point and had become accustomed to the informal, unstructured, American-style early years system. On reflection, I realise how much I learned from my UK-qualified counterparts, as the school itself offered no formal training in the new EYFS framework.

Living, volunteering and working in the US taught me about democracy in education and the importance of children having a voice and making their own choices, a notion advocated by John Dewey (2010). Play-based, child-centred pedagogy was widely accepted in the US cultural landscape, and I don't remember receiving any pressure from parents in

regard to their children's academic abilities when I worked within either the American or British framework. Children naturally transitioned from their early years setting to their local primary school without any requirement for assessments or interviews. The notion of following children's interests and accepting that every child is unique and learns in a distinct way was promoted in both settings. The British school I worked in was influenced by the ideas of Gardner (2004), who suggests that children have different learning styles, such as: visual, kinaesthetic or auditory. These and other ideas gave me a new awareness that we all learn in different ways, children and adults alike. I became more reflective about how I introduced new concepts, knowledge or experiences to children. For example, some children learn better if they are moving around as part of an activity rather than sitting down. I have found that the same can be true for the adults I encounter when conducting training workshops.

The next stop on my career trajectory was Hong Kong, a place I had dreamt of living since I was 14 years-old, inspired both by family friends who had visited on holiday and by TV documentaries. I was drawn to the fusion of Eastern and Western cultures in what was then a British colony. I joined an international pre-school as a nursery practitioner, and over the next ten years was promoted several times until I reached my final position as senior curriculum coordinator. The impact of being immersed in a competitive culture that did not share the education values of or follow the pedagogical approaches I had experienced in the US was bracing. It was clear to me that practitioners were being placed in the uncomfortable position of being forced to teach along a pedagogical trajectory that they did not necessarily feel comfortable with and knew to be beyond a child's cognitive capability just to please the parents and management. This just didn't feel right to me, and I had an inner desire to learn more about the Hong Kong education system and culture in general. Once I did, I soon became sympathetic to the anxiety students and parents were experiencing owing to the competitiveness of primary school assessments and competitiveness in general. At the same time, I understood that this competitiveness was part of the historical cultural/educational landscape of Hong Kong and had to be treated with respect. I found the early years system confusing: on the one hand, we were expected to teach a play-based, child-centred programme, and yet, on the other, the expectations of parents and the general education arena dictated a more formal, teacher-directed, results-driven trajectory.

In 2012, I was given the opportunity to become the founding head of curriculum of a new early years setting (the setting under study) catering for children aged 6 months to 6 years. The visionary founder of the setting was keen to implement programmes that focused on a play-based, child-centred approach that involved following children's interests, taking the focus away from homework, worksheets and a results-driven curriculum. I collaborated with the institution's founder and practitioners to co-construct a bespoke pedagogical model called The Language of Children (LoC). The LoC framework has been an ongoing reflective process for all practitioners employed at the setting since its inception, each in some way contributing to the blueprint, which constitutes a collaboration of ideas infused with different life experiences, knowledge, cultures and values. The journey has been exciting, albeit challenging with respect to providing ongoing support and training to a diverse and transient cohort of staff. It is this that was one of the catalysts for my choice of research topic.

My own educational beliefs, understanding and values have been constructed through a combination of research, practice and life experiences. Having grown up in a small town in England during the 1970s and 80s, I feel lucky to have had the opportunity to experience a relatively relaxed childhood characterised by play, quality conversation and time with loved ones, and freedom, not least from copious amounts of homework, exam stress and excessive exposure to technology. It wasn't until I was in my 40s and studying for a Master's in Early Childhood Education at the University of Sheffield that I began to see a shift in my own pedagogical understanding and practice. The MA journey taught me the importance of being reflective in my daily practice and looking critically at research findings rather than accepting them verbatim. These are particularly important practices in a globalised world in which new ideas spread rapidly and people are easily influenced by what they read, hear and see. Writing and implementing education policies over the years within culturally diverse communities and teams and in different countries has taught me to be culturally sensitive and aware of local ecologies (Steer *et al.*, 2007), as well as to appreciate Tan's (2016) advice that what works in one country does not necessarily work in another.

As a social science researcher in the field of early childhood education, I firmly believe that methods and methodologies are necessarily underpinned by values or core beliefs that

distinguish them from other methods and methodologies. My own values and experiences as someone who recruits and provides professional training and support for practitioners in my professional role as head of curriculum certainly influenced the thesis topic I chose and guided my choice of research questions. As Carr (1985) points out, educational researchers have 'always conceded that values influence their choice of research problems and their views about the practical uses their research results should serve' (p. 120).

My ontological and epistemological approach was that as both constructivist and interpretivist which led to my adoption of qualitative case study methods to seek the experiences and opinions of the practitioners. I acknowledge that each of us has different perspectives on and interpretations of the same notions, of what something looks like, sounds like or reads like in practice, and that we all construct knowledge in different ways, just as children learn in a multitude of ways (Gardner, 2004). Over the years, I have learnt not to assume that all trained practitioners have the same knowledge or experience of theory and practice, or indeed implement their knowledge/theory in the same way. This assumption is particularly relevant in Hong Kong, an international city with both local and multinational early years practitioners with a diverse range of experience and qualifications obtained from universities worldwide. My epistemological assumption is that knowledge is created through participants' personal experiences and interactions with others, just as my own professional and personal experiences and interactions have influenced my knowledge and values. For this reason I chose to conduct face-to-face, one-to-one, semi-structured 60-minute interviews as one of my data collection tools and adopt a thematic data analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006), to seek the answers to my research questions.

Since formulating the research design for this study, my position in the setting under study has changed. I was formally resident in Hong Kong, working full-time as head of curriculum, whilst I now fulfil the position in a part-time capacity working remotely from London, with three four-week trips a year to Hong Kong.

3.3 Insider Researcher Positionality

At the beginning of the research process, I was an insider researcher, although I have since progressed to operating simultaneously as both an insider and outsider researcher, as I now

work remotely from England. Nevertheless, conducting a case study within my own organisation renders me to some extent an insider researcher (Sikes and Potts, 2008), which is how I have viewed myself for most of the research process. According to the literature, this position comes with both advantages and disadvantages, and it is important to reflect upon each in the research design process and to be clear from the outset why a particular topic has been chosen (Yin, 2014; Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier, 2013). Sikes (2004) notes that 'a major criticism of much educational research is that it is biased and partisan' (p. 19). Although some educational researchers claim that their research is non-partisan, Carr (2000) posits that such research always 'convey[s] an educational commitment even if this is unintended and even though it remains unacknowledged and undisclosed' (p. 440). It is widely agreed that it is not possible for an educational researcher to carry out research without some degree of partisanship and without having 'some commitment concerning its purpose, value and goals' (Carr, 2000, p. 440). I accept Greenbank's (2003) supposition that research cannot be value-free, that is, free of the researcher's own personal, cultural and moral values. However, I was conscious throughout the research process of the need to be both reflective, that is, to 'thin[k] critically about the research process[,] how it was done and why, and how it could have been improved', and reflexive, which refers to 'the self, the person who did the research, the subject' (Wellington, 2015, p. 101). Where applicable, I engaged in member checking to ensure that the information I was reporting was accurate and a true representation of the participants and setting, both of which were central to this study. According to Smyth and Holian (2008), insider researchers are 'immersed, embedded and strongly connected; however there are challenges and risks to rigor and credibility' (p. 34), which encapsulates one of my main worries: being able to maintain credibility amongst both my peers and a wider audience.

During the planning phase, both internal and external credibility issues needed to be considered to determine the potential impact on the setting itself, thus making it critical that I was sufficiently reflexive to ensure the 'production of credible data and trustworthy results' (O'Leary, 2015, p. 65). I had conversations with the school's founder and head at the very beginning stages of the research design. They both felt that the study's results would help the school to reflect on its own pedagogical trajectory, thereby enhancing future practice and training at the setting. I quickly discounted the notion of involving practitioners and managers from other settings, as I would have questioned the reliability

and validity of the data and had fears over potential conflicts of interest. Although my position would still have been that of researcher, I would have had an ethical responsibility to be transparent about my role as head of curriculum at what would very likely have been considered a rival school, given that all early years institutes in Hong Kong are private and independent, and thus compete with one another for students. Had consent for access been approved by the relevant gatekeeper, I still would have been concerned about the reliability and credibility of the data collected during interviews and the availability of any documentary evidence. It is feasible that despite reassurance with regard to confidentiality and ethical procedures, practitioners and managers might still have felt that their participation could potentially jeopardise their position in and allegiance to their own setting. I also questioned whether another early years setting would be willing to share relevant documentary evidence with me, as each school has its own policies and systems in place and tends to be protective of them.

One of the dilemmas of being an insider researcher is the potential conflict between two roles, in my case that of a manager within the organisation and that of researcher (Smyth and Holian, 2008). However, working from London part-time has strengthened my role as researcher and enabled me to focus on the facts revealed by the data and not become involved directly with the setting or practitioners on a daily basis. To some extent, my position has shifted in the direction of 'outsider' researcher, a position that makes it easier to be more 'neutral' or 'objective' than perhaps would be possible as a pure 'insider' researcher (Drake and Heath, 2008), especially when analysing and reflecting on the data. Prior to stepping away from my full-time position, I was fortunate to be part of daily reflection and planning meetings, and I often engaged in and facilitated classroom learning with the children throughout the school. Therefore, I believe that I hold a trusted position in and am familiar to the school community, which was an important factor in being permitted access to practitioners, children, classrooms and documentary evidence in the most authentic way. It is my hope that the participants in this case study did not view my data collection methods as infringements on their space or time, but rather as an extension to the cycle of discussion and reflection on pedagogy that the institution's practitioners and management embark upon as part of regular practice. On a personal level, I believe that stepping away from the setting has helped to alleviate any concerns I may have had about a conflict of interest, tension or bias creeping in, which Smyth and Holian (2008) caution

against. At the same time, I believe that had I not been an insider conducting this research and enjoyed a trusting, positive professional relationship with the participants, it may not have been possible to gather such a rich body of authentic data. In my view, having the good fortune to live and work in Hong Kong, a very special East-meets-West culture, for 17 years, rendered me more empathetic in my approach and questioning and afforded me the ability to connect with the participants regardless of culture or language ability.

The distinct advantages to conducting a case study as an insider researcher include the potentially unique perspective it allows and the robustness of the resulting findings (Smyth and Holian, 2008). O'Leary (2015) suggests that being an insider researcher can offer a study a 'rich, local context' (p. 15), and Smyth and Holian (2008) believe that 'insider researchers offer a unique perspective because of their knowledge of [the] culture, history and actors involved' (p. 36). The case study framework has afforded me the opportunity to provide clear background information on the setting under study, as well as the wider context of Hong Kong, which is an important factor in enabling the audience to form their own conclusions and assumptions. I do not consider the study to be about my own experiences or possible biases, but rather about those of the practitioners and managers who work with the school's children and their parents every day. I consider the opportunity to be an 'insider' researcher while experiencing aspects of being an 'outsider' researcher to be a privilege.

3.4 Research Approach

As I began to plan my research approach for this study, I reflected on the aims of the study, as outlined at the beginning of this chapter, and the following research questions:

1. What aspects of implementing a play-based, child-centred approach are practitioners finding challenging?
2. How do practitioners navigate parental expectations?
3. How can practitioners be best supported in their practice within their own setting?
4. How can practitioners who have not experienced the pedagogy of play as part of their own childhood education or teacher training adapt to teaching a play- and child-centred approach?

To gain insight into these complex issues, I decided that the best approach was to seek the views of the practitioners themselves by conducting a case study in my own institution. Drawing on the conception of practitioners as 'lost souls' who feel they are losing their identities and who are often actors of silence (Ball, 2003), I decided that providing practitioners with an appropriate platform for ensuring that their opinions were heard and valued would be an important aspect of my case study and offer fruitful insight into my research questions. My approach could be considered highly subjective in that I sought the personal experiences, thoughts and ideas of the participants.

Adopting a qualitative case study approach afforded me a certain amount of flexibility to create a research model that was right for the context within which the study was situated (Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier, 2013; Opie, 2008), which chimes with Stenhouse's (1978) supposition that no two cases are alike. Although in some ways it would have been easier to have specific rules to follow when embarking on the case study, their absence afforded me the flexibility to choose the research methods I believed to be best suited to the questions I wished to answer (O'Leary, 2004). Thinking about the two societies with which I am most familiar professionally, Hong Kong and the United States, I have never encountered two identical settings. Each setting is characterised by its own distinct ethos, culture, competency, and personal and social values, and the same holds true of its staff and the families it serves. This is especially true in Hong Kong where each setting is afforded a certain amount of autonomy and flexibility with the way they design and structure their programmes (Curriculum Development Council, 2006).

In my own practice, I have found case studies to be a powerful learning and training tool for understanding the dichotomy between theory and practice, particularly when they are well-organised and written in a story-like style that is captivating from the beginning (Flybjerg, 2011). However, given that every setting operates differently, it would be difficult to draw any conclusions from the data thereon without first understanding the context (Yin, 2014). Tal's (2014) case study on an emergent curriculum in a traditional setting in Israel illustrates the depth of detail and richness that can be cultivated and which Flyvbjerg (2011) posits a case study makes possible. Case studies have significant strengths, including their potential to provide 'a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by presenting

them with abstract theories or principles' (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p. 289). Burgess *et al.* (2006) concur, noting that 'such studies can penetrate situations and offer insights not easily gained by other approaches' (p. 59). The case study approach is particularly appropriate for the Hong Kong early years context, wherein practitioners, and perhaps even the government, are struggling to apply the theory of a non-prescriptive, child-centred, play-based approach to practice (Luo *et al.*, 2013; Chan, 2010). Wellington (2015) argues that 'the ability to relate to a case and learn from it is perhaps more important than being able to generalize from it' (p. 173). In my professional experience, when practitioners attend workshops or other forms of professional training, they bring with them their own 'lenses', affording them the luxury of constructing new knowledge relevant to their prior experience. A case study has the potential to provide authentic and practical examples, which practitioners in particular find useful, thus making it easier for this audience to draw their own conclusions concerning how ideas and strategies can be extrapolated and implemented in their own settings.

Despite the various advantages of case studies, I do take on board Yin's (2014) warning that case study research 'remains one of the most challenging of all social science endeavors' (p. 3). Yin (2014) further cautions researchers that they must outline a clear and rigorous path beginning with a thorough literature review and well-thought-out research questions or objectives. Wellington (2015) similarly reminds us that a case study also needs to be achievable with very clear boundaries. O'Leary (2015) warns that there is a tendency for researchers to be 'wedded to particular methods', emphasising that it is pivotal to a study that researchers choose the most appropriate methods for answering their questions and that their 'methods need to fall from [those] questions' (p. 49).

3.5 Research Methods

The three main data collection tools I chose for this study were: face-to-face, one-to-one, semi-structured 60-minute interviews with eight classroom practitioners and the head of school; two separate semi-structured classroom observations of two classes; and a review of documentary evidence. Although there is no set formula for a case study, both Yin (2014) and O'Leary (2015) remind us that research questions are pivotal to the research process,

and are indeed what defines the investigation and then helps to inform the methodology and methods. The literature documents a wide range of views on case study research in general. Yin (2014) posits that the more that research questions 'seek to explain some present circumstance (e.g., "how" or "why" some social phenomenon works), the more the case study will be relevant' (p. 4). Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2013) suggest that using a variety of data collection tools can add quality and different perspectives to a case study, and note that employing two or more methods allows the information collected to be triangulated to add to the validity and 'reinforce [the] legitimacy of the conclusions drawn' (p. 95). Flyvjerg (2011) highlights the importance of telling a story that captivates the audience and of using a range of collection methods to gather evidence, likening the process to weaving a tapestry to form the final analysis and conclusions. Stenhouse (1980) discusses the advantages of gathering evidence 'in such a way as to make it accessible to subsequent critical assessment, to internal and external criticism and to triangulation' (p. 4).

To answer the research questions I sought the views of practitioners through one-to-one, semi-structured interviews, which enabled 'multi-sensory channels to be used: verbal, non-verbal, spoken and heard' (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p. 349). Semi-structured interviews allow a subjective approach that encourages participants to discuss their experiences and opinions openly (Opie, 2008), which I believed to be pivotal to this research and to answering the research questions. A distinct advantage of conducting face-to-face, semi-structured interviews is being able to repeat or reword questions if there is any misunderstanding and giving participants plenty of time to respond in a way that is comfortable for them. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to be 'flexible in terms of the order in which the topics are considered ... to let the interviewee develop ideas and speak more widely' (Denscombe, 2010, p. 175). English was the second language of some of the interviewees, and one-to-one interviews offered the potential to alleviate the misunderstandings that may arise with other methods such as written questionnaires, as clarifications can more easily be sought. Cognisant of Marsh's (2009) warning about creating a 'power imbalance' (p. 6), I gave the participants full control over the interview schedule, including the time and location, with the caveat that the interview should not interfere with their regular teaching duties.

Two other research methods were considered and then dismissed: focus group interviews with a small group of practitioners and practitioner questionnaires distributed to all 14 practitioners employed in the setting. The main advantage of the former is that such interviews 'yield a wide range of responses' (Cohen *et al.*, 2007, p. 373). The potential challenge to conducting focus group interviews in my setting is that English is not the native language of some practitioners. I was also concerned about potential cultural and personality barriers, which are not uncommon in international settings, where not everyone feels comfortable expressing their opinions or personal challenges in front of their peers. Accordingly, my concern was that focus group interviews would not yield data as rich as that from individual interviews. The main advantage afforded by a questionnaire survey is the ability to obtain the opinions of a large sample of practitioners in a short space of time, thereby 'rapidly collecting a wide range of views' (Robert-Holmes, 2008, p. 143). However, Cohen *et al.* (2007) caution that questionnaires 'can cause problems with data handling' (p. 330), particularly when space is provided for respondents to write additional comments, which, in the context of my study, would have been the questioning format adopted. As previously mentioned, language barriers do exist within the study context. Hence, there are a variety of ways to interpret the same ideas, which would have made it difficult to clarify misconceptions or ask extension questions. Although interviews are more time-consuming for participants, I believe them to be the most authentic way of garnering accurate responses. For these reasons, I chose one-to-one interviews over either focus group interviews or questionnaires in my research design.

Non-participatory, semi-structured classroom observations of practitioners make it possible to describe, understand and begin to form connections concerning the theory-practice dichotomy, particularly when photographs become part of the case record (Stenhouse, 1980). Using visuals, photographs in particular, makes it easier to record what is happening in the classroom and to document the environment in which practitioners are located. I wanted to provide visual context to the study to supplement and verify my written interpretations of the observations. During the planning process, I considered videoing the classroom observations instead of photographing them. However, having used both modes on previous occasions as part of my role as head of curriculum, I was concerned that I would be narrowing my 'observation lens' by videotaping the lessons and that I would miss

the bigger picture. I was also concerned that it would be difficult to capture both of the co-teachers present in the classroom during the observations with a video recorder.

My reason for conducting classroom observations of two different classes was to verify the interview data and documentary evidence concerning such questions as what a play-based, child-centred approach looks like in practice in the study setting, what aspects of such an approach the practitioners find a challenge, and what classroom set-up is preferred, for example, one conducive to whole class teaching or one in which children have independent access to resources. It is evident from previous studies conducted in Hong Kong that what happens in one class might not happen in another. It is also possible for inconsistencies to occur between what is said in an interview and what happens in the classroom. For example, Wang and Lam (2017) found the structure of the play-based setting they examined to be more formal than they would have expected from their interviews with the practitioner concerned. I felt that it was important for the validity and reliability of the study to triangulate the data gathered from the practitioner and head of school interviews with observations from two classrooms. Gathering a selection of documentary evidence, including planning documents, class schedules, professional teacher training agendas, photographs of the research setting and in situ learning, and statistics on the primary schools children will be attending, made it possible to further triangulate the data. It thereby helped 'to increase the 'trustworthiness', reliability and validity of [the] research' (Wellington, 2015, p. 223). Yin (2014) suggests that '[p]hotographs … can help to convey important case characteristics to outside observers' (p. 115).

3.6 Timeframe and Constraints

My ethics application to the University of Sheffield was approved in December 2017 (see Appendix A). That same month, it was announced to staff that the setting under study was coming under the sole ownership of a person who had previously been a silent partner, with the founder leaving to focus on other projects and her family. We were also informed at this time that the landlord was raising the rent on the school space considerably, which might necessitate a move to a new location and potentially a temporary closure. The school's experience is indicative of how fragile the business rental market landscape is in Hong

Kong, with huge rent increases every few years causing the closure of many early years institutions and other businesses. Not knowing what the new circumstances meant for the company or my own position, I felt it was important to begin collecting data as soon as possible. I was naturally concerned about the coming changes and whether they would prove unsettling for some of my participants. I thus decided that it would be in the best interests of the study to conduct the interviews in March 2018 instead of waiting until my next planned trip to Hong Kong in August 2018. I had already received ethical approval from the university and approval from the relevant gate keeper (see Appendix B), but I still needed to expedite the process of conducting pilot interviews, recruiting participants and collecting data. My goal was to collect the interview data I needed before the end of the academic year in June 2018. The detailed timeline I followed can be found in Appendix C.

3.7 Sample Group

There are 14 practitioners at the focal institution, and my aim was to gain the agreement of at least half to participate in one-to-one semi-structured interviews, as well as to interview the head of school. I was confident that such a sample size would represent a range of nationalities and experience. At the study's outset, the teaching staff represented at least nine nationalities, including Chinese, Irish, British, Canadian, Chinese-Canadian, Italian, Malaysian, American and New Zealander.

I initially considered interviewing practitioners who had worked in the setting for just one or two years, given that their memories of their initial experiences and challenges would be fresher than those who had been employed there for longer. However, upon further reflection, I realised that those who had worked in the setting for longer would be able to offer more insight into how best to navigate parental expectations and how teachers can best be supported in-house. I was ultimately successful in recruiting eight practitioners who had worked in the focal institution for between 6 months and 6 years and had a range of background and experience, and were therefore capable of providing me with the data needed to answer my research questions. I had hoped that at least two or three of the Chinese teachers would volunteer to participate, which three did, but I did my best to ensure that no one felt under pressure to take part. All of the practitioners in the sample had

received induction training upon joining the setting, had experience teaching children between the ages of 6 months and 5 years, and had been working at the setting for at least one full term.

Further information on the eight practitioner participants and the head of school, including their nationalities, qualifications and experience, can be found in Chapter 4.6.

3.8 Pilot and Lessons Learnt

Before embarking on the pilot questionnaire, I had not fully realised the critical impact it would have in guiding me through the interview process. The piloting process helped me to be reflexive about my position as researcher while conducting the interviews, for example, to take care with the way (tone of voice) I asked questions and responded to answers and with my facial expression and body language. The literature reports numerous benefits of conducting pilot interviews, such as ensuring that participants understand the questions (Stake, 1995) and that the research instruments are functioning effectively (Bryman, 2008), practising avoiding 'biases' and 'being judgmental' (Cohen *et al*, 2007, p. 361), and obtaining an understanding of the realistic timeframe needed to conduct the interviews. Having an opportunity to assess and to 'ask the interviewees to tell [me] how the interview felt for them, whether they understood the questions' and for any other useful information was invaluable in preparing for the actual interviews (Nutbrown, 2010, p. 9), which are further discussed below.

In line with Nutbrown's (2010) advice to conduct pilot interviews with people 'who are similar to [the] sample' (p. 8), I chose to interview one practitioner and one head of school in an early years setting with a similar educational structure and approach to the setting under study. Both pilot participants were people I had previously worked with and had known professionally for some time. They worked for the same organisation but on different campuses. Once I had selected the two potential participants, I telephoned them to give them some background information on the study and its purpose and asked whether they would be willing to participate in a pilot interview. I then followed up by email with an information sheet and consent form, as well as a list of the initial questions I intended to ask (see Appendices D and E). The two pilot participants were given the choice of where

and when to meet for the interview. Hannah, the practitioner, chose to meet me after work at a coffee shop located close to my setting, and Tamara, the school head, chose to meet me at her home on a Sunday morning. Both pilot interviews were conducted during the first week of February 2018. At the beginning of both, I thanked the participants for their time and help, asked whether they had any questions and gave them an opportunity to withdraw if they wished. Assurances were given that their anonymity would be respected, and signed consent forms were collected.

I met with Hannah first. One of the first things she did when she arrived at the coffee shop was thank me for sending the questions ahead of time. She acknowledged that she had found this very useful and appreciated the time she had been given to think about her responses and make notes. Her comments in this regard prompted me to give the participants in the main study ample time to review the questions in advance so they could come prepared. I found that Hannah referred to her notes throughout the interview, which made me realise that notes might prove an important tool for the other participants. I had not initially planned to jot down Hannah's responses to my questions on my question sheet, but did so because I was concerned about the voice recorder malfunctioning. On reflection, I actually found the process of writing down the answers helpful to immediate reflection following the interview. I also discovered when listening to the interview recording that a coffee shop is not the ideal venue for an interview, given the considerable amount of background noise. I therefore realised the importance of carefully considering the interview location.

When I arrived to meet Tamara, she seemed enthusiastic about the interview. I noticed that she did not have the questions with her, which I thought nothing of, as it was not a prerequisite. She then mentioned that she had had a quick read-through of the questions when I had emailed them to her a week before, but hadn't looked at them since. I believe that this may be one of the reasons that the interview with Tamara took close to two hours to conduct. As I went through the questions one by one, I noticed short silences and hesitations during some of the questions, particularly those pertaining to staff training, recruitment and parental expectations, causing me to feel uncomfortable at times. I realised that I had perhaps put Tamara in an awkward position with some of my questions, not

because of my position as researcher, but because of my position as head of curriculum at a competitor institution. It did make me question whether I had made the right decision by interviewing a professional from another setting and whether I should have instead conducted the pilot in my own setting, with a practitioner and manager who had recently left the company. I also realised that it would be absolutely critical when conducting interviews to be confident that all of the participants understood the purpose and background context of the study. I therefore made the decision to conduct a short presentation for all prospective participants in the setting under study before they made their decision about participating.

Further, having discovered that the interview would take much longer than an hour if the interviewee had not read and reflected upon the questions prior to the interview, I realised that I needed to give the participants copies of the questions well in advance of the interview date. Also, to save time and improve the flow of the questioning process, I divided the questions into categories with dedicated headings.

I did not conduct a pilot test of the non-participatory, semi-structured classroom observations because their focus was not completely clear to me prior to the practitioner interviews, and I did not want to unnecessarily disturb classes. In my capacity as head of curriculum, I regularly spend a significant amount of time in classrooms either as a non-participant or participant observer, and I was therefore confident that my presence in the classroom would be a familiar routine for practitioners and students alike. The only tools I planned to use during the observations were a camera and pen and paper to write notes. Had I felt the need to conduct any additional observations, I knew that I would have the opportunity to do so without any access or time constraints before returning to London.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

The literature highlights a number of considerations that arise in designing a successful case study (Yin, 2014). It is the researcher's responsibility to ensure the process is well-designed because of the potential time and emotional costs to others involved in the study (Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier, 2013). It was therefore critical that from the very beginning of the research design, I was transparent about the study's procedures and

boundaries, conformed to recommended ethical standards (British Educational Research Association, 2018) and adhered to the ethical guidelines of the University of Sheffield. May (2011) posits that 'ethics are fundamental in maintaining the integrity and legitimacy of research in society and in protecting practitioners and participants' (p. 47).

As an 'insider' researcher (Sikes and Potts, 2008) with automatic access to teachers, parents, students and documentary evidence, it was essential that I maintain a 'duty of care' (British Educational Research Association, 2018, p. 13) to the participants and remain sensitive to ethical considerations while carrying out the research. Research can affect people in different ways, and it was therefore my responsibility to safeguard the safety, confidentiality, and emotional and physical well-being of every person involved in the study, myself included. Although my participants might not be classified as a vulnerable group, I believe that we are all vulnerable in some way. I thus made it clear throughout the interviews that there were 'no right or wrong answers', and regularly reminded 'the participants of their own worth and the importance of the topic' (Cohen *et al.*, 2007, p. 365).

As noted earlier, I first gained formal approval to conduct the study from the University of Sheffield ethics committee. The institutional gatekeepers at the time were the focal school's founder and head and deputy head, all of whom had given me informal consent before ethical approval was granted by the university and formal consent once the approval had been granted. However, as noted above, in January 2018 the founder and head left the school. The new head of school, who had previously been the deputy head and had worked at the setting since its inception six years previously, became the new primary gatekeeper. Although she had earlier indicated her consent, I did check in with her again after the personnel change to double-check that she was still happy for me to proceed with the study, which indeed she was, and therefore provided me with a formal consent letter (see Appendix B). I discussed the revised data collection timeline with her (see Appendix C) and supplied her with copies of the information letters I had prepared for the practitioner participants (see Appendix F) and the parents of the children I planned to observe in the classroom (see Appendix G). I also provided her with copies of the informed consent forms for the participants (see Appendix H), as well as those to be signed by parents on behalf of their children (see Appendix I).

Once it had been confirmed which practitioners were willing to be interviewed, two classes were chosen for the classroom observations. Although it did not matter which nursery or pre-nursery classes I observed, the selection process did involve specific ethical criteria. For example, I did not want the observations to be disruptive or stressful for any child or class, and I therefore met with the head of school to find out whether there were any classes that I should exclude. As she informed me that any class would be suitable, I selected one upper nursery class of 4- to 6-year-olds and one pre-nursery class of 2- to 3-year-olds, both taught by practitioners who had volunteered to be interviewed. I then checked in with the practitioners to verify that they would be happy for me to observe their classes.

Parental consent was sought for the classroom observations, with parents fully informed of the purpose of the study and the amount of time I intended to spend observing each class in action. I made it clear that I had no plans to enter into direct dialogue with the children, unless such dialogue occurred naturally or was initiated by a child. I also requested the parents' permission to use the photographs I took during the observations for future publications and/or presentations, subject to the children also being okay with it. With the exception of one parent, I was given such permission. When subsequently taking photographs in the classroom, I took care not to capture the child whose parent had refused permission. Keen to acknowledge the rights of the child (Marsh, 2009) and wanting to be transparent with the children about the purpose of my presence in the classroom and use of a camera, I followed Sargeant and Harcourt's (2012) suggestion to seek the assistance of the class practitioner to explain both my presence and the study's purpose, as well as what would happen to the data once they had been collected. The two class practitioners offered such explanation to the children during group time at the beginning of the day and gave them an opportunity to ask questions and/or express any concerns about me being present in the classroom and taking photographs while they played. On the first day of observation in the upper nursery class, a 4-year-old girl came up to me and said that she did not want to be photographed playing. I immediately smiled and thanked her for letting me know, put my camera down and promised that I would not take any photographs of her. I made sure that she felt safe and that her feelings were important. The photographs taken during each classroom observation were transferred to a separate file on my password-protected computer.

At a later date in the research process, I realised that the initial consent I had received from the practitioner participants did not include permission for me to publish photos of their faces, and I therefore sought formal permission from the University of Sheffield ethics committee to do so. I sent an email to the committee in March 2019 (see Appendix J) and received written approval soon afterwards (see Appendix K). I immediately sent an additional consent form (see Appendix L) to the five practitioners affected, one of whom was not an interviewee but happened to be covering for another teacher on one of the days I conducted the observations. All participants in the study were assured of anonymity and have been assigned pseudonyms throughout the thesis to prevent their identities from being revealed. However, by consenting to their faces being shown in photographs in future publications or presentations, they also consented to their identity possibly being revealed.

The one-to-one semi-structured interviews with the practitioners and head of school were recorded on my handheld voice recorder. Each interview recording was placed in a separate, password-protected file. When not in use, the voice recorder was kept in a locked drawer in my office, and then personally transported back to London. Throughout the research process, I was in possession of all audio recordings and photographs, and performed all data transcription and analysis myself.

Although I have direct, privileged access to a wide range of documentary evidence, I sought permission from the aforementioned gatekeepers to make use of that evidence, and all documents have been anonymised to ensure that no specific practitioner, child or member of management is directly identifiable. All participants were informed several times throughout the research process of their right to withdraw from the study at any time for any or no reason.

3.10 The Participant Interviews

Within one week of making the short presentation to prospective participants and emailing the information letter to participants (see Appendix F), I received confirmation from eight practitioners and the head of school that they would be willing to volunteer for my study. I was pleased with the response and felt I had a good sample to work with, as discussed in Section 3.7 above. As also discussed, to give the interviewees time to prepare and to reduce

the potential length of the interviews, I sent copies of the research questions to all participants (see Appendices N and O) at least a week before their scheduled interviews. Participants were in control of the interview schedule and chose a time when they had non-contact hours in their timetable (see Appendix M). They chose to meet in their own classroom, studio or office. Some of the interviews were conducted while seated at a table in the classrooms, and others while seated on cushions on the floor, depending on the participant's preference. The practitioner interviews lasted between 50 minutes and 1 hour, whilst that with the head of school lasted 1 hour and 15 minutes.

All of the participant arrived on time for the interviews and brought the interview questions with them, although they were not required to do so. In accordance with Opie's (2008) recommendation, I held a pre-interview briefing to review the purpose of the study and interviews and the way in which the data they provided would be used. During this briefing, I ensured that the participants were comfortable and had water on hand if they needed it and explained again that I would be recording them. Before we began the interviews, I reminded them that this was an opportunity to be honest about their experiences and views and that nothing they said would have a negative impact on our working relationship or their position in the company. I emphasised that there were no right or wrong answers, and, as Cohen *et al.* (2007) suggest, I verified my interpretations of their 'answers during the course of the interview' (p. 364). The language barrier made it particularly important that there were no misunderstandings. Before turning on the recording device, I asked the participants whether they had any final questions.

I was conscious of my body language and facial expression throughout the interviews, especially when I asked questions about the LoC and the individual challenges participants faced within their role in the setting. I wanted the participants to be honest and to feel safe talking to me about any aspects of the LoC they did not enjoy teaching or elements of their role they found to be a struggle. I had reflected beforehand that I might find myself in a situation to hear negative feedback about something that I had had a hand in creating, which is never easy. However, I do feel that I was able to remain impartial throughout the interviews.

I noticed that all participants except the head of school had written responses on the question form that they referred to at some point during the interviews. Some of the participants gave direct answers to the questions without any elaboration, whereas others expanded upon the information I had requested, perhaps because they were particularly interested in or passionate about the given topic. My assumption is that the participants had come prepared by reading the questions beforehand, and thus took their role as interviewee seriously. All of the participants but one seemed to enjoy the opportunity to discuss their viewpoints, at least judging from their body language, which I perceived as relaxed.

Hamilton and Corbett-Whittier (2013) point out that it is crucial for a researcher to be an effective questioner and listener, which I endeavoured to be mindful of during the interview process. Drawing on the lessons I learnt from the pilot interviews, I was conscious of my body language, did not rush through the questions (Weiss, 1994) and gave the participants plenty of time to answer without feeling rushed. Some of the participants were chattier than others and did not answer the questions in a linear manner. I used the question sheet as a guide, but if a particular topic arose in conversation before we had come to it on the question sheet, I continued along that trajectory to keep the flow of thought and conversation going.

One of the practitioner participants seemed to hesitate on a few questions, and I am unsure why. It may have been that she hadn't had time to read the question in advance or think carefully about it or perhaps felt uncomfortable discussing the given topic. On reflection, I should have asked whether she was okay or felt uncomfortable answering the questions about which she was hesitant.

I chose to interview the head of school after all of the practitioner interviews had been conducted, which afforded me an opportunity to adapt the questions based on the responses I had received from the practitioners. For example, I was able to ask the head to discuss in detail the topics usually covered during the school's annual orientation training and professional development workshops. This strategy also allowed further verification of whether there was consistency between what practitioners and management were telling me. Owing to time constraints, the head of school interview was conducted four months after the practitioner interviews.

At the end of all of the interviews, I gave the participants an opportunity to share any additional information that had not arisen during the course of the interviews. Two of them expressed how happy they were to have been given an opportunity to participate in the interviews and to express their views. In addition to recording the interviews, I also jotted down recurring themes that arose.

3.11 Means of Analysis

When making a decision about the means of analysis to use for this study, I drew predominantly on the work of Wellington (2015), Yin (2014) and Cohen *et al*. (2011, 2007). In addition, to answer my research questions I drew on the thematic analysis framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), which they suggest 'provides an accessible and theoretically flexible approach' (p. 77). I found it to be useful in guiding me through a process that proved to be both systematic and reflective (Wellington, 2015) within the context of my study.

Adopting a primarily inductive approach to data analysis (Yin, 2014) allowed me to enter into the interviews without any preconceptions about the responses I would receive. As discussed in Chapter 2, I began the study without any prior theoretical propositions; instead, these developed through a combination of the interviewee responses and a review of the literature. Yin (2014) argues that researchers often employ both inductive and deductive strategies, which was certainly the case in my analysis. Before beginning the study, I conducted an extensive review of the literature pertaining to the challenges that practitioners face within the Hong Kong context, and it was the literature that guided me in the organisation of my research questions, and thus exerted an influence on participants' responses.

Owing to the qualitative and holistic nature of the study, I did not use any form of computer-assisted analysis, which, according to Wellington (2015), 'cannot do the imaginative thinking or conception of codes for the researcher' (p. 273). I initially did some NVivo training and engaged with the process with an open mind to see whether this tool could be more effective than manually analysing the data. We all learn in different ways, and I did not think that NVivo would be any more effective than manual analysis for my purposes. Because I had previously met and had direct contact with all of the participants,

the data seemed real and personal to me. Being able to continually read, reflect and make notes on the interview transcripts throughout the research process, as well as having a set of coloured highlighters to visually sort and identify the themes accordingly was invaluable.

Although the interview transcription process was lengthy, I agree with Cohen *et al*. (2007) that transcribing 'is a crucial step in interviewing, for [without it] there is the potential for massive data loss, distortion and the reduction of complexity' (p. 365). The transcription and data organisation processes did indeed render it easier to make clear the connections between the research questions and participants' answers. Yin (2014) suggests that a helpful starting point in analysing case study data is to 'search for patterns, insights, or concepts that seem promising' (p. 135). Whilst taking this suggestion on board, however, I also acknowledged the cautionary note sounded by Cohen *et al.* (2011) about keeping the 'copious amounts of written data to manageable and comprehendible proportions' (p. 559). In analysing the interview transcripts, I constructed specific categories based on the research questions and colour-coded the answers given by the participants. In addition, I created a miscellaneous category into which any information that did not relate directly to the research questions but might be worthy of consideration could be placed for retrieval at a later stage if necessary. Some of the unexpected themes or patterns that began to appear were a sense of belonging, values and beliefs, classroom set-up, and autonomy and collaboration, which I later realised fit into my research questions. An overview of the process I followed, which fits into the framework developed by Braun and Clarke (2006), can be found in the table below, along with references to examples that can be found in Appendices P, Q and R.

Braun and Clarke (2006)	The process I followed
1. **Familiarisation with the data**	- During the taped interviews, I had a notepad on which I casually jotted down themes that recurred during the interview, including a sense of belonging, values, beliefs, classroom set-up, collaboration and idea sharing. - Transcribing the audio-recorded interviews helped me to become familiar with the data. Once the transcriptions were complete, it was helpful to print them out and spend time reading and reflecting upon the responses before I did anything else, and then to do so again throughout the research process.
2. **Coding**	- I first numbered all of the questions answered in each interview transcript to help me with the later organisation of codes and data, as well as to locate specific quotes that would come in useful later. - I then went through the interview answers and initially colour-coded them according to the research questions. Once that was done, I merged the responses from each participant onto one table, under the heading of the specific research question (see Appendix P). - I followed the same process for data that illuminated repeated and unexpected patterns, such as 'beliefs and values' (see Appendix Q).
3. **Searching for themes**	- I began to sketch out thematic maps that helped me to organise and make sense of the data. For example, for the first research question I mapped out the themes from the interview with relevance to that question (see Appendix R).
4. **Reviewing themes**	- I reviewed and reflected on the themes that had been identified earlier to verify whether they had relevance to and/or answered the research questions. This gave me an opportunity to fine-tune the themes.
5. **Defining and naming themes**	- Each theme was organised and assigned to the relevant research question, including unexpected themes that evolved from the data.
6. **Write-up**	- The final analysis and write-up was conducted.

3.12 Limitations

Whilst going through the process of analysing and ultimately presenting the data collected in this study, I was aware that there are different ways that information or knowledge can be interpreted (Thomas, 2016). Whilst I have made every effort to represent each of the participant's views, it would have been impossible to do so completely due to the volume of data I collected (Wellington, 2015). However, in situations where the participants'

responses were similar or particularly poignant as it related to the research questions, I used verbatim quotes from the interviews to add authenticity and reliability to the presentation of the data.

In choosing to conduct face-to-face interviews I had made every effort to ensure that the participants felt safe and comfortable to share their experiences and thoughts. However, I am aware that not everyone is always willing to discuss their professional challenges, especially with a senior member of staff who happens to be the researcher. My fear was always that the participant may see their challenges as a sign of weakness, which could lead to them not willing or able to be completely honest, in which case, an anonymous questionnaire may have been more apt.

Throughout the data collection and data analysis I have made every effort to be reflexive, being conscious of avoiding any bias that may creep in. I am aware that each of the participants will have an opportunity to read this thesis on completion and therefore, I was very mindful to present the data collected in the most authentic way.

Chapter 4

The Case

4.1 Introduction

As stated in the thesis introduction, I am aware that a single case study cannot be representative of all early years institutions in Hong Kong, as each setting is unique and operates in its own way (Yang and Li, 2018a). It is thus my intention here to provide a detailed profile of the setting under study to allow readers to make informed decisions about and comparisons between this case study and their own context and to determine the applicability of the research account herein (Yin, 2014).

The information presented in this chapter represents my own insider knowledge acquired through my position as founding head of curriculum at the setting under study, as well as data gleaned from the literature provided by the setting, its website, and the notes taken during my interviews with the head of school and eight practitioners and the classroom observations As part of my reflexive approach, I asked the head of school to read and verify all of the information in this chapter and afforded her an opportunity to add to, remove and/or edit any information that she felt was not an accurate representation of the setting under study. I wanted to reduce any potential bias that may have crept in owing to my dual position as head of curriculum and researcher.

The chapter is organised into the sub-sections:

4.2 The Setting: A description of the locality of the focal setting is given, along with some context about the ethos, values and education programmes offered to families.

4.3 The Space: A description of the setting is provided, along with a floorplan and photographs of the communal areas used by the children, staff and families.

4.4 The Language of Children Teaching and Learning Framework: An overview of the bespoke play-based, child-centred teaching and learning framework is offered, along with an outline of the Western-influenced models that inspired it.

4.5 The Staff: The focal setting employs a range of staff who are assigned distinct roles. An explanation of those roles and a flowchart is provided to add clarity to the context.

4.6 The Participants: Detailed information on the qualifications and experience of the eight practitioner participants and head of school is presented to help readers to better understand the context of the answers given in Chapter 5, which offers data analysis and reports the study's findings.

4.2 The Setting

The setting under study is located in an affluent area on the south side of Hong Kong Island and is categorised by the EDB as a profit making, private independent (PI) setting (Hong Education Bureau, 2020a).It is situated on the third floor of a modern high-rise commercial building with 10,000 square feet of indoor space and no outdoor provision. A variety of businesses operate within the building, with the first three floors home to seven learning centres offering tuition services in such subjects as Mandarin, phonics, maths, architecture and general homework support.

The intent of the setting's visionary founder and owner was to create a diverse and inclusive early years platform for change in Hong Kong that would facilitate passion and a joy for learning and put children first (see Fig. 1).

Fig. 1. The ethos/values of the setting.

The founder had a desire to create a setting that empowers staff and welcomed parents, caregivers and grandparents as part of the school and wider learning community. The setting offers parent-/caregiver-accompanied, sensory-focused playgroup classes for children from the age of 6 months; pre-nursery classes as a bridge between accompanied and unaccompanied classes; half-day nursery classes for children from the age of 3; and enrichment education classes focusing on the creative, visual and dramatic arts. The main medium of instruction is English, with the option of bilingual classes (English/Mandarin) for children in the playgroup and pre-nursery classes. Children over the age of 3 also have the option of twice weekly one-hour Mandarin enrichment classes.

The setting is unique in that it attracts a wide range of nationalities from around the world, each bringing with them their own set of cultural and educational values and experiences. Accordingly to statistics published by the setting, in the 2013-2017 period, 33% of the children were Chinese, either from Hong Kong or mainland China, and 67% represented the rest of the world (Fig. 2). According to the head of school and practitioners, the vast majority of the children's parents are highly educated and multilingual, with experience of living in two or more countries.
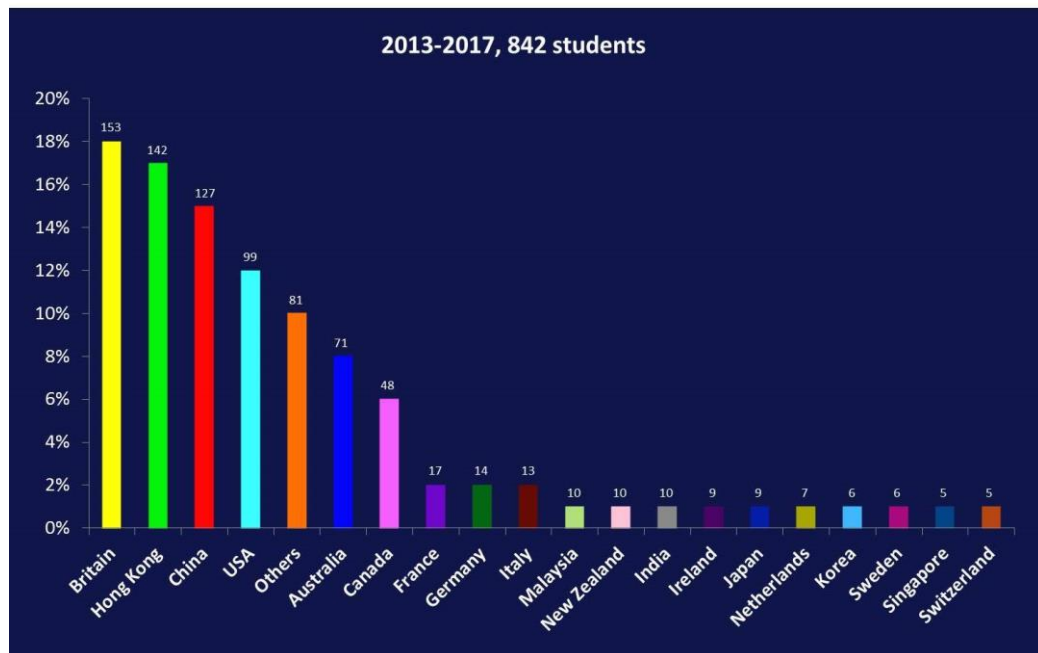
Fig. 2. Distribution of the children's nationalities.

The setting under study is not eligible for the pre-primary voucher scheme (PVS) due to the annual fees for weekly half a day classes being HK $144,000; an amount which exceeds the HK $24,000 maximum permitted by the scheme. Therefore, the parents in the setting are unable to apply for a fee subsidy and the school is unable to apply for any grants for school improvement (Hong Kong Education Bureau, 2020b).

Owing to the transient nature of Hong Kong expat life, children can join the setting at any point throughout the year and, subject to availability and consultation with their parents, are allocated to an age-appropriate class. If the child has additional needs, specialists may also be consulted. Some children remain in the setting for the entirety of their early years schooling, whereas others join particular classes and then move on to another early years setting, primary school or another country. The flow chart in Fig. 3 depicts the trajectory children would take if they remained at the setting throughout their pre-primary education.
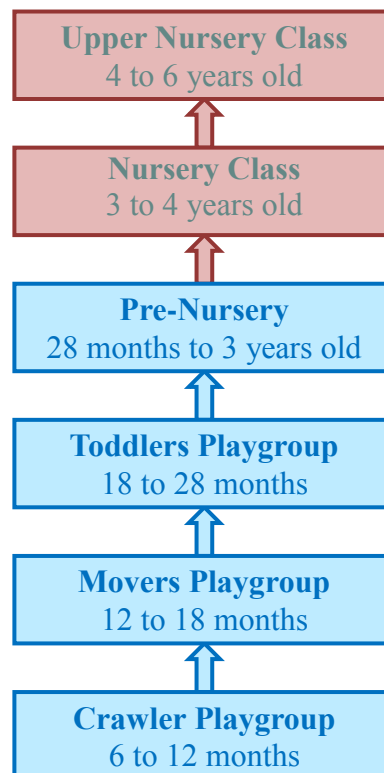
Fig. 3. The trajectory children take as they move through the setting.

As noted in the literature review, Hong Kong offers a wide range of primary school options with varying curriculum models and educational approaches. Children from the non-selective, inclusive setting under study have been accepted into more than 18 different primary schools during its six years of operation. Amongst the curricula offered in the schools depicted in the pie chart in Fig. 4 are British, American, Singaporean, German, French, IB, Canadian, Montessori, bilingual and local. These schools attract all nationalities, not only children whose parents are native to the countries in question. For example, the Chinese International, Canadian International, French International and German Swiss International schools are popular amongst a wide range of nationalities.

2014-2019 Primary School Leavers
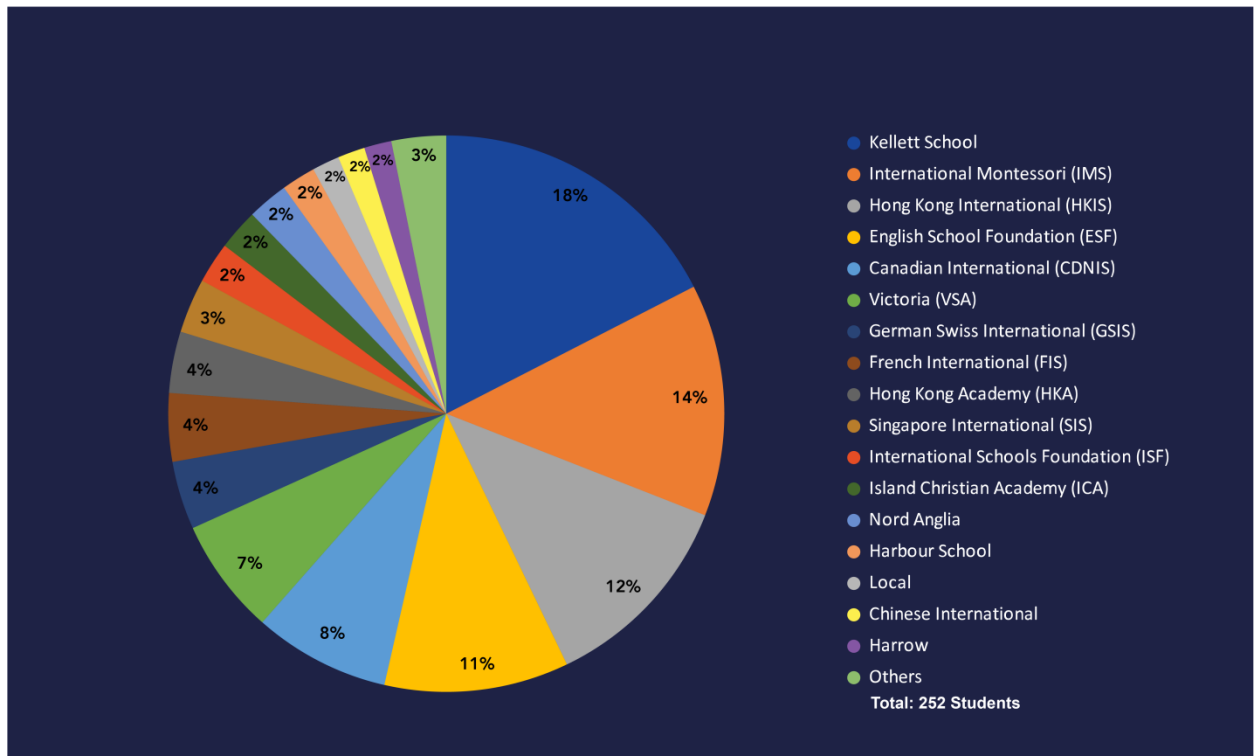
Fig. 4. Primary schools in Hong Kong that the setting's children move on to.

Each year, a small percentage of students leave Hong Kong and attend primary school elsewhere, as illustrated in Fig. 5.

2014-2019 Countries our Students Went On To
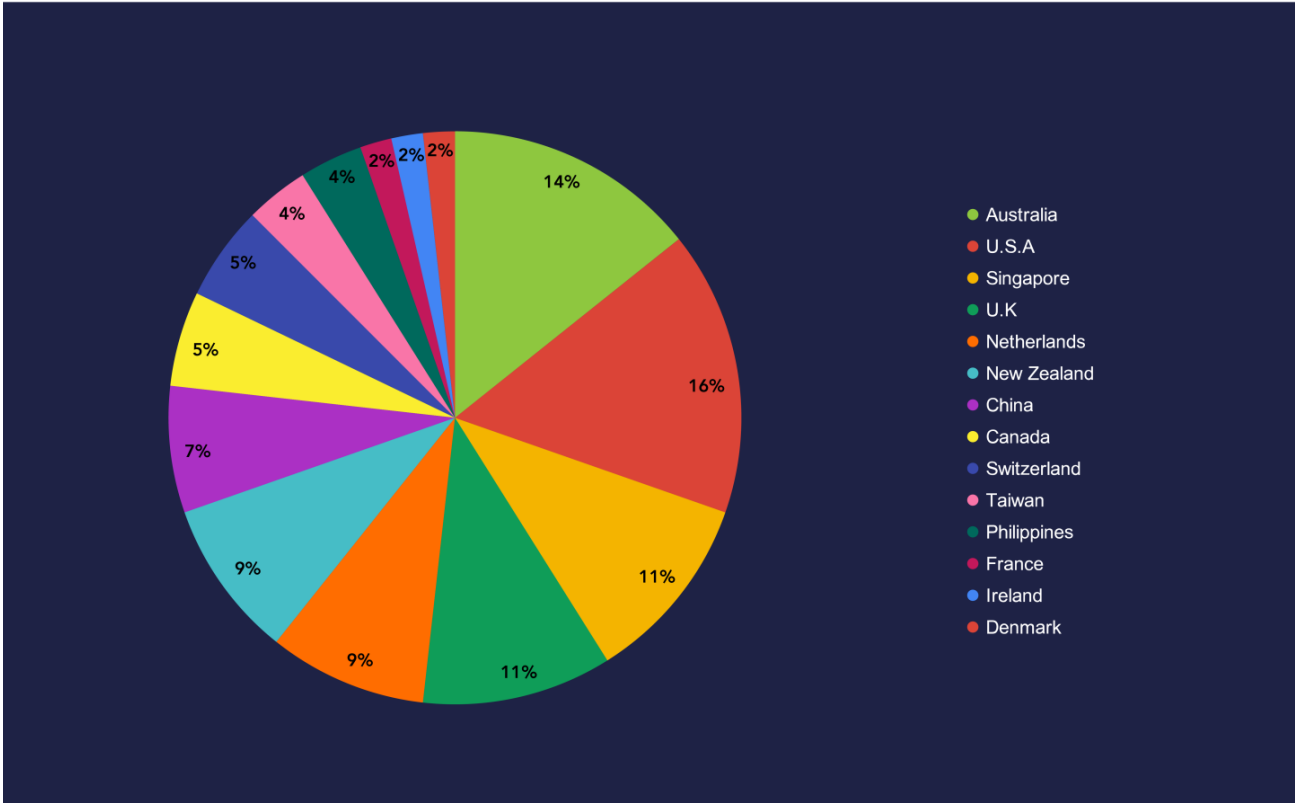
Fig. 5. Countries in which some former students attend primary school.

The focal institution's management and practitioners support parents with their overseas and Hong Kong applications by providing comprehensive school reports, required recommendation letters and advice on school suitability.

4.3 The Space

Located within the setting's 10,000-square-foot floor space (Fig. 6) are six large classrooms; one designated over 3's playground (Fig. 7) and one designated under 3's playground (Fig. 8); two activity rooms, one of which is used as an art studio and the other as a drama and music studio; a feeding and changing room for babies and toddlers; and a large seated reception area in which parents/caregivers can stay as long as they wish while their children are in class (Fig. 9). Alongside the parent/caregiver area is a children's gathering area (Fig. 10), where the children can sit and look at books should they arrive early. Within the reception area there is a resource library with a wide range of child development and education books for the parents/caregivers to read, as well as a self-service coffee and tea bar. As is typical with most commercial rented spaces in Hong Kong, the space began as a blank canvas, with no indication of the type of business that occupied it previously. The founder worked with an independent architect to custom design the space for the desired early years setting.
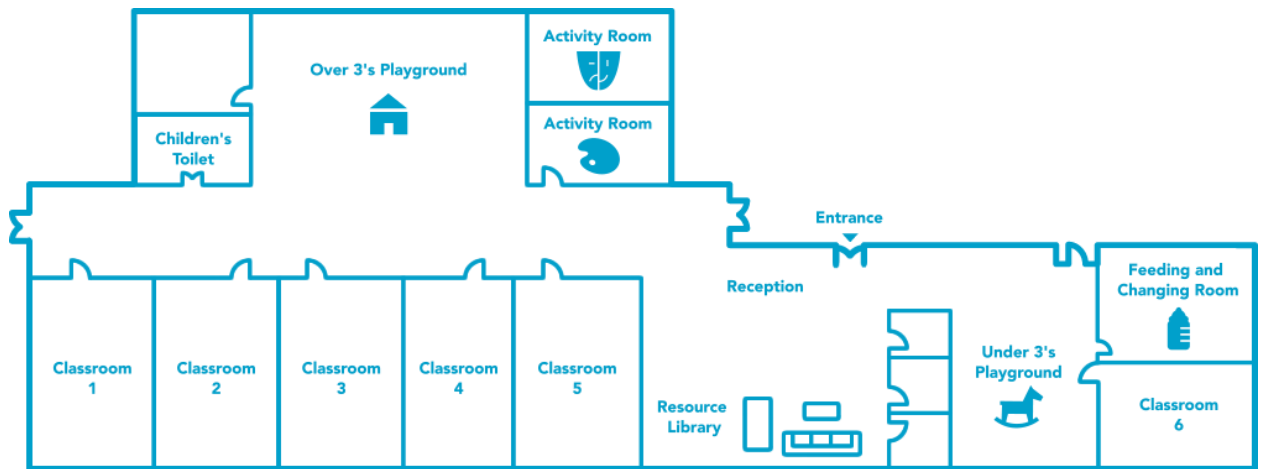
Fig. 6. Floorplan of the setting.

Fig. 7. The Over 3's playground.

Fig. 8. The Under 3's playground.
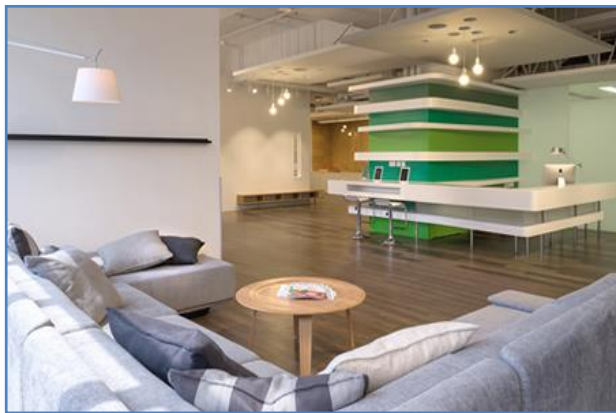
Fig. 9. The parent reception area.　　　　**Fig. 10.** The children's gathering area.
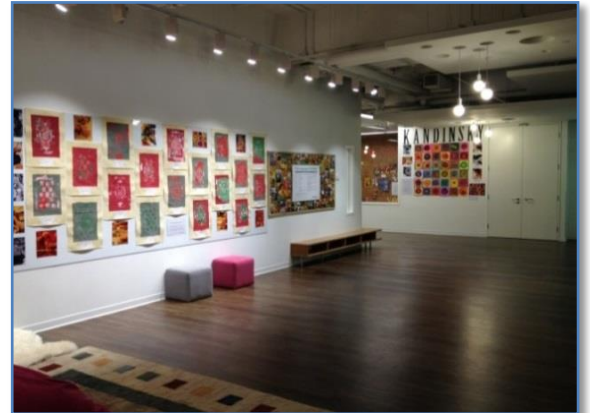
4.4 The Language of Children Teaching and Learning Framework

As noted, the focal early years institute designed its own bespoke play- and child-centred teaching and learning framework called the LoC. It is just one of numerous progressive early years models in Hong Kong that have been crafted with a fusion of Western influences. The LoC framework draws on several Western-inspired education models grounded in evidence-based research and practice, including the Reggio Emilia approach from Italy (Edwards *et al.*, 2012), the EYFS curriculum from England (Department of Education, 2017), High Scope from the United States (Holt, 2007) and the Te Whāriki framework from New Zealand (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2017), which were integrated to create an experiential, active learning approach that embraces the notion that every child is unique and learns in a different way as part of everyday practice. Tying together the pedagogical threads from the aforementioned models, the LoC is a flexible, evolving framework tailored to the Hong Kong context, thereby supporting Tan's (2016) supposition that 'reform initiatives are being (re) interpreted, challenged and modified in such a way that the final form they take in a locality may be very different from that in an original setting' (p. 196).

One of the considerations in the design and marketing process of the LoC was having an understanding of the skills that would be assessed during the primary school interviews that most of the children would be attending; as well the type of ongoing written reports and assessment documentation the primary schools and parents would expect to see from our setting. As a team it was important for us to have conversations and shared understandings about how we could ensure that through a play-based, child-centred approach the children would have an opportunity to develop the skills they needed for primary school assessments without the use of worksheets and homework. Another consideration was the terminology we used when talking to the parents about the programmes we offered. As an example, using the terms child-initiated learning or free play is generally misunderstood by parents in Hong Kong who interpret it as meaning that the children do whatever they wish and that there is limited structure. A further consideration was adapting the programme to fit into half day classes opposed to full day. Wood (2013) suggests that a given 'curriculum is designed to fit particular values and purposes' (p. 2), which is certainly the case in the setting under study. It is evident when looking at the pedagogical influences adopted by the

LoC depicted in Fig. 11 in a table provided by the focal setting, that there is considerable overlap with the ideas and practices of different educational models.

'The Language of Children'

HS=High Scope, RE= Reggio Emilia, TW=, Te Whāriki, EYFS = Early Years Foundation Stage, EX = Experiential Education

Environment	Curriculum	Teaching Style
Photos of the children (HS)	Children work in small and large groups (HS)(RE)(TW)(EYFS)	Allow children to do things for themselves (HS)(RE)(EX)
Well labeled classroom (HS)	Active learning (use of senses) (HS)(RE)(EX)	Adults and children to work together for mutual respect (HS)(RE)(TW)
Easy access to a wide range of materials (HS)	Supported to solve own problems (HS)	Adults engage in the children's world (HS)
Interest areas (block, art, science, book areas)(HS)(EX)	Children use initiative to explore and seek out answers to their own questions (HS)(RE)(EX)	Adults are a role model for children (HS)
Range of materials (HS)	Children have time to plan – do – review (HS)(EX)(RE)	Adults use encouragement rather than praise – specific to the children's actions (HS)
Inviting space to play together or along (HS)(EYFS)(TW)(RE)	Children as active learners (HS) (RE)(EX)	High quality adult-child interaction (HS) (EX)
Low shelves and dividers (HS)	A consistent, but flexible routine (HS)(RE)(EYFS)	Adults are trained in how children learn (HS)
A calming and relaxed environment – especially at the beginning of the day (HS)	Empower children (HS)(RE)(RE)(EYFS)(EX)(TW)	Teachers ask 'real' questions (HS)
Space for children to place their belongings (coats, bags, shoes etc)) – that belongs to them with photo/name (HS)(RE)	Children learn from key experiences gained from the world around them and their own discoveries (HS)(EX)(RE)	Teachers find out what children are interested in and then helps to promote and scaffold those areas (HS)(EX)(RE)
A safe, stimulating / challenging and well respected environment is created (HS)(EX)(RE)	Adult and child initiated learning (HS)	Teachers are very involved in the children's work and participates with them (HS)
Regularly reflect on the environment with the children and change materials/equipment for more appealing ones if necessary (EX)	Routine should be flexible (HS)(RE)(EX)	Teachers give children time to transition from one activity to another, for example, 5 mins to home time or story time (HS)
Have agreed shared rules for the classroom/school (HS) (EX)	Children are encouraged to talk about what they are doing (HS)(RE)(EYFS)(EX)(TW)	Teachers form partnerships (HS)(EYFS) (RE)(TW)
Learning is visible (RE)	Children are given a choice on how to use the materials (HS)(RE)(EX)	Teachers form authentic relationships with the children (HS)(RE)
Build a community (HS)(RE)(TW)	Children reflect on what they are doing, what they want to do and what they have learnt – could share a piece of work with the group for example(HS)(RE)(EX)	Highly reflective for teachers and children (RE) (EX)
	Children to somehow sign themselves in at the beginning of the day (photos/name) (HS)	
	Large group time and small group time (HS)	
	Planning time for children – with the help of a teacher (HS)	
	Recording/documentation/photos of children\s ideas and thoughts (HS)(RE)	
	A problem solving approach is adopted for dealing with conflict (HS)	
	Time for deep level learning (EX)(RE)	
	Children to be encouraged to follow their own interests (HS)(EX)(RE)	
	Introduce children to new materials and equipment (HS) (EX)	

Materials/Equipment	Parents	Assessment
Reflect the community (HS) (TW)(RE)	High levels of parent involvement (HS)(RE)	Regular observations and assessments which are shared with the parents - this helps to strengthen the relationship between the parents and their children (HS)(EYFS)(RE)(EX)(TW)
Manmade and natural (HS)(RE)	Regular parent workshops (HS)(EYFS)(RE)	
Open ended materials (HS)(RE)(EYFS)(EX)(TW)	Lots of two way communication between teachers and parents (HS)(RE)(TW)	

Fig. 11. The global early years models adopted by the LoC framework.

The LoC framework consists of six areas of learning and development – Communication, Language and Literacy; Personal, Social and Emotional Development; Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy; Creativity, Music and the Arts; Physical Development; and The World – which fit into four categories: Learning to Do, Learning to Be, Learning to Know and Learning to Live Together (Fig. 12). The setting's practitioners use these categories as a broad and flexible guide to plan learning opportunities for the children based on the children's own interests. The educational and developmental learning objectives are drawn from the EYFS framework (Department of Education, 2017).

The Language of Children®

	Learning to DO	Learning to BE	Learning to KNOW	Learning to LIVE TOGETHER
Personal, Social and Emotional Development	Form relationships with adults and peers Reflect and openly share their opinions and feelings	A confident, happy and socially well adjusted person	How to work independently and as part of a class and community How to make decisions and learn from their mistakes	Successful in family and social life as well as having a strong sense of self worth
Physical Development	Move freely with pleasure and confidence Use small and large muscles with coordination, balance and accuracy	A healthy and strong person	How to develop a safe, healthy and life long lifestyle How to construct and get involved with different types of play and sport on a small and large scale	Able to take responsibility and care of themselves and others; both physically and emotionally
Communication, Language and Literacy	Be a confident talker and listener Be able to discuss their plans and ideas to a high level with both adults and peers	An effective communicator	How to express themselves in a variety of ways through storytelling, role play, rhyme, drama and writing How to develop the love of reading	Able to communicate with anyone, in a wide range of contexts
Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy	Think Critically Experience first hand mathematical concepts and relationships	An adept problem solver	How to use a variety of skills to solve mathematical and everyday problems How to develop an understanding of number, space, shapes, calculations, time, pattern, measure, data analysis, mathematical relationships and vocabulary, classification and 1:1 correspondence	Working out solutions independently or collectively to everyday problems - as well as the more complex
Creativity, Music and the Arts	Think creatively Use all of their senses to support them in all areas of learning	A successful innovator	How to use their imagination in their play and experimentation of music and the arts How to express feelings, knowledge and interests through drawing, model making, painting, singing, dance, musical instruments and movement	Has an appreciation for the arts and is able to make valuable contributions to society
The World	Use technology to support learning Be open to finding out about how and why things happen and work, including current and past events	A worldly person with a global perspective	How to be an inquisitive explorer, scientist, astronomer, botanist, politician and world citizen How different cultures celebrate religious and other events that are important to them	A knowledgeable person with world views and respect for the environment and other living beings

The Language of Children®. Taking threads from the following pedagogical practices; EYFS, High Scope, Experiential, Reggio Emilia and Te Whariki

Fig. 12. The LoC framework.

4.5 The Staff

As shown in the organisational chart in Fig. 13, the setting's staff cover all aspects of operation, including teaching, management, administration, marketing and finance. The managing director oversees operations, and is in frequent communication with the board of directors. The head of school supervises and manages the 14 practitioners and artists in residence. A designated learning support coordinator (LSC), who is also a UK-trained speech and language therapist, teaches two pre-nursery classes per week, as well as conducting private therapy sessions with students and offering in-class support to the practitioners. The practitioners are generally responsible for teaching either under 3's or over 3's classes (see Fig. 3 above for the age range in the various classes). The LSC supports the practitioners with classroom management strategies/training and liaises with parents and outside therapists to support children who may need a little extra learning or developmental support.
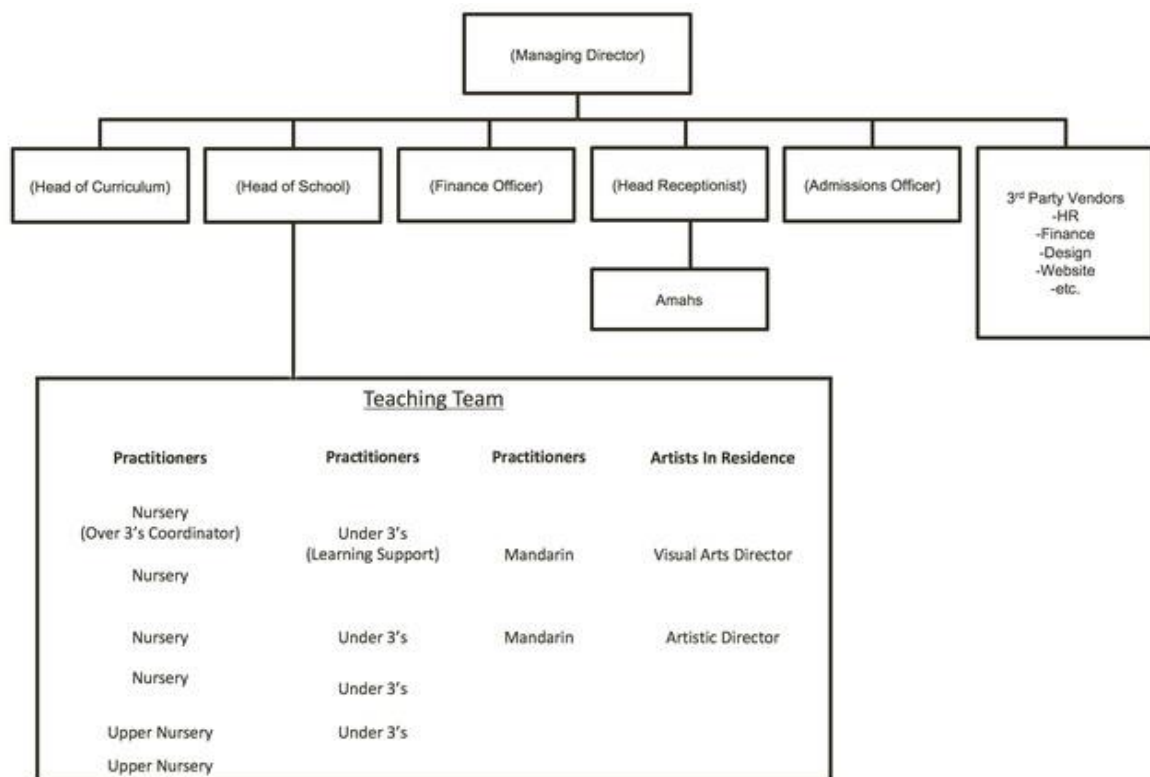
Fig. 13. A flowchart depicting the organisation of staff and who they report to.

As a part-time head of curriculum situated in England, I conduct weekly Skype meetings with the head of school. During my three to four annual school visits (each trip lasting between two and four weeks), my responsibility is to conduct staff training, which includes formal classroom observations, and parent workshops.

The head of school and I conduct global recruitment every year, with interviews held in Hong Kong and England or via Skype. The setting requires practitioners to hold a degree or certificate in early childhood education and have at least two years of classroom experience. Owing to the transient nature of expatriate life, staff turnover is generally high, meaning that locally situated practitioners (who do not require a working visa), who account for 50% of the teaching team, are pivotal to the success of the school and to programme continuity. Practitioners, regardless of whether they are local or overseas hires typically remain for two to three years, as per their initial contract, and then have an option to extend if both sides are in agreement. This arrangement is typical of employment contracts in Hong Kong early years settings. It is not unusual however, for practitioners to seek teaching posts in other countries once they have completed their first contract in Hong Kong. As Yang and Li (2018a) observe, it is important to parents in Hong Kong that English is infused into early years settings, and schools therefore often look to overseas recruitment. Owing to visa requirements, overseas hires must be on time-specified work contracts.

4.6 The Participants

The study's participants comprised eight practitioners and the head of school. As the study concerns their experiences and opinions, it is important to give readers some contextual background information, including participants' professional and cultural background, thereby enabling them to contextualise the findings and conclusions in relation to their own professional context and understanding.

All of the information on the participating practitioners/head of school in the participant profile table in Fig. 14, as well as the biographical information presented in the following pages, come from the one-to-one interview transcripts. The profile gives the participants' aliases, as well as their nationality, qualifications and the country in which their

qualifications were obtained. In addition, the following information is recorded: how many years the participants have been teaching a play-based approach; how many years they have been teaching; the length of time they have been employed in the setting under study; and the countries in which they taught in before joining the setting. Participants were emailed the table and their biographical details (including their assigned alias) for a verification of accuracy. They were also invited to edit or remove any information that was incorrect or that they felt uncomfortable revealing. I received responses from all of the participants within a week, all of whom verified the accuracy of the information. The only exception was Jess, who had left the company at the end of her first year, three months after her interview, and left no forwarding contact details.

The responses I received in addition to information verification were positive and supportive. Three of the participants thanked me for including them in the study, and Gili gave me permission to use her real name in the study if I wished. However, I politely declined her offer, explaining the ethical procedures I needed to follow. Tara, the head of school, added additional information to her biography to include further details of her previous employment.

Practitioner/Head of School Participant Profiles

Name and Nationality	Qualifications and where they were obtained	Years teaching a play-based Approach / years teaching in general	Time employed at the current setting	Previous countries of settings taught in before current setting
Jess **New Zealand**	B.Ed in ECE (NZ)	15yrs / 17 yrs	8 months	NZ, Australia, Egypt **China**
Gili **British**	B.Ed in ECE studies (UK) PGCEi (UK)	4yrs / 5yrs	4 years	**HK**
Sam **American**	B.A in Psychology & Education (USA) Certificate in ECE	8 mths / 4yrs	8 months	Thailand, **HK**
Seb **British**	B.A in ECE (UK) Level 3 National Diploma in Child Care (UK)	10 yrs/ 10 yrs	2 years	**UK,** Italy
Nat **British**	M.A ECE (UK) Diploma in ECE (Australia)	27yrs /27yrs	2 years	**UK,** Poland, Philippines, **HK**
Rhea **Chinese**	BSc (China) Applied Psychology MA (HK) in Education	1.5 years / 8 yrs	1.5 years	**China, HK**
Kat **Malaysian / Singaporean**	B.A in Education (China)	4 years / 6 yrs	4 years	Malaysia, **HK**
Bea **Chinese / Canadian**	B.A in ECE (Canada)	4 yrs/ 4 yrs	2 years	Canada, **HK**
Tara (HoS) **British**	N.N.E.B, C.P.Q.S (UK)	38yrs / 38yrs	4 years	France, Australia, UK, Egypt, **HK**

Qualification Key:

B.A: Bachelor of Arts Degree; **BEd:** Bachelor of Education Degree; **BSc:** Bachelor of Science Degree; **CPQS**: Certificate in Post Qualifying Studies; **ECE**: Early Childhood Education; **M.A**: Masters of Art Degree; **N.N.E.B**: National Nursery Examination Board; **PGCEi** – Post Graduate Certificate in Education (International)

Country Key:

HK: Hong Kong; **NZ:** New Zealand; **UK**: United Kingdom; **USA:** United States of America

Fig. 14. Participant profile table.

Practitioner/Head of School Participant Biographies

Jess – *Nursery Practitioner (3- to 4-year-olds)*

Jess was born and grew up in New Zealand and had been employed by the setting under study for 8 months at the time of the interview. After a childhood spent exploring the outdoors and engaging in plenty of play, she studied for a Bachelor of Education in early childhood education. Upon graduating, Jess worked in numerous early years settings teaching the Te Whāriki framework, which she liked very much because of its holistic nature, although she commented that in practice it varied from setting to setting.

Keen to travel and experience different cultures, Jess taught in early years settings in Australia, Egypt and China before joining the setting under study. She believes that play is a good way to learn. Accordingly, she has continued to apply the fundamentals of how she taught in New Zealand, despite finding it a challenge to do so in certain settings outside her home country. Jess said that she is not keen on the goal-oriented EYFS, preferring the holistic child-centred nature of the Te Whāriki approach. She added that the early years settings in which she had taught in China and Egypt were highly goal-oriented and not play-based, which is what had prompted her to seek alternative employment in Hong Kong.

Gili – *Upper Nursery Practitioner (4- to 6-year-olds)*

Gili was born in England and moved to Hong Kong with her parents, as part of her father's work commitments, when she was 4 years-old. She attended both pre-school and a British international school in Hong Kong before going to the UK to study for a Bachelor of Education in early childhood education. As a child, Gili spent summers on her grandparent's farm in England, and she has fond memories of being given the freedom to roam all day in and around the fields with her siblings.

Gili left university with a vision of the type of setting in which she wanted to work based on the play-based, child-centred pedagogy to which she had been exposed during her degree. She expressed her disappointment at working in an early years setting that expected her to teach interview preparation and communication classes to 2- to 4-year-olds upon her

return to Hong Kong. Gili noted that she does not take an academic approach at school, but respects that children learn in different ways and therefore do best in a nurturing, play-based setting that values children as individuals. Last year, she was awarded a PGCEi under the supervision and mentoring of a fellow staff member at the setting under study.

Sam – *Playgroup and Pre-Nursery Practitioner (6 months to age 3)*

Sam was born in America and studied for a degree in psychology and education in California. She has fond memories of attending a play-based pre-school and having lots of freedom to explore and play after school. Keen to work in education and travel, Sam began working in Thailand teaching English to children aged 7 and upwards. Following that, she taught at a Thai Government kindergarten teaching 4- and 5-year-olds, which was her first experience of working in early years education. The focus was on workbooks, with some play allowed at the end of the day.

After observing the practice of an American kindergarten in Thailand, where she was amazed to see how much the children learned through play and how much more relaxed they seemed than at the kindergarten at which she worked, Sam decided to study for a distance-learning early childhood diploma and then find a play-based kindergarten to work at. Sam subsequently moved to Hong Kong to work in an international kindergarten, but was disappointed to discover a disconnect between what she was studying and what she was expected to do in practice, such as teach letters and numbers to children as young as 18 months old and teach through workbooks to 3- and 4-year-olds. This experience prompted Sam to explore other employment options in Hong Kong, and ultimately to accept a position at the setting under study.

Seb – *Pre-Nursery Practitioner (3- to 4-year-olds)*

Seb was born and grew up in England and studied for a Level 3 National Diploma in child care before continuing with a top-up degree in early childhood education. He has fond memories of his own play-based early years experiences, including den-making, although recalls that his education post-reception year was more teacher-led. Seb enjoyed his time

working in Sure Start centres, where he worked alongside parents to guide them in interacting with their children and took advantage of opportunities to draw on the knowledge of more experienced practitioners and access current research.

Keen to take his passion for early years education abroad, Seb taught for two years at an Italian play-based kindergarten, where he appreciated having the autonomy to 'plan in the moment' for the children in accordance with their interests. Two years prior to the one-to-one interview for the current research, Seb joined the setting under study, where he has worked with all age groups and was recently promoted to co-coordinator of the over 3's. At the time of the interview, Seb was teaching a pre-nursery class.

Nat – *Upper Nursery Practitioner (4- to 6-year-olds)*

Nat was born and raised in England. When she moved to Hong Kong as the mother of young children, she spent a considerable amount of time searching for a play-based setting in which to work and for her children to attend. Nat feels strongly that children learn best through play, and thus finding the right setting for herself and her children was very important to her. During her time in Hong Kong, Nat studied for a distance-learning diploma in early childhood education and then continued with a Master's degree in the same subject through a UK university.

Once her children were older, Nat went to work in an international school in the Philippines and then in Poland, where she found it challenging to educate parents about how children learn through play. The approach to learning in the Polish setting was quite formal, prompting Nat to return to Hong Kong two years ago. Once again, finding a play-based setting was a priority. Coming from a family of teachers, Nat enjoys engaging in regular conversations and comparing notes on classroom practice with her adult children who now also teach in Hong Kong.

Rhea – *Mandarin Practitioner (all ages)*

Rhea was born and raised in China in a town close to Shanghai. She completed her undergraduate studies in China before obtaining a Master's degree in education from a

Hong Kong university. Play was not a part of her schooling or home life, and it wasn't until Rhea had completed her studies that she began reading research on the notion of implementing play in early years education. Although learning through play was not covered in her studies, she became curious about play-based, child-centred learning and keen to work in a setting that values it.

Rhea previously taught at an international kindergarten in Hong Kong that focused on whole class teaching with homework and workbooks. It implemented no specific curriculum, and teaching was generally conducted through a textbook. Rhea had joined the setting under study 18 months prior to the interview. When hired, she was completely new to play-based learning and wasn't sure how it was possible to fuse playing and learning. Rhea was inspired to apply for a position at the setting after reading about the company's approach to teaching and learning on its website.

Kat – *Mandarin Practitioner (all ages)*

Kat was born in Singapore, moved to Malaysia at the age of 3 and attended university in Shanghai. Play was not an aspect of her education, which focused on academics from an early age, i.e. homework, worksheets, exams and scores. Kat reported that her family had no idea about how play could constitute learning, perceiving it as an activity for children to engage in only if they had time to do so once they had finished homework, classes and tuition sessions.

Kat's experience of teaching kindergarten children in Malaysia and in her first job in Hong Kong involved a whole class approach using a chalkboard and referring to a textbook, with worksheets regularly handed out and homework assigned. Inspired by her own research and her conversations with others, Kat became interested in discovering more about play-based, child-centred learning and in finding a setting in which she could learn new skills. She considers herself to be a creative person and wanted to engage with a flexible and creative approach to learning. Kat had joined the setting under study four years prior to the interview. She said that the first year was a real learning curve for her, as she struggled to learn how children can learn through play.

Bea – *Playgroup and Pre-Nursery Practitioner (6 months to age 3)*

Bea was born in Hong Kong but moved to Canada with her family after kindergarten, completing her schooling and obtaining a Bachelor's degree in early childhood education in that country. Play was not a big part of her upbringing, and her after-school activities included enrichment classes, piano practice and Maths classes. Bea felt that although her mother had taken her to Canada to escape the competitiveness and stress of the Hong Kong education system, achievement and success remained important.

After graduating from university, Bea worked in a play-based early years setting in Canada before returning to Hong Kong to work in a kindergarten that followed the EYFS framework. Bea felt that although the kindergarten should have had a play-based focus, most of the time it didn't, being very theme-focused and teacher-directed. Reflecting on her own studies in Canada and inspired by further reading, Bea began to search for employment in a play-based, child-centred setting that was in alignment with her own values and beliefs.

Tara – *Head of School (non-teaching)*

Tara was born in England. Motivated by a strong desire to work with children, she completed an NNEB qualification in 1980, which further strengthened her belief in the efficacy of a play-based, child-centred approach to early years education. A desire to travel led her to spend three years as a nanny in France before travelling to Australia for six months. She subsequently worked as a home visitor, working with young children (age 5 and below) with special educational needs in their own homes, providing support to their families and delivering structured teaching through child-led play. While working in a children's hospital providing play opportunities to long-term patients, she acquired her CPQS. Before moving to Hong Kong in 2008, she ran a play-based OFSTED facility for children living in supported housing who had experienced domestic violence.

Tara's first job in Hong Kong was in a play-based, child-centred setting. She remained there for 13 months before being offered a role within an NGO to further develop the organisation and introduce a play-based curriculum for three early years settings. However,

when the organisation began struggling for funds less than a year later, she decided to leave Hong Kong. It was the plans for the establishment of the setting under study that drew Tara back to Hong Kong. She has been with the institution since its inception, beginning as a classroom practitioner before being promoted to coordinator of the over 3's curriculum, deputy head of school and then head of school, the position she currently holds.

Chapter 5

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Findings and Discussion

5.1 Introduction

As discussed in the methodology chapter, the data collection tools used to answer the research questions in the present case study were 60-minute, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with eight practitioners and the head of school; two non-participatory, semi-structured classroom observations of two classes; and documentary evidence. Having three data sources afforded me the opportunity to triangulate the data and thereby increasing the reliability, validity and trustworthiness' of the findings (Wellington, 2015). The classroom observation schedule for both classes can be found in Appendix M.

The study's aim was to identify the aspects of a play-based, child-centred approach that practitioners are finding a challenge to put into practice; how practitioners are able to navigate high parental expectations; and how they can best be supported in their practice within their particular Hong Kong setting to feel secure and confident in practice. A further aim of the study was to determine how practitioners who have not experienced the pedagogy of play as part of their own childhood education or teacher training are able to adapt to teaching a play- and child-centred approach. The four research questions I sought to answer are:

1. What aspects of implementing a play-based, child-centred approach are practitioners finding challenging?
2. How do practitioners navigate parental expectations?
3. How can practitioners be best supported in their practice within their own setting?
4. How can practitioners who have not experienced the pedagogy of play as part of their own childhood education or teacher training adapt to teaching a play- and child-centred approach?

I have organised the remainder of this chapter into the six following subchapters.

5.2 The Educational and Cultural Context of the Focal Setting: The literature has reported widely on the competitive educational and cultural landscape that exists in Hong Kong. To add context to the interview responses, I considered it important to gain clarity as to whether this view of the landscape was shared by the practitioners in this study. I also sought clarification from the participants about their interpretation of a play-based, child-centred approach to add further context to the data.

5.3 Challenges of Implementing a Play-Based, Child-Centred Approach: The numerous challenges that early years practitioners in Hong Kong face in adopting play-based approaches in the classroom have been illuminated by the literature (Chen *et al*., 2017; Cheng *et al*., 2015). In this subchapter, I seek answers to the first research question: *What aspects of implementing a play-based, child-centred approach are practitioners finding a challenge?*

The three main themes illuminated by the data are the challenges of *meeting parental expectations*, *creativity and flexibility*, and *the implementation and understanding of play.*

5.4 Navigating Parental Expectations: Parents have been described as driving the policy discourse within early years institutes (Cheung *et al.*, 2017; Hong Kong Government News, 2017) and as having high expectations of their young children (Wong and Rao, 2015; Chan and Chan, 2003). In this subchapter, I seek answers to the second research question**:** *How do practitioners navigate parental expectations?*

Three key themes emerged from the data: *communication with parents*, *being knowledgeable about and supportive of the primary school process*, and *promoting shared understandings*.

5.5 Supporting Practitioners in Their Practice: To be able to conduct their jobs confidently and to feel secure in their practice, practitioners are expected to have a broad range of skills, experience and knowledge (Curriculum Development Council, 2017; Recchia and Beck, 2014). However, they are not always prepared for or equipped with such skills, experience and knowledge during their university training or via in-house support. In

this subchapter, I seek answers to the third research question: *How can practitioners be best supported in their practice within their own setting?*

Three key themes emerged from the data: *shared values and beliefs* with colleagues and the setting as a whole, *induction training*, and *practitioner support tools.*

5.6 Adapting to a Play- and Child-Centred Approach: The literature suggests that practitioners who were born and/or raised in a culture that does not value play find it a particular challenge to adapt to teaching a play-based approach (Grieshaber, 2016). The same is true of those who have not received adequate training (Vue *et al.*, 2015; Wu, 2014). In this subchapter, I seek answers to the fourth research question: *How can practitioners who have not experienced the pedagogy of play as part of their own childhood education or teacher training adapt to teaching a play- and child-centred approach?*

The findings of this study suggest that practitioners are able to adapt to teaching a play-based pedagogy as long as they hold similar values and beliefs to those of their setting and colleagues and are afforded ample time and support to adapt, particularly in their first year.

5.2 The Educational and Cultural Context of the Focal Setting

Hong Kong has been described as a 'competition-driven society embracing the philosophy of "survival of the fittest"' (Wong, 2006, p. 280), and research suggests that parents have high expectations of years institutions and are the key drivers of the early years education policy discourse (Cheung *et al.*, 2017; Hong Kong Government News, 2017). They thus hold the primary power, or 'cultural capital', within the early years field. There is the added complexity that many primary schools in Hong Kong are highly selective, thus creating additional tension for parents, children and practitioners alike owing to the strong competition for entry (Humpage, 2016). Because each 'field' operates differently (Yang and Li, 2018a), and practitioners entering a given field bring with them their own habitus, i.e. knowledge, values and experiences (O'Donoghue, 2012), I sought to gather contextual information to provide a more nuanced understanding of the study's findings. More specifically, I sought information from the participants on the cultural and educational context in which the focal setting is positioned, as well as their interpretation of play-based, child-centred learning. As reported in Chapter 4, the study participants represented seven nationalities, namely, Chinese, Singaporean, Malaysian, Canadian, New Zealand, American

and British, and between them they had taught in the 11 following countries/territories: Thailand, China, Hong Kong, England, Italy, Egypt, the Philippines, Australia, Malaysia, France and New Zealand.

The participants described the parents in the focal setting as affluent, highly educated and coming from a range of countries/territories, including Hong Kong. One of the participants, Sam, described the parents as being '*really interesting people, a lot of whom are in finance and business jobs*'. Gili added: '*I think parents here in Hong Kong have high expectations … it's all private education, and they pay a lot of money to see outcomes*.' All of the participants referred to Hong Kong as competitive, whether with regard to culture, education, money or employment status. Nat suggested: '*There is a culture of making money and competitiveness, and when you are out socially you can definitely feel that*.' Gili, who moved from the UK to Hong Kong with her family at the age of 4, shared the following about her experiences in the territory.

> *In general, Hong Kong is a very competitive environment…. A lot of people come here for high-profile jobs, so you get the best of the best…. It is one competitive cycle, and I don't know how you break it. I went to a workshop recently called 'simplicity parenting', and the speaker was talking about this whole idea of parents being competitive with each other. [For example] if one parent has their child enrolled in phonics classes, then other parents feel the pressure to enrol their child[ren] so as to keep up. Even in my own life, when I am talking to friends who work in Hong Kong, I can feel the pressure, for example, when they start comparing who has the best work package … it's not pleasant.*

The aforementioned responses suggest that the competitive-driven society that exists in Hong Kong (Wong, 2006) is felt amongst the participants, in and out of the classroom.

In my literature review in Chapter 2, I point out that a play-based, child-centred approach has numerous interpretations, and the literature provides illumination on how those interpretations can differ between settings and indeed within settings (Yelland and Leung, 2018; Izumi-Taylor *et al.*, 2010). I considered it important within the context of this study to ascertain exactly what a play-based, child-centred approach meant to the participants. The common themes I identified in the participants' responses included '*allowing children*

to explore, engage and discover' (Bea); *'giving ... children the opportunity to follow their interests'* (Jess); *'play is spontaneous',* and child-centred learning allows children *'[to] have a voice in terms of how the room is set up and the choices they make'* (Seb); and *'children having ownership of their learning without strict boundaries'* (Nat).

Three of the participants (Sam, Rhea and Kat) had not previously worked in a play-based, child-centred setting, and it was interesting to note that their interpretations were very similar to those of the participants who had worked in such a setting for much longer. For example, Sam, who had previously taught in traditional teacher-directed early years settings in both Thailand and Hong Kong, described a play-based, child-centred approach as follows.

> *It is a shift away from the traditional approach of standing up in front of the class with the children all looking at the teacher. We are more interested in what the individual children are interested in rather than the class as a whole and what they can do. [Play] is an opportunity for children to make their own choices and to be free to find out what they enjoy, as well as an opportunity to learn new skills and to be challenged. The reason they are engaging is because they are interested. I think the element of freedom and choice is really what play is all about. At my previous setting[s] in Hong Kong and Thailand, everyone had to do the same activities together, but this way [a play-based, child-centred approach] children are given more choices and can follow their interests.*

Listening to and reflecting on the responses practitioners gave when asked to describe a play-based, child-centred approach led me to conclude that there was a mutual understanding of what such an approach means in practice in the setting under study amongst the participants, and presumably more widely amongst the settings' practitioners as a whole. This is important to note because it is not unusual, especially in the context of Hong Kong, for practitioners not to have shared understanding or knowledge (Wu, 2014), which can lead to a failure to fit into their given professional habitus (Maton, 2014). Without shared knowledge of what a play-based, child-centred approach looks like in practice in a particular field, practitioners will likely find it a challenge to hold any kind of power within that field, thus leaving an opening for parents to be the drivers of teaching and learning (Cheung *et al.*, 2017; Hong Kong Government News, 2017).

5.3 Challenges of Implementing a Play-Based, Child-Centred Approach

One of the aims of this study was to identify the aspects of a play-based, child-centred approach that practitioners are finding challenging to put into practice. In this subchapter, I discuss the findings gleaned from the one-to-one, semi-structured interviews, classroom observations and documentary evidence with respect to this question: **What aspects of implementing a play-based, child-centred approach are practitioners finding challenging?**

Adopting a thematic analysis approach (Braun and Clarke, 2006), I identified three main themes: *meeting parental expectations*, *creativity and flexibility*, and the *implementation and understanding of play*. I placed the themes of creativity and flexibility together owing to the overlap between them.

5.3.1 Meeting Parental Expectations

At least six of the participants cited the management of parental expectations as a challenge, rendering it the greatest challenge of implementing a play-based, child-centred approach identified by the participants in this study. More specifically, the participants said that it was a challenge at times to communicate with parents about how and what their children are learning. Rhea, a Chinese practitioner who had no prior play-based experience before joining the setting, expressed the following: '*[S]ometimes, it is difficult to explain to the parents exactly what we do because there is no fixed curriculum.*' It was not only practitioners new to play-based, child-centred learning who found such communication with parents difficult, but experienced practitioners too. For example, Gili, an experienced play-based practitioner of four years' standing, said '*the challenge for us is finding a balance and educating the parents on what the children are learning*'.

Sam, who had worked in the setting for eight months at the time of the interview, found it a challenge to '*get parents on board with this type of curriculum…. [H]ow do we show them that this is a really good place for their children and that it is a good way for children to learn?*' During the interviews, all of the participants at some point made it clear that they valued and believed in a play-based, child-centred approach. However, five of them questioned whether the setting's parents really valued the notion of play-based learning.

Rhea's view is representative: '*I honestly don't think parents always understand the value of play…. [T]hey think the key element [of learning] is a child being able to count to 10 forwards and backwards, and they think that is the priority when really it isn't.*' The participants either suspected or knew that some of the parents were taking their children to other institutions to supplement their learning. For example, Sam said: '*I hear some parents say that they go to other places that use flashcards to bolster learning…. I don't think they would be doing that if they thought they were getting everything they needed from this setting.*'

It is not unusual in Hong Kong for children to attend extracurricular classes or, in the words of Wong and Rao (2015), 'cram schools' (p. 2). However, it is understandable that the lack of commitment to or belief or trust in a play-based approach described by Sam could indeed make a practitioner's job difficult, as it necessitates finding ways to meet parental expectations and offer reassurances about the learning taking place.

Whilst it is well-recognised that play can support learning and development, the learning outcomes of a play-based approach are not often visible or measurable (Wood, 2013), which can pose a challenge for practitioners implementing such an approach. For example, Jess, an experienced play-based practitioner of 17 years who was born and raised in New Zealand and had taught in New Zealand, Australia, Egypt and China before joining the focal setting, stated that despite her experience of working and communicating with families from all over the world, she '*struggle[s] with the pressure from parents [who although] want the best [for their children] … want immediate results, proof and evidence, which is not always immediately obvious through play activities*'. A similar view was shared by Bea, a Chinese/Canadian national who has worked in both Canada and Hong Kong:

> *The challenge is that parents just want to see results really quickly. Even if deep down they believe in play-based learning, and we tell them that they [children] can still achieve the same things, they really want to visually see it as soon as possible.*

One of the challenges the participants faced in meeting parental expectations was navigating the gaps in parents' knowledge of how learning can be achieved through play. Within the more traditional didactic approaches that some of the practitioners had

previously adopted, parents are accustomed to receiving homework books or worksheets depicting the learning that has taken place on any given day, a strategy that is commonly implemented in Hong Kong settings (Fung and Cheng, 2012; Ebbeck, 1995). Rhea shared her experience:

They [the parents] think there needs to be worksheets and paper proof of the learning that has taken place that day. I used to teach from workbooks for 2- and 3-year-olds [in her previous setting], which I didn't believe in. In the very academic-based kindergarten I used to teach at the children had textbooks they needed to bring every day, and we gave them homework and assessments every term, which the parents could see.

For a practitioner to be able to communicate to parents about the learning that is taking place in the classroom and to offer justifications for not providing workbooks, they would arguably need to feel confident about their own knowledge and the teaching/learning taking place. Surprisingly, Jess, a native New Zealander with years of experience teaching in four different countries, emphasised strongly during her interview that she feels considerable pressure from parents with regard to the primary school interview process and regularly receives requests for measurable outcomes of children's learning. Although she had previously taught in academic-oriented early years settings in Egypt and China, she said the pressure in those settings did not reach the same level of intensity with respect to parental expectations. As noted, the concern for many parents is whether their children will achieve what they need to achieve for primary school success in a setting that follows a play-based approach, even if they perceive such an approach as ideal (Chan, 2016). It could be that such concern is driven by the demands of primary schools, which exert pressure on parents that is then transferred to the practitioners of early years settings. It is evident from the data collected in the current study that the tensions surrounding primary school assessments are a challenge for practitioners, regardless of their experience in or knowledge of the field. Sam's view is representative:

I feel pressure from parents to get their children ready for primary school interviews, such as writing their names. There is also pressure from parents to push numeracy and literacy skills at an early age. I am not sure if it's the influence of Asian culture or other factors.

Jess went so far as to say that such intense parental pressure takes away some of the enjoyment of teaching and summed up the situation as follows.

The pressure from the parents about [the children] getting into primary school is hard; parents want proof that their children are learning. They are worried that their children won't get into primary school, which puts pressure on us to reassure them that their children are learning through a play-based approach. The problem is the children here are not feeding into one primary school, which makes it more complex, ... [and] so meeting the needs of the community [necessitates] a much wider picture.

As discussed in Chapter 3, I chose to interview Tara, the head of school, after completing all of the practitioner interviews. Doing so allowed me to verify the data by obtaining the views of someone who had worked at the setting since its inception in 2013. Before becoming head of school, Tara worked as a practitioner at the setting. She identified the ability to communicate with parents and meet their expectations as a pivotal aspect of practitioners' professional role, but acknowledged that some topics of discussion pose a challenge:

I think communicating with parents about why we do what we do can be a challenge for some teachers…. I [have] always believe[d] that if parents are signing up for our setting then they believe in what they are signing up for. However, I think parents get into a bit of a panic when they are getting closer to their child going to primary school, and then put more pressure on the teachers with lots of questions. I think it is then a challenge for the teachers because they know why they are doing what they are doing, but they get worried about saying the right thing.

As noted, meeting parental expectations was identified as the greatest challenge in delivering a play-based, child-centred approach by the practitioners in this study. The interview data further suggested that communicating with parents about what and how their children are learning and dealing with primary school readiness questions are challenging issues for practitioners regardless of their experience and qualifications. It is fair to assume that an understanding of the Hong Kong primary school process is not knowledge that many practitioners are likely to have when they enter the field. Interestingly, and very

surprising to me personally, Rhea described the general school culture in Hong Kong as even more competitive than that in mainland China. As suggested in the literature review in Chapter 2, it is not only parents who hold significant capital or power within the field in question; so too do primary schools. The findings of this study illuminate the dominance within the field of the primary school admissions and assessment process. That dominance, in turn, exerts pressure on parents and practitioners alike. It is important to note however, that it is not the parents who are the focus of criticism here, but the complex socio political factors to which they are situated within the Hong Kong context.

5.3.2 Creativity and Flexibility

During the interviews, all of the participants expressed how much they enjoy the creativity and flexibility that a play-based, child-centred approach affords, despite the challenges they sometimes face. Nevertheless, four of the practitioners and the head of school identified implementing creative and flexible teaching within a play-based, child-centred model, particularly in their first year of teaching at the focal setting, as a challenge. Nat, who had worked in a range of play-based settings during her 27-year career, stated that she '*enjoy[s] the flexibility and autonomy*' she has as a teacher in the setting, and noted that she has become more creative since joining it. In Gili's view, practitioners in the setting are '*very lucky to be given the autonomy to teach creatively in a way that is right for the children … and to go with the children's interests*'. However, even though she considers herself to be a creative person, Gili acknowledged that she sometimes lacks inspiration or ideas and that planning for this type of curriculum can be time-consuming.

Thinking up new ideas and setting up activities based on the children's interests are also sometimes difficult for other practitioners in the setting, as Kat, a Malaysian/Singaporean national and early years Mandarin teacher who joined the setting four years ago after working at kindergartens in Malaysia and Hong Kong, explained, noting that the setting constituted her first exposure to a play-based, child-centred approach: '*I initially found it hard to adjust to the flexibility of the curriculum and using the skill of observing and listening to the children to plan in a creative, spontaneous way. I think some teachers have a lack of creativity.*' Bea, a Chinese Canadian educated in both Canada and Hong who worked in a Canadian kindergarten before returning to Hong Kong to work in another

kindergarten before joining the focal setting two years ago, also offered her thoughts on creativity and the time constraints of planning:

Planning can be time-consuming.... You know, you want each day to be new and exciting, and it can be difficult to think of new ideas. We all go through it ... needing some inspiration. Whereas in other curriculums you might have lots of structure in the curriculum where you don't need to worry about coming up with something new or creative because it's already written down.... Yeah, it's difficult because, as I said, I love the flexibility of ... being creative, but sometimes I do lack inspiration for ideas.

Bea said that in her previous Hong Kong setting she had been accustomed to preparing learning activities for the children without much thought, for example, just '*throw[ing] toys out on the table for [the] children to play with*', whereas she has now learnt to think more creatively and is able to set up a '*child-centred classroom [more] effectively*'. Particularly helpful in the process, she said, has been being given time to brainstorm with and test out ideas on her colleagues. Examples of what Bea was referring to with regard to setting up activities in an appealing way can be found in the photographs presented in Figs. 15 and 16, which depict a wild animal activity and farm activity, respectively, that she arranged for her pre-nursery class. The two activities were inspired by her previous day's observation of the children's interest in and discussions about animals.

Fig. 15. Wild animal activity.

Fig. 16. Farm activity.

Planning for and facilitating a play-based, child-centred approach is generally open-ended and spontaneous, requiring practitioners to react to their daily observations of and interactions with children and to plan accordingly, in contrast to whole class, didactic teaching in which teachers can simply refer to a textbook. Rhea was born and raised in China and had no experience of the former approach during her childhood or as part of her degree studies or former employment as an early years practitioner in Hong Kong. Having always taught a structured, teacher-directed approach before joining the focal setting, she was keen to discuss the challenges she had faced with the new approach:

> *The most challenging part was working with the Language of Children. It is more difficult to teach in a flexible way…. I didn't really understand the approach and curriculum at the beginning. I found it really challenging in the beginning to think of different ideas. I just didn't know what to teach. In my previous setting, I used to teach from a textbook. It is difficult to think of ideas to teach…. I sometimes need more creative inspiration.*

As noted earlier, early years settings in Hong Kong have been implored to design their own bespoke education models based on the guidelines of the curriculum guide (Curriculum Development Council, 2006). However, there are numerous skills that are required to teach a play-based, child-centred approach, amongst them creativity, observing and listening to children, asking questions and good classroom management (Chan, 2016; Cheung, 2016). The interview data suggest that not all of these skills come easily to practitioners without practice and guidance. In Kat's view, '*being a play-based teacher requires skill, open-mindedness, creativity, being an observer and listener of children and being flexible*', skills she suggested other practitioners struggle with too. Tara seemed to concur, expressing the view that creativity does not come naturally to everyone and acknowledging that, as a practitioner, she '*really struggled with coming up with creative ideas [to aid] the children's learning*'. Tara added that not only was creativity a personal challenge for her as a practitioner, but also that it is an '*area everyone has to work really hard with and support each other [to achieve]*'. It is helpful that some of the setting's practitioners are '*really creative and come up with and share the most amazing ideas to provoke children's learning*', she said, acknowledging that such collaboration and idea-sharing are pivotal to the success of the setting's teaching and learning model, which is reactive to the children's

interests and conversations, as well as to practitioners' observations. Tara was keen to emphasise that everyone in the setting works hard to support one another through regular discussion and sharing of ideas, with planning and reflection time built into practitioners' weekly timetable.

The literature has identified a need in Hong Kong for further teacher training in the area of creativity, as the development of creativity requires a significant change in practice within Chinese contexts (Cheung *et al.*, 2013). According to the research of Chen *et al.* (2017), it is not only practitioners, but children too, who struggle with creativity, a supposition backed up by the views of Nat, Bea, Tara and Gili, all of whom noted the challenge of engaging children who are not accustomed to a play based-approach in activities that require them to think for themselves and make decisions. Nat, for example, stated that '*the parenting is a very different style here, and so some children tend to come into class lacking creativity and idea [and thus] worry about initiating certain activities*'. Nat, Gili and Bea all said that they often spend a lot of time modelling play and decision- and choice-making with the children to ensure that they benefit from play-based sessions. Tara suggested that the language barrier between the children and practitioners may also be a reason for some of the children's inhibitions in putting forward ideas and seeming lack of decision-making and play skills. Given the range of nationalities represented at the setting, it is not unusual for the children who attend to have English as a second or even third language. Whilst conducting one of the class observations in the pre-nursery class and during child-initiated time, I observed an example of relational pedagogy (Hedges and Cooper, 2018). The practitioners were engaged in responsive interactions through modelling play and language to the children (Fig. 17), as well as engaging in conversation and questioning them to scaffold their learning (Fig. 18) (Walsh, *et al*, 2011).

Fig. 17. A practitioner modelling play and language.

Fig. 18. Practitioners engaged in conversation and questioning.

One thing that was evident to me during the classroom observations was how calm and unrushed the sessions were. I did not perceive any urgency on the practitioners' part to rush through any of the activities, conversations or questioning, which was confirmed by Nat, who said she felt no pressure to rush the children through learning: '*we are not pressured [by management] to get children through academic skills; we can go at the child's pace, which is quite nice ... very nice.*'

Understandably, it requires time for practitioners and children alike to adapt to any approach when they are first exposed to it. However, time can be a constraint or barrier for

some practitioners, such as those in the study conducted by Chen *et al.* (2017), who were attempting to implement the Project Approach in a Hong Kong setting but gave up when they perceived that insufficient progress was being made in the time they had allotted. Another constraint they noticed was a lack of engagement from the children, who, in their view, lacked the necessary skills to handle the requirements of the Project Approach. The study illustrated how challenging it can be to implement a play-based, child-centred approach when practitioners, children and parents alike are complete novices, particularly in the absence of any support, training or education for the actors involved. Vu *et al.* (2015) argue that in-house training, at the very least, is critical for enabling practitioners to connect theory to practice and become more engaged with the children in their care. Such training can also boost practitioners' confidence and expand their knowledge base.

5.3.3 The Implementation and Understanding of Play

It is well-documented in the literature that the transition to a play-based approach can present challenges for practitioners who struggle to put the theory of play into practice (Chen *et al*., 2017; Cheng *et al*., 2015). As previously noted each practitioner brings to the classroom and setting their own 'habitus', which encompasses different interpretations and experiences of what incorporating a play-based, child-centred approach looks like in theory and practice (Izumi-Taylor *et al.*, 2014). To add to the complexity of the situation in Hong Kong, Grieshaber (2016) argues that practitioners from cultures influenced by Confucian philosophy, whose values and practices are very different from those that prevail in the West, find it a particular challenge to implement a play-based pedagogy. Based on her observations from six years of working in Hong Kong, Tara agreed that practitioners with no prior experience of such pedagogy find it difficult to understand and implement:

> *Well, for the teachers who have come from working with a teaching model that is very prescriptive and focused on rote learning and whole class teaching or large group learning it is a challenge. I think that sometimes there [are] too [many] teacher-led activities…. Sometimes they [practitioners] see it [a given activity] as being play, but it's not necessarily child-led.*

It has been widely reported that even practitioners who are keen to adopt an approach that encompasses play-based, child-centred learning tend to revert back to the methods they experienced in their own schooling or prior teaching practice if they lack the necessary experience, training or support (Luo *et al.*, 2013; Chan, 2010). Rhea and Kat, neither of whom had prior experience of play as an educational or social discourse in their own kindergarten study or as part of their education degree courses, both mentioned the challenge of putting theory into practice. According to Kat, '*my own family had no idea about play ... [as] it is not very common in Asia I would say*'. The closest example of an opportunity to play during her own schooling that Rhea could recall was the provision of blocks in the school playground.

When she first joined the current setting, Rhea explained, she '*just didn't understand how to teach through play*'. In her previous setting, she added, '*we had a white board and textbook, so the teachers could just teach the same thing to the whole class*'. Despite having no prior experience of child-centred, play-based pedagogy, both Kat and Rhea shared with me a desire to learn more about it. However, Kat did note that whilst reading theory has helped, she still struggles to put it into practice: '*I f[i]nd it hard adjusting to balancing what I want the children to achieve within a play-based environment ... and understanding what that look[s] like in our setting.*' Kat's struggles are understandable, given that putting theory into practice can look very different in one setting than in another, and therefore may diverge widely from what a given book may say (Yang and Li, 2018a). Kat further explained that although she knows what she wants the children to learn, that is, what the learning objective is, she is still sometimes unsure about the best way to structure the environment to encourage child-initiated activities. In the beginning, she said, she felt there was not enough time in class sessions to achieve what she wanted to do with the children, which is why she initially found getting the balance right between child-initiated and teacher-initiated activities so difficult. Rhea, too, said she had experienced challenges in striking the right balance between allowing the children to work independently and knowing when and whether to step in and conduct teacher-led activities, especially during child-initiated time.

I obtained a copy of the class schedule for the pre-nursery class, which caters for children between the ages of 2½ and 3. Both Rhea and Kat spend time teaching this age group, as well as older children. The schedule, shown in Fig. 19, is for a 90-minute class that has been divided into six sessions. It seems to provide an equal balance between child-initiated time, during which the children have a choice concerning what they play with and/or what activities they engage in, and teacher-initiated time, during which the practitioner takes charge, by, for example, taking the children to the bathroom for a 5-minute toilet break. The two sessions of child-initiated time (45 minutes in total), including physical play time on the playground, are highlighted in orange.

Class Schedule	Allocation (minutes)
1. **Child-initiated time.** The classroom has been set up with activities that the children have previously shown an interest in. The children are free to choose any of the activities or to take items from the shelves.	25 mins
2. **Teacher-initiated group time**. This involves singing, playing musical instruments and a discussion about the morning, as well as reflection on what the children have been playing with.	15 mins
3. **Toilet time**. The whole class goes to the bathroom together	5 mins
4. **Physical play time on the indoor playground**. The children have free access to a wide range of gym equipment, including a climbing wall, bikes and a swing.	20 mins
5. **Snack time.** The children sit down together with the practitioner for a healthy snack.	10 mins
6. **Teacher-initiated group movement, music and story.** This includes reflection on the morning activities, music and movement activities, followed by a story and goodbye song.	15 mins

Fig. 19. A pre-nursery class schedule.

In advance of the child-initiated time, the practitioners spend time planning and setting up activities for the children based on their previous observations of the children's interests and abilities. The children also have access to the materials and equipment on the shelves and within the classroom – also known as continuous provision. Within the focal setting, child-initiated time offers a platform for practitioners to extend children's learning through conversations, modelling and questioning. Kat and Rhea stated that they initially worried about how the children would achieve their learning and developmental milestones without more teacher-led activities, noting that they initially saw child-initiated and teacher-initiated time as separate. Wu (2014) also reported the practice of practitioners treating teacher-led and child-initiated activities as distinct, with no attempt to engage the children

in play. Kat acknowledged that it would be easier and less time-consuming to teach everyone together as a whole class, as she had done in her previous setting. As noted above, other researchers have reported such a disconnect or lack of time to learn and adjust to new approaches to prompt practitioners to revert back to whole class teaching (Fung and Cheng, 2012; Ebbeck, 1995). Over time, however, Kat and Rhea's understanding of play has grown. In Kat's words: '*[I am] beginning to understand that it is important to take the time to observe and talk to the children and learn about their interests.*' Both practitioners now feel confident setting spontaneous learning objectives, especially during child-initiated time. For example, during one of the classroom observations, I noted the following. After Kat observed one of the 4-year-olds in her class writing the Chinese characters for big, small and mouth (大, 小 and 口, respectively) on the chalk board during child-initiated time [Fig. 20], she stepped in and extended the child's learning by introducing her to a new, more complex, Chinese character, i.e. 魚 (fish), which the child showed immediate interest in and began to copy onto the chalk board [Fig. 21].

Fig. 20. Child-initiated time: character writing.　　**Fig. 21.** Chinese extension activity.

Both Rhea and Kat told me they had applied to work at the focal setting because they believed in its teaching and learning approach. Rhea, for example, said she had applied '*because I believe in play and that [no] child would [ever] say no to play*', adding that

children '*just have the right to play [at] this age, and play-based learning is just the best way to teach*'. When asked to give her reasons, Kat became animated in both body language and expression:

> *I have always wanted to work in a play-based environment. It is challenging and creative, and I am a creative person. I can't work in an environment where [there] is a fixed curriculum. That is not what I want to do. Surprisingly, I have learnt so much here, so much; I am not the same teacher I was four years ago.*

Recchia and Beck (2014) suggest that the 'practices which teachers value highly are practices which they are more likely to give high priority [to]' (p. 543). This certainly seems to be the case with Kat and Rhea, who have clearly worked hard to change their practice and understanding in line with what they believe to be best practice for young children. The two shared a desire to teach in a play-based, child-centred setting after reading about and researching the subject extensively. That said, both suggested that it has been the support of their colleagues and in-house training that has helped them to adapt to the setting's approach. Cheuk and Hatch (2007) concur that collegial support and in-house training have generally produced 'positive outcomes with regard to changing teachers' beliefs and classroom practice' (p. 445). Kat further explained: '*I was able to observe the teachers who knew how to implement play and [to] do a lot of self-reflection. I was able to learn much more from them than [from] looking at a book.*'

Wu (2014) argues that a lack of belief in the value of a play-based approach is likely to prove a constraint to the adoption of such an approach, which is likely to be the case for practitioners with different values and beliefs from Kat and Rhea, both of whom said it took them about a year to feel comfortable with putting theory into practice and to understand how to do so. As Rhea noted, '*it takes a long time to change, and I have worked hard to change*'. Arguably, institutional support is equally important to a desire to succeed for practitioners looking to adopt a new teaching practice. As discussed in the literature review, implementation of a play-based, child-centred approach varies considerably from setting to setting, and possibly from classroom to classroom, as demonstrated in the studies conducted by Izumi-Taylor *et al*. (2014) and Wu (2014). This is especially true of Hong Kong settings, where the interpretation and practice of Western approaches often differs (Yelland and Leung, 2018). What the findings of the current study demonstrate is the value

of giving practitioners who are new to the field the necessary time, guidance and tools to align their professional habitus and values with those of their co-workers and setting by ensuring that they work closely with colleagues and observe, engage with, collaborate with and, thus, learn from them.

5.4 Navigating Parental Expectations

There is limited literature to date suggesting how practitioners can navigate the high parental expectations in Hong Kong educational settings (Yang and Li, 2018; Hong Kong Government News, 2017; Campbell-Barr *et al.*, 2013). A common response to dealing with such expectations is for practitioners to revert to teaching what they know and what parents expect (Cheung, 2017). However, instead of reverting to the traditional approaches and measurable outcomes of worksheets, testing, textbooks and homework that some parents seek, the practitioners interviewed in this study identified several strategies for dealing with parental expectations in response to my search for answers to my second research question: **How do practitioners navigate parental expectations?**

The data collected for the first research question, a detailed account of which is given in the previous subchapter, clearly showed the navigation of parental expectations to constitute a significant challenge for the participants. During her interview, Tara, the head of school, commented that, in general, '*parents have very high standards and expect quality from [the setting] … and for the teachers to be knowledgeable*'. Although this was a view shared by Seb, who has been teaching at the setting for two years and previously taught in Italy and the UK, he believes parents' high expectations stem from enrolment pressure from primary schools: '*I don't think the parents want to have such … high expectation[s], but they have to … there is no choice*.'

During the interviews, the participants were noticeably keen to share their various strategies for navigating parental expectations with me. The following three key themes emerged from the data: *communication with the parents; being knowledgeable about and supportive of the primary school process;* and *shared understanding*. Each is addressed in turn in the following sections.

5.4.1 Communication with Parents

All of the participants expressed the belief that one of the most effective ways of addressing parental concerns is to engage in regular conversations with parents. According to Jess, the competitive nature of Hong Kong makes it imperative to communicate with parents frequently to keep them informed. Seb, who was born and raised in the UK, spoke passionately about his interactions with parents, particularly during his time working at Sure Start Centres in the UK, where he worked alongside and supported parents in interacting and playing with their children and shared research with them:

> *I feel that in order to do anything, ... it all starts with those very first interactions with the parents.... When you first meet them, it starts the chain of those parent partnerships. Once those are in place, I think parents are keener to come in and talk to us and ask questions ... once they have built a trust[ing] and positive relationship with the teacher.*

However, Seb acknowledged that it is not always easy to engage and communicate with parents. When talking about the parents in the focal setting, he said that '*it can be intimidating talking to these powerful people*'. Seb and other participants described the importance of reassuring parents by being open and honest with them, building trust and creating partnerships. Jess, for example, mentioned that '*reciprocal respect is important*': '*If they [the parents] don't trust you, they are not going to believe you.*' Gili, who has taught at the setting for four years, said she feels passionate about building positive partnerships with parents: '*I think that being really honest with parents and having an open dialogue is one way we can support parents.*' Kat was sympathetic to some parents' difficulty understanding how their children are learning: '*I have to have a lot of conversations with parents because it [a play-based approach] is a totally different way to how they learned as a child.*' What was evident during the interviews was the patience with and empathy towards the parents on the part of most participants, who often acknowledged how difficult the setting's approach must be for them, either for cultural reasons or because of the competitive spirit exuded by Hong Kong society in general. Sam suggested that

... it is important to have direct verbal contact with parents. I think for any parent who doesn't have any background knowledge of education you can understand why they don't understand the value or purpose of what a child is doing, such as painting on an easel.

Several practitioners said they receive numerous questions from parents about the learning taking place in the setting. To answer those questions, the practitioners engage in face-to-face or telephone conversations or respond via email. According to Bea:

We get lots of questions, and the best thing we can do is explain how children are achieving the same things through a play-based approach.... The thing is, I do find that a lot of parents want to see results straightaway. It is not easy, as we are not doing flashcards. However, I do understand that if parents are not seeing results straightaway, it is hard [for them] to understand the learning value perhaps.

In Jess's view, it is part of the practitioner's role to engage in regular communication with parents and to explain the learning process, a view shared by the setting as a whole. Bea said: '*We talk a lot to parents and ... explain that just seeing results immediately is not necessarily developmentally appropriate. For instance, they [the child] might not be cognitively [ready] to understand more complicated concepts.*'

Whilst all of the participants cited face-to-face communication with parents as a strategy that they both use and feel to be important, they also talked about creating an open-door policy for parents and offering parents plenty of reassurance about their children's development and learning. As a newly qualified early years teacher some 26 years ago, I myself found communicating with parents to be a daunting task and, accordingly, tended to lean heavily on my more experienced co-teacher. It was at least a year before I felt fully confident in answering parents' questions about learning and development. I can therefore understand the task of face-to-face communication proving a challenge for some practitioners, particularly within the Hong Kong context and for those who lack professional knowledge or are new to the field. When I asked Gili where she got her confidence to talk to parents about their children's learning, she replied: '*I feel well supported by management and feel well equipped to answer questions from the training we have received.*' At least half of the practitioners interviewed cited support from

management and professional development opportunities as having assisted them with their transition into the setting. The specific training offered to practitioners by the setting is discussed in subchapter 5.5.

Other platforms of communication with parents that the interviewees discussed were newsletters; a school Facebook page; research articles; weekly class letters with photographs depicting what the children are interested in and learning; visual documentation posted in classrooms, either on display boards or in classroom windows; and the learning portfolios sent home with children every half term. Seb explained that in the weekly letters to parents, practitioners write about '*what the children have been doing and what skills the children have been learning [and] we also suggest and write research articles to share with parents*'. An example of a weekly class letter can be found in Appendix S.

Tara confirmed that the practitioners take it in turns on a monthly basis to decide on a research topic, say, toilet training, speech development or literacy promotion at home, and then write a short paper on it along with helpful tips for parents. She added that practitioners are given time during their regular work week to meet with parents and that they all have access to a computer and classroom telephone to use for communication with parents.

5.4.2 Knowledge of and Support for the Primary School Process

The participants in this study talked openly about the pressure that both children and parents are under and the strategies they use as practitioners to support parents through the challenges of the primary school entry process. As previously reported, it is not unusual for children as young as 2 to be forced to compete for places at international and even local primary schools in Hong Kong by attending formal interviews and assessments (Humpage, 2016). Such competitive pressure is likely one of the reasons parents seek early years programmes that introduce formal academics and skills at a young age (Fung and Cheng, 2012; Ebbeck, 1995) despite such introduction not being recommended by the Hong Kong Government (Curriculum Development Council, 2017). The end result in many settings is tension for practitioners struggling to navigate parental expectations and pressure (Hong

Kong Government News, 2017). Gili shared the story of one 4-year-old child in her class who attended several school interviews over the period of a few months:

> *We know the parents feel the pressure, and then the children feed off of that. We had a little girl, who went to a school interview, and she was off school the week before, and the mum said it was because she was really anxious because they were going for a school interview. That can't be right. So for the next interview, I sat down with the girl and looked at the school on the Internet; we Google-mapped it and talked about the sort of activities she might do on her visit. We try to make it as natural as possible for the children and not treat it like an interview, but more of an adventure or fun outing.*

During my observation of the nursery class, I was able to experience first-hand the awareness of primary school placement that seems to exist amongst the children. During group time, a spontaneous conversation broke out amongst four 4-year-old children, with one of the children talking about the school interview she had attended the day before:

> **Child 1**: *I went for an interview at HKIS, and that's going to be my new school.*
>
> **Child 2**: *My mummy went to look at Harrow and HKIS and said I was going to go to one of those schools. Do you [Child 3] know which school you will be going to?*
>
> **Child 3**: *Yes, Harrow.*
>
> **Child 2**: *I'm going to Harrow too.*
>
> **Child 1**: *I am going to GSIS because my brother, sister and cousin go there.*
>
> **Child 4:** *I am going to the Peak School because it is near my house.*

The practitioners in the classroom did not discourage this conversation despite it taking place during teacher-initiated group time. Whether the setting's practitioners agree with the primary school assessment process or not, they are openly supportive of parents and children alike. Nat is a case in point. Having been through the primary school assessment process with her own young children when she lived in Hong Kong many years ago, Nat, who returned to Hong Kong two years ago, was particularly empathetic towards parents. She expressed the view that parents, particularly those who are new to Hong Kong and/or its education system, need to be supported through the primary school application and assessment process and helped to understand the different teaching and learning

expectations of various schools. Several of the participants discussed how they advise parents on whether a particular primary school suits their child. They said, for example, that they talk about the different learning styles that children have, with some more suited to academic schools and others to less rigid school environments. Sam said she informs parents of whether a particular school is inclusive, whilst Gili had this to say:

> *I think when we have those conversations with parents about prospective schools, it's about us being honest with parents and saying if we don't think it [a particular school] is going to suit their child…. For example, if it's [a non-inclusive] or really academic school that won't suit the child's learning style, they do need to know. It is about building that trust with parents … showing them other options.*

There is a wide choice of primary schools in Hong Kong (Ng, 2012), and primary school selection can arguably be a complex arena for both parents and the early years practitioners who wish to help them to navigate it. Knowledge of the different schools available is arguably particularly important in the Hong Kong context owing to the limited inclusivity of schools in general. Hong Kong has a performative culture, which Ball (2003) suggests means that schools are 'unlikely to "invest" in work with children with special needs where the margins for improved performance are limited' (p. 223). As part of their professional development, practitioners in the focal setting are able to choose two or three primary schools per year to visit to learn about their ethos, facilities, curriculum and application/assessment process. Gili, like several other of the interviewees, said she finds this experience invaluable: '*It is really helpful to have some knowledge about primary schools, what they offer and what the interview process is like…. It helps us when talking to parents.*' Kat and Sam said the primary school visits help them to understand children's next steps and supply them with knowledge they can then share with parents. Sam added that the annual workshop on the primary school process that management organises each year also helps parents to understand what to expect at interviews and the process as a whole.

Because children in Hong Kong do not typically feed into local community schools, it can be quite challenging to acquire knowledge of the various types of primary schools available. The focal setting keeps an up-to-date record of which Hong Kong primary schools its students move onto [see Fig. 4 in Chapter 4] and gathers school brochures

during practitioners' visits, and is thus in a good position to help parents. Arguably, the setting itself thus serves as a useful tool for parents as they navigate the system.

5.4.3 Shared Understandings

With so many important topics raised with and by parents with respect to the value of play, the expectation of immediate and visible results and navigation of the primary school process, another important strategy for the setting and its practitioners is building positive relationships and sharing information with the families. This is an area which has been highlighted in the Hong Kong kindergarten curriculum guide for all settings to work on (Curriculum Development Council, 2017). Amongst the subjects the guide suggests should be covered are 'children's growth, emotion management and moral development' and the improvement of parenting skills (p. 75). Tara commented that many of the parents whose children attend the focal setting '*are high achievers, a lot of professional career people, who I think are well educated…. Some do a lot of research, but some don't have a good understanding of child development*'. Even well-educated parents are not always very well informed, she added, noting that they are therefore open to learning.

In addition to the child development topics the setting likes to share with families, they also provide platforms to engage in discussions that focus on curriculum topics such as numeracy and literacy. Nat volunteers each year to conduct literacy workshops for parents, and noted that '*the parents always have lots of questions*' during the workshops. If practitioners themselves lacked specific curriculum or child development knowledge, however, conducting in-house parent workshops could prove a challenge. I thus asked Tara to tell me more about the educational support they offer to parents. In general, she said, the setting offers monthly or bi-monthly workshops or information sessions on a variety of topics based on feedback they receive from parents or on practitioners' individual interests. For example, one practitioner recently conducted a workshop on the value of exploratory play for babies, a particular passion of hers. Most of the parent workshops are conducted in-house by practitioners themselves as illustrated below in Fig. 22, however, Tara explained, the setting occasionally engages the services of an external presenter.

Topic	In house/external presenter
Raising Third Culture Children	In-house
Exploratory Play with Babies	In-house
Communication and Literacy for Under 3's	In-house
Communication and Literacy for Over 3's	In-house
The Importance of Sensory Learning in the Early Years	In-house
The ABC's of your Child's Developing Brain	In house
Strategies for Successful Parenting	External
Toilet Readiness	In-house
Over 3's Information Session	In-house
Transition Information Session	In-house
Navigating the Primary School Process	In-house
Child Development: The Truth and Myths	In-house
Active Listening Workshop	In-house
Supporting Non-verbal Children	In-house
Common Childhood Illnesses and Management	External
Understanding Dual-language Development in Children	External
My Brilliant Baby – Understanding Multiple Intelligences	External
A Curriculum Talk about the LoC – Curriculum Night	In-house
The Value of Play	In-house

**Fig. 22.** Parent workshops conducted in the setting.

Tara said she believes that the parents who choose the setting know what they are getting. However, that does not always stop them from seeking top-up sessions for their children elsewhere. Two of the practitioners indicated that they knew parents were going elsewhere to receive additional tutoring for their children in such subjects as phonics, a situation that perhaps serves as a catalyst to prompt practitioners to work even harder to communicate with and enhance parents' understanding about play-based learning within the setting. Tutoring centre attendance is common in Hong Kong, and has also been identified as a popular after-school activity for the children of Asian families living in Australia (Sriprakash *et al.*, 2016). According to Opper (1994), by focusing on the '3Rs' such attendance can fill a gap in non-academic early years education. Bea shared her own experience of growing up in Canada, noting that she attended maths and piano classes after school to supplement her learning. What was evident from the interviewees' responses was their patience with parents and understanding that many of them truly do not understand the value of play-based pedagogy.

The participants also offered further information on the additional platforms they use to enhance the parents' understanding of the settings pedagogy, such as window and board displays around the school, which are helpful for explaining complex topics in simple

terms and perhaps helping parents to visualise their child's learning journey. Sam was keen to tell me about a recent display she created on an internal classroom window:

> *Recently, I did a big window display about the process of writing. There are parents who expect their children to be writing from an early age, and it is an expectation at some of the school interviews, but you can't just put a pencil in a young child's hand and expect them to be able to write. So ... showing and explaining to parents the process of writing and how it can be developed through different classroom play experiences ... really helps the parents to understand.*

Fig. 23 below shows one of the window displays in a classroom that Sam teaches in. The display informs parents of the benefits for children of writing on vertical surfaces.
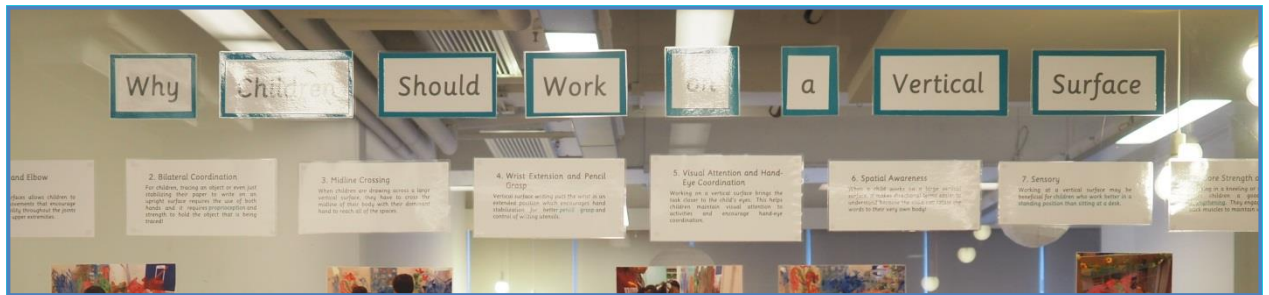
Fig. 23. Window display on the benefits of writing on a vertical surface.

All of the setting's practitioners take it in turns to research and plan the window and classroom board displays, which are usually changed on a half-termly basis. Bea spoke proudly about the display she recently created:

> *In order to do a play-based approach, you have to work with the parents and help to educate them about what we are really about. Like the little bulletin board I did showing how parents can support their child's learning and development.*

During the pre-nursery classroom observations for this research, I noticed that the practitioners use a display board in the classroom to record children's ongoing interests, activities and learning [Figs. 24 and 25]. The board is positioned low enough to be visible to the children, as well as to their parents and caregivers.
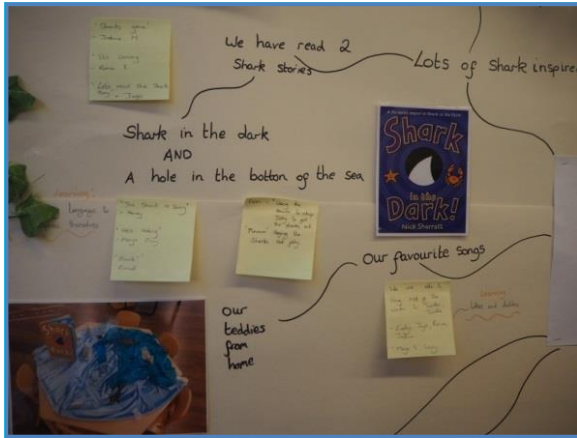
Fig. 24. Pre-nursery class notice board.   **Fig. 25.** Pre-nursery class notice board.

During the classroom observations, I saw numerous examples of displays depicting what children of all ages and stages were learning through play. For example, one display in the pre-nursery class showed a child learning about shapes and spaces, as well as engaging in problem-solving using pom poms and egg boxes [Fig. 26], whereas another in the nursery class is an example of how one practitioner linked a treasure map activity to an EYFS literacy milestone [Fig. 27].

Fig. 26. A numeracy display.   **Fig. 27.** A physical development display.
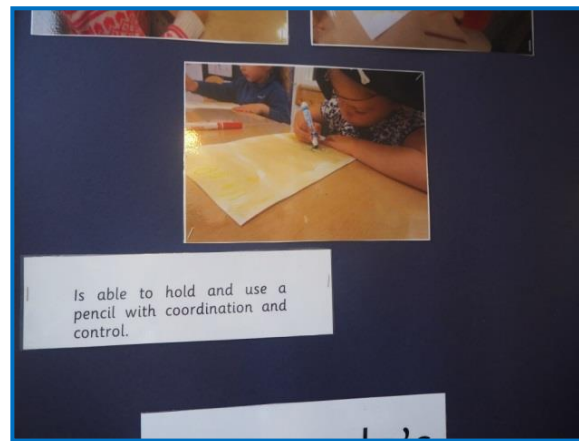
Just walking around the setting made it evident that classroom boards and windows are a valued communication platform for supporting parents' understanding and informing them of the learning that is taking place. The participating practitioners were proud to tell me about their displays. Rhea, for example, was clear about the purpose of her displays: '*I*

think mummies just are not sure what or how we teach the children [through play], so I need to do display boards so they can see their children learning.' The participants talked enthusiastically about using various methods to share information and knowledge with parents, something they seemed to take quite seriously. As it serves parents from all over the world, many of whom speak English as a second language, the setting's use of visual photos, as well as engaging in conversations about the children, their interests and their learning, conducting presentations and writing letters, can be powerful in helping parents to better understand the notion of learning through play. Having regular conversations and contact with parents also enables the practitioners to learn more about their children and their home culture which Brooker, 2010 posits is 'critical for all actors' (p. 28). If, as Wood (2015) posits, 'understanding the intersection of play and learning in different cultures' (p. 191), is complex, then it seems critical that early years institutions make an effort to provide different platforms to promote shared understandings between practitioners and families, especially if they want to broaden school cultures (Brooker, 2010a).

The evidence compiled for this research suggests that the practitioners in the setting under study have embedded within the setting and their own practice a range of strategies for navigating parental expectations, with a wide range of communication platforms employed to inform parents of the learning taking place as part of a play-based, child-centred approach, including parent workshops, board and window displays, weekly letters, research articles, emails, children's learning portfolios, face-to-face communication and a Facebook page. Although, as the participants indicated, these measures do not always stop parents from seeking external educational resources, such as sending their children to tutoring centres to receive more formal learning modes, their use suggests that the setting's practitioners are teaching in line with their values and beliefs rather than changing their practice to incorporate the formal learning that the Hong Kong government are keen to move away from (Curriculum Development Council, 2006).

5.5 Supporting Practitioners in their Practice

As both newly qualified and experienced practitioners in Hong Kong work towards integrating play-based, child-centred practices into their settings, they are often faced with constraints and challenges in navigating what I have described throughout this thesis as a

complex pedagogical landscape. As previously discussed, early years practitioners are expected to have a broad range of skills, experience and knowledge to be able to fulfil their role (Curriculum Development Council, 2017; Recchia and Beck, 2014). Huggins (2013) suggests that the diverse range of clientele and challenges of keeping abreast of evolving pedagogies can easily affect such practitioners' confidence and professional identity. It is therefore important to identify how practitioners can best be supported within their settings to feel confident and well-equipped to fulfil their professional roles.

As discussed in the literature review, there is an expectation in Hong Kong that professional development should be conducted in-house, which can be problematic for settings with limited financial resources or few staff willing or able to plan and deliver in-house training. Tara, the head of school, acknowledged that there are very few opportunities for early years professional training in Hong Kong, although a collaborative Reggio networking group was formed several years ago. That group, which was instigated and organised by the management of several early years institutions, including the focal institution, has gradually expanded to include more schools over the past two years. Each school within the group takes it in turns to host a workshop, with workshops conducted two or three times a year. As with the focal setting, most early years institutions in Hong Kong have a limited training budget, and are therefore on the look-out for ideas on how to reduce professional development training costs. Tara said that she '*encourage[s] the teachers to share their knowledge and passion and [assures them that management] will support them if they want to conduct a workshop or presentation for their peers*'. She also informed me that LSC and the under 3's and over 3's coordinators regularly conduct workshops, and I also do so in my role as head of curriculum. In the absence of support and training, practitioners are often forced to work in isolation, which can result in between-class inconsistencies within a setting, a problem identified in Wu's (2014) study. Additionally, a lack of regular, and appropriate, professional development can exert a negative impact on student outcomes and curriculum and teaching quality (Chan, 2016).

In answer to my third research question – **How can practitioners be best supported in their practice within their own setting? –** the participants responded by emphasising the pivotal importance of *shared values and beliefs* with both the setting and one's colleagues, *time to settle in and learn*, and *practitioner support and learning tools*.

5.5.1 Shared Values and Beliefs

What surprised me most when conducting the interviews and then reflecting back on the data was how often the words 'shared values', 'beliefs', 'believe' and 'value' came up when the participants were talking about the setting, settling in and their colleagues. It quickly became evident from patterns in the data just how important shared values and beliefs were to the participants and how critical they were to feeling secure and confident in practice within their setting. Having shared values seemed to be linked to how quickly the participating practitioners were able to settle into their roles after joining the setting and how supported they felt. For example, when I asked Sam what had helped her to evolve as a play-based, child-centred approach practitioner, she replied that '*being surrounded by like-minded people who all have similar values and who have worked in this type of setting before has really, really helped*'. I received similar answers from Bea, Gili, Kat, Seb and Rhea, with Kat expressing the following about the importance of consistent values and a shared ethos within the setting:

> *It really helps to have consistency in the school with everyone, including management, sharing the same ethos and values. When we have tough conversations with parents about not pushing their children into too much too soon, I have to revert back to our ethos and values and reflect [on them]. It helps that our school is not a big one so that it is easier for us to control the quality and make sure everyone is on the same page with what is play-based learning.*

Within the setting, I found a general understanding amongst the practitioners that they all share the same passion for teaching in a play-based, child-centred setting and gain inspiration from it. In Bea's words:

> *I think we are so lucky here because everyone is so passionate, which inspires the rest of us. So, even if we are having a bit of a moment and [are] not sure what to do, someone else can come up with an idea, and I might think – wow I never thought of that.*

Inconsistency within a setting or field can readily create tension. Betteney *et al.* (2018) suggest that in order to feel confident and secure in their practice, practitioners need to

'have an ability to confidently articulate their professional values' (p. 435). Tara explained that the setting implements a three-stage recruitment process, the first stage of which is an in-depth discussion with candidates (usually over the phone) about their values and their beliefs about how young children learn best, an approach that Wood (2010) considers sensible owing to the many differing interpretations of play. The second stage is an opportunity to come into the setting and have a tour, followed by a formal interview. The third stage requires the applicant to spend time in the classroom and conduct a group time activity for the children. With respect to the importance of consistency, Tara contended that it is '*critical for us [both the setting and potential practitioner] to be in alignment*'. She said that she has hired several practitioners over the years, including three who participated in this study, who had no experience in a play-based setting but displayed passion and a desire to learn during the recruitment process. Having mutually shared values and beliefs would seem critical in this context when entering the field, as to quote Gunter (2002) 'one must … possess at least the minimum amount of knowledge, or skill, or 'talent' to be accepted as a legitimate player' (p. 11).

Tara acknowledged, however, that adapting to any new approach can be difficult initially, which concurs with Kat and Rhea's foregoing descriptions of their early struggles to put theory into practice when they first joined the setting. However, with determination and hard work, they have adapted, although many of the participating practitioners were eager to assure me that in their view they are always learning. Recchia and Beck (2014) maintain that 'practices which teachers value highly are practices which they are more likely to give high priority' (p. 543) which certainly seems to be the case in the focal setting. If the values and beliefs towards learning of the setting and practitioners are not in alignment, such a mismatch can arguably become a barrier to the successful implementation of a play-based, child-centred approach.

Discussion early on in the recruitment process about values and beliefs, and whether those of the setting and interviewee align, seems advisable. It not only affords potential hires an opportunity to decide whether the setting in question is a desirable place to work, but also offers the setting a chance to determine whether the candidate would be a good match. Identifying a potential mismatch is of course more difficult for settings looking to initiate change and/or implement desired reforms with current staff alone (Wong and Rao, 2015).

5.5.2 Induction Training

All of the participants mentioned how valuable they had found the week of induction/professional training the setting had offered at the beginning of their employment, noting that in addition to being informative it had helped them to settle in:

> *Induction training was really helpful, as there was none at my previous setting. [It] was super helpful … even in the way of getting to know each other and feeling each other out and getting a feel for the environment. It was great to be able to be in the space and get comfortable without the children.* (Sam)

Four of the practitioners shared their prior experiences of working in other Hong Kong settings with me, telling me that there had been no induction or even any time to settle in and get a feel for how the setting operated in practice. Instead, they were expected to teach on their very first day. Given that practitioners come to a setting with their own habitus encompassing a wide range of experiences, culture and knowledge (O'Donoghue, 2013), it is easy to understand the participants' enthusiasm about their induction experience. Induction training is conducted during the first week of each new academic year, with all practitioners, regardless of tenure, participating, either by attending the workshops and presentations or preparing and presenting sessions themselves. Induction week takes place before classes begin, which affords new practitioners' uninterrupted time to assimilate new routines and policies. Because the focal setting employs both international and local staff on two-year contracts, there are usually three or four new staff members joining each year. According to Betteney *et al.* (2018), the successful completion of induction training is critical to any setting. However, it is likely a particularly valuable experience in Hong Kong, as the participants confirmed, owing to every setting in Hong Kong operating differently (Izumi-Taylor *et al.*, 2014), with practitioners bringing their own habitus with them when they join.

Tara explained that, in addition to workshops, induction week generally includes the following elements: team-building exercises and a social event, usually a boat trip or visit to a local *dai pai dong:* opportunities for new practitioners to familiarise themselves with the school environment and the equipment and resources available; an overview of company policies and procedures; the provision of a teacher handbook with information

about the curriculum and roles and responsibilities of practitioners; participation in a mock lesson conducted by a practitioner who has taught at the setting for longer than a year; and an opportunity to watch training videos that have been recorded in-house. One of the induction workshops for new practitioners focuses on helping them to understand the cultural context and educational/primary school landscape, which Tara posits is crucial for all staff, not just those coming from overseas. Seb, who arrived at the setting with eight years' experience in play-based pedagogy under his belt, said he found watching training videos in his first week very helpful, as they showed actual classes in action. A full list of the workshops and presentations conducted during induction week can be found in Fig. 28. The titles highlighted in orange are conducted every year and attended by all practitioners, whereas the others are intended specifically for new practitioners.

Topic	In-house/external presenter
Team-building Exercises	In-house
School Policies and Procedures	In-house
School Structure, Ethos, Values and Processes	In-house
The Language of Children – Ethos, Background, Programmes	In-house
Inclusive Education and it Means in the Current Setting	In-house
Cultural Context and Educational Landscape of Hong Kong	In-house
Inspiring Environments: The Environment as a Third Teacher	In-house
Communicating with Children and Parents	In-house
Characteristics/Role of a Great Teacher	In-house
Sensory Learning in the Early Years	In-house
Crisis Management Training	In-house
Safeguarding Children	In-house
Behaviour Management	In-house
Specific Under 3's, Enrichment and Over 3's Training	In-house (as needed)
First Aid Training	External

Fig. 28. The workshops/presentations conducted during induction week.

Tara explained that, as part of the settling-in and learning process, during their first month in the setting new practitioners are paired up with mentors, that is, colleagues who have been with the setting for some time. Being assigned a colleague who can, when possible, come into the classroom with them and/or answer any questions they have on a daily basis has been a valuable experience for most of the practitioners I interviewed. The benefits of collaborating with others have been highlighted by Betteney *et al.* (2018), who posit that 'co-experienced practice lead[s] to a reproduction and re-creation of shared professional understandings' (p. 437). New practitioners in the focal setting also have an opportunity to

watch their mentors teach, which Rhea described as a particularly helpful experience: '*I think that, first of all, it is good for [a] new teacher to go and observe another teacher to see how they plan and conduct their classes.*'

It has been suggested that working alongside skilled colleagues can be a highly effective component of a professional training plan for teachers, as it can enhance knowledge and improve classroom skills (Yuen, 2011). Nat, who taught in Poland before coming to Hong Kong, said that '*being assigned mentors was really helpful in the beginning, as a lot of my ideas and classroom strategies have come from working with them and observing*'. Tara discussed how daunting taking up a new role can be for practitioners, especially in the first few weeks when they are learning the routines of a new class and getting to know the children and their caregivers. She said that '*it is particularly important in the beginning to get into the classrooms and help the new teachers*'. Sam suggested that '*you can read all the books in the world about it [putting theory into practice] but observations and doing it yourself is best. It is about trial and error*'. Seb concurred, stating that whilst theory is really helpful, it is not until you actually get into the classroom with the children that it all begins to make sense. Recchia and Beck (2014) argue that newly qualified practitioners often do not feel fully prepared for classroom practice because of a lack of opportunities to work and collaborate with others in the field. Therefore, embedding such opportunities right from the start is highly beneficial, even for experienced practitioners new to a particular field, particularly for co-creating a shared professional habitus.

5.5.3 Practitioner Support and Learning Tools

According to the participants, numerous tools are supplied in the focal setting for practitioners to draw upon for support in their practice in addition to the aforementioned induction training in which everyone participates during the first week of each academic year. Those singled out as particularly important by the participants included having designated weekly time incorporated into their timetables to meet and collaborate with colleagues and to engage in mutual planning and reflect on and share ideas; being afforded regular opportunities to conduct both informal and formal peer observations for learning purposes; being offered regular in-house training such as SEN training; and receiving ongoing support from the in-house LSC. Other support tools mentioned as helpful include

subscriptions to professional magazines; a teacher resource library with a wide range of books covering such topics as child-development, curriculum design and classroom design; half-termly supervisory meetings that give practitioners an opportunity to check in with their immediate supervisor; and annual appraisals with the head of school in which they discuss their performance and areas for development.

A lack of time to learn about and acclimate to teaching the Project Approach was one of the reasons identified by the practitioners in the study conducted by Chen *et al.* (2017) for reverting back to familiar methods. Time is arguably a valuable asset for anyone learning a new skill or attempting to acquire new knowledge. For the practitioners in the focal setting, however, it seems to be a crucial element in helping them to feel confident and secure in their practice. In Kat's words: '*Teachers need time to adapt and change. If I had not … been given time and opportunity, I may never have known and reached my potential.*' She made it clear that she believed that being given ample time to adapt, as well as enjoying the support of colleagues and management, had been critical to her success, particularly as the setting constituted her first exposure to a play-based approach. The setting makes sure that practitioners' weekly schedules include non-contact time to work on classroom prep, planning and research, and, during weekly one- to two-hour meetings led by the under 3's and over 3's coordinators, practitioners discuss the learning that has taken place in their classrooms during the week, brainstorm activity ideas, and talk about particular challenges or particular children about which/whom they need advice.

As well as giving them an opportunity to talk to their peers and gain fresh ideas, these meetings – or 'sharing platforms', as Bea called them – help to '*extend current ideas or thinking*', which Bea said can be very motivating. During the meetings, practitioners take it in turns to bring a new idea or research article to share and discuss. Seb, too, said he found the weekly meetings useful, noting that it is inspirational to talk to colleagues, and Sam was equally enthusiastic:

> *Our discussions and reflections challenge us to keep learning and encourage us to come up with new things to share and use in our practice. I am really enjoying it … it is really cool. I think we have learnt so much from each other over the last 8 months by having regular discussions about what the benefits are of certain activities for the children…. We have really evolved as a team. It has been very*

helpful. I feel like I am constantly learning new things … you know being a learner myself.

In addition to regular discussions with their peers, the participants also found peer observations valuable. Kat noted that observing her peers is more helpful than reading theory: '*Being able to observe others [is] best because I can observe … teachers who know how to implement play, and I [am] able to learn much more from them than … from a book.*' Bea, too, cited formal peer observations as a helpful learning tool, particularly during her first year in the setting when she struggled to think of ideas for classroom and activity set-up. Given that every practitioner does things slightly differently, she said, peer-learning is a valuable way of developing one's professional practice:

> *Learning from peers is really valuable because everyone has a slightly different teaching style and ideas. If you put a toy out, children have so many different ways of playing with it, and we as practitioners are like that … we are all different, and we all set up the activities different[ly] and play with loose parts differently. So, I think being able to observe others helps you to expand your ideas, your knowledge and your creativity.*

The setting encourages practitioners to choose a class to formally observe at least once a term, followed by a follow-up discussion with the person being observed. A sample of the peer observation form that practitioners complete during observations can be found in Appendix T. Following the observation and follow-up discussion, during which they have an opportunity to ask questions, practitioners then spend some time reflecting on what they observed and on the thoughts of the practitioners who were observed.

In addition to the aforementioned induction training workshops, the setting also offers other regular workshops. These are conducted in-house, externally or as part of the Reggio networking events that occur two or three times a year. Fig. 29 below presents a list of the topics these workshops have covered over the years.

Topic	In-house/external presenter
Raising Bilingual Children	External
The Impact of Movement on Development	External
Phonics	In-house
Language and Communication	In-house
Assessments/Portfolios in the Early Years	In-house
Technology in the Early Years	In-house
An Emergent Approach	In-house
Supporting Language Development	In-house
What are Provocations?	Reggio networking event
Environment as a Third Teacher	Reggio networking event
Reading Developmental Reports/Shadows in the Classroom	In-house
Managing Behaviour	In-house
Communicating with Parents	In-house
Teaching Music in the Early Years	In-house
An Introduction to Reggio and the Environment	External
Speech Milestones and Red Flags	External
Learning through Play	In-house
Process Art	In-house
Differentiation	In-house
The Value of Block Play	In-house
Recent Research on Bilingual Learning amongst Young Children	External
Speaking and Listening and How They Fit into our Policy	In-house
Sensory Integration	In-house and external
Exploring our Creativity/Scaffolding /Extending Provision	In-house
Asia Expo Conference	Free annual event in Hong Kong
A Reggio Educator from Japan	Reggio networking event
Communicating with Children	In-house
An Overview of Child Development	In-house

Fig. 29. The workshops/presentations provided for the practitioners

The focal setting is an inclusive setting, which means it is non-selective when accepting students. It is clear from the literature that a move away from whole class teaching towards more integrated play-based, child-centred teaching poses challenges for classroom behaviour management and supporting children with additional needs (Cheung *et al.*, 2017). In a traditional setting that advocates a didactic, whole class teaching approach, children are expected to follow rules and remain seated and silent (Chan, 2016), thus rendering the management of classroom behaviour and support for individual needs relatively manageable. In this context, seven of the participants in this study expressed their appreciation for the regular special educational needs (SEN) workshops and ongoing support from the in-house LSC. SEN is an area of professional development that has been identified as generally lacking in Hong Kong (Li and Hsieh, 2019; Lee *et al.*, 2014). Tara emphasised how important it is as an inclusive setting to employ an in-house learning support specialist with experience of a range of learning styles and needs and behaviour

management strategies, noting that it helps the entire school community to feel fully supported.

Kat suggested that practitioners in general struggle to work with children with different types of behaviour and needs: '*We are taught that children learn in different ways, but this is especially challenging when a child has [special] needs. We always need a lot of training in this area to know how to support these children.*' As discussed in the literature review, without appropriate tools in place or classroom management and behaviour strategies for dealing with SEN children, practitioners are likely to feel helpless, isolated and under immense pressure, and in turn develop a negative attitude towards inclusivity in general (Lee *et al*., 2014). In-house training on how to support inclusivity in the classroom can help to boost practitioners' confidence in this regard. Gili also noted that access to a wide range of workshops and training had empowered her more generally to have conversations with parents about their children's overall development and learning. She added that it was also comforting for parents to know that if she didn't have the answers they sought, they could go to management. In summary, being equipped with a wide range of tools and afforded opportunities to attend workshops, conduct peer observations, and meet with colleagues to reflect, plan and share ideas helped the participants to feel both supported and well-equipped to teach a play-based, child-centred approach, whilst co-creating a shared professional habitus within their specific field.

5.6 Adapting to a Play- and Child-Centred Approach

My fourth research question was: **How can practitioners who have not experienced the pedagogy of play as part of their own childhood education or teacher training adapt to teaching a play- and child-centred approach?**

The interview findings suggest that most of the participants, regardless of their amount of experience, qualifications or the countries in which they have taught, have encountered challenges of some kind in adapting to teaching a play- and child-centred approach in the context of Hong Kong. The literature suggests that such adaptation is a particular challenge for practitioners who were raised in a Confucian culture, as 'the traditional Confuci[an] form of pedagogy … stresses rote learning and direct teaching' (Grieshaber, 2016, p. 12).

Of the participants, Kat, Rhea and Bea were all born in a Confucian culture, and thus had not experienced play-based, child-centred learning as part of their school or home culture. Although Bea had been taken to Canada by her mother for some of her schooling, '*to escape the competitiveness and stress of Hong Kong education*', play had not been part of her upbringing, and the achievement of success had remained paramount. Although Bea studied for her early childhood degree in Canada, when she returned to Hong Kong to teach there were some aspects of implementing a play-based approach that she initially struggled with, namely, thinking up creative ideas, setting up a classroom and activities in a well thought-out way, and answering parents' questions about the learning taking place. For Kat and Rhea, however, such implementation and even an understanding of play in practice posed a significant challenge, as neither had had exposure to a culture other than the Confucian culture in which they were raised.

Despite having no experience of play-based pedagogy in their own childhoods or during their teaching degrees, however, both Kat and Rhea, like Bea, had developed a strong desire, based on their own reading and research, to incorporate such pedagogy into their own teaching. That said, the two women initially struggled to find the proper balance between teacher-led and child-initiated activities and worried about fitting in and achieving learning objectives. They emphasised that it would have been impossible to learn what they needed from reading theory alone, noting that they have benefited greatly from the support of their peers, in-house training and opportunities to observe colleagues who know how to implement play. Cheng (2011) argues that in the absence of support and training, Chinese practitioners often see themselves as powerless and sometimes fall back into conformity with the traditional approach by which they were themselves taught. What the data collected in the current study illuminate is that if practitioners have a desire to learn and are offered the right kind of support, adapting to and being able to successfully deliver play-based pedagogy is entirely possible, regardless of cultural/educational background, as the cases of Kat, Bea and Rhea make clear. However, the evidence suggests that it is also critical for practitioners and the setting as a whole to share the same values and beliefs. It is shared values and beliefs, as well as shared practice, that allow practitioners to co-create a mutual professional habitus, which suggests that 'anyone wishing to function within [a] field [needs] to articulate the norms of that field consistently' (Betteney *et al.*, 2018, p. 436).

Bea, Kat and Rhea all expressed the value they place on play-based learning for young children during the interviews, noting that they indeed believe play to be the best way for children to learn. They also emphasised that valuing and believing in the efficacy of play have been critical prerequisites to adapting to new teaching and learning approaches within the setting and to feeling confident and secure in their practice despite the initial challenges they faced. Without belief in a play-based, child-centred approach, Wu (2014) suggests, it would be very difficult for a practitioner to adopt such an approach. After all, as Lau (2012) rather colourfully puts it, 'asking a teacher to change his or her educational ideology would mean asking a teacher to change his or her religious belief from the traditional religious faith to a new form of religiosity' (p. 19). The participants in this study who had previously worked for other Hong Kong settings said they had experienced inconsistences in those settings between their values and beliefs about how young children learn and what and how they were expected to teach. In the focal setting, in contrast, it was evident that the school is in alignment with practitioners and vice versa.

One potential limitation of my fourth research question is that all of the study's participants had chosen the focal setting based on shared values and beliefs about how young children learn. It would have been interesting to seek answers to the same question from practitioners who had recently been asked to shift from a more traditional approach to a play-based, child-centred approach.

A summary of the key findings and contribution to knowledge from this study is provided in the following chapter.

Chapter 6

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Conclusion

6.1 The Aims of the Study

The aims of this study were to identify what aspects of a play- and child-centred approach early years practitioners in a Hong Kong early years setting catering to children aged 6 months to 6 years are finding a challenge to put into practice; determine how these practitioners are able to navigate high parental expectations and gain practice support; and discover how practitioners who have not experienced the pedagogy of play as part of their own childhood education or teacher training are able to adapt to teaching a play- and child-centred approach.

I was guided throughout the research process by the following research questions:

1. What aspects of implementing a play-based, child-centred approach are practitioners finding challenging?
2. How do practitioners navigate parental expectations?
3. How can practitioners be best supported in their practice within their own setting?
4. How can practitioners who have not experienced the pedagogy of play as part of their own childhood education or teacher training adapt to teaching a play- and child-centred approach?

The data collected in this study have provided some clear answers to the research questions and contributed to knowledge in the Hong Kong early years education arena. The study's significance lies in its contribution to scholarly understanding of the complex challenges that early years practitioners in Hong Kong face. The study has also uncovered some of the pivotal support and learning tools available to practitioners within the setting under study that have enabled them to feel confident and secure in their practice. This is an important finding because the literature reports numerous instances of practitioners abandoning the implementation of play- and child-centred approaches owing to parental pressure (Cheung *et al.*, 2017; Hong Kong Government News, 2017), a lack of understanding of how to adapt

Western approaches to their own setting or context (Chen *et al.*, 2017; Cheng *et al.*, 2015) and/or insufficient training and support (Cheung, 2017).

The findings of this study have revealed that the practitioners, regardless of experience were able to adapt to teaching a play-based pedagogy as long as they held similar values and beliefs to those of their peers, management and setting and are afforded ample time and support to adapt and learn, particularly in their first year. This is an important factor for other settings to draw on when they consider employing, training and retaining staff, as this study has illuminated the importance of practitioners in Hong Kong to co-create a shared professional habitus to enable them to feel confident and successful in practice. It is these shared values and beliefs and other factors that I suggest form the foundations of a practitioner success pyramid [see Fig. 30]. Additionally an ongoing cycle of support and learning tools [see Fig. 31] embedded within the setting provides a critical tool for success, regardless of a practitioners' prior experience, knowledge or training. It is expected that other early years settings, not only in Hong Kong, but globally will find aspects of both the practitioner success pyramid and support and learning tool cycle useful and relevant, As discussed throughout the thesis, it is not only practitioners in Hong Kong who are faced with change and adaptation in policy and practice, but practitioners working in other countries around the world. The practitioner success pyramid and support and learning tool cycle can be used as a starting point to reflecting on and developing or enhancing policy, support and practice in any early years setting.

As I was in the planning stages of my research, the EDB issued a formal announcement imploring practitioners to implement the play-based approaches recommended in the recent *Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide – Joyful Learning through Play, Balanced Development All the Way* (Curriculum Development Council, 2017) rather than give in to parental demands and 'mov[e] … towards doing something that they may not like to do' (Hong Kong Government News, 2017). I therefore believe that the findings of this study come at an apt time and, as such, have the potential to make a significant contribution to future policy and practice within the Hong Kong early years arena.

6.2 The Research Journey

My motivation to conduct this particular study came from my responsibilities as the founding head of curriculum at a Hong Kong early years setting, in particular my responsibility to provide ongoing support and training to a diverse and transient cohort of staff. Having lived and worked in Hong Kong for 17 years when I embarked on the research, I had first-hand experience of how complex and challenging the pedagogical landscape can be for all actors involved, especially the practitioners who educate and work with children and families on a daily basis.

My decision to adopt a qualitative approach was influenced by my ontological and epistemological view that the setting's practitioners had distinct backgrounds, experience, knowledge and training, and thus would each bring his or her own interpretations of and perspectives on what something *looks like, sounds like and/or how it reads* in practice. To capture those diverse interpretations/perspectives, I conducted a case study in the setting, in which I had worked for seven years, seeking the opinions of eight practitioners and the head of school.

The methods I chose to seek answers to my research questions were face-to-face, one-to-one, semi-structured 60-minute interviews with the eight classroom practitioners and head of school; two separate semi-structured classroom observations of two classes; and a review of documentary evidence. A distinct aspect of the study was the involvement of participants representing seven different nationalities, three of whom had been raised in a Confucian culture. The rich insights afforded by such a diverse group of participants are reflective of Hong Kong's global, dynamic population. Such diversity, I believe, further contributes to knowledge of the Hong Kong education arena.

The pilot questionnaire and interviews with one practitioner and a head of school working in a different Hong Kong early years setting proved to be a valuable part of the research process, helping to provide a clearer pathway to the one-to-one interviews with the main study's participants. The pilot process affirmed that I had made the right decision to conduct the study in my own setting, as conducting it in a competing setting would have opened the door to a potential conflict of interest.

I adopted a primarily inductive approach to data analysis (Yin, 2014), and drew on the thematic analysis framework of Braun and Clarke (2006), which I found to be useful in guiding me through a process of analysis that proved to be both systematic and reflective (Wellington, 2015).

In the following subchapter I provide a summary of the key findings elicited from the study data, along with the two models I have created from the data, which I call the Practitioner Success Pyramid [Fig. 30] and Practitioner Support and Learning Tools Cycle [Fig. 31].

6.3 Key Findings

Several challenges that the participants have faced in implementing a play- and child-centred approach within the Hong Kong context were identified from the data. Owing to a flexible framework whereby day-to-day planning is conducted through daily observations of and interactions with the children, the participants said they initially struggled to gain inspiration for new ideas and to think creatively when setting up a child-centred classroom environment and organising activities based on the children's interests and abilities. A significant challenge for two of the practitioners who had been raised in a Confucian culture and lacked any play-based learning experience as either a child or a professional was putting the theories they had read into practice. Both said that doing so had proved more difficult than they had imagined. A particular struggle was striking the right balance between child-initiated and teacher-initiated activities. It took them a while to learn how to move away from whole class teaching to successfully observing and listening to the children and being able to ask appropriate questions. Both of these participants acknowledged that adapting to Western-influenced approaches had not been easy for them. What had made it possible, they believed, was being given ample time to learn and support from, and collaboration with their peers and managers.

One of the most frequently mentioned challenges for the participants as a whole was responding to parents' concerns and questions and providing evidence of what and how their children were learning. Seb, an experienced, UK-trained practitioner, acknowledged that it can be intimidating talking to parents, whom he described as '*these powerful people*'. Several of the participants talked of navigating parental anxieties about pre-primary

learning objectives and responding to their frequent questions about schooling options. The catalyst for such anxieties/questions is parents' fear that their children will not be accepted by their preferred school in Hong Kong's highly competitive education environment (Humpage, 2016). In the participants' view, it was this fear that prompted parents to seek visible and measurable learning outcomes, which are not always obvious when children are engaging in play-based activities, as well as the teaching of numeracy and literacy at an early age. It could thus be argued that the Confucian culture that prevails in Hong Kong is not the only driver of parents seeking early academics. Rather, the high expectations of primary schools, which demand that young children complete written and verbal assessments may play an equally important role. Such expectations, I suggest, place practitioners under additional pressure to devise alternative strategies for conveying a child's progression and achievement of learning milestones to parents. The intensity of that pressure was evidenced in the interview with Jess, who, despite over 15 years' experience teaching a play-based approach in New Zealand and three other countries, found parents' requests for immediate results and proof/evidence of learning to be extremely stressful. Providing such proof/evidence and engaging in dialogue and shared understandings with parents about the efficacy of play-based pedagogy in general were both essential elements of keeping parents happy and helping them to understand their children's progress, the participants felt.

The interviews, classroom observations and documentary evidence all highlighted strategies that the focal setting uses to navigate parental expectations. The ability to communicate with parents and share information with them about the learning taking place in the classroom, as well as the primary school selection, application and assessment process, were found to be key aspects of a practitioner's role in the setting. Amongst the numerous strategies embedded into practitioners' daily practice are sending home a learning journal that documents children's learning and achievement of milestones throughout the year, writing a weekly class letter and sending photographs to parents, along with an explanation of the learning that has taken place. The participants expressed the belief that it is important to maintain an open-door policy whereby parents are encouraged to engage in face-to-face dialogue, email correspondence and/or telephone conversations with their child's teacher. All of the participants contribute in some way to sharing information with parents on a wide range of topics throughout the year, including providing

parents with details on the curricula offered by and assessment/interview processes at various primary schools. The participants have learnt, through collaboration, reflection meetings and training, different ways to make learning visible. For example, they make use of classroom windows and walls to communicate learning processes and demonstrate how certain play-based activities relate to the EYFS learning milestones. Practitioners in the setting share the task of writing monthly research articles and conducting regular in-house workshops for parents on a wide range of topics. The study's identification of these parental support strategies fills a significant knowledge gap, as there is limited literature on how Hong Kong settings support parents.

Another significant finding revealed by the data is that a pivotal prerequisite for feeling supported and well-equipped, and thus experiencing success in their role, is for practitioners to have shared values and pedagogical beliefs with their peers, managers and the institute as a whole. The participants identified their peers in the setting as one of their biggest sources of support and inspiration thanks to shared values and beliefs about how young children learn. Such shared values/beliefs came as a relief to some of the participants who had previously worked in Hong Kong settings where they did not exist. The interview data revealed that shared values and beliefs made it possible for practitioners to feel a strong connection with their peers, and thus to feel settled and confident within the setting, which the literature identifies as an important factor for success (Betteney, 2018). It is likely to be particularly significant in the Hong Kong context owing to the complexities of early years settings, which often look and operate very differently from one another (Yang and Li, 2018a).

It is clear from the literature that university teacher training courses do not always equip new practitioners with the tools they need (Recchia and Beck, 2014), and practitioners in Hong Kong do not receive any professional development training from the government (Cheung, 2017), thus leaving them with knowledge and skill gaps. Amongst the requisite skills and knowledge for practitioners in play-based, child-centred classrooms identified in the current research are the ability to think creatively; the confidence to communicate with parents about their expectations and answer parents' questions; knowledge of the primary school assessment process; classroom management and learning support strategies; flexibility in planning; the ability to observe and respond to children's interests; and the

ability to put the theory of play into practice. The interview data suggest that not all of these skills/knowledge come easily to practitioners without practice and guidance. For example, the participants noted how difficult it can be to talk to parents about developmental, educational or primary school matters without the requisite knowledge. Many of them emphasised that it was having ample time for reflection, opportunities to observe and collaborate with their peers, and the training and support provided by their peers and management that had equipped them with the confidence and knowledge needed to communicate with and develop shared understandings with parents, and thus to be able to implement a play-based, child-centred approach. In the absence of these factors, Kat argued, it would not have been possible for her to reach her full potential within the field.

The findings of this study suggest that it is crucial for early years practitioners to have some form of induction training at the beginning of their employment, as well as ongoing training and support throughout the year. Sam cited the benefits of being able to have the time to settle in and connect with and get to know her peers; as well as to become familiar with the school environment, policies and procedures during the induction period. Although the participants entered the setting with different interpretations of what a play-based, child-centred approach looks like in practice, it was through being given opportunities to observe peers who had worked in the setting longer and going through a process of trial and error in the classroom that had helped them to understand what such an approach looked like in the focal setting.

The aforementioned data suggests that there is a hierarchy of success consisting of several layers/stages that precede a practitioners' ability to feel secure and confident in their practice when implementing a play- and child-centred approach. As a pre-requisite to employment the data has illuminated the importance of shared values and beliefs amongst the practitioners about how young children learn. Time to settle in to the setting and be provided with an ongoing cycle of support and learning tools were cited by the practitioners as an important factor to them being able to develop autonomy and collaborate effectively with their peers. I have called this hierarchy for success a Practitioner Success Pyramid, a visual representation of which can be found in Fig. 30. Following on from this, I have provided a more detailed account of the specific cycle of support and learning tools, including a visual representation [Fig. 31].
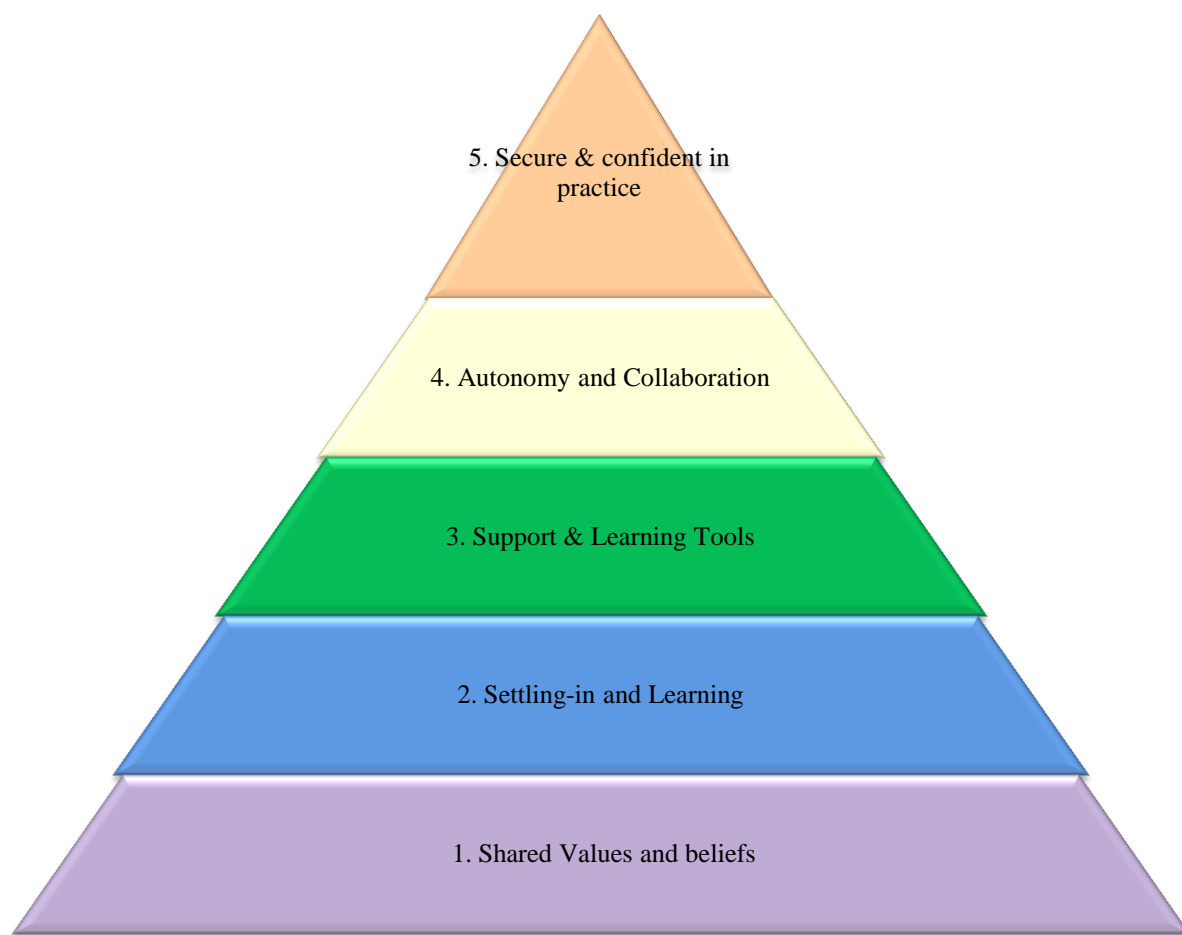
Fig. 30. Practitioner Success Pyramid

1. Shared values and beliefs. The findings of this study suggest that practitioners do not need to have prior knowledge of or experience teaching a play- and child-centred approach; however, what they *must* have is a desire to learn and a belief in the value of such an approach. If there is no alignment in values and beliefs about how young children learn amongst practitioners, managers and the institute as a whole, then it is questionable whether early years practitioners in Hong Kong would ever be in a position to feel truly secure and confident in practice.

2. Settling-in and learning. For the participants in this study, being afforded ample time to settle into their new environment – as opposed to being expected to teach in the classroom on their first day without any induction training or knowledge of company policies and procedures – was crucial. Having an opportunity to get to know their peers, being supplied with a teacher handbook, attending workshops, watching in-house training videos and attending peer-taught mock classes was essential to helping them feel settled and well-informed.

3. Support and learning tools. The participants highlighted a wide range of support and learning tools they saw as crucial to their role as practitioners working with a play- and child-centred approach in Hong Kong. The Practitioner Support and Learning Tools Cycle presented in Fig. 31 show the specific such tools identified. Several participants singled out being assigned a mentor [a member of staff who had worked in the setting for at least a full academic year] in the early stages of their employment as particularly helpful.

4. Autonomy and collaboration. The participants cited opportunities to meet and collaborate with their peers as crucial to their success at navigating the various challenges they faced. Although they also enjoyed the autonomy they were afforded over what they taught, they said such autonomy succeeded only in conjunction with collaboration. Weekly planning and reflection meetings, monthly informal professional development sharing sessions and periodic peer observations in the classroom were identified as valuable platforms for sharing ideas and concerns and acquiring new knowledge [see Fig. 31].

5. Secure and confident in practice. Once practitioners feel secure and confident in their practice within the setting (usually by the end of their first year), they are given an opportunity to participate in induction training for and mentor new practitioners and to present workshops throughout the year.

Fig. 31. Practitioner Support and Learning Tools Cycle

The provision of a Practitioner Support and Learning Tools Cycle [Fig. 31] embedded within the focal institution has not only been instrumental in equipping practitioners with what they need to navigate the challenges they face, but has also helped them to acquire the confidence they need to implement a play-based, child-centred approach in Hong Kong. It should also be noted that all of the participating practitioners considered themselves to be 'learners' in their first year of teaching in the setting, regardless of their experience and

qualifications, but thanks to the support and mentorship they had received, they felt sufficiently equipped and confident to mentor new staff in subsequent years.

What the data collected in the current study reveal is that if practitioners have a desire to learn and are offered the right kind of support, it is entirely possible for them to adapt to and successfully deliver a play-based pedagogy, regardless of their cultural/educational background, as the cases of Kat, Bea and Rhea make clear. However, the findings indicate that such a pedagogical transition is not an easy one to make without sufficient support for practitioners born and raised in a Confucian culture. Kat, Rhea and Bea all faced similar challenges in adopting Western methods, especially in their first year of practice, but with perseverance and the support and learning tools embedded within the focal setting [see Fig. 31] were able to overcome them. What is important to note is that both Rhea and Kat applied to work in the setting specifically because they believed that play is the best way for young children to learn, despite never having experienced such learning themselves, either during their childhoods or as part of their teacher training. It might be easy to assume that a practitioner who holds a degree in early childhood education and has experience working in a play-based setting in other parts of the world would find it relatively easy to fit into a Hong Kong setting. This study suggests that that is not necessarily the case, revealing the importance of embedded support and learning tools, as well as shared values and beliefs amongst practitioners, management and the setting as a whole. It was by having these shared values and beliefs as a foundation, along with the support they received at different stages, as illustrated in the foregoing Practitioner Success Pyramid that they were eventually able to feel confident and secure in the field.

In summarising and further articulating the main findings of this study, I have found it helpful to draw on Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capital. It is widely accepted that there is a parent-driven policy discourse in Hong Kong (Cheung *et al.*, 2017; Hong Kong Government News, 2017), meaning that parents hold the primary power, or 'cultural capital', within the early years field. It can thus be a challenge for practitioners to feel the necessary power or confidence within the field in the face of pressure from parents and other market forces (Hong Kong Government News, 2017) to implement the approaches recommended in the Hong Kong *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* (Curriculum Development Council, 2006). As noted throughout the thesis, in the absence of adequate

professional development training or support, practitioners will struggle to put theory into practice (Chen *et al*., 2017; Cheng *et al*., 2015), which can cause inconsistency between knowledge and practice within the field (Wu, 2014).

By drawing on the Practitioner Success Pyramid [see Fig. 30] and Practitioner Support and Learning Tools Cycle [see Fig 31] which have evolved from the data, it makes it easier to visualise and understand what a professional habitus can look like in practice. Within the context of this study it is by possessing shared values and beliefs on entry into the field which enables the practitioners to play the game and 'to be accepted as a legitimate player' from the outset (Gunter, 2002, p. 11). This I suggest is a critical first step to the practitioners gaining some of the necessary confidence or power within the field, and a pre-requisite to co-creating a shared habitus within their field. If there is no alignment in values and beliefs about how young children learn amongst practitioners, managers and the institute as a whole, then it is questionable whether early years practitioners in Hong Kong would ever be in a position to feel truly secure and confident in practice.

In the absence of a shared professional habitus, it will be difficult for practitioners to function or 'play the game' within the field, thus reducing their chances of gaining the ability to command power or capital (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992). These factors are important to note because without shared understanding or knowledge (Wu, 2014), it is difficult if not impossible to form a shared professional habitus (Maton, 2014).

6.4 Insights and Limitations

Whilst this study has some limitations that may limit the transferability of my findings, it also offers some rich insights. First of all, it is important to note that the study cannot be considered representative of all kindergartens in Hong Kong, which operate independently. They are all afforded a certain amount of autonomy, and each has its own interpretation of the *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* (Curriculum Development Council, 2006) and of what policies and recommendations should look like in practice (Yang and Li, 2018a). The Practitioner Success Pyramid and Practitioner Support and Learning Tools Cycle presented in Figs. 30 and 31 both emerged from a single case study, and further research would be required before I could argue that they are scalable models.

Second, all of the practitioners who participated in this study chose to work in the focal setting in the knowledge that they would be able to put their values and beliefs about how children learn into practice. Their values and beliefs were thus in alignment with those of their peers, management and the setting as a whole, regardless of their prior experience, knowledge or training. The results may have been different in a setting that had recently changed from a traditional didactic, whole class teaching approach with practitioners and/or managers who do not equally value or support a play- and child-centred approach.

Third, the setting in this study is located in an affluent area of Hong Kong that attracts families from all over the world in addition to families from Hong Kong and mainland China. It is possible that the experience of practitioners who work in a less affluent part of Hong Kong or in an area that attracts fewer international families would be different. For example, whilst the demand for a place in an international primary school is inevitably high in a setting with a large international intake, it is likely to be relatively low in less affluent settings with a primarily local intake.

Finally, owing to the limited professional development training offered by the Hong Kong government, and thus the pressure for in-house support and development, it is important to consider the budget limitations of different settings. The focal setting, for example, is in the fortunate position of being able to employ a full-time learning support coordinator who provides regular training and support to staff in addition to the other support/learning tools in place. However, despite this relative luxury, the study also revealed the focal setting to have a limited training budget, with most in-house training thus conducted by management and practitioners themselves.

6.5 Intended Audience

Whilst the findings of this study will be of interest to scholars, managers and practitioners working in early years settings in Hong Kong, they are anticipated to be of particular interest to the Hong Kong government and to universities and colleges for use in reflecting on the future design of policy and teacher training programmes in Hong Kong. As a single case study cannot be representative of all early years' institutions, my intention is for

readers to use the findings to reflect on and/or enhance their current pedagogical practices and strategies, thereby contributing to knowledge within their own professional context.

6.6 Recommendations for Future Research

This thesis raises further questions that I would like to put forward as recommendations for future research.

First, the findings illuminate the pressure that Hong Kong parents feel under with respect to their children's academic achievements, and thus their demand for immediate, visible results. Although the literature has documented that such high expectations are rooted in Confucian culture, the data presented herein contribute to the literature by revealing the intense pressure that primary schools place on families in the form of entrance and assessment criteria. A study capturing the voice of parents would be helpful for understanding the root cause of the high academic expectations parents in Hong Kong have for their young children. Do they come from their own cultural values, or are they a direct result of the demands imposed by primary schools? It would also be interesting to investigate how parents view play-based pedagogy and what support they need to better understand it.

Second, although this study identified primary school demands as a source of pressure on parents, and in turn on practitioners and children, it is unclear how aware of such pressure primary schools are. The attitudes and expectations of primary schools would thus be a worthy topic for further investigation.

Finally, it would be fruitful to conduct research in other Hong Kong early years settings to determine how the proposed Practitioner Success Pyramid and Practitioner Support and Learning Tools Cycle can be adapted to fit different contexts.

6.7 Reflecting Back and Thinking Forward

The research process that has resulted in this thesis has constituted a remarkable journey of reflection and adaptation. Being able to step away from both the focal setting and Hong

Kong while working remotely in the UK has been beneficial to the research, I believe. Having space away from daily interactions with the setting and participants has given me an opportunity to reflect without bias. I believe I now have a more in-depth understanding of the complexities and challenges the setting's practitioners face in their everyday practice, as well as of the support and learning tools that should be put in place to help them.

Despite the benefits of globalisation and the ease with which people can move from country to country for work and education, this study has taught me that it cannot be assumed that it is easy for trained and experienced practitioners to move from one context to another without sufficient support from their new setting. The study has shed light not only on the challenges that Chinese practitioners experience in adopting Western approaches, but also on those faced by Western-trained practitioners in adapting to a new (Chinese) context.

In sum, this research offers new insight into the complex challenges that early years practitioners in Hong Kong face and how they can be supported in navigating those challenges in practice. Drawing on Bourdieu's concepts of field, habitus and capital has enabled me to articulate the complex relationships of capital or power that exist in Hong Kong early years settings (Cheung *et al.*, 2017; Hong Kong Government News, 2017). The findings show that it is not only parents who hold significant such capital/power; so too do primary schools. They not only document the dominance within the field of the primary school admissions and assessment process, but also the pressure that dominance exerts on parents and – in my view – practitioners and arguably children. The findings suggest that in their quest to obtain capital or power within the field by managing parental demands and implementing a play- and child-centred approach (Hong Kong Government News, 2017), practitioners must develop a shared professional habitus. The Practitioner Success Pyramid and Practitioner Support and Learning Tools Cycle that evolved from the data offer valuable insights on the processes and support required to aid practitioners in that quest.

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Appendix A

Approval letter from the Ethics Committee – December 2017

Virginia Humpage
Registration number: 150107853
School of Education
Programme: EdD in Early Childhood Education

Dear Virginia

PROJECT TITLE: Navigating a complex pedagogical landscape: Case study of a progressive early years model in Hong Kong

APPLICATION: Reference Number 016897

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 19/12/2017 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

University research ethics application form 016897 (dated 27/11/2017).

Participant information sheet 1037583 version 1 (27/11/2017).
Participant information sheet 1037585 version 1 (27/11/2017).
Participant information sheet 1037586 version 1 (27/11/2017).
Participant consent form 1037590 version 1 (27/11/2017).
Participant consent form 1037589 version 1 (27/11/2017).
Participant consent form 1037587 version 1 (27/11/2017).

The following optional amendments were suggested:

If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation please inform me since written approval will be required.

Yours sincerely
David Hyatt
Ethics Administrator
School of Education

Appendix B

Approval letter from the gatekeeper to commence the research

12th January, 2018

Dear Ginny,

This letter is to inform you that we give you formal consent to proceed with your case study as part of your studies for an EdD at the University of Sheffield. You may have full access to our teachers and parents / children within our setting in order for you to gather any evidence or information that you feel is necessary for your study. In doing so, I would ask you to follow our safeguarding and confidentiality policies at all times.

I do wish you all the best as you embark on this study and please do let me know if there is anything I can do to help.

Kind regards,

T. Ennis.

Head of School

Appendix B

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I do wish you all the best as you embark on this study and please do let me know if there is anything I can do to help.

Kind regards,

T. Ennis.

Head of School

Appendix C

Data collection timeline

Month/Year	Action
November 2017	Approval received by the Gatekeepers
December 2017	Ethical approval confirmed from the University of Sheffield
January2018	Formal approval granted by the new key Gate Keeper
January 2018	1 practitioner and 1 Head of School from another Hong Kong setting are asked to participate in a pilot interview. Information letters and consent forms were shared and interview questions sent ahead of the mutually agreed date and time of interview.
February 2018	Pilot consent forms and pilot 1:1 interviews conducted
February 2018	A short presentation conducted to prospective practitioner participants and Head of School
February 2018	Information letters and consent forms sent to prospective practitioner participants
February 2018	8 Practitioner and 1 Head of School participant signed consent forms received and two classes identified for semi-structured observations.
February 2018	Information letters and informed consent forms sent to the parents of the two classes I wished to observe
February 2018	Signed consent forms received from all participants
February 2018 to August 2019	Collected the documentary evidence
March 2018	Practitioner 1:1 interviews conducted
March 2018	Classroom observations conducted
August 2018	Head of School 1:1 interview conducted
March 2019	Emailed the Ethics committee at the University of Sheffield to ask for permission to send an additional request and consent form to the practitioner participants I had observed in class to use their faces in their photographs as part of my case study.
March 2019	Permission from the Ethics committee was granted and the email additional consent forms were sent to practitioners and all were signed and received within the week.

Appendix D

Pilot questionnaire for the practitioners

- What are the values/ethos of the setting?
- Have you worked at any other settings in Hong Kong? How were they the same or different?
- Do you think the parents have high expectations? In what way?
- How do you meet the parents' expectations?
- How do you get to know your children and families – is that important? Why?
- What is your definition of play within the context of your setting?
- How do you incorporate play into your classes?
- Has your interpretation of a play-based curriculum/approach changed since joining this setting? Can you please explain.
- What are the biggest challenges with executing this type of curriculum?
- How are these challenges managed?
- How do you know what the children's interests are?
- How do you incorporate the children's interests into the session?
- How do you plan for this?
- What do you think has prepared you the most for your role in Hong Kong?
- Biggest challenges that are different from where you have come from?
- How can practitioners be best supported in their practice (of putting theory into practice)?
- What training or professional development have you received from your current setting?
- What additional training do you feel would enhance your practice in Hong Kong?
- Do you feel pressure from parents in regard to the primary school interview assessments?

Appendix E

Pilot questionnaire for the head of school

- What are the values/ethos of the setting?

- Have you worked at any other settings in Hong Kong? How were they the same or different?

- Can you explain the clientele of your setting? Do you feel the parents have high expectations? In what way?

- How do you meet the expectations of the parents, who represent a range of cultures from around the world?

- Is any support offered to the parents in terms of workshops, settling into the school community, information sessions?

- What are the challenges with managing an early years setting in Hong Kong?

- How do you support the teachers with training within your setting?

- What do you find to be the biggest challenges for teachers?

- What workshops have you provided? Do you outsource or conduct them in-house?

- Do you have any communication or partnerships with Hong Kong primary schools?

- How do you help parents and children with the transition to primary school?

- What is your understanding of local values, and how do you incorporate these considerations into your programmes?

Appendix F

Information Letter for Participants – February 2018

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1. Research Project Title:

Navigating a complex pedagogical landscape: Case study of a progressive early years model in Hong Kong

2. Invitation paragraph

You are being invited to take part in a research project. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

Please take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

Thank you for reading this.

3. What is the project's purpose?

Hong Kong's early childhood education system is often referred to as competitive and complex, especially in regard to practitioners being able to implement a child-centred, play-based approach following children's interests. I am interested in finding out what some of the main challenges are that practitioners and managers face when implementing a progressive early years approach within the Hong Kong context. Some of the questions I am seeking answers to are:

- What are the main challenges that practitioners and managers face with implementing a progressive approach in Hong Kong?
- How are practitioners able to manage parental expectations?

- How can practitioners be supported in their practice?

The study will involve conducting 1:1 interviews with at least 8 practitioners and 1 senior manager which will be voice recorded, and observing two classes of children. The classroom observations will be conducted with one class of 2 ½ - 3 ½ year olds with a maximum of 12 children in a class, and one class of 3 – 5 year olds with a maximum of 18 children in a class. The classroom sessions are scheduled for between 2hrs and 3hrs, and I plan to observe each of the two classes two times each over a one month time frame. In each classroom there are 2 full time teachers who are with the children the entire session.

A camera will be used to photograph some of the activities and classroom set up of the classes. Documentary evidence will also be requested, such as copies of lesson plans, curriculum overviews and class schedules.

I plan on conducting the study between the 1st March 2018 and the 30th March 2018.

4. **Why have I been chosen?**
You have been invited to become a participant in this research project as you are either a practitioner or manager that currently works in a Hong Kong early years setting which promotes a child-centred, play-based approach following children's interests. As a valued and reflective professional your personal experience and opinions are considered important to this study.
It is hoped that there will be at least 8 practitioner participants and 2 senior manager participants who are willing to participate.

5. **Do I have to take part?**
It is entirely up to you to decide whether or not to take part in this research project. If you do decide to take part you will be given this information sheet to keep (and be asked to sign a consent form) and you can still withdraw at any time. You do not have to give a reason.

6. **What will happen to me if I take part?**
If you choose to take part in the research, your period of involvement will be from the 1st March 2018 until the 30th March 2018. During this period of time 1:1 interviews will be

conducted during the month of March 2018 and if your class has been selected to be observed, these observations will commence in March 2018. A follow up reflection interview after the classroom observations have been conducted will be conducted.

7. **What will I have to do?**

You will need to attend a 1:1 semi-structured interview with myself which will last for approximately 1 hour in duration. The interview will be conducted sometime in March, during your contracted working hours; at a time that is convenient for you. The location will be either in your own classroom or in a colleague's classroom. The interview format will consist of me asking questions in regard to your professional background and experiences of teaching a child-centred, play-based approach following children's interests within the Hong Kong context. There will be no right or wrong answers to the questions. You will not be required to prepare anything specific for the interviews; however, you will be given a copy of some general questions I would like to discuss in advance of the interview to give you time to reflect on your own experiences prior to our discussion.

If your class is chosen to be observed, this will take place for two whole class sessions on a mutually agreed date in March. However, you will not be expected to do any additional preparation for this observation, other than introduce me and my research project to the children which we will discuss collaboratively along with the Head of School.

8. **Will I be recorded, and how will the recorded media be used?**

Data collection will be in the form of three types:

(i and ii) Audio recordings and Transcripts of the 1:1 semi-structured interviews

(iii) Photographs of the classroom observations [where applicable to you]

The audio and/or photography recordings of your activities made during this research will be used only for analysis and for illustration in my thesis and possibly future conference, publications, presentations and/or professional development training. No other use will be made of them without your written permission, and no one outside the project will be allowed access to the original recordings. I will be transcribing and analyzing the

recordings myself. The voice recordings will be held by myself on a password protected hand held voice recorder and the transcriptions will be held on my personal password protected laptop computer until my thesis has been formally accepted; at which point I shall delete the voice recordings.

9. What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

The reflexive nature of this research may lead you to question your own practice, values and beliefs. However, you will be able to use this as an opportunity for your own self-reflection and professional development rather than a criticism.

10. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this process will provide you with an opportunity to reflect on your professional experiences and share your own ideas and thoughts with other colleagues in the field of early years education.

11. What happens if the research study stops earlier than expected?

If the research study stops earlier than expected, you will be informed as soon as possible. It is anticipated that this would only happen if there were unforeseen circumstances such as ill health.

12. What if something goes wrong?

If you have a complaint regarding how the research has been conducted by myself, you will be able to raise the complaint with my Supervisor (Elizabeth Chesworth. e.a.chesworth@sheffield.ac.uk). She will investigate the nature of the complaint. If you are dissatisfied with the outcome of the investigation, then you will be able to contact the University Ethics Officer (d.hyatt@sheffield.ac.uk).

If you have concerns related to the arrangements of the interview schedules or classroom observations then you will be able to raise these with me or the Head of School.

13. Will my taking part in this project be kept confidential?

All the information that I collect about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. Unless participants requests for their first name to be used in the transcripts and the final research document, then all participants will be given a

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pseudonym. You will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications. The name of the research setting will not be used, however a description of the locality will be used.

14. What will happen to the results of the research project?
The final results of the research will be published in the form of my EdD Thesis, any associated publications and conference presentations.

15. Who is organising and funding the research?
This independent research is for my EdD thesis

16. Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via Sheffield University's School of Education ethics review procedure.

17. Contact for further information
Virginia Humpage
Vjhumpage1@sheffield.ac.uk

Tel: HK: 852 60100312 or UK**:** 07552 600496

You will be given a copy of this information sheet and a signed consent form to keep.

Thank you for taking part in this research project.

Appendix G

Information Letter for Parents – February 2018

Title of Project: Navigating a complex pedagogical landscape: Case study of a progressive early years model in Hong Kong

Researcher: Virginia Humpage

Dear Parents,

As part of my doctorate studies for an EdD at the University of Sheffield I am seeking your permission to conduct an observation of your child participating in their everyday classroom routines, along with their peers.

A large focus of my study is focusing on what an early years programme which incorporates a child-centred, play-based approach following children's interests looks like in practice. I will be interested to see how the children's interests are used to facilitate their learning and what their typical class session looks like in practice. I will not be focusing on any one child in particular and I will not be interviewing the children nor having any direct contact with the children as part of my study.

I do plan on taking photographs of the class in action which may include your child being captured in the photographs. These photographs will be used as part of my thesis and subsequently may be used for future presentations, any associated publications and professional development training purposes. The normal classroom routine will not be disrupted and it is not expected that any risk, inconvenience or discomfort will ensue as a result of me conducting the classroom observations.

I plan on conducting the classroom observations over two lessons in the month of March 2018 and both teachers will be present during the entire time.

The class teachers will be explaining my presence to the children on each of my two class observational visits and I will also be available to answer any questions they may have. The children's verbal permission will be sought at the beginning of each session for me to take photographs and if at any time your child indicates to either the teachers or myself that they do not wish for me to take photographs or indeed be present in the classroom then their wishes will be respected and photographs of them in particular will not be included in the research.

Please note that your child's name will be kept confidential and will not be documented as part of this study in any way.
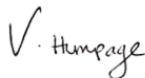
This study has been approved by the School of Education Ethics Committee at the University of Sheffield in the UK.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this project, please do contact myself, Virginia Humpage at vjhumpage1@sheffield.ac.uk or contact me on the school office number: 852-3487-2255 or indeed I would be happy to meet with you in person at school.

If you agree for your child to participate in this project, please sign a copy of the Consent Form and return it to school to the attention of Virginia Humpage by the 14th February 2018. A copy of the signed form will be returned to you for your own records.

Thank you for your support with this research project.

Virginia Humpage

V. Humpage

Appendix H

Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Project: Navigating a complex pedagogical landscape: Case study of a progressive early years model in Hong Kong

Name of Researcher: Virginia Humpage

Participant Identification Number for this project: **Please initial box**

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated February 2018 explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.

2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences. In addition, should I not wish to answer any particular question or questions, I am free to decline.

3. I understand that my recorded responses will be anonymised before analysis. I give permission for the researcher to have access to my anonymised responses.

4. I agree for the anonymised data collected from me to be used in future publications, conference presentations, and professional development training.

5. I agree to take part in the above research project.

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant   Date   Signature
(*or legal representative*)

_____   _____   _____
Name of person taking consent   Date   Signature
(*if different from lead researcher*)
To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

_____   _____   _____
 Lead Researcher   Date   Signature
To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/pre-written script/information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be placed in the project's main record (e.g. a site file), which must be kept in a secure location.

Appendix I

Informed Consent Form for Parents

Title of Research Project: Navigating a complex pedagogical landscape: Case study of a progressive early years model in Hong Kong

Name of Researcher: Virginia Humpage

Participant Identification Number for this project: **Please initial box**

4. I confirm that I have read and understand the information letter dated February 2018 explaining the above research project and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the project.

5. I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that I or my child are free to withdraw our consent at any time without giving any reason and without there being any negative consequences.

6. I agree that research data collected for the study from the classroom observations may be published and/or be used in presentations and/or professional development training in a form that may identify my child through the use of a photograph, but will not identify them by name.

4.   I agree that my child _____[insert child's name] may take part in the above research project.

_____   _____   _____
Name of Parent/guardian   Date   Signature
(*or legal representative*)

_____   _____   _____
Name of person taking consent   Date   Signature
(*if different from lead researcher*)
To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

_____   _____   _____
 Lead Researcher   Date   Signature
*To be signed and dated in presence of the participant*

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/pre-written script/information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be placed in the project's main record (e.g. a site file), which must be kept in a secure location.
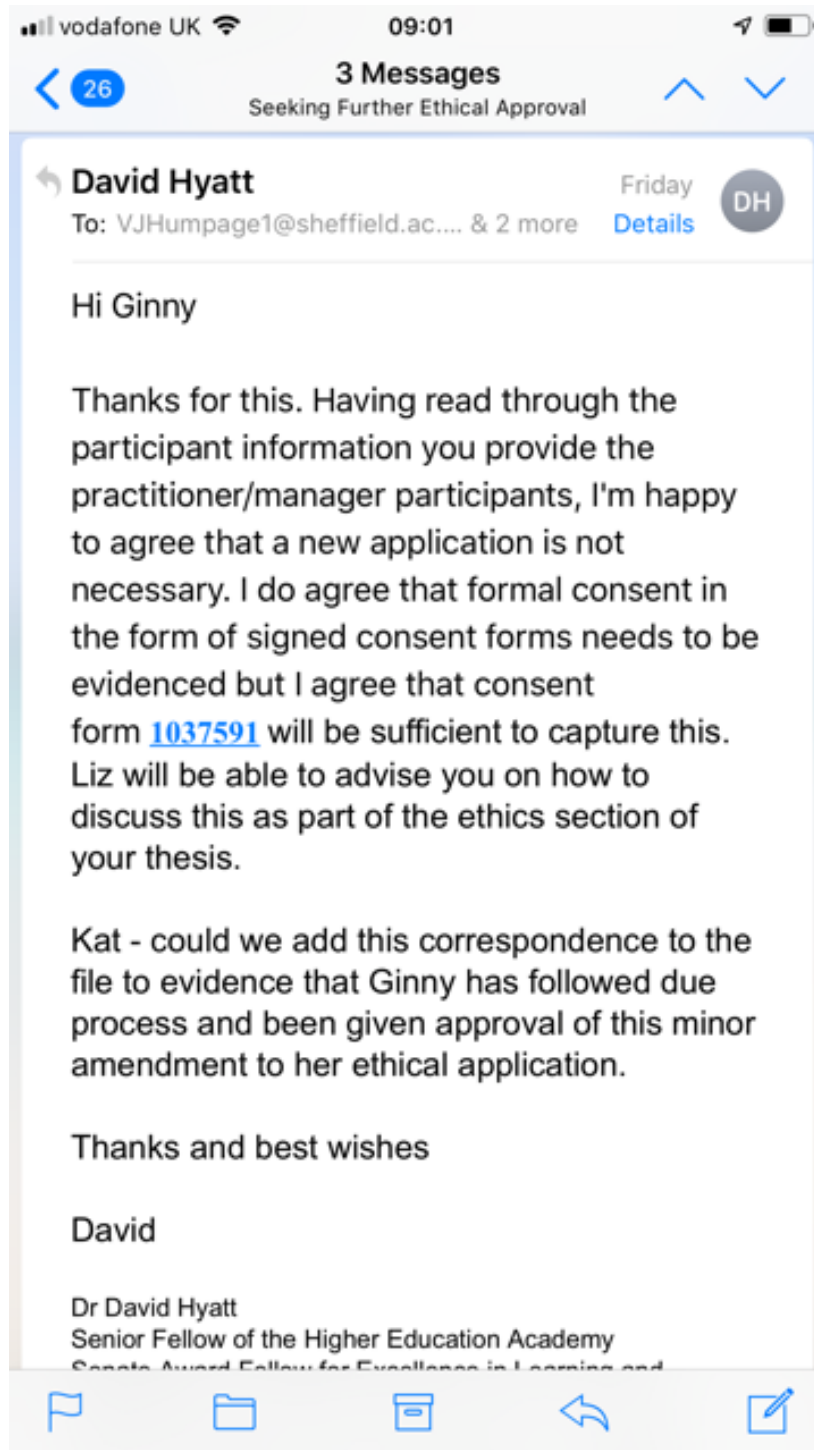
Appendix J

Email to the Ethics Committee – March 2019
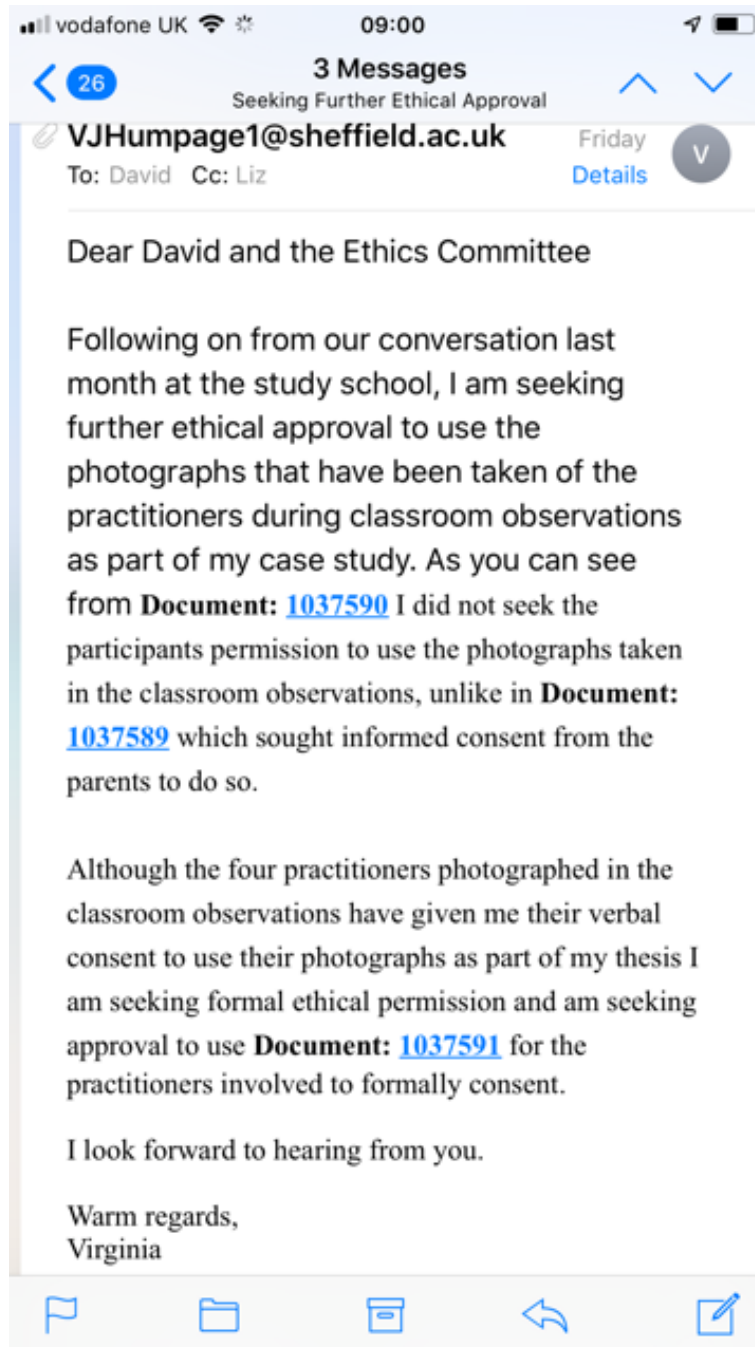
Appendix K

Email from the Ethics Committee – March 2019

Appendix L

Additional Participant Consent Form

Title of Research Project: Navigating a complex pedagogical landscape: Case study of a progressive early years model in Hong Kong

Name of Researcher: Virginia Humpage

Participant Identification Number for this project: **Please initial box**

1. I agree that research data collected for the study from the classroom observations I have been a part of may be published and/or be used in presentations and /or professional development training in a form that may identify me through the use of a photograph, but will not identify me by name.

_____   _____   _____
Name of Participant   Date   Signature
(*or legal representative*)

_____   _____   _____
Name of person taking consent   Date   Signature
(*if different from lead researcher*)
To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

_____   _____   _____
 Lead Researcher   Date   Signature
To be signed and dated in presence of the participant

Once this has been signed by all parties the participant should receive a copy of the signed and dated participant consent form, the letter/pre-written script/information sheet and any other written information provided to the participants. A copy of the signed and dated consent form should be placed in the project's main record (e.g. a site file), which must be kept in a secure location.

Appendix M

Participant Interview Schedule and Classroom Observation Schedule

Participant Interview Schedule

Practitioner Name	Date	Time	location
Rhea	12th March 2018	3pm-3.50pm	Art Studio
Jess	12th March 2018	5pm – 6pm	Participants classroom
Bea	13th March 2018	2pm-3pm	Participants classroom
Gili	13th March 2018	4.05pm – 5pm	Art studio
Sam	14th March 2018	1.30pm-2.25pm	Participants classroom
Seb	14th March 2018	3.30pm – 4.30pm	Participants classroom
Nat	17th March 2018	2pm – 2.50pm	Own classroom
Kat	20th March 2018	3pm – 3.55pm	Art Studio
Manager Name	**Date**	**Time**	
Tara	6th August 2018	5pm – 6.15pm	Own Office

Classroom Observation Schedule

Class Ages	Date	Time	Practitioners
2 ½ - 3yrs	21st March 2018	10.30am - 12:15pm	Seb and Substitute
2 ½ - 3yrs	28th March 2018	10:30am – 12:15pm	Seb and Bea
4 – 6 yrs	23rd March 2018	9:00am - 12:00	Gili and Nat
4 – 6 yrs	27th March 2018	9:00am- 12:00	Gili and Nat

Appendix N

Interview questions for the practitioners

Questions about the participant

- What is your nationality?

- Where did you grow up?

- What are your qualifications, and where did you go to college/university?

- How long have you taught in HK?

- How many years have you been teaching a play-based curriculum?

- Where else have you taught?

Setting under study

- How long have you been working at the current setting?

- What are the values/ethos of the setting?

- Why did you choose to work in a setting that incorporates a play-based, child-centred curriculum?
- Are there many differences working in this setting as opposed to where you have worked before?
- What is your understanding of local values, and how do you incorporate these considerations into your planning/practice/class?

Play

- What is your definition of play within the context of your setting?

- What is your understanding of child-centred learning?
- How do you incorporate child-centred learning into your classes?
- Has your interpretation or implementation of a play-based curriculum/approach changed since joining this setting? Can you please explain.
- Do you think families in your setting value play as a learning tool?
- How do you inform parents of the learning that is taking place in the classrooms?

Curriculum

- As you may be aware, Hong Kong does not have a statutory early years curriculum; therefore, what are your thoughts about teaching a curriculum that has been described by some as a 'designer' or flexible framework?
- How is it the same as or different from the frameworks and guidance you have used before?
- What are the advantages/disadvantages of teaching such a curriculum?
- What are the biggest challenges with executing a curriculum such as this?
- How are these challenges managed?
- How do you incorporate the children's interests into the session?
- How do you plan for this?
- How do you find out about their interests at home?

Professional development

- What training or professional development have you received while teaching in Hong Kong? Is it outside or internal training?
- How often?
- Do you receive less or more professional development than in your last setting? In what way?
- How do you think practitioners can be best supported in their practice (of putting theory into practice)?
- Do you think there is a value in learning from peers? If so, in what way?
- What additional training do you feel would enhance your practice within this Hong Kong setting?

Primary schools

- What are your thoughts about the process of children applying to and being accepted into primary schools in Hong Kong?
- What do you think are parents' main concerns about their children's next steps to primary school?
- Why do you think this is?
- How do you manage these expectations?

Families

- How would you describe the expectations parents have in regard to their child's pre-primary education?
- How do you meet the parents' expectations?
- How do you get to know your children and families – is that important? Why?
- How do you engage the families in your setting?

Do you have any other thoughts or comments you would like to share with me today?

Thank you for your valuable time.

Appendix O

Interview questions for the head of school

Questions about the participant

- What is your nationality?

- Where did you grow up?

- What are your qualifications, and where did you go to college/university?

- How long have you worked in an early years setting in Hong Kong?

- How many of those years were as a manager/practitioner?

- How many years have you worked in a play-based, child-centred setting?

Setting under study

- How long have you been working at the current setting?

- What are the values/ethos of the setting?

- Why did you choose to work in a setting that incorporates a play-based, child-centred curriculum?

- Are there many differences working in this setting as opposed to where you were working before?

- What are both the advantages and challenges of operating an early years setting in Hong Kong?

- What, if any, are some of the biggest challenges for your setting?

- What is your understanding of local values, and how do you incorporate these considerations into your programmes

- What are some of the environmental or policy/cultural constraints you are faced with?

- How have these influenced the decisions you make in your setting?

Curriculum

- Please tell me about the Language of Children framework that your setting has developed and implemented to meet the guidance of Hong Kong's *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum.*
- Who has had input into the design of the framework?
- How is it the same as or different from the frameworks and guidance you have used before?
- What are the advantages/disadvantages of using such a framework in your setting?
- In your opinion, what are some of the biggest challenges for practitioners with executing a framework such as this?
- How are these challenges managed?
- How do you ensure the consistency and quality of the programmes your setting is offering?

Play

- What is your definition of play within the context of your setting?
- What is your understanding of child-centred learning?
- Has your interpretation or implementation of a play-based curriculum/approach changed since joining this setting? Can you please explain.
- Do you think families in your setting value play as a learning tool?
- How do you inform parents of the learning that is taking place in the classrooms?

Practitioners

- What qualifications or characteristics do you seek when employing early years teachers in your setting?
- What do you find are the biggest challenges for early years practitioners in your setting?
- How do you support the practitioners with training/professional development within your setting?
- What topics do you cover in the orientation process?

- How often do you provide professional training? Do you outsource it or conduct it in-house?

Families

- Can you describe the clientele of your setting?
- Do you feel the parents have either high or low expectations of the services you provide? In what way?
- How do you meet the expectations of the parents, who represent a range of cultures from around the world?
- Is any support offered to the parents in terms of workshops, settling into the school community, information sessions?

Primary schools

- What are your thoughts about the process of children applying to and being accepted into primary schools in Hong Kong?
- What do you think are parents' main concerns about their children's next steps to primary school?
- Why do you think this is?
- How do you manage these expectations?
- How do you support families during the primary school application/interview/admission process?
- Do you have any communication or partnerships with Hong Kong primary schools?
- How do you support parents and children with the transition to primary school?
- What processes do you have in place to help your teachers succeed?
- Do you have a budget for training?

Do you have any other thoughts or comments you would like to share with me today?

Thank you for your valuable time.

Appendix P

Interview responses for research question two

| 1. How do practitioners navigate parental expectations?	Practitioner
• I think being really honest with parents and having that open dialogue. They can come and talk to us whenever they want to. Us visiting primary schools and understanding their expectation…um, after all we want children to experience success and get into these schools. I think when we have those conversations with parents about prospective schools, it's about us being honest with parents and saying if we don't think it is going to suit their child at a particular school. For example if it's a really academic school that won't suit the child's learning style they do need to know. It is about building that trust with parents…showing them other options. I think we are a huge support for parents, you know… they bring their children to us every day and trust us. We observe the children a lot and share that with the parents. (17) • It is about reassuring parents about age expectation / appropriate education, they don't always know what [the children] should be doing and when. Parents of the younger children ask a lot about when the children are going to learn to read and write – they don't really understand the process; for instance why is scooping pasta with spoons important - we [practitioners] know what is right and we have been given the tools to explain to parents why we are doing what we are doing. You know, we have these conversations with parents all the time. I want my child to go to walking and not crawling, but we know this is important development wise, so it's good to feel empowered to have that conversation. (18) • We talk a lot about what learning is and the important of social development. Building the parents trust and gaining that reciprocal respect is important… if they don't trust you they are not going to believe you. (19) • Very important (pause) we have drop in sessions for the children - the first impression is everything and we want parents to know that we will do everything we can to support that child and we want to build the trust straightaway. Giving parents the time is something we do and having a good relationship with the children is as important because parents travel a lot, so taking time to pick up the phone and talk to them to find out information is important. (20)	Gili
• I think mummies just are not sure how we teach the children – so I need to do display boards so they can see their children learning. (32) • We provide opportunities for the parents to volunteer and attend school events and culture days. This helps us to show the parents what is happening in the school. (51)	Rhea

Appendix Q

Interview responses pertaining to values and beliefs

Values and beliefs of the practitioners in the settings	Practitioner
• I value children as individuals and they have different ways of learning such as through doing, listening and observing. I value that every child is different so am very much focused on the children (7) • I chose to work in my current setting because I believed that it really was a play based approach. After my experience in Thailand and Hong Kong I thought I was signing up for a play based, but it wasn't how I had envisioned it or thought it would be (12) • In this setting I feel like it is more relaxed and because we are not pressuring the children to do things (pause) it is more natural I think. (12) • I had a relaxed early childhood where play, especially outdoor play was valued. I used to climb trees, play on my bike and with friends. Pre-school was very play based too. I remember when I got to grade school being very stressed out by exams at school in America. (13) • I am currently studying for a diploma and believe that play is children's work and if they weren't getting anything out of it they wouldn't do it. I do believe that children get so much more out of playing than what they would if they were sitting at a desk and reciting. (14)	**Sam**
• I don't have any experience of play in my own kindergarten experience. We were taught sitting down whilst a teacher stood at the front of the class and we were assigned homework. (6) • My own family had no idea about play (pause) it is not very common in Asia I would say. (8) • I think here the teachers inspire children instead of teaching children so I think this is the difference between real play based and between teachers. Instead of feeding children with loads of learning targets we are here to inspire children in different ways and we allow children to express themselves and show their talent in different ways and that is very different. We are not only a teacher, but we inspire. (13) • My understanding of play has changed since being in the setting (pause) I thought play was just fun. (14) • My interpretation of play has totally changed, my understanding was that it was more close ending (pause) every activity and game should lead to the answer I want, but now I have to balance between closed and open ended. (15) • I always wanted to work in a play based environment – it's challenging and creative and I am a creative person. (23) • I can't work in an environment where it is a fixed curriculum. (23) • Surprisingly I have learnt so much in this setting I am not the same teacher I was four years ago. (23)	**Kat**

Appendix R

Interview Question one

What aspects of implementing a play-based, child-centred approach are practitioners finding a challenge?
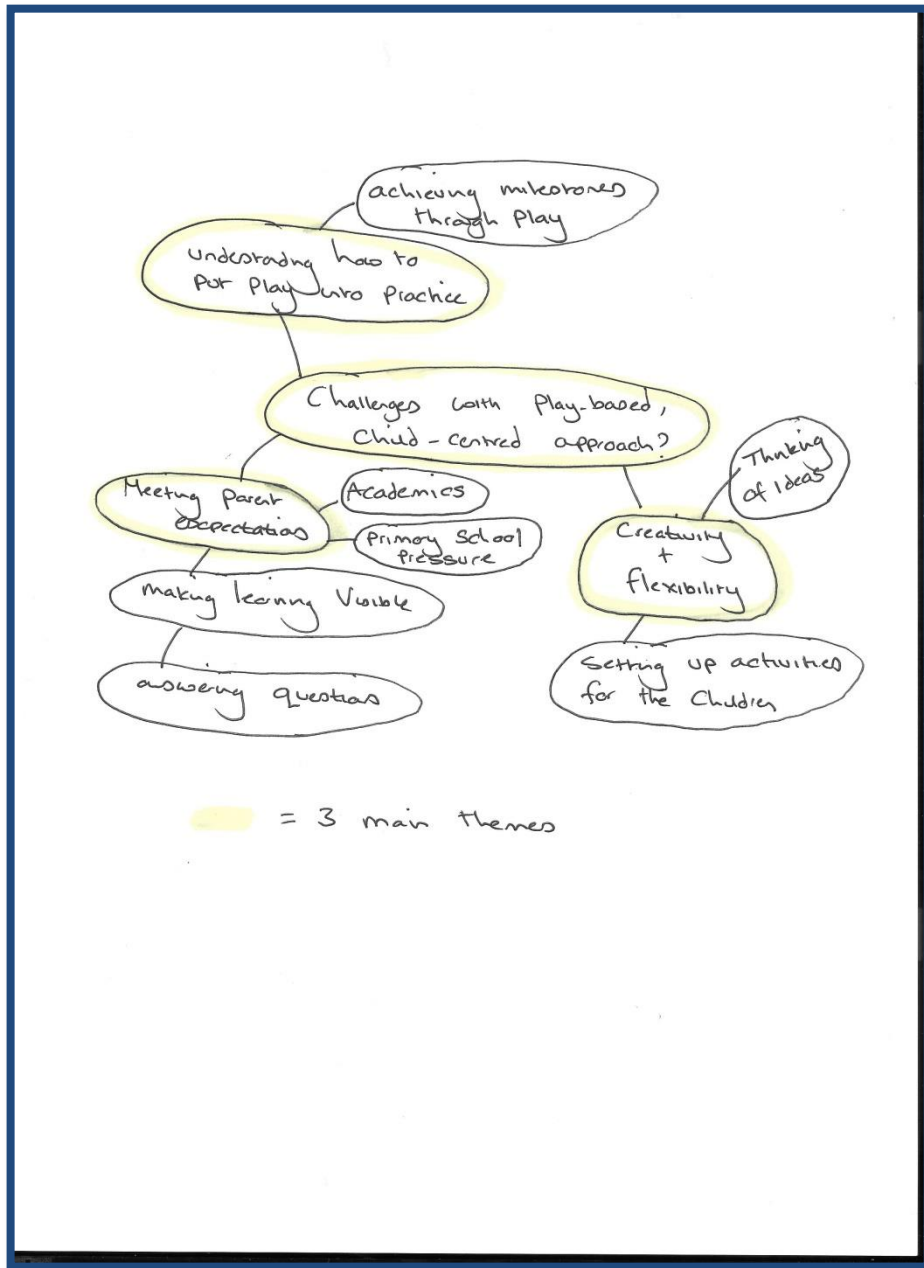
Appendix S

Example of a class weekly letter

Dear Parents,

With the very wet and windy weather we have had of late, the children arrived at school on Monday full of talk about typhoons, thunder, and rain and flooding. This proved to be a great provocation for the week. The children shared their experiences and feelings; some children said they were a little frightened of the wind and thunderstorms this led us to explore and experiment with loud sounds using a variety of noise makers, allowing the children to experiment.

In class this week ………………

The weather theme carried over in to the children's creativity as it became a place where the children could reproduce what they thought a typhoon could look like on paper. Large bowls, with a mixture of soap, water, glitter and paint were whisked around – just as a typhoon would do! Paper was then floated on the top to create representational pictures. The children particularly enjoyed this activity and shared their results with their peers and teachers. This activity was great for interacting and socialising together, and sparked a lot of conversation between the children. They began with the idea of typhoons and how the movement of the whisk made the water do different things; when fast the water went up the edges and looked like a hurricane! After some more experimenting with different materials, the children then decided they had made an 'ice field' and this then sparked more conversation about weather and with the support from a teacher discussion took place about different climates, around the world.

The children then began to speak about Hong Kong weather; rain, hot and sun were some words that they came up with. We then discussed what we would like to find out more about the weather in Hong Kong was like; Miss XX suggested 'humidity' and the children were very excited to learn more about this new descriptive word.

Like most of our activities this week our role play corner was also focused around weather. From discussion and following the children's interest, we made a weather station. This included exposure to numbers, mark making, imagination and creativity. The children also used different instruments to re-enact the sound of rain, storms and thunder. They showed interest in the way the different musical instruments sounded; rain sticks, different drums and castanets. Using different parts of the hands they were able to make loud, medium and quiet sounds on the drums depending on what they said the weather was like outside! The weather station has encouraged the children to use their imagination and really participated in role play and play together.

Following our talk by Ms. XX from Plastic free Seas, the children gave their ideas as to how we could reuse recyclable items. Making boats proved to be the most popular idea and, as well as plastic, paper was suggested as an item we could use. This was a great opportunity for the children to explore the different properties of materials, along with floating and sinking. The children noticed how the items made from paper became very soggy and did not float. The word 'absorption' was introduced and the children continued with their exploration to see which materials can absorb water. This led back to the original discussion about the best materials to make boats and we found out plastic was definitely the best option!

Appendix T

Example of a completed peer observation

Peer Observations

Environment take notes on; how the classroom is set up including; documentation (how is learning visible), teacher area, what inspired you?

Table and carpet areas were all set up with activities for the children to come straight into the classroom and access. It was clear to see that the activities took into account the children's interest especially the picnic set out on the carpet as most children spent a long time exploring the different resources.

The planning was available on the wall and it was clear to see that this had been followed as all areas were set out according to this. (Insects and mark making, picnic, music, stories sensory play.)

Children each had their own coat peg with their picture and name. They were all confident to come in and place their bag on their peg without adult supervision, showing a good routine set in place by the pre-nursery teachers.

Teaching and Learning: what do you feel worked well? Was the teaching style different from the way you teach? Was there anything you would have done differently? Was there anything you thought 'wow' that's something new?

XXX was able to navigate around the classroom easily, she spent time interacting with all the children, taking time to get down to their level. She used a lot of Makaton signing with the children and I observed some children throughout the session signing words also. The school routine was followed throughout, tambourines were used to warn about upcoming transitions and group time songs were sung as per nursery classes also.

There is nothing I would have done differently. I was extremely inspired by XXX reading Brown Bear, Brown Bear and signing the whole book also. The children were all engaged and focused throughout.

Make notes on what you feel you have taken from the session (What changes if any will you make to your environment and or documentation and or teaching? What training, research further professional development do you feel would enhance your practice?

I will definitely be incorporating more Makaton into my sessions in nursery class. I am currently attending weekly sessions with XXX to further my professional development.

Set yourself a goal to achieve by the end of December

- Observe more under 3's classes.
- Use more Makaton signs daily with the children especially who, what, when

Appendix U

Lesson plan for the Pre-Nursery Class

Time/schedule	Activities	Objectives / Schemas	Resources/Notes/ASP goals
8.30 – 8.55 Project Time	Playdough with open ended items Savannah scene with animals Sand / water	Fine motor strength and creativity Small world imagination Texture and language development – remembering own events	
9.10 – 9.25 Group Time	Hello song, Face cards, Mystery box, Environmental sounds and pictures	Listening and attention	
9.25 – 09.30 Toilet Time	Encourage children to sit on the toilet	Self-help and independence	
09.30 – 09.50 Playground Time Activities	Boat – dress up – kitchen – animal house		
9.50 – 10.00 Snack and group play	Pouring water, using tongs and tidy up. Farm house	Taking turns and tidying away together	
10.00- 10.15 Group/Music and Movement	Memory game with basket	Memory recall	
Reflections and interests/next steps for next week:			