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A comparison of teachers' musical abilities between public and private kindergartens in Qingdao, Shandong Province, China

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Abstract

This study investigates teachers' musical abilities in Shandong kindergartens in China, making a comparison between public and private kindergartens. For this research, five public and five private kindergartens were selected within the same city. The methods of non-participant observation and semi-structured interviews were used to collect data. The findings show that the overall musical abilities of public kindergarten teachers were greater than those of private kindergarten teachers. This study reveals that leadership and government policy are important factors for influencing the results, and puts forward recommendations for making changes in policy to improve teachers' musical abilities in private kindergartens.

Keywords: Music education; early childhood; Chinese kindergartens; teachers' musical abilities

Background of early childhood education in China

In China, official government guidelines for early childhood education contain the curricula of children's overall education, in which the music curriculum is included. According to the document *Guidelines for the Kindergarten Curriculum (trial version)* (Ministry of Education, 2001), education in kindergartens should be divided into five domains: health, language, society, science and art (including fine arts and music). Thus, music became a compulsory curriculum subject in Chinese kindergartens, and all kindergartens should have music lessons. However, there is no music specialist to teach music in kindergartens, and all curricula are conducted by general teachers.

Kindergartens

In China, kindergartens [yòu'éryuán幼儿园] refer to institutions that provide education and care for children from age 3–6 (Ministry of Education, 2016). There are three grades of children in Chinese kindergartens: junior class (for children aged 3–4), middle class (for children aged 4–5) and senior class (for children aged 5–6) (Ministry of Education, 2016). Information from the Ministry of Education shows that in general, there are two main types of kindergartens: public (i.e. government-funded and supported) and private (independent from government funding or support). In China, public and private kindergartens do not exclusively represent the children from families of lower and higher socioeconomic status, respectively. Among the participating kindergartens in this current study, two private kindergartens have high tuition fees, but others do not charge that much more than public kindergartens and can be accessed by many ordinary families (Table 1). More recently, in attempting to solve the problem whereby many families

Table 1. Kindergarten Details

Kindergarten	PubK1	PubK2	PubK3	PubK4	PubK5	PriK1	PriK2	PriK3	PriK4	PriK5
Founded year	2004	1951	2013	2003	2015	2004	2011	2012	2014	2011
Location	Urban	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Urban	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural
Awards	Provincial demonstration	Provincial demonstration/ Municipal top ten	Municipal top ten	/	/	Provincial/Municipal demonstration	Provincial demonstration	Municipal top ten	/	/
Tuition fees	¥700/month	¥680/Month	¥580/Month	¥420/Month	¥300/month	¥4580/month	¥1800/Month	¥780/Month	¥1000/Month	¥630/Month
Total children	340	456	210	100	342	302	355	295	100	60
Total full-time teachers	36	58	25	10	26	53	51	34	15	8
Teachers' educational backgrounds	Bachelor 53% Diploma 47%	Bachelor 58% Diploma 42%	Bachelor 42% Diploma 58%	Bachelor 40% Diploma 60%	Bachelor 45% Diploma 55%	Bachelor 48% Diploma 52%	Bachelor 50% Diploma 50%	Bachelor 35% Diploma 65%	Bachelor 20% Diploma 80%	Bachelor 10% Diploma 90%
Teachers' major	Early childhood (Preschool) education*									

*In China, the concept of preschool education is used interchangeably with early childhood education.

cannot enrol their children in public kindergartens and find it financially difficult to enrol in private kindergartens, the government has been encouraging private kindergartens to adopt the status of ‘universally beneficial private kindergartens’ (普惠性民办幼儿园) (The State Council, 2010). These kindergartens receive funding support from the government so long as the fees are not higher than those of public kindergartens. For all kinds of private kindergartens, the teacher’s salary is decided by kindergarten owners. In order to attract more children and parents, some private kindergartens offer specialist music lessons such as Orff or piano, but because these extra (paid) lessons are not allowed in public kindergartens, this study kept the focus on teachers’ general music lessons and the uses of music throughout the day.

In line with the expectations of the national and provincial guidelines, Qingdao government publishes kindergarten teacher textbooks. All public kindergartens must use government textbooks to teach children, while private kindergartens can use either government textbooks or their own textbooks, but must teach all five domains (Yan, 2022). In the participating private kindergartens of this study, three used government textbooks and two used their own textbooks, each of which included all the resources needed for music lessons, such as the teaching objectives, notation, analysis, equipment and teaching steps. Based on the cultural influences and a large number of children in each class, the most common teaching in Chinese education is teacher-centred (Benson & Fung, 2005). The format of the teacher-centred classroom is that children sit behind desks arranged in rows, facing the teacher in front of them, with the teacher lecturing and questioning while the students are listening and responding (Sium, 2014). Thus, the inclusion of music is mainly determined by teachers. Based on the author of this article’s extensive fieldwork in kindergartens, this suggests that children’s musical experiences differ depending on the level of the teachers’ musical skills or the ways teachers present music. In other words, teachers’ musical abilities and experience play a significant role in children’s music lessons and, therefore, in nurturing a setting that is conducive to formally developing children’s musical skills.

Teachers

In China, to be a kindergarten teacher, the kindergarten teacher qualification certificate is necessary (Ministry of Education, 2016), meaning that only those teachers who have qualified can be hired as teachers by any kindergarten. The examination is national; the first round is a written examination, and only those who have passed are eligible for the second round, which is an oral examination in which the assessment of musical skills is included. According to the *Syllabus of Teacher Qualification Examination in Primary and Secondary Schools and Kindergartens (trial) (interview part)* (Ministry of Education, 2012), candidates should have basic piano, singing, dancing and drawing skills. After obtaining the kindergarten teacher certificate, people who want to work in kindergartens need to pass recruitment examinations. Private kindergartens organise their own examinations. For public kindergartens, each city or district government organises a unified examination for candidates and distributes successful teachers to different kindergartens at a later date. The government publishes the scope and content of the examination every year in order to help candidates prepare (there is no significant difference between each year). According to the Qingdao recruitment brochure in 2021, the unified recruitment examination for kindergarten teachers was similar to the national examination for the kindergarten teacher certificate, which was divided into a written and an oral examination (including musical skills).

Research context

In China, most kindergarten teachers study preschool education (early childhood education) when at university. At this level of study, Chinese universities provide compulsory courses for preschool teaching students to learn musical skills, including playing piano, singing songs, improvisational accompaniment for children’s songs and music theory (Yan, 2021). Nevertheless,

university teachers who teach musical skills to preschool teaching students have majored in music rather than preschool education, and therefore, they do not necessarily have the pedagogic insight into working with children in this age group (Yan, 2021). Thus, to enable university teachers to provide more appropriate teaching, it is necessary and useful to learn about the expectations and musical experiences of teachers.

Musical ability is a contested term that has been linked to innate talent (e.g. general intelligence, mental capacities, empathy) and experience/process-based (e.g. practice, time, effort) (Zentner & Strauss, 2017; Shouldice, 2019; Okada & Slevc, 2021). As this research only focuses on teachers' musical abilities as presented or conveyed to children in the classroom, the notion of 'musical ability' here mainly refers to teachers' musical skills (e.g. the levels of singing, playing piano, dancing) and other aspects that affect music teaching quality (e.g. teaching materials, time allotted, attitudes, pedagogies and, interactions with children). Additionally, to establish the reasons for the musical differences between public and private kindergartens, teachers' personal experiences (such as educational background, teaching experiences and their own ideas) are also important in this study.

Literature review

The value of music in children's development

Music education plays a significant role in children's overall development. Many studies examine the importance of music education in schools. For example, Swanson (1979) indicates that music is a subject that enables children to maintain a healthy contact with the world, and music helps people identify themselves as well as acting as a means of self-expression and recreation that children benefit from. Wright (1998) shows that as music education is beneficial for children's physical, emotional and social development, children should have equal opportunity to access music education in schools. A study by Pound and Harrison (2003) shows that by joining in music activities, children's social interaction, collaboration and their sense of identity can be promoted, as well as their spiritual, moral and cultural development. It also demonstrates that children's understanding of music contributes to their development of literary, creative, and mathematical abilities. Mills (2005) argues that music is a unique form of communication that can impact children's feelings, thoughts and actions, and is seen as part of individual development, creativity, and expression.

Some Chinese studies have indicated the importance of music education for children. For instance, Lyu's (2012) study shows that, under certain conditions, music education can have a positive effect on children's overall development, including the physical, linguistic, cognitive, emotional and individual development. Ma's (2013) study demonstrates that, in some cases, musical learning can assist the development of children's cognitive function, which then relates to children's creative development. A paper by Yang, Fang, Xu and Shen (2015) suggests the potential value of music for children's linguistic and creative development and also indicates that children's self-discipline and attention can be improved in the process of learning music. Similarly, Tang (2016) discusses four main benefits of music on children's development: (i) improving children's intelligence; (ii) improving children's attention; (iii) contributing to children's physical exercise; and (iv) improving children's moral development.

Issues concerning teachers' musical abilities

The teacher's attitude, ability and approach play a significant role in children's music experience. Firstly, teachers should be full of enthusiasm and participate in music activities (Haines & Gerber, 1980; Campbell, 2004; Trinity College London, 2005). Secondly, teachers should have the ability to plan and organise appropriate musical activities for children (Haines & Gerber, 1980; Trinity

College London, 2005). However, concerns are raised in literature about teachers who lack confidence in teaching music. Swanson (1979) notes that when teachers have musical skills, the responsibility for children's music in the class remains with the teachers and they must meet this challenge. Pugh and Pugh (1998) say that planning is as essential to music education and that teachers must know what to achieve, how to achieve it, and how to use time effectively. Moreover, Campbell (2004) mentions that teachers should 'shape the musical knowledge and skills of their students step by small step, fashioning a sequence that fits individual and collective learning paces and styles' (p. 4). She also notes that behaviours relating to good music teachers include 'frequent eye contact with children, focused energy, carefully structured programmes that maintain children's attention on tasks, minimal teacher talk, and clear musical cues, gestures, and directions' (Campbell, 2008, p. 11). In addition, teachers should accept and appreciate children's spontaneous music-making, including songs, movements and experimentation (Haines & Gerber, 1980).

Some Chinese studies have focused on teachers' abilities in music. For instance, Zhang's (2009) study found that the majors of kindergarten teachers were different, with most of them majoring in early childhood education or music, with a small proportion from other majors, which resulted in different teaching results. The musical skills of the teachers who studied early childhood education are limited, while those who studied music lack the knowledge of children and early childhood teaching methods, and teachers of other majors may not be sufficiently experienced with music. Similarly, Zhang (2010), Xue (2018) and Kong (2019) also demonstrate that teachers' musical abilities and experiences need to be improved, and Zhang's (2010) paper notes how teachers describe themselves, including their lack of confidence in organisational capability in music activities, their creative capabilities in music, dance, rhythm or games; basic music theory, the skills of playing musical instruments, improvising, music theory and grasping the concept of music education.

Research questions

This study focuses on two research questions: (i) What are the differences in teachers' musical abilities between public and private kindergartens? and (ii) What are the factors influencing those differences?

Methodology

Chinese culture is characterised by 'a collectivistic orientation and is high in power distance' (Choy, 2017, p. 32). This idea is inherent in spheres of educational influence, such as the provincial government, which controls the education system, and thereby making early childhood education similar across all locations in Shandong Province in eastern China. As such, for this study, research was undertaken in one city: Qingdao. This study focuses on teachers' musical abilities in general music lessons. Observation was used to access what and how the teachers teach, along with gaining an ethnographic understanding of the educational setting. As Bernstein and Lysniak (2018) indicate, non-participant observation can provide the researcher with a deeper understanding of how teachers structure activities and interact with students. Thus, extensive non-participant observation was used in this study. Moreover, in connection with the objectives of this research, semi-structured interviewing was the chosen method for comprehending teachers' experiences, views of using and teaching music, and their strategies for teaching children. Because teachers' personal experiences and views are different, it was necessary to allow space for the interviewer to develop or change questions depending on the teachers' answers. As Bernard and Ryan (2010) suggest, semi-structured interviewing allows the researcher flexibility to change the order and details of how topics are developed, following up topics of interest. Despite the interviewer controlling the overall direction, the interviewees are asked similar questions, which helps when looking for similarities and differences.

For this study, ten kindergartens were chosen from Qingdao, including five public and five private kindergartens. In Shandong Province, kindergartens are evaluated by the government every year according to specific evaluation criteria, and those kindergartens that have obtained a high score can be awarded titles, such as ‘provincial demonstration kindergarten [省级示范幼儿园]’, ‘municipal demonstration kindergarten [市示范幼儿园]’ and ‘municipal top ten kindergarten [市十佳幼儿园]’.¹ The selected kindergartens covered different levels, including awarded kindergartens and ordinary kindergartens. Two public kindergartens (PubK1 & PubK2) and two private kindergartens (PriK1 & PriK2) are ‘provincial demonstration kindergartens’, and one public kindergarten (PubK3) and one private kindergarten (PriK3) are ‘municipal top ten kindergartens’. Moreover, Milner (2008) notes that in the USA, urban schools have higher student transience and cultural diversity. This situation also occurs in China (Zhang, 2011). The development of each area in Qingdao is different, which may lead to the situation that the fees of kindergartens, parents’ demands, teachers’ assessments, and government funding are different between urban, suburban, and rural areas (Fan, 2011). Therefore, one public kindergarten (PubK4) and one private kindergarten (PriK4) are in urban areas, and one public kindergarten (PubK5) and one private kindergarten (PriK5) are in rural areas to offer diversity of communities within the study. To establish the factors that influence teachers’ musical abilities, teachers’ educational background, major, and musical experience were also collected from each kindergarten. The details of these ten kindergartens are shown in Table 1.

Data collection took place over two to three weeks in each kindergarten. For the teacher interviews, four teachers were chosen from each kindergarten, in which three teachers each were from junior, middle, and senior classes because the objectives of music lessons might be different between each age group, and one teacher was chosen depending on their available time. A principal or director teacher in each kindergarten was also interviewed. Before observation of general music lessons, aspects that needed to be observed were noted, for example, noting how the teacher started their teaching: with a warm-up activity or direct teaching. The duration of each process was also noted. Following this, how the teachers taught a song, what equipment they used, their teaching styles, the engagement of children, and teacher delivery were noted (confident, enthusiastic, patient, or lacking energy). Also, children’s level of engagement (whether they engaged in the activities or not) and the result of that musical performance was observed, which reflected to an extent whether the strategies were successful for children’s learning. All the observed music lessons were video-recorded, which allowed the possibility to re-watch after the class had finished.

Regarding ethical considerations for this research, permission was gained from the Principals of all kindergartens involved. Before starting to investigate, an information sheet and consent form were sent to Principals and teachers of all kindergartens to read and sign, which included the aims of this research, what participants would be asked to do, and what data would be collected. This also stated that participation was voluntary, and participants could withdraw from the project at any time and without any disadvantage. Moreover, a newsletter was distributed to children’s parents by the teachers to inform them about the project, stating that the researcher would also spend time with children under their teachers’ supervision. If they did not wish their children to be involved or a child did not want to be involved, they could contact their teachers or email the researcher directly. The information sheet also informed teachers that the interviews would be audio-recorded and music lessons would be video-recorded with their permission. It was noted that participation was completely voluntary, and the interview results would be anonymous.

Findings

Interviews

Thematic analysis was used to analyse collected data. The findings of the teachers’ interviews were divided into three main areas based on the emergent themes: (i) teachers’ educational background; (ii) leadership’s requirements of teachers; and (iii) teachers’ personal concerns.

Teachers' educational background

This study mainly investigated teachers' university/college backgrounds. As shown in Table 1, all teachers learnt early childhood (preschool) education. Based on teachers' interviews, either for Diploma or Bachelor, music courses (e.g. music theory, vocal, dance, piano) were compulsory courses for them. However, the length of learning musical skills is different between diploma and bachelor. According to teacher interviews, teachers who held a diploma had four semesters of music classes while teachers who had a bachelor's degree only had two semesters of music.

Also, all teachers mentioned their preparation for the kindergarten teacher qualification examination, in which the test of musical skills was included. For example, a teacher in PubK2 said:

When I was in the second year of my bachelor's study, I started preparing for the teacher qualification examination. I prepared not only for the written exam, but also for the oral exam at the same time, such as the skills of singing, playing the piano, telling a story, and drawing. Because the method of the oral exam is drawing two from these, I must practice and prepare for all skills.

According to teachers' interviews, 28 of 40 took music-related tests (singing, playing the piano, and dance) in the examination for the kindergarten teacher.

Leadership's requirements of teachers

In teacher interviews, teachers often said they do music 'Because it is the Principal's requirement for us' or because 'The Principal asks us to do this', which reflected that leadership influences how and whether teachers were using music in their classrooms.

In this study, the Principals in public kindergartens asked the 'director teachers' to check each lesson plan in advance and look around every class to inspect the teaching. Music lessons were also included in this process. This was especially evident in PubK1 and PubK2, where, in order to support the quality of a lesson, the teachers were required to revise every teaching plan based on the comments of the director teacher until it was approved. The principal of PubK1 said:

To be honest, the purpose of schooling is to learn something, either for children or for their parents. So, the most important task for teachers is to teach every lesson effectively and to a high quality. The first step of improving the quality of lessons in designing a good lesson plan, so I require teachers to spend plenty of time on revising their lesson plan. It is the basis for a good lesson.

Also, the leadership in these kindergartens shared the belief that these musical skills are essential skills for teachers to master, and if they found a teacher who did not play the piano or a specific lacked skill, they asked that teacher to practice more and would check on them again.

Among private kindergartens, only PriK1 and PriK2 had similar requirements and inspections. The other three private kindergartens did not have such requirements for their teachers, and the principals/director teachers explained why. For example, the director teacher of PriK3 said:

I know many teachers' musical skills are bad, and their organisation of music activities is perfunctory. We are eager to strengthen our teachers' teaching level and require teachers strictly to improve their musical skills, but we also know if we want to retain teachers we can't demand too much. As private kindergartens, our teachers' working hours are longer, and our salary and welfare (insurance and housing funds) is worse than that of public kindergartens, so most of the teachers leave when they have passed the examination for public kindergartens.

We worry if we demand too much of teachers, more teachers may choose to quit. In the end, we decided that as long as teachers can complete the lessons, we don't pay much attention to the teaching level.

From the analysis, it was evident that the leadership's requirements of teachers are different between public and private kindergartens, possibly because of the demands placed on them.

Teachers' personal concerns

In the teachers' interviews, all teachers expressed the view that music learning is important for children, and they paid a lot of attention to their music lessons. Nevertheless, at the same time, it was apparent that teachers' concerns about their job were different depending on whether they were in public or private kindergartens. All public teachers only focused on their current job, such as exchanging ideas with colleagues to improve their teaching, or how to decorate a music area in the classroom. For instance, a teacher in PubK5 said:

We often observe and discuss other teachers' lessons. On the one hand, I give my comments to other teachers, but at the same time, I can learn many things from their lessons, and also get ideas from other teachers' comments.

However, all interviewed private kindergarten teachers reported that they spent much time preparing for the public kindergarten unified recruitment examination after work. An interviewed teacher in PriK4 had passed the public kindergarten examination and left this private kindergarten the previous year. Also, the repertoire of music in the unified examination comes from government-published textbooks, but because private kindergartens may use their own textbooks (e.g. PriK5, 6), teachers suggested that it is more challenging. All interviewed teachers in PriK4 and K5 mentioned this point. As a teacher in PriK6 said:

Our kindergarten uses different textbooks from public kindergartens. For the teaching materials of examination, it is hard to directly transfer into my classroom work. As well as completing my daily work, I have to find extra time to practice.

Observations

As these non-participant observations showed, all children in the class were involved in general lessons; they sit in their chairs arranged in rows and listen to the teacher in front of them. In total, observation notes were created for 64 structured music lessons in all selected kindergartens, which include some lessons repeated by the same teachers. The findings of observations are discussed in two parts: (i) teachers' musical skills and (ii) other aspects of music lessons.

Teachers' musical skills

According to the observations, it seems that all teachers in these public and private kindergartens have some basic musical skills (e.g. singing in tune, playing simple improvisation on the piano, and dancing), which was consistent with the interview findings.

All observed music lessons included the teacher singing a song while playing on the piano, thus teachers' musical skills were evaluated by their ability to play and sing the required songs in the textbooks, depending on the number of mistakes (e.g. wrong notes) or stops during the process. For the teachers where I observed more than one lesson, only the 'best' lesson was counted (as decided by me as the observer). The teachers who played and sang well or only made a few mistakes/stops (no more than three times) were placed in the 'proficient' category, while those who made many mistakes/stopped were noted in the 'not yet proficient' category. The results

	Proficient	Not yet proficient
Diploma	Public n=10 Private n=7	Public n=4 Private n=11
Bachelor	Public n=10 Private n=3	Public n=6 Private n=7

Figure 1. The levels of the teachers' musical skills. (N means number of teachers in each category).

shown in Figure 1 are based on the two categories of 'proficient' and 'not yet proficient'. The findings demonstrate that there were more 'proficient' teachers than 'not yet proficient' in participating in public kindergartens, whilst conversely, there were more 'not yet proficient' teachers than 'proficient' in the private kindergartens.

Other aspects in general music lessons

For the evaluation of teachers' musical abilities beyond their level of musical skills, factors such as managing the time allotted for each section, teaching materials/equipment, teachers' attitudes and emotions, the interaction with children and the result of children's learning were noted as important factors in the criteria.

According to my observations, teachers' lesson plans and materials such as PowerPoint, pictures, or relevant charts were prepared for every lesson in the public kindergartens, but some private kindergarten teachers (e.g. PriK3, PriK5) often taught children only by demonstration and rote learning without the use of such teaching materials. Although music lessons in public kindergartens often exceeded the expected time, the whole teaching activity was relatively complete. This was not always the case in the observation in the private kindergartens, where the teaching sometimes started or ended very suddenly. For the singing activities, public kindergarten teachers explained the lyrics logically and carefully and added some body language and relevant pictures to help the children understand and remember. I also observed that in some private kindergartens, teachers repeated the lyrics to encourage children recite and repeat them. I also observed that they seldom corrected inconspicuous mistakes (e.g. dotted notes, or the changes in dynamics) in children's singing. During the lesson, teachers in both public and private kindergartens often asked the children questions. However, I observed some differences here when children's answers were wrong or the answer was not what the teacher wanted; public kindergarten teachers generally made corresponding explanations quickly based on the children's answers, whereas the private kindergarten teachers often said 'no' and invited another child to offer a response.

Discussion

In this study, all participating teachers in both public and private kindergartens have basic musical and performance skills, such as singing in tune, playing a simple improvisation on the piano, and dancing. The research revealed that this was because teachers gained such experience in college/university. Firstly, all teachers studied the major of early childhood education and obtained musical training for both the bachelor and diploma levels of study. Secondly, all teachers had a minimum set of musical skills and exercises/training in order to pass the kindergarten teacher qualification. For the assessment of skills in the oral examination, all interviewed teachers mentioned that candidates need to draw two skills from the five options: singing while playing

games, playing the piano while singing, improvised dance, telling a story, and drawing. For example, in the examination questions for playing the piano while singing, the music notation of a children's song is offered, and the candidate needs to improvise an accompaniment on the piano while singing the song in tune. Candidates must learn and practice all these skills for the examination even though they are not actually tested on each during the examination.

Based on the findings of this study, some aspects of teachers' overall abilities in structured music lessons in public kindergartens seemed higher than teachers in the majority of private kindergartens included in this study, although the sample size is very small and the results are not generalisable. Some reasons for these differences were also examined as part of this study, and participants suggested that the length and extent of their own study of music may impact this, potentially impacting the levels of teachers' musical skills and experience and also their confidence in using music.

For example, a teacher with a bachelor's degree in PriK5 said:

I'm not a specialist of music. I only learnt musical skills for 2 semesters when I was at university, so I don't have the confidence to sing, and even more seriously for playing the piano. Some songs are hard for me to play on the piano, and I have too much paperwork to do so don't have time to practice and prepare. So I don't often sing and play piano. Though sometimes I prepare, I still often played the wrong notes. To be honest, I know music lessons are compulsory and important but I don't like music lessons, it's hard for me.

A teacher with a diploma in PubK1 said:

When I studied at college, I learnt singing for 2 semesters, and playing piano and dancing for 4 semesters. I think my musical skills are enough for teaching children. Their songs are short and simple, so I don't worry about that.

Similarly, according to my observations, all teachers used music throughout the day. For example, some teachers played music on the piano whilst others played audio recordings. The teachers in this study who were diploma holders generally liked to play on the piano; many of them played very skilfully and had the confidence to use and teach music. Teachers in this small study who were mainly bachelor holders liked to play audio recordings of music and seldom played the piano in daily routines. The interview with the principal of PubK1 explained her views on this, although it is noted that this is an individual view based on her own experience and perspective, and not necessarily commonplace.

It seems to be a common phenomenon that teachers who studied for a diploma were good at musical skills, especially those who studied early childhood education at polytechnic schools, because they learnt musical skills for much longer than others. The academic knowledge of teachers who studied for a bachelor's degree was better, but their practical abilities were worse than teachers who had diplomas.

However, based on the observations of general music lessons, as shown in Figure 1, there is no significant difference in the levels of musical skills between diploma teachers and degree teachers in contrast to the findings of Leu's (2008) research. As many teachers in this study qualified a long time ago, another comparison was made of the results of some new teachers. Comparing the teachers who had worked for no more than three years and have the same number of teaching years, as shown in Figure 2, there are more diploma teachers in the 'proficient' category and more bachelor teachers in the 'not yet proficient' category, although the samples are extremely small and not statistically viable. In both public and private kindergartens, the levels of musical skills of diploma teachers were more proficient than bachelor teachers, and this was especially evident

	Proficient	Not yet proficient
Diploma	Public n=3 Private n=5	Public n=1 Private n=2
Bachelor	Public n=1 Private n=1	Public n=4 Private n=5

Figure 2. Comparing new teachers' musical skills.

between the two kinds of teachers within the same kindergarten (e.g. PubK5, PriK1, and PriK3). It reveals that, within this group, teachers' teaching experiences might be a factor that caused different results in teachers' musical abilities in the classroom. In this study, the average years of teachers' teaching experiences for most of the public kindergartens were longer than those teachers in private kindergartens. Therefore, the musical skills of the more experienced teachers may have improved over time as they engaged in more music activities, but it is not possible to ascertain this within the boundaries of the study.

An interesting and surprising finding occurred in relation to the teachers' educational backgrounds. As shown in Table 1, the overall proportion of teachers who had bachelor's degrees in public kindergartens was higher than for private kindergartens. If following the above statement, it could be expected that teachers' musical skills in private kindergarten might be better than public kindergartens. However, this was not the case in my observations, with public kindergarten teachers exhibiting greater overall musical skills. Nevertheless, the small sample size can only relate to the teachers in this study and cannot be generalised. Another important influencing factor was revealed, which was the constraints of leadership in the kindergarten.

As previously discussed, the leadership in public kindergartens has more requirements on teachers than private kindergartens. It is not specifically known what the potential impact of this is, and there is potential to follow this up in future research.

With the strict requirements of leadership in PubK1 and K2, no matter whether the teachers were diploma or bachelor holders, all of them often played on the piano throughout the day rather than using audio recordings. With the lower requirements of leadership, though some teachers in private kindergartens could play the piano well they spent less time practising and preparing music lessons, which, speculatively, might lead to the evaluation of their musical skills as being not as good as those found in public kindergarten teachers. Again, though, this is a few small sample and the results may differ between contexts and locations. Government policy may also be an important factor in motivating potential teachers to study for examinations and work either in private or public kindergartens, potentially impacting their access to music education as a teacher in training.

Recommendations

To ensure that children have at least similar musical experiences, some changes in policy could help improve private kindergarten teachers' musical abilities and experience. As illustrated in this study, because the salary and employment conditions for private kindergarten teachers were lower than public kindergarten teachers, the leadership's requirements for teachers' musical abilities with their teaching role were lower in private kindergartens so as to encourage retention. However, nationally, this is seemingly not enough to stop the movement of teachers from the private to the public sector, which impacts the proportion of relatively new and inexperienced

teachers in different settings. Thus, if the government can issue relevant policies to protect the income and welfare of private kindergarten teachers, this situation may be minimised. There is also a case to fully consider the impact of including music in all forms of training and qualifications.

Despite the Education Department not interfering with the teacher recruitment of private kindergartens, it could consider how to implement regular inspections for private kindergarten teachers as a way of influencing them to strengthen teaching practices. Moreover, for private kindergartens, the results of the study indicated that participants felt that the government did not appear to show the same concern for their quality of education as for public kindergartens, even in the case of universally beneficial private kindergartens who obtain funding support from the government. In order to improve children's music education in private kindergartens, it is suggested that the policy requirements for private and public kindergartens should be the same, and the government should be involved by checking they are being upheld. By doing so, it is purported that the leadership's requirements of teachers would be raised in relation to music education, so no matter whether teachers hold a diploma or degree, their musical experiences and abilities would be improved.

As shown in this study, the general music lessons observed were all teacher-centred. Many Chinese studies (e.g. Benson & Fung, 2005; Wu & Liang, 2014; Wang, 2016; Kong, 2019) have noted the weaknesses of teacher-centred pedagogy (e.g. it ignores the individual development of children) and that the standards of the major international institutions of early childhood teacher education (e.g. NAEYC, CEC, NBPTS) tend to favour child-centred pedagogies. In China, with a large number of children in the class, it is a challenge for educators and teachers to provide a mix of teacher-centred and child-centred pedagogies but this study provides much to consider further in the future.

Limitations

This research was undertaken in a small number of kindergartens, and selected from one city in Shandong Province, thus, the findings have limitations meaning that they may not be representative of the overall situation of early childhood music education in the whole Shandong Province, let alone the whole of China. Also, although all teachers agreed for me to observe their classes, it was inevitable that with my presence, teachers' preparation, attitudes, coping styles, or teaching methods might be different to what they might normally be. Even though many notes, photos, and videos have been recorded throughout the research, it is possible that there are some other phenomena, issues or features that were not highlighted in this study. Even so, the study did reveal the diversity of music teaching in the kindergartens that participated.

Note

1 Municipal top ten: it means ten aspects of this kindergarten are top in this city.

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