

Crossing the Borders of Play and Learning

**Ethnic Asian-Chinese Parental Perspectives on the Value and Purpose
of a Play-based Early Childhood Curriculum**

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Abstract

“Learning through play” is an important component of Western early childhood education, and plays a key role in the play-based curriculum in New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 1996; White, O’Malley, Toso, Rockel, Stover, & Ellis, 2007). However, this concept is challenged in New Zealand by Ethnic Asian-Chinese (EAC) immigrant families, who question the educational value of play for young children (Guo, 2006; Li, 2001a; Liao, 2007; Wu, 2003, 2009). For the early childhood education sector in New Zealand, this tension is compounded by the early childhood curriculum, *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996), because it affirms both the valuing of play and the valuing of diverse cultural perspectives. Further research and discussion of EAC immigrant parental perspectives on play in early childhood education will be essential to addressing this tension.

The objective of this research is to investigate EAC parental perspectives on the value and purpose of a play-based early childhood curriculum and to explore the implications for early childhood teachers in order to support the building of effective partnership with immigrant families in New Zealand.

This research involved eight EAC immigrant parents who had or currently have at least one child attending a play-based early childhood setting in New Zealand. A qualitative approach was employed to allow EAC parents’ experiences, values and beliefs of a play-based curriculum to be explored and examined in detail. Factors that EAC parents perceive as being most important for children to learn at a play-based early childhood curriculum were explored through interviews with the volunteer participants.

Findings from the study revealed that although EAC parents may view learning as distinct from play, they agree that children should have an opportunity to play and expect their children to learn through play. The results of the study contribute to an understanding of the historical and cultural background of EAC parents and how they perceive children’s learning and play. Practical suggestions for pedagogy and future research were also identified.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Ming-Hua (Rita) Huang

A rectangular box containing a handwritten signature in black ink. The signature appears to be 'Ming-Hua' followed by a stylized flourish.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Introduction

Play is an important area in early childhood education in New Zealand. *Te Whāriki*, the New Zealand national early childhood curriculum, states “play is valued as meaningful learning and the importance of spontaneous play is recognised” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 82). Play is promoted as an important vehicle for children’s learning and development and provides opportunities for children to develop a broad range of skills such as creative expression, cognitive competencies and literacy skills, as well as social competence (Glover, 1999; Kieff & Casbergue, 2000). Early childhood teachers are expected to support children to learn through play by providing appropriate materials and act as mediators and facilitator during children’s play (Harley, 1999; Ministry of Education, 1996).

However, the concept that play is central to children’s learning has been challenged by Chinese immigrant parents (Guo, 2012; Liao, 2007; Wu, 2009 & Yen, 2008). For instance, Liao (2007) found in her study that Chinese immigrant parents much prefer formal learning over playing. In addition, she argues that Chinese parents view play activities as activities for amusement and passing time rather than as a pathway for learning. It was also found that Chinese immigrant parents have high expectations of their children’s academic achievement and focus little on their children’s play (Chan, 2011; Liao, 2007; Wu, 2009). For many Chinese, the relationship between play and education is not about educating children through play; what is more important is how play and environment might impact on children (Bai, 2005).

The issue of diverse ideas about play and learning has grown in importance in light of recent increasing number of Asian¹ enrolments in early childhood services in New Zealand. According to the annual census summary report of early childhood education (ECE) centres, 8.1% of enrolments in licensed services were identified as Asian in

1. The term ‘Asian’ here is taken from the Statistics New Zealand definition, referring to the peoples from an area from Afghanistan to Japan, and from China to Indonesia (Ministry of Health, 2012).

2012 (Ministry of Education, 2012) -- an increase of 10.9% from the previous year. *Te Whāriki* promotes both the value of play, and the significance of “migrants’ diverse beliefs about child rearing practices” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p.18). Yet, so far, there has been little discussion about the partnership between early childhood teachers and Chinese immigrant parents. In this thesis, I argue that Chinese parents’ values and beliefs about a play-based curriculum need to be understood if a more effective partnership between early childhood centres and Chinese immigrant parents is to be developed.

1.2 Background of the research

Te Whāriki, New Zealand’s early childhood curriculum framework, promotes the culture, value and practice of children’s families (Ministry of Education, 1996). As an early childhood professional myself, I agree that play is a form of learning, while as an EAC parent, I also believe it is important for the immigrant Chinese parents’ voice and opinions about their children’s learning need to be heard and valued. The reasons and the cultural background why Chinese parents are not likely to encourage play need to be understood in order for teachers to communicate and work with these parents more effectively.

The primary purpose of the study is to explore Ethnic Asian-Chinese (EAC) immigrant parents’ perspectives on the value and purpose of a play-based early childhood curriculum. In the literature the term *curriculum* has many meanings and definitions. Some key meanings for this thesis include: a model, a document or a plan for children’s learning (McLachlan, Fler & Edwards, 2013) and “the sum total of the experiences, activities, and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur within an environment designed to foster children’s learning and development” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 10).

As play is highly valued for early childhood education in New Zealand, all early childhood settings are required to provide a rich play environment for enhancing

children's learning and development (Ministry of Education, 1996; Ministry of Education, 2011). The play-based curriculum is underpinned by a view that children are able to express their preferences and are offered freedom to make their own choices on what they want to play most of the time when they are at their early childhood settings (Ministry of Education, 1996; Santer, Griffiths & Goodall, 2007).

The term *Ethnic Asian-Chinese immigrants* in this study refers to migrants of Chinese origin or ancestry who have traditional Chinese cultural origins and background (McIntyre, 2008). All of the participants in this study identify themselves as Ethnic Asian-Chinese (亞洲華人) rather than Chinese (中國人), although their first language(s) are Mandarin and/or Cantonese and their cultural and traditional origins are Chinese.² This sample includes immigrant parents who are originally from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Brunei.

The research's primary objective is to investigate EAC parents' perspectives on their children's learning in a play-based early childhood curriculum, particularly their ideas of the relationship between play and learning in comparison to the traditional Western perspective. The secondary objectives of the research are:

- How do EAC immigrant parents define and perceive *play* and *learning* in early childhood education?
- What kind of environment (including home and educational settings) do EAC immigrant parents expect for their children in their early years?
- How do EAC immigrant parents perceive the role of the early childhood teacher and the play-based curriculum?
- What strategies can early childhood centres use to enable them to work in partnership with EAC immigrant parents in order to enhance their children's learning?

This study contributes to an understanding of the cultural background of EAC parents by examining historical and contemporary literature in education from a Chinese

² Mandarin is the official language spoken in mainland China and Taiwan, and Cantonese is one of the Chinese dialects, mainly spoken in Guangdong and Guangxi provinces as well as Hong Kong.

perspective. This is a foundation to understanding how EAC parents perceive children's learning and play. While a number of studies related to the present research have been undertaken in the past (see, for example, Guo, 2006; Liao, 2007; Wu, 2009; and Yang, 2011), the focus of that earlier work was predominantly on the challenges Chinese immigrant parents face when raising children in their host country and their ideas of education in general. Arguably, there remains a need to incorporate a qualitative approach to examine EAC parents' ideas of their children's play-based early childhood settings in order to determine in depth their perceptions of play and learning. This understanding is essential for early childhood centres in New Zealand if they are to work in partnership with the EAC parents who may have very different viewpoints and expectations of their children's education due to their sociocultural background. The present study differs from earlier ones in that it provides more comprehensive insights into EAC parents' perspectives on the relationships between play and learning in early childhood education and so presents a more diverse cultural viewpoint. The results of this study may therefore be of benefit to play-based early childhood teachers because having a greater understanding of their families' cultural backgrounds will enable the teachers to work more effectively with EAC parents in order to enhance children's learning through play.

1.3 Organisation of the study

This thesis consists of eight chapters, organised in the following way.

Chapter 2: Literature Review of Western Perspectives on Play and Learning

The importance of play is a central and influential theme in early childhood education and practice in New Zealand. It is also closely associated with children's early development and is regarded as a vehicle for children's learning in the traditional European-heritage early childhood curriculum (McLachlan, Flear & Edwards, 2013; Parmar, Harkness & Super, 2004). This chapter examines and discusses research and theory on play and play-based curricula from a Western viewpoint. It aims to determine the relationship between play and learning in early childhood education from diverse viewpoints in the West. The philosophies that underpin the teacher's role within a play-based curriculum are reviewed and evaluated. The cultural elements that influence children's play and learning are also addressed.

Chapter 3: Literature Review of Chinese Views on Learning and Play

In contrast to Western ideas on early childhood education, Chinese have a different view on what children need to develop in their early years. This chapter focuses on Chinese traditional philosophy in early childhood education, and gives an account of the historical background of Chinese educational philosophy. It also reviews and examines the literature concerning Chinese immigrant parents' apprehension about their children's early childhood education in their host countries. It argues the need to consider a child's sociocultural background when implementing a play-based curriculum in early childhood education.

Chapter 4: Research Design and Implementation

The current study has employed a qualitative approach in order to allow EAC parents' experiences, values and beliefs of a play-based curriculum to be explored and examined in detail. The study involved eight EAC immigrants in New Zealand who had or currently have at least one child attending a play-based early childhood setting in New Zealand. The eight parents were invited to talk about their perspectives on play and learning as well as their experiences of being involved in their children's early childhood education in New Zealand. Factors that EAC parents perceive as being most important for children to learn at a play-based early childhood curriculum were explored through interviews with the volunteer participants.

Chapter 4 describes the methodological approach adopted in the study. A qualitative approach was employed to investigate EAC parents' experiences, values and beliefs of a play-based curriculum in detail. Eight participants were interviewed, and the interviews were conducted in the participants' first language so that they could express clearly and fully their views on play and learning. The research instrument is identified and the procedures followed in collecting and analysing data are stated. A justification for the research approach and design is provided.

Chapter 5: Results and Discussion of EAC Parents' Perception of Play and Learning in Early Childhood Education

An analysis and discussion of the research data is presented in chapters 5, 6 and 7. Qualitative results from the data collected by interviewing EAC parents are examined and discussed in relation to previous research studies and literature. Chapter 5 reports

and discusses how EAC parents in the current study perceive play and learning in early childhood education.

Chapter 6: Results and Discussion of EAC Parents' Concerns about the Play-Based Early Childhood Curriculum in New Zealand

Chapter 6 continues to examine EAC parents' perception of play and learning in early childhood education, with the focus in this chapter being a discussion of the findings of EAC parents' ideal early childhood curriculum. EAC parents' concerns and their expectation of early childhood centres are also discussed and examined.

Chapter 7: Results and Discussion of EAC Parents' Expectations of Early Childhood Teachers

This chapter focuses on examining and discussing EAC parents' perceptions and expectations of early childhood teachers. The main issues addressed are the role of the early childhood teacher and some concerns about early childhood teachers from the EAC parents' perspective.

Chapter 8: Implications and Conclusion

The final chapter of the thesis summarises the research findings, and the pedagogical implications of these findings for early childhood teachers, centres and teacher education providers are considered. The limitations of the study are identified and evaluated, and areas for further research suggested.

The present study is set out to determine the perspectives of Ethnic Asian-Chinese immigrant parents on the value and purpose of a play-based early childhood curriculum. Throughout this thesis the abbreviation EAC will be used to refer to Ethnic Asian-Chinese. In addition, the transcripts of the EAC parents who chose to be interviewed in Mandarin will be presented in the traditional written form of Chinese. Each Chinese quotation will be followed by its English translation, as translated by the researcher.

Chapter 2: Literature Review of Western Perspectives on Play and Learning

2.1 Introduction

Play has been thought of as a key factor in learning and development throughout the history of European early childhood education. For example, in the Ancient Greek period, Plato stressed the importance of play and emphasised that enforced learning will not stay in one's mind (Gibbons, 2007; Santer et al., 2007). Analysis of the Ancient Greek and Roman cultures shows that children played with objects such as balls and toy soldiers, and played running and jumping games (Gibbons, 2007; Santer et al., 2007). Hundreds of years later, the images of children's play became visible on some paintings in the 13th century. In the 16th century, "children's games had become the focus of artists' representations" (Santer et al., 2007, p. 2), but a 100 years later, people in the 17th century did not consider children's play was worthy of discussion or debate. However, play became important and valued again in the 18th century due to the impact of the Romantic movement (Santer et al., 2007). As a consequence, the worlds of childhood, play and education had been interconnected by the 19th century and this philosophy has influenced contemporary early childhood education (Ahn, 2008).

Accordingly, play is an important component in Western early childhood education and is believed to play a key role in learning. Play is closely associated with children's early development and is regarded as a vehicle for children's learning in the traditional European-heritage early childhood curriculum (Kieff & Casbergue, 2000; McLachlan, Flear & Edwards, 2013; Parmar, Harkness & Super, 2004; White, Ellis, O'Malley, Rockel, Stover, & Toso, 2009). The importance of play to children's learning is emphasised in the New Zealand national early childhood curriculum framework, *Te Whāriki*, which values play as a meaningful learning experience for children (Ministry of Education, 1996).

This chapter will examine and discuss a selected range of literature on play and play-based curriculum from a Western perspective in order to determine the relationship

between play and learning in early childhood education. The literature review begins by discussing the definition and history of play and play-based curricula in Western early childhood education. It will then go on to examine the relationship between play and learning from diverse viewpoints. The philosophies underpinning and the teacher's role within a play-based curriculum will also be discussed. Finally, the sociocultural elements that influence children's play and learning will be addressed.

2.2 The science of play and learning

Various definitions of *play* are found in the field of early childhood education. Ahn (2008), for example, suggests that play is seen as an educational tool and is the "work of a child", while Santer et al. (2007) argue that play is a multifaceted layer of activities and so there should be more than one meaning of play. In addition, play should be intrinsically motivated and a self-chosen activity which is enjoyable and fun (Kieff & Casbergue, 2000). Many play and game studies have shown children play in increasingly complex ways as they get older (Ahn, 2008; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Furthermore, play often is associated with being outdoors and being with friends, can involve pretend and fantasy, and includes playing games (Kieff & Casbergue, 2000; Sutton-Smith, 1997). However, while most Western educationists believe that play is central to children's experience and learning (Santer et al., 2007), this concept is still an area of debate and challenged by parents from other cultures (Kieff & Casbergue, 2000; Wu, 2009).

As philosophers became more interested in the child's play, so too did the emerging discipline of human sciences, and by the beginning of the 20th century there was much scientific attention on child's play. Hence over the past century there has been a dramatic increase in scientific research about the relationship between play and learning in early childhood education (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Arguably, the most influential has been the cognitive developmental theorist Jean Piaget, who studied play from a cognitive viewpoint.

From a cognitive perspective, a child's play mirrors and consolidates the development of cognitive stages (Sutton-Smith, 1997). Piaget believes that children actively construct their own world by interacting with people, objects, materials and

environment (Kieff & Casbergue, 2000; Santrock, 2009). From Piaget's perspective, learning occurs through the processes of *assimilation* and *accommodation*. In order for a child to take in new knowledge, they need to adapt their new learning and try to fit it into their previously developed understanding (Santer et al., 2007; Santrock, 2009). For Piaget, "learning is a continuing process of adaptation to the environment" (Santer et al., 2007, p. 5). Through play and exploring the environment, children have opportunities to encounter, process, then adapt the new knowledge (Glover, 1999).

Sigmund Freud and Erik Erikson studied children's development from a psychoanalytical perspective. Freud and Erikson see the role of play as being an emotional release for children. Through play, children develop their self-esteem and mastery of their thoughts and body. According to this perspective, play can be used as a way for children to react to their world and to learn to deal with situations they come across (Kieff & Casbergue, 2000; Santrock, 2009).

According to sociocultural perspectives, children extend their own understanding and develop new skills through their social interaction with parents, teachers, siblings and peers. While Piaget promotes that a child's development leads one's learning, Vygotsky believes that learning leads a child's development. To Vygotsky, play is a form of learning because it enables a child to behave beyond their average age and above their daily behaviour. For example, children often act the role of a mum or a dad when they are playing family. Moreover, Vygotsky advocates that children's learning takes place within a social context and suggests that a child's play enables adults to anticipate the development of the child's cognition (Santer et al., 2007; Sutton-Smith, 1997). Vygotsky's sociocultural approach also promotes that children learn what is important in their own culture by "participating in the cultural events and using the tools of the society" (Han, 2010, p. 81). When playing with peers or adults, children develop their social understandings and relationships. In addition, they discover culturally suitable ways to express ideas and solve problems (Glover, 1999; Kieff & Casbergue, 2000).

From a developmental point of view, children learn new things and develop cognitive skills through play (Santrock, 2009; Sutton-Smith, 1997). It is also an activity through which children learn to socialise with others. In addition, imitating adult activities in pretend play prepares the child for the future. However, a major problem with this

perspective is that play psychologists often convert the maps of a child's development towards maturity into recommendations for how to accelerate a child's progress across those maps (Sutton-Smith, 1997). The milestones of children's development suggested by child development theorists have been used by many teachers and parents, especially in many Asian countries, to compare their children's development progress with others'. For example, a parent might feel proud if her 4-year-old child is able to read a 6-year-old's textbook. Research by 李芳森 (2006) in Taiwan indicated that many parents who wanted to accelerate their child's progress enrolled their child in after-school academic classes or extra-curricular activities (playing instruments, learning another language, etc.) and, as a result of these after-school classes and activities, the child had less time to play freely (李芳森, 2006).

The above discussion has provided some influential Western perspectives on the value of play and how play enhances children's learning. The findings from the literature review suggest that play enables children to release emotion, construct their new knowledge, and socialise with others. One question that needs to be asked, however, is whether the cultural perspectives of theorists become the filter when they study play. For example, Santer et al. (2007) ask whether a theorist's culture, values and beliefs as well as professional heritage influence the way they perceive play as well as its role in learning. Kieff and Casbergue (2000) argue that one's knowledge about play, past experiences with play, and cultural values regarding play all influence how one perceives the meaning and value of play. People from a different culture might not see the value of play to children's learning in the same way as Western teachers do. As a result, early childhood teachers in New Zealand should not feel surprised if an immigrant parent does not view play as an important factor for their children's learning. Instead, teachers need to try to find out what value children's families place on play (Fleer, 1999).

2.3 Philosophies that underpin the “play-based curriculum” in early childhood education

It is necessary here to clarify what is meant by the term *curriculum* before we start to discuss the *play-based curriculum*. Curriculum is generally understood to mean a model, a document or a plan for children's learning (McLachlan, Fleer & Edwards,

2013). Curriculum can be referred to as the provision of care, education and planned experiences; activities, then, are a form of curriculum. In addition, curriculum is an educational setting and should reflect children's needs; it also describes how to accomplish the educator's vision for learners (Ahn, 2008; Ministry of Education, 1996). Overall, it is the "sum total of the experiences, activities and events, whether direct or indirect, which occur with an environment designed to foster children's learning and development" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 10). The New Zealand early childhood curriculum is supported by a framework of four principles and five strands. These elements are woven together by the metaphor of the mat, or whāriki, and guide teachers in a holistic and integrated approach to a child's learning – including learning through play.

There are a number of educationalists who have contributed to the development of the play-based curriculum in early childhood education through their distinct curriculum philosophies and approaches – Froebel, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Montessori and Steiner have all influenced the thinking and practice of early childhood education. The theories that support their curricula promote that childhood is different to adulthood and therefore adults ought not to seek to prepare children for adulthood. In addition, these educationalists have stressed that adults should avoid dominating children's learning because children are highly intrinsically motivated themselves (Santer et al., 2007).

Rousseau believed that education should mirror children's innate goodness, a philosophy which is often referred to as *naturalism*. There are a number of similarities between Rousseau's and Piaget's ideas about play. Rousseau agreed with Piaget that children develop their senses through play. Moreover, Rousseau suggested that children should be allowed time to explore the natural world without restrictions in order to sustain their spontaneous interests. According to Rousseau, play is a child's right and he promoted that children need to learn from experience rather than a book. As a result, Rousseau's ideas are deeply embedded in current thought about early childhood education (Ahn, 2008; Santer et al., 2007).

Pestalozzi criticised cruel punishment and rote learning and advocated children's dignity and individuality (Ahn, 2008). To Pestalozzi, play is vital to human fulfilment and achievement (Santer et al., 2007). His contribution to play-based curricula is to

develop educational concepts; for example, field trips, grade levels, ability grouping, and allowing for individual differences (Ahn, 2008).

Froebel believed that children are strong and confident spiritual beings. Through play, children are able to work things out themselves. He believed play is an essential process for children's learning. In addition, he promoted that there are basic components of play. These components include manipulation of sets of objects, application of arts-and-crafts activities, and songs and games (Ahn, 2008; Santer et al., 2007). Each of these components has become the core curriculum of many early childhood settings around the world and in New Zealand.

Maria Montessori's work and philosophy in early childhood curriculum provided the foundation for later theorists such as Piaget and Vygotsky (Mooney, 2013). Although Montessori believed that play could be integrated into school curriculum (Ahn, 2008), she did not believe in play or toys. As a result, children in Montessori kindergartens experience real household tasks, have child-sized furnishings and use real tools (Mooney, 2013; Santer et al., 2007). Although the Montessori curriculum has been criticised as being too structured when compared with other play-based curricula, many of her ideas about early childhood teaching are still prevailing in contemporary early childhood settings. These practices include providing real tools for children to work with, keeping materials and equipment accessible to the children, and creating beauty and order in the classroom (Mooney, 2013; Ahn, 2008).

According to Mooney (2013), John Dewey was a progressive educator and the founder of the child-centred curriculum. Dewey believed that education must be both active and interactive, and that education has to involve the social world of the child and their community. He advocated that play activities contribute to children's intellectual and social development. Dewey also believed that children need teachers' assistance to make sense of their world (Ahn, 2008; Mooney, 2013).

2.4 The play-based curriculum in early childhood education in New Zealand

Play is highly valued for early childhood education in New Zealand (Gibbons, 2007; New Zealand Kindergartens Inc., 2009; Stover, 2011; White et al., 2007). Guided by *Te Whāriki* and *Licensing Criteria for Early Childhood Education and Care Centres*

2008, all early childhood settings in New Zealand are required to provide a rich play environment for enhancing children's learning and development (Ministry of Education, 1996; Ministry of Education, 2011). According to White et al. (2009), play is an approach to children's learning in New Zealand. Early childhood teachers are provided with a considerable amount of guidance through their education, regulation and professional development to encourage children to learn through play. Central to this curriculum is the child-centred approach valued by Western societies (Liao, 2007; Wu, 2009).

Play in early childhood settings in New Zealand takes many forms. Children are given choices to engage in a range of core curriculum play areas such as physically active play, sand, water, science, painting, play dough, carpentry, blocks, puzzles, fantasy play, music and movement, stories and books, etc. (New Zealand Kindergartens Inc., 2009; Penrose, 2000). The play-based curriculum is underpinned by a view that children are able to express their preferences and choices by the age of three (Santer et al., 2007). Young children (three to five years of age) are offered freedom to make their own choices on what they want to play most of the time when they are at their early childhood settings.

New Zealand's approach to play and learning has been significantly influenced by the Playcentre movement. This unique approach to early childhood education promoted a philosophy and practice of play (Stover, 1998). It is significant to note that parents were key to this approach and so Playcentre philosophy reflected wider community beliefs about the value of play for young children's development. It is also important to note the Playcentre movement's beliefs about the value of free play contributed to what Stover (2011) terms the *educationalisation*³ of play.

Sutton-Smith (1997) notices that people who work with children use play as a way of becoming involved with the children and enhance their learning; however, this gives

³ In Stover's (2011) study, "*educationalisation* is used to track 'free play' in its shaping of the classroom 'grammar' of both historic and contemporary early childhood settings; that is, the organisation of space, resources and equipment" (p. 12).

rise to another potential problem – when letting children participate in a free-play environment, are the adults sure about what resources or assistance to provide for children in order to enhance children’s learning? Santer et al. (2007) support free play by reminding us about the tension between the language of play and how adults understand and translate their understanding into an effective pedagogy. They found that some early childhood teachers were not sure the relationship between play and cognitive development and felt a need to justify play and its inclusion in their curriculum.

On the other hand, Santer et al. (2007) reported that many early childhood centres in United Kingdom combine “teaching” and “providing freely chosen instructive play activities” in order to provide a more effective curriculum. This shows the tension between the needs of children and the needs of society. The children’s needs are often identified by adults, while the needs of society often relate to the skills and competencies required in the future workforce. As a result, cultural values and beliefs, and children’s academic achievements and later success in society are some of the factors that might influence the definition of these needs (Chan, 2011; Wu, 2009).

2.5 The role of the adult within a play-based early childhood curriculum

The role of the teacher is central to the development and implementation of a play-based curriculum. Kieff and Casbergue (2000) remind us that early childhood teachers need to do more than simply provide opportunities for children’s play; they also need to plan for play by creating environments and schedules, developing and modifying curricula, and advocating for the use of play as a context for learning. The play environment, including indoor and outdoor spaces as well as the wider neighbourhood, should offer a wide variety of possibilities for children to explore actively and enjoy new challenges (Ministry of Education, 1996).

The second role that early childhood teachers have in regard to children’s play is to engage and interact with children as they play. Besides observing children at play and assessing their learning, teachers need to constantly make decisions about when to interact with children at play and be prepared to move in and out of play activities. For example, there will be time during children’s play for teachers to ask open-ended

questions in order to extend children's concept knowledge and language skills. In addition, there might be situations where teachers need to demonstrate how to use new materials or equipment at children's play (Kieff & Casbergue, 2000). However, early childhood teachers need to avoid unnecessary intervention or dominating children's activity when extending and supporting their play (Ministry of Education, 1996).

In addition to the above two roles, early childhood teachers need to record and assess children's learning through play. Kieff and Casbergue (2000) suggest that teachers can use play as a context for assessing children's developing knowledge, skills and dispositions. These assessments provide useful information about children's learning and development for teachers and parents (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Accordingly, adults have an important role in supporting children to develop the quality of their play. The level of conversation and discussion in children's play is central to children's learning. Harrison and Tegel (1999) and McLachlan et al. (2013) suggest that the role of the adult when supporting children's play should include engaging children in the process of play, assisting children to explore complex issues such as feelings or moral dilemmas, linking children with like-minded peers, allowing children time to play and to explore, providing opportunities for creativity, and encouraging the development of language, literacy and numeracy skills.

There is an ambiguous relationship between the adult's role and the playing child within a play-based early childhood curriculum. Piaget promoted that children need to be allowed freedom to freely explore, play, experiment and participate in guided learning activities (Ahn, 2008; Mooney, 2013). This notion of free play requires that adults minimise their role to preparation and observation of the environment in order to allow a natural unfolding of a child's development (Mooney, 2013; Santer et al., 2007).

One of the limitations with a play-based curriculum is that the curriculum fails to show how the teacher tacitly shapes free play. Han (2010) found that early childhood teachers infrequently intervened in children's interactions during free-play time, and when they did intervene, their comments "were directive in nature, regardless of children's developmental needs" (p. 82). The Chinese immigrant parents in Wu's (2009) research also questioned there was no available evidence to show their children's learning through free play.

2.6 Cultural perspectives on play and learning

The above discussion has given an account of Western perspectives of children's play and the importance of play for early learning experiences. According to Kieff and Casbergue (2000), the nature and purpose of play is greatly affected by one's cultural background. Following research from Cooney and Sha (1999), groups within cultures can also have different perceptions of play, based on political, religious and economic contexts. If play is an expression of the increasing individualisation of human life over the past centuries of Western history (Sutton-Smith, 1997), then Western ideas of play could be challenged by people from different cultural values (Ahn, 2008, Chang, 2003; Chan, 2011). As a result, for the value of play and a play-based curriculum to be understood by immigrant parents, one needs to take into account the immigrants' cultural perspectives about both play and education (Cooney & Sha, 1999; Han, 2010; Kieff & Casbergue). Hence the following chapter will continue the literature review, but with the focus being on Chinese views on learning and play.

Chapter 3: Literature Review of Chinese Views on Learning and Play

3.1 Introduction

Play has been considered a key factor in children's learning throughout the history of Western early childhood education (see chapter 2). Recent developments in early childhood education have highlighted the need and value of play in early childhood education (Claiborne & Drewery, 2010; Ministry of Education, 1996; Parmar, Harkness & Super, 2004; Santer et al., 2007). Naftali (2010) promotes that children are persons with unique emotional needs and seeks to redefine childhood as a time of play and relaxation rather than study or toil.

However, a major problem with this pedagogy is that many Chinese parents expect their children to "work" rather than "play" (Chang, 2003; Liao, 2007; Parmar et al., 2004; Roopnarine & Johnson, 2001). This issue has grown in importance in light of recent studies of traditional Chinese views of childhood (Hsiung, 2008; Pye, 1996; Zhu & Hu, 2011). In addition, this matter has become central to research of education in New Zealand because of the increasing number of migrants from South East Asia coming to settle in New Zealand (Liao, 2007; Wu, 2009; Yang, 2011).

This chapter discusses Chinese traditional philosophy in early childhood education, and gives an account of the historical background of Chinese educational philosophy. It then goes on to review the literature concerning Chinese immigrant parents' apprehension about their children's early childhood education in their host countries. It argues that children's sociocultural backgrounds need to be considered when implementing a play-based curriculum in early childhood education.

3.2 Chinese educational philosophy

In order to understand the views of migrant parents on the relationship between play and education, it is important to understand their values and beliefs about both education and play, as well as the ways in which they regard the two as connected and/or distinct. To understand Chinese educational values and beliefs, it would be useful to have a summary of the key influences on Chinese educational thought. In the

history of educational development in China, there are a number of classic philosophical texts that have laid the foundations of teaching and learning and have had a great impact on Chinese education. For example, the importance of early childhood education had been noted in the *Book of Change* 易經 which was one of the earliest philosophic classics in China. The *Book of Change* emphasises that the purpose of early childhood education is to nurture children's virtue and moral characters and promotes that children need to be taught through their daily life experiences in order to learn skills for surviving and to be accepted in their society (歐陽秀明, 2009).⁴

In the Chinese history of education development, Confucius (551–479 BCE) has been regarded as the *Fore-Master of Utmost Divine* (至聖先師). He has a great impact not only on wider culture and politics, but also on education in China and some other Asian countries. Confucius established a private school and devoted his life to education, a life which included teaching, researching and writing. His philosophy on education, together with the purpose, content, method and principle of teaching and learning, has been revered and practised by Chinese society (馬永, 2005).

One of Confucius' principles of education is that learning should be a delightful experience for the learner. In addition, the learner's self-motivation to learn should be encouraged. Confucius said, "They who know the truth are not equal to those who love it, and they who love it are not equal to those who delight in it" (Legge, 2001)⁵. This viewpoint resonates with approaches in Western early childhood education. For example, both Confucius and Plato claimed that enforced learning does not stay in a learner's mind, and promoted that learning should take the form of play or enjoyment (Gibbons, 2007; Santer et al., 2007).

Confucius emphasised that a teacher needs to understand each learner's characteristics and ability then educate individuals accordingly. His idea of *educating someone*

⁴易經蒙卦: "蒙以養正, 聖功也"

Meng, *Book of Change*: "To deal with the young and ignorant ones by nourishing and uncovering their original nature. This is as the same as what a Saint does."

⁵Yong Ye Sixth, *Analects*, 論語雍也篇第六: 子曰: "知之者不如好之者, 好之者不如乐之者"

according to his natural ability (因材施教) has been practised by many Chinese teachers over two thousand years. This principle again resonates with the values and beliefs that underpin a play-based early childhood education curriculum. For example, early childhood teachers in New Zealand are encouraged to plan their curriculum based on their observation about the children they work with (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Confucius stressed that the learner should be encouraged to explore and find the answer for themselves before the teacher offers guidance or support.⁶ This principle is in line with what Piaget suggested; namely, that the learner should be encouraged to develop their own capacity rather than be pushed to progress to higher level (Ahn, 2008; Mooney, 2013). According to Confucius, the teacher needs to be able to recognise the learner's current ability in order to decide how much support should be given, a principle synonymous to Vygotsky's concept of *Zone of Proximal Development*. The Russian theorist Vygotsky promoted that with the support of a more competent peer or adult, the learner will be able to achieve the things that they cannot do on their own (Santrock, 2009).

Most importantly, Confucius believed that a learner should apply what they have learnt to their daily life and that they should contribute to society, not just recite or memorise the teaching (馬永, 2005).⁷ This is a significant point because this interpretation of Confucius' work differs to many Chinese peoples' experience of education. The popular image of the Chinese student is that of the rote learner, and this image prevails and is encouraged in Chinese culture (Li, 2004).

⁶論語述而篇第七：“不憤不啟，不悱不發，舉一隅不以三隅反則不復也”

Shu Er Seventh, Analects: The Confucius said, "I do not open up the truth to one who is not eager to learn, nor help out any one who is not anxious to explain himself. When I have presented one corner of a subject to any one, and he cannot from it learn the other three, I do not repeat my lesson."

⁷子路第十三：“誦詩三百，授之以政，不達；使于四方，不能專對。多，亦奚以為？”

Zi Lu Thirteen, Analects: The Confucius said, "Though a man may be able to recite the three hundred odes, yet if, when entrusted with a governmental charge, he knows not how to act, or if, when sent to any quarter on a mission, he cannot give his replies unassisted, notwithstanding the extent of his learning, of what practical use is it?"

The Confucian educational principles described in this chapter demonstrate that there are several similarities between Confucianism and Western educational philosophies. However, few writers have discussed the similarities between these two philosophies.

Mencius (372–289 BCE) has been regarded as *Second Saint* (亞聖) and is the most revered educational philosopher after Confucius. He emphasised that every learner can be taught and become a saint or sage.⁸ In addition, he stressed that the environment has a great impact on a child's learning, a philosophy which preceded Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory by two millenniums. In addition, Mencius' educational philosophy derives from his theory of original goodness of human nature.⁹ According to Mencius, everybody is born with four virtues: *Zen* 仁 (benevolence), *Yi* 義 (righteousness), *Li* 禮 (propriety) and *Zi* 智 (wisdom). The purpose of education is to enable the learner to revive these virtues and eventually to become a good person, perform appropriately and consequently improve their society (郝建山, & 彭坤, 2009).

In contrast to Mencius' theory of original goodness of human nature, Xun Zi's 荀子 (313–238 BCE) argued that the human nature is innately evil; hence Xun Zi emphasised the importance of education as the practice that can transform one's sinful nature into goodness. However, Xun Zi believed that in order for this transformation (education) to work, a learner needs to learn diligently and acquire *Li* 禮 (propriety) and *Yi* 義 (righteousness) in daily life, starting from early childhood (歐陽秀明, 2009).

3.3 History of childhood and education in China

Although there is no comprehensive study of a Chinese history of childhood, information can still be found in the two subdivisions of cultural and social history (Hsiung, 2008). Children were rarely mentioned prior to the Han dynasty (206 BCE–CE 220), when writing and discussion about childhood suddenly became an intellectual

⁸ 孟子公孫丑上: “人皆可以成堯舜”

Gong Sun Chou I, Mencius: “Everyone is able to achieve what Yao and Shun (ancient sages) had accomplished.”

⁹ 性善論: Theory of original goodness of human nature

focus (Hwa, 2006). This was because many Confucians lived during the Han dynasty and these idealists believed that society would become more peaceful and civilised if education was made available to most people (Kinney, 1995).

In the history of education in China, fetus instruction and education has been important since the Han dynasty (Pye, 1996). According to Han Confucians, education of children should begin at conception and moral instruction is the centre of Confucian discourse on children. Hence foetal education was seen as “a way to influence the moral development of a child at the earliest possible time” (Hwa, 2006, p. 224). The mother was seen as the child’s first major educator, and it was believed her action during the pregnancy would impact on the foetus. A pregnant woman was expected to “be careful in what she saw, ate, heard and said, and it required her to be ritually correct” (Hwa, 2006, p. 224). Consequently, foetal instruction and total immersion in virtue was recommended and the practice laid the foundation of the moral development of children in China (Kinney, 1995). In addition, it was believed that a child at birth was undeveloped or incomplete, and should be empowered by education.

Han Confucians encouraged mothers to be the moral educator for their young children. A classic and well-known example is that the mother of Mencius spent a lot of effort turning Mencius to the right path and eventually he became a great Confucian master (Hwa, 2006; Wu, 2009). On this historical and traditional basis, Chinese parents, particular mothers, believe they are accountable for their children’s education and see their children’s success as being more important than their own welfare. An example of this is evident in a study carried out by Wu (2009), in which Chinese middle-class professionals migrated to New Zealand for their children’s education despite the social and financial hardships that they experienced as a result of their migration.

3.3.1 Origins of Chinese formal learning

In China, government school started during the reign of the emperor Han Wudi (141–87 BCE); however, it was not a universal education – school was only for educating the princes and boys in the capital as women and girls were not encouraged to receive formal education during that time (Kinney, 1995). A century later, another emperor Wan Mang (9–23 CE) proposed to launch an elementary school in every village so that children of commoners could have opportunities to be educated (Hwa, 2006). For

thousands of years up until in the early 1900s, school children in China would recite the teachings of Confucius at the start of the school day, until they were permanently recorded into their memory. The purpose of learning these teachings by rote was that “it helps the youngest generation understand, preserve, and feel a sense of ownership for traditional Chinese culture” (Zhu & Hu, 2011, p. 418). The Confucian values of Ren 仁 (benevolence), Yi 義 (righteousness), Li 禮 (propriety), Xia 孝 (filial piety) and Zhi 智 (wisdom) not only form the core of most Asian cultures, but also set the standards for most families, communities and political behaviour. As a result, Confucian values and children’s education are frequently connected in Chinese society. Stories, sayings, and special terms are often used to promote Confucian ideals when adults socialise or educate children (Yim, Lee & Ebbeck, 2009).

For Chinese, learning aims to achieve breadth and depth of knowledge, but it is also about applying this knowledge, the unity of knowing and morality, and contributing to society (Li, 2001b). Matters of filial piety, ancestor worship, clan and patrilineage identity, moral instruction, and sex and age role differences, all come together and reinforce each other in the Chinese views about childhood (Pye, 1996). Confucianism highly values education, especially moral development (Hwa, 2006; Yen, 2008). Bai (2005) argues that according to Confucian theory, the relationship between play and education did not centre on educating children through play, but on “the influence of play and environment on children” (p. 14). For many Chinese, learning has been a matter that should be distinct from play (Liao, 2007). Children are allowed to play after they have completed their serious learning. Play is often used as a reward rather than a strategy in encourage children’s learning (Cooney & Sha, 1999).

Although Confucius promoted that learning should be a joyful activity, Chinese rarely conceptualise learning as a fun activity (Li, 2001b). For thousands of years, the Chinese have been teaching young children about moral principle, basic concepts of science, daily life, and history (Yim et al., 2009; Zhu & Hu, 2011). In the past, children were encouraged to learn these principles and knowledge by citing classical primer reading materials. One of these materials is the *San Zi Jing* 三字經, which is a lens to understand the core curriculum of early childhood education in ancient China. The *San Zi Jing* 三字經 provides a view of Chinese culture, history, and civilization. In addition, it supports the ways in which young Chinese children develop spoken

language. While this traditional way of teaching young children to recite classical reading materials is still popular in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, it has become a controversial issue in recent times with modern Chinese early childhood educators promoting that children should be more active in their own learning (Tang, 2006; Zhu & Hu, 2011).

Since traditional Confucianism emphasises and values education, academic achievement became important for gaining higher social status for Chinese people (Chan, 2011; Yen, 2008). Education not only leads a person to become a noble and moral person, but for thousands of years in Confucian societies, including China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan and Korea, education has also been a mechanism, through national examination systems, to select an elite for governance (Liu, 2012).

3.3.2 Play and childhood in ancient China

The literature analysed above highlights the key principles and approaches to education in Chinese society and presents a general, albeit recently challenged, image of the young child as a studious, respectful and dedicated learner. Confucian educators were generally concerned that play and a playful environment would distract children's attention from serious study (Bai, 2005). However, not all Confucian educators promoted this approach to learning – some liberal scholars such as Wang Yangming (1472–1529) “saw the usefulness and necessity of using sober and educational play to regulate and mould children” (Bai, 2005, p. 15). Wang Yangming believed the original model of Confucian education did value play by encouraging learners' singing and practising of etiquette. In addition, the story of Mencius (372–289 BCE; one of the most important philosophers of the Confucian school after Confucius' death) illustrates that young children did play typically in their daily life and play was widely accepted in Chinese society (Bai, 2005; Wu, 2009).

Although Chinese children can be seen playing in a range of settings in the ancient paintings and woodcuts, Bai (2005) argues that “traditional” Confucians tried to shape the ordinary child to an ideal by entirely ignoring the perceived enjoyable aspects of children's play. Bai goes even further by saying this approach seemed to “represent a hostile attitude to children playing” (p. 27) and is evident in many Confucian writing.

One issue that complicates the understanding of this history of early childhood educational techniques in China is the limited attention to childhood. Hsiung (2008) argues that many studies of childhood histories in China are done by scholars whose focus is more on history and politics than on children or childhood. Children are considered as private property, attached to the family and there to extend family development. This traditional view of the child being dependent on adults is still prevailing in the majority of modern Chinese early childhood centres (Tang, 2006). The subordinate status of the child can be retained throughout an individual's entire life, as long as the parents are alive (Hwa, 2006).

3.3.3 Chinese parents' and teachers' perspectives

In contrast to Western developmental theories, Chinese see character, personality and temperament as all nurture and not nature (Pye, 1996). An example of the difference between the way Euro-American and Chinese American parents perceive learning is evident in two relatively recent studies. Parmar, Harkness & Super (2004) found that when compared to Euro-American parents, Chinese American parents prefer their preschool children to be taught in a more formal structured and directive way. In the second study, it was reported that American parents believed that the innate ability of the child is a greater contributing factor to success than any kind of formal tutoring (Lin, Gorrell, & Taylor, 2002), whereas Chinese believe persistence and effort are the keys to educational performance and achievement. Throughout history, Chinese parents have commonly shown love to their children as a way of supporting them to succeed in education (Pye, 1996).

However, influenced by Western education theories and philosophies, there has been a dramatic change over the past century in education philosophy and practice in the Chinese societies such as China, Hong Kong and Taiwan. The rise of a psychological discourse of childhood signals a shift in Chinese ways of governing school and family life (Naftali, 2010). Western educational policies and practices such as learning through play and the belief that children should be independent learners have impacted on early childhood programmes in Chinese communities as well (Yen, 2008). A major problem with this new approach is that most early childhood teachers in China do not have faith that young children can learn independently and actively (Tang, 2006) and

high parental expectations are rooted in Chinese cultural heritage (Li, 2001a). Wang, Elicker, McMullen, & Mao (2008) found many teachers in China saying that traditional teaching based on Confucian conventions and socialist ideas has come into conflict with Western ideas about developmentally appropriate practice, individual creativity, autonomy and critical thinking.

Similarly, Yen's (2008) study reported that teachers in Taiwan mostly give lectures and expect students to memorise content, an approach which has been criticised by early childhood professionals, and many early childhood centres have taken on a heavy academic focus. Because most Taiwanese are descendants of Chinese, traditional Confucian cultural values and contexts are also found in Taiwan. As in China, any move to a child-centred philosophy and child-centred methods in Taiwan would conflict with the ideas of Taiwanese parents and society about how best to educate children. Parents like to push teachers to give academic lessons or activities in preschools as they believe children will develop cognitive skills faster with early formal academic learning (Chang, 2003; Yen, 2008). Due to the influence of Confucianism, Chinese and Taiwanese parents place a heavy emphasis on academic advancement and view early childhood education as a preparation for elementary (primary school) education (Wang et al., 2008; Yen, 2008). Consequently, an academic-oriented early childhood curriculum still prevails in Chinese society because of parents' high expectations for their children's academic achievement.

In recent years, there has been an increasing interest in how Chinese immigrant families adjust their traditional educational values and practice in their host countries such as United States, Australia or New Zealand. Yang (2011) and Guo (2012) reported that Chinese immigrants in New Zealand hold traditional Confucian values and conceptualise their perspective of how young children learn within the New Zealand context. Chinese parents use traditional instructional learning strategies along with the child-initiated play-based approach to encourage their child's learning in literacy and numeracy. In addition, they conduct various educational activities at home to facilitate their children's literacy and numeracy learning.

Questions have been raised about the disconnect between activities at home and practices at early childhood centres. There is potential conflict when trying to form a cross-cultural community of practice in which immigrants' knowledge and perceptions

can sit alongside those of early childhood centres (Guo, 2012). At the same time, Wu (2009) argues that in order to maximise benefits for their children, Chinese immigrant mothers in New Zealand have “promoted, criticised, and rejected various traditional Chinese practices and beliefs” (p. ix). Taken together, these results suggest that “an understanding of the values inherent in any culture is important for teachers of young children” (Yim et al., 2009, p. 301) and is critical if teachers want to form an effective partnership with families from diverse cultures while recognising that not all families of ethnic group will have identical expectations.

3.4 Summary

The two literature review chapters have given an account of how learning, education and play are perceived by Westerners and Chinese as well as some historical perspectives of why this might be so. These findings suggest that an understanding of the values and beliefs inherent in any culture is essential for early childhood teachers when working with families from diverse cultures. One of the more significant findings to emerge from the literature is that Chinese highly revere children’s learning and their education and rarely emphasise the value of play. As a result, many Chinese immigrant parents find it challenging when sending their children to play-based early childhood settings in their host counties. There is, therefore, a definite need for further research into immigrants’ values and beliefs of a play-based curriculum – hence the current study.

Chapter 4: Research Design and Implementation

4.1 Introduction

This study aims to explore a sample of Ethnic Asian-Chinese (EAC) immigrant parents in New Zealand in order to determine their perspectives on the value and purpose of a play-based early childhood curriculum. Participants' stories about attending early childhood settings in New Zealand and their aspirations about play and learning for their children were heard, recorded, translated and interpreted against a background of descriptive, comparative and historical findings about the role of play in early childhood education.

A qualitative approach was chosen to allow the experiences, values and beliefs of the EAC parents about a play-based curriculum to be explored and examined in detail (Hennink, Bailey, & Hutter, 2011). Eight participants were interviewed. The interviews were conducted in the participants' first language so that they were able to express their views on play and learning fully and clearly. The interviewees' experiences of participating in play-based early childhood settings and ideas of play, learning and the role of the teacher were discovered and studied. The data gathered via the interviews were compiled, translated and analysed. Themes and insights emerged from the data and are discussed in chapters 5, 6 and 7, and a discussion of the implications of the findings of the research can be found in chapter 8. The final chapter also presents strategies suggested by the researcher that might enable early childhood teachers in play-based early childhood settings to work effectively and in partnership with EAC immigrant families.

4.2 Population and sampling

The participants chosen for this study are eight EAC immigrant parents (see Table 4.1) who all had or currently have at least one child attending a play-based early childhood centre in New Zealand. The EAC parents are all female. Half of the participants were aged between thirty and thirty-nine at the time of their interview, and the other half

were over the age of forty. Seven of the participants were living in Auckland and one in Hamilton.

Table 4.1: Participants' Background Information

Name (Alias)	Age	Origin	Mother tongue	Years in NZ ¹⁰	EC centres attended	City of residence
Ai (S1)	mid 40s	Taiwan	Taiwanese /Mandarin	11	Public kindergarten	Auckland
Ping (S2)	early 40s	Taiwan	Taiwanese /Mandarin	15	Public kindergarten/Home-based care	Auckland
Ching (S3)	mid 30s	Brunei	Mandarin	18	Play group/ Montessori	Auckland
Tai (S4)	mid 30s	Taiwan	Taiwanese /Mandarin	15	Private full-day centre	Auckland
Mei (S5)	mid 30s	Hong Kong	Cantonese	8	Public kindergarten/Montessori	Auckland
Fei (S6)	mid 40s	Mainland China	Mandarin	7	Private full-day centre	Auckland
Huei (S7)	early 40s	Taiwan	Taiwanese /Mandarin	16	Public kindergarten / Private full-day centre	Hamilton
Yu (S8)	mid 30s	Hong Kong	Cantonese	22	Private full-day centre/ Montessori	Auckland

The term *Ethnic Asian-Chinese immigrants* in this study refers to immigrants of Chinese origin or ancestry who have traditional Chinese cultural origins and background (McIntyre, 2008). All eight participants identified themselves as Ethnic Asian-Chinese (亞洲華人) rather than Chinese (中國人). Their first language(s) were

¹⁰ This is not a criterion for the selection of participants, but a question when interviewing the participants in this study.

Mandarin and/or Cantonese and their cultural and traditional origins are Chinese.¹¹ The research included immigrant parents who were originally from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Brunei.

In deciding on a participant sample, a decision was made to use the category of EAC for two reasons. Firstly, the participants belong to the same ethnic group and so share certain characteristics such as “customs, language, common origin and ancestry” (McIntyre, 2008, p. 16). Secondly, most of the research on parent experiences and views on early childhood education (ECE) in New Zealand has been conducted with participants from mainland China, and hence the current research does not acknowledge this wider collection of cultures. Therefore, it is important to realise that the group in this current study is not limited to only Chinese people from mainland China. However, EAC is a broad ethnic group, not a homogenous one. It is also important to realise that not all people from the countries represented in the research (mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan and Brunei) are EAC and share this culture; for example, Brunei’s population is two-thirds Malay with a significant Chinese minority (BBC News Asia-Pacific, 2011).

To participate in the study, parents must have had at least one child attending an early childhood setting in New Zealand at the time of the research or had a child that had attended an early childhood setting in New Zealand in the previous five years. All eight participants in this study had at least one child attending an early childhood setting at the time they were interviewed.

Due to a lack of information on the exact location of EAC immigrant families, a *snowball sampling* technique was employed to recruit potential participants for this research (Dawson, 2009; Kumar, 2011). Snowball sampling is a sample recruitment method which “employs research into participants’ social networks” (Browne, 2005, p. 47) in order to identify hard-to-reach hidden populations (Sadler, Lee, Lim & Fullerton, 2010). The snowball sampling method was used to invite a sample of EAC parents to participate in one-to-one interviews to explore their situations, feelings, perceptions,

¹¹ Mandarin is the official language spoken in mainland China and Taiwan, and Cantonese is one of the Chinese dialects, mainly spoken in Guangdong and Guangxi provinces as well as Hong Kong.

attitudes, values, beliefs and experiences of a play-based early childhood curriculum in New Zealand (Dawson, 2009; Kumar, 2011).

In order to select the sample, the researcher distributed fliers in her workplace and community, to religious groups and on her Facebook page. These strategies minimised the time required to recruit potential participants (Hine, 2011). The flier briefly explained the project, invited the reader to share the flier with others who may be interested in participating, and provided details on how to contact the researcher. When a respondent contacted the researcher, they were encouraged to invite people they knew who met the sampling criteria to participate in the research. The research required a minimum of six participants and a maximum of eight. Participants were selected in chronological order. Thus, the first eight respondents were chosen to be interviewed and the fliers were subsequently removed.

As the main aim in this qualitative study is to explore in-depth information from Ethnic Asian-Chinese immigrant parents and to acknowledge a diverse set of views, the sample size does not play a significant role in the selection of a sample (Kumar, 2011). However, when compared with similar research projects (Coates, 2006; Heald, 2006; Ho, Holmes, & Cooper, 2004; Liao, 2007; Mitchell, Haggerty, Hampton, & Pairman, 2006; Te One, 2008; Wu, 2009; Xu, 1999; Yu, 2005; C. Zhang, 2008; N. Zhang, 2008), it was believed six to eight successful interviews should be a reasonable size to explore a diversity of EAC immigrant parents' voices.

4.3 Methodology and methods

Methodologies refer to the principles, values and ideologies that underpin a research. Roberts-Holmes (2011) advocates that appropriate methodologies enable a researcher to carry out research more effectively. A qualitative approach is a technique used to explore and clarify people's "situations, feelings, perceptions, attitudes, values, beliefs and experiences" (Kumar, 2011, p. 104). Because the main objective of this study is to ascertain EAC immigrant parents' perspectives on play and learning in early childhood education, the qualitative approach was chosen. This allows EAC parents' attitudes, behaviours and experiences in participating in a play-based early childhood setting to

be explored and examined in depth and in detail (Dawson, 2009; Hennink, Bailey & Hutter, 2011).

The design of this study was based on a phenomenological approach that allows the researcher to centre the study on the lived experience of the EAC parents while at the same time to explore their views on play and learning (Knaack, 1984; Mutch, 2005; Morse & Richards, 2002). Phenomenology is a theoretical framework which a researcher can use to focus on the phenomenon of study (Mutch, 2005). The framework provides insights into the meanings of experiences that people may previously have not been aware of but can subsequently recognise (Morse & Richards, 2002). The phenomenological approach in the present study was adopted to investigate how EAC immigrants interpret their experiences and ideas of play and learning, and how the researcher can in turn interpret their interpretations (McIntyre, 2008; Shank, 2006).

There are a number of attractive features to using a phenomenological approach to study EAC parents' perspectives on a play-based curriculum. When each EAC parent described their story of participating in an early childhood setting, it manifested their perception and is a form of their interpretation of what an ideal early childhood curriculum should be. In addition, it was necessary for the researcher to examine and analyse each EAC participant's stories along with their ideas of the values and beliefs of a play-based curriculum so that she could get an understanding and overview of these EAC parents' lived experiences (Morse & Richards, 2002). Such an understanding is vital because it means that their children's culture, language and learning can be recognised and supported by their early childhood services in their host country – New Zealand (Ministry of Education, 1996).

4.4 Data gathering and analysis methods

The main data-gathering method employed in this study was semi-structured interviews. This method was chosen because semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to explore the deeper aspects of EAC immigrants' experiences (Dawson, 2009; Shank, 2006; Wu, 2009). Each participant was interviewed once and interviews were

conducted in Mandarin and/or English, with each participant choosing their preferred language for their interview. The semi-structured interview questions are included in Appendix A. A digital recorder was used to record all the interviews. Recordings were transcribed by the researcher and Mandarin transcriptions were translated to English, also by the researcher. Transcriptions and translations were made available to the participants for verification.

Interview is a data collection method commonly used in social sciences (Kumar, 2011). The research questions were centred on perspectives on the words *play* and *learning*. The purpose of this design was to gain insight into the issue of the value and purpose of a play-based early childhood curriculum from the perspective of an EAC immigrant parent, and was more concerned with depth of the insight rather than breadth.

At the heart of this study was a need to explore whether EAC parents value play in their child's learning. This complex topic was suited to using interviews as "interviews are able to elicit subtle, ambiguous and sometimes contradictory issues" (Roberts-Holmes, 2011, p. 8) which arise with play and learning in different cultures. The subtle responses from the EAC parents when they were interviewed enabled the researcher to explore some of the parents' emotions, feelings and experiences of participating in a play-based early childhood centre in New Zealand in great depth. Moreover, the literature discussed in the previous chapters provides evidence that cultural views and experiences of play and learning are very nuanced, and hence the choice of interviews allowed the researcher to gain insight into the EAC immigrant parents' perceptions and to capture their individual voices and stories (Hennink, Bailey & Hutter, 2011).

Mutch (2005) identifies three common interview techniques that researchers use to gather data. The *structured interview* employs a set of prescribed questions and requires fewer interviewing skills. In contrast, the *unstructured interview* follows a general theme rather than a specified set of questions, and "the respondent ... plays a bigger part in determining the direction [of the interview]" (Mutch, 2005, p. 126). In this study, the *semi-structured* approach was chosen: the EAC parents were asked a set of questions in a more open-ended manner than a structured interview but in a way that enabled the researcher to maintain a focus on the research aim, something that can be lost in a completely unstructured interview.

A standardised structured format was applied in which each respondent was asked the same questions. Seven open-ended questions were listed on the interview schedule to guide the interview (see Appendix A). This strategy allowed the researcher to keep the interview focused and at the same time was flexible enough to allow the discussion to go in different directions based on the emerging responses (Roberts-Holmes, 2011; Mutch, 2005; Kumar, 2011).

In this study, semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to get a more in-depth understanding of EAC parents' perspectives (Mutch, 2005), while the use of structured interview questions meant that uniform information was collected to ensure the comparability of data (Kumar, 2011). As the eight EAC parents in this study were all asked about their views on play and learning and about their experiences of participating in a play-based curriculum, their responses can be easily analysed for common themes or compared for further discussion. The respondents' English reading or language capability was not a concern because they were interviewed in the language or languages they are most confident in, i.e. Mandarin or English. In addition, their understanding of the questions could be checked throughout the interview process by the researcher, who could explain the questions when necessary. This methodology means that a higher chance of successful completion can be expected (Mutch, 2005). However, success also depended upon the researcher establishing a relationship with the EAC participants in order to encourage them to talk about their experience and viewpoints freely (Mutch, 2005).

For the purpose of data analysis, an interview summary form was completed after each interview had taken place. This included details about the participants, the time and place of the interview, duration of the interview, and details about the content and emerging themes (Dawson, 2009). Interview data was analysed in order to identify themes that emerged from the participants' experiences and perspectives. The analysis included seeking implications for teachers and ECE centres, particularly in relation to the willingness of EAC parents to participate in a play-based early childhood setting. The audio-recording of each interview was transcribed word for word in Chinese (or English if the participant used English). The transcripts were then summarised in the form of matrices, in English, to record the categories based on key focusing questions (Boeije, 2010; Hennink, Bailey & Hutter, 2011). The transcribed interviews were

closely studied to identify the main themes they communicated. These themes were sorted by issues relating to the EAC parents' perspectives on a play-based curriculum and their ideas of play and learning. NVivo10 computer software was used to code, organise and classify the data gathered. The contents of the interviews were analysed by the researcher, with assistance from her research supervisor, in order to identify the main themes that had emerged from the respondents (Kumar, 2011)

4.5 Ethical considerations

In accordance with the ethical guidelines issued by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEK), privacy and confidentiality were respected throughout the research process. The participants were contacted by both phone and email before the study commenced. The aim of the research and the nature of the study were clearly explained to them in both English and Mandarin (Chinese traditional written form was used in the written information), and a Participant Information Sheet was provided (see Appendix C). All participants signed a consent form which stated that they acknowledged their involvement was voluntary, they understood their rights as participants, and that they agreed to audio-recording of the interview (see Appendix B). Participants were assured that their participation would not affect their relationship with their child's early childhood centre in any way. They were also informed that they were able to withdraw from this study at any time before the researcher had completed the data collection.

All eight participants were sent a copy of the transcription of their interview, via email or post, to check if the data was accurate before the researcher started the analysis process. They were also informed on the consent form that a summary of the research report would be made available to them if they indicated they were interested in reading the results of this study.

To ensure confidentiality, each participant was assigned a code and an alias. They were assured that no identifying information would be included in this study. In addition, all participants were informed that the information they provided would only be used to accomplish the aims of this research.

One of the purposes of this research is to enhance the parent–teacher partnerships that are central to the effectiveness of early childhood education for children, whānau, and communities. The research design in this study promoted participant autonomy by encouraging the potential participants to contact the researcher rather than being approached by her. The participants were well informed about the research process and what they needed to do when participating in this research. Both Chinese and English written information were provided to ensure there would be no language barrier for the potential participants when deciding whether or not to participate in this research.

The research method adopted in this study provided a chance for the EAC immigrant parents to be participants rather than objects of the study; and as such to have a voice in relation to the nature of early childhood education in New Zealand. One of the roles of participants in this research project was to provide their perspectives and views on the play-based curriculum in early childhood education. The semi-structured interview methodology was chosen as an effective way to encourage participation in the research because it ensured there were no constraints (such as language) on the EAC parents sharing their opinions, ideas and beliefs on the research topic. In addition, after each interview had been completed and transcribed, the participants were invited to check and comment on the transcription of their interview; this process ensured the validity of the data.

Instead of approaching potential participants, the researcher distributed fliers in her community to encourage the potential participants to contact her. An information sheet (written in both English and Chinese) was provided for the potential participants in order to assist them in understanding the purpose and questions of the study before agreeing to participate in this research. The researcher informed the participants of each step of the research procedure and obtained their consent before proceeding with the interview. In addition, to protect their privacy, the identity of the participants remains confidential and is only known by the researcher. AUT document safety protocols were followed when managing the data.

4.6 Summary

This chapter has justified the research design and detailed the research procedure. It included explanations of why qualitative and phenomenological approaches were adopted in an attempt to explore EAC immigrant parents' perceptions of a play-based curriculum in depth. It explained why the research design focused on a qualitative approach to data collection to allow a comprehensive analysis of the research questions. It justified and discussed the semi-structured interview schedule used to collect data from EAC parents and the purpose and values of the methods employed in this study. The steps taken to ensure ethical considerations were incorporated into the research process were outlined, as well as the principles of participation, partnership and protection.

Chapter 5: Results and Discussion of EAC Parents' Perception of Play and Learning in Early Childhood Education

5.1 Introduction

An analysis and discussion of research data gathered during face-to-face interview is presented in the following three chapters, and the research questions posed in chapter 1 are addressed and concentrated on. The primary purpose of the study is to explore Ethnic Asian-Chinese (EAC) immigrant parents' perspectives on the value and purpose of a play-based early childhood curriculum. The research aims to investigate EAC parents' perspectives on their children's learning in a play-based early childhood curriculum, particularly their ideas of the relationship between play and learning in comparison to the traditional Western perspective. The secondary objectives of the research include:

- How do EAC immigrant parents define and perceive *play* and *learning* in early childhood education?
- What kind of environment (including home and educational settings) do EAC immigrant parents expect for their children in their early years?
- How do EAC immigrant parents perceive the role of the early childhood teacher and the play-based curriculum?
- What strategies can early childhood centres use to work in partnership with EAC in order to enhance their children's learning?

Qualitative results from the data collected by interviewing EAC immigrant parents are examined and discussed. The results of the study are also discussed in relation to previous research studies and literature. This chapter reports and discusses how EAC parents perceive play and learning in early childhood education, and the EAC parents' concerns and their expectation of early childhood teachers will be discussed in chapters 6 and 7.

5.2 EAC parents affirm the values of play

The EAC parents were first asked about their views on play and learning. As shown in Table 5.1, most of the EAC parents agree with the idea of *learning through play*. The results show that the parents in the current study have a clear understanding of the value of learning through play, that play is significant, and that ECE teachers should actively support play.

Table 5.1 Summary of EAC immigrant parents' ideas of play and learning

	Play	Learning
Ai (S1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Adult's role is important so children's play can be guided – Play should help a children to learn something, rather than only play freely 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Politeness – To learn rules and boundaries
Ping (S2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Adult's role is important in guiding children's play – Children should have time and freedom to play in early years – Children are able to choose what they want to play – Teacher needs to identify children's interests and to extend their play 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Social skills (with both children and adults) – Knowledge about the world – Early literacy – To establish a bond with parents and care for the family – To be confident in themselves
Ching (S3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Through play, children learn from older children – Help children to develop social skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Children need to learn rules and boundaries
Tai (S4)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Children need to play and learn, not 'free play' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Learn how to take care of self – To learn norms, rules and boundaries – Subject knowledge, i.e. Science, Nature
Mei (S5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Play is a sort of learning – Children learn better through play – Make friends – Language skills – Problem solving skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Eye and hand coordination – Moral, rules and manners – Self-help skill, tidy up own environment
Fei (S6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – The role of teacher is important in children's play – Learning through play rather than free play 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Brain development, i.e. memory – Talent and Skill training, i.e. swimming, dancing, art & craft ... – Subject knowledge – Prepare for school, i.e. basic literacy and numeracy skills – Politeness

<p>Huei (S7)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Play is a child's work and is important for children - Through play, children learn about the people, places and things - Learning through play 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - To learn how parents care for them - Develop own personality and character - Gross and fine motor skills - Social skills - Morals, rules and boundaries, politeness - To be exposed to a range of classical literature (both Chinese and English)
<p>Yu (S8)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Play should have purposes that help a child to learn something, i.e. sensory. - Maori dancing, singing are also kinds of play - There is no problem with 'play' itself, but it would be better if children can learn things through play. - Play should be carefully planned by adults rather than let children play freely without any purpose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Preparation for school, i.e. basic literacy and numeracy skills - To learn knowledge about the world - Learn to concentrate

One EAC parent identified play as a form of learning and believed that children learn how to make friends and develop language and problem-solving skills through play. In addition, play is considered a more relaxed way for a child to learn than learning through formal instruction.

嗯...我覺得如果你講那個 PLAY, 跟那個坐下來讀書, 一起寫字; 我覺得...

嗯...那個 PLAY 是一種比較 RELAXING 的方式, 讓他學東西 [Mei]

I feel that play is a more relaxing way for children to learn things, when compared to a situation where a child needs to sit down to read or write. [Mei]

Yes, play – they [children] can make friends, they can discuss, and they can find their way out. They can use their brain to sort things, rather than “I teach you”, I sit down, and following my instruction to write my name ...¹² [Mei]

Although most EAC participants expected their children to learn something through play (for example, problem-solving, language or social skills), one EAC parent had a

¹² Mei addressed this quote in English directly.

deeper perspective. She believed that parents should be active in playing with children and that she played with her child because that she had fun with her child while they played together. In addition, through involvement in her child's play, she was able to observe her child's personality and dispositions.

我唯一會比較常買的,我會花錢去買的(其他大部份的玩具是從 TOY LIBRARY 借的),就是那個拼圖 PUZZLE ... 我會跟我小孩子拼,然後,我在裡面得到很多樂趣...有時候他幫我找到,有時候我幫他找到,就是這方面就是我們兩個親子之間那種玩的時光.....而且就是那個拼圖,我們就是從十二片拼到廿四片,再一直拼到九十六片這樣子 [Ping]

The toys I often buy for my child are jigsaw puzzles (I borrowed the other toys from the Toy Library). I have a lot of fun doing puzzles together with him. Sometimes he found the required pieces for me; and every so often I found the parts he was looking for. This was how we play together and strengthened our relationship. [Ping]

我比較在意的是,就是孩子跟我的互動,還有他的自信心的培養,還有他學習的那個動力 ... 後來我有 iPad 以後,我會跟他一起玩跳棋,象棋 ... 我就從那邊去觀察到他的人格特質

What I care more is the interaction between my child and me, as well as his self-confidence and motivation ... When we had got an iPad, I often played chess games with him. Through the way he played the games, I was able to see his personality and dispositions. [Ping]

The transcripts indicate that this EAC parent is positive about her child playing as long as he can benefit from the play. Although these results differ from Bai's (2005) argument that Chinese parents have a hostile attitude towards children's play, it is consistent with other research findings that Chinese parents agree that children learn through play (Liao, 2007; Rao & Li, 2008; Wu, 2009). In addition, this finding also confirms that parents are more likely to participate in their children's play when they value play for its cognitive and educational benefits (Sutton-Smith, 1997)

However, much of the literature reviewed indicates that Chinese give very little attention to the value of play (Bai, 2005; Cheng, 2001; Cooney & Sha, 1999; Parmar, Harkness & Super, 2004). One of the reasons EAC parents only offer limited support for their children's play may be because they worry that play might distract their children from learning (Bai, 2005; Liao, 2007). This finding is in agreement with Okagaki and Diamond's (2000) findings which show that parents might view play with suspicion if they are not able to see a clear academic focus in the curriculum. Hence, if the parents are confident that play actually assists their children's learning, then this worry might be eliminated.

5.3 What EAC parents expect their children to learn in their early years

Although there is a lot of literature that indicates that Chinese parents emphasise their children's academic progress, the results from this study found that academic knowledge and skills are not the priority for EAC parents when they were asked to consider what they expect their children to learn in their early years. As can be seen from the Table 5.1, every EAC parents in this study stressed the importance of their children learning morals, norms, rules and boundaries (規範, 規矩), as well as being polite.

我覺得...現在...我的女兒三歲了,所以她也在建立她的心靈,她的個性,她的態度的時候。她需要學的就是”規矩”囉,跟...嗯...要懂得稍為的禮貌,跟...就是要控制她的情緒啦... [Ching]

I feel that ... as my daughter is three years old now, and this is a stage where she develops her spirit, personality and mindsets. What she needs to learn is to know the rules, boundaries, and manners. She needs to be polite when interacting with others. In addition, she needs to be able to self-control her emotion... [Ching]

父母最在意的就是說...從小就是說... 孩子他能夠學會文質彬彬啊,然後有禮貌,吃有吃樣,站有站樣,坐有坐樣... 這是最基本的。 [Huei]

Being a parent, what I care the most is that my child would be gentle and refined in manner. He needs to be polite and behave appropriately at all time, for

instance eating, standing and sitting. I think these are basic matters my child needs to learn. [Huei]

Most EAC parents believe that early childhood education is vital to a child's moral development. They believe that children need to be taught and disciplined from a very young age.

第一個我是覺得說, 就是規矩。因為小朋友他們其實是不懂得什麼對, 什麼不對; 我們應該要教他去做什麼是對的事情, 因為他們還什麼都不懂嘛... 因為那是最基礎的教育, 如果他們的基礎打得好, 其實以後他就是待人處事方面其實很多都很有用。如果規矩方面沒有建立起來, 他們長大就會沒有規矩。所以我覺得規矩在幼兒, 就是最重要的 [Ai]

I think the first thing [for children] is to learn the rules and boundaries and behave themselves. Because young children don't understand what is right, what is wrong, thus we need to teach them ... Because that's the foundation of education. If this foundation is laid properly, it would assist them to deal with matters and people more easily. If they don't learn the basic norms or boundaries in their childhood, they won't behave appropriately when they grow up. Thus I believe it is very important for young children to learn the rules and boundaries, and to behave well. [Ai]

Cultivating inner character is a very important element and goal of education in Chinese culture (Guo, 2006; Liao, 2007; Wu, 2009). An ideal person, according to Confucian standards, demonstrates self-restraint, controls their feelings and emotions, and maintains harmonious relationships with others (Guo, 2006). Confucian values are central to the educational expectations and practice of EAC parents, and so learning is more than just cognitive or academic achievement (Chan, 2011; Liao, 2007; Zhai & Gao, 2008). It is possible to hypothesise that this kind of moral development is less likely to occur in a free-play scenario, and therefore free play is not so prevalent in Chinese society.

Besides learning about norms, rules and boundaries, another core Confucian value that EAC parents expect their children to learn is filial piety.

他們要學習的 ... 最基本就是來自父母對他們的關心 [Huei]

A fundamental thing children need to learn is to understand how their parents care about them. [Huei]

Ching also had similar expectations of her child:

父母不是在家給你吃, 放你去睡覺, 跟你洗澡的人, 他是給你吃, 給你住的環境, 供給他一切東西的人. 所以, 至少他要懂得開始去 ... 就是愛惜這個人啦! 至少他就是顯示點疼惜父母啊 [Ching]

Your parents are not only the people who feed you or put you to sleep. They also provide you everything you need such as food and shelter. Thus, the basic thing a child needs to learn... is to cherish his/her parents. At least she needs to show some appreciation. [Ching]

These two examples demonstrate how EAC parents might see the importance of filial piety (孝順) and expect their children to develop this virtue, which is a fundamental moral principle in Confucianism. In the areas such as China, Taiwan or Hong Kong, children are taught basic moral principles such as filial piety at early childhood centres and schools. Every child is expected to appreciate as well as respect their parents and to practise filial piety at home (Liao, 2007; Yang, 2011; Zhai & Gao, 2008). Yet when their children grow up in a host country where the mainstream has different cultural values and beliefs, some of EAC parents worry that their children might not be able to continue or possess these basic Confucian morals.

While many early childhood centres expect children to be toilet trained before enrolling them, Ching was pleased that her daughter's centre helped her through her journey of toilet training:

我已經覺得我現在兩個小孩沒辦法 TOILET TRAIN 那麼好, 所以我...所以精力方面, 所以就...當然如果靠外面的時候, 就有這種 CENTRE, 有這種 SERVICE 就他也...就可能也要看小孩子; 就可能我的女兒也讓別人教就快一點, 所以她回到家裡, 她現在就很...她可以開始慢慢...比較會上 TOILET,

會跟我講...而且都是先之前，都還會忍著，跟我講。所以，那種 PROGRESS 就很好。 [Ching]

As I have two little children, I felt I was exhausted when training my older child to toilet. Therefore, when I need help from outside the home, I sent my older child to the early childhood centre where provides this service [to help children's toilet training]. Of course, it also depends on individual child, I think my daughter progresses better if she was taught by other people. She now is able to tell me before she needs to go to the toilet. Thus, I am very pleased with her progress.
[Ching]

The transcript indicates that some EAC parents, especially first-time parents, appreciate the support they get from their children's early childhood centre. Ching was relieved when her daughter finally completed her toilet training with the support of her early childhood teachers. This finding further supports the idea of *Te Whāriki* that early childhood services should endeavour to establish a “partnership between parents and the other adults involved in caring for the infants” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 22).

One EAC parent argued that play and learning are different things and they should not be put together for older children. She does believe that children under two years need many opportunities to play because very young children learn about the world through play, a belief that is consistent with the constructivist theories of sensorimotor play that informs the role of a teacher working with infants and toddlers (Santrock, 2009).

However, the parent also stressed that children over two years of age need to have a different kind of play:

那3歲到5歲，他們 PLAY，我覺得就應該要有不一樣的 PLAY，所謂的‘智能 PLAY’而不是說還是那種，那種‘玩具’的 PLAY.....譬如說，所謂的‘智能’，我所說的‘智能’，譬如說，你‘PUZZLE’也是一種 PLAY，那個是用，動腦筋的 PLAY，而不是只是你手去碰觸的 PLAY。玩具是手去碰觸的 PLAY，那你所謂要動腦筋的所謂‘智能’的 PLAY，是你用手，同時你要用你的腦。 [Tai]

Three- to five-year-olds need to have different type of play, which is intellectual play rather than playing with the toys ... One of the examples of the intellectual play is the jigsaw puzzle. When playing with puzzles, you need to use your brain

[to think], not only your hands. If a child simply plays with a toy, he only utilises his hands, yet when he / she participates in an intellectual play activity, the child then not only exercises his hands, but also his brain. [Tai]

Tai's view reveals several important points in relation to play and learning. Firstly, this EAC parent does value play as long as children can learn something from it. Secondly, play activities need to be developmentally appropriate according to a child's needs and development. Lastly, it is important to develop older children's intelligence. What is interesting when comparing Tai's opinions with Ping's is that both these EAC parents referred to jigsaw puzzles as a valuable play activity. This result is consistent with Wu's (2009) finding that *eduplay* (play with an educational purpose) is preferred by EAC parents. Tai's attitudes appear to reflect the popular and typical approach of EAC parents in relation to children's learning (Guo, 2006).

The results identified a range of learning outcomes that EAC parents expect for their children in early childhood education settings, namely:

- social skills
- knowledge about the world
- early literacy and numeracy
- self confidence
- self-help skills
- brain development, i.e. memory and intelligence development
- preparation for school
- gross and fine motor skills, and
- learning to concentrate.

5.4 Learning happens at centre and play happens at home

The study also found that some EAC parents believe that learning should happen at an early childhood centre while play should happen at home.

應該在家的環境就是還是讓小孩 RELAX 的地方，在學校才是學習的地方，在學校不是‘玩’的地方。 [Tai]

Home is an environment where children can be relaxed. School is the place for children to learn rather than play. [Tai]

I send my children to their kindy for four hours for four mornings [per week]. So, they have time to play with toys, and they also have some learning, like reading, writing, cutting or something. Umm, so, they ... if the four hours is totally play, why do I send them there? I can let them to play here, or send them ... I can go with them! I am not a working mum, I am a mum, OK? I can go to Mission Bay! Yes, for me, I won't teach them writing at home, because she does all the learning at the school. So I don't expect the kindy will do all the "my job"! You know what I mean? I want them to learn something there! [Mei]

These two transcripts indicate that some EAC parents view learning and play as two distinct matters and do not associate the two together. Both Tai and Mei are full-time mothers and believe that it is not necessary to send their children to an early childhood centre unless their children can "learn" something. For these parents, play is a way for children to relax themselves and is a fun thing; it is something which children can do at home. However, they want their children to learn things at the centre, such as subject knowledge, rules and morals, and also how to take care of themselves.

Although a strong relationship between play and learning has been reported in the Western literature (Ahn, 2008; Claiborne & Drewery, 2010; Gibbons, 2007; Ministry of Education, 1996; Parmar et al., 2004; Santer et al., 2007; Sutton-Smith, 1997), the current study found that some EAC parents separate play from learning and believe that learning should take place at the centre or school while play happens at home. The finding further supports the idea of Cooney and Sha (1999) that Chinese consider the purpose of play to be more recreational rather than to aid learning.

As mentioned in the literature review, learning is a serious matter for Chinese. Children are not only expected to achieve breadth and depth of knowledge, they also need to be a moral person and contribute what they learn to society (Guo, 2006; Li, 2001b; Hwa, 2006; Pratt, 1992; Yen, 2008; Zhang, 2008; Zhu & Hu, 2011). As a result, learning is rarely conceptualised as a fun activity by Chinese.

5.5 Summary

This chapter has investigated EAC parents' perceptions of learning and play in the early years of childhood. One of the more significant findings that emerged from this study is that many EAC parents view play as distinct from learning and expect children to learn at their early childhood centres. The second major finding was that EAC parents agree that children should have opportunities to play but would like to see their children learning through play rather than the children just enjoying free play. The present study confirms previous findings and contributes additional evidence that suggests EAC parents would be more positive about a play-based early curriculum if they are reassured that learning does occur when their children participate in the play activities at their early childhood centres.

Chapter 6: Results and Discussion of Ethnic Asian-Chinese Parents' Concerns about the Play-based Early Childhood Curriculum in New Zealand

6.1 Introduction

Chapter 6 continues with the presentation of the findings from the interviews with eight EAC immigrant parents. While chapter 5 looked at the EAC parents' perception of play and learning in early childhood education, this chapter will focus on their concerns and their ideas of what would be an ideal early childhood curriculum. The chapter will show that many of the EAC parents' answers to the third research question (How do EAC immigrant parents perceive the role of the early childhood teacher and the play-based curriculum?) support their answers to question one (How do EAC immigrant parents define and perceive *play* and *learning* in early childhood education?). A close look at the EAC parents' responses also adds depth to the research's findings about the participants' views on early childhood education centres.

6.2 Centres could be unhygienic

In terms of the physical environment, one EAC parent in the current study believed the early childhood centres should be safe, home-like, calm, relaxing, and have many resources. In addition, the cleanness and hygiene of the early childhood setting was seen as essential:

We have been to a centre, it was very scary ... it was dirty, it's not healthy, it's not a hygienic environment. Yes, it is not healthy, and you can see that they are so dirty and they ... they [the children] have running noses. Umm ... they are ... some children are sick, they are still there, they don't send them home. And the teacher doesn't do ... just stands at the side or having a cup of tea watching ...
[Mei]

What Mei was hoping to see was a clean, hygienic and healthy environment where children were well looked after by the staff. However, as the above centre did not meet

her expectations, she decided to enrol her child at another early childhood centre despite the fee being more expensive at the second centre. Accordingly, the first centre described by Mei was unable to demonstrate what *Te Whāriki* promoted, i.e. “the health and well-being of the child are protected and nurtured” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 15), as it did not appear to be providing a healthy environment for children.

6.3 Mat time is important for children’s learning

Another learning experience some participants expected their children’s early childhood centres to provide is more and longer mat times. According to Education Review Office (2007), a *mat time* can be a form of *group time* “which give educators an opportunity to work with small groups or the whole group of children on a particular interest or project” (p. 14). Different to free-play activities, mat time is a teacher-led activity and lasts from five to twenty minutes, depending on the developmental needs of the children who participate. When asked her opinion about the programme delivery at her child’s centre, Huei said:

課程安排哦？因為他們大部份都是玩，所以他們 MAT TIME 的時間比較短...他們所設定給小孩的時間可以，但是可以再多...有時候是只有一個 MAT TIME 而已，不過好像要依小孩子年紀...但是透過老師講說，把它拿掉的原因是因為兩歲半的孩子不穩定，而且他們學習會很累，所以後來他們把它拿掉一個，只剩下一個 MAT TIME。那我就覺得說對於比較大的孩子就不夠。[Huei]

Programme planning? Because they [children] play most of the time, thus their mat time is shorter. The duration of each mat time is fine, but I think it could have been more [mat times] ... Sometimes there is only one mat time [per session]. I think they did this according to children’s age ... teacher mentioned that the reason they take off a mat time was because they had more 2½-year-olds who got tired when sitting too long on the mat. So they have only one mat time now. I think this is not enough for the older children. [Huei]

This transcript shows that the EAC parent was disappointed when her early childhood centre reduced the frequency of mat times from twice to once per session. This might

be related to EAC parents feeling their children will learn more through teacher-led activities than through a child-centred play curriculum.

Fei's opinions were similar to Huei's, and she also expressed her wish for more opportunities for small-group activities in her child's early childhood centre. When asked her views on the programmes at her child's early childhood centre, Fei said:

他們也幼兒園沒什麼課程啊？大部份只是 MAT TIME 時間，然後就 MORNING TEA 時間， LUNCH TIME 時間，但是都沒什麼課程。... 我覺得 FREE TIME 時間，玩的時間太長了...對，就是說，每天玩的都是，他們小孩子大部分喜歡的是 OUTSIDE 的那種 OUTDOOR 的活動啊！我覺得可以抽，每天抽出那麼一個小時的時間，可以讓他們有一個集體的簡單的那種學習的時間。就是說，感興趣的那種，比如分組啊，對那個簡單的就是智力遊戲智力開發的那種學中玩。[Fei]

It doesn't seem they [the centre] have a programme! Besides the mat times, they have only morning tea and lunch time. I don't think they have enough planned curriculum/teaching. I felt children have too much free-play time ... Yes, in other words, they mainly play in the outdoors. I think they could have an hour each day to have group activities to learn something that they might be interested; for examples, to play games that would assist children's intellectual/cognitive development. [Fei]

For some EAC parents, play is not seen as part of the early childhood curriculum, but mat time or group time is. A possible explanation for this might be that a teacher has to take an active role during mat time or group activity, so in these two situations it is more obvious to EAC parents that teaching and learning is happening. This finding corroborates the ideas of Liao (2007) that "Chinese immigrant parents prefer a more directive, structured and firmer teaching approach" (p. 132). It is possible to hypothesise that one of the reasons that some EAC parents question the value of free play is they are not sure what their child could learn from free-play activities. Hence, this finding has important implications for developing communication strategies between early childhood centres and EAC parents about children's learning at the

centres. One strategy, for example, is to document children's learning through a variety of play activities and to share this information with their parents.

6.4 Centres should provide parents with more information about their child's learning

Several parents in this study indicated they would like to receive more information about their child's experiences at the centres. Ping, Huei and Yu were given their child's portfolios to read at home regularly and expect the centre to provide more and authentic information about their child.

我剛來的時候就覺得說哦，那個小孩子可以讓他自由自在的去玩，真的是很好。那我現在也是覺得很好，只是說，可能，像在褓姆家，不是都會寫記錄嘛！她一個人帶三個，然後我女兒她做了什麼什麼的，她會觀察，然後記下來。可是到了幼兒園的時候，他可能沒辦法做這樣子的記錄。私立的還是有哦，DAY CARE 有哦，公立的就沒有。對，那如果公立也有的時候，我透過那個記錄我就可以多瞭解我的小孩...[Ping]

When I first came [to New Zealand], I felt it was great for children to play freely. I am still feeling the same now. When my daughter attended a family day care, her caregiver observed and often recorded what my child had done during the day there, although she had to take care of three children at the same time. However, my son's early childhood centre was not able to do the same. His first centre did provide some record of his learning, but his second early childhood centre did not do so. If his centre could provide some observation or information of my son for me, I then would be able to understand my child better... [Ping]

他們都會寫一些 INFORMATION...資料，就是像 LEARNING STORIES 啊，PORTFOLIO。我們常常可以自己拿起來看；像是這次兩個禮拜的 HOLIDAY，老師說妳可以帶回去看這樣。我覺得他們這點蠻好，就是讓你可以拿回去，那有時也許，我們跟...可能跟他的爺爺奶奶在一起那也可以拿給他們分享一下。 [Huei]

They [the teachers] often write information such as learning stories or child portfolio ... We [the parents] can help ourselves to read this information. During the last two-week school holiday, the teachers told me to take my son's portfolio home, which I made me feel very good. We often share this information with my child's grandparents when we visit them. [Huei]

It is apparent from these comments that EAC parents appreciate the information provided by the early childhood teachers about their child. Through reading the teachers' observations about their children and looking at their children's portfolio, EAC parents not only gain a better understanding of what their children do at their early childhood centre, but also a deeper insight into their child's disposition, personality, social skills and what they are learning. This finding is in agreement with the Education Review Office's (2008) finding that immigrant parents appreciate being informed about what their children do at their school. Therefore, written information, such as observations and portfolios, would be able to provide EAC parents a better idea of the value of a play-based curriculum if the teacher is able to articulate the child's play experience effectively in a learning story.

Besides providing parents with written information about their children, Ching's and Huei's centres hold parent meetings frequently to improve the communication between staff and parents. According to the Education Review Office's (2008) report - *Partners in learning: Parents' voices* - immigrant parents expect their child's teachers to be proactive in developing a relationship with them. Fei, one of the EAC participants in the current study, stressed her difficulty in developing a relationship with the teachers at her daughter's centre due to the language barrier. She also felt there was not enough time to communicate with the teacher when dropping off or picking up her child. It can therefore be assumed that parent-teacher conferences could be an effective way to establish a relationship and improve communication with EAC parents.

The interviews show that EAC parents value the effort that staff devote to reporting their child's learning and progress. Through effective communication, EAC parents would have a better understanding of what their child learns at their centre. These findings add substantially to our understanding of assessing children's learning and communication with parents. The findings further support the principle encapsulated in

Te Whāriki that “observations and records should be part of two-way communication that strengthens the partnership between the early childhood setting and families” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 30)

6.5 ECE centres should prepare children for school

Many of the EAC parents from this study felt that early childhood education should prepare children for school. An area that they were particularly concerned about it is that their child doesn't fall behind their peer group because of limitations in their English proficiency. For example, Ping sent both of her children to early childhood settings when they were quite young in order for her children to be immersed in an English environment in their early years.

In addition to developing proficiency in English, one EAC parent, who is also a New Zealand-trained primary school teacher, emphasises the importance of equipping children for school by exposing them to some essential learning areas, such as science, early literacy and numeracy. Moreover, children should be able to sit down for a period of time when they start school. She said:

如果是他們在 KINDY 給他們多一點時間 EXPOSE , 然後在...可能在小學的時候, 他們會 CLICK IN...'哦...我知道了!' 然後再多一點 REPETITION, 多一點給他們 EXPOSURE, 然後他們可能會 PICK UP 得快一點, 可是...在大一點才 PICK UP, 然後他們可能會覺得沒有自信因為覺得其他小朋友都懂了現在, 可是我不懂。然後他自己也會好像 FALL BEHIND, 很難 PICK UP。所以我覺得是如果是越小, EXPOSE 他們這些東西, 我覺得都好! [Yu]

If they [children] are being exposed more [in the essential learning areas] in their early years, they might be clicked in [earlier when they learn things at school]. “Yes, I’ve learnt this before!” a child might say. Their teacher at school then can offer more repetition and exposure for them to master the new skills and knowledge. As a result, they would pick up new learning easier. On the other hand, if children pick up these new things when they are older, it might affect their self-esteem as they feel other children are better than them. Consequently they might fall behind and find hard to pick up the new learning.

Thus I believe children should be exposed to these essential learning areas, the sooner the better! [Yu]

From the perspective of a primary school teacher, this EAC parent believes that children would be more confident when they start school if they have already been exposed to some essential learning areas, such as numeracy and literacy, during their early childhood education. Most of other EAC parents in the current study also expected their children's early childhood centres to enhance children's subject knowledge or prepare their children for school.

A question that needs to be asked, then, is whether the play-based curriculum adequately prepares children for school. Liao (2007) found that many Chinese immigrant parents in her research did not believe that "play enables children's readiness for school" (p. 4). Yu (the EAC parent who worked at a primary school) also commented that some new children in her new entrant class are lost and not sure what to do when they first start school.

我覺得小孩子是可以，不用他坐很久；可是給他一些 CONCENTRATION 的時間，給他們坐下，可以拿筆起來寫什麼都可以。可以畫東西和什麼，給他們一些時間是坐下來 CONCENTRATE 的，不是跑來跑去。因為我覺得在 NEW ENTRANCE 的時候，很多小孩子沒有 BOUNDARIES，然後他們都不知道上學是什麼回事，他們來的時候就跑來跑去跑來跑去；哦，可以做什麼就做什麼了；他們不知道是要坐下來，老師現在要跟你做什麼做什麼。所以我覺得如果是在 KINDY 他們可以 PREPARE 小孩子多一點，就比較好。我知道很多 KINDY 都會這樣子做；可是，也有很多都不會。 [Yu]

I think children should get used to sit for a while [by the time they start school]. It doesn't need to be long, but we need to allocate them some time to sit down and concentrate on writing or other tasks; for example, drawing. The purpose is for them to learn to concentrate on one thing rather than run around. I find that many new entrants at primary school don't know the boundaries nor what to do at school. When they first start, they run around in the classroom and do whatever they like to do. They don't know they need to sit down or listen to teacher's instruction. I think it would have been better if their kindy could

prepare them better. I know many kindies do a good job on this, but there are some which don't. [Yu]

This comment exemplifies the importance of preparing children for school. One of the issues that emerge from this finding is how well play-based early childhood centres prepare four- and five-year-olds for school. Do early childhood centres communicate their transition to school policy with parents, especially those from other cultures? Liu (2008) claims that transitioning children from early childhood centres to schools is a collaborative effort which involves not only the child, but also the parents, school and community. Each of these stakeholders needs to be ready to play a part for a smooth transition.

Henderson (2012) identified a problem that may hinder children's transition from their early childhood centres to school. She argues that the different perceptions of school teachers and early childhood teachers about early childhood education could create an invisible barrier between a school and its contributing early childhood centres.

According to Henderson (2012), it is common to hear comments like "school is a place of learning, and early childhood as a place of play" (p. 21) in Australia. However, after being shown a few children's learning stories at their early childhood centres, some school teachers began to see the early childhood centre as a place of learning rather than merely as a place of play. An implication of this is the possibility that EAC parents have a similar view, i.e. play is distinct from learning, if the parents are not sure what their children could learn from play. Yet this view could be changed if early childhood teachers work closely with parents and help them to understand the value of play.

A few EAC parents in this study felt that some early childhood centres do not "teach" much and this is due to the government policy in early childhood education.

私立的可能很多幼兒園,他有好像是,他有去教;但是公立的好像就是從來沒有安排;我想好像是政府不喜歡這種,覺得這種學習好像就是在小學的那種任務;去幼兒園的任務可能不是 [Fei]

It seems that many private early childhood centres teach [subject knowledge/formal learning], but not the public kindergarten. I think it might be

the government doesn't like this way of education. It seems that formal teaching should be only promoted in primary school, not in early childhood settings. [Fei]

This EAC parent feels that some early childhood centres teach more than others. She assumed it might because the government (i.e. the Ministry of Education) does not support formal teaching. Because she believes this is what the government promotes, she seems to have accepted it. As a result, this parent sent her child to a centre that she believes teaches more, even though she had to pay more fees. This finding is consistent with Wu's (2009) research that migrant mothers will often seek ways to resolve any differences between home and the early childhood centre themselves rather than ask the centre to change.

Chan (2011) also found that Asian immigrant parents, instead of sharing their disagreement or discontent with teachers, "prefer to work with their children in their own way at home" (p. 67).

6.6 Structured and grouped according to children's age curriculum is preferable

Three EAC parents in this study sent their children to Montessori early childhood centres. Their reasons for choosing Montessori over other early childhood settings include:

- The children learn to tidy up their own stuff.
- Staff will help with toilet training.
- The children are well looked after.
- The children learn lots of things, such as science, planets, math, literacy and self-help skills.
- The teacher encourages children to try different activities.
- The children are polite and well behaved.

Although all of the above learning outcomes are promoted in *Te Whāriki*, and so should be available at all early childhood centres in New Zealand as well as most of the play-based early childhood centres in New Zealand, it is interesting to note that these EAC parents chose the Montessori centres over other play-based early childhood centres. A

possible explanation for their choice could be that the teacher's presence in the above learning areas is more visible in a Montessori centre than in free-play centres. The comment below shows how an EAC parent would like to see the teacher involved in children's play.

他可以 FREE CHOICE，因為他比較多老師，然後他會看看小孩子對於那些東西比較 INTEREST，然後他就會去跟小孩子教他怎麼玩的東西，教他怎麼做。然後如果是他覺得他常常在 SANDPIT 玩的時候，他會介紹他去玩其他的東西這樣子。因為我去 VISIT 的第一天，我覺得那裡的小孩子很友善，他們也是很有禮貌.....然後我覺得這裡他們做東西,玩的時候不是 CHAOTIC，他們好像都知道每個小孩子要做什麼；然後他們在一個 GROUP 裡面，一個小孩子可以領一個 GROUP，‘哦, 怎麼玩, 現在?...現在我們要做什麼？ [Yu]

Children have free choice [of the activities]. As they [the Montessori centre] have more teachers, thus the teachers are able to teach children how to play with or do something based on individual child's interest. If a child is found to spend a lot of time playing at the sandpit, the teacher will introduce him some other activities. When visited the centre at the first time, I was impressed that the children there were all friendly and polite. In addition, it is not chaotic no matter when children do their work or are at play. Every child seems clearly knowing what to do. A child can be a leader of a group and discusses with others what they want to do next. [Yu]

One of the important features highlighted by this comment is that this EAC parent would like early childhood teachers to take a more active role in guiding children's play. For example, when a child has spent a long period of time in the sandpit, an EAC parent might expect the teacher to encourage the child to try some other activity. However, this finding does not support what *Te Whāriki* promotes; namely, that children's play should be valued as meaningful learning and spontaneous play should be recognised. Furthermore, *Te Whāriki* says that unnecessary intervention should be avoided (Ministry of Education, 1996) – a philosophy that does not seem to be appreciated by EAC parents. The key problem revealed here is how we define the term *spontaneous play*. Is it a form of spontaneous play when a child has been spending

hours in the sandpit? What is the adult's role in extending children's learning in free play if there is only little adult intervention?

One participant in the current study felt that her child played a lot at her early childhood centre whereas she would like to see more group opportunities planned for the older children in the centre.

我覺得 FREE PLAY，尤其是對於一個孩子從早上到下午這個時間的話，我覺得 FREE TIME 時間，玩的時間太長了。他們小孩子大部分喜歡的是 OUTSIDE 的那種 OUTDOOR 的活動啊，大部份的時間每天都在這裡，我覺得可以每天抽出那麼一個小時的時間，可以讓他們有一個集體的簡單的那種學習的時間，就是說感興趣的那種，比如分組啊，對那個簡單的就是智力遊戲智力開發的那種學中玩，玩中學的那種。比如說四歲到五歲之間有一個 GROUP，因為他要為上學年齡要做打算，有一個 GROUP。如果要做什麼，三歲到四歲之間也有一個 GROUP，他們是不同的。要到一個時間的時候，都在一起，要做一下活動適應這個年齡的四歲到五歲這樣的，為了上學做基礎的那種。 [Fei]

I feel the free play and free time is too much [at my child's centre], especially for a child who attends an early childhood centre for the whole day. Most children only like to play outside for the outdoor activities. I would like them to allocate a group activity learning time for children to learning something they are interested in. For example, to play with the games that would develop children's intellect, so they could learn through play. Four- to five-year-olds should be gathered in a group because they need to be prepared for school. Three-year-olds should have a group, too, as they are different to the older children. If there is a set group activity time, every child then would do something [productive] that are appropriate for their age. [Fei]

This EAC parent pointed out her reasons for having group activities in a play-based early childhood centre. First, when attending a play-based centre where free play is promoted, the parent was concerned that children were likely to spend most of their time outdoors. Thus she would like to see children encouraged to spend some time inside to learn something; for example, games that develop children's cognition. For

this parent, learning is mainly associated with cognitive development in the indoors and play is mostly associated with outdoor activities. Her comments also show that she views play as distinct from learning. However, this parent might change her perception if she could be reassured that children learn “growing control of body and physical coordination” as well as “widening social interaction, and development of a sense of others” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 21) through participating in outdoor play.

Another reason for the need to having group activities based on children’s age, according to the above participant, is to prepare children for school. As most children in New Zealand start school at the age of five, she believed that four-year-olds should have more opportunities to participate in activities that prepare them for school. She also suggested that the younger children should be grouped, too, and have activities that are developmentally appropriate for their age while the four-year-olds have their own group times. This idea is in agreement with what *Te Whāriki* promoted, i.e. that activities need to be “age appropriate and developmentally appropriate” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 11) in order to actively engage children in learning.

Another EAC parent, Huei, also raised her concerns about the mixed-age curriculum at her child’s kindergarten:

我送他去的那一所 [幼稚園] 他就是後來他們 CANCEL 他們自己的第一個 MAT TIME, 因為有三歲小孩子, 然後又配四歲.....兩歲半到快要面臨五歲的孩子這樣。但是透過老師講說, 把它拿掉的原因是因為兩歲半的孩子不穩定, 而且他們學習, 他們會很累, 所以後來他們把它拿掉一個, 只剩下一個 MAT TIME。那我就覺得說對於比較大的孩子就不夠 [Huei]

The centre [my child goes to] cancelled their first mat time, because they have children aged from 2½ years to 4½ years. One of the teachers told me that it is because 2½-year-olds are too young to sit on the mat for too long and they get tired easily. Thus they now have only one mat time each session. I feel it is not enough for the older children ... [Huei]

One of the questions that emerge from the above findings is whether early childhood centres should plan their programmes based on children’s age and stages. As mentioned earlier, while *Te Whāriki* supports age-appropriate and developmentally

appropriate practices (Ministry of Education, 1996), it also emphasises “a more general socio-cultural perspective on learning and teaching” (Hill, 2005, p. 23). Children in a mixed-age environment are able to foster *tuakana-teina* relationships, where older children take care of the younger ones (Ministry of Education, 1996; McCarthy & Durie, 1997), a practice supported by Rowland (2010), who states that children who participate in mixed-age settings learn better social skills. Williamson (2006) argues that teachers may face challenges when planning for mixed-age groups of children; for example, the younger children might be left out or the older ones might get bored. However, this problem could be resolved by planning ahead, allowing time for the curriculum to emerge, and by creating ways for children to learn through play.

Another issue is that early childhood settings may feel pressure from parents to implement a school-based curriculum. Hill (2005) argues that early childhood centres often justify their isolated *preschool* activities (i.e. interrupting the block play of toddlers in order to *count the blocks*) because of perceived, rather than actual, pressure from parents to include more structured activities. Yet the findings of the current study differ from Hill’s (2005) argument, and suggest that EAC parents do expect early childhood centres to prepare their children for school by having more structured group activities based on children’s ages.

6.7 Summary

This chapter has investigated some issues that concern EAC parents about the play-based early childhood curriculum practised in New Zealand early childhood education centres. One of the more significant findings to emerge from the current study is that some EAC parents expect the early childhood teacher to play a more active role in guiding children’s learning and play. The interviews also show that EAC parents would like to see more activities planned for older children in order to prepare them for school. The findings in this chapter suggest that EAC parents appreciate the written information of their children’s progress provided by early childhood centres. Parents gain a better idea of the value of a play-based curriculum if the teacher is able to articulate the child’s play experience effectively in a learning story or the child’s portfolio.

Chapter 7: Results and Discussion of EAC Parents' Expectations of Early Childhood Teachers

7.1 Introduction

In the Chinese history of educational philosophy, the role of the teacher has been thought of as a key factor in education. For Chinese, a teacher is like a parent and is perceived as authoritative figure (Chan, 2011). “*Once a teacher, for life a father-figure* 一日為師, 終身為父” is a Chinese saying that depicts how important a teacher is. Chinese look upon a teacher as 師 *shi*, which can be literally translated as a *master of one's discipline*. According to Confucianism, teaching is more than just transmitting knowledge, it is also about cultivating personal qualities within students and guiding their self-awareness (Shim, 2008; 尤俐妮, & 許健將, 2011).

However, a teacher's role may not be easily seen within a play-based early childhood setting where a child-centred approach is employed to encourage children to explore their own environment and to find their own answers (Ministry of Education, 1996). A parent might only see the children running around at the centre and wonder what the teachers actually do.

This chapter focuses on EAC parents' perceptions and expectations of early childhood teachers. It will examine some concerns raised during the interviews about early childhood teachers, and includes a discussion of EAC parents' perspectives of the role of the early childhood teacher.

7.2 The EC teacher should be more than a play facilitator

As discussed in the chapter 2, play is an important component in Western early childhood education and plays a key role in learning. According to Santer et al. (2007), the adult's roles in facilitating children's play may involve “participation, observation, consultation, selecting materials and resources, involving parents, planning and writing policies” (p. 59). Santer et al. (2007) also pointed out that adults who facilitate free play need to be aware that the relationships that the adults develop provide children

with opportunities to act autonomously, make choices, follow their interests and interact with peers. These roles accord with principles stated in *Te Whāriki*, which says that adults in early childhood settings “need to know how to support and extend children’s play without interrupting or dominating the activity and should avoid unnecessary intervention” (p. 83).

EAC parents, though, expect to see teachers actively involved in their children’s learning and this can cause tension in a play-based centre – parents who do not see the teacher’s active involvement in children’s play may question the teacher’s responsibility in guiding their children’s learning.

因為每一個小朋友就是玩不同的東西嘛, 那老師沒有辦法就是說一個集體的, .就是說給他們一個集體〔的概念〕, 給他們玩這個遊戲到底吸收到什麼? 那就是我只是, 我喜歡玩黏土, 我只是一直玩一直玩; 但是, 我可以從黏土上學到什麼? 但如果有老師, 說: ‘好, 我這個遊戲是玩黏土’, 那老師就會帶動: ‘玩黏土我們會做到什麼? “你可以做到什麼啊?’ 就是有一個東西帶領他, 就是比較有一個目標。那這邊〔紐西蘭〕就會覺得沒有目標, 就是我喜歡玩黏土, 就玩; 他也不知道玩這個是, 是什麼東西? 所以我是覺得說遊戲是可以, 但是遊戲中學習要有一個目標給他。但是我是覺得他們這邊就是太自由了, 那老師並沒有從中可以協助到什麼。 [Ai]

As every child plays with different activities, it is not possible for the teacher to give all children a collective idea of what they can learn when playing with something. In other words, if a child is interested in playing with play dough, this child might spend a long period of time only playing with it, but the child might not sure what he would learn from this play dough activity. However, if the teacher could have some conversation with the child and lead the activity, for example, by saying “OK, this game is called ‘play dough’; what can we make with these play dough?” when supporting the child’s play, it would be more purposeful and meaningful. Yet here in New Zealand, I don’t feel there is an aim or purpose for children’s play. For instance, if a child like playing with play dough, he would continuously play with it without knowing what or why he is playing with it. I think it is OK for children to play, but they need to be given an

aim or purpose. I feel it is too free [in early childhood settings] here [in New Zealand] and the teacher does not really help much [at children's play]. [Ai]

To this EAC parent, play could be a form of learning if there is a clear goal or purpose of what the child would get out from it. Ai also believes early childhood teachers have an important role to make children's play more purposeful and meaningful. However, Ai was disappointed that many teachers in her child's early childhood centre did not seem to be committed to "guiding" children's play. This finding supports Chan's (2011) finding that "Chinese immigrants, from varied countries, are used to the traditional Chinese ways of teaching and learning which is highly teacher-oriented, and consider teachers as the authority with the source of wisdom who are not to be challenged" (p. 67).

Because EAC immigrants are so used to their traditional *highly teacher-oriented* way of teaching and learning, then if play is claimed as a form of learning, they expect to see their children's early childhood teacher to be more involved in and guiding children's play. As discussed in the previous chapter, if the teacher is not seen to be involved in children's play, then an EAC parent thinks that they might as well keep their child at home to play. Furthermore, the child-centred pedagogy practised in Western education has not been widely accepted by Chinese parents (Chang, 2003; Cheng, 2001), possibly because it is so different from the teacher-oriented philosophy of teaching and learning in traditional Chinese education. As a result, EAC parents might not trust that young children will learn from free play. Particularly when there is no adult involvement in an activity, EAC parents may regard free play merely as a way to "pass time" or as a leisure activity (Wu, 2009). However, EAC parents may regard play more constructively and appreciate it as a form of learning if they see their children's play being supported, facilitated and extended by a more competent peer or adult (Yang, 2011). This finding corroborates the idea of Vygotsky, who suggests that social influence and instruction are essential for a child to achieve their potential level of learning (Santrock, 2009).

For many Chinese, teaching is regarded as a sacred profession and teachers have a big responsibility in educating students. Confucian values such as *Ren* (benevolence), *Yi* (righteousness), *Li* (Courteousness), *Xiao* (filial piety), and *Zhi* (wisdom) are frequently

connected with children's education and teachers are expected to foster these traditional Confucian values in children (尤俐妮, & 許健將, 2011; Yim, Lee & Ebbeck, 2009). When immigrant EAC parents are not able to observe their children's early childhood teachers teaching these Confucian values or taking an active role in interacting with children, these parents are likely to question the role of the early childhood teacher in New Zealand.

One question often asked by EAC immigrant parents is whether the early childhood teacher should be present at children's play. It is understandable that EAC parents would like to know what exactly early childhood teachers do if they are rarely seen interacting with children at their play, especially those EAC parents who believe a teacher should actively "teach" children. According to *Te Whāriki*, "adults should plan activities, resources, and events which build upon and extend children's interests...[and] respond to children's questions, assist them to articulate and extend ideas, take advantage of opportunities for exploration, problem solving, remembering, predicting, and making comparisons, and be enthusiastic about finding answers together" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 83). Parents would have been a better understanding of what and how their children are learning if the above practices are made visible; for example, through learning stories, newsletters or centre blogs.

Besides actively guiding children's learning, some EAC parents in the current study also expect their children's early childhood teacher to be patient and loving.

覺得最重要的扮演的角色就是要耐性囉，然後很有，真的，最主要要耐性啦！
可以去看不同樣的小孩子，就知道要怎樣的去陪同他，教導他，引導他囉
[Ching]

I think the most important role of a teacher is being patient. Yes, patience is very important. Despite the disposition of children, a teacher needs to know how to take care, teach and guide them! [Ching]

老師我覺得應該是在孩子的方面應該盡到，就是愛，有那種愛心；一定要有那個愛心。而且孩子無論對錯，你要錯的你可以跟他說。但是，有些老師我覺得發現忽略孩子的感受。應該教孩子怎樣知道在幼兒園裡有怎麼樣的社交，然後有禮貌。要有禮貌，從老師本身就要做到這一點。但是我發現

有很多老師只是我為了上班而來上班，不是說發自內心的熱情來愛這些孩子那種的。 [Fei]

In terms of the role of teacher, I think they need to love children and have a passion [for working with children]. In addition, if a child has done something wrong, the teacher needs to correct him. However, I felt some teachers ignore children's feeling. A teacher needs to show children how to socialise with others and have manners, and to be a role model for children. Yet, I found many teachers only work with children for making a living, not because they truly love children. [Fei]

Although these qualities of being patient, loving and compassionate are not articulated in *Te Whāriki* or the in the definition of “Good character and fit to be a teacher” on the New Zealand Teachers Council’s website, EAC parents regard these as important qualities for their children’s early childhood teachers. When Fei was asked how she would know whether a teacher works for making a living or because the teacher truly loves children, she told the researcher, “I can feel it and I can tell!” These comments given above enhance our understanding of what EAC parents expect from early childhood teachers. A good teacher, say some of the EAC parents in the current study, should not only teach children knowledge, but also needs to be passionate about their job. Furthermore, teachers need to display respect for and understanding of the cultural values and views of EAC parents (Guo, 2006; Kieff & Casbergue, 2000; Ministry of Education, 1996).

7.3 Early childhood teachers should have good subject knowledge

Recently, researchers have shown an increased interest in the importance of subject knowledge of early childhood teachers (Happo & Määttä, 2011; Lee, 2010; Melendez Rojas, 2008). *Te Whāriki* suggests that children’s early childhood education experience should be linked with the learning areas of language and languages, mathematics, science, technology, social sciences, arts and health and physical well-being that are outlined in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007). In addition, children moving from the early childhood setting to school need to show

confidence and competency in the above essential learning areas (Ministry of Education, 1996).

A question that needs to be asked, then, is whether teacher education providers adequately prepare early childhood teachers so that they can enhance children's learning in the above subject areas. An EAC parent in the current study raised her concern about teachers' subject knowledge.

我覺得這邊老師本身就 KNOWLEDGE 不足吧！像現在我孩子的幼稚園，一下雨，就放卡通給小朋友看；我今天過去，老師又用電腦放卡通給小朋友看。為什麼他不要放一些動物給小朋友看？還是一些貓啊狗啊給小朋友看？還是一些，比如說，昆蟲啊，比如說蝴蝶的演變啊給小孩子看？為什麼一定要放卡通？難道在家裡還看不夠嗎？所謂要扮演什麼角色，我覺得應該要把他們所知道的東西教給小朋友，他們應該要整理一套出來他們要教小朋友什麼？你甚至可以一個禮拜有一個課表，甚至於一個月一個課表。 [Tai]

I feel that many early childhood teachers here don't seem to have enough [subject] knowledge. For example, teachers at my child's early childhood centre often play cartoons for children to watch in rainy days. I saw children were watching a cartoon video on the computer when I dropped off my child today. Why don't they play some educational videos such as animals or insects for children? For instance, they could have played a video of how a caterpillar becomes a butterfly. Why do they have to play cartoons? Children have already watched enough cartoons at home, isn't that enough?

In terms of teacher's role, I think they need to teach children all they know. They need to have a plan of what they would like to teach children; for example, having a weekly and monthly planner. [Tai]

It is apparent from the above comments that this EAC parent does not trust that her child's teachers have enough subject knowledge in, for example, science. She argued that her child watches enough cartoons at home, and so while her child is at the early childhood education centre, she expects the teachers to "teach" children some knowledge or, at least, to have the children watching educational videos rather than cartoons. This parent believes one of a teacher's roles is to plan curriculum and to

teach children what they know. However, she did not feel this planning was visible in her child's early childhood centre. Furthermore, it does not seem that her child's early childhood centre was providing satisfactory evidence of assessment information for this EAC parent.

According to the *Registered Teacher Criteria* described by New Zealand Teachers Council, teachers need to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding of relevant content (New Zealand Teachers Council, 2009). Furthermore, a research report conducted by Ministry of Education states that strong subject knowledge, especially in mathematics and science, is necessary for teachers who teach across all subjects in primary settings. The report does concede, though, that student teachers entering initial teacher education do not necessarily have enough subject knowledge to support effective teaching (Rivers, 2006) – a concession that might validate the above EAC parent's suspicions. This is a concern because the report also states that early childhood teachers' subject knowledge is important in supporting and extending children in all the essential learning areas prescribed in *Te Whāriki* and the New Zealand Curriculum Framework (Ministry of Education, 1996; Ministry of Education, 2007).

7.4 EAC immigrant parents expect teachers to help their children's English development

One of the reasons why some EAC parents immigrate to New Zealand is for their children to have better education opportunities and so that their children can master the English language (Wu, 2009; Yang, 2011). An EAC parent in the current study explained how she prepared her two children for learning English.

因為我們在家裡就是沒有說英文，所以我就安排我的孩子(老大)在一歲半的時候就開始去那個 DAY CARE。然後一個禮拜去兩天，然後一直到他三歲的時候就去讀幼稚園，就是 FULL TIME，一天六小時，就五天嘛。

我的女兒(老二)現在一歲多，我是先讓她到 FAMILY DAY CARE 去，就可以彌補那個英文上面的不足。” [Ping]

Because we don't speak English at home, thus I purposefully sent my son to a day care centre when he was 1½ years old. He started with two days a week at his centre till he was three years old. He then went to his preschool full time — six hours per day, five days a week.

My daughter is now 1½ year old. She goes to a family day care part time (the caregiver is a local Kiwi lady), in order to make up her English language learning. [Ping]

Ping does not speak English at home with her children because she would like her children to maintain their first language. However, so that her children do not fall behind when they start school, she expects her children to pick up English at their early childhood settings. This result accords with Yang's (2011) finding that Chinese immigrant parents generally teach their children Chinese at home and expect their children to be competent in both home and mainstream languages in the host country.

In order to communicate and work with Chinese immigrant families more effectively, some early childhood centres in New Zealand have started to employ teachers who speak both English and Chinese languages. Having bilingual teaching staff clearly is an advantage for early childhood centres because these teachers not only work with mainstream children but can also help with children and parents who know little English. However, an EAC parent in the current study has drawn attention to the paradox in having too many Chinese teachers at her child's early childhood centre.

以前那邊沒有那麼多華人老師, 現在越來越多了, 小孩子在幼稚園跟本不需要說英文, 這個是我最擔心的地方[Tai]

There were not so many Chinese teachers at this early childhood centre before. However, there are more now. My child does not have to speak English at the centre. I am really worried about it. [Tai]

This EAC parent is concerned that her child might not need to learn to speak English at the centre if he can communicate with his Chinese teachers in his first language. The problem here is not the number of Chinese teachers at a centre, but how these teachers support EAC children to learn the English language. Although *Te Whāriki* states that “adults should respect and encourage children's home language” (Ministry of

Education, 1996, p. 73), early childhood centres need to be aware of EAC parents' aspiration for their children to learn English at the centre. Teachers who speak a Chinese language can talk to new EAC children in their home language when settling them into the centre; however, once these children are settled and used to the centre routines, they should be encouraged to use English at play as well as during other daily routines.

7.5 Communication between EC Centre and EAC parents

According to *Te Whāriki*, “adults should take time to listen seriously to the views parents and caregivers have of their children’s learning and development and share decision making with them” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 55). An EAC parent in the current study commented on the regular one-on-one parent–teacher interviews that her child’s centre provides.

我女兒的幼兒園，她才上了三個星期，然後，它有個比較奇怪的地方就是父母不能進去它的教室裡面，知道它做些什麼。我們父母只可以送她去學校跟接她回來的時間才見到她。不過，這個月 25 號就有個叫 SETTLING APPOINTMENT MEETING 跟 PARENT 的，所以就才大概有一個瞭解，她的進度是怎樣的；她也去了那麼久，她的進展是怎麼樣的 [Ching]

My daughter has been attending her early childhood centre for three weeks. One thing I find strange is that parents cannot go into the classroom to observe what children are doing. I only get to see my daughter at the centre when I drop off and pick her up. However, I had a “Settling appointment” meeting with the teacher on 25th of last month. I had gained more ideas of my daughter’s progress at the centre after the meeting. [Ching]

The early childhood centre that Ching’s daughter attends does not have an open-door policy for parents, although most centres in New Zealand do. A possible explanation for the centre’s decision not to allow parents into the classroom is that the centre’s managers do not want the teachers and children distracted during their daily routine. However, the centre holds one-on-one meetings regularly with individual parents to report and discuss the child’s learning and progress. As a result, parents are able to

have more in-depth communication with the staff and to address their concerns. This form of communication may suit many EAC parents who are not confident in their English or are too shy to approach the staff. One EAC parent in the current study told the researcher that she did not often communicate with her child's teachers due to her language barrier.

偶爾啦，偶爾去繞一繞；因為我的英文也不是那麼好，有一些交流的話，會找一些華人的老師去交流一下啊。但是我有問一下，但是老師具體都是說很好。有的時候我問問，有的也簡單的交流一下；嗯，很好，都是這麼說。所以也沒有必要去問他 [Fei]

I only talk to the teachers sometimes when I drop or pick up my daughter from the centre. Because my English is not very good, if I have to talk to a teacher, I would normally speak with Chinese ones. However, every time when I asked them how my child was doing, they always told me she was doing fine. Thus, I don't feel a need to ask them about my child's progress. [Fei]

Fei's comments illustrate that it is not always easy for early childhood teachers to have decent and in-depth communication with every parent when they drop off or collect their children each day. Although Fei's early childhood centre does not provide one-on-one meetings with parents like those conducted at Ching's centre, the centre does survey parents by encouraging them to fill out an evaluation and feedback questionnaire once a year. The feedback form gives parents a channel through which they can express their ideas about and expectations of the centre, and an opportunity for the centre to improve their programme and communication by responding to the parents' feedback. This way of communication could be welcomed by EAC parents because they are able to take their time to write up their opinions. Communication would be further improved if the centre were to make a Chinese version of the questionnaire available to the EAC parents because a form in their own language would encourage them to complete the questionnaire.

7.6 Summary

This chapter has given an account of and the reasons for the roles of the teacher in a play-based early childhood curriculum from the perspective of eight EAC parents. The findings in this chapter suggest that early childhood teachers should extend, facilitate and support children's play, and also make the teacher's role more visible to parents. One of the more significant findings to emerge from this chapter is that early childhood teachers need to communicate with EAC parents more effectively in order for parents to have a better idea of what their children have learned through participating in the play activities at the centre. Furthermore, the evidence from this study suggests that early childhood teachers should have good subject knowledge so that they can more successfully extend and teach children about learning areas such as science and mathematics. As a result, teacher education providers need to be accountable in ensuring early childhood teacher graduates are competent in teaching all curriculum areas within the context of the principles and strands of *Te Whāriki* (Ministry of Education, 1996).

Chapter 8: Implications and Conclusion

8.1 Introduction

This study set out to determine Ethnic Asian-Chinese (EAC) immigrant parents' perspectives on the value and purpose of a play-based early childhood curriculum. Eight participants – Ai, Ping, Ching, Tai, Mei, Fei, Huei and Yu (aliases) – voluntarily participated in this study. The data was gathered through face-to-face individual interviews.

Chapter 8 starts with a summary of the key findings of the study. This is followed by a consideration of pedagogical implications for early childhood teachers, centres and teacher education providers that have arisen out of the study, and suggestions of areas for further research. The limitations of the study are then identified and evaluated. The chapter concludes with a brief summary of the preceding sections.

8.2 Summary of key findings

The researcher sought to investigate EAC immigrant parents' perspectives on their children's learning in a play-based early childhood curriculum, particularly their ideas of the relationship between play and learning in comparison to the traditional Western perspective. The key findings of EAC parents' perceptions of a play-based curriculum that emerged in this study can be grouped into three themes: EAC parents' perceptions of play and learning in early childhood education; EAC parents' concerns about the early childhood curriculum in New Zealand; and EAC parents' expectations of early childhood teachers.

8.2.1 EAC parents' perceptions of play and learning in early childhood education

One of the more significant findings to emerge from this study is that EAC parents are more likely to value play when they are reassured that the play activities have cognitive and educational benefits. From a Western perspective, play is a form of learning for children. Yet the cultural background of EAC immigrants, which heavily emphasises teacher-oriented ways of teaching learning, means that many EAC parents are

concerned that play might distract their children from learning. However, if the EAC parents are confident that play does assist their child's learning, this worry might then be eliminated.

A second finding of the study is that EAC parents do not necessarily regard academic knowledge as the main priority in early childhood education. Most of the EAC parents in this research stressed the importance of moral education and expect their children to be polite and follow the norms and rules of society. EAC parents with younger children also appreciated the support from their children's early childhood centre with, for instance, helping children to be toilet trained.

The study has found that EAC parents want learning and play activities that they regard as appropriate for the developmental stage and age of their children. An EAC parent in the study believes that children under two years of age need to have many opportunities to play freely in order to learn and make sense of the world; however, the same parent believes that when children get older, they need to be encouraged to develop their intelligence. In other words, some EAC parents prefer play with an educational purpose for older preschool children.

The study has found that some EAC parents separate play from learning. It has also revealed that EAC parents believe that learning should take place at the early childhood centre or school while play happens at home. For EAC parents, play is seen as recreational and for leisure, whereas learning is a more serious matter and may not be conceptualised as a fun activity.

8.2.2 EAC parents' concerns about early childhood curriculum in New Zealand

Chapter 6 revealed that an EAC parent considers a hygienic and healthy environment to be important when choosing an early childhood centre for their child. The chapter also investigated some issues that concern EAC parents about the play-based early childhood curriculum.

The study found that EAC parents expect early childhood centres to provide more and longer mat times for children. Some parents in the current study were concerned that their children's early childhood centres had reduced the frequency of mat time. Play is

not seen by these EAC parents as part of the early childhood curriculum, whereas mat time and group time are. It was shown that some EAC parents believe their children would learn more through teacher-led activities than through a child-centric play curriculum. A significant finding that emerged from the study is that one reason EAC parents question the value of free play is they are not sure what their child might learn from play activities. The findings suggest that early childhood centres need to develop communication strategies in order to share a child's learning at the centre with their parents.

Besides providing parents with information about their children, the findings in the study also suggest some strategies to develop partnership between teachers at early childhood centres and EAC parents. Due to the language barrier, some EAC parents do not feel comfortable chatting casually with the teacher. It is not easy to have an in-depth conversation within the short period of time when the parent drops off or picks up their child at the centre. In addition, the teacher might be busy working with other children and is unable to spare sufficient time to talk to each parent. The evidence from this study suggests that parent-teacher conferences and questionnaires could be helpful ways to give more feedback to and get feedback from EAC parents.

Another concern expressed by many of the EAC parents in the study is whether the early childhood centres are adequately preparing their children for school. EAC parents expect early childhood centres to assist EAC children to learn English – a proficiency they see as an essential part of their child being ready for school. The study has found that generally EAC parents teach and maintain their first language at home and expect children to learn good English at their early childhood centres. Most of the EAC parents in the study also expected their children to be exposed to some essential learning areas, such as numeracy, literacy and science, before starting school.

8.2.3 EAC parents' expectation of early childhood teachers

Chapter 7 described how EAC parents in the current study prefer their children's teachers to take a more active role in guiding children's play and learning. From an EAC parent does not see the teacher actively involved in children's play in a play-based setting, the parent begins to question the teacher's role and responsibility. For many EAC parents, play could be perceived as more constructive or a form of learning

if they see the play being supported, facilitated and extended by a more competent peer or adult. The results of the study indicate that EAC parents would understand how their children learn if the teacher's role and their children's achievements were made more visible. For example, parents can be informed about how their children learn through play and how their play has been extended and facilitated by the teacher through reading children's learning stories, newsletters and centre blogs.

As well as guiding children's play and learning, EAC parents in the study expect their children's early childhood teacher to be patient and loving. Traditionally, teachers are highly regarded in Chinese culture. As a result, it is inevitable that EAC parents hold high expectations of their children's teachers. A good teacher, for some EAC parents in the current study, should not only teach children knowledge and extend their learning, but also needs to be passionate about their job. Taken together, these results suggest that early childhood teachers need to display respect for and have an understanding of the cultural values and views of EAC parents.

Another expectation from EAC parents in the study is that early childhood teachers should have appropriate subject knowledge in, for example, mathematics and science in order to extend and support children's learning in these essential learning areas. The observations made by some parents to the researcher suggest that maybe that competence is not there in all early childhood teachers, and teacher education providers need to ensure that all early childhood teacher graduates are competent in teaching all essential curriculum areas.

One of the reasons why some EAC parents immigrate to New Zealand is so that their children can have a better education and the opportunity to master the English language. The study showed that some EAC parents maintain their first language at home and expect their children to learning English at their early childhood centre. However, one EAC parent in the study raised her concern that her child might not need to speak English at his centre because there were several Chinese staff available for the child to communicate with. The findings suggest that early childhood centres need to be aware of EAC parents' aspiration for their children to learn English at the centre. Teachers who speak a child's home language can use it to assist a new entrant to settle in, but once the child is used to the centre routines, they should be encouraged to use English when playing and during other daily routines.

8.3 Pedagogical implications

The findings of this study have a number of important implications for future practice. The transcripts from the interviews indicate that EAC parents may view play as different from learning. Nevertheless, these parents agree that children should have opportunities to play and expect their children to learn through play rather than just play freely. The findings show that EAC parents have a problem with a perceived lacking of planning at early childhood centres rather than questioning the play itself. The present study confirms previous findings and contributes additional evidence that suggests play-based early childhood centres need to work closely with EAC parents and to inform them about their children's learning through play activities. The findings suggest that sharing information about how their children are participating in the curriculum and assessments of their learning is an effective way for a centre to work with EAC parents. This finding, of course, also has implications for how centres communicate with EAC parents, whether it is through informal conversation, sharing of children's learning stories and portfolios, or by holding regular parent-teacher conferences.

When planning and assessing children's learning, it is vital for early childhood teachers to integrate their own belief of play into their documentation in order to assist parents' understanding of what their children have learned through play. If teachers believe in the philosophy of learning through play, they need to ask themselves and reflect on the following questions during the process of their planning and assessment:

- What is the intention and purpose of free play?
- What is the good practice in free play?
- How do I maintain the balance between the freedom of play and the structured play activities in my planning?
- What do children actually learn through the activities I plan?
- How will I assess this learning and transfer it into documentation for parents?

There is, therefore, a definite need for early childhood teachers to be aware that perspectives on learning are culturally embedded and play is not the only way for children to learn. Early childhood teachers in New Zealand need to be open-minded

and try to understand diverse perspectives on learning and play (Ministry of Education, 1996; New Zealand Teachers Council, 2009). They also need to remind themselves that the role of teachers is not to educate parents but to incorporate parents' views into their centre's programme in order to enhance children's learning. As a result, migrant children will develop "confidence that their family background is viewed positively within the early childhood education setting" (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 66).

In general, it seems that EAC parents expect early childhood teachers to be more actively involved in their children's learning and play. The role of the teacher in the play-based curriculum in New Zealand is very different from EAC parents' ideas of what a teacher should do. One implication of this is that early childhood teachers could make their role in extending children's play and exploration more visible to parents by involving them in the planning and assessment process (Ministry of Education, 1996; Ministry of Education, 2004). Another implication is that written documentation should be made available for EAC parents to review and comment on.

The evidence from this study suggests EAC parents expect early childhood teachers to have good subject knowledge so that they can teach children effectively in areas such as science and mathematics. The parents' expectation is consistent with the Ministry of Education's statement that teachers' subject knowledge is important in supporting and extending children in the essential learning areas prescribed in *Te Whāriki* and New Zealand Curriculum Framework (Education Review Office, 2008; Ministry of Education, 1996; Ministry of Education, 2007). This finding has implications for teacher education providers, who must ensure early childhood teacher graduates are competent in teaching all essential curriculum areas. In addition, early childhood centres need to assess teachers' subject knowledge and offer professional opportunities accordingly in order to enhance early childhood teachers' teaching and practice.

Professional development opportunities should also be made available to early childhood teachers so that they can learn and develop strategies for working in partnership with EAC parents. It is recommended that workshops on Chinese perspectives on learning as well as intercultural communication be held in order to assist teachers to develop a better understanding of EAC parents' perspectives and their aspirations for their children's learning.

This study has added substantially to our understanding of how EAC parents view play and learning in early childhood education and their aspiration for their children's education. Cultural differences mean that the views of EAC parents can sometimes be very different from those of New Zealanders. However, early childhood centres need to affirm and celebrate cultural differences, as promoted by *Te Whāriki*, and ensure their programme and resources are sensitive and responsive to EAC culture and heritage (Ministry of Education, 1996).

8.4 Implications for further research

The current findings add to a growing body of literature on EAC parents' perspectives on play and learning in early childhood education. Concerns expressed by EAC parents about a play-based early childhood curriculum have been identified and discussed, and their expectations of the role of the teacher in supporting children's learning have been clarified and examined.

However, the extent to which factors such as country of origin, gender, age or own childhood experience exert an influence on EAC parents' perceptions of play and learning are issues that have not been fully addressed in the current study. Further research that would contribute to a fuller understanding of EAC parents' ideas of early childhood education is called for, and several possibilities are presented below.

A research project that incorporated a different methodological approach and a larger sample size would be of value. The present study was limited to a very small number of participants; hence it is not possible to generalise the study's findings to the general EAC population.

This study has identified a number of factors that EAC parents perceive as important influences on their children's learning in a play-based curriculum. Future research could examine the relationships between the EAC parents' beliefs and the identified factors.

Additional research is also needed to examine the perspectives of others involved in early childhood education, such as those of early childhood teachers and teacher educators. This would produce a more comprehensive understanding of the values and

purposes of a play-based curriculum in early childhood education, and add strength to the current study.

8.5 Limitations

Finally, a number of important limitations of the study need to be considered. Firstly, the most important limitation lies in the fact only eight participants were interviewed. The study's small sample size means that the findings from the study cannot be generalised to make a clear statement about all EAC parents' ideas on play and learning in early childhood education. The number of participants was also too small to sufficiently address the research questions. It is suggested that a larger sample, including a greater number of culturally different participants, should be further considered. A further limitation is the challenge of carefully interpreting the participants' responses. This qualitative study depends on the researcher's individual judgement and interpretation in the analysis of interview data. Consequently, it can allow the researcher's subjective opinions to bias the information presented or the conclusion drawn.

8.6 Summary

The primary purpose of the present study was to examine EAC parents' values and beliefs about a play-based curriculum in early childhood education. The study also aimed to investigate EAC parents' ideas of play and learning in the early childhood years as well as their ideas of the role of the early childhood teacher.

The most significant finding from the study was that although EAC parents may view learning as distinct from play, they agree that children should have an opportunity to play and expect their children to learn through play. A second finding is that EAC parents expect early childhood teachers to take a more active role in children's play and learning. Furthermore, early childhood teachers should have adequate subject knowledge so that they are able to enhance children's learning in essential curriculum areas.

Results from this investigation of EAC parents' perceptions of learning and play in early childhood centres in New Zealand have pedagogical implications for early childhood centres and teacher education providers. It was suggested that early childhood centres should involve EAC parents in the planning and assessment process. When teachers share children's learning stories and portfolios, EAC parents can have a better understanding of their child's learning through play. Sharing also gives parents a better understanding of the teacher's role in extending children's learning in a play-based curriculum. The second implication of the study is that teacher education providers need to ensure early childhood teacher graduates are competent to teach in all subject areas. The early childhood centres also need to provide professional development for teachers who need support in enhancing children's learning in essential learning subject areas. Finally, it is recommended that workshops are made available to assist teachers to develop a better understanding of EAC parents' perspective of learning and to teach them a range of strategies to improve intercultural communication.

The small sample of the current study means it is limited to describing only the perspectives of the participants interviewed, and it would be unwise to use their comments to make generalised statements about the views of all EAC parents. Further research should look at EAC parents' views in a larger study with more participants. It is also recommended that factors identified as important in affecting EAC children's learning in a play-based curriculum need to be further researched. Additional research that combines different perspectives from teachers and teacher educators is also necessary.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview questions

Semi-structured Interview Questions (訪談問題)

Ethnic Asian-Chinese parental perspectives of the value and purpose of a play-based early childhood curriculum (亞洲華人家長對於以遊戲為主的幼兒教育的看法)

Please introduce yourself and your family: Name, country of origin, length of immigration.
(請你簡單的介紹您自己以及您的家庭: 姓名, 原居地, 移民至紐西蘭多長時間)

What is your idea/definition of 'play' and 'learning' in early childhood education?
(你對於遊戲 (PLAY) 及學習 (LEARNING) 在幼兒教育的定義及看法是什麼?)

What sort of environment (including home and educational settings) do you think children should have in their early years? What is the role of teachers and parents?
(您認為對於零至五歲的兒童來說, 他們需要什麼樣的成長環境 [包括家裡及幼兒園]? 您認為老師及家長對於幼兒的學習成長應扮演什麼角色?)

What is your impression of early childhood centres/settings in New Zealand?
(你對於紐西蘭的幼兒園 / 幼兒教育場所的印象是什麼?)

What do you think about the emphasis on play in early childhood education in New Zealand?
(您對於在紐西蘭的幼兒教育特別強調遊戲 (PLAY) 的重要性有什麼看法?)

How have your views on play and education changed over time?
(和您剛到紐西蘭的時候相比, 您對於 遊戲 [PLAY] 及教育學習 [EDUCATION] 的看法有什麼改變嗎?)

If your views on play and education for preschoolers have changed, what do you think has caused this change?
(若您現在的看法不同於您稍早的看法, 您認為是什麼原因讓您改變您的觀點及看法呢?)

What is your experience of involving in your child's early childhood centre/setting? How would you like to influence the EC centre environment?
(談談您本身參與您的孩子的幼兒園活動的經驗? 身為一個家長, 您會如何影響您的孩子幼兒園環境?)

Appendix B: Consent Form

Consent Form For use when interviews are involved.



Project title:

Ethnic Asian-Chinese parental perspectives of the value and purpose of a play-based early childhood curriculum

Project Supervisor: Dr Andrew Gibbons

Researcher: Ming-Hua (Rita) Huang

- I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 26/06/2012
- I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that it will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- I understand that I may withdraw myself or any information that I have provided for this project at any time prior to completion of data collection, without being disadvantaged in any way.
- If I withdraw, I understand that all relevant information including tapes and transcripts, or parts thereof, will be destroyed.
- I agree to take part in this research.
- I agree that the findings in this research can be used in subsequent reports.
- I wish to receive an electronic copy of the report from the research (please tick one):
 - Yes → my email address: _____
 - No

Participant's signature:

.....

Participant's name:

.....

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....
.....
.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 17 August 2012
AUTEK Reference number 12/182

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form



研究訪問同意書

研究主題:

亞洲華人家長對於以遊戲為主的幼兒教育觀點研究

研究指導老師: Dr Andrew Gibbons

研究者: 黃明華 (Ming-Hua (Rita) Huang)

- 我已經讀了並瞭解研究者所提供的有關此研究的資訊 (日期為 04/04/2012).
- 我已被告知及提供機會詢問問題. 我對於此項研究的所有問題已得到解答.
- 我瞭解當我在被訪問時, 我的談話會被錄音及記錄. 訪問結束後, 我的所有談話會被以文字記錄下來.
- 我瞭解在整個研究資料搜集完成之前, 我可以在任何時間要求停止參與此項研究或是要求我所提供的資訊不被包含在此項研究之內. 而這些要求也不會使我處於任何不利的地位.
- 如果我決定不參與這個研究, 我瞭解所有有關我的資訊, 包括錄音及訪談記錄將會被銷毀.
- 我同意參與這項研究.
- 我想要收到一份研究報告: (請勾選一項):
 - 是 → 我的電子郵件帳號: _____
 - 不需要

受訪者簽名:

.....

...
受訪者姓名:

.....

...
受訪者聯繫資訊:

.....
.....
.....

日期:

Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee 於 17 August 2012 核准本研究提案.

AUTEC 核准編號 (Reference number) 12/182

請注意: 受訪者必須保留一份本 "研究訪問同意書"

Appendix C: Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet



Date Information Sheet Produced: 19th September 2012

Project Title

Ethnic Asian-Chinese parental perspectives of the value and purpose of a play-based early childhood curriculum

An Invitation

Dear parents,

My name is Rita Huang. I am a student on the Masters of Education programme with AUT University under the supervision of Dr. Andrew Gibbons. I am currently undertaking a research project investigating Ethnic Asian-Chinese parental perspective of the value and purpose of a play-based early childhood curriculum. Please be assured that your participation in this research is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time prior to the completion of data collection.

What is the purpose of this research?

'Learning through play' is an important component of New Zealand early childhood education, and plays a key role in the play-based curriculum. However international research has shown that different cultures and ethnicities have different views on the educational value of play. New Zealand has welcomed many migrants from Asia-Pacific region in the past 30 years. Therefore it is important to understand the views of these migrants regarding the learning of their young children. The objective of this research is to investigate Ethnic Asian-Chinese parental perspectives on the value and purpose of a play-based early childhood curriculum. The research will also explore the implications for early childhood teachers in order to support the building of effective partnerships with immigrant families.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

Fliers have been distributed around my workplace and community to recruit the potential participants. In addition, messages have been delivered via Facebook. You are one of the respondents who has shown interest in participating in this research. The potential participants in this study may include immigrant parents who are originally from China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and other south Asian countries who refer to themselves as Ethnic Asian-Chinese (including Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei), and should have at least one child either currently attending or having attended an early childhood setting in New Zealand in the past five years. People who respond to the flier will be welcome to invite other respondents.

What will happen in this research?

Each individual interview will take approximately 30-40 minutes and you can choose whether you would like to be interviewed in English or Mandarin. The interview will involve questions about your views on learning and play in New Zealand early childhood education. The interview will be audio taped and then transcribed and translated into English and a summary will be sent back to you. Confidential information will only be available to the researcher of this project. You will still be able to withdraw your information up until the data collection has been completed. Neither you nor your child nor your early childhood centre will be identified in the thesis or associated reports in the dissemination of the research. Please indicate on your Consent Form

if you would like to have a copy of the final research report. An electronic copy of the final report will be emailed to you if you are interested.

What are the discomforts and risks?

As you will be interviewed in the language (either Mandarin or English) you are more comfortable with, it is unlikely for you to experience any discomforts or risk during the interview process.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

In the unlikely event that you experience any emotional or physical, psychological discomfort during the interview process, you are encouraged to ask the researcher to stop the interview process at any time and to resume it when you are ready. It is appropriate to reschedule another time for the interview if you prefer. Please be reminded that you can withdraw from this research at any time if you experience any discomforts or risks. Support or compensation (e.g. counselling) may be provided if relevant and necessary.

What are the benefits?

The findings of this research will be presented and published in an academic context (e.g. Educational Journals, Conferences) which will provide early childhood teachers and centres a better understanding of the Chinese community and parents' expectations in order to work more effectively with Ethnic Asian-Chinese families. In addition, as part of the requirement for completing a Master's degree, this research will assist the researcher in obtaining this qualification.

What compensation is available for injury or negligence?

In the unlikely event of a physical injury as a result of your participation in this study, rehabilitation and compensation for injury by accident may be available from the Accident Compensation Corporation, providing the incident details satisfy the requirements of the law and the Corporation's regulations.

How will my privacy be protected?

You will not be identified in the final report as your full names or your child/ren's early childhood centres will not be mentioned. Any personal information that may reveal your identity will be excluded from the final report.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

There should be no costs for you to participate in this research except the time (30 – 40 minutes) you spend for the interview.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

Please take your time to consider if you would like to participate in this research. It would be appreciated if you could contact the researcher **within 2 weeks** after receiving this information sheet if you would like to be interviewed.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

By returning your signed Consent Form before the interview, you will be agreeing to participate in this study. The arrangements for the interview will then be finalised with you.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

Please indicate on the Consent form if you would like to receive an electronic copy of the summary of the findings from this research.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Dr Andrew Gibbons, andrew.gibbons@aut.ac.nz, (09) 921 9999 ext 7929. Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary, AUTECH, Dr Rosemary Godbold, rosemary.godbold@aut.ac.nz, (09) 921 9999 ext 6902.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Researcher Contact Details:

Ming-Hua (Rita) Huang, gomingshua@gmail.com, (09) 968 8765 ext 7124.

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Dr Andrew Gibbons, andrew.gibbons@aut.ac.nz , (09) 921 9999 ext 7929

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 17 August 2012, AUTEK Reference number 12/182

研究計劃說明書



日期: 19th September 2012

研究名稱

亞洲華人家長對以遊戲為主之幼兒教育觀點研究

研究邀請

親愛的家長,

我的名字叫黃明華 (Rita Huang), 目前是 AUT 大學的教育碩士研究生, 我的指導老師是 Dr. Andrew Gibbons。我目前正在研究亞洲華人移民家長對於以遊戲為主之幼兒教育的觀點及看法。您可以自由決定是否參與這項研究, 在整個訪談資料收集完成之前, 您可以隨時要求撤回您所提供的任何訪談資訊。

研究動機及宗旨

“從遊戲中學習”在西方的幼兒教育一直極受重視, 並且在紐西蘭的幼兒教育扮演著重要的角色。然而最近許多教育研究發現不同文化及種族對於‘遊戲’ (PLAY) 於教育的價值也有不同的看法。在最近三十年來, 紐西蘭很歡迎亞太地區的移民; 因此這些移民家長對於他們孩童學習的觀點及看法極有需要被主流社會所瞭解。本研究計劃的目的便是針對紐西蘭的亞洲華人移民家長進行研究, 以探討其對於以遊戲為主的幼兒教育的看法及認知, 及增進教師們對於亞洲華人移民家長的瞭解及關係建立與合作。

我是如何被發現及邀請參與此項研究計劃?

首先, 我在我的工作單位, 華人社區及 Facebook 分發 / 張貼此項研究計劃的說明並邀請有興趣之華人家長與我聯繫; 您便是其中之一。此項研究之“亞洲華人移民”指的是移民來紐西蘭且有中華文化傳統者, 包括原居住於中國, 台灣, 香港或是其他東南亞國家 (含新加坡, 馬來西亞及汶萊) 者。此外, 這些移民必需有至少一位小孩目前正在紐西蘭就讀任何一個幼兒園; 或是在最近五年內曾就讀者。符合上述條件並與我聯絡者將被邀請參與此項研究的訪談或是推薦其他符合條件者。

關於這項研究計劃的進行及過程?

研究者將會對同意受訪者進行單獨的訪談。整個訪談約為 30 至 40 分鐘且受訪者可選擇以英語或是華語 (普通話) 接受訪問。訪問的內容將為針對您對紐西蘭幼兒教育之學習與遊戲 (LEARNING AND PLAY) 的看法。整個訪談內容將會被錄音及轉為書面記錄。若您以華語接受訪談, 則書面記錄將會被翻譯成英文。您的訪談書面及翻譯記錄摘要完成後, 將會請您確認是否無誤。您所提供的所有個人資訊僅會被用於本項研究 (亞洲華人家長對於以遊戲為主的幼兒教育的看法); 您的所有資料將會被安全的儲存與保密。無論您, 您的孩子或您的幼兒園的真實名稱將不會出現在研究報告中。在訪談資料搜集完成之前, 您可隨時要求退出本項研究。在進行訪談之

前，研究者會取得您的書面同意書。若您希望得到一份研究報告電子版，請在您簽立研究訪問同意書時註明。

訪談過程是否有風險或令我感到不適？

當接受訪談時，您可以選擇您希望使用的語言（華語--普通話或英語）。因此在整個訪談過程中，您可以盡量表達您個人對研究主題的看法，而應不會有任何不舒服或有風險的感覺。

如何降低風險或不適的感覺？

在整個訪談過程中，若您有任何情緒，身體或心理的不適，您可以隨時要求研究者暫停訪談，待您準備好再繼續。若您希望安排另一個時間接受訪談，研究者也會配合您重新安排訪談時間。提醒您若您感受到任何不適或風險，您可以隨時要求退出此項研究訪談。若您有需要的話，我們可以安排諮商及其他協助。

這項研究有何益處？

這項研究結果重點將被發表於教育學術期刊及研討會以協助幼兒園及專業幼教人士對於華人家長對幼兒教育的觀點有進一步的瞭解，進而能夠更有效的與華人家長合作以提昇教育品質。此外，這項研究亦為研究者能否取得其碩士學位要件之一。

若我受到意外傷害將會得到什麼補償？

雖然參與這項研究訪談，您受到身體傷害的機率極小；但若因意外致使您受到傷害，且符合“意外補償委員會”(ACC)的條款，您將可申請意外傷害補助。

我的個人資料保密？

有關於您個人，小孩及幼兒園的真實姓名將不會被提及於最終的研究報告中；任何有關您的個人資料亦不會出現在任何研究報告中。

參與這項研究我要付出些什麼？

參與項研究您唯一需付出的是 30-40 分鐘的時間來接受訪談；您無需擔心會有費用或其他項目的付出。

我有多長時間來考慮是否參與訪談？

您可以有充份的時間來仔細考慮是否參與此項訪談。若您願意參與訪談，請在收到此說明書**兩週**內聯絡研究者。

我要如何同意參與這項研究？

若您同意參與這項研究並接受訪談，請您務必仔細閱讀及簽署“研究訪問同意書”並在訪問開始前交給研究者本人。研究者會與您約定訪談的時間及地點。

我想要瞭解這項研究的結果？

當整項研究計劃完成後，若您想要收到一份研究結果重點報告，請在簽署“研究訪問同意書”時註明。

如果我還有對此項研究的其他疑慮？

如您有任何有關此項研究的整體疑慮，請聯繫本研究之監督及指導者：Dr Andrew Gibbons, andrew.gibbons@aut.ac.nz, (09) 921 9999 ext 7929

如您對於此項研究的進行過程有任何疑慮及不滿，請通知 A U T 大學的研究委員會：Executive Secretary, AUTECH, Dr Rosemary Godbold, rosemary.godbold@aut.ac.nz, (09) 921 9999 ext 6902.

我需要聯絡誰以取得更進一步有關本項研究的資訊？

如果您還有其他對參與此項研究的問題請聯繫：

研究者本人 :Rita Huang 黃明華, gominghua@gmail.com, (09) 968 8765 ext 7124; Mobile: 021 210 6524

研究監督及指導者 : Dr Andrew Gibbons, andrew.gibbons@aut.ac.nz , (09) 921 9999 ext 7929

謝謝您的合作與支持！

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 17 August 2012, AUTEK Reference number 12/182.