

# The Importance of Play in Early Childhood Education: A Critical Perspective on Current Policies and Practices in Germany and Hong Kong

Stefan Faas

*University of Education, Schwäbisch Gmünd*

Shu-chen Wu

*The Education University of Hong Kong*

Steffen Geiger

*University of Education, Schwäbisch Gmünd*

## Abstract

In order to reflect international reform movements in a system- and culture-comparative perspective, the following article investigates the early childhood education systems in Germany and in Hong Kong, with reference to the respective social and educational roots, pedagogical development lines, and basic educational approaches. In addition, current developments, policies, and practices are described. The basic structural requirements of the respective systems will be presented, and the different reviews and implementation of international developments in Germany and Hong Kong will be explained. Special emphasis is placed on the importance of play in early childhood education. In this context, a current qualitative study of the authors is presented, which examines different perspectives on learning at play. The results of this exploratory study show that the interpretations and discussions of international reform approaches in different cultural settings are sometimes very different. The statements of the German and Chinese participants indicate that international developments are assessed primarily in the context of national educational traditions and structures. Against this backdrop, it is assumed that international reform movements—despite some assimilations—will have different effects in national education systems.

## Keywords

Early childhood education, importance of play, international reform movement, cultural comparison

## Introduction

Under the influence of globalization, education systems—from early childhood education to higher education—have been under enormous pressure to reform. Many countries undergoing educational reforms have referred to international research findings and trends to create new pedagogy to meet those trends. Some new approaches, such as results-oriented teaching and learning, as well as learning based on prescribed standards, especially in literacy,

numeracy, and science, have been increasingly applied, despite objections and resistance to them (Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, & Manning, 2001; Hargreaves & Shirley, 2011; Ramberg, 2014). Many of these strategies and developments are similar in principle (Gogolin, Baumert & Scheunpflug, 2011), and they

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### Corresponding Author:

**Stefan Faas**, University of Education, Oberbettringer Straße 200, 73525 Schwäbisch Gmünd, Germany  
Email: stefan.faas@ph-gmuend.de

can be summarized as general aspects of international education reform movements. Particularly in the area of early childhood education, controversies about the nature of the reform have been observed. The debate in many countries has focused on the question of what children should do in kindergarten (Rossbach, 2008; Faas, 2016) or on the question of what are appropriate goals for children's day-care centers (Dahlberg, Moss, & Pence, 1999).

The overall direction and thrust of this discussion has been binary. On one hand, the focus was on the specific acquisition of certain abilities and skills in appropriately arranged learning settings, on the other hand, the support of participation, exploration, and self-initiated learning of children was brought to the fore (Katz, 1999). In terms of institutions, the discussion has referred to educational institutions of early childhood as places of school preparation and also spaces of play, learning and social integration, based on the individual needs of children.

Dahlberg, Moss, and Pence (1999, p. 63) critically described the social construction of early pedagogical institutions as producers "of care and of standardized and predetermined child outcomes" and as reproducers "of knowledge, identity and culture"; in this view, kindergartens enhance "children's development and preparation for compulsory schooling which includes starting school 'ready to learn'". The authors also pointed out that early childhood educational institutions, on the other hand, can be also viewed as forums in civil society, with reference to the Reggio Emilia approach (see Gandini, 1993; Abbott & Nutbrown, 2001).

This debate is still relevant today in current international discourse about the further development of national education systems, which are becoming increasingly more similar. Pasi Sahlberg (2011), a Finnish pedagogue, considered this controversy within the framework of an international reform movement, with particular reference to the school; in his opinion, the focus of education policy has shifted from structural reforms to improvement in education outcomes. This trend

has been fostered through the strategies of private foundations, consulting firms, and transnational organizations (e.g., in industrial states, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, OECD). The strategies of such institutions have influenced the education policies of nation states with the aim of improving the quality of education systems and practices. According to Sahlberg (2015), there are five main types of reform: (1) competition between educational institutions; (2) standardization and common criteria for measurement in the educational context; (3) a focus on teaching subjects such as literacy, numeracy, and natural science; (4) test-based accountability; and (5) free school choice. All of these types are aimed at improving the performance of children, as well as the approximation of national education systems and forms of learning, and ultimately bringing about changes in practices. These changes are mainly reflected in a stronger orientation toward learning outcomes and a stronger integration of classroom assessment, which has also been critically referred to as "teaching for the test" (Amos, 2011, p. 330).

From the underlying perspective, the approaches and strategies aforementioned are a normative basis for national education systems, but they also contrast in terms of current developments, which in the case of this article are viewed in system and culture-comparative considerations between Germany and Hong Kong. The assumption has been that international reform movements are adapting to education systems and will always be integrated in a cultural-specific context (Stromquist & Monkman, 2014). The implication is that international reform movements meet with specific pedagogical traditions and roots, which are then interpreted, assessed, and integrated differently, which has had different effects on national education systems.

This article will first describe the early childhood education system in Germany and then in Hong Kong, with reference to historical analyses and current statistical data. Next, the social and educational roots, the pedagogical development lines and basic educational approaches, and

current developments, policies, and practices in the context of international reform movements will be examined and discussed. Then, the basic structural requirements of the respective systems will be presented; and the different appraisals and implementation of international developments in Germany and Hong Kong will be explained, with regard to the importance of play in early childhood education and reference to a current qualitative study by the authors. This aspect is interesting because the question of what children are supposed to do in kindergarten touches on the question of the role of (free) play for children in early childhood education, and the importance of play in Germany and Hong Kong is traditionally very different. Finally, the article will end with a summary and conclusion.

## **Early Childhood Education and Care in Germany**

### **Social and Educational Roots**

As in other European countries, the emergence of children's day-care centers in Germany has been closely linked to the difficult social situation of mass poverty at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The establishment of public early childhood education institutions aimed to assist poor families by allowing all employable family members to be employed while avoiding accidents among unsupervised children, thereby helping to stabilize household income. The innovation also prepared children for their future poor living situation by means of specific educational measures (Erning, 1987). Against this background, children's day-care centers in Germany developed first as "emergency facilities" mainly supported financially by ecclesiastical organizations. Their main focus was on the welfare of children and families, and the primary concern was the supervision and care of children (Erning, 2004; Reyer, 2006a).

A counterpoint to this utilitarian model was the approach of Friedrich Froebel (1782–1852). The starting point for Froebel's conception of early childhood education was as an independent educational task for pedagogical work with young children, and not the care of

otherwise unattended children. The didactics and the methodical approach did not simply follow the school model, although Froebel paid attention to the question of how early childlike and scholastic education processes could be coordinated. The central reference points of this approach were the children's activities and their play as the preferred medium of learning (Froebel, 1839/1982). From this perspective, the support of children's play and the pedagogical accompaniment of childlike educational processes by adults represented important elements of pedagogy. On the one hand, the situational aspects of "free play" were taken up and passed on (e.g., in terms of basic experiences); on the other hand, it also involved providing specific activities (e.g., finger games, exercise games, gardening), didactic materials, and specific defined topics and contents (Heiland, 2003).

Child care in an education-related setting was the framework within which the development and differentiation of the preschool in Germany took place. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the discussions in this area led to intensive efforts to assign kindergarten as an education system according to Froebel's pedagogical concept which made attendance at these institutions compulsory for all children. At that time, the predominant view was that the education of young children could only be achieved in the immediate vicinity of their mother (Reyer, 2006a), so children's day-care centers were not the rule but rather the exception to be used in an emergency situation for the purpose of social welfare. In the context of social legislation (*Reichsjugendwohlfahrtsgesetz*), which was enacted in 1922 and implemented in 1924, a conclusion was reached in this debate about the legal and administrative position of early childhood education for youth welfare. Children's day-care centers were thus strengthened in their care function and recognized as an independent institution (Reyer, 1987). This assignment to the child and youth welfare sector, which still exists today, has shaped the field of early childhood education and care in Germany. At the same

time, the training of staff for day-care centers in Germany was uniformly regulated. While the pathways were very different then, a two-year full-time training course was introduced in 1928 (Derschau, 1987).

### **Development Lines and Basic Educational Approaches**

Due to the division of Germany after the Second World War, the kindergarten system developed in different directions for almost half a century. There were two models of preschool education, and each absorbed the ideas of social welfare and education in different ways. In East Germany and the later German Democratic Republic (GDR), the idea of early learning as a contribution to popular education, and the goal of integrating as many mothers as possible into the work force, were equally important reasons for institutional early childhood education. Kindergarten was considered to be the lowest level of schooling and was administratively assigned to the Ministry of National Education. Day-care centers were run under municipal or company management; and for the parents the care and upbringing of the children, apart from a small contribution for meals, was free of charge. Early on, there was a quantitative expansion of day-care centers and the establishment of full-day nursing care. By 1975, the attendance rate was over 90% (Reyer, 2006b; Rossbach, 2005). In West Germany, children's day care was linked directly to the pre-war situation. Kindergartens became again part of the child and youth welfare system, with an emphasis on the care and supervision of children (Erning, 1997). The day-care centers were predominantly non-profit private, with the church related institutions dominating. The attendance rate, however, remained below 50% until the 1970s in West Germany (Reyer, 1987). In both East Germany and West Germany, the training of staff for children's day-care centers was similar. In both German states, the training courses were housed in specialized schools for social pedagogy, which did not have the same status as academic colleges. The program took three years to complete and included both theoretical subjects and guided practice (Liegler, 1990).

A rethinking and reevaluation of kindergarten as an educational institution took place in the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1960s within the framework of the discussion on social qualification requirements, equal opportunities, and self-determination in a democratic society. Kindergarten was thus decoupled from the family situation, which was regarded as an emergency situation, and evolved into a family-supported educational institution for all children between the ages of three and six years old. In this context, there was a considerable increase in the number of available child-care places in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as an intensive examination of the content and methodical work in preschool institutions. New curricula and didactic approaches were introduced and tested, such as the function-oriented, discipline-oriented, and situation-oriented approaches (Konrad, 2004; Neumann, 1987).

The function-oriented approaches were based on "psychic functions" (e.g., perception, thought, creativity, and language). These were considered fundamental for development and education, and for the successful management of social requirements. In this context, the assumption was that the development of these psychological functions was encouraged and supported by regular, isolated practice. Correspondingly, training sessions and training units were developed for children's day-care facilities. In this respect, the function-oriented approaches—with respect to pedagogical forms of instruction—were directed primarily toward promotion and support of children's learning in order to help them to acquire certain skills and abilities (Rossbach, 2005).

The discipline-oriented approaches, on the other hand, were based on the structure of different topics and underlying scientific disciplines. The basic assumption was that a system of ordered knowledge was also suitable for pedagogical work in kindergarten in order to systematize the children's experiences. There was also an age-appropriate didactic mediation of elementary scientific concepts and principles in different areas of knowledge (e.g., mathematical quantities in mathematics) so that

subsequent levels of education could build upon them. This explicitly addressed the aspect of preparation for school (Rossbach, 2005). The discipline-oriented approaches included the demonstration, explanation, and joint elaboration of area-specific topics (Trembl, 2000).

Due to their focus on working with practice material, an emphasis on school preparation, and a lack of orientation on the current life situations of children, etc., the function-oriented approaches and the discipline-oriented approaches were strongly criticized from the outset. By the 1970s, the situation-oriented approaches, which did not originate from content to be conveyed but rather from real-life situations, emerged as an alternative approach. With situation-oriented approaches, children acquired competencies that would help them to meet current and future situations. Subjective-oriented learning did not take place in isolation, but was always integrated into a concrete context of social applications and relevant everyday situations (Rossbach, 2008). For example, dealing with mathematical quantities was not practiced with specific learning units, but instead tested in relevant everyday situations such as shopping, or when playing. The focus was on the support of children in life-related learning opportunities in terms of situation-based learning.

With the situation-oriented approaches and their dominant position in practice—in contrast to the function-oriented and discipline-oriented approaches—Germany had taken a path which was criticized because it meant a decoupling of Germany from international developments (Rossbach 2005). With regard to current educational developments, it is implicit that this particular path favors a critical analysis of international reform movements both in disciplinary discourse and in practice, often by referring to the pedagogical traditions in Germany (Willekens, Scheiwe, & Nawrotzki 2015). In the further discussion, we will again take up this aspect.

### **Current Developments, Policies, and Practices**

As already indicated above, the situation-oriented approaches have shaped pedagogical work in children's day-care centers in Germany in recent decades. The orientation to the life-world of children, with an emphasis on social learning and learning in free play, developed into the general guiding principles of pedagogy in early childhood education. Since the mid-1990s, however, this one-sided situational orientation has been increasingly criticized, supported by the results of various school-related comparative studies, such as the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) (Baumert et al., 1997) and the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) study (Baumert et al., 2001). The latter study, in particular, has grown in importance because in comparison to pupils from other OECD countries: (1) German pupils were only mediocre with regard to average reading; (2) the proportion of German pupils leaving school without basic competencies in the areas of reading, mathematics, and natural sciences was comparatively high; (3) the difference between the lowest and highest grades was particularly high; and (4) within Germany, there were great differences in the performance of pupils from different social groups, in particular between pupils with and without a migration background (Waldow, 2009, p. 476).

These results, which were perceived by the German public as "PISA-shock" (Gruber, 2006), stimulated a discussion about the education system and led to education reforms in Germany in the following years, especially in the field of early childhood education. Because Germany refused to participate in corresponding longitudinal studies from the early 1970s to the 1990s, the German public was not prepared for these results, which left them surprised and shaken (Waldow, 2009). On the other hand, the results of the study were accompanied by a scientific debate in which the quality of the education system and,

in particular, of kindergarten were increasingly questioned (see Tietze, 1998).

Against this backdrop, the aforementioned criticism of the situation-oriented approach intensified. In particular, the lack of developmental psychological foundations and empirical evaluations, and a decoupling of international developments in this context were questioned. In addition, criticism also focused on conceptual and curricular aspects (e.g., the neglect of cognitive promotion, as well as the decreased assessment of factual learning and its importance in childhood education processes) (Rossbach, 2008). In addition, it was argued that the early start of competency development well before the start of schooling, the connection to specific learning areas, and the special importance of early competencies for later learning at school were necessary in order to develop specific competencies in certain areas of education already taking place in kindergarten (Sylva et al., 2004). In the following years, extensive reforms took place in the field of German early childhood education, which were linked to various international reform movements:

(1) Content area curricula was implemented in all 16 federal states in Germany in kindergarten focusing on language and literacy, mathematics, and natural sciences, in addition to social learning. This led to a stronger emphasis on area-specific learning in kindergarten, although the concept of holistic and everyday integrated learning was emphasized. In addition, intensive accompaniment of the transition between kindergarten and primary school, close cooperation with parents, and sustainable quality development were defined (Standing Conference of the Ministers for Youth Affairs & Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs, 2004). In this respect, a certain orientation towards international developments was shown here—the increasing emphasis on literacy, mathematics, and natural science was also described as a central element of international reform movements (Sahlberg 2015). Nevertheless, aspects which are typical of the

German context remained: Educational plans and guidelines were not legally binding due to the historically determined anchoring of the early childhood education sector in social legislation, based on the freedom of the organizations, as defined here, to decide on the educational goals and content (Diskowski, 2009).

(2) Changes in practices in children's day-care centers were also seen. These included, in particular, the intensification and systematization of observation, documentation, and diagnosis of childhood education and development processes (e.g., Viernickel & Völkel, 2006), the development and implementation of new pedagogic concepts in this context (e.g., Laewen & Andres, 2007; Leu et al., 2007), and a stronger emphasis on specific content areas of education, in particular language and literacy, and scientific and mathematical education. In this context, corresponding specialist didactic concepts and materials were also introduced. In addition, increased cooperation and support of the parents was observed, as well as the introduction of measures of quality development (Mischo & Fröhlich-Gildhoff, 2011). In comparison with international reform movements, it must be taken into account that these changes are not yet equated with a stronger standardization of practice. The individual children's day care facilities also have a great deal of freedom in the choice of methods, observation instruments and concepts of quality development. And in practice, non-standardized procedures are likely to dominate both in the context of observation and documentation as well as in quality development.

(3) There was a fundamental further development of the qualifications for early childhood education staff in Germany; thus, the teaching content and concepts of the vocational training schools for social pedagogy were significantly changed (Mischo & Fröhlich-Gildhoff, 2011). Furthermore, in 2004, the first bachelor's program in early childhood education was launched, as vocational training was no longer adequate to meet the increased requirements in practice (Faas, 2013). By 2013,

67 undergraduate courses at 53 universities and colleges were developed and implemented, some of which were very different in nature. A growing number of master's degrees has since supplemented this academic qualification in the area of early childhood education. Germany was one of the few industrialized countries without specific academic qualifications for working in day-care centers. In 2014, only 5% of all employees in children's day-care centers had an academic degree, 70% had a degree as an *Erzieherin* (a graduate of a vocational training school for social pedagogy), and 13% had a qualification as a *Kinderpflegerin* (lower level vocational training school). The remaining employees had no specific degree or early childhood education degree (Autorengruppe Fachkräftebarometer, 2014). In response to these reforms, structural changes are now evident at the level of continuing education and training, as the variety of offers has increased, and there is an increasing focus on competency profiles and quality requirements (Müller, Faas, & Schmidt-Hertha, 2016).

In addition to the above-mentioned reforms in the German early childhood education system in the last few years, a massive expansion of child day care began in the 2000s—particularly with respect to facilitating a better balance between family and work (Rauschenbach, Grgic, & Meiner-Teubner, 2016). While in 2007 approximately 89% of the children between three and six years old attended a day-care center, that number increased to 95.3% in 2015. The difference was even larger in the care of children under three years of age: in 2007, only 15.5% of children under three years old attended an appropriate institution, whereas in 2015, 32.9% attended such an institution (Ministry of Families, 2016; Statistisches Bundesamt, 2012). In 2015, 33.1% of children's day-care centers in Germany were publicly-owned, 63.9% were non-profit organizations (e.g., churches), and 3% were other independent organizations (i.e., for-profit organizations). This is a peculiarity in Germany that has resulted from the history of

child care and is responsible for some decoupling from international developments ([www.laendermonitor.de](http://www.laendermonitor.de)).

## Early Childhood Education and Care in Hong Kong

### Social and Educational Roots

Unlike Germany, which has a long history of early childhood education, kindergarten education in Hong Kong emerged beginning in the early twentieth century. At that time there were only a few kindergartens operating in Hong Kong providing preschool education for children from middle-class families. These kindergartens were sponsored by private or religious organizations (Opper, 1992). Kindergarten education was not affordable for poor families, so their young children were looked after by older siblings or extended family. Before that time, some private primary schools and private tutors also provided formal education for young children from wealthy families. Reading and writing were the main tasks for children to learn. Some classic texts like *Sanzijing* 三字經 and *Qianziwen* (The Thousand Character Classic, 千字文) were common readings that taught young children to be good people and to live in harmony with others (Hsiung, 2000). The texts were embedded with Confucian morality (e.g., filial piety and respect for elders) and they were written in triplets or quartets of characters for easy memorization. Many of these conventional idioms were recited by Chinese parents from generation to generation. However, these child-care settings were not aided and administered by the government at that time. Even in the British colonial era the government took a *laissez-faire* attitude toward kindergarten education, regarding it as a luxury (Sweeting, 2004), and thus neglected its development.

### Development Lines and Basic Educational Approaches

After the Second World War, early childhood education expanded because of the influx of a large number of refugees from Mainland

China. Many refugee parents had to work, and therefore needed kindergartens to take care of their children (Wong & Rao, 2004). Early childhood education was provided to children to prepare them for primary school entrance examinations, which had very few spaces available. In such a milieu, kindergarten education began to resemble formal education, and academic learning was imperative. By 1970, the number of preschools increased dramatically (Opper, 1992). This rapid proliferation was affected by the introduction of compulsory and free primary and secondary education in 1971 and 1979 (Sub-committee on Review of School Education, Board of Education, 1997). Nevertheless, regulatory standards for preschool education were not yet established to accommodate the rapid boom of kindergartens.

Since the 1980s, early childhood education has been publicly observed and nominally - administered by the Hong Kong Government, which can be seen in several reports such as *The White Paper on Primary Education and Pre-primary Service* (Hong Kong Government, 1981) and *A Perspective on Education in Hong Kong: Report by Visiting Panel* (Hong Kong Government, 1982). Since all kindergartens were privately run and were mostly provided by voluntary agencies or private enterprises, some people inevitably regarded them as a business for profit-making. The growth and development of preschool education created a need for the promotion of kindergarten teacher training. However, the government's attitude toward preschool education was unclear. For example, they questioned the effect and importance of kindergarten education in the *Education Commission Report No. 2* (Education Commission, 1986) and suggested that kindergarten should not be converted into an aided sector. It was not until 1994 that the Hong Kong Government affirmed in its Policy Address its commitment to improving the quality of early childhood education, although the focus was still on upgrading teachers' qualifications and training.

In the 1980s, the Hong Kong early childhood education curriculum was a hybrid of Eastern and Western cultures. It incorporated

learning and teaching approaches from European and American societies, such as the thematic approach and the project approach, of which the thematic approach was advocated by the Hong Kong Government (Sweeting, 2004). This approach first appeared in the *Guide to the Kindergarten Curriculum* (Curriculum Development Council, 1984) and was the dominant approach in many kindergartens until recently. The thematic teaching and learning approach referred to the practice of teachers organizing the learning of subject matter around a theme. The teaching themes were closely related to the children's experiences, and "various 'subject' aspects related to these themes [were] taught through individual and group activities" (Curriculum Development Council, 1984, p. 3). However, in practice, the teaching themes were commonly selected by the schools, and they were usually not based on children's interests and experiences. The early childhood education curriculum was permeated with Chinese and Confucian values such as conformity and diligence. Therefore, drill practices and the printing of Chinese and English words were often performed in the classroom, as reported in the Quality Assurance Inspection Annual Reports from 2000 to 2007 (Fung, 2009). It was believed that children learned through such drill practices. Children, particularly older ones, often had assignments to complete (e.g., printing Chinese characters and English alphabets, counting exercises, etc.). In 1999, the Education Department—the predecessor of the Education Bureau (EDB) — issued a *List of Dos and Don'ts*, which was recently revised (Education Bureau, 2012). The list states that the lecture form of teaching and drill practices should be avoided; however, these practices still exist. Therefore, the child-centered policy has not yet been fully implemented, because it contradicts the traditional cultural beliefs and practices of teacher-directed teaching and learning.

Requirements to be qualified to teach changed in 2003, when all newly appointed kindergarten teachers were required to possess a Qualified Kindergarten Teacher (QKT) qualification or its equivalent (Education and



Manpower Bureau, 2002). In the 2001–2002 academic year, the minimum academic entry qualification for kindergarten teacher training was raised from two passes in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination (including one language subject) to five passes, including both Chinese and English (Legislative Council Secretariat, 2005). Teachers were trained after the completion of Secondary 6 education. To work in kindergartens, teachers had to register with the EDB to attain qualified teacher status. As for the qualifications for working in child-care centers (for children 0 to 6 years old), child-care workers were required to complete training courses and register with the Social Welfare Department (SWD). Kindergarten teachers with a QKT qualification were eligible to register as child-care workers. Because the government required kindergarten teachers to have a QKT qualification after 2003, almost all of the teachers were thus trained by 2006/2007. For example, in 2015/2016, 96% of the teachers were trained, of whom 91.2% had a Certificate in Early Childhood Education (ECE), 4.7% held a Qualified Kindergarten Teacher (QKT) certificate, and 0.1% held a Qualified Assistant Kindergarten Teacher (QAKT) certificate (Education Bureau, 2016).

A child-centered approach was advocated in the *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* (Curriculum Development Council, 1996), which stressed the all-around development of children. The *Performance Indicators—For Kindergartens* (Hong Kong Education Department, 2000) also noted that child-centered teaching as an approach should achieve the objectives of constructing knowledge, provoking thinking, developing learning abilities, and fostering positive values and attitudes. In addition, the 2006 *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* (Curriculum Development Council, 2006) put more emphasis on child-centered learning than any of the previous guides had. Particularly, the role of teachers has changed from an authoritarian role to engaging in various roles, such as facilitator, information provider, and learning assessor. However, the early

childhood education curriculum in Hong Kong still tends to be more teacher-centered, in that teaching behaviors are mostly didactic and involve a great deal of structured reading from textbooks and rote memorization of information (Chan, 2016).

Most schools or teachers still established their learning objectives and themes before the semester commenced, and as a result, children's autonomy, interests, and self-initiation were found less often in the classroom. Each age-segregated class (3 to 4 years old, 4 to 5 years old, and 5 to 6 years old) had about 30 students and two teachers, and the class was usually divided into two groups. Whether the instruction was conducted as a whole class or in groups depended on the nature of the activities and space needed. Moreover, individual needs were rarely met in such an instruction-oriented classroom. Most of the kindergartens used subject-based teaching and learning. English, Mandarin, Music, Computer, and Sport were the common subjects, although integrated learning was advocated. In the *Guide to the Kindergarten Curriculum* (Curriculum Development Council, 1993), an integrated approach was suggested, in which “play,” “learning,” and “care” should be taken into account as a whole in contributing to children's overall development. Politically, Hong Kong was to meet the international early curriculum development trends, e.g., integrated approach, child-centered, and playful learning approach. However, such a gap between policy and practice created a challenge for practitioners (Grieshaber, 2006) because conceptually and practically they were not ready and capable of putting the policy into practice (Wu & Rao, 2011; Wu, 2014). Therefore, the child-centered approaches remain unachievable and unattainable objectives.

### **Current Developments, Policies, and Practices**

In Chinese culture, play is not traditionally associated with learning. However, the curriculum policy, in the 1984, 1993, 1996, and 2006 curriculum guides, as well as the review

of the 2006 guide, reiterated and advocated the play-based learning approach, though it was seldom applied in local practice. Moreover, the most recent curriculum policy was created in response to local and international practical experiences and research findings from other countries and regions (Curriculum Development Council, 2016). The current version of the *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum* (Curriculum Development Council, 2006) emphasized the role of play in early learning more than earlier versions of the document have. However, a discrepancy between policy and practice has been identified (Cheng, 2011). This may be attributed to difficulties in teachers' understanding or conceptualization of the theories of play and learning or play-based learning, as well as other factors (e.g., school management, transition issues, parents' concerns and expectations, and cultural expectations and values) (Cheng, 2001; Cheng & Stimpson, 2004; Fung & Cheng, 2012; Wu & Rao, 2011).

Another reason for the decreased consideration of children's play may be that the provision of early childhood education in Hong Kong has been heavily influenced by market forces (Ho, 2008); in such a highly market-driven context, parents play a vital role. Kindergartens have made great efforts to survive in such a competitive context by meeting parental expectations of academic preparation for primary education. For example, many parents desire schools that give their children more assignments than those that allocate more time for play. Therefore, even though teachers may recognize the importance of play, they still hesitate to implement play-based learning because they have to consider the parents' concerns (Wu, 2014), who may regard play and learning as dichotomous and opposites.

Recently, the curriculum guide, which will be released in 2017, was revised to accommodate to the Free Quality Kindergarten Education (Curriculum Development Council, 2016). Joyful learning through a play approach is outlined in the review of the 2016 *Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum*. As in previous guides, play is considered an instrument for learning. However,

in the forthcoming curriculum policy, free play as a context for learning will be advocated for the first time, which is unprecedented; in particular, free exploration in play has been emphasized. In it, it is suggested that teachers provide not less than 30 minutes per day for free play for the half-day program and 50 minutes for the whole-day program. In practice, free play would involve free-choice activities within a scheduled time frame. Not all children would have the same amount of time to play freely because only those who finish their assigned tasks quickly would have extra time to play (Wu & Rao, 2011). The revised curriculum guide provides a clearer guideline on play arrangement than any of the previous guides. However, it may still be a challenge for practitioners to implement play-based learning, particularly when teachers do not associate play with learning, and they conceive and practice them separately (Wu, 2014; Wu & Rao, 2011).

### **The Importance of Play in Germany and Hong Kong Play in Different Cultural Contexts**

The reforms and developments described in Germany and Hong Kong stand for different responses to international reform movements. In this context, there are some similarities between Germany and Hong Kong. In the field of early childhood education, these similarities include an increase in state investments in early childhood education, efforts to improve the qualifications of the pedagogical staff, an emphasis on the task of school preparation, and under this influence the development of national curricula. Further, there are also similar discourses about content (e.g., in relation to the question of what children should do in kindergarten and the importance of free play in this context). On closer examination, however, there are a lot marked differences in the discourses and related reforms, particularly the adjustments made because of national traditions and cultural peculiarities (see Stromquist & Monkman, 2014). Against this background, the educational practice in Hong Kong seems to be much more closely aligned with developments

described in the context of the Global Education Reform Movement (GERM) than in Germany.

With regard to the importance of play, this aspect is particularly evident. In German early childhood education, for example, there is a long tradition of playing, which goes back to Friedrich Froebel, and the promotion of playing is still the central element of early childhood education. Accordingly, free play takes up the most time in kindergarten. Playing and learning are conceived as inseparable in terms of children's confrontation with their life-world, which leads to elementary knowledge (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006).

What the child learns, above all, in playing is—play. He acquires the adroitness or adeptness; the ways of behavior; the techniques; the improvisation and the social systems that are required for the appropriate methods of play. The child becomes at home in a life style or aspect of living that is indispensable for humanity (Flitner, 1972, p. 51).

Against this background, the current debate about reforms in early childhood education, as well as a stronger orientation toward school preparation and area-specific learning, is viewed critically. The focus of the scientific debate is, above all, the question of how the cognitive support of children and the early development of competencies in certain areas of content can be combined with the idea of free play. It is undisputed that the school preparation of children cannot be achieved by an earlier implementation of school learning forms (Rossbach, 2008). Rather, learning at play, freedom in children's own decisions, self-determination, and social learning should continue to be the central elements of early learning.

The debate about reforms and the importance of play in children's day-care centers in Hong Kong has taken place in a completely different context. In the Chinese tradition, play and learning are regarded as two different activities that are juxtaposed. For example, the *Trimetric Classic*, a book for children that contains the essence of Confucianism, introduced the famous saying “*ye jing yu qin*,

*huang yu xi*” (“a career is refined by hard work but ruined by play”) and the traditional Chinese idiom “*qin you gong, xi wu yi*” (“hard work makes the master, while play brings no good”). These conventional notions are often quoted when instructing children, which has affected Chinese perceptions of play. In Chinese classrooms today, play continues to be regarded as not central to learning; instead, it is often used instrumentally by teachers to achieve learning and teaching objectives (Cheng & Wu, 2013).

In addition to these conceptual differences, it is also assumed that pedagogical professionals in children's day-care centers in Germany and Hong Kong have incorporated different playing and learning concepts (Wu & Rao, 2011). In the following, a current qualitative study will be presented, which examined different perspectives on learning at play (Wu, Faas, & Geiger, in preparation). The results underline the different cultural contexts of the debate on international reform movements and their implementation.

### Empirical Study

Twenty-eight early childhood education professionals and 12 parents took part in this study. In a first step, 12 kindergarten professionals (six German and six Chinese) were interviewed and observed. The semi-structured interviews were aimed at examining their understanding of learning at play. During the observations, the researchers followed the professionals' instructions to film what they regarded as learning at play episodes. The researchers confirmed the episodes' content with the educational staff afterwards and edited the video clips accordingly. Four representative three-minute videos from each culture, containing the most learning elements at play, were selected. In a second step, applying video-cued multivocal ethnography (Tobin, Hsueh, & Karasawa 2009), the selected video clips were shown to 16 other kindergarten professionals (eight German and eight Chinese) and 12 parents (six German and six Chinese) in focus groups to elicit their perspectives on and understanding of learning at play. Before the

videos were shown, the kindergarten learning approach in Hong Kong was introduced to the German participants and vice versa. As the German kindergartens advocated education partnership (*Erziehungspartnerschaft*), the educational staff and parents were grouped together for the discussions. However, the Chinese parents' and professionals' discussion groups were conducted separately because they were used to being interviewed independently. The Hong Kong groups watched and discussed the episodes videotaped in the Hong Kong kindergartens first, then those from the German kindergartens, while their German counterparts viewed and discussed the videos in the reverse order.

The following research questions of the study were examined in detail:

1. What are Hong Kong and German pedagogical professionals' and parents' understanding and perceptions of learning at play?
2. What are the commonalities and differences?

Looking at the selection of practice examples for learning at play by early childhood professionals in Germany and Hong Kong, revealed very clear differences, which followed the traditional pedagogy of the respective countries. All of the Hong Kong examples included activities in a group oriented to collective learning objectives. All the children were included and involved in the activity, and each of them was guided under a teacher's supervision. The tightly structured activities were rather similar to games, because rules and competition were clearly identified. The focus of play was on learning in the group, whereas the German examples contained only individual activities or activities in small groups based on the children's aims and psychic needs. To select situations of learning at play in their own pedagogical practices, the German professionals focused on daily activities, and specific learning situations were given much less consideration; in addition, they stressed the importance of the environmental setting and the children's self-

initiative and self-experience. The German teachers' professional role was characterized by reacting to the children's curiosity and autonomy. In contrast, the Chinese teachers emphasized a systematic learning approach focused on learning objectives, the rules of play/games, and a specific course of play.

... when we [teachers] write a teaching plan, each activity has its objective. That is why we stress the importance of purpose [of play] (HK\_teacher\_T03).

However, the differences between the German and Chinese participants were no longer clear with regard to the results of the group discussions: the German pedagogues and parents emphasized again the importance of the children's own activities and exploration during play. Further, the Germans judged the Chinese play activities as being too teacher-oriented and therefore assumed that they were not applicable to German kindergartens, especially since self-employment is an important learning factor.

Chinese teachers' and parents' statements were inconsistent: on the one hand, they emphasized the learning approach and the importance of teachers' intervention and guidance in play. On the other hand, they also saw the importance of children's self-initiative and self-experience, which are not shown in their children's play episodes, but in those of their German counterparts. Even if they positively evaluated the German play activities in some cases, there were critical voices regarding their transferability to the Chinese practice of early childhood education. In particular, the kindergarten teachers believed that it would be difficult to implement the German methods because of time and space constraints and parents' concerns.

I think that children are happiest in the [German] color play among all the episodes. They are most sincere. The teacher intervenes appropriately to teach them more, some deeper things (HK\_teacher\_T02).

I saw teachers' guidance, children's participation, and happiness... The most

important thing is that children get engaged in activity. Besides, the teachers' guidance is clear and children have learned from it. They even can apply it at home. This is authentic learning (HK\_parent\_F01).

The results of this exploratory study show that the interpretation and discussion of international reform approaches in Germany and in Hong Kong are very different. The statements of the German and Chinese participants indicated that international developments are assessed primarily in the context of national educational traditions and structures. Against this backdrop, it is assumed that international reform movements—despite some assimilations—will have very different effects in the future. These effects and differences appear to be rooted in the past of the countries or in the particular development of the early education system, as well as in the social and cultural expectations arising from this context.

## **Conclusion**

Internationalization and globalization have placed educational practices under the constant pressure of comparison based on a universal benchmark, which entails quantification at the expense of local cultural particularity and unquantifiable qualitative aspects of education. Certain features and developments, such as university rankings, impact factors of research, PISA, student-teacher ratios, and graduate employment and income, are often used to measure different levels of education. In addition, all of these aspects have a specific impact on the conceptualization and development of early childhood education. The focus is on strengthening the developmentally appropriate practices, the child-centered learning and play-based learning, and early literacy, numeracy, and natural science, which are all emerging as elements of international trends or international reform movements.

The current social conditions and the actual needs of society are often not reflected or adequately taken into account (Grieshaber &

Yelland, 2005) in consideration of such international trends in national curricula and education policies. Moreover, the ability of national education systems to adapt to international developments has not been questioned enough. Rather, the universal effectiveness of specific strategies and measures has been prematurely assumed, especially in light of different cultural contexts. However, there is some empirical evidence in different areas of education that suggest that critical consideration of such assumptions is required (Tymms, 2011; Maag Merki, 2010). Against the background of different historical developments in early childhood education, the importance of play in Germany and Hong Kong has been shown in various facets, which should lead to consequences in dealing with international education studies and their results.

The results of the observations (videos), interviews and group discussions in Germany and Hong Kong show very different contexts of education and learning and thus very different points of connection for the discussion and alignment on international reform movements. Examples for this are:

- All of the Hong Kong videos showed activities in a whole group, oriented to collective learning objectives. The focus of play was on learning in the group, whereas the German films included only individual activities or activities in small groups, based on the children's aims and psychic needs.
- To select situations of learning at play in their own pedagogical practice, the German professionals focused on daily activities, and specific learning situations were given much less consideration. In addition, they stressed the importance of the environmental setting and the children's self-initiative and self-experience. Their professional role was characterized by reacting to the children's curiosity and autonomy. In contrast, the Chinese teachers emphasized a systematic learning approach, focusing on learning

objectives, the rules of play/games, and a specific course of play.

- There were also differences in the opinions on the pedagogical concept of playing. Thus, the participants from Hong Kong emphasized the learning approach and the importance of teachers' intervention and guidance in play, while the German participants believed that the central aspect of learning at play was the children's own activities.

These results support and lend plausibility to the assumption that the results of international longitudinal studies, as well as subsequent reform movements cannot simply be transferred to national contexts. Empirical evidence, in terms of collected data and facts, is significant only through its embedding and interpretation in concrete social or institutional practices (Moss & Urban, 2010). The described fundamental differences between the education system in Germany and Hong Kong, the structuring and shaping of the pedagogical field, its historical, social and cultural framework, the different meaning and contextualization of terms and concepts - e.g., the term "play" – underline this. Against this background, in addition to international comparative longitudinal studies, cultural comparative qualitative investigations are needed to focus on the reception, assessment, and implementation of international trends in national and regional practices. With a view to historical developments and normative discourses, these studies will facilitate a much broader debate on national education systems, which is much more suited to the complexity of international comparisons.

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#### About the Author(s)

**Stefan Faas, PhD**, is professor for Social Pedagogy at the University of Education Schwäbisch Gmünd, Germany. His research is focused on early childhood education, family and parent education, transformation research as well as internationalization of education and social support. Before that time he was working as a scientific assistant at the Institute of Education at the Eberhard Karls University of Tübingen.

**Shu-chen Wu, PhD**, is assistant professor at the Department of Early Childhood Education at The Education University of Hong Kong. Her research interests include comparative early childhood education, children’s perspectives, policy, and play pedagogy.

**Steffen Geiger** is an academic staff member at the Department of Social Pedagogy and Early Childhood Education at the University of Education Schwäbisch Gmünd, Germany. His research is focused on international comparison of inclusive education and educational staff with migration background in children's day care facilities.