Children's learning in Japan and China: A comparative study of preschool parents' perspectives

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This article explores parents' perspectives of children's learning, drawing on a comparative research project with a focus on survey data from 200 preschool parents in Japan and China. The findings were compared between the two countries in order to identify common and distinct perspectives in terms of what and how children learn in the families and preschools, and parents' expectations and concerns. Emphasised in the analysis was the importance of situating parents' perspectives within different contexts, acknowledging the subjective, contextual and diverse conceptions of children's learning.

Introduction

Children's learning begins at home. Research on various aspects of child development provides compelling empirical evidence that parents play a key role in children's learning processes and outcomes (Rodriguez, 2019; Yulianti, Denessen & Droop, 2018). In an educational context, parents have been regarded as experts in children's experiences and their knowledge is recognised as a crucial part of curriculum and educational practices (Watchman & Spencer-Caveliere, 2017).

Just as the world is composed of different values and practices, the ways of learning in children vary greatly and this, to a certain extent, depends on their parents' knowledge about what and how children learn. Some parents may see children's cognitive performance as important while others tend to emphasise children's play. The connection between parents' knowledge and children's learning experience has been a focal point of scholarly attention (Niklas, Cohrssen & Tayler, 2016; To & Chan, 2012).

This comparative project explores preschool parents' knowledge about children's learning through surveying their perspectives. Participants comprised 200 preschool parents from China and Japan. Placing parents' knowledge at the centre of the analysis, the study provides a distinctive lens for understanding the similarities and differences between their perspectives. The purpose is to extend current discourses on children's learning in the contexts where such an investigation is largely absent.

Significance of the research

A Western-driven discourse of education has dominated scholarly studies. There was little research on preschool children's learning in Asian countries and most of this looked at policies and teaching practices (Lee, 2014; Luo, Tamis-LeMonda & Song, 2013), which tended to subscribe to notions of skill development, knowledge acquisition and proper

behaviours by assuming "a making of young children as miniature students" (Lee, 2014, p.157).

One noted feature of some research on children's learning in Asian countries is the general use of *Asia* as a catch-all term (Lee, 2014; Lin, 2012). As a personally, socially and culturally constructed concept, learning can take many forms (Silseth & Arnseth, 2011), thus bringing to the fore questions like 'are there differences in Asian children's learning between different countries?'; 'what and how Asian preschool children learn in their families?' and 'how do parents perceive children's learning?'

From the perspective that family values and practices propel children's learning, it is surprising that little attention has been directed at seeking Asian parents' knowledge about what and how children learn in preschool years. This paper aims to make a contribution in this regard by identifying and analysing Asian parents' perspectives on children's learning in order to broaden and diversify the concept.

China and Japan are the most populated nations in East Asia. A study in these countries would inform us of some important ways in which learning is understood. There is evidence that "the UK and USA looked to East Asia for models" (Bray, 2014, p.24). In so doing, the expectation of the current study is to generate insights that might inform the understandings now valorised in Western scholarship.

A comparative study between China and Japan is of considerable significance for several reasons. First, comparative research contributes to extended knowledge in education. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is leading efforts to conduct educational research through a comparative approach, in order to identify "practical ways to extend the quantity, improve the quality, and appropriately orient the direction of education around the world" (Bray, 2014, p.27). Comparative research is effective in terms of questioning taken-for-granted specifics, understanding variations in practice, and achieving more completed and balanced understandings (Samuelsson, Sheridan & Williams, 2006).

Secondly, Japan and China share some educational traditions (Tu, 1996), but they differ in their family arrangements and in the extent to which families and societies commit themselves to the contemporary global influences (Tobin, Hsueh & Karasawa, 2009). According to Manzon (2014, p.100), a comparative study is valid only "when the units for comparison have sufficient in common to make analysis of their differences meaningful". It is the assumption of this study that similar traditions and distinctive situations between China and Japan provide not only similar versions of children's learning but also room for significant differences, thereby creating a valid comparison of the cases.

Thirdly, to our knowledge, there has not been any research to date which explores parents' perspectives of preschool children's learning through a comparative approach. While the variability in how parents understood early childhood education has perhaps been best illustrated in a very recent edited book which included 19 countries (Philipson & Garvis, 2019), attention was paid to early childhood education in general but not

specifically to children's learning. Very little attempt was made to compare and look across at the countries. China and Japan were not included in the book.

Since there is a legitimate need for parents' input in children's learning, and since, to our knowledge, no comparative investigation has been conducted on such a focus, a study of this nature certainly seems warranted.

Relevant literature

Children's learning: The English discourse

Children's learning has been discussed very extensively in English publications and there seems to be some consensus on what it involves and how it should happen. According to Taylor (2015), learning in preschool years means "to know, to do, to live together, and to be" (p.160). This point is consistent with an earlier account by Katz (2008), who wrote in her well-known article on what young children should learn that learning meant the development of knowledge, skills, dispositions and feelings. Others, such as Hargraves (2014) see learning by young children as constructing working theories, which for her means "the construction and application of knowledge, skills and dispositions" (p.320).

Among all, learning disposition is an aspect which appears to have gained the most prominence as an approach and outcome of great importance in children's learning. Early childhood scholars (Katz, 2008; Perkins, Jay & Tishman, 1993) have long expressed learning dispositions, or habits of mind, such as curiosity or creativity, as desirable learning outcomes. At the heart of learning disposition is an intentional and motivational system, with the emphasis on the strengths and capabilities of each child, giving rise to a claim that learning is underpinned and driven by children's "tendencies to put their capabilities into action" (Perkins et al., 1993, p.75).

The constructivist and social constructivist perspectives have been the key theories cited in the discussions about how children learn (Soysal & Radmard, 2017). The unifying feature of these accounts, which confirm that children's learning is the result of their participation and collaboration with the learning community, is that they are each built around the key idea of active learners. The legitimacy of teachers as definers of what and how children learn has therefore been challenged by the contemporary scholarship, which has advocated less of directed teaching and more of child centred learning (Silseth & Arnseth, 2011), and subscribed to notions of play, everyday experience, and inquiry making.

In spite of these common points, children's learning is by no means a universally established discourse. Diverse and locally embedded values and approaches contribute to some different ways in which children learn.

Children's learning in China

The way that researchers have gone about understanding Chinese children's learning involves assuming a strong influence of the Chinese tradition. Confucian ideals are pointed out as the most remarkable cultural underpinnings (Ribbens, Phoenix, Yu & Xu, 2017).

In Confucian terms, learning is aligned with the development of proper characteristics that lead to a self-perfection (Li & Wang, 2004). An ideal person pursues knowledge to the best of one's ability (Wang, 2007). A devotion to the "individual intellectual development, skill acquisition and love for learning" has been strongly emphasised in relation to one's learning (Wang, 2007, p.416). In Chinese culture, hereditary factors are not as important as a heart for learning so "one can go beyond what nature has given" (Li & Wang, 2004, p. 419). For this reason, "if a person is perceived as refusing to learn, he or she may be regarded as socially irresponsible , and worse yet, immoral (not wanting to strive to be good)" (Chao, 1995, p. 126). With this orientation, there is a strong emphasis on children's early learning, competition and achievement (Li & Chen, 2017). Parents are regarded as playing a key role in making and helping children to learn and children achieve for their families (Li & Wang, 2004).

Since the 'open door' policy in the early 1980s and the exposure to Western practices, children's needs, choices and rights have become a dominant discursive orientation in early childhood education in China (Qi & Melhuish, 2017). This has applied significant insights to the construction of learning in Chinese children. Emerging in the early childhood field is a strong orientation towards children's play, individuality and active learning (Li & Chen, 2017).

It is evident that Chinese society today is studded with a variety of conceptions about children's learning (Qi & Melhuish, 2017). Children's learning sits in a wider context for achieving an integrated and balanced experience "between traditional Confucian ethics and values and the new global values" (Yin, Li & Wang, 2014, p.296). For parents, the richness of information in relation to children's learning provides an arena that can be either a valuable resource or a conceptual and practical confusion. It is therefore an unfortunate finding that Tobin et al. (2009) noted that "Chinese parents give their children too much attention, too little attention, the wrong kind of attention, or all three" (p.38). For them, this is attributable to "the anxieties and concerns about how the Chinese family and Chinese society are changing in response to the acceleration of economic and social change" (p.38).

Children's learning in Japan

The predominant values underpinning children's learning in Japan have been the "cultural characteristics of East Asia" (Zhai, 2017, p.12). The values are reflected in children's attributes and behaviours, including, for example, interdependence, empathy and responsibility (Ferguson & Kuby, 2015). According to Izumi-Taylor and Rogers (2016), despite the fact that Japanese made numerous attempts to draw together diverse insights

and practices from many countries, a clear goal of children's learning is still socialisation based on their own values.

Japanese religious beliefs are critical to the development of young learners. In Japan, children's learning and development are couched in terms of a divine nature and "the good child identity which assume all children are basically good and should be given more ample opportunities" (Burke, 2008, p.150). Hegde, Sugita, Crane-Mitchell and Averett (2014) described Japanese children's learning as being facilitated by a strong notion of play and children's everyday life experience. A close look at Japanese preschools reveals that the idea of 'whole child' forms the basis of children's learning (Ferguson & Kuby, 2015). Tobin et al. (2009) pointed out that Japanese preschool children are "given the opportunity to be *kodomo-rashii* (childlike)" (p. 108).

The notions of *uchi* (inside) and *soto* (outside), with their emphasis on a clear boundary between children's environments add further dimensions to our understandings of children's learning. The dualistic distinction that "*uchi* is the private, intimate arena" and "*soto* is the public arena", and they are different from each other, is used to define children's learning within their families and outside in the public spaces (Burke, 2008, p.140). One of the central principles in the ideology which underpins *uchi* and *soto* is the knowledge about what to do in different contexts (Hayashi, 2011). Learning in *uchi* is for the development of intimacy in a relaxed form while the focus of *soto* is on a cooperative public relationship and group activities (Burke, 2008). According to Burke, Japanese children at a very young age know the difference between *uchi* and *soto* and the different behaviours associated with these contexts.

Unlike China who has been strongly influenced by globalisation, Japan has been trying hard to maintain its own cultural and national identity. In Tobin's (2011) analysis, for a society such as Japan that has seen a loss of its cultural values in the modern times, there is a legitimate reason for children to learn "to be Japanese, to have the cultural traits, behaviours and beliefs that are seen as traditionally Japanese and as in danger of disappearing in post-modern Japan" (p.19).

The current study

The purpose of this study was to explore Japanese and Chinese preschool parents' perspectives of children's learning through their responses to survey questions. Participants comprised 100 parents from Tokyo, Japan (89 females and 11 males) and 100 parents from Shenyang, China (72 females and 28 males) and they ranged from 26 to 43 years of age and all had higher education qualifications. The respondent pool was created on the basis of the researchers' relationship with the preschools where the parents had at least one child attending. The similar demographic situations between the two cities also formed the decision for the chosen participants. Shenyang is the capital of Liaoning Province and the largest city in North East China. Its cultural, economic and educational contexts are comparative with those in Tokyo.

The research drew on the results of the parents' responses to survey questions. This method was used because it allowed for confidentiality and was therefore considered to provide more accurate answers. Survey research was also useful in cross-cultural studies, because it was more likely to reduce cultural bias (Fairbrother, 2014).

The research was conducted in line with the ethical guidelines at Deakin University and the Chinese and Japanese participating institutions, by ensuring that participants gave informed consent. All the survey responses were anonymous but steps were still taken to make sure that limited contextual information was revealed during dissemination.

The questions posed to the participants were open ended in order to encourage open responses. In addition, drawing on the advice of Lee and Fouts (2005), we made the questions as simple as possible in order to enable participants' understandings and achieve comparability of the results. The survey questions are shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Survey questions

Question 1	What do you think your child should learn in the early childhood years?
Question 2	How should your child learn?
Question 3	What are undesirable learning behaviours of a child?
Question 4	What does your child tend to do when he or she does not go to the preschool?
Question 5	What do you tend to do with your child?
Question 6	What do you expect your child to learn at the preschool?
Question 7	What do you want your child's teachers to do with your child's learning?
Question 8	Do you have any questions or comments to make in regards to your child's learning?

Participants were approached before the data collection. They were briefed about the study by the first author who is fluent in Chinese. The Japanese study was conducted by a Japanese early childhood academic and an English-Japanese research assistant.

The first author one and an English-Japanese translator respectively translated the two sets of data into English. Data were analysed using content analysis to examine participants' responses in relation to the research questions. The research team worked together to analyse the texts to identify their frequencies.

Specifically, we took the following steps in the process: (1) reading through the responses; (2) identifying parts of the responses relevant to the research questions and labelling them as codes; (3) creating response categories by putting together related codes; and (4) arranging response categories into results. In our analysis, multiple codes were counted as separate responses. The Appendix shows the frequency of the responses across the two groups.

To increase the precision and credibility of the results, the technique of peer review was adopted. The second author and the Japanese early childhood academic helped review the

data. The purpose was to clarify and consolidate the researchers' understanding of the responses, making sure of the accuracy and equivalence of English translations.

Results

What should a child learn?

Twenty-six categories were generated from the two groups. *Self-care* was the most frequent category in the Chinese data (n=60), and *social skills* was mentioned the most in the Japanese group (n=91). In both cases, some categories were created from a similar number of responses, including *healthy routines; expressing self; curiosity; making the right judgements* and *a sense of safety and protection*. Another eight categories were also identified in both groups but differed in their frequencies. These included *developing a happy and positive personality; curiosity; academic knowledge and skills; independent thinking; developing and following interests; social manners; knowing what they want; developing intellectual abilities; a healthy body; active listening* and *self-discipline*. For example, *academic knowledge and skills* was identified by 15 Chinese parents. In contrast, only three Japanese parents made this point. *Children's social manner* was more preferred by Japanese parents (n=28) than their Chinese counterparts (n=6). Some categories were only generated in one group. *Sports; attributes for a quality life* and *understanding some cultural traditions* were identified by the Chinese parents while *problem solving; a wide range of interests; following rules* and *playing hard* were responses found only among the Japanese.

How should a child learn?

Play was the most frequently mentioned point in both the Chinese (n=49) and Japanese groups (n=55). Examples included: 'play is the best way a child learns' (Japanese Participant/JP 23); 'play makes children learn' (Chinese Participant/CP 77). In addition, *a free and happy approach to learning* was the category that was generated by an equal number of responses (n=16) in both groups. However, a larger number of parents in Japan described *real life experiences; children's own interests; praise and encouragement* and *group experience* as effective ways of learning for children. Further differences between the two groups were shown in the ways in which the Chinese parents described the *continuity between home and preschool education; readings; sports* and *asking questions* as how children should learn whereas the Japanese participants talked about *sitting at the desk and study; doing housework* and *hands-on activities; trials and errors; outdoor in nature* and *parents' and teachers' instructions* as useful approaches in children's learning.

What are undesirable learning behaviours of a child?

Parents from the two groups identified 11 undesirable learning behaviours in children. Among them, three were common: *passive learning; avoiding difficulties* and *repeating mistakes*. The majority of responses from the Chinese group was *avoiding difficulties* (n=59) while in the Japanese group was *passive learning* (n=26). In comparison, Chinese parents made many more responses (n=201) to this question than the Japanese participants (n=49). This could indicate the difference between the parent's attitudes towards children's learning

behaviours. An example of response from the Japanese parents is 'no behaviour is undesirable in children because they are changing all the time' (JP 90). Even so, three categories in the Japanese data were not found in the Chinese group. These were *trying to be number one; being a good child from others' perspectives* and *refusing to socialise*. What was not seen in the Japanese data that appeared in the Chinese group was: *rote learning; unfocused and disengaged* and *learning without gains*.

What does your child do when the child does not go to the preschool?

Nine activities that children tended to do in their after preschool hours were described by both groups, despite the variation in the frequency of parents' responses. These activities included *play; housework; extracurricular activities; spending time with the family; playground or park; reading; visiting friends or relatives; travelling* and *doing anything the child wants*. Among them, *extracurricular* was the most frequently mentioned activity in the Chinese data (n=93), while Japanese children *spent most of their time with their families* (n=47). Chinese parents (n=87) identified *children's play* more frequently than the Japanese parents (n=22). The Japanese parents (n=38) on the other hand gave much more importance to *children's involvement in housework*. *Going to playgrounds or parks* was described with similar frequencies in both countries (C/n=34; J/n=40). *Reading* was a noticeably regular activity for Chinese children (n=36) while *visiting friends or relatives* was what Japanese children did quite often (n=19). *Watching TV* (n=19) and *doing physical activities for body exercises* (n=7) were evidently pointed out by Chinese parents while the Japanese group mentioned *growing vegetables* (n=8) *and relaxing at home* (n=4) as children's activities. Further, one Chinese parent stated 'having tests with me or in some classes is what my child does sometimes' (CP14).

What do you tend to do with your child at home?

A remarkable number of 288 responses were made by the Chinese parents while their Japanese counterparts contributed 100. In total, nine categories were generated from both groups and among them, *play* was identified as the key activity that Chinese parents did with their children (n=82) and *doing house work* was the main one that Japanese parents identified (n=34). Apart from *sports* which was mentioned by five Chinese parents, all the other eight categories were generated from both groups despite the significant difference in the number of responses from each group. *Play; creating something together; watching TV; reading; helping the child with the child's learning* and *practising music* more frequently took place in Chinese families. On the other hand, Japanese parents shared much more *housework* and *talked* more with their children.

What do you expect your child to learn at the preschool?

A total of 18 experiences were provided by the two groups. Among them, seven were shared. 36 Chinese and 48 Japanese identified *social skills* as what their children should learn at the preschool, which was the category that appeared most in both groups. Examples of this type of responses included: 'cooperation, care, learning together' (CP 45) and 'cooperation, negotiation, peer conflict resolution, care, empathy and open communication' (JP 5). *Children's independence*; *experience with the group routines* and *group rules*

were other experiences that were also quite frequently described. *Experiencing successes and failures* and *reading and writing* were pointed out by similarly small numbers of parents in both countries. There was also a considerable variation in the responses between the two groups. Quite a large number of Japanese parents identified *active listening; a broad range of interests; effective communications; sitting and listening for a certain length of time* and *making decisions* as what they expected their children to learn in the preschools while none of the Chinese parents described these. In much the same way, some of the responses by the Chinese parents were not given by their Japanese counterparts. These were *performing well in learning; socio-dramatic play in the theme of professions; to be recognised* and *developing a habit for learning.*

What do you want your child's teachers to do with your child's learning?

Twenty categories were identified in the two groups. They were generated from a total number of 259 Chinese responses and 117 Japanese responses. A large number of Japanese parents (n=31) expected teachers to develop their children's *active listening skills* whereas the highest number of the Chinese responses (n=87) was made in relation to teachers' role in *guiding their children's development* by 'telling what is more suitable for my child' (CP22) and 'making the child progress' (CP37). Eight categories were shared between the two groups while the number of responses varied considerably: *developing children's moral concepts; teaching knowledge and skills; guiding development; looking after children; providing individualised education; loving but strict; creating children's group habits* and *understanding children*. Within each group, the second most frequently mentioned point was *teacher's teaching* in the Chinese group (n=48) and *developing children's group habits* in the Japanese group (n=17). Chinese parents also expected teachers to *encourage children's decisions; be interested in each child; create a happy and safe learning environment; develop children's social skills; communicate with parents* and *inspire children*. Their Japanese counterparts did not make these responses. In contrast, the Japanese group provided six points which were not found in the Chinese group: *developing children's habits and skills to actively listen; teaching children social rules; helping children manage their emotions; preparing children for school; sharing with children their own experiences* and *providing children with various learning opportunities*, for example, 'taking care of animals' (JP11).

Parents' questions, comments and concerns

Parents' questions, comments and concerns was a voluntary question but it generated 36 categories, presenting the most categories among all the survey questions. Within them, 32 came from the Chinese data. Eight were generated from the Japanese group with four being shared with the Chinese group. A great number of the Chinese parents expressed *children's challenging and wilful behaviours* as a concern (n=17). Examples of such responses included 'crying nonstop' (CP8), and 'not listening to parents' (CP60). Children's learning and learning behaviours were frequently mentioned in Chinese parents' responses. *How to develop children's social skills; whether children should attend extracurricular activities* and *how to help a child to avoid bullies* were three most frequently raised questions. Parents' concerns about their own parenting were also evident in the Chinese data. These included, for example, *how to communicate with children; appropriately love children* and *control parents' own emotions*. A large number of Japanese parents (n=17) described their emotional control as well. The other

categories that were generated in both groups were the questions about *how to maintain close parent-child relationships; if a child needs to be prepared for school* and *how to develop children's social skills*. Four categories that were only generated in the Japanese data included: *children develop both independence and interdependence* (n=10); *children are happy* (n=2); *children experience various things to grow strongly* (n=11) and *children keep their own interests but also learn rules* (n=9).

Discussion

Past studies have viewed parents' knowledge about children's learning as insightful and valuable (Niklas et al., 2016; Reyes, Idding & Feller, 2015). The findings of the current study illustrated such a view as parents presented their perspectives of children's learning. Their responses ranged widely in focus and there was clear evidence that children's knowledge, skills, dispositions and feelings were all integral components of the parents' perspectives. Interwoven into the parents' responses were obviously Taylor's (2015) four pillars of children's learning: "learning to know, to do, to live together, and to be" (p.160). The results thus provided us with a window into how children's learning was widely perceived in Asia and challenged the previous view that Asian children were shaped into miniature school children (Lee, 2014; Luo et al., 2013). Parents' perspectives of children's learning and the diversity of Asian experiences were what were overlooked in other research and it was clear in this study that learning was a diverse concept and it was dangerous to generalise or make considerations through a single lens.

The purpose of the study was to explore and compare Chinese and Japanese parents' perspectives of children's learning. The results showed three points that were made by similar numbers of parents in the two countries: *children's development of healthy routines; the importance of play* and *children's social development*. Clear ideas emerged that the parents saw children's learning as focusing on the development of healthy, playful and socially competent learners. Considering many other common categories between the two groups, for example, *healthy body; self-care; children's own interests* and *children's group experiences*, it is possible to infer that parent's construction of children's learning in both countries tends to be oriented to children's physical wellbeing, social development and interest-based experiences. These results are strikingly parallel to Hu, Yang and Leong's (2016) research with Chinese parents as well as Rodrigues, Padez and Machado-Rodrigues' (2017) study in Portugal. They both reported how parents were trying to raise playful, physically healthy and socially competent children. This common view among parents highlights some essential elements as central to conceptualising children's learning across countries.

Many other responses in the present study also emerged as being made similarly by the two groups. The parents shared beliefs in the importance of children's development of, for example, *expressions; curiosity; academic skills; independent thinking; concentration; interests* and *a sense of safety*. Similarly, all the parents spoke of *observing and imitating others, predictable routines* and *child's own interests* as appropriate ways in which children should learn. Their viewpoints swirled around some identifiable focus in relation to what and how children should learn although different numbers of responses were generated from the groups. Apparently, parents in some different countries have been able to develop a certain level of similar

knowledge about children's learning (Bourn, 2016; Whalley, 2017) and this is especially so with Japan and China due to some common traditions in relation to education (Tu, 1996). Taken together, the results suggest that children's learning in a wide range of areas is not merely a unique phenomenon in a particular context but rather a serious and significant educational matter across countries.

The distinction regarding children's learning in their families was easily identified between the two groups. Apart from taking children to playgrounds or parks, Japanese and Chinese parents shared little in their accounts of what their child did after preschool time. Results indicated that almost all Chinese children in this study (93%) attended extracurricular activities and a relatively large number of Japanese children (47%) spent time with their families or helped with housework (38%).

These differences between Chinese and Japanese children's after preschool learning experiences are, in fact, deeply rooted in cultural and contextual characteristics of children's education in the two countries. What is referred to as pursuing knowledge in the Chinese culture has constructed a constant learning dimension in children's lives where children are expected to take any possible opportunities to develop their knowledge (Li & Wang, 2004). In contrast, Japanese people have accorded children's learning with their socialisation and given priority to children's everyday experiences. Ferguson and Kuby (2015) noted that everyday life is embedded in Japanese children's learning experiences.

Why did so many Chinese parents arrange extracurricular opportunities for children? Drawing on the past studies, we interpret this in several ways. Firstly, this could be attributed to the role of families in children's learning. When home-based learning is strongly empathised in the Chinese tradition (Lau & Rao, 2011), it is understandable that parents take children's learning after preschool hours seriously. Secondly, cultural traditions in relation to learning could still play an important role. While play and children's choices are increasingly given importance in children's learning, the main focus in many parts of China is still early learning and achievement (Li & Chen, 2017). For this reason, it can be the case that play and children's choices slip into purposefully organised learning experiences (Hu, Yang & Leong, 2016). Thirdly, from Yin, Li and Wang's (2014) point of view, Chinese parents' arrangements of children's extracurricular activities are driven by a strong intention to maximise children's learning opportunities. Fourthly, in Rodrigues, Padez and Machado-Rodrigues's (2017) words, the phenomenon of children's extracurricular participation portrays a group of active but anxious parents who do not want their children to fall behind.

Unlike their Chinese counterparts, a much smaller number of responses were made by the Japanese parents in regards to children' extracurricular activities. Of particular importance for children's family experience in the traditional Japanese context is a sense of contribution and closeness in a relaxed environment (Burke, 2008). This traditional practice seemed to have been embraced by the participating Japanese parents. At first glance, Japanese parents appeared to be relaxed with their child's learning and the parents' own role in the child's learning experience. However, when looking more in depth into

the data, there was a significantly high number of parent's interactions with their child through housework and spending time together, suggesting that Japanese family was a site where children socialised into family members and developed their life-oriented skills and experiences.

In regards to children's learning in preschools, Japanese parents provided a similarly high number of perspectives as the Chinese group. This is an interesting result and could be explained by the popular notions of *soto* and *uchi* in the Japanese culture, revealing the parents' embracing of an ideology that home is for the development of intimacy, whereas the focus at *soto* is formal learning and group experiences (Hayashi, 2011).

Children's preschool experience is another question, apart from children's undesirable learning behaviours that received very dissimilar responses from the two groups. Among the 18 responses that the parents contributed, only seven were shared. Further, despite the fact that Japanese parents made much less responses to the questions of children's learning with the families, they contributed more points than the Chinese group in relation to children's preschool experiences. Japanese parents' stronger expectation for children's preschool learning was testament again to the functioning of *soto* in the Japanese society as parents constructed preschool as an important *soto* where children developed their formal learning experiences. Without such a boundary in their mind, the Chinese group did not appear to think that preschool was more important than their homes in terms of supporting children's learning.

Previous research has shown that expectations and perceptions for the role of teachers in children's learning differ between different parents (Jungert, Landry, Joussemet, Mageau, Gingras & Koestner, 2015). Not surprisingly, parents in the present research made some dissimilar points about their expectations for the preschool teachers. Chinese parents gave many more responses and many of them spoke of teachers with a focus on how *teachers should guide their child development; teach necessary knowledge; develop children's moral concepts* and *look after children*. A few Chinese parents also expected *teachers to understand their child*, *be interested in each child* and *act as a liaison with the child parents*. It was however very apparent that the Japanese parents did not give much thought to the role of preschool teachers. We found this result very interesting. While they made many responses in relation to children's learning in preschools, the Japanese parents did not seem to expect teachers to do much. It seems that the Japanese parents were not preoccupied with what teachers could do but instead they expected their child to experience a natural learning process as a member of the preschool group. On the contrary, the Chinese data supports the findings of previous studies that Chinse parents had high expectations for teachers' work with their children (Lau & Rao, 2011; To & Chan, 2012).

The data illustrate an anxious image of parenthood experienced by the Chinese parents, a result consistent with Tobin et al's (2009) findings. Despite the fact that parents' comments were an unrequested item, 32 categories were generated from the Chinese group. This was not matched by the Japanese data which suggested only 8 categories. The Chinese data were structured around several recurring responses addressing *children's extracurricular activities; behaviours; parent-child communications* and *children's social experiences*.

None of the Japanese parents were concerned about their child's behaviours but some Japanese parents pointed out their *own emotions* and *parent-child relationships* and this was similarly listed in the Chinese group. What was distinctive about the Japanese data was some expectations that their *child could get various learning experience* and *there are opportunities for children to learn both independence and interdependence*, and to *follow their own interests* and *learn the rules*. Obviously, the Japanese parents were looking forward to various experiences in their child's learning and this could have also explained why they did not describe many undesirable behaviours.

At the vertical level of data analysis, when looking again at all the points cited by each group, the frequency with which the words *real life* and *social* or *group* occur is striking with the Japanese respondents, which crop up in almost all the questions in relation to children's learning. We found an overwhelming description of *children's extracurricular activities* in the Chinese group, which is the most frequently occurring response among all the data. These findings indicate the most salient activities or experiences through which learning occurs with children in the two participating groups.

Conclusion

Our discussion in this study focused on the perspectives of Japanese and Chinese preschool parents on their children's learning. In exploring the results, we were struck by both the common threads that revealed parents' values, expectations and concerns, and the ways how parents' perspectives were woven into their own specific patterns. The study reveals that children's learning sits in a wide cultural and international context. It is therefore crucial that no single model is foisted upon early childhood education, in such a way as to override other traditions and the rich diversity of experiences through which children learn.

The findings have implications for education. In a period of increasing globalisation and educational convergence, it is vital that comparative analyses of children's learning become part of the discourse that challenges dominant views regarding what and how children learn, to incorporate the contextual, multifaceted and complex aspects of children's experiences. While comparative research is increasingly popular in early childhood education, absent from it is a clear commitment to parents' knowledge, especially in the context of Asian countries. There is considerable evidence from the present research to suggest that parents are knowledgeable and they are an essential part of their construction of children's experiences.

It is important to understand the limitations of the current study. There are some disadvantages to using broad questions and our focus was not on in-depth perspectives of parents which could complement the approach taken in this research design. This questionnaire study was limited in the extent to which it could enable an in-depth exploration of children's learning, as understood by parents. The causal relationship between the responses and participants was not determined, in the absence of specific information about parents' backgrounds. In future research, socioeconomic information should be included as a variable to understand how participants' backgrounds are

associated with their perspectives. Further, our study samples were admittedly narrow. We did not include parents from a wider range of communities or social groups and children should have been part of the research in order to obtain more profound information about the topic.

In view of these limitations, we have proposed that the concept of children's learning be more specified to encompass detailed information from the parents through face to face interviews, and by including teachers' and children's perceptions and feelings about children's experiences. The further study of children's learning in the form of comparative research will need to gather evidence from richer and wider perspectives. Research of this kind would link parents, children, teachers and researchers in the close examination of children's learning experiences.

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Appendix: Response categories and parents' responses

Questions	Response categories	By Chinese (n=100)	By Japanese (n=100)
What do you think your child should learn in the early childhood years?	Self-care.	60	45
	Healthy routines (e.g. enough sleep, healthy diets).	36	33
	Happy and a positive personality.	18	4
	Expressing self.	18	17
	Curiosity.	16	12
	Academic knowledge and skills.	15	3
	Independent thinking.	12	39
	Ability to tell wrong from the right.	9	7
	Sports.	3	
	Attributes for a quality life (love and to be loved).	4	
	Developing and following interests.	17	4
	Concentration.	3	7
	Social manners (e.g. greeting others, be polite; respectful).	6	28
	Social skills (e.g. cooperative, make and keep friends).	37	91
	Sense of safety and self-protection.	11	13
	Persistent.	2	8
	Understanding some cultural traditions.	3	
	Self-recognition.	1	10
	Develop intellectual abilities through games such as lego.	3	1
	Healthy body.	2	13
	Active listening.	6	29
	Problem solving.		18
	A wide range of interests.		15
	Following rules.		22
	Playing hard.		9
	Self-discipline.	2	5

How should your child learn?	Observing and imitating others.	12	27
	Play (games, activities).	49	55
	Real life experiences.	19	39
	Through concreate examples and visual resources.	6	
	A free and happy approach.	16	16
	Be provided with a learning environment.	3	1
	Through predictable routine activities.	6	5
	Through own interest.	13	37
	Through continued education between home and preschool.	2	
	Through own initiatives and actions.	7	28
	Be praised and encouraged.	3	19
	Through readings.	2	
	Through sports (e.g. running).	2	
	Asking questions.	3	
	Peer and group experience.	2	41
	Cultural resources.	3	
	Sit at the desk and study.		4
	Helping with house work and hands on activities.		7
	Trial and errors.		16
	Outdoor in nature.		11
	Parents or teachers' instruction or guidance.		28
What are undesirable learning behaviours of a young child?	Passive learning (e.g. only following others).	18	26
	Rote learning.	37	
	Unfocused and disengaged.	58	
	Learning without gains (not learned what should be learned).	3	
	Avoid difficulties. Finish things on the half way.	59	14
	Lazy. Rely too much on parents.	18	
	Repeating mistakes.	2	3
	Does not like study or learn new things.	6	
	Trying to be number 1.		2
	Be a 'good' child from others' perspectives.		3
	Refuse to socialise.		1
What does your child tend to do when the child does not go to the pre-school?	Play (e.g. free play, play toys, play games, with siblings or others).	87	22
	Housework.	3	38
	Extra curriculum activities (e.g. music, arts, English).	93	15
	Spending time with the family outside (e.g. shopping, eating)	27	47
	Watching TV.	19	
	Playground or park.	34	40
	Reading (e.g. home or library).	36	2
	Physical activities for body exercise.	7	
	Visiting relatives or friends.	3	19
	Tests (in other courses).	1	
	Traveling.	6	7
	Doing whatever the child wants to do.	2	1
	Growing vegetables.		8
	Relaxing at home.		4

What do you tend to do with your child at home?	Play.	82	3
	Creating something together (e.g. artwork, construction).	61	4
	Reading (e.g. stories).	66	17
	Watching TV or movie (children's cartoon).	18	5
	Help the child with the child's learning (writing, numeracy…).	22	6
	House work.	3	34
	Practise music.	9	3
	Talking.	22	28
	Sports.	5	
What do you expect your child to learn at the pre-school?	Social skills and engagement (cooperative, empathy).	36	48
	Independence.	17	14
	Perform well in every aspect of the learning.	2	
	Group routines.	19	15
	Self confidence in groups.	6	
	Experience what the child cannot do or learn at home.	23	7
	Socio-dramatic play in the theme of professions.	1	
	Develop an interest in learning.	16	2
	Follow rules.	19	29
	To be recognised.	2	
	Habits for learning.	17	
	Experience success and failure.	3	5
	Reading and writing.	4	3
	Active listening.		31
	Be interested in everything and trying out for everything.		18
	Effective communication (e.g. expressing self, negotiating).		29
	Sit and listen for a certain length of time.		15
	Make decisions.		5
What do you want your child's teachers to do with your child's learning?	Developing children's moral concepts.	31	9
	Teaching (e.g. knowledge, skills).	48	8
	Guiding development.	87	10
	Encourage children's decisions.	6	
	Look after children.	26	4
	Individualised education.	3	5
	Be interested in each child.	6	
	Loving but strict.	2	7
	Creating a relaxed and safe earning environment.	19	
	Develop children's group habits.	9	17
	Develop children's social skills.	6	
	Understanding children.	11	3
	Communicate with parents about children.	3	
	Inspire children.	2	
	Develop children's habit and skills to actively listen.		31
	Teaching children social rules.		4
	Help children manage emotions.		5
	Prepare children for school.		4
	Sharing with children their own experiences.		2

	Provide children with various learning opportunities (e.g. take care of animals).		8
Parents' questions or comments in regards to your child's learning	How to develop children's appropriate learning habits?	3	
	How to effectively communicate with the child?	7	
	Children's occasional curiosity might interrupt daily plans.	1	
	Should the child go to extra curricula activities?	11	
	Children getting challenging and wilful.	17	
	Control parents' own emotions.	10	17
	Should a child should win at the start?	2	
	How to understand children's developmental features and changes.	6	
	How to maintain close parent-child relationships?	2	2
	Children's short attention span.	7	
	How to be a good model for the child?	3	
	Various influences in the outside world are hard to avoid.	1	
	How to develop children's social skills.	13	
	Not be able to understand children.	1	9
	How to keep children motivated.	7	
	If the child needs to be prepared for school.	2	5
	How to appropriately love the child.	6	
	The child is too ineffective.	2	
	When children see bad things in society, how to communicate to them?	11	
	Children's emotional regulations.	3	
	Balance children's interests and their needs for social competitions.	6	
	How to develop children's learning habits?	7	
	A soft child who gets bullied.	9	
	The child gets addicted to digital games or TV shows.	4	
	A child who does not like outdoor play.	1	
	A child who only likes story books but does not like science books.	1	
	Should physical means (penalty) be used with a child?	1	
	Mum and dad have different beliefs and practices with the child.	1	
	How should a child learn about sensitive things such as death or sex?	1	
	A child who repeats mistakes.	1	
	Building a child's confidence.	1	
	I want the child to experience both good and bad experiences to learn.	3	
	I want the child to develop both independence and interdependence.		10
	I want the child to be happy.		2
	I want my child to experience various things to grow strongly.		11
	I want the child to keep his own interest but also learns rules.		9

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