

The Market-Oriented Education Approach Brings Challenges to the Practice-Based Learning Approach in Pre-school Higher Education

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Abstract

Universities in China are encouraged by the Chinese government to adopt a practice-based learning approach in the Higher Education sector. Such emphasis exerts great impacts on the traditional practice-based pre-school Higher Education and has also imposed some challenges onto academics in Universities. The market-oriented approach requires Universities to emphasize employability skills that meet the demands of delivering a modernized and international pre-school education. Universities need to adapt their curriculum design to embed practical training on employability skills into the curriculum. Building on our existing knowledge, the pre-school curriculum is aiming to work with pre-school practitioners. Bridging the gap between University teaching and practical skills required by the pre-school sector, this process facilitates practice-based learning for students and improves research for academics. Piloting practice-based learning allows Universities to focus on enhancing employability skills and helping Universities adapt their curriculum to achieve the desirable employability skills they want their graduates to have. As a result, the practice-based learning approach informs Universities' curriculum design and quality standards so that graduates develop employable attributes.

Key words: Market-oriented approach; Integration

between Universities and pre-school practitioners; Pre-school education; Practice-based learning

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1. INTRODUCTION

Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area has become a national strategy to boost the local economy. The urban agglomeration of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area has attracted a large number of international talents. There is an increasing demand for high-quality talents who specialize in pre-school education. The Chinese Ministry of Education highlights the important role of a market-oriented approach in the Higher Education sector. Such emphasis imposes some challenges on Universities' pre-school education and changes the way how Universities design their curriculum and engage with their students. The concepts of student-centered and market approaches allow Universities to re-design their curriculum activities to help their students understand the needs of our society, and most importantly, cultivate students' perception of pre-school education as a service. For the Chinese Ministry of Education, the practice-based learning approach represents one of the most important attributes of building a world-class undergraduate degree.¹

¹ Implementation opinions of the ministry of education on the construction of first-class undergraduate courses [EB/OL].2019-10-24. Retrieved from http://www.moe.gov.cn/srbsite/A08/s7056/201910/t20191031_406269.html

2. BACKGROUND OF TRADITIONAL PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION AND ITS CURRICULUM

Although there is an extensive literature on pre-school education in the last 40 years, the research on the effects of the practice-based learning approach adopted by the pre-school discipline is still scarce. It is challenging for educators to understand how to connect practitioners with pre-school educators, and which education style is most effective in enhancing students' learning (Wang, Ding, & Liu, 2019). From the "Opinions on Strengthening the Educational Practice of University Students" whitepaper outlined by the Chinese Ministry of Education in March 2016, "the practice-based learning approach is not reflected in the undergraduate pre-school discipline". Employability skills are missing from Chinese Universities' curriculum and teaching activities. Graduates often lack crucial skills that potential employers (e.g., pre-schools, primary schools, special schools, etc.) desire.² In 2017, the whitepaper on "Implementation Measures for University Professional Qualification (Interim) proposed by the Chinese Ministry of Education clearly outlines the specific quality assurance standards to monitor University degrees. The outlined quality assurance benchmark highlights the value of "student-centered, market-oriented, and continuous improvement".³ To satisfy the demands of employers, the practice-based learning approach was documented in the whitepaper which specifies the quality assurance standards and benchmarks for pre-school educators to comply. Pre-school educators are gradually realizing that the practice-based learning approach meets societal needs as well as individual developmental needs. Additionally, educators should consult practitioners in the process of designing their curriculum to finalize course contents, activities, and training on employability skills. In other words, the pre-school education degree in Universities should adopt a market-oriented approach in designing curriculum. Such fundamental changes in the curriculum design will significantly reduce the gap between the needs of practitioners and those training provided by educators (Qiu and Peng, 2019). The practice-based learning approach allows graduates to develop employability skills that practitioners are looking for, thus, enhance the value of a University degree.

The Chinese Ministry of Education puts forward the market-oriented education concepts as an important

quality assurance benchmark to evaluate University degrees, aiming to improve the employability skills that University graduates should have. The fundamental driver of market-oriented education is the emphasis on providing student-centered service. Preparing graduates with skills that employers are looking for should be the direction that educators are heading. Furthermore, the nature of pre-school education is practical, fun-based, activity-based, friendly, and professional (Li & Tang, 2019; Yu & Liu, 2017). Such characteristics indicate that pre-school education cannot be theory-driven but practice-driven.

The "Teacher Education Curriculum Standards (Trial) [2011] Document No. 6" developed by the Chinese Ministry of Education in 2012 stipulates the curriculum standards, which represents the overall requirements and evaluation basis for the quality of pre-school education.⁴ Following the Chinese Ministry of Education "National Standards for Undergraduate Professional Teaching Quality in Regular Colleges and Universities" (Teaching Guidance Committee of Higher Education Ministry of Education, 2018), The pre-school education degree associate with some weakness. For example, the course contents are primarily theory-driven, overlapped contents, and lack practice-based learning and inappropriate employability skills training activities. The integration of theory and practice is relatively weak (Zhu & Zhang, 2019; Wang, 2013; Li and Zhang, 2013). This situation is difficult to win the battlefield of serving regional economic and societal development.

2.1 Learning Outcomes of Pre-school Education Discipline

The traditional University curriculum is often developed to support societal development, and cultivate professional talents to service our society. This is determined by the nature of an underdeveloped society. The curriculum design aims to focus on the development of moral, intellectual, physical, artistic, and professional qualities of future pre-school teachers. However, such curriculum design gradually reveals some problems such as it includes some generic training objectives and others are difficult to operationalize. Recent social changes have fundamentally changed pre-school discipline. Universities have become one of the main training providers for pre-school practitioners. The concept of the practice-based learning approach has dramatically changed the pre-school education sector and impose challenges to educators in the process.

2.2 Differentiated Learning Outcomes for Each Level

The concept of "student-centered, market-oriented, and continuous improvement" is now embedded in the Higher

² Opinions of the ministry of education on strengthening the educational practice of normal students [EB/OL] [2016-03-17]. Retrieved from http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A10/s7011/201604/t20160407_237042.html

³ Notice of the ministry of education on printing and distributing the "Implementation Measures for Normal University Professional Certification (Interim)" [EB/OL] [2017-10-26]. Retrieved from http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A10/s7011/201711/t20171106_318535.html

⁴ Opinions of the ministry of education on vigorously promoting teacher education curriculum reform [EB/OL] [2011-10-8]. Retrieved from http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A10/s6991/201110/t20111008_145604.html

Education quality assurance system. Which quality assurance benchmarks should be used to evaluate pre-school degrees in Higher Education remain unclear. Moreover, whether the benchmarks should differentiate diploma degrees from bachelor degrees still need to be clarified. If the practice-based approach matters in the Higher Education sector, should the bachelor degrees curriculum significantly differ from those of diploma degrees when they are all taking the practice-based learning approach? In some Universities, the diploma degree and the bachelor degree are sharing a similar curriculum, so how Universities should tackle the relationship between curriculum design and differentiate the practical skills educators want graduates to achieve at both diploma and bachelor level. This is one of the challenging tasks for academics and policymakers in the Higher Education sector.

From the education level perspective, there are two levels of programmes that focus on pre-school education: pre-school diploma (including various vocational diploma schools) and bachelor's degree. The learning outcomes of the two levels of courses are almost the same. In particular, the learning outcomes of bachelor's degrees and diploma degrees are ambiguous. How is a bachelor's degree in pre-school education differ from a diploma degree at the learning outcomes level remain unclear? Learning outcomes of a bachelor's degree in pre-school education cannot be structured without a clear understanding of what is needed in the job market. Therefore, market-oriented education should guide Universities design their learning outcomes, but not the other way round. Adopting a market-oriented approach and following Higher Education teacher certification standards, Universities need to outline the specific learning outcomes that prepare graduates for the specific job market. The education sector becomes a service sector, Universities should avoid using a standard approach in educating and training their students and differentiate the learning outcomes of bachelor's degrees and diploma degrees.

2.3 Universities Are Shaping the Development Pre-school Education

Pre-school education in the Higher Education sector is an incubator that leading the development of pre-school education. Academics in Universities are one of the main forces in making innovative changes to pre-school education. The challenge that academics are facing is the lack of practical experiences. The majority of academics focus on theory and research in the pre-school discipline, the real problems that nurseries are facing are often neglected. Many academics focus on theory contribution instead of practical skills enhancement. The purpose of pre-school education is to provide excellent service to parents and society, and practical experience plays a crucial part in education. Without practical skills, the pre-school education discipline is detached from real-

life experience (Zeng, 2009, pp.17-20). As a secondary discipline, academics in the pre-school education discipline fails to understand the real challenges faced by many nurseries and experience problems in transforming practical knowledge into theory building. A large majority of the pre-school curriculum in Universities is still at a premature stage, it is too early to claim the world's leading position in the pre-school education discipline. Student-focused and marketing-oriented approaches bring many challenges to academics, we cannot afford to avoid the importance of practical experience. Integrating theory and practice in the high-quality education strategy, pre-school education should prepare graduates for the job market by enhancing their practical skills.

2.4 Thinking Behind Curriculum Design

The curriculum is the core element of talent training, and the quality of courses directly determines the outcomes of talent training. Practitioners strongly recommend the alignment of learning outcomes with the on-job requirements. The pre-school discipline should outline clear learning outcomes and highlight the appropriate employability-related attributes so that the curriculum is designed to achieve these goals. By bringing the practical experience and theoretical understanding of pre-school education together, graduates will be able to apply the theories learned into practice (Liu, 2015). Theorists often talk about the theoretical concepts, basic principles, and basic methods. As a result, the graduates of pre-school education often work in other sectors or change their major. Such phenomenon often disrupts the teaching but also causes huge economic losses for Universities. How to break such a vicious circle? Who should be responsible for designing a pre-school education curriculum? What is the philosophical basis for pre-school education? How to deal with its starting point and endpoint? Who is at the "center"? How can the needs of theorists and practitioners compromise?

The existing curriculum design of bachelor degrees in pre-school education is systematic and holistic and such emphasis neglects to incorporate employability attributes in the curriculum design process. According to the national undergraduate teaching quality standards, the total credits for a pre-school education degree are 140-160 credits. Specifically, 30% are general courses, pre-school education specific modules comprise about 30%, and the rest focus on practical modules. The potential conflict between the expansion of professional courses and the increase of practical courses has become more and more prominent. For University academics who lack practical working experience, the emphasis on market orientation brings a huge challenge to their career. Additionally, market orientation also influences curriculum design, teaching pedagogical methods, and student satisfaction. These challenges often put University academics under greater pressure (Yang, 2012, pp.122-123). Li and

Zhang claim that the pre-school education curriculum often focuses on theory, which leads to potential content duplication and disconnection between theory and practice (Li, 2013, pp.222-224). The concept of market orientation should be embedded in the curriculum. Student-centred and market orientation is the appropriate way to improve the curriculum design.

3. THE STRUCTURAL CHALLENGES OF PRACTICAL MODULES IN PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION

3.1 Undifferentiated Theoretical Modules and Practical Modules Lead to Low Student Satisfaction

The “National Standards for the Teaching Quality of Undergraduate Degrees” emphasizes theoretical courses, practical courses, and final year projects. The practical courses include educational internship, educational training, educational practice, educational inspection, and educational investigation. Many colleges and Universities have also creatively-arranged other practical courses for their students. The benefits of emphasizing the practical courses of pre-school education generate some benefits. Education must prepare graduates to meet the needs of economic and social development. This is a basic philosophical proposition. However, in the face of rapid social changes, the pre-school education talent training and practice model are lagging. The pre-school bachelor’s degree offers similar practical courses to a diploma degree. The undifferentiated degree often restricts the employability of graduates. Furthermore, the quality of internships for pre-school education students is often low and fails to enhance students’ practical skills that kindergartens and nurseries are looking for (Song & Li, 2017). A student survey results reveal that 50.2% of students claimed that “theoretical knowledge disconnects from practice”, and 38.5% suggested that “theoretical knowledge offers a narrow perspective”. 3.5% of students claimed that the theoretical knowledge is outdated, and only 7.8% of students claimed the opposite (Guleng & Hai, 2019, pp.20-21). In 2018, students from three normal colleges participated in a survey, only 20.9% of the students consider working in kindergartens and/or nurseries when they start the course. The percentage is even lower for final year students (Zou & Chen, 2019). The student satisfaction survey results indicate that 42% are very satisfied or satisfied, whereas, 58% are not satisfied or dissatisfied (Li, 2016, pp.42-51).

With the implementation of the “Professional Standards for Kindergarten Teachers” (for trial implementation), kindergartens tend to have high expectations on the professional skills that graduates should develop. Due to historical reasons, the number of bachelor students

in pre-school education is relatively small, and society urgently needs more talent with specialized skills in pre-school education to advance the sector. According to the survey, students from a university have sufficient theoretical knowledge but lacks practical skills. During the internship, students experience difficulties in understanding children’s needs and fail to observe daily activities in practice. Such challenges prohibit students transfer theoretical knowledge into practical skills (Yu, 2017, pp.297-301).

According to a questionnaire survey of 139 students majoring in pre-school education, 2.9% of the students stated that the professional skills of bachelor students are not as good as those on a diploma course in terms of art, vocal music, piano, and dance subject. Furthermore, diploma students have better practical skills than bachelor students, so bachelor students are not competitive in the job market (Yu, 2017, pp.297-301). Many pre-school education graduates at the bachelor level report that they are not competitive in the job market when compared with diploma students, or sometimes they are in a less advantageous position (Chen & Zheng, 2016, pp.125-128). The reason is that the basic skills of bachelor graduates are relatively weak, they need to be retrained before they start their jobs, and they tend to be too self-centered. The current stage of undergraduate pre-school education shows that the current practical training is not adequate and do not tie closely with employers’ expectation. Universities often do not take responsibility for inadequate practical training.

3.2 Practice Modules Do Not Meet Job Market Demands

From the perspective of the content design for practical modules, there is a lack of in-depth discussions and cooperation between Universities and kindergartens, and other practical organizations. Higher Education Institutions are working in isolation with practitioners. The practical teaching modules often lack scientific and pertinent nature. Many colleges and Universities still only focus on theoretical training in pre-school education, and there is little practical training aimed at enhancing the core competence of kindergarten teachers. Simulation teaching is only a formality, and teachers’ specific guidance is outdated and lacks innovation (Wang, 2018, pp.133-167).

From the perspective of colleges and Universities, academics feel unable to focus, while students think that learning is messy, which makes many pre-school education graduates of normal universities encounter various difficulties at work. For example, some graduates speak eloquently, but they experience problems with transforming theories into practices. The phenomenon makes pre-school education graduates feel extremely embarrassed about their situation (Yang, 2018, pp.214-215).

3.3 Initiatives of Curriculum Re-design

The Chinese government puts forward the concept of market orientation in the quality standards for “Ordinary Colleges and Universities Teacher Professional Certification Implementation Measures (Interim)”. This standard highlights the importance of developing the core competence of University students, and pinpoint the quality assurance standard from a practical perspective. The first thing that should be considered is how to differentiate a bachelor’s degree from a practice-based degree in regards to education duration and content skills for training. Furthermore, there is growing evidence that higher education tends to focus more on theoretical training rather than practical skills enhancement. As the result, there is an urgent problem in the professional training program which breaks up the bridge between school education curriculum and social expectations for graduates. However, currently, the education curriculum still follows a traditional format that implements theoretical knowledge transfer, especially when teachers do not update their subjective knowledge in pre-school education discipline, students are struggling to understand how to use the knowledge to solve practical problems (Wang, Ding, & Liu, 2019). At the current education model, almost all training programs implemented are based on teacher-centered mode, there is a huge gap between theoretical guidance and practical knowledge, graduates have insufficient skills to meet employers’ expectations (Zhang & Guan, 2019, pp.81-84). One survey reported that the most popular people in kindergartens are those who have professional and proficiency skills, and expertise to identify potential development opportunities for students (Yu, 2017, pp.297-301). Japanese scholars suggested that more than 50% of junior teachers had insufficient practical skills (Yamazaki & Fan, 2015). There are three main problems in the current curriculum design: firstly, the weak link between theoretical knowledge building and practical knowledge application, students are unable to understand how to use the knowledge to solve practical problems. Secondly, some overlapping content was found in different teaching programs. In other words, the same essential skills may be taught more than once in a different curriculum. Thirdly, less attention is paid to the art curriculum, which inhabited art ability development of students (Liu, 2018).

Compared with the pre-school education training programs offered in European and American countries, Universities are closely connected with kindergartens. More than 50% of the training component is practice-based in British and American universities (Cheng & Zhao, 2017, pp.139-144). Education policy reveals that students who plan to work in kindergartens need to go to two or more schools to practice in order to obtain sufficient credit for the practice-based modules. In particular, the placement period usually lasts at least

32 weeks for bachelor degree students, in contrast, 24 weeks of placement is required for diploma students (Professional Standards for Qualified Teachers and Pre-service Requirements for Teachers in the UK) (Jiang & Howe, 2019). In Japan, students have the option to choose one day in a week to work at the kindergarten which could be transferred for module credits. In China, students often take a semester-long placement at kindergartens. The curriculum design of pre-school education in China still needs to increase the proportion of practical modules to enhance students’ employability skills.

UNESCO education expert Raj Roy-Singh claims that higher education should focus on quality rather than quantity. An urgent problem of pre-school education discipline in China is potentially the lack of high-quality design. Growing evidence suggests that the gap between university education and practical businesses is increasing significantly (Song & Li, 2017, pp.34-43). There is a strong tendency among parents in Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area to proactively select high-quality kindergarten teachers. Given fresh graduates’ lack of practical skills, the phenomenon of being selected by parents has brought challenges to the early childhood education sector. It is urgent to improve the curriculum design to meet these urgent demands.

4 MARKET-ORIENTED PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION

4.1 Integration of Professional Knowledge Training and Practical Modules

The market orientation has been already listed as a clear requirement for pre-school education discipline. Integration between subjective knowledge training and kindergarten practices is not only an experiment to improve the practices, but also an approach to investigate the important theoretical contribution to high-quality education.

The cooperation between universities and kindergartens becomes an innovative teaching approach in the pre-school education discipline. Using Huashang College, Guangdong University of Finance and Economics as an example, the college has its own kindergarten on campus where pre-school education students can apply the subjective knowledge into practice. Such unique initiative allows students to develop and enhance their practical skills in kindergartens. The kindergarten on campus has 5000 square meters, and it includes pre-schoolers and toddlers. The on-campus kindergarten provides fantastic placement and internship opportunities for students and allows academics to bring the classroom into real-life scenarios. In this way, academics in the pre-school discipline can guide students in practice while learning the theories.

The benefits of having a kindergarten on campus are prominent. Students can apply their theoretical understanding into practice but also implement their thinking and teaching style into practical educational activities. It is an efficient approach to bring the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical implementation. On the other hand, practical activities in kindergarten will enhance students' understanding of theoretical knowledge, they will also understand how every knowledge point is applied in daily educational activities. In addition, during practical activities, students are able to check their understandings and identify areas for improvement. After four years of study, pre-school graduates will have sufficient subjective knowledge and advanced practical skills that kindergarten acquire.

Kindergarten teachers will face enormous pressure when they struggle to apply theoretical knowledge to resolve practical problems. These teachers tend to experience difficulties in improving their practical skills, low adaptability to the work environment, and struggle to meet societal demands. Therefore, practical training for pre-school teachers should adopt a student-centered approach in the curriculum design. Such training will provide valuable opportunities for students to interact with practices (Zhang, 2019, p.97). On-campus kindergarten helps to address the gap between theoretical understanding and practical problem solving and reduce the potential overlapped content across all modules offered in the programme. The integration of bachelor's degree education and kindergarten activities not only meets the policy requirement but also satisfies the educational aims outlined by the Ministry of Education.

4.2 Collaboration Between Kindergartens and University Academics

Collaboration between Universities and kindergarten represents a cooperative model for the sector. Both universities and kindergarten share similar values that aim to advocate equal rights and opportunities to learn and contribute to the reform of curriculum design (Zhao & Hu, 2015, pp.37-39). In China, a huge number of kindergarten teachers are lacking awareness and practical skills in the workplace. As aforementioned, university academics may not necessarily aware of the latest business practices in kindergarten. Therefore, it is an urgent task to facilitate the collaboration between academics and kindergarten managers in order to enhance the quality of pre-school education.

The benefit of such cooperation is mutual. First, kindergartens are often very selective and they prefer to employ those who have working experiences. Those candidates with sufficient practical experiences can design appropriate curriculum and develop the most appropriate teaching activities for preschoolers and toddlers. In return, universities can provide an intensive training program and encourage their students to implement their knowledge

in practice. Furthermore, university academics tend to gain the opportunity to work in kindergarten and have the opportunity to enhance their practical skills.

4.3 Establishing a Video Library for Pre-school Education Discipline

Academics often evaluate their teaching activities, teaching plans, and student activities to provide an excellent student experience. Academic specialists should consider record practical teaching sessions so that students are able to watch the recordings to improve their understanding. The recordings are useful for those who do not have the opportunity to participate in the practical sessions. The recordings are valuable resources for academics to reflect their understanding and identify research gaps that worth further research.

4.4 Establish an Effective Evaluation System

An effective evaluation system is necessary for quality assurance purposes. The quality of practical modules has a direct impact on the employability of students. One of the main challenges of integrating on-campus kindergarten and pre-school discipline is the performance evaluation system. Academics involved in the practical modules are expected to follow the University's standard strictly and the teaching content will be monitored. More importantly, those academics who work at kindergarten will also be evaluated by kindergarten's guidelines, including teaching plan, teaching design, and students learning outcome. However, the evaluative results may differ between both parties. Such differences may negatively influence academics' salaries. Thus, the integration model for both kindergarten and university education brings significant challenges to the university's quality assurance guidelines. First, the practical implication will be considered in evaluating one's theoretical understanding of the subject. The traditional assessment for theory testing is challenged and students are expected to apply the knowledge into practice. Second, universities should integrate mock experiments and actual practical implementation into a coherent method. Such a method provides students the opportunity to practice in hypothetical scenarios and then apply the knowledge learned with pre-schoolers and toddlers. Third, the experiment procedure should integrate with the performance outcome. Assessors may assess students on how to use declarative knowledge and procedural knowledge to solve practical knowledge. Finally, professional knowledge and general knowledge should be evaluated together, students will enhance their subjective knowledge and improve their skills in a typical activity (e.g., singing, dancing).

4.5 Integration of Theoretical Subjects With a Field Experiment

The gap between theory and practice is still the main barrier for educating pre-school students at universities (Song & Li, 2017, pp.34-43). Despite the market demands

are considered, the previous pre-school curriculum often separates theories from practices. Human has both procedural memory and declarative memory. Procedural memory includes how to perform various tasks and actions including sports skills and cognitive skills. Repetition of these tasks will enhance one's procedural memory. Therefore, pre-school discipline requires students to repetitive practice tasks and action-related skills. Therefore, it is challenging to separate theories from practices. The pre-school programme offered in the USA, Great Britain, Japan, and Australia often put great emphasis on work placement. With the opportunity to apply theories into practice, students in these countries are able to develop the skills that both society and kindergartens need. Many universities in the West allow students to take a year-long placement, however, extending the placement period will not simply resolve the challenges faced by the pre-school education discipline in China. The curriculum design, educational activities, work placement, and quality assurance standards should be integrated to develop a suitable approach for the pre-school education sector in China.

In sum, pre-school education discipline should consider the cooperative model between universities and kindergartens. Adopting a market-oriented approach, universities should consider to re-design the curriculum and emphasize the importance of employability skills of graduates. In this way, universities will able to prepare their students for the job market and bridge the gap between theory and practices in China.

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