Teachers’ beliefs about peer social interactions and their relationship to practice in Chinese inclusive preschools

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ABSTRACT
As previous research indicated that children with special educational needs are at risk of social exclusion, this study investigated the link between teachers’ beliefs about children’s social peer interactions and their teaching practices. Using a qualitative case study examining seven teachers from four inclusive classes at one preschool in Shanghai, data from interviews and participatory observations were triangulated. Three degrees of (in)consistencies when combining interviews (teachers’ beliefs) and observations (teachers’ practices) were identified: high consistency, some (in)consistency and high inconsistency. Four critical contextual factors explain these inconsistencies: challenging classroom compositions, whole-group teaching, lack of parents’ support and an academic-performance orientation. Indications for future inclusive teacher training were developed.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 15 March 2021
Accepted 15 September 2021

KEYWORDS
Inclusive education; preschool teachers’ beliefs; peer social interactions; China; contextual factors

Introduction
Young children with special educational needs (SEN) have exhibited positive developmental and quality-of-life outcomes when they have full access to inclusive preschools (Purcell, Turnbull, and Jackson 2006). In spite of legal and moral imperatives, there are different interpretations and transformation of national policies in practice based on each country’s specific socio-political context, cultural attitudes and belief systems about disability, which leads to considerably different developmental stages of inclusive education among national contexts (Artiles, Kozleski, and Waitoller 2011). As international political and economic power increases, Chinese government joined the worldwide endeavour to improve the quality of current preschool inclusive services by granting more children with SEN equal educational opportunities (Hu and Roberts 2011).

China acknowledged the need for early intervention and special education service from the first national law of “The People’s Republic of China on Protection of Disabled Persons Act” (National People’s Congress 1990). The law argued that early childhood inclusion...
should be the main format to offer children with SEN access to general preschools. Further, the ‘Educational Guidelines for People with Disabilities’ emphasised the importance of early childhood inclusion (National Education Committee of the People’s Republic of China 1994). Nevertheless, while encouraging kindergartens to accept children with SEN, Chinese government did not claim it as a must. Nowadays, very few public preschools are willing to consider enrolling children with SEN. Any Chinese preschool can reject children with SEN, citing reasons irrespective of the legal recommendation (Wang and Shen 2009). Some researchers indicate that the general ambiguity in the relevant legislations serves as another reason for the lack of associated educational services for children with SEN (McCabe 2003). The essential governmental legislations did not provide specific guidelines for teachers to implement inclusion in their daily practice. More challenges were identified while exploring studies examining Chinese early childhood inclusion: the common large class size (teacher–child ratio of 1:20–30); teachers’ lack of standard qualifications in special and inclusive education (Yu, Su, and Liu 2011); the widely existing social stigma towards children with SEN (Lee and Regan 2010); the prevailing medical model of disability (Deng and Poon-McBrayer 2012); limited resources (Ding 2008).

Teachers’ beliefs and practices

Some theories have emphasised the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and their teaching practices. Magoon (1977) and DeFord (1985) proposed a constructivist perspective on teachers’ cognitions that indicate teachers are knowing beings and that this ‘knowledge, then, forms a system of beliefs and attitudes which direct perceptions and behaviors’ (DeFord 1985, 352–53). Moreover, based on the ‘theory of planned behaviour’ proposed by Ajzen (1991), Haney, Czerniak, and Lumpe (1996) discussed how teachers’ beliefs can significantly influence their classroom behaviours.

Empirical studies (Hellmich, Löper, and Görel 2019; Schwab and Alnahdi 2020) indicated that teachers’ beliefs interact with their practices in complex ways; however, little is known about the nature and the extent of this interaction (Farrell and Ives 2015). Two main trends illustrating the relationship were identified. While some evidence identified links between teachers’ beliefs and practices (Kuzborska 2011), some showed a partial relationship between the two constructs, mainly with frequent inconsistency (Liu 2011).

In their literature review, Buehl and Beck (2015) identified that most studies exploring teachers’ beliefs examined certain school subject teaching such as literature, maths, science, and very few on children’s social interactions. On examining these few studies, consistent discrepancy regarding teachers’ beliefs and actual socialisation practice was identified (McClintic and Petty 2015; Zinsser et al. 2014). Teachers generally valued children’s social-emotional development but such beliefs did not necessarily translate into daily practice, suggesting a ‘philosophy-reality conflict’ (Hatch and Freeman 1988, 158). Thus, it is of great importance to explore what factors could lead to the discrepancies between the two constructs.

Factors influencing teachers’ beliefs and practices

Vygotsky and Leont’ev’s ‘cultural–historical activity theory’ is ‘a process theory for understanding the human life form generally, and its concrete manifestations in
human activity more specifically’ (Roth 2014, 4). Following this theory, it can be assumed that teachers’ beliefs and practices are derived from where they are situated within a wider social, cultural and historical context and cannot be examined out of context (Spruce and Bol 2015). This theory serves as the theoretical framework to identify potential contextual factors that explain the inconsistency between teachers’ beliefs and practices (Robbins and Stetsenko 2002).

Previous research identified that classroom compositions influenced teachers’ practice (Steinberg and Garrett 2016). Specifically, factors like ‘learners’ behaviours’ and ‘time’ led to the disconnect between teachers’ belief and their practice (Müller and Zurbriggen 2016). Some studies indicated that varying psychological, social and environmental realities, such as strong academic-performance orientation and inadequate teacher training (McClintic and Petty 2015) could potentially constrain teachers from implementing their beliefs in the instructional decision-making. Environmental or work-related stresses, such as lacking parents’ and administrators’ support, also led to the inconsistency (Wen, Elicker, and McMullen 2011). In addition, teachers’ experience and personal practical knowledge seemed to influence how they practice what they preach (Baum and King 2006).

**Teachers’ practices promoting peer interactions**

Examining the outcomes of inclusive education, some literature review indicates that children with SEN are at risk of being socially excluded in the mainstream class (Schwab 2018). Therefore, it is important to not solely consider children’s academic but also socio-emotional development in inclusive settings.

According to the literature review of Bossaert et al. (2013), social participation can be divided into four aspects: friendships, interactions, social self-concept and social acceptance. Previous research showed evidence for several strategies to foster students’ social participation in primary and secondary schools. For instance, teachers can easily change classroom seating arrangements (van den Berg, Segers, and Cillessen 2012) or create inclusive classroom environments with specific decor (Buchholz and Sheffler 2009). Some study indicated that teachers’ feedback influences students’ social participation (Wullschleger et al. 2020). Following the results of Schwab (2015), teachers can influence students’ interactions (e.g. how students spend breaks). The way teachers interact with students with SEN is crucial. For instance, Schwab, Sharma, and Hoffmann (2019) indicated that teachers should avoid putting students’ disabilities into the spotlight and rather underline the features that all students have in common. Moreover, teachers can organize collaborative learning in small groups to foster children’ social participation by strengthening their social competencies (Nota, Ginevra, and Soresi 2019). Most school interventions exploring peer relations intend to increase students’ social-emotional competencies (e.g. Hassani et al. 2020). In this context, Howe (2019) stated that teachers’ beliefs about interventions that foster peer social interactions are related to their teaching.

Among the previous studies examining teachers’ practice to promote children’s social interactions in inclusive settings, only a few targeted preschools (e.g. Howe 2019; Hu, Lim, and Boyd 2016). Those studies revealed that teachers lacked concrete strategies for appropriate and consistent initiations and missed teachable moments to facilitate such interactions. Meanwhile, there is hardly any research on teachers’ beliefs and practice about children’s social interactions in inclusive preschools. Thus, in order to fill the
research gap and further contribute to the discussion of the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and practices, the current study will address the following research questions:

(1) To what extent are teachers’ strategies identified from the interview (teachers’ beliefs) consistent with the strategies identified from the observations (teachers’ practices)?

(2) What are the factors that influence the inconsistency of teachers’ beliefs and practices to promote children’s peer interactions?

**Method**

A qualitative case study was designed with semi-structured interviews to explore teachers’ beliefs and participatory observations to examine their practice. The data collection lasted three months: two and a half months for observations (eight weeks in four classrooms and two weeks in public spaces) and a half month for interviews. Two types of observations were done: (1) general observations from 8 am to 12 pm describing events and reflections; (2) 20 intensive observations during ‘outdoor-play’ when most peer interactions occurred. The intensive observation lasted five minutes per session and observational notes contained information on the specific teacher and context being observed; and memos reflecting on-site thoughts (Punch 2012). After all the observations, the seven interviews with seven teachers from four inclusive classes were conducted. Two different consent forms were signed by the participating teachers and children’s parents. To ensure participants’ anonymity, pseudonyms were used to replace their names and no photos of any kind were taken during the data collection process.

**Participants**

The researched preschool was founded in the end of the twentieth century, being then one of the few inclusive preschools in Shanghai. It was the biggest public preschool located in a middle-class living community. By the time of data-collection, it had 175 children aged from three to six and 21 teaching staff. Guided by the five learning goals embedded in the preschool’s curriculum (children’s health; language; social skills; scientific and artistic knowledge), teachers, for example, apply certain activities to promote children’s social skills by strengthening their learning of Chinese collectivism values (e.g. the virtue of caring for the younger and weaker others).

The participants comprised seven female teachers aged from 26 to 50 years from four inclusive classes: teachers Cai and Duo from class one, teachers Chen and Liu from class two, teacher Yao from class three and teacher Huang and Gao from class four. Four teachers had a four-year bachelor’s degree and the rest three had a one-year qualification training. Five attended some lectures or workshops on special and inclusive education for the past 12 months. Their teaching experience ranged from two to 30 years. Apart from one teacher, all the other six had some experience with children with different kinds of SEN (e.g. autism, physical disabilities, social and emotional problems).
**Data analysis**

Since the researched phenomenon has been rarely explored in Chinese preschools, an inductive approach to qualitative content analysis was applied to analyse the data (Mayring 2014). Overall, the analysis contained six phases: (1) becoming familiar with the data; (2) selecting the units of analysis; (3) open coding; (4) formulating preliminary codes; (5) developing themes or categories; and (6) finalising the themes or categories. While following the above steps to identify strategies from both data, pronounced differences and similarities among the strategies were identified, which triggered the first research question to examine how consistent teachers’ beliefs and teaching practices about peer social interactions are. Three categories showing different degrees of (in) consistency of teachers’ beliefs and practice, and four factors that influence the inconsistency were identified.

**Trustworthiness**

We applied the following strategies to improve its credibility: peer debriefing, member checking, establishing strong consensus, and being reflective (Pearson, Albon, and Hubball 2015).

**Results**

**(In)consistency between teachers’ beliefs and practices**

As shown in Table 1, among the five levels of strategies on teamwork, the classroom environment, the curriculum and activity design, as well as individual children, three categories of (in)consistency between teachers’ beliefs (strategies from interviews) and their practices (strategies from observations) were identified.

**The first category: high consistency**

The first category of strategies was consistently identified from both data, showing some of teachers’ beliefs to promote children’s peer interactions converged highly with their

<table>
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<th>Table 1. Three categories of (in)consistency.</th>
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<td><strong>Level of strategy</strong></td>
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<td>1: Teamwork</td>
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<td>2: Classroom environment</td>
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<td>3: Curriculum design</td>
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<td>4: Activity design</td>
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<td>5: Focusing on individual children</td>
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INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF EARLY YEARS EDUCATION 467
practices observed. One to two strategies on each level fall into this category (see Table 1): cooperation with the principal and other teachers; decorations; teaching friendship and character education; toy exchange activity; certain social skill teaching.

Cooperation with the principal and other teachers. While admitting inclusion as a challenge, all teachers perceived the cooperation with the principal and other teachers as essential for making it work. Teacher Cai put it as follows: ‘our principal has practiced inclusion for more than 15 years … she shows us how to engage children with SEN’. This cooperation was frequently observed. During the outdoor activity, the principal, together with teacher Duo, encouraged child D to join in his peers’ play (FN3 in IC4). After the morning exercise, teacher Liu gave Chen some feedback to cope with child F’s challenging behaviours towards his peers (FN in IC 2).

Classroom decorations. Teachers frequently mentioned using various materials to decorate the classrooms: photos of children in wheelchairs playing with others; slogans encouraging positive social behaviours. ‘If they (children without SEN) see those pictures daily, they will gradually find it natural to play with them (children with SEN)’ commented Liu. Teachers were often observed to explain the decorations to children (FN in IC 4), and those decorations were seen everywhere and updated regularly.

Teaching friendship and character education. As part of the strategies embedded in the curriculum, teaching the concept of friendship and character education were spoken highly of by teachers. First, they talked about how important it is to teach in an interesting way; ‘if we directly ask them to do this and that, they may not listen to it. By using a song or a theatre play, they would accept better’ (Gao). Moreover, teachers embedded the concepts teaching in the classroom’s physical environment: ‘books showing how to care for the younger are scattered and children can access them easily’ (Cai). High consistency was identified from the observations. It was seen across the four classrooms, teachers frequently used stories or theatre-play when introducing those concepts. For example, seeing child F failing to communicate with his peers, teacher Liu and Chen used a story to ask for the whole class’s opinions to help the character Mao to better communicate with others, from which F could learn concrete ideas to interact with others (FN in IC 3).

The toy exchange activity. This activity exists in two established transitions of a regular day: 20 minutes between children arriving and group greeting and 20 minutes between lunch and nap. Many teachers stated that it was easy to implement this activity since ‘it could be so naturally embedded in an ongoing day’ (Liu). Consistent with their interviews, all teachers were observed to regularly implement this activity during the two transitions (FN in IC 2; FN in IC 1).

Certain social skills teaching. All teachers agreed that children with SEN need individualised specific social skills learning: ‘sometimes, we need to repeat one rule many times so that F can understand … not okay to poke others’ (Liu). Consistent with their interviews, most teachers were observed to teach children with SEN certain social skills on different
occasions; while Chen taught F how to appropriately interact with others (FN in IC 2), Yao showed B how to join a pretend play (FN in IC 3).

**Second category: some (in)consistency**

For this category, while no strategies from the first and the third levels were identified, one to two from the other three levels were identified as somewhat (in)consistent (see Table 1). They include: adapting the playground; creating activity formats and the ‘share and exchange’ activity; encouraging children and applying peer support.

**Adapting the playground.** Five teachers mentioned they made some adaptations to the playground. They changed the size of certain play materials, like expanding the woods to make broader ‘bridges’ so that ‘C can walk on them like her peers and play with them’ (Cai). Some teachers used the public spaces as an extension of their classroom in transitional phases: ‘children can get more spaces to interact with each other instead of waiting in the classroom aimlessly for the next activity’ (Chen). Though those adaptations were observed, they were only applicable for several materials. Most materials were not adapted to accommodate children’s different needs (e.g. the unanimously large-sized yoga balls). Moreover, the public spaces were used mostly as a rushed transitional space instead of a space claimed to promote social interactions (FN in IC 1).

**Creating activity formats and the ‘share and exchange’ activity.** While the ‘mixed-age’ format enables children to interact broadly with a bigger group of peers across different classrooms, the ‘small-group’ format and the ‘share and exchange’ activity let them to interact deeply with a smaller group of peers, as claimed by some teachers (Cai, Huang). They ‘want to create many possibilities for children with SEN to participate and interact with others’ (Duo). There was some inconsistency observed from teachers’ daily practice. During the ‘mixed-age’ format, children with SEN were seen to be mostly accompanied by adults, instead of by their peers, leading to very few peer interactions (FN in IC 4). Moreover, during the ‘share and exchange’ activity, teachers were observed to constantly interrupt children (FN in IC 1; FN in IC 3). Meanwhile, ‘small group’ format was only observed during the ‘life-skill’ activity in one class (FN in IC 4).

**Encouraging children and applying peer support.** While asking children without SEN to support their peers with SEN, teachers encouraged them to interact with each other; ‘I encouraged E to share his bilingual book with others. I also encouraged two kids to ask E to join their play’ (Chen). Apart from serving as their role models, children without SEN can also ‘become good friends with children with SEN while supporting them’ (Yao). Meanwhile, they emphasised both strategies should be applied voluntarily: ‘children need to hit it off naturally with each other’ (Liu). Some consistency was observed, like when teacher Liu encouraged child E to share his book with others (FN in IC 2). But a closer examination revealed that some teachers applied the strategies in a forceful way, like ‘you need to invite G to play’ (FN in IC 4). Sometimes they interrupted ongoing activities and forced children to help their peers with SEN, leading to unwilling and superficial interactions that stopped immediately when the teachers were not present (FN in IC 2). Moreover, certain criteria were applied while selecting
children for peer support: e.g. they needed to have younger siblings at home (FN in IC 3), contradicting with what claimed as voluntary processes.

**The third category: high inconsistency**
Apart from the fifth level, some strategies from the other four levels showed high inconsistency between teachers’ beliefs and practices to promote children’s peer interactions (see Table 1).

**Cooperation with the shadow teachers**, **the special educators and the BBYs**. All teachers expressed high appreciation for cooperating with shadow teachers, special educators and BYYs to facilitate more inclusion: ‘I feel reassured when they (the special educators) are around. I do not know whether I will be able to manage all this alone’ (Liu); ‘our BYY supports me … she is of great help’ (Cai). Meanwhile, they mentioned how closely they cooperated with the three groups, such as ‘talking with the special educators about how to engage children during the mixed-age group activity’ (Gao); or ‘consulting teacher Tao (one shadow teacher) about how to deal with F’s aggressive behaviours’ (Liu). Nevertheless, those cooperations were seldom observed and mostly the two sides worked separately: the three groups taking care of children with SEN while teachers taking care of the rest of the class (FN in IC 1; FN in IC 3).

**Social and emotional environment design.** All teachers perceived it valuable to create an open, supportive and communicative environment with three key elements. Firstly, constant and open communication with children was key to build such environment: ‘to communicate with child A about her concerns … we also talk openly with her peers … they would understand each other’ (Gao). Secondly, children’s differences should be accepted, like ‘whenever B shows improper behaviours, others would understand and still play with him’ (Yao). Thirdly, the importance of being ‘sensitive about disabilities by not directly explaining them … instead normalising disabilities and treating them like little brothers and sisters’ (Huang). Nevertheless, such communications were very rarely observed. Instead, some teachers criticised children’s certain behaviours (FN in IC 2) and treated their differences negatively, like teacher Cai complaining about child D eating slowly (FN in IC 1). They also talked negatively about some children’s disabilities on various occasions (FN in IC 4).

**Dealing with children’s conflicts and negative emotions.** First, teachers emphasised that whenever children are having conflicts or negative emotions, they would ‘comfort them before identifying what the causes are’ (Liu). Second, teachers mentioned how they creatively deal with the situations by ‘introducing a story experienced by some children without mentioning the names … asking them to discuss what they would do … would be able to deal with it’ (Yao). However, teachers were observed to ignore most children’s conflicts and negative emotions, and seldom were the mentioned creative ways observed (FN in IC 4; FN in IC 3).

**Parents’ involvement.** All teachers regarded parents’ involvement as important and talked about specific ways to engage them, like ‘they can use the same playing rules with child F … then those strategies will be reinforced at home’ (Chen). Nevertheless,
parents were rarely seen, nor involved in activities (FN in IC 2). Moreover, a strong distrust between teachers and parents was identified, like Cai was frequently observed to blame child D’s parents for not taking his situation seriously (FN in IC 1).

**Factors identified**

Four factors were identified to influence teachers’ inconsistency between their beliefs and practices.

**Factor one: challenging classroom compositions**

This factor talks about children’s challenging behaviours, limited spaces and lack of resources.

*Children’s challenging behaviours.* While holding beliefs to support peer interactions, some teachers talked about how their motivation went down when children demonstrated challenging behaviours; ‘it would be difficult to ask other children to invite child F … he tends to break things or poke others’ (Gao).

*Limited spaces.* There are 25–30 children in each class and this considerable number makes the classroom very crowded; ‘it becomes difficult to flexibly arrange activities to promote peer interactions’ (Chen). This limited space also creates difficulties for teachers to accommodate every child’s needs to ‘interact with each other’ (Huang).

*Lack of resources.* Many teachers talked about the lack of adapted playing and teaching materials; ‘only the big yoga balls … not so many adjusted materials’ (Gao); ‘while designing story-reading … not many books for children with SEN’ (Huang). The lack of personnel was also mentioned; ‘my colleague has been sick for almost one year … I feel overwhelmed’ (Yao). Some further mentioned there were ‘not enough special educators to share methods to initiate peer interactions’ (Liu).

**Factor two: a ‘whole-group’ teaching approach**

Many teachers find it difficult to continuously promote peer interactions in ‘whole group’ teaching though ‘the big number of children makes the approach quite practical’ (Gao). Like Huang stated: ‘this approach requires teachers to make sure the whole class is first taken care of’ before addressing individual child’s needs.

**Factor three: lacking parents’ support**

Many teachers talked about the difficulty to implement relevant strategies if parents were not supportive or showed little appreciation; ‘we suggested some little things for child C’s parents to motivate him … but obviously they are not doing it’ (Duo).

**Factor four: an academic-performance orientation**

Although admitting children’s social interactions as part and parcel of later development, many teachers expressed that they did not see the value of focusing on children’s social development since ‘children’s performance won’t be examined later by how many friends they have’ (Liu).
Discussions

Our study explores Chinese teachers’ beliefs and practices about peer social interactions in an inclusive preschool in Shanghai. Three categories of (in)consistency were identified to describe the relationship and four contextual factors were identified that influenced the relationship.

Results indicated that observational and interview data only partly overlap. While high consistency of teachers’ some strategies was identified, some (in)consistency, and high inconsistency were found for the other strategies. Therefore, in line with previous literature (Noh, Steed, and Kim 2016), it can be stated that teachers’ beliefs are not necessarily consistent with their practices. Interestingly, higher consistency was identified from teachers’ strategies that explored physical environment changes (e.g. classroom decorations) compared to those in the social and emotional environment (e.g. open and constant communication). More inconsistency was identified regarding teachers’ strategies to deal with children’s conflicts and negative emotions. In this line, our research underpins previous study (S. Schwab 2018) by indicating that the inclusion of students with social and behavioural difficulties leads to more challenges compared with the inclusion of students with other types of SEN.

Guided by Vygotsky’s and Leont’ev’s ‘cultural-historical activity theory’, we identified four contextual factors that potentially shape the inconsistency of teachers’ beliefs and practices.

First, the classroom compositions appear to be important. This is related to the total number of children in class and the proportion of children showing challenging behaviours. Therefore, in line with other research on classroom compositions (Müller and Zurbriggen 2016), it can be suggested any overrepresentation of children with special needs like social-emotional disorders should be avoided. Second, agreeing with Hu, Lim, and Boyd (2016), limited classroom spaces pose great difficulty for teachers to initiate small-group teaching where children could interact more with each other. Third, aligning with another study (Malki and Einat 2018), teachers discussed the significant lack of resources, especially that of personal resources to promote more high-quality peer interactions.

Convergent with the previous study (Hu et al. 2015), the whole-group teaching was found as the standard instruction approach in the researched kindergarten. Though Hu and Li (2012) talked about how it prevents children from being active agents to exercise autonomy and develop independent skills, this approach dominates Chinese preschool teachers’ teaching, taking up averagely 46% of their activity time (Liu 2011).

Resonating with another study (Parker and Neuharth-Pritchett 2006), the lack of parents’ support potentially leads to the gap between teachers’ beliefs and practices. Teachers’ efforts of promoting peer social interactions could be extended to the home environment if parents are supportive (Montgomery and Singer 2017). If parents fail to do so, the connection between home and kindergarten that potentially reinforce children’s emerging social skills will be broken.

Finally, aligning with some previous study (McClintic and Petty 2015), the strong emphasis on children’s academic performance influences the inconsistency of teachers’ beliefs and practices. Many teachers did not regard children’s social development as
important as their cognitive development, which was widely identified among Chinese teachers (Tobin, Hsueh, and Karasawa 2009). The strong orientation on children’s academic performance leads to Chinese teachers’ general lack of interest in children’s social development on all levels of schooling, and preschool teachers need to constantly deal with the pressure to prepare children for standardised testing in the first grade year (Hu and Roberts 2011).

**Limitations and implications for practice**

Our study utilised a sample from the pilot inclusive kindergarten project initiated by the Shanghai Municipal Commission of Education. Therefore, cautions must be taken when generalising the findings since the researched preschool is not representative of general early childhood programmes, nor does it represent kindergartens located in other regions of China, particularly those in rural China. Moreover, the relatively short observational time may pose a challenge to reveal a complete picture of teachers’ practice, potentially leading to the inconsistency between their belief and practice. Despite the limitations, our study provides some valuable implications. The four factors identified leading to the inconsistency between teachers’ beliefs and practice further reinforce the lack of resources, knowledge, and skills among Chinese teachers. Thus, adequate resources (e.g. larger classroom spaces and adapted materials) need to be ensured in the classrooms. Meanwhile, the following recommendations need to be included in future inclusive teacher training: (1) knowledge of children’s social development; (2) methods to balance the whole-group and child-centred teaching; (3) knowledge and skills to work with parents.

Firstly, converging with previous literature on teachers’ beliefs and practices to promote children’s social development in some Asian countries (Noh, Steed, and Kim 2016), many teachers in the current study did not consider children’s social interactions as the key focus. Thus, a thorough understanding of the fundamental value of children’s peer interaction and social development should be emphasized (Šukys, Dumčienė, and Lapėnienė 2015). Teachers should be attuned to the levels of children’s social adjustment, have an awareness of how children process social information, as well as know their different stages of social development.

Secondly, due to its practical (promoting instructional efficiency) and cultural (fostering a sense of community and belonging) values (Wang 2011), ‘whole-group’ teaching has been deeply rooted in Chinese teachers’ instructions. Future training needs to show teachers how to adopt a more balanced approach using both structured whole-group approach and less structured and more child-centred activities (Hu, Lim, and Boyd 2016).

Thirdly, future training also needs to enhance teachers’ knowledge and skills to work with parents. They must understand the characteristics of the children with SEN, and the ‘structural, functional, and external characteristics of the family’ (Johnson and Kastner 2005, 507). Moreover, they need to acquire specific methods to involve parents in their daily practices and build a sense of connection between kindergarten and home environment (Haines, McCart, and Turnbull 2013): such as inviting parents to the classroom to observe certain strategies application and extend such practices at home (Mendez, McDermott, and Fantuzzo 2002).
Conclusions

Our study is the first to examine the relationship between Chinese teachers’ beliefs and practice about children’s social peer interactions in an inclusive preschool, which provides key guidelines for inclusive education research. Future research needs to examine teachers’ beliefs and practices in preschools of different quality levels from diverse areas (rural, suburban, and urban China) within longitudinal designs. They should explore other possible internal or external factors that may influence teachers’ beliefs and practices, which would enhance the literature and best inform educators working towards improving the current inclusive education research (Buehl and Beck 2015).

Notes

1. ‘Preschool’ and ‘kindergarten’ are used interchangeably.
2. All names are pseudonyms.
3. FN: field notes.
4. IC: inclusive classroom.
5. Shadow teachers are experts whom parents of children with autism spectrum appoint to support their children in general kindergartens or primary schools.
6. BYY: Baoyuyuan, aid teachers in each classroom.
7. By the time of our research, there were 30 preschools (including the one we targeted) in the project.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The author(s) reported there is no funding associated with the work featured in this article.

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