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Promoting peer interactions in Chinese inclusive preschool classrooms

Strategies teachers apply for children with Special Educational Needs

submitted by

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Abstract

After almost three decades since the concept of LRC (learning in the regular classroom) was first introduced in China to develop inclusive education, China has made quite some progress in offering children with disabilities access to general schools. It has also improved the implementation of inclusion on the preschool level, aiming at increasing the quality of current inclusive services by granting more children with disabilities equal educational opportunities for quality ECE (early childhood education) programs (Hu & Szente, 2010; Gargiulo & Piao, 1995; Hu & Roberts, 2011).

While examining research studies conducted focusing on inclusion on Chinese preschool levels, very few of them targeted at teachers' actual practices and explored how their practice would influence children's inclusion on a daily basis. The current study applies a social constructivism paradigm to explore how teachers promote the interactions of children with and without SEN in the naturalistic setting and collect in-depth data from interviews and observations to explore whether their beliefs and practice are consistent with each other. As Chinese kindergartens gradually embrace a more balanced curriculum of both whole-group teaching and free play, it is important that studies are conducted to explore how teachers support children's daily peer interactions in inclusive kindergarten settings in order to fulfill their changing role (Hu et al., 2016).

The first key finding is that both preventive and interventive strategies are identified in the current study and five different levels are developed to present them. Specifically, strategies from the teamwork level; strategies from the classroom environment level; strategies from the curriculum design level; strategies from the activity design level and strategies from the individual children with SEN level. Different from previous studies, the current study has identified another two new levels of strategies explicitly focusing on the activity level and the teamwork level. Moreover, there are similar strategies (e.g., parental involvement) being identified from two different levels.

Secondly, children's different ages and disabilities influence the frequency teachers apply specific strategies from different levels. Since older preschool children show stronger skills to regulate their own emotions and more advanced cognitive development to argue and rationalize with teachers, thus we find that some strategies (e.g., 'resolving conflicts' and 'dealing with negative emotions') were identified

more frequently from the older class group. Young children are often engaged with themselves and tend to be disconnected from ongoing play activities (e.g., Mendez, McDermott & Fantuzzo, 2002) and so fewer strategies such as ‘creating more small groups’ and ‘creation of share and exchange activity’ were identified. As to children’s different disabilities and how they influence teachers’ different strategies, it is found that for children who are diagnosed with EBD (emotional behavior disabilities), teachers have more frequently applied strategies that target at improving their skills to resolve conflicts and more effectively deal with his negative emotions (frustration, anger). For Children with autism spectrum disorders, they emphasize on the cooperation with parents in the whole inclusion process.

Thirdly, discrepancies between the observational and interview data about the strategies have been identified. Three categories for the consistency and inconsistency from all strategies on different levels were identified: high consistency; some consistency and inconsistency, high inconsistency. Based on Vygotsky’s and Leont’ev’s ‘cultural-historical activity theory’ that emphasizes the key value of considering the contextual factors while exploring the relationship between teachers’ beliefs and practices (Fang, 1996; Robbins & Stetsenko, 2002), five critical contextual factors were identified including the complicity of the classroom, the overwhelmed teachers, whole-group and teacher-centered approaches, un-supportive parents as well as strong academic-performance orientation.

This study advocates a paradigm shift within the country to encourage new ways of thinking and researching. It also reveals that teachers, though generally agreeing with the philosophy of inclusion and acknowledging the value of peer interactions, feel challenging to promote the social interactions of children with SEN on a daily basis in an inclusive preschool setting. In-service training that targets improving teachers’ theoretical knowledge and practical skills to promote more peer interactions are thus strongly recommended.

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Glossary of Chinese terms

Buke: attending extra-curriculum classes

Baoyuyuan: the aid teacher

Chiku: endure the hardship before one succeeds

Gaokao - National University Entrance Examination

Qipaoxian: the running start line, the very beginning of children's development

Qizhi: promote children's intelligence

Putegongcun: the general and special education co-exist

Suibanjiudu: children with three types of disabilities study in the general classroom

Touyuan: hit it off with someone

Xiao: Filial piety

Xiaodidi or Xiaomeimei: younger brother or sister

Yincaishijiao: teach students based on their different abilities

Youjiaowulei: teach the students regardless of their differences

Yijiaojiehe: combine the medication and education together

Zhongkao: the High School Entrance Examination

Zhongguoteshezhi: China develops in its own way

1 Introduction

Inclusive education is a global trend that carries the idea of providing children-regardless of their ability, gender, ethnic or cultural origin-with equal resources, participation and learning opportunities (Thomas & Loxley, 2001; Jelas, 2000). While inclusion is being discussed as an international phenomenon, it becomes essential to examine the differences in its meaning across different educational systems and how it is understood and practiced within a particular historical, social and cultural context. Thus, the first chapter aims to provide essential contextual knowledge of early childhood inclusive education in China, which orients itself predominantly on the education of children with disabilities. First of all, it starts with section 1.1 targeting at a general introduction of early childhood inclusion in the international context. In section 1.2, I talk about early childhood inclusion in China. Within this section, an introduction of the Chinese education system (section 1.2.1) will be first presented and then follows by the definition of inclusive education in China (1.2.2) and the education of children with disabilities in China (section 1.2.3). In the end, section 1.2.4 addresses the development of early childhood inclusion. Section 1.3 talks about the challenges of implementing early childhood inclusion. Then in section 1.4, I further explain why to conduct the study in Shanghai. This chapter ends with a summary (section 1.5).

1.1 Early childhood inclusion in the international context

Inclusive education emphasizes that each child to be an equally valued member of the school culture involving presence, participation, acceptance and achievement (Eldar, Talmor, & Wolf-Zukerman, 2010; Humphrey, 2008). It involves all children having the right to participate actively in a general education setting and to be valued as members of that education community (Carrington, 2007). Many early care and education programs worldwide share the value that children with disabilities should participate in natural environments alongside their peers without disabilities (Guralnick & Bruder, 2016; Dessemontet, Bless, & Morin, 2012; Odom, Teferra, & Kaul, 2004).

Young children with disabilities have shown positive developmental and quality-of-life outcomes when they have full access to inclusive preschool settings (Odom, Vitztum, et al., 2004; Purcell, Turnbull, & Jackson, 2006). Many of them have gained social engagement (Brown, Odom, Li, & Zercher, 1999), social acceptance (Odom, Zercher, Li, Marquart, & Sandall, 2006), and friendships (Buysse, Goldman, & Skinner, 2002) in a general preschool setting. Meanwhile, research that conducted comparisons between the overall quality of inclusive and non-inclusive programs revealed that inclusive preschools tended to have higher score on overall quality (Buysse et al. 1999; Dessemontet, Bless, & Morin, 2012; Hestenes, Cassidy, Shim, & Hedge, 2008), which indicates that the quality of a preschool program is likely to be increased for all children as a result of promoting inclusion services.

In spite of legal and moral imperatives, there are different interpretations and transformation of national policies in practice based on each country's specific sociopolitical context, cultural attitudes, and belief systems about disability, which leads to very different developmental stages of inclusive education in the international context (Meijer, 2003; Pijl, Meijer & Hegarty, 1997). Kozleski et al. (2011) and Peters (2003) suggested that there are generally two groups of countries that took part in the inclusion movement while facing different challenges and issues. Specifically, some countries such as Canada, the United States and Sweden, continue to lead the development of early childhood inclusion (Frankel, 2004; O'Brien, 2007; Palsha, 2002). Meanwhile, in many Asian, African, South American countries, the movement toward inclusive education is gradually occurring (Forlin, 2010; Ajodhia-Andrews & Frankel, 2010).

Within the Asian countries or cities that join in the inclusion movement, Singapore (Nonis, Chong, Moore, Tang & Koh, 2016; Yeo, Neihart, Tang, Chong, & Huan, 2011) and Hong Kong (Lee, Yeung, Tracey & Barker, 2015; Cheuk & Hatch, 2007), for example, have gradually started to explore the im-

¹ In this study, 'preschool' and 'kindergarten' are used interchangeably.

plementation of early childhood inclusion. Specifically, governmental policy-makers, as well as education professionals and practitioners show increasing interests in establishing inclusive preschools where children with various disabilities can have access to a general kindergarten (Hu & Li, 2012). As its international political and economic power increases, Chinese government joined the worldwide endeavor to improve the implementation of inclusion on the preschool level, aiming at improving the quality of current inclusive services by granting more children with disabilities equal educational opportunities for quality ECE (early childhood education) programs (Hu & Szente, 2010; Gargiulo & Piao, 1995; Hu & Roberts, 2011).

1.2 Early childhood inclusion in China

1.2.1 Brief introduction of the Chinese education system

The current Chinese education system consists mainly of four key elements: basic education, vocational education, higher education, as well as adult education. Apart from adult education, the only selection standard of the other three different levels of educational institutes is the students' academic performance, which is highly selective and exclusive, leading to the deprivation of the rights of some students who do relatively weaker to receive a good quality education. This competitive nature of Chinese education system starts as early as at the kindergarten level. Children, starting from the age of three, or even younger, are taught Mathematics, English as well as Chinese language skills in the kindergarten. Their cognitive development is positioned as the critical development to prepare them ready for primary schools where the academic-performance serves as the only standard for their success.

This highly competitive nature of the educational system also negatively influences how Chinese parents and school teachers perceive education for children. Parents feel the urge not to let their children fail at the 'Qipaoxian' (the starting line). A number of teachers suffer from 'burnout' due to the big amount of working load, less holiday time, the more extra burden from weekend classes. In many cities in China, it has reformed teachers' payment scheme to reward teachers who enable children to gain higher academic performance (except for LRC designated pupils), which was perceived by many teachers as an 'invisible hand' (p. 24) directing teachers' practice towards what was desired in the school's vision (Tan, 2013).

Even though the Chinese government strives to provide more children with access to general education, it has not changed its primary orientation on selecting children based on their academic performance. Usually, after finishing their secondary schools, based on their academic performance during the ‘Zhongkao’ (the High School Entrance Examination), students will have to make a decision about whether they to continue the high school to prepare for ‘Gaokao’ (the University Entrance Examination) or to go to a vocational training school to learn practical skills. For those who choose to go to high school, there are still possibilities that they will go back to the vocational training school after they have a bad result from the ‘Gaokao.’ The period of preparations for ‘Gaokao’ is considered as one of the most challenging and stressful phases of high school in China for students (Lu, Shi, & Zhong, 2018). While attending colleges can bring high returns (Li et al., 2012), many students work hard to prepare themselves ready during the three years in high school, some even starting the preparation as early as primary school.

1.2.2 What is ‘inclusive education’ in China

The definition of inclusive education is still inconsistent and unclear in China, which is shared in the international context (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Norwich, 2013; Slee, 2011). Among the research studies conducted in China focusing on examining inclusive education, the practice of LRC (children with disabilities learning in the regular classroom) becomes the center of discussion, gradually being conceptualized as a Chinese policy and practice of inclusive education. Most of the previous research studies fail to provide a rationale for why focusing only on the education of disabled children in general preschool settings while pursuing an understanding of early inclusive education in China (Hu & Szente, 2010; Hu, Lim, & Boyd, 2016).

In her dissertation project targeting at exploring disabled children’s participation and learning in general primary and secondary schools in China, Wang (2016) gave adequate rationales for focusing on children with disabilities while exploring inclusion in the Chinese school context. To start with, research that targets a particular group of children tend to face the potential challenge of being criticized for generating categorical thinking about diversity and beliefs and practice that lead to exclusion. Thus, in recent years, more and more research studies, as Norwich (2013) found out, in order to create more distance

from the specific circumstances of disability and difficulties, tend to emphasize the perception of ‘all’ while talking about inclusive education. Nevertheless, like what Miles and Singal (2010) addressed in their research, the emphasis on ‘all’ could potentially sideline the interests of disabled children since other issues, such as those concerned with ethnicity, gender or socio-economic class interests could draw more attention (e.g., Tan, 2014). Thus, Wang (2016) first argued that inclusive education needs to address both ‘all’ and ‘some’ so that it can contribute to the learning and participation of all children but at the same time not overlook the marginalization and exclusion facing vulnerable groups. Moreover, by agreeing with Allan (2010), Wang further explained that Chinese children with disabilities are the only group of children whose exclusion from regular schools is still legitimized and rationales to do so still dominate, it is thus essential to involve them while conceptualizing inclusive education in the Chinese context. In the end, Wang (2016) concluded her argument by stating that to examine the inclusion process of disabled children will not only contribute no less to a complete knowledge of inclusion in China but also demonstrate the urgency to address issues this group is facing. I share the same understanding and argument in the current research inquiry while exploring an understanding of teachers’ inclusion practice in Chinese preschools.

1.2.3 The education of children with disabilities in China

Children with disabilities in China have, on a small scale, received some education at the beginning of the 20th century. Nevertheless, this development had come to a halt when the ‘Cultural Revolution’ took place during the 1960s. During the next ten years, it had slowed down the development of education, as schools were shut down and many teachers and intellectuals were suspended. It was not until 1978, the year the ‘Reform and Open Door’ policy being introduced by the then Premier Deng Xiaoping, Chinese people were encouraged to look at what the western world looked like, which contributed to a more accepting and tolerant society for accepting individuals’ differences (Dual & Cheng, 1990). School populations were becoming more diverse: comprising students with different economic backgrounds as well as different abilities.

Along with the ‘Reform and Open Door’ policy, part of the Chinese government’s attention also started to shift to the education and the overall well-being of children with disabilities. As early as the 1980s,

long before any implementation of legislation and laws to advocate for the development of inclusion in China, the practice of including children with disabilities in nearby general schools was experimented in rural areas due to the lack of transportation that prevented the students from attending special schools located mostly in the city or the town center (Yang & Wang, 1994). This initiative was called “‘Learning in Regular Classrooms’” (LRC or ‘Suibanjiudu’ in Chinese), as a government policy of accepting children with disabilities in mainstream classes (Deng & Poon-Mcbrayer, 2004). It was in the year of 1988 at the first ‘International Work Conference on Special Education,’ the concept of LRC was first introduced, together with the call for special classes attached to general schools (Kou, 1996). Since then, the ‘China National Institute of Educational Research Special Education Center’ has led several nationwide pilot projects targeted specifically on including children with disabilities in regular classes. The first systematic endeavor of inclusion started from the mountainous areas rather than in cities, a choice made from the government due to the lack of resources for children with SEN² in mountainous areas. It was described as ‘this strategy does not necessarily reflect allegiance to the concept of the mainstream, rather it more accurately reflects a shortage of personnel, limited fiscal resources, and facilities in addition to geographical considerations’ (Deng & Manset, 2000).

In the 1990s, China responded to the worldwide movement to improve the implementation of inclusion more systematically by initiating and implementing its laws and legislation. Specifically, while UNESCO was advocating the implementation of inclusive education, China responded by implementing its first national law ‘the People’s Republic of China on Protection of Disabled Persons Act’ (National People’s Congress, 1991), which dedicated itself to ensuring the fundamental rights of people with disabilities. Furthermore, in 1994, in responding to ‘Salamanca statement’ initiated from the UNESCO ‘World Conference on Special Needs Education’, ‘the Educational Guidelines for People with Disabilities’ was carried out by the National Education Committee of the People’s Republic of China, which further emphasized the importance of inclusive education and advocated for its implementation on the

² In this current study, children with disabilities and children with SEN are used interchangeably.

national level. Moreover, the ‘Nine-Year Compulsory Education Law’ implemented in 1986 further addressed the educational needs of children with disabilities by stating that ‘all children who have reached the age of six...regardless of sex, ethnic group or race’’ have access to general schools (The National People’s Congress 1986, p. 41). Even though the word ‘inclusion’ was not directly addressed in this legislation, it advocated schools to try to accept children with various learning needs (Wang, Rule, Latham, & Fiechtl, 1993).

Despite of the influence that the western ideology and perceptions of special education have cast on the foundation and development of special education and later inclusive education in China (Deng, Poon-Mcbrayer & Farnswo, 2001), the Chinese government developed inclusion based on its political, economic and cultural backgrounds (Deng & Su, 2012). Specifically, on the one hand, they have maintained a special educational system as the leading educational format for children with profound special education needs. On the other hand, the special education system also serves as the primary resource for supporting the development of inclusive education in general schools. It is a development model that both emphasizes the importance of special education and inclusive education, as is often referred to as ‘special education schools as the backbone, learning in regular classroom as the main body’ in a number of research studies (CPG, 2011; Deng & Manset, 2000; Deng & Guo, 2007). The Chinese government aimed to build more special schools and set a target that by 2020 every town of more than 300,000 residents should have at least one special education school (CPG, 2011).

Children with disabilities learning in regular classrooms (LRC) is the main format of inclusion in the Chinese school system. It officially offers access to public schooling for children with the following three categories of disabilities: children with intellectual disability, children with visual disability and children with hearing impairments in elementary or secondary schools. Those children take up the largest percentage of the student population with disabilities in China and their education constitutes the weakest part in Chinese compulsory education system (Gu, 1993; Xu & Shi, 1990). In 2016, according to the statistics of the Ministry of Education, there were in total 2080 special schools and 491,700 children with disabilities were enrolled: specifically, 36,100 children with visual disability; 90,000 children with hearing disabilities; and the rest 260,500 children with intellectual disabilities, and 105,100 for children with other various disabilities. At the same time, regular schools provided education to other

270,800 children with disabilities (including via special classes in regular schools). What's more, in recent years, due to the persistent argument and persuasion of many parents and increasing social awareness of autism, children with autism spectrum disorders have also been, in some big cities, included in the general kindergartens and primary schools (Huang, Jia & Wheeler, 2013). Also, some cities that are economically and culturally developed like Beijing and Shanghai have also initiated policies to encourage parents to send their children with disabilities for EI (early intervention) and related services by offering partial reimbursement. The maximum amount available for reimbursement per family is 500 yuan (65 euros) monthly.

Despite the progress China has made for the past 30 years since the implementation of LRC, there are a number of children with other types of disabilities being excluded from the public school system (Deng & Manset, 2000), let alone children in rural areas (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004). For example, children with severe intellectual disabilities and multiple disabilities have not been given the access to general schools mainly because school resources such as qualified teachers, professional support still are lacking (Deng, 2003). Moreover, while examining from the national level, many children are deprived of equal access to general schools due to the striking regional differences for every aspect in Chinese schools. To be more specific, the developmental gap between the western and eastern China and the internal differences within a region or a city leads to rather differentiated levels of the development of special education and LRC. The public services (e.g., reimbursement provided to families with children with disabilities), for example, are only limited to children in the city areas (Ellsworth & Chung, 2007; Li, 2007).

Even for children already enrolled in regular schools, discrimination, marginalization and exclusion against them still exist. As Hu, Lim and Boyd (2016) indicated that most of the children with disabilities only physically presented themselves in the general classroom and rare participation and learning took place. What's more, in her dissertation study (Wang, 2016) where the researcher focused on the participation and learning of children with disabilities in the 'pilot inclusive schools' in Shanghai, she found out that only with appropriate methods applied by the teachers and balanced power relations between teachers and the students, children with disabilities were able to voice their views on schooling. In fact, for most of the time, many teachers showed a lack of proper methods to include students with SEN.

What's worse, it also revealed that many of the enrolled students with SEN were not recruited in the whole evaluation system because their performances were automatically ignored, which led to the situation that some students with SEN did not attend the classes regularly and some did not even show up in the classes.

1.2.4 Early childhood inclusion in China

China acknowledged the needs for early intervention and early 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) (Gargiulo & Piao, 1995). The law also argued for that early childhood inclusion should be the main format to provide children with disabilities with access to general preschools (Chen, 1996; Yang & Wang, 1994). What's more, in 1994, the 'Educational Guidelines for People with Disabilities' was carried out by the 'National Education Committee of the People's Republic of China,' which further emphasized the importance of early inclusive education. Those two legislations serve as the fundamental legislations for the advocacy and preliminary implementation of early childhood inclusion, calling for a national endeavor to establish quality kindergarten (from birth to six) programs and offer services to young children with disabilities (Chen 1996; Gargiulo & Piao, 1995; Yang & Wang, 1994).

Chinese government furthered its endeavor to support the rights of children with SEN by carrying out its Tenth Five-Year Plan (2001–2005), explicitly stating that the education of infants and toddlers with disabilities in rural areas in China is of importance and advocating that those children need to be placed in inclusive preschools (National People's Congress 2001). The Eleventh Five-Year Plan, 2006–2010 (National People's Congress 2006) intended to fulfill the promise of including the majority of children with disabilities in regular preschools. In addition, since 2004 from the 'Fourth Plenary Session of the 16th Central Committee', the Chinese government has advocated establishing a harmonious society. The goal can't be accomplished when the educational needs of children with SEN are not met (Zhu, 2005). Under those policies, more national planning concerning equity in education has taken place: specifically, the Chinese government gathered professionals to explore the concept of quality preschool inclusion in the Chinese context and methods for assessment (Hu & Li, 2012; The State Council, 2010).

Following these government initiatives, a few cities such as Shanghai and Beijing initiated pilot pre-schools to include children with disabilities in regular classrooms but millions of other children in the majority of the country still await appropriate services.

While examining the legislation and plans initiated by the Chinese government, we cannot deny their fundamental contribution to a better inclusive preschool education development in China. Nevertheless, they failed to provide specific guidelines for concrete implementations for kindergartens as well as for teachers (Hu, Lim, & Boyd, 2016, Hu & Szente, 2010). A close examination on the guidelines reveals that there is a lack in the following aspects: evaluation for the performance of children with SEN, teachers' professional knowledge of children with SEN, inclusive curriculum, governmental roles in the implementation process, as well as sustainable funding resources (National Education Committee of the People's Republic of China 1994). Therefore, the whole situation of early inclusion for children with disabilities still shares the same unfulfilling nature of inclusive education for children on the primary and secondary school levels: most of the children with SEN are not given any access to general kindergartens (Yan, 2008). A survey conducted in Hebei province revealed that none of the regular kindergartens had enrolled any children with disabilities (Jiao et al., 2004). Most regular early childhood education facilities in China have not been familiar with inclusion, nor have they considered providing this type of service (Wang & Shen, 2009; Zhang, 2003).

1.3 Challenges in implementing early childhood inclusion

1.3.1 Policy

Currently, the Chinese government is eager to extend such inclusive education into the preschools (National People's Congress 2001, 2006). Both educational laws and national plans indicate that public preschool inclusion should be the primary avenue for children with disabilities. Nevertheless, while encouraging kindergartens to accept and educate children with SEN, they do not claim it as a must. As of today, very few of government-run, community-based preschools are willing to consider enrolling children with disabilities. Any preschool in China can reject children with disabilities, citing reasons irrespective of the legal recommendation for inclusive practices (Wang & Shen, 2009; Yan, 2008). Moreover, some researchers also indicated that general ambiguity in related legislation serves as another

reason for the lack of related educational services for children with disabilities (McCabe, 2002). In addition, the essential legislation and other governmental plans also fail to provide specific guidelines for concrete implementations for kindergartens as well as teachers, making the implementation of preschool inclusion less possible (National Education Committee of the People's Republic of China 1994).

1.3.2 Classroom practice and qualified teachers

The difficulty of educating children with SEN has been increased because of the large-class size predominant in preschool settings: specifically, the ratio of teacher and children is usually 15–20:1. Usually, one teacher has to be responsible for more students in rural areas compared to city areas. Teachers' major concerns are with most of the students, not individually catering for each child's specific needs, which makes it difficult for inclusion to take place (Chen, 1996). Moreover, social collectivism has served as the cornerstone for schools and teachers are not trained or expected to teach children based on their individual needs (Deng et al., 2001). Deng and Harris (2008) describe the standard practice in Chinese classrooms as 'curriculum, instructional methods, and academic standards are identical for all students' (p. 202). Thus, to accept children with disabilities present big challenge for teachers and schools, since 'the traditional uniformity in viewing students' ability and rigidity of using a whole class lecturing mode for all students was no longer valid for the newcomers with special needs' (p. 198). Thus, even though some methods were introduced to Chinese teachers and classrooms for accommodating children's various needs, general incompetence to individualized or differentiated education is still identified among Chinese teachers (Yu et al., 2011).

Meanwhile, there is still no national standard qualification for teachers in special and inclusive education (Yu et al., 2011). Both pre-service and in-service teachers, in general, lack a proper understanding of inclusion. From various research studies, teachers, in general, expressed the concern of lacking the basic knowledge of children with SEN (Li, 2007; Zhou, 2006). Teachers' training system usually requires teachers to have four years of training (a college degree program) for primary and the above schools. For kindergarten teachers, it usually takes three years to finish. While examining the contents and formats of those courses offered among the degree-seeking programs, few of them focus on offering students knowledge of special education, let alone inclusive education (Law, 2011). Even though a few

universities in China prepare teachers to work with children with special needs, almost no programs specialize in early childhood inclusive education (Liu & Zeng, 2007). Meanwhile, a lot of in-service training programs are mostly short-termed or take place on weekends when the teachers are tired after the whole week's work (Deng et al., 2001).

1.3.3 Cultural understanding of children with disabilities

Within the Chinese culture, people are influenced by Confucius' philosophy, which values collectivism and accepts one's social role in a hierarchical society (Deng et al. 2001). People with disabilities have always been perceived as having a lower social status of the hierarchic feudal pyramid for centuries and social stigma toward people with disabilities still widely exists (Lee, 1995). In nowadays China, their voices are still far less heard than the voices of others (Lee & Regan, 2010; Pearson et al., 2002). A sympathetic social attitude towards children with a disability had been carefully nurtured under the dominant Confucian philosophy which advocated harmonious order and humaneness in social relations (Deng & Poon-McBrayer, 2004; Yu, Su & Liu, 2011). It is the community's shared responsibility to take care of them (Shen et al., 2008). To be specific, in his study (Fengyan, 2004), the researcher illustrates the moral implications of the Confucian tradition by showing how Confucian ideas of human nature, when applied to moral education in educational settings, tends to focus on the practice of virtue or goodness. This cultural belief is shared in some other Asian cultures and has been perceived as an obstacle for further development of inclusive education (Deng & Harris, 2008; Forlin & Lian, 2008).

1.3.4 Prevalence of medical model

In China, the regulation of the disability population was embedded in a national social trend to medicalization (Kohrman, 2005). The practice of LRC was introduced as an extension of the special education service, thus leading a medical discourse of remedy to prevail in general schools (Ebersold & Evans, 2008). We see that strong advocacy to promote 'a combination of medicine and education' (Yijiaojiehe) has been identified among the pilot preschools to include children with disabilities. To promote such practice is framed as meeting the 'practical' needs of treatment for children's impairments. Nevertheless, some researchers also criticized that to perceive children's disabilities based on a medical model might

lead to practitioner's hopes for 'normalizing' disabled children instead of realizing the critical role of educational provision in constructing children's educational difficulties (Deng & Lu, 2012).

1.3.5 Resources

Even though for the past thirty years, we have witnessed drastic economic development in China, making itself as the second biggest GDP increasing country as well as the most thriving developing country in the 21st century, we still see substantial differences between the city and rural areas (Ding, 2008), leading to different allocations of fund and basic infrastructure. Moreover, financial constraints have always been a significant barrier to quality educational services for all children in China (Huang & Wheeler, 2007). In addition, a lack of EI services may lead parents to travel thousands of miles from less developed cities to big cities like Beijing and Shanghai in order to seek such services. Take the children with autism spectrum disorders as an example; the very well-known training center established by parents with children with autism spectrum disorders in Beijing is called 'Xing Xing Yu'³. Very few families have access to the training center because of its limited places.

1.4 Why focusing on Shanghai

Lewin and Wang (1994) concluded that no research could completely depict China, considering its distinctive regional variations. The current research intends to achieve an understanding of Chinese pre-school teachers' daily practice of including children with disabilities in general preschools, instead of aiming for making generalized results. I chose Shanghai to conduct the current research since it is one of the only two cities (Shanghai and Beijing) where the local government is systematically implementing pilot inclusive preschool programs in China. Furthermore, Shanghai has a unique context that might interest a wide international audience: for example, its excellent PISA performance has drawn international interest in exploring its education. In 2009, intensive attention was shifted towards the Chinese

³ Xing Xing Yu: a parent-organized habitation center for children with autism spectrum disorders in Beijing.

education system due to Shanghai students' extraordinary performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Takayama (2008) vividly described it as to have provoked a 'PISA-shock.' At the same time, education in Shanghai is also treated as the reference society in the educational policy field (Sellar & Lingard, 2013; Waldow, Takayama & Sung, 2014).

Since 1949, Shanghai has been serving as the forefront of educational reform in Mainland China (Arens, 1952). While increasing the enrolment rate of compulsory education is still addressed in the recent national policy statement 'Mid-term and Long-term Plan of Education Reform (2010-2020)', Shanghai's local interpretation orients its practice more on achieving 'quality' over 'quantity' (ShCoE, 2010). Moreover, Shanghai has been serving as the exemplary city for experimenting with pilot inclusive preschools, which aims at providing an implementable model that can be used to develop preschool inclusion in other Chinese cities. Since 1995, the Shanghai Municipal Commission of Education (SMCE) has started pursuing the goal to provide children with SEN with three years of high-quality early childhood education and ever since then; it has been dedicating to reaching this goal (Hu & Szente, 2010). Shanghai government has carried out the Three-Year Special Education Action Plan (2014-2016) to develop its special and inclusive education. Take the district where the researched kindergarten is located as an example: since 2013, within Chang Ning district, six kindergartens accepted children with disabilities and until 2016, there were already eleven kindergartens that engaged themselves in early inclusion. In order to guarantee its current progress, Chang Ning district further implemented its 'Chang Ning District Long-Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)' that aims at improving the overall preschool education quality.

1.5 Summary

The introduction chapter presented how inclusion is developed in the format of 'LRC (learning in the regular classroom)' in China and how its social, political and cultural circumstances influence the formation and development of LRC. Even though after three decades of development of LRC in China, very few of the research studies have focused on children's social interactions in an inclusive preschool setting, let alone examining how teachers' daily practice influence the social interactions. The researcher

of this study specifically selected Shanghai to conduct the research study for it being the ‘forerunner’ of inclusive practices on the preschool level.

2 Literature review

In the following sections, 2.1 will address the importance of children's social interactions. Section 2.2 focuses on research studies targeting social interactions in inclusive preschool setting. In section 2.3, the author will talk about how different social interactions children with and without SEN have in inclusive settings. Followed by that will be a discussion about teachers' support in children's social interactions (section 2.4). In section 2.5, teachers' beliefs and practices in inclusive settings will be talked about. Then in section 2.6, discussions on social interaction and teachers' role in China will be presented. This chapter ends with an introduction to the aims of the current study (section 2.7).

2.1 Importance of children's social interactions

Within this section, I will first talk about the historical development of children's social interactions. Followed by this, an introduction of theories that support the importance of children's social interactions will be presented. In the end, empirical evidence that supports the importance of children's social interactions will be discussed.

2.1.1 Historical development focusing on children's social interactions

While looking at the history of research studies focusing on children's peer interactions and their relationships as early as the 1920s, we have seen many substantial stages with specific emphases on children's overall development. In the early 1920s, research studies put a relatively strong emphasis on the social perspective of children's overall development. In North America, a number of research studies focusing on children's peer interactions and relationship started to appear in children's developmental studies, mainly concerning how children's differences played a role in their social behaviors and interactions, generating study results from the development of social participation (Parten, 1932), friendship (Challman, 1932) to assertiveness (Dawe, 1934), conflict, aggression (Maudry & Nekula, 1939) and other constructs concerning group dynamics (K. Lewin, Lippitt, & White, 1939). While examining the research studies after the outburst of the Second World War, it is identified that strong influence generated by social-political factors on children's developmental studies. First of all, during the 1940s and 1950s, while a decline in the research focusing on peer interactions and social relationship was identified, studies exploring how children's specific characteristics may account for potential conflicts

or successful social interactions in a social group started to appear due to an apparent change of the focus to group processes and democratic values. Among those studies, some provided valuable experiences for contemporary studies targeting at identifying potential factors that influenced children's social group experiences. In the 60s, there was a sudden shift of research focus to specifically exploring children's cognitive and academic performance influenced by the pragmatic educational orientation corresponding to the Cold War and the social policy targeting at the eradication of poverty. By the end of the 1960s, it had become the time for child developmentalists to be reminded of their early roots and Hartup served as one of the provocative roles in the process with his published chapter of Child Psychology in 1970s. In the middle of 1970s, many preschools and childcare centers came into being, which, in a way, contributed partly to more research studies on children's peer relationship and social relationship (Rubin, Bukowski, Parker, & Bowker, 2008). In the 1980s, this development was well supported by the rise of the psychopathology in psychology (Rubin, Bowker, & Gazelle, 2010). To be more specific, children's peer interactions and relationship were treated valuable for the study of normal development and the study of maladjustment. Scientific interest in the processes underlying social development in children has come to the forefront of scholarly activity in psychology and education since the mid-1970s. Contemporary social scientists have been rapidly extending the research literature and knowledge base regarding children's social development.

2.1.2 Theories that support the importance of social interactions

'In the light of the increasing evidence for the influence of the peer group on the behavior and psychological development of children and adolescents, it is questionable whether any society, whatever its social system can afford to leave largely to change the direction of the influences and realization of its high potential for fostering constructive development both for the child and his society' (Bronfenbrenner, 1967)

Piaget (1932), Mead (1934; 1964), and Vygotsky (1978) claimed the value of children's social interactions with peers in contributing to cognitive development. Specifically, unlike the way children interacting with adults, in which they tend to give up in defending themselves due to the unbalanced power

relationship, they are more likely to reflect, coordinate and reconstruct their original views while interacting with their peers. This process of reflections and reconstructions contributes to the sustainable development of their relevant cognitive competencies. They further mentioned that during those interactions with their peers, children also learn to negotiate with others, which may contribute to children's better operational thinking. Mead (1964), states his opinion explicitly through the proposal of the concept 'self.' Through interacting with others, an individual comes to the recognition of his (or her) own existence (as in "the self is a social process,"). He further argued that through socially interacting with their peers, children also start to learn to take different perspectives by 'position exchanging' with others. 'Role theory' (Goffmann, 1959; Sarbin & Allen, 1968) describing interpersonal interactions in terms of the various roles that people play provides further evidence for the value of early interactions with peers for children's development. Specifically, any child who has not experienced varied social situations may not be able to develop a sufficient repertoire of social roles, and would thus be less socially competent in the social world.

2.1.3 Empirical evidence that supports the importance of social interactions

More than one hundred years ago, Mead had explained his understanding of social interactions: "The probable beginning of human communication was in cooperation, not in imitation, where the conduct differed and yet where the act of the one answered to and called out the act of the other" (Mead, 1909, p. 406). Interaction refers to the social exchange of some duration between two individuals. The term interaction is reserved for dyadic behavior in which the participants' actions are interdependent such that each actor's behavior is both a response to and stimulus for, the other participant's behavior. At its core, an interaction comprises "such incidents as Individual A shows behavior X to Individual B, or A shows X to B and B responds with Y" (Hinde, 1979, p.15).

Early in their lives, though limited by their relatively less developed linguistic ability as well as their egocentric ways of thinking, one of the children's critical developmental capabilities is to seek for social interactions with their peers (Howes, 1988). As later, their language and other cognitive competencies mature, their social interactions also become more frequent and complicated (Hartup, 1983; Harper & McCluskey, 2003; Rubin et al., 2010). Specifically, by interacting with one another in a school context,

children get to know social norms and skills, understand and acquire content knowledge, develop their self-concept, as well as achieve emotional support (Rubin, Bukowski, & Laursen, 2009). Therefore, peer interactions are an essential component of children's overall development (Hartup, 1976).

Guided by varied theoretical approaches, some researchers, on one hand, have identified that successful peer interactions provide both a key 'natural' context and a mechanism for the acquisition and elaboration of essential developmental abilities such as social, language, and cognitive competencies (Bijou, 1993; Guralnick & Neville, 1997; Odom, McConnell, & McEvoy, 1992a; Harper & McCluskey, 2003). On the other hand, some researchers have noted that children who lack positive peer interactions are likely to suffer from failure in academic performances, delinquency, social isolation as well as depression (Wentzel, 2009). Based on its crucial importance, many educators support that it is the fundamental feature for children in their early childhood to achieve effective peer social interactions (Guralnick & Neville, 1997; Odom, McConnell, & McEvoy, 1992b).

2.2 Research on social interactions in inclusive preschools

Inclusive education aims to ensure equal access and opportunities for all individuals with SEN (Special Educational Needs) to learn, regardless of their various specific needs (Booth, Ainscow, 2007; Jelas, 2010). Inclusive practices emphasize on principles and values that seek to maximize respect for individual differences in development, ensure equal access, and foster a sense of belonging to a shared community (Guralnick, 1978; 1990; Eldar, Talmor, & Wolf-Zukerman, 2010). It provides a supportive environment in which young children can grow and learn side by side with their typically developing peers (Chandler-Olcott & Kluth 2009; Booth, Ainscow, Black-Hawkins, Vaughan, & Shaw, 2000; Kalam-bouka, Farrell, Dyson, & Kaplan, 2005). It can stimulate learning, development and children's feeling of acceptance (Bredenkamp & Copple, 1997). Moreover, the quality of social interaction children have in an inclusive preschool is an essential indicator of ECE (early childhood education) program quality as it looks beyond structural features of the program and influences children's development (Hestenes & Carroll, 2000).

In an inclusive preschool setting, children are provided with opportunities to exchange their ideas and feelings with each other and to take part in social-communicative interactions with their peers who can serve as their same-aged models of competent behavior (Grubbs & Niemeyer, 1999; Harjusola-Webb, Hubbell & Bedesem, 2012; Hestenes & Carroll, 2000). Through a natural behavior modeling format, they can socially interact with their peers, developing social abilities (Guralnick, Connor, Hammond, Gottman, & Kinnish, 1995; Grubbs & Niemeyer, 1999) as well as friendship (McDonnell, Thorson, Disher, Mathot-Buckner, Mendel, & Ray, 2003; Willis, 1994). In particular, young children with disabilities are provided with socially supportive and developmentally engaging classroom environments where positive interactions with their typically developing peers take place (Hu, Lim, & Boyd, 2016). Other research studies have also been identified showing positive social interaction of children with disabilities in a range of inclusive early childhood settings (e.g., Kontos, Moore, & Giorgetti, 1998; Tsao et al., 2008).

2.3 Differences in social interactions between children with and without SEN

Together with the research studies that show how children with disabilities benefiting from inclusive preschool settings, studies exploring the challenges and difficulties children with disabilities may experience in interacting with their peers in an inclusive preschool setting also appeared (e.g., Diamond, 2002). To be more specific, researchers have identified significantly fewer social behavior (Brown, Odom, Li, & Zercher, 1999), fewer social exchanges (Hestenes & Carroll, 2000; Diamond & Hong, 2010; Lafferty, McConkey, & Taggart, 2013), less sophisticated engagement (de Kruif & McWilliam, 1999; Kontos et al., 1998; McWilliam & Bailey, 1995) among children with varied SEN compared to their peers in inclusive preschools. They are frequently overlooked as play partners by their peers in inclusive settings (Guralnick & Groom 1988; Diamond, Le Furgy, & Blass, 1993; Skinner, Buysse, & Bailey, 2004) and seem to have stable lower social status compared to their peers (Kuhne & Wiener, 2000).

While looking into the potential reasons that lead to those difficulties in interacting with their peers, one study identified that the stigma associated with their disability could often result in active isolation and the lack of social invitations from their peers (Chen, Justice, Rhoad-Drogalis, Lin, & Sawyer, 2018;

McConkey et al., 2013). Some studies explained that those social interactions are asymmetrical, which starts in the very beginning of the interaction process based on the different developmental abilities and competencies between children with and without SEN (Janson, 2007; Kugelmass, 1989). Dyson (2005) further agreed by attributing the lack of social connections to a mismatch of social and play competencies rather than a negative attitude towards disability or difference. Other studies revealed that their unusual or unpredictable behaviors might lead to social rejections by their peers (Odom, Buysse, & Soukakou, 2011).

While the potential reasons for the difficulties vary, what we see children with SEN in an inclusive preschool setting while interacting with their peers is that they are often in the subordinate place and being taken care of or even protected by their peers (Janson, 2001; 2007; Meyer, 2001). This somewhat vertical process of interactions prevails in most of the social interactions, and it differs fundamentally from the horizontal nature that we perceive from normal peer relationships and peer interactions (Lindsey, Cremeens, & Caldera, 2010). Thus, it is not hard to assume that there are substantial differences between the two groups (Guralnick & Groom, 1987) and more separated playgroups started appearing in inclusive preschool settings (e.g., Hanline, 1993), which put the goals educators try to achieve for inclusive education at stake.

Some research studies indicated that merely placing children with SEN in an inclusive preschool setting will not naturally generate increased social interactions with their peers or safeguard their improved social status or social competence (Conderman, 1995; Sale & Carey, 1995; Kemple, 2004; Janson, 2008; Brown, Odom, & Conroy, 2001). In most cases, peer relationships do not automatically occur because young children are in close proximity to their peers in the classroom (e.g., Carter, Sisco, Brown, Brickham, & Al-Khabbaz, 2008). This can be counteracted by the implementation of carefully planned social interventions. Therefore, considerable efforts need to be invested in designing social interventions in order to create possible contexts where more peer interactions can take place.

Research into interventions targeting at supporting social interactions between children with and without disabilities have been prevalent for the past quarter-century (Batchelor & Taylor, 2005). We see effort has been devoted to devising ways to promote the social interactions between children with and without

disabilities in preschool programs (e.g., Brown, Odom, & Conroy, 2001; Kohler, Strain, & Shearer, 1996; Odom & Brown, 1993; Odom, McConnell, McEvoy, & Peterson, 1999). Several reviews that discussed some effective intervention strategies have been published previously (Brock, Biggs, Carter, Cattet, & Raley, 2016; Watkins, O'Reilly, Kuhn, Gevarter, Lancioni, Sigafos & Lang, 2015; Bierman, 2004; Harrower & Dunlap, 2001). Among the intervention efforts, the role of teachers in promoting the social interactions of students is often emphasized (Brown, Odom, & Conroy, 2001; Kohler, Strain, & Shearer, 1996; Odom, McConnell, McEvoy, & Peterson, 1999; Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008; Stanton-Chapman, Walker, & Jamison, 2014). The development of social competence in the peer group setting requires the attention of an adult who understands the social needs and capabilities of young children and knows how to provide appropriate support and intervention when needed (Kemple & Hartle, 1997).

2.4 Teachers support children's social interactions in inclusive preschools

2.4.1 The theoretical framework for teachers' importance

The importance of teachers' intervention strategies to scaffold children's social interactions with their peers is fully supported by Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) theory and Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory. In particular, Vygotsky explains that an adult's guidance can more effectively facilitate a child. Specifically, with adults' guidance, children may learn things by more active involvement, and through the time they may achieve the task on their own (Yang, 2000). The potential contributing role of adult guidance to shorten the distance between the developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). Therefore, the classroom environment should be a place where social interactions are encouraged through the assistance of the teacher (Gnadinger, 2008). Teachers can understand children's problems with peers, comprehend their viewpoints, and decide on the necessary intervention strategies for facilitating healthy peer relationships (Moon, 2001). The theoretical framework of Vygotsky is thought to provide a perspective to guide the present study by investigating teachers' specific strategies to promote and facilitate peer social interactions.

Within the ecological theory (also known as development in context) framework, Bronfenbrenner (1979) emphasizes that human behavior cannot be attributed to the characteristics or behavioral events of an individual one. Instead, he argued that the individual develops through dynamic interactions among multiple social contexts. Teachers, with whom a child has direct contact within the context immediately surrounding him or her including others (e.g., parents), play an essential role in influencing the child's social life. Consistent with this presupposition, many researchers have conducted studies to address the impact of adults' involvement on young children's social development. Meanwhile, numerous studies have documented the relationships between children's social and emotional competence and a range of their teachers' behaviors in the classroom, including teachers' affective expression, modeling of empathy, responsiveness to children's emotions (Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Nucci & Turiel, 1978).

2.4.2 Empirical support for teachers' importance

As part of the everyday classroom routine, teachers fulfill their roles by offering children social skills instructions to prepare them for potential peer interactions. The development of positive peer relations is perceived as a fundamental, programmatic goal for early childhood educators (Brown, Odom & Conroy, 2001). They are the key to orchestrating successful peer interactions for all children within the early childhood program. In an inclusive preschool setting, solid patterns of teachers' behavior associated with the absence or presence of the social dimension in children's lives. Specifically, teachers support children with disabilities and scaffold them to learn more from interacting with their peers (Stanton-Chapman, Kaiser, & Wolery, 2006; Hu, Lim & Boyd, 2016). With their support, children with disabilities also tend to show more frequent social exchanges and engage themselves more in the classroom activities (Hestenes & Carroll, 2000; Hu, Lim, & Boyd, 2016). On the other hand, without teachers' support, they show a tendency to fall back to inappropriate behaviors and may less likely to initiate those social interactions (Hartmann & Brougère, 2004). Typical preschoolers tend to interact with their peers with SEN more when teachers trained them to initiate and respond to each other (Koegel, Vernon, Koegel, Koegel, Paullin, 2012; Banda, Hart & Liu-Gitz, 2010; Harper, Symon, Frea, 2008; Bass & Mulick, 2007). Thus, we see the critical value of teachers' different intervention strategies to promote

social interaction between children with and without disabilities in an inclusive preschool setting. Teachers need both preventive and interventive strategies that promote children's social interactions and overall social competence (Harjusola-Webb, Hubbell & Bedesem, 2012; Hestenes & Carroll, 2000). Those strategies require careful preparation, creativity, reflections in order to provide opportunities for peer interactions to happen.

2.4.3 The definition of teachers' strategies

While examining the previous research studies that focused on exploring teachers' prevention and intervention strategies, those strategies can be categorized mainly into three types (McEvoy, Odom, & McConnell, 1992). The first type focuses on "environmental arrangement" interventions to establish a supportive and open classroom-wide environment that encourages children's social interactions. The classroom environment is where peer interaction takes place and where social skills will be mastered or performed (Korinek et al., 1999; Vincent, Horner & Sugai, 2002). Pavri & Monda-Amaya (2000) characterize such environment as one, in which children learn the skills and strategies needed for solving social problems, resolving conflicts, developing friendships, learning to work cooperatively with others as well as enhancing self-esteem. Approaching social competence from universal design for learning (UDL) perspective (Pisha & Coyne, 2001) and structuring the physical and social environments to support the social capability of all students. Specifically, through organization and structure feature changes of the classroom, such as routines and schedules, teachers can affect the social dynamics of the classroom to foster interactions among peers in inclusive settings (Kemple, 2004). Such arrangements might include restricting the physical area of the classroom where play activities take place (Brown, Fox, & Brady, 1987), providing play activities that promote social interaction (DeKlyen & Odom, 1989). Despite its importance, some teachers target at social interventions without regard for classroom and schoolwide structures that support or interfere with those interventions, giving little consideration to the environment (Korinek et al., 1999).

The second type of strategies mainly targets interventions on curriculum and activity design. Specifically, including social interaction and social skills, curricula is a critical component of the curriculum in

an inclusive environment. Kemple (2004) suggests that teachers can support children socially in inclusive settings by actively applying the structured use of curriculum materials and activities. Specifically, apply cooperative games, social problem-solving exercises, role-playing activities and stories to assist in developing children's social competence, as well as schedule free-play, routines that encourage independence, and positive systems of behavior management to support children's social interactions. Apart from this, teachers can also apply affective interventions in the activity design focusing on applying group-focused interventions to change peers' attitude towards children with disabilities (Favazza & Odom, 1997). For other times, they will use stories, materials, and puppetry designed to illustrate the ways of perceiving children with disabilities. In addition, teachers also use friendship activity intervention, in which they adapt the songs, group games, activities from young children in order to create more opportunities for social interactions to take place among children (Twardosz, Norquist, Simon & Bodkin, 1983). Incidental teaching of social skills is also embedded in the curriculum and activity design: when teachers use incidents arising from an ongoing play to support or help shape the ongoing interactions of children with disabilities and their peers by modeling appropriate social skills (Brown, McEvoy & Bishop, 1991; Odom, Zercher, Marquat, Sandall, Wolfberg, 2002). Besides, research also suggests that parents should be actively involved as partners for different curriculum activities to be more effective (Van de Wiel et al., 2002).

The third type focuses on "child specific" interventions: children with special needs may need additional support (Terpstra & Tamura, 2008). To be more specific, teachers provide instruction or training directly to children on skills that they may use in social interactions with peers. First of all, teachers base their strategies mainly on the cognitive-behavioral approaches that encourage children to regulate their behaviors by teaching them self-monitoring, self-instruction, anger management and self-reinforcement skills (e.g. Ervin, Bankert & DuPaul, 1996; Van de Wiel, Matthys, Cohen-Kettenis, Van Engeland, 2003; Miranda & Presentacion, 2000). Secondly, they also refer to the behavioral approaches of positive reinforcement (where appropriate behavior is immediately rewarded), behavior reduction strategies (e.g., redirection), and response cost (a type of punishment in which something valuable is taken away) in increasing on-task behavior (e.g., Fabiano & Pelham, 2003) while designing specific strategies. Moreover, teaching children to initiate social or toy play (Haring & Lovinger, 1989; McConnell, Sisson,

Cort, & Strain, 1991), coaching them to use social skills (Ladd, 1981; Oden & Asher, 1977), or promoting social problem-solving skills (Strayhome & Strain, 1986) are all examples of child-specific interventions. In addition, strategies of this intervention type include teachers' scaffolding: specifically, teachers' systematic use of prompting children for involving in social interaction with peers and reinforcing those interactions (Stanton-Chapman, Kaiser, & Wolery, 2006; Craig-Unkefer & Kaiser, 2002; Brown & Odom, 1994; Chandler, Lubeck, & Fowler, 1992). Another aspect is the active application of peers' support: typically developing peers are a valuable resource either as part of a behavior management program (e.g., peer-monitoring) or peer-oriented intervention (e.g., McEvoy & Welker, 2000).

Based on the three main types of intervention strategies from the previous literature studies, one can establish the following definition of teachers' strategy for the current research. To be more specific: teachers' strategies are ways teachers design that are both preventive and interventive involving careful planning and preparation with relativity and reflections and provide children with opportunities. Those opportunities focus on either the classroom environment (e.g., establish a socially supportive learning environment and school culture), or the curriculum and activity planning (e.g., design learning activities and offer instructions), or individual children (e.g., scaffold, teach individual children in order to promote children for better social interactions and social competence development) (Brown, Odom & Conroy, 2001; Vincent, et al., 2002, Hubbell & Bedesem, 2012; Stanton-Chapman, Kaiser, & Wolery, 2006; Hu, Lim & Boyd, 2016).

2.5 Teachers' beliefs and practices

A number of theories have emphasized the relationship between teachers' beliefs and their practices. Specifically, Magoon (1977) and Deford (1985) proposed a constructivist perspective on teachers' cognitions that indicate teachers are knowing beings and that this knowledge casts an influence on their actions: 'knowledge, then, forms a system of beliefs and attitudes which direct perceptions and behaviors' (Deford, 1985, p.352-353). According to the theory of planned behavior, Haney, Czerniak, and Lumpe (1996) proposed that teachers' beliefs can significantly influence their behaviors in the classroom. Teachers have a curriculum construct system that is developed based on their different experience

and this construct influences their specific actions in the classroom (McClintic & Petty, 2015; Hamilton, 2006). Guided by this construct, early childhood teacher plans and executes his or her practices.

2.5.1 Consistency and inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and their practice

Even though beliefs interact with practices in complex ways (Ogan-Bekiroglu & Akkoç, 2009) and little is known about the nature and the extent of how teachers' beliefs influence their teaching practices (Laplante, 1997; Haney, Lumpe, & Czerniak, 2002; Bryan, 2012), two main trends of relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices were identified while exploring the previous research studies. One group of researchers indicated more consistency of teachers' beliefs and their behaviors, while the other group identified more inconsistency between the two constructs. What is more, previous studies have mainly targeted at teachers' specific school subject or cognitive-learning teaching beliefs and practices, and few of them are on teachers' beliefs and practices regarding children's social development.

On the one hand, consistency has been identified among the research studies targeting teachers' beliefs and practices regarding a particular school subject-teaching (e.g., Wallace & Kang, 2004). Lee and Porter (1993) started from the idea that reality is very complex and humans build simplified models of it, indicating that a teacher creates a mental model of science-teaching based on the beliefs about the students, and his /her teaching behavior is highly consistent with the mental model. Thus, high consistency among the primary and secondary science teachers was identified from some research studies (e.g., Mitchener & Anderson, 1989; Cronin-Jones, 1991; Appleton & Asoko, 1996; Verjovsky & Waldegg, 2005). Meanwhile, high consistency was also identified in teachers' language teaching, especially literacy and reading teaching (Leu & Misulis, 1986). On the other hand, some studies have only found a partial relationship, mainly with frequent contradictions, between teachers' beliefs and classroom teaching behavior (Lopez, 1999; Wilson, Konopak & Readence, 1991). Expert or more experienced primary and secondary school science teachers with firm philosophical commitments to constructivism and conceptual change identified contradictions between their beliefs and their classroom teaching behaviors (Kang & Wallace, 2005; Abell & Roth, 1995; King, Shumow, & Lietz, 2001).

While teachers' pedagogical beliefs and practice showed a different degree of consistency and inconsistency regarding actual subject teaching and their practice, consistent discrepancy regarding

teachers' beliefs about children's social development and actual socialization practices was identified. Specifically, one study (Zinsser, Shewark, Denham, & Curby, 2014) targeted on teachers' beliefs about children's emotional-social development and their teaching practices. Teachers generally value children's social-emotional development. Nevertheless, their belief does not necessarily translate into daily interactions with students. Another study (Kemple, 1996) focused on exploring teachers' beliefs and practice regarding children's social dramatic play. The results indicated that teachers showed strong beliefs in the importance of sociodramatic play to children's development but varied regarding the time they spent on children's sociodramatic play in practice.

McClintic and Petty (2015) revealed that teachers recognize the essential value of outdoor play. However, their behaviors inhibited children's play from the observations. It is further suggested from the study that a 'philosophy-reality conflict' (Hatch & Freeman, 1988, p. 158) was identified. To be more specific, teachers recognize the freedom, creativity, and imagination as essential characteristics of outdoor play, but in practices, they showed their role of supervising the children, organizing the playground and of ensuring the rule enforcement. This discrepancy between developmentally appropriate beliefs and observed practices were also noted in other studies (Bryant, Clifford, & Peisner, 1991; McMullen, 1999). Typically, in research that reported a disconnect between teachers' beliefs and their actual practices, the pattern was for teachers to report highly appropriate beliefs, but engage in significantly less appropriate practices (McMullen, 1999).

2.5.2 Potential factors influencing teachers' beliefs and practice

Some research studies have been designed to explore the potential factors that play a role in leading to the discrepancies between the two constructs. Vygotsky's and Leont'ev's cultural-historical activity theory (Robbins & Stetsenko, 2002) serves as the theoretical framework during the process. From this theory, we know that teachers' beliefs and practice cannot be examined out of context (e.g., Fang, 1996; Spruce, & Bol, 2015; Author, 2012). Cross (2004) has further argued: 'Teaching has no meaning in and by itself, and there is no one teacher that has sole authority over everything related to the act of teaching. Teachers' work (goals, activities) and how they do their work is derived from where they are situated within a wider social, cultural, and historical context.' (p. 34). It is, therefore, necessary to take different

contextual factors into account since they may shape and form the relationship between teachers' certain beliefs and practices (Fang, 1996).

First of all, it is found that many of the teachers carried out their practice based on classroom realities. Specifically, factors like the learner behaviors, learner's specific learning needs, time, resources and materials, and course content play a role in leading to the disconnection between what the teachers said and what were observed in the classroom (Ajzen, 2002; King, Shumow, & Lietz, 2001; Cronin-Jones, 1991). Secondly, some studies have indicated that varying psychological, social and environmental realities either created an opportunity for or constrained teachers from implementing their beliefs in the instructional decision-making. One study identified that physical environment, administrative duties, institutional constraints play a role in the identified inconsistencies between interview and observational data (Brown & Melear, 2006). Another example showed that strong academic-performance test for children starting from the preschool and inadequate teacher training play a role in explaining teachers' inconsistency of their beliefs and practices (McClintic & Petty, 2015). Thirdly, environmental or work-related stresses, such as unsupportive parents and administrators, were found to influence inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and practice as well (McMullen, 1999). Despite the strong influence from the complexity of the classroom, of the school, and the community on teachers' specific practices, experienced teachers, compared to the new teachers, seem to show more consistency between their beliefs and practices (Huibregtse, Korthagen, & Wubbels, 1994; Pavo'n, 1996).

2.6 Social interactions and teachers' role in inclusive kindergartens in China

While examining the research studies focusing on inclusion on the preschool level in China, a number of the following topics appeared. To start with, the first group of studies targets at giving a general introduction to inclusion on the preschool level (e.g., Hu, Roberts, Wang & Zhao, 2011). They specifically looked into the historical development of inclusion on the preschool level, analyzed the legislation and laws that supported inclusive education and summarized the studies by focusing on the main challenges on different levels (e.g., legislative, cultural, and economic levels). The second group of research studies targeted at exploring preschool teachers' perceptions and attitudes towards inclusion, indicating that kindergarten teachers generally showed conservatively positive attitudes towards the idea

of inclusion (Zhou, 2006). Nevertheless, due to a lack of professional knowledge and positive interactions with children with various disabilities, teachers' attitude tends to be negatively influenced, as indicated by the teachers in Beijing and Shanghai inclusive preschools (Yan, 2008; Zhang, 2006). The third group of researchers focused on how teachers facilitate inclusion at the preschool level in the Chinese sociocultural contexts. Among the very few research studies, one focused on assessing early childhood teachers' perceived training needs (Hu, 2010). Specifically, it showed that teachers need training mainly in the following aspects: children's behavior management, the IEP process, inclusion strategies, as well as communication skills with parents and families. The other research conducted by Zhou (2008) provided teachers with specific instructional strategies to work with children with disabilities, especially with autism spectrum disorders and hearing impairment. Those strategies were developed based on one eight-year-long research study targeting at some pilot inclusive kindergartens in Shanghai.

Among all the previous studies focusing on inclusion on the preschool level, only one research study examined the interaction and engagement of children in the inclusive setting (Hu, Lim & Boyd, 2016). Specifically, they examined children's interactions and engagement across five types of activities (i.e., group teaching, mealtime, outdoor activities) and subject matter for whole-group lessons (i.e., music, storytelling, art, and general knowledge or life skills). The findings of this study indicated that, first of all, there was a relatively lower frequency of peer interactions compared to child-adult interactions. Secondly, those interactions were negative in tone: specifically, children were observed to stop the child with disabilities to touch his or her toy, to warn the child not to make a mess, or take away the toy rather than play it with the child with disabilities. Thirdly, when there were social interactions, they tended to be initiated mainly by the child with disabilities since teachers failed to teach or guide children without disabilities to socially interact with their peers. Last but not least, teachers lacked concrete strategies for consistent and appropriate initiations, and they usually missed teachable moments to model for children. The researchers further indicated that the whole group-teaching and teacher-led orientated pedagogy, which are predominant in Chinese kindergartens, played a critical role in leading to the few and negative peer interactions in the inclusive kindergartens.

2.7 Aims of the current study

In chapter two, I examined theoretical perspectives and empirical studies relevant to the current research inquiry, which targets at exploring teachers' strategies applied to promote the social interactions of children with and without SEN in one inclusive preschool in Shanghai. In China, children's social interactions have been relatively less emphasized compared to their cognitive growth. Chinese educational system focuses predominantly on students' academic performances. The general lack of interest in children's social development prevails in Chinese society. Moreover, previous research studies carried out in China targeting at inclusive education focused mainly on examining teachers' attitudes, perceptions towards inclusive education (e.g., Yan, 2008; Zhang, 2006) and only one (Hu, Lim & Boyd, 2016) targeted at children's social interactions and engagement in different activities in inclusive preschool classrooms. None has its focus on the role of teachers in facilitating the social interactions in the process and what specific strategies they have applied to promote or prevent those social interactions from taking place. Despite its universally well-recognized importance, children's social development and their social interactions have been rarely explored in inclusive preschools in China, let alone teachers' role during the process. Under these critical circumstances, this study is initiated to specifically target children's social interactions, especially the social interactions in an inclusive setting between children with and without SEN. It aims at promoting the basic social awareness of the importance of children's social interactions and social development.

Moreover, the present study responds actively to national and regional policies for a better quality of inclusive preschools in China. To further explore the concept of quality inclusive preschool and methods for effective assessment, the government has gathered professionals for national planning concerning equity in education (The State Council, 2010). In the city of Shanghai, the pilot inclusive preschool that I selected for the present study, together with another 29 inclusive preschools, intends to serve as the models for national implementation of inclusive education in the future. Therefore, to ensure the high quality of the pilot preschools is of key importance, which explains the value of the present study because positive peer interactions are one of the crucial indicators for high-quality inclusive preschool since it targets further than the structural features of the program and directly influences children's development (Hestenes & Carroll, 2000).

Thirdly, despite China's increasing endeavor to support inclusion to take place at the preschool level and its initiative to develop the pilot inclusive preschools for better implementation of inclusion, very little has been known regarding the daily inclusive practices of teachers from the existing inclusive preschools in China. Much less is known about how the teachers from the inclusive preschools perceive the social interactions between children with and without disabilities and how their practices influence children's social interactions. Therefore, the current research targets at examining what teachers specifically do and say, in their daily practices, to promote the social interactions between children with and without disabilities and potentially how they may differ from what they believe and what they practice regarding their strategies to promote children's peer interactions. Moreover, as Chinese kindergartens slowly embrace a more balanced curriculum of both whole-group teaching and free play, it is thus essential that studies are conducted to explore how teachers support in children's daily peer interactions in inclusive kindergarten settings in order to fulfill the changing role (Hu et al., 2016).

Furthermore, this line of inquiry can help professionals to understand better how they deal with children's peer interactions so that they can improve in their future practices to better support children's social interactions in an inclusive setting. Findings of the present study are supposed to underline the critical importance of teachers' role in children's development of social skills and peer relationships in the early years. Besides, this present study will also provide insight to guide future inclusive teachers' training in China regarding teachers' strategies to promote peer interactions in the inclusive settings, which potentially may also provide references for inclusive teacher training from other cultures.

Three research questions are formulated as stated below. Considering the exploratory nature of the current research, I designed the research questions at a comparatively broad level on purpose so that they can serve mainly as guidance for the inquiry process (Agee, 2009):

- 1) What are the concrete strategies teachers apply in promoting peer interactions in the Chinese inclusive preschool?
- 2) How children's different ages and different disabilities influence teachers' strategies to promote peer interactions?

3) To what extent are strategies identified from the interview consistent with the strategies identified from the observation data?

3 Research design

This chapter addresses mainly the research design of the current inquiry. To be specific, section 3.1 will talk about methodological considerations. Then the author will present the qualitative case study design (section 3.2). Followed by that, the author will talk about how to increase trustworthiness (section 3.3). In the end, issues regarding ethics will be discussed (section 3.4).

3.1 Methodological considerations

While taking a thorough look at the research methodologies from the previous research studies that have been conducted to examine inclusion at the preschool level, many of them are exclusively quantitative mainly in the format of the questionnaire and quantitative observations (e.g., Hu, Lim & Boyd, 2016). Only very few research studies have applied a non-positivism paradigm that recognizes the value of social constructivism where the explorations of the researched phenomenon taking place in its naturalistic settings (e.g., Hu, Roberts, Wang & Zhao, 2011). Those research studies also have a relatively narrow focus, mainly targeting at teachers' attitudes, perceptions towards inclusive education, therefore, a big part of the whole picture of how inclusion is practiced is missing (Wang, 2016). Same problems have also been identified from most of the research studies conducted in China, focusing on inclusive education at all levels of schools (Meng, 2008). Therefore, in order to further contribute to the development and implementation of inclusive education, a broader research topic range and more constructivism-paradigm-based methodology should be applied to conduct research studies.

The current research is designed under the social constructivism paradigm. It is shared that social constructivism as a research philosophy is difficult to be defined nor to be explained in a precise and succinct manner (Burr, 2015). The main reasons for this universally accepted definition are mainly that different kinds of social constructionists (e.g., Burr; Parker; Gergen) have different understandings towards it. To sum up, there is no one single feature that could identify a social constructionist position. Despite the lack of a universally sufficient definition, research studies designed within the social constructionism paradigm characterized themselves (at least loosely) with one of (or more) the following aspects (Burr, 2015). It challenges the idea that conventional knowledge is based on objective, unbiased observations of the world and claims instead that knowledge is produced and sustained by social process and all

knowledge are historically, culturally and socially specific. This allows for a sufficient explanation to the understanding of concepts such as SEN, disability and inclusive education in the Chinese preschool context in the current study.

In the social constructivism paradigm, the way to research human experiences and social phenomena is to examine interactions, processes and practices, in which knowledge is co-constructed through language and actions. It claims that reality is socially constructed and can best be understood by exploring the tacit, i.e., experience-based, knowledge of individuals. Therefore, immersion and empathy are necessary conditions (Hammersley & Gomm, 2000; Stake, 2000; Baxter & Jack, 2008). Another advantage of this approach is the close cooperation between the researcher and the participant while encouraging participants to illustrate their stories (Crabtree & Miller, 1999).

Moreover, according to social constructionism, while understanding that individuals, as personal agency, have the abilities to bring about changes, we know that it is of key value to recognize those personal agencies as necessary premises to better ensure more inclusive practices (Burr, 2015). Therefore, this current research study recognizes the importance of teachers in children's school life and treat teachers as the agents who could 'engage in the process of construction of meaning or identity in such a way as to influence the form that that meaning or identity takes' (Fraser & Robinson, 2004: p.76).

Overall, according to the social constructivism orientation that underpins in the research study, I immersed myself in teachers' daily practices in their individual classrooms as well as their activities within the whole kindergarten. By doing this, I hope to be able to explore their specific interactions with the environment, with all children that in a way contributed to or hindered the social interactions between children with and without SEN.

3.2 A qualitative case study approach

Among the different approaches within the framework of qualitative studies, a case study has been chosen and applied to explore the researched phenomenon in the current research project. The definition of case study is characterized as an approach "that facilitates exploration of a phenomenon within its context using a variety of data sources" (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p.544). This ensures that the researchers will explore the phenomenon not through one lens, but rather through a variety of different lenses, which

enables the researcher to understand and reveal the multiple facets of the phenomenon. Creswell (2013b) described case study design as a qualitative approach that collects detailed, in-depth data to explore a real-life, contemporary bounded system (a case) or multiple bounded systems (cases) over time, which enables the researcher to develop an in-depth understanding of the researched phenomenon. MacDonald and Walker (1975) described the case study as ‘the study of the instance in action.’ With its increasing popularity among qualitative researchers (Thomas, 2011), a qualitative case study has been claimed to be a stand-alone qualitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011b). The specific rationales for choosing a case study design for the current study are as follows:

First of all, as discussed in Chapter 2 focusing on the research studies done on inclusion in China, very little is known about children’s social development and interactions in Chinese inclusive preschools, let alone teachers’ role and their concrete strategies applied to promote those social interactions, the current study will be the first one designed to explore that phenomenon. Therefore, a strong explorative orientation of the current study and relative flexible research design are assumed. A qualitative case study design, while differing from many other types of social inquiry (e.g., experiments; survey studies), is explorative (Merriam, 2009; Hammersley & Gomm, 2000) and is uniquely flexible in comparison to other qualitative research designs (Hyett et al., 2014).

Secondly, this research study is designed to achieve a holistic understanding of teachers’ role in children’s social interactions with each other and their specific strategies applied in their daily practices to promote those interactions. Thus it is of value to apply a research design that enables the researcher to be able to observe those phenomenon taking place in the naturalistic setting. A qualitative case study design provides the researcher the possibility to explore the phenomenon taking place in its naturalistic settings and everyday process (Hyett et al., 2014; Baxter & Jack, 2008; Miles & Humberman, 1994). Therefore the data collected will be considered as natural phenomena in people’s real lives. A qualitative case design also enables the researcher to collect detailed, in-depth data to explore the researched phenomenon from different sources, which will contribute to an in-depth understanding of the issue (Bassey, 1999; Thomas 2010; Creswell, 2013b).

Thirdly, the core characteristic of a case study is its outward-looking nature: from the details of the case; we can grow, to expand our knowledge and refine our behavior- This means both intensive study of the case itself and extrapolations to other cases and the nature of the phenomenon (Cohen, 2003). This study aims at exploring how teachers from one of the pilot inclusive preschools in Shanghai promote children's peer interactions through a case study design. It is intended to study this particular inclusive preschool and gain very in-depth understanding regarding this preschool, which would shed light upon how the other pilot preschool teachers are doing in general. Moreover, a qualitative case study design matches with this inquiry for it focuses on creating a source of ideas and hypotheses and it is a source for new interventions (Kazdin, 2003). One primary purpose of the current study is to explore how teachers support the social interactions of children with SEN in the pilot inclusive preschool so that more evidence could be collected to design an effective teachers' training program targeting at improving teachers' current strategies, which can contribute to better implementation of inclusion daily.

Last but not least, according to Yin (2003), a case study design should be considered when the focus of the study is to answer "how" questions. For the current study, it is the first one to explore how teachers from the pilot inclusive preschool support the social interactions of children with SEN on a daily basis in the naturalistic environment. Moreover, it is further emphasized that the researcher cannot manipulate the behavior of those involved in the study. This aspect of a case study design matches the current study also very well: the researcher wants to explore the researched phenomenon unobtrusively in order to gain authentic data.

3.3 Trustworthiness: ensure the quality

The necessity of addressing methodological credibility serves as one of the essential key standards for a good case study (Hallberg, 2013; Morse, 2011). As with any other qualitative methodology, a case study focuses on raising its rigor at all stages (Pearson, Albon & Hubball, 2015). Many frameworks have been developed to assess the rigor or the trustworthiness of qualitative data (e.g., Guba, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and strategies for creating credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability have been extensively discussed across different fields (e.g., Krefting, 1991; Sandelowski, 1986, 1993). Many researchers also focused on establishing general guidelines for critically appraising

qualitative research (e.g., Forchuk & Roberts, 1993; Mays & Pope, 2000). Apart from based on the general guidelines offered from those studies, the current research also summarized some strategies from previous studies specifically targeting at improving the rigor and credibility of a case study design (Pearson, Albon & Hubball, 2015). It aims at designing a well-constructed case study that has the following characteristics as its core: being holistic, context-sensitive, comprehensive and systematic (Patton, 2002). In the end, there are six ways developed to increase the credibility for the current case study: getting close to the researched context mainly by applying prolonged engagement, triangulation of sources of data and research methods, peer debriefing, member checking, develop strong consensus, as well as being reflective.

3.3.1 Getting close to the researched context

The main concern of case study research is to study a phenomenon within its social context. It is impossible to understand any phenomenon without reference to the context in which it takes place. Thus, it is imperative that the researcher spends prolonged or intensive time in becoming oriented to the situation, ‘soaking in the culture through his or her pores’ to be sure that the context is appreciated and understood (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and to develop an engaging relationship with the participants. Meanwhile, creating rapport with the people and getting permission from them are essential first steps that may contribute to a smoother data collection process (Gaikwad, 2017; Leininger, 1985). It is through the prolonged or intensive exposure to the researched phenomenon that the researcher is able to build strong trust with the participants who may later volunteer different and more sensitive information that would usually be hidden, which enables the researcher to explore the phenomenon from multiple and new perspectives that would enhance research findings (Kielhofner, 1982). Moreover, this closeness to the participants will also lead to participants’ less social desirability to perform while being observed or interviewed (Krefting, 1991; Kirk & Miller, 1986). In the following paragraphs, it addressed how the researcher managed to build up an emotional rapport and understand the researched context and the teachers step by step while discussing the potential issue of ‘going native’ during the process.

3.3.1.1 Building up the emotional rapport: being an expert or a student

Before the official data collection started, practical organized an informal meeting with all teachers, during which I shared the following aspects with all teachers, highlighting the commonalities between us (Ergun & Erdemir, 2010). First of all, I explained that I am a student who is doing the dissertation project, focusing on inclusive practices. Secondly, I emphasized that they are the experts and my goal is to emerge myself in their daily practice in order to be able to reveal the accurate picture of what they do in the naturalistic setting. I said that I am highly interested in listening to their ideas and opinions, ready to learn from and with them. Thirdly, I emphasized that I am not the expert to evaluate their performances and so there is no need for them to show their best practices. After this, I also shared with all teachers that I used to be an inclusive kindergarten teacher. Finally, I very generally introduced the topic I was going to explore for the dissertation project and answered some of the questions raised by teachers regarding my dissertation.

Having honestly and openly shared with all teachers about myself and my research, I noticed that there was more ease among the teachers. The following three feedbacks from the many given by teachers at the end of the informal meeting revealed some changes in their attitudes towards me:

‘Oh, so what you saying is that you are not here to ‘examine’ or ‘inspect’ our daily practices or evaluate our work. Right?’

‘What the principal told us before made me think that you are here to make our practices better, but now I know that, like the students from Hua Dong Normal University, you are here to conduct your research.’

‘We are interested in your experiences in German inclusive kindergartens, maybe sometimes we can share about them during the lunch breaks together.’

(Teachers’ feedbacks on the informal meeting, 14:00, 19.09.2017)

To further the effort of establishing a better rapport with all teachers, I also initiated the following efforts: first of all, during the first week, I spent the first three days to be present in different inclusive classrooms,

supporting teachers' work whenever they needed, as Taylor and Bodgan (1984) saying to become familiar with the setting before beginning to collect data. This period provided teachers some transitional phase to get used to the researcher being in their classroom and it also enabled them to understand the way I conducted the data collection. For most of the time, I would be sitting in the corner of the classroom and write down notes, as keeping a running observation record (Dewalt & Dewalt, 2002) is essential. Since previously, teachers' usual ways of participating in a research study were mainly filling out online questionnaires, my research methods were quite rare for them in the beginning. Some teachers seemed to be confused and not sure how they would behave because they seldom had the experiences of being observed for such an intensive and long duration of time in a naturalistic setting. One teacher came to me after I finished the first-morning session in her class, asking curiously 'are you going to be with us the whole morning? I thought it would be done very quickly.'

Secondly, I decided to spend the lunchtime with all teachers after the morning session, as "hanging out" is the process through which the researcher builds trust and establishes rapport with participants (Bernard, 1994) as well as getting to familiarizing oneself with the setting or culture (Bernard, 1994). During lunchtime, it was the first context where I met teachers outside of the classroom. We started to chat on different subjects and sometimes teachers would ask my experience of working in a German inclusive kindergarten. It was during the lunch break time that a closer relationship was gradually established with the teachers.

While exploring all possibilities to build the rapport with all teachers and other staff from the kindergarten, I also kept in mind to keep relative distance (Marcus & Fischer, 1986). One of the most important reasons to keep a relative distance is, as many research studies have indicated, the danger of 'going native' and losing the critical lens to interpret the findings due to prolonged and intensive exposure to the researched environment (e.g., Milinki, 2016). Moreover, relative distance also needs to be established because there are some widely acknowledged benefits of researchers being an outsider during the data collection process (Kerstetter, 2012). Thus, while trying to gain teachers' trust and build strong rapport with them, I kept on being reflective at the same time since it is highly recommended to prevent the researcher from getting overinvolved with their participants and the researched context (Good, Herrera, Good, & Cooper, 1985; Ruby, 1980).

3.3.2 Triangulation of data sources

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), applying triangulation is one of the valuable strategies in evaluating and guaranteeing the quality control of qualitative research, particularly credibility. It has been recognized as a hallmark of case study research that is applied to enhance data credibility (Patton, 1990; Yin, 2003; Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). Stake (2005) defines triangulation of data as ‘a process of using multiple perceptions to clarify the meaning, verifying the repeatability of observation or interpretation.’ Specifically, through the collection and comparison of those data from different resources, data quality has been enhanced based on the principles of idea convergence and the confirmation of findings (Knafl & Breitmayer, 1989). This principle is necessary to avoid misinterpretation and to diminish researcher bias and subjectivity in the data and the possibility of misinterpretation when examining the findings against various data sources and perspectives (Yin, 2003; Stake, 2005). It also contributes to better practices of in-depth analysis and verifies findings or offer much richer details about the case (Mathison, 1988; Stake, 2010).

In the current study, the researcher applied the triangulation of research methods and data sources to enable multiple types of data to speak to each other and contribute to the depth of the evidence being collected (Knafl & Breitmayer, 1989; Axinn & Pearce, 2006; Flick, 2007). Specifically, semi-structured interviews with all teaching staff: not only with all the seven participating teachers from the four inclusive classrooms but also with the principal, the special educators, the teaching principal. An informal chat with some parents in order to gain a complete picture of how teachers did to promote children’s peer interactions. What is more, participatory observations were also carried out both in the general observation during the whole morning session in the classroom and intensive observation during the outdoor play-session so that I could observe how teachers interacted with children from different periods and places.

3.3.3 Peer debriefing

Peer debriefing involves feedbacks and thoughts from peers from the field of science during the research process and findings (Flick, 2007; Baxter & Jack, 2008). It is based on the same principle as member

checks and thus they all have the chance to discuss and clarify the interpretation and contribute new understanding of the issue under study to achieve better accuracy and adequacy.

Specifically, during the research process, peer debriefing took place two times: before and after the data collection process. The first time the researcher presented the research design before going to China for data collection. To be more specific, I presented the research design and data collection methods in the ‘qualitative methods group’ organized by the Bielefeld School of Education. The participants provided constructive feedback on the research design and the research focus. Some of them shared their experience of conducting participatory observations: specifically, how to balance the role of being an observer and participant. The second time of peer debriefing took place during the ‘early year conference’ organized by the Educational Science Department of Bielefeld University. I presented the first results in a working group consisting of researchers and professors who are experts in inclusive education and qualitative methodology. The participants provided some positive feedback on the first results and further provided some thoughts and opinions on how the next stage of analysis could be conducted.

After finishing all the analyses, the researcher also presented the whole dissertation project at ECER 2018, an international conference held by the European Education Research Association and focused explicitly on ‘inclusion and exclusion’ that year. The purpose of this presentation was to gain some feedback on the final results and hopefully, some indications for discussion. During the process, some researchers expressed interest in the research study, saying it targeted on inclusion at a country that the European audiences seldom know. Most of them found the results very comprehensive and interesting: especially the different levels of consistency and inconsistency revealing the gap between teachers’ beliefs and practice, which resonates with the dilemma facing the European education practice as well. Some of them gave a direction to explore the potential factors that may play a role in leading to those different levels of consistency or inconsistency, which I decided to develop further and talk about in the discussion session. Apart from the meetings and conferences, peer debriefing in the science field was, at the same time, taking place with one peer colleague from the same discipline and research focus during the whole data analysis process and constant opinions exchange and communications were going on all the time.

3.3.4 Member checking

Researchers may want to conduct a process of member checking to examine how their interpretations of the data agree participants' understanding. During the process, the participants have the opportunity to discuss the interpretation and contribute to more accuracy of information and interpretations on the researched topic (Gaikwad, 2017). It is a technique that consists of a continual process of testing with informants during the data collection, data analysis and interpretations, as well as reaching conclusions processes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, after finishing transcribing all the interviews with the participating teachers, I sent the transcripts back to the teachers.

While fully knowing what Sandelowski (2002) mentioned that member-checks might lead to a different interpretation of participants' reactions, I still decided to do so. The rationales were as follows: it is of importance to make sure that all participating teachers felt involved in the data collection and analysis process. Their feedbacks were crucial for helping researchers to clarify the interpretation, and combine new or additional perspectives on the issue under study to achieve better accuracy and adequacy (Flick, 2007). Krefling (1990) mentioned that member checks are more difficult for informants to carry out at the latter stages of the research process when the higher conceptual analysis is necessary than in the data gathering phase, in which descriptive data are reviewed by informants. Therefore, I summarized the main results with two tables, which were explained in very understandable languages for teachers to understand. Two common themes were identified from the comments. 1) Many teachers expressed that they did not expect that they used so many strategies that could promote the interactions between children with and without SEN, for which they expressed appreciation for helping them to realize those strategies. They further explained that they would use those strategies more consciously in the future. Secondly, one must consider the ethical aspect of this strategy (Krefling, 1990): specifically, researchers must be selective about which informants are involved in member checking. Often, informants are not conscious of the information discovered by the researcher and may become troubled if made aware of it (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For example, some teachers explained that they did not know that there was such a gap between what they believed and what they practiced. I responded to them, explaining, due to the relatively short duration I spent for the observation in each class, the results may not be able to catch a complete picture of what they really would do and say.

3.3.5 Establishing strong consensus

The consistency of the findings can be better improved by having more researchers independently code a set of data and then meet together to come to a consensus on the emerging codes and categories (Pearson, Albon & Hubball, 2015). The definition of consensus differs from the one of inter-rater reliability that has often been used in quantitative research. Instead, it suggests the possibility of involving other researchers at a more general level to increase the credibility of the research, which has been referred as credibility and trustworthiness in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In the current study, one master student majoring in education was enrolled to do the open-coding session of the interview data. She had some qualitative data analysis experiences while working as a research assistant for quite some time. Before the official open-coding process started, the researcher gave a five-hour training to the master student targeting at the following aspects: a general introduction to the current dissertation project was given to the master student: its background and the main research questions, data collection and analysis methods, the purpose of the research project. After the training, one session was designed focusing on answering potential questions the student might have. When the introduction of the dissertation was done, a three-hour training on 'open-coding' with Atlas.ti was carried out. To be more specific, it was delivered mainly in the format of showing a Youtube video to introduce the software. After this, we did two times of open-coding trails together before the official co-coding started. After all the training, the student could contact me any time she came across any uncertainties or questions. It was made sure that there were no uncertainties or problems regarding the open coding process before the official co-coding took place.

Each time the co-coding of one interview lasted around four to five hours to finish. We first separately finished our coding and then compared and contrasted, trying to reach an agreement in the end. In total, we co-coded four interviews together, which all took place at my office without disturbance. One example of how we resolved difference in deciding one code: for the strategy of how teachers encouraged 'little teacher' to interact with child B, the student coder did not count this as a strategy for promoting the peer interactions because she identified from the data that the little teacher showed some reluctance during the process. I explained that for some other occasions, this strategy of 'encouraging the little teacher to play with B' functioned pretty well and so it should, therefore, be counted as a strategy from

the teacher. We finally reached the agreement that this can be counted as a strategy, but the different situations of how it worked should be further explained.

3.3.6 Being reflective

A qualitative approach is reflexive in that researchers serving as a part of the research, not separate from it (Aamodt, 1982). On entering a new culture, the researcher must continuously reflect on his or her characteristics, experiences and examine how they influence data gathering and analysis. Such constant reflections of the researchers' interpretations can also contribute to and maintain high rigor of the qualitative case study design (Baxter & Jack, 2008; Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007; Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson & Spiers, 2002). Moreover, since the current inquiry is, in every sense, exploratory focusing on how teachers promote children's social interactions through a qualitative research lens, it is highly likely that I would come across many uncertain situations. Thus, it is of key value for me to maintain reflective during the whole research process. Specifically, constant reflections were made on how my previous knowledge and experience as an inclusive kindergarten teacher; my western experiences and ideology as well as me being a female researcher could influence the data collection and analyzing process (Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Krefting, 1991; Aamodt, 1982).

3.3.6.1 Professional knowledge and experiences as a previous kindergarten teacher

First of all, as a support teacher in an inclusive kindergarten for one year in Germany, I have achieved some knowledge and understanding of how inclusion should be implemented: specifically concerning children's social interaction, the researcher has her understanding of what teachers should do and should not do to promote positive peer social interactions. Therefore, reflections were required as to how the previous knowledge and experience would influence the data collection and analysis process. Specifically, how would I deal with the possibility that my own understanding or knowledge may prevent myself from gaining a more objective perspective of the researched phenomenon? What other potential problems my previous knowledge or understanding might still pose? On the other hand, despite the potential negative influences my previous knowledge and experience may shed upon the data collection and interpretation processes, it was also of value to recognize their potentially positive role it might contribute to better data collection and analysis. Specifically, as an inclusive kindergarten teacher, I

understood what the potential challenges might be to implement inclusion on a daily level and this shared working experience also connected the teachers and me emotionally closer. Moreover, the previous knowledge and experience also might contribute to better recognition of teachers' strategies in promoting children's peer interactions. Thus, during the whole process, I was very much aware of how my experiences, perspectives, or stances influenced my actions and interpretations (Krefting, 1991; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010).

3.3.6.2 *Western studying and working experience*

It is important to keep in mind that my western experience of studying and working may serve as potential obstacles that create distances with the participants: Cui (2015) indicated some resistances from the Chinese participant because of her experiences of studying abroad. Wang (2013) mentioned some concerns and uncertainties from the Chinese participants for her application of 'seemed' foreign research methods as well as potential ethical problems those methods might bring in. Ergun and Erdemir (2010) talked about being an "outsider in one's own land". In the current research, similar issues also arose for the first several days of the researcher's stay. It was frustrating, like Punch (2012) talked about the inevitable emotional challenge of doing fieldwork.

As part of the standard western procedure for conducting research, all participants are required to sign a consent form before they officially participate in the research studies. However, in the researched kindergarten, teachers had difficulty understanding this procedure (Riessman, 2005). Specifically, many of them expressed surprise or confusion while being handed with the consent forms before the observations took place and most of them showed some suspicion and uncertainty towards signing it. One teacher said: 'in China, often when we sign something, it is automatically connected to wrongdoings, especially reminding people of committing wrongdoings.' Another teacher expressed: 'I do not understand why you need permission from us? The decision is directly from the Principal, we all have no choices but to participate unconditionally'. Robinson-Pant and Singal's (2013) view that a researcher should reflect on both legalistic perspectives and cultural norms in order to negotiate research ethics, which means specific changes need to be on the way regarding signing the consent form. However, it is also vital for me to stay progressive and be able to communicate directly with teachers, telling them about the rationales for doing so before I made any compromise.

3.3.6.3 Being a young and female researcher

Ergun and Erdemir (2010) pointed out that female researchers are more likely to be accepted as non-threatening, caring and protective. In the current research, like most participating teachers who are female and relatively young, the researcher also shared the same gender and age, which might have some influence on how they perceived me, which potentially contribute to the establishment of emotional bond or rapport. Specifically, teachers started to talk about their problems and shared emotions with me as the data collection process went on, which may not be possible if it had not been assumed that I could understand them because of also being a female. In addition, being young also gave some credit to the fact that I was a student who was doing her dissertation project, thus being considered as less intimidating as an expert.

3.4 Ethics

This section will mainly address the ethical issues raised during the study. Specifically, we focus on the following aspects: the procedural ethics like how to gain the consent forms from the participants, to maintain participants' confidentiality and anonymity, as well as to deal with other ethical dilemmas that I encountered during the fieldwork.

3.4.1 Consent forms

In total, two different consent forms were handed out: one for all participating teachers and one for all the parents of children. In general, the consent letters explained the purpose and benefits of the research, expectations from participants, the principles of confidentiality and anonymity, and participants' rights to participate or withdraw at any point (Lindsay, 2000). Moreover, gaining consent does not consist of a one-off session but is an ongoing process. Therefore it is participants' right to refuse to participate or to say no whenever they feel uncomfortable or so (Knox et al., 2000; Lee, 1993; Lewis & Porter, 2004; Porter, 2009).

While communicating with the principal about the consent forms, she anticipated problems with obtaining parents' consent forms. First of all, in China, to sign one's name on a piece of paper is often connected to official or government-related issues, a cultural perception also discussed in another study

(Wang, 2016), which might influence their perceptions of the current research project and me as a researcher. Secondly, parents would potentially refuse to sign the form since they find it unusual, which would lead to low participation of their children. After hearing the principal's rationales, I expressed that I understand the rationales and also respect kindergarten's own ways of doing things. So I proposed the following plan based on Robinson-Pant and Singal's (2013) view that a researcher should consider and reflect on both legalistic perspectives and cultural norms within the researched context in order to negotiate research ethics. I plan to talk shortly with parents at the end of the parent meeting about the research project my research also who I am. The principal agreed with this proposal.

As Riessman (2005) argued that the notion of 'ethics-in-context' should be promoted to explore the divergent understandings of ethics, the following plan came up as an adjustment for achieving children's consent. During the parent meeting, I emphasized that the confidentiality of their children is my top priority to maintain during and after the data collection phases and that all their information would be kept confidential. For those parents who were not able to come to the parents' meeting that day, I wrote one little introduction of the research and me and asked the teacher who had signed consent forms to send the introduction to the parents in the Wechat group, where the teachers and parents communicate regularly. All parents were given two to three days to consider. It turned out in the end, all parents, including those with children with disabilities, all agreed for their children's participation.

The principal later explained that the good relationship between the kindergarten and parents of children with disabilities plays a role in their unanimous permissions to their children's participation in the research study. 'Many parents are really thankful for what we have done for their children' explained the principal, 'normally their children would not be accepted to enter a general kindergarten, but we accept everyone and even those that had been denied the possibilities to enter a normal kindergarten. We created the possibilities for the children, for the parents and the family. Therefore, parents are very thankful for us and they trust us. They would cooperate with you because they think that you have gained the permissions from the kindergarten and all the teachers. They trust the kindergarten, the teachers and thus they also trust you'.

3.4.2 Confidentiality and anonymity

Like other qualitative researchers, case study researchers collect data from people as participants or human subjects. Therefore, it is vital to be aware of the participant's rights, such as keep the participant's identities and data confidentially (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). Pseudonyms were used to replace all participants' names. No photos of any kind were taken during the whole data collection process. During the first eight-week observation period, the researcher only used a notebook and observational sheets to record all the observation information. The notebook was all the time strictly kept to the researcher and all the notes for each observational day were written down in the word format with the next 24 hours and saved in a folder on the PC where the access requires a password only the researcher knows. During the last week, when all interviews with teachers took place, a recorder was applied to record the interviews. Before the interview started, it was made very clear to the teachers that they have the right to refuse to answer the questions or even withdraw from the interview anytime they feel uncomfortable. It was emphasized that what they talk for the interview will be kept highly confidential; nobody apart from the researcher has any access to the information. In order to enable teachers to get used to being recorded, we did one little trail-session: specifically to see whether the sound worked, see how the teacher felt about being recorded, and to see where to place the recorder during the whole recording process. Only after we agreed on everything and the teacher felt ready, the recording process started. Each day, after the recording for the interviews, the transcripts were immediately done with the next 24 hours and the transcripts were all saved to the same folder where the observational notes were kept.

3.4.3 Other ethical issues

As part of the effort to control the potential effects of negative labeling (Wang, 2016), first of all, during the observation, the researcher tried to sit in the corner, showing a relative distance away from all children, not showing whom to observe. Secondly, the researcher tried to look around the classroom and observe different social interactions taking place in the classroom, aiming not to only focus on the children with SEN and the occasions when teachers were interacting with them. While trying to minimize the risk of singling out children with SEN, it was of difficulty to change the fact that some teachers were relatively insensitive to this issue. They purposefully more often attended to children with SEN during

the observations: it was easy to identify this insensitivity since many children showed some uneasiness or surprise immediately when they teachers approached them, which was also mentioned by Wang (2016) in her dissertation focusing on the participation of children with SEN in inclusive primary schools in Shanghai.

4 Methods

The structure of the method chapter is as follows: it will first start with the data collection procedures (section 4.1), followed by a discussion about the participants' characteristics (section 4.2), participants (section 4.3), concrete methods applied in the study (section 4.4) as well as data analysis process (section 4.5).

4.1 Data collection procedures

Three months before the data collection took place, I started contacting potential inclusive kindergartens in China. The standards to select the kindergarten should be as follows: 1) the kindergarten needs to be an inclusive kindergarten; 2) the kindergarten needs to be a public kindergarten with sustainable governmental support for developing inclusive education. Because early childhood inclusion is at its preliminary developmental stage in China and there has been rather little research done focusing on inclusion at this school level. Therefore, I examined the contact methods through all the previous studies conducted at Chinese inclusive preschools (e.g., Hu, Lim, & Boyd, 2016). According to them, to contact the Beijing/ Shanghai Municipal Ministry of Education that is responsible for initiating the pilot inclusive preschool projects served as the typical way. However, the following information of the pilot project was still not open to the public: which kindergartens were included in the pilot project and how to contact them. Thus, I first tried to get the permissions from the Beijing/Shanghai Municipal Ministry of Education to gain access to the pilot kindergartens.

I first started to check the ministry's websites where their phone numbers turned out to be the only possible contact information, but it never reached anyone. It was only at the end of that month, one officer from the Beijing Municipal Ministry of Education answered the phone. After introducing myself and the dissertation project, the officer explained that it was not possible to tell me the name of the pilot inclusive kindergartens since it was still an ongoing project and he was not authorized to do so.

Seeing the dead-end to the possibility of getting the permission from the ministry, I started to try to gain access to those kindergartens through using the contact of some friends who have been working for the non-governmental organization 'Save the Children' in China. 'Save the Children' has first initiated a

group of projects in the past years focusing on developing inclusive education in rural areas in China and it has been one of the leading powers to implement inclusion. Along the process, it has established a number of cooperation with universities, public, and private inclusive schools and kindergartens. Through the friends, I got to know there is a ‘Wechat’⁴ group focusing on exchanging information and knowledge concerning inclusion in China, in which all stakeholders including parents, teachers, principals, governmental and non-governmental officers from many cities gather together. Mrs. Zhang, the kindergarten principal from one of the inclusive pilot public kindergartens in Shanghai where I later carried out my research study approached me in the group and showed interest in giving me permissions to conduct the research project in her kindergarten.

We got to know each other in the group and later managed to have two long telephone calls before I left for China to collect the data. The first talk focused mostly on sharing experience and understanding of inclusive education and general information about the kindergarten. The second time focused more on general aspects of the research plan: the duration of the research stay and methods to conduct the study. Specifically, I mentioned that it would be vital for me to give an official introduction of the research project to the teachers and to attain their consent forms before researching in their classrooms. Principal Zhang responded actively for the requests and explained that we would figure everything out when I arrived.

4.1.1 The first day

On the 30th, August 2017, I visited the kindergarten for the first time. I met the principal and then was invited to attend the first teacher meeting for the new semester. Teacher meeting usually takes place at 13:00 after lunch and finishes at 14:30 when all teachers are supposed to start the afternoon session until 16:30. Usually, the meetings will focus on reflections of the teaching, general teaching plans as well as

⁴ Wechat: WeChat is a mobile text and voice messaging communication service developed by Tencent in China

other administrative issues. During the meeting, principal Zhang started to talk about the agenda, and after that, she introduced me as follows:

'This is teacher Tan⁵, who is now studying education at Bielefeld University, Germany. She will conduct her dissertation in the coming two months together with us. Let us warmly welcome her.'

Shortly after she finished, all of the teachers stood up and applauded, nodding at me and smiling.

'She is an expert in inclusion and so let us all be motivated and cooperate with her. This will only be beneficial to your inclusion practices.' added principal Zhang.

So even though I emphasized that I did not want to be introduced as an expert, Principal Zhang still introduced me this way. In order to create some emotional bonding with the teachers, I talked about my experience as a kindergarten teacher in Germany for one year and the many challenges to implementing inclusion on a daily basis. I further explained that the research focus originated directly from the practices when I was working in the kindergarten. After the meeting, Principal Zhang explained to me that to introduce me as an expert would guarantee teachers' full support, winning more authority.

'That's how the other professors and researchers in China did. They introduced them as experts and so teachers would respect them and cooperate. This will make the research process easier.'

Later that day, principal Zhang further showed me the kindergarten and the classrooms: how many classes; how many children in each class; how many children with disabilities in each class; basic information of the special class. I suggested to principal Zhang that I still wanted to talk with the teachers tomorrow during the lunch break about my study and deliver the consent forms for them to sign. Principal Zhang suggested that there was no necessity for such actions because she could require the teachers

⁵ Teacher Tan: usually, it is a way to show respect for people in school context. However, its use also expands to contexts out of schools.

to participate and I can pick up whichever classes to conduct the research. Besides, teachers would not really understand and appreciate the value of signing the consent forms because they have seldom done this before for other research studies. I explained further that it was of importance to ensure teachers' voluntary participation in my study and it was a fundamental step to do in order to guarantee their rights. Finally, we agreed that I would deliver the consent forms but I needed to respect teachers' decisions regarding whether to sign or not.

4.2 Participants' characteristics

4.2.1 The kindergarten

A detailed description of the context of the researched kindergarten is essential in a case study report and will offer direction for others in deciding for themselves the appropriateness of generalizing case study findings to other contexts (Gerring, 2007; Mejía, 2010; Stake, 2010). Specifically, the researched kindergarten was founded in 1991, being then the only inclusive kindergarten in Chang Ning District, Shanghai. Located within a middle-class living community, the kindergarten is the biggest public kindergarten in the community. In total, it takes up 2283 square meters and the buildings take up 1121 square meters. By the time the researcher collected the data, it had 175 children aged from three to six and 21 teaching staff. There are seven classrooms in total: two classes for three-year-olds; two classes for four-year-olds; two classes for five-year-olds; and one special class for mixed-aged children. Each classroom, according to the Shanghai Guideline for Kindergarten Education, has two main teachers and one aide teacher who helps out with the routine care and cleanup, resulting in an average children-teacher ratio of 15–20 to 1. As presented in table 1, we also see how many students each class has and how many children with SEN are in each class. The kindergarten has excellent basic infrastructure and there is some technology equipment (e.g., PC; Beamers; LED screen) to make teaching more diversified. In the following paragraphs, we will illustrate several other relevant perspectives that could help the readers to shape a better understanding of the researched kindergarten.

4.2.1.1 Kindergarten's community involvement

The kindergarten serves as the most active cooperation partner with the Chang Ning Special Education Center for planning and organizing in-service special and inclusive education training within Chang

Ning district. It has won national and regional recognition for being dedicated to guiding the sustainable development of special and inclusive education within the district. Meanwhile, it also co-organizes many types of activities including lectures from professors and experts from both national and international universities as well as share-exchange sessions with doctors from the community hospitals, aiming at establishing active cooperation with the community.

4.2.1.2 The format of inclusion

In general, in each age group, there is one inclusive classroom: class one for three-year-olds (inclusive class one); class two for four-year-olds (inclusive class two); class three for five-year-olds (inclusive class three). Nevertheless, the two classes for the four-year-olds are both inclusive classes. Thus we have the second four old class as inclusive class four. There are two types of inclusion in the researched kindergarten: whole-day inclusion and partial inclusion. Within the four inclusive classes, one to two children with SEN spending their whole day in the inclusive classroom. Other children with diagnosed SEN only join the inclusive classrooms for partial inclusion, usually during the outdoor sports session or indoor free play session. For the rest of the time, they stay in the special class for regular activities and different one-to-one therapy sessions given by the special educators focusing mainly on their language development and social and emotional behaviors. Principal Zhang mentioned that the kindergarten is trying to develop a new format of inclusion activity, which is to ask the children from the inclusive classrooms to spend time in the special class during the lunch or snack time. As an intention to ‘normalize’ the existence of the ‘special class,’ principal Zhang explained that this type of inclusion activity would send a message to the children and teachers that the special classroom is not only for children with SEN but also a place for everyone in the kindergarten.

The process of children with SEN being enrolled in the general class for full inclusion is as follows: it is a decision made between the parents of the children with SEN and the ‘central expert team’ consisting of professors, doctors, teachers and parents from Chang Ning Special Education Center. If the child with diagnosed SEN has shown relatively good cognitive understanding based on the IQ test and no apparent aggressive behaviors, they would then receive the recommendation from the team to be enrolled into the inclusive classroom. However, this does not mean they would be then officially enrolled. Usually, there is still a ‘trying-out’ session for two to three months within one semester, during which the team

would examine carefully how the child adapts him/herself in the inclusive classroom and how they get along with their peers. Only after a positive assessment after the ‘trying-out’ session, children with SEN would then be officially enrolled in the inclusive classrooms. Others with diagnosed SEN who have not met the above standards would have to stay in the special class for a brief time. During the time in the kindergarten, only partial inclusion activities⁶ in the general class are arranged. However, it would be possible to be enrolled later in the inclusive classroom when they have made progress based on the regular evaluation carried out by the central expert team every semester. In the current study, the researcher targeted mainly on the whole-day inclusion in the four inclusive classrooms.

In addition, as long as the child is officially identified as a child with SEN in the kindergarten, he or she would receive around 1200 euros per year, which is almost four times more than their peers. Specifically, the fee covers the following aspects: resources allocated for children with SEN including learning and playing materials; medical examinations from the hospitals; special educator’s in-service training and bonus.

4.2.1.3 The role of aid teacher (Baoyuyuan, BYY)

In each class, there are usually two main teachers and they take turns to be in charge of the teaching (Monday, Wednesday, Friday, teacher A; Tuesday, Thursday, teacher B) and one aid teacher (Baoyuyuan, BYY). The responsibilities of BYYs cover a wide range and are not clearly defined: starting from the very basic maintaining the hygiene of the classroom, organizing meals and snacks, to supporting the child with SEN during different activities. In the researched kindergarten, all the BYYs are females, with age ranging from 45 to 65. Their working years in the classroom are differing from three to eight years and they have been working with the same teachers starting from the day children entering the class for three-year-olds until the day they graduate from the kindergarten.

Table 1: Description of the kindergarten

⁶ Partial inclusion activities: children from the special class join their peers from other classes during the outdoor playing time and the snack time.

Class	Number of students	Teachers	Children with identified SEN	Others
<i>Inclusive class 1</i>	25 (13 boys; 12 girls)	Two main teachers; one shared part-time teacher with inclusive class two	Child C with delayed development	Baoyuyuan
<i>Inclusive class 2</i>	26 (14 boys; 12 girls)	Two main teachers; one shared part-time teacher with inclusive class one	Child E (with autism) and child F (with a social-emotional disability)	Baoyuyuan
<i>Inclusive class 3</i>	27 (14 boys; 13 girls)	One main teacher; one intern; one shared part-time teacher with inclusive class four	Child B with diagnosed autism	Baoyuyuan (serves as a teacher)
<i>Inclusive class 4</i>	27 (15 boys, 12 girls)	Two main teachers; one part-time teacher with inclusive class three	Child A with physical disabilities	Baoyuyuan
<i>General class 5</i>	25 (14 boys, 11 girls)	Two main teachers; one shared part-time teacher with general class six	None	Baoyuyuan
<i>General Class 6</i>	26 (12 boys, 14 girls)	Two main teachers; one shared part-time teacher with general class five	None	Baoyuyuan
<i>Special class</i>	10 (6 boys; 4 girls)	Three special educators and one shared part-time teacher	Four boys with autism; three girls with delayed development; two boys and one girl have social-emotional and behavioral problems	Baoyuyuan

4.3 Participants

All seven teachers from the four inclusive classrooms participated in the study. Consent forms were delivered to them and they all signed and returned them to the researcher before the data collection process started. On the consent form, the researcher clearly explained that the participation of the study is fully voluntary and teachers have every right to withdraw the study during the data collection process

as long as they feel intruded or simply not willing to continue. What is more, the researcher introduced the contents of the research study briefly and further clarified that the results of the study would be later delivered and shared to all teachers through emails. For more detailed information to the consent form, please refer to Appendix A.

As shown in table 2, the following basic information of the seven teachers was collected at the beginning of the data collection: teachers' age, gender, educational background, training in special /inclusive education; teaching years and experiences with children with SEN.

Table 2: Description of participants

Teacher	Age	Gender	Educational background	Training in special/ inclusive education	Teaching years	Experiences with children with SEN
<i>Teacher Cai (inclusive classroom 1)</i>	30	Female	Bachelor's degree in early childhood education	None	Since 2009	Children with autism from her classroom
<i>Teacher Chen (inclusive classroom 2)</i>	30	Female	Bachelor's degree in early childhood education	None	Since 2009	None
<i>Teacher Yao (inclusive classroom 3)</i>	27	Female	Bachelor's degree in early childhood education	Attended some lectures and workshops	Since 2015	Some experiences with children with behavioral problems and with autism
<i>Teacher Duo (inclusive classroom 1)</i>	32	Female	One year teacher's qualification program	One-year training program for the resource classroom teacher	Since 2009	Children with delayed development and children with autism
<i>Teacher Liu (inclusive classroom 2)</i>	50	Female	One year teacher's qualification program	Attended lectures and workshops on special education	Since 1987	Children with autism and delayed development

<i>Teacher Huang (inclusive classroom 4)</i>	30	Female	Bachelor's degree in early childhood education	Attended lectures and workshops on special education	Since 2009	Children with physical disabilities
<i>Teacher Gao (inclusive classroom 4)</i>	26	Female	One year teacher's qualification program	Attended lectures and workshops on special education	Since 2015	Children with physical disabilities

All the seven participating teachers are female, which is considered typical regarding that there are few male teachers at the preschool level both nationally and internationally. In total, there are two ways to become a kindergarten teacher in Shanghai: either to register for a one-year teacher's qualification program or to enter the teacher college for four years. The differences between the two are that the former is less well-received compared to the latter since the latter is characterized by more general theoretical knowledge of children's development. The teachers from the researched kindergarten have access to special and inclusive education training due to the cooperation with the East China Normal University and the Chang Ning Special Education Center. In the researched kindergarten, children with SEN are mainly children with a physical disability and intellectual disability, resembling the situation of children with SEN included in the 'LRC' classroom starting from the primary and secondary school levels.

4.4 Methods

In choosing research methods, I agree that the fundamental principle is to consider the extent to which the data collected through the methods could best serve the purpose of answering the research questions.

4.4.1 Participatory observations

In recent years, there has been a steady increase in the application of participatory observation as a way to collect qualitative data in education research. It is regarded as one of the core methods in a qualitative case study design. It has been selected in the current study mainly for the following three reasons: first of all, it enables me to 'observe the participants in its natural setting' for prolonged and intensive period of time, matching the definition given by Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte (1999): "the process of

learning through exposure to or involvement in the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the researcher setting" (p.91).

Secondly, it offers a more complete picture of the researched phenomenon: like what DeWalt and DeWalt (2002) believed that "the goal for the design of research using participatory observation as a method is to develop a holistic understanding of the phenomena under study that is as objective and accurate as possible given the limitations of the method" (p.92). De Munck and Sobo (1998) agreed by emphasizing that compared to other qualitative methods, the valuable contribution participatory observations can bring to research projects is that it provides valuable access to the "backstage culture" (p.43) and offers the researcher the possibility to describe teachers' strategies in the greatest details. The comprehensive nature also contributes to increasing validity to the current study, since it enables the researcher to have a more thorough perspective of the studied phenomenon and a better understanding of the context (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002).

Thirdly, participatory observation requires the researcher to be open-minded and nonjudgmental towards the researched: specifically, the researcher should be interested in learning more about the teachers while being aware of the propensity for feeling cultural shock and for making mistakes during the data collection process. Moreover, this method enables the researcher to remember that most of the challenges or difficulties coming along the data collection process can be overcome and that the researcher should remain to be a careful observer and a good listener (DeWalt & DeWalt, 1998). This aspect is valuable to the current research study since challenges are likely to arise considering that the study is among the first few explorative studies to examine teachers' daily practices and their influences on children's social interactions in a Chinese preschool context.

At last, through participatory observation, the researcher can examine teachers' nonverbal expressions of feelings, grasp how they communicate with each other in different ways (Schmuck, 1997), which could help to ensure the quality of representation through triangulation. Moreover, it provides the researcher an opportunity to examine some of the teachers' ideas and thoughts that they usually would not directly express during the interviews for its impolitic, impolite, or insensitive nature (Marshall & Rossman, 1995). Also, after conducting the participatory observations, the researcher will achieve a

better idea about the context the researched phenomenon taking place and the individual teachers' characteristics and their performances in daily settings, which offers a strong basis for developing the interview guide (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002). All in all, participatory observation can thus provide us with a yardstick against which to measure the completeness of data gathered in other ways, a model which can let us know what orders of information could escape us when we use other methods.

During the participatory observation, the physical presence of the researcher in the classroom also influences how teachers and children interact with each other to some degree. In order to minimize the intrusiveness of my physical presence, I also spent the first three days in the kindergarten before the official data-collection started, to be present in different classrooms. I arrived in the classrooms earlier than the kids in the morning and sat in the corner of the classroom while trying to flexibly support the teachers and children whenever I was asked to, or it was necessary. What made the process easier was that teachers and children from the researched kindergarten were quite used to have 'outsiders' in their classrooms. First of all, they had some experience with researchers from the East China Normal University for the cooperation of 'research-based' practices and 'teachers as researchers' projects. Secondly, they also had some parents of children with SEN visiting the classrooms during the 'trying-out' sessions.

The participatory observations were carried out as the first data source. While carrying out the participatory observations, I acted as the observer as a participant (Gold, 1958), which means the researcher, for most of the time, was still an observer, not a member of the classroom. Nevertheless, I also made it very clear in the beginning to the teachers that they could ask for my help at any time. It turned out that they seldom initiated to ask for help and it was usually the researcher offering help and teachers accepting it. For most of the time, I would be able to take notes of events exactly as how they happened in details (Clark & Leat, 1998) during the observation sessions. However, in situations like when my support was needed, it became a bit difficult to take notes of everything. So instead, I put down the key words and came back to my notes immediately after that, writing down everything as much in details as I could remember (Bernard, 2006). In order to better orient and guide myself in the observation phase, I also developed an observation protocol. A detailed version will be found in Appendix C.

4.4.1.1 *What to observe*

To define what to observe is an essential step before the participatory observation started. The definition of teachers' strategies in the current study is as follows: teachers devise ways that are both preventive and interventive and be actively involved in careful planning and preparation with relativity and reflections and providing children with opportunities. Those opportunities focus either on the classroom environment (e.g., establish a socially supportive learning environment and school culture), on the curriculum and activity planning (design learning activities and offer instructions), or on individual children (scaffold, teach or encourage individual children in order to promote, to support, to increase, to foster, or to prepare children for better or more successful social interactions or to achieve social skills development and social competence development; or to learn with interacting with their peers). (e.g., Stanton-Chapman, Kaiser, & Wolery, 2006; Hu, Lim & Boyd, 2016). It addresses both broad and specific concerns for developing social competence in students with disabilities. Specifically, during the data-collection period, the researcher kept an open mind to observe how teachers, in general, interacted with children in the classroom, with a focus on teachers' relevant behaviors, spoken or non-spoken languages that can indicate their certain specific intervention or prevention strategies to deal with children's peer interactions.

In total, two types of participatory observations were carried out: 1) the general observation took place every day from 8 to 12 during the morning sessions. Specifically, there were two columns drawn on the observation sheet: one for describing the events and one for writing down my reflections, feelings and thoughts at the same time (Murchison, 2010). More information for how this observation sheet looks like, please refer to Appendix C. 2) as to when to conduct the intensive observations, there was a process of exploration and changes involved due to the explorative nature of the study. I first tried the 'free-play' session taking place at the beginning of the morning session. Nevertheless, during this session, teachers were engaged with many different tasks, which left them very little time to 'interact' with the children. Specifically, they needed not only to keep an eye on children's play but also greeted the newly coming children. Meanwhile, they also needed to prepare the materials and be ready for the whole day activities. So after some observation, I chose another session to conduct the intensive observation: the 'outdoor-

play' session taking place around 10:15 every day. This session was chosen because most of the interactions were observed to take place between teachers and children. The intensive observation lasted five minutes every session and was written on a sheet containing information like which specific teacher being observed and the specific context being observed. For a more detailed look at the contents of the observation sheet, please refer to appendix C. In total, 20 sessions of intensive observations were collected. I also included one column in the observation sheet named memo section to write down free notes reflecting my feelings and emotions (Bernard, 2006; Punch, 2012).

4.4.1.2 Saving the data

So every day during the first eight weeks of my stay in the kindergarten, I spent half of the day in the kindergarten collecting observational data and then went back to my living place to sort out the data from that day by putting them into a more systematic and organized way. Since the purpose of the field notes from the sheets was to capture what happened in its greatest details, they sometimes looked a bit chaotic. Therefore, it was of necessity to organize them in a better-structured way. The order of the general observations followed the kindergarten's morning session: 'free play session—greeting all children—outdoor exercises—morning snack session—teaching session—summarizing—free play—prepare for lunch—lunch session—short break'. As to the intensive observations, I collected the data on the observational sheets that showed a relatively good order of organizing the data, which made the 'writing-down' of the data on the word document much more manageable.

In order to save all the new word documents of all the general and intensive observations, I first created the file 'data collection' under the general folder named 'fourth chapter' together with other folders for different chapters of my dissertation on my PC. While under 'data collection,' I created four new folders named after each classroom: inclusive classroom one; inclusive classroom two; inclusive classroom three and inclusive classroom four. Then under each classroom folder, new folders for each of the teacher belonging to the specific individual classroom were created. Under an individual teacher's folder, there were one for the observational data and another for the interview data. All the observational notes were then put under the observation folder, organized in the order of the specific days when the observations took place. At the same time, same folders with the same structure of storing the observational data were established in Atlas.ti, with which the data analyses were later conducted. Atlas.ti is one of

the most applied software to conduct qualitative analyses and the aim of Atlas.ti is to support researchers uncover and systematically analyze complex phenomena hidden in unstructured data. So in this way, we have all the data well-organized and saved both on the computer and Atlas.ti for preventing any data from getting lost or overlooked.

4.4.2 Semi-structured interviews

As what qualitative research studies that are interested in listening to the oral history traditions of the field and of the participants' life stories in order to study various aspects of their experience would do, I applied semi-structured interviews as the second data collection method. One of the biggest strengths is that it allows the interviewed teachers a degree of freedom to explain their thoughts and to highlight areas of particular interest and expertise that they feel they have. It also enables teachers' specific responses to be questioned in-depth, and in particular to bring out and resolve apparent contradictions (Horton, Macve, & Struyven, 2004), which is valuable considering that Chinese inclusive teachers usually lack the opportunities to be heard due to relatively few research studies focusing on them. Secondly, it can provide reliable, comparable qualitative data (McEvoy, Odom, & McConnell, 1992). Thirdly, it also contributes to an increasing validity to the current research project and enhances its credibility of the information the researcher achieved (Pearson, Albon & Hubball, 2015).

In total, there were ten interviews conducted: seven with the teachers from the four inclusive classrooms, one with the general special educator, one with the principal, and one with the teaching principal⁷. All interviews were conducted during the last two weeks of the researcher's stay after the participatory observations were finished. The rationales for this arrangement were as follows: first of all, if we conducted the interviews before or during the observation data collection, teachers would know what they had been observed and therefore they would not behave naturally while being observed, which would

⁷ Teaching principal: the teacher who is responsible for the teaching design and evaluation of the whole kindergarten.

compromise the authenticity of the data. An interview guide was developed to orient the researcher in the interview process, which is also presented in Appendix B.

Basically, at the end of the last second week, the researcher informed all the teachers about the interviews and a timetable was designed based on each teacher's schedule. After some discussions, all teachers had finally agreed on the schedule: specifically, on Monday, there were two interviews with teacher Liu and teacher Chen; on Tuesday, there was one interview with teacher Gao; on Wednesday two interviews with teacher Cai and teacher Duo; on Thursday, one interview with teacher Yao; on Friday, one interview with teacher Huang. All the interviews took place during teachers' lunch break starting from 12:30 until 13:50, lasting for around one hour. All the teachers blocked this period to take part in this interview so that we would have enough uninterrupted time. Moreover, all interviews were conducted in the individual classroom when the children napped in another room on the second floor, so there were no children or other staff coming to interrupt in the interview process. The interviews with the principal, the teaching principal and the special educator took place at the principal's office at lunch break on Tuesday during the last week.

Immediately after each interview, I transcribed it into word documents and put them in orders as I did with the observational data: both in the folders created on the computer and were also saved on Atlas.ti. The transcriptions needed to be done immediately after the interviews because it was of crucial importance to write everything down, not only the interview notes, also some feelings, reflections, as well as observations I had during the interview process when the memory was still fresh. In general, for each interview, the full transcriptions of each required around four to five hours. After finishing all the transcripts, I returned them to the teachers to read through whether I had transcribed everything they had said, based on which, relevant changes had been made. Some teachers wrote back, expressing thanks for helping them recognize some of the strength they already have to implement inclusion by reading through their interview transcripts. One teacher expressed some concern that her answers might cause some unsettling responses to the kindergarten. I wrote back to her, reassuring her anonymity. One teacher suggested some changes to the transcripts, for example, the translation of some Shanghai dialect words.

4.5 Data analysis

In total, after around two months of staying at this kindergarten, I returned to Germany with a massive amount of data. Specifically, there were several hundred pages for the almost 200 hour-long general observational notes, 20 worksheets containing the 20 sessions of the five-minute intensive observational notes, ten more than one-hour-long interviews. Meanwhile, I also collected the documents from the official websites indicating teachers' strategies as well as a number of pages of memos focusing on reflections, thoughts, feelings and emotions while collecting all the above data.

Qualitative content analysis was decided and applied to analyze the observational and interview data for the current research project (Lauri & Kyngas, 2005; Chinn & Kramer, 1999; Kohlbacher, 2006). Mayring (2000) proposed that there are two different procedures for qualitative content analysis according to researcher's approaches: inductive category development and deductive category development. Since the researched phenomenon has been rarely explored in a Chinese preschool context, thus an inductive approach was employed. An inductive approach based on inductive data moves from the specific to the general. Thus that particular instances are observed and then combined into a larger whole or general statement (Chinn & Kramer, 1999).

Specifically, the following steps were followed during the data analysis process (Mayring, 2014):

- 1) Preparation phase: make sense of the data \longrightarrow translate all data \longrightarrow selecting the unit of analysis
 \downarrow
- 2) Organizing phase: the unit of analysis \longrightarrow open coding \longrightarrow Formulating preliminary codes and revising the codes \longrightarrow categorization \longrightarrow levels of categories
 \downarrow
- 3) Reporting the analyzing process and the results: model, conceptual system, conceptual map or categories

4.5.1 Preparation phase

4.5.1.1 *Translating all data*

Since all the interviews were conducted in Chinese and part of the observational notes were written in Chinese, I needed to translate all the data mainly from the two resources into English. The translation process lasted almost two weeks after the data collection process. During the translation process, a number of challenges appeared. First of all, there were some words appearing only from the researched kindergarten context, which were quite challenging to translate them to English that expressed their full meaning. For example, the translation of ‘Qizhi’ class (the special class). A literal translation would be ‘a class that promotes children’s intellectual competence,’ however, in this kindergarten, ‘Qizhi’ class also serves as a transitional class between when children with SEN are first recruited to the kindergarten and when they are recruited to the inclusive classroom. In addition, according to the principal, they would finally turn this class into a room where all children, instead of only children with SEN, would have access to. So I decide to use the special class for the translation of ‘Qizhi’ class since it still mainly serves as the classroom for children with SEN. So we can see that it was challenging to translate those words while maintaining their authentic meanings in the kindergarten context.

Secondly, there were also a number of words that only existed in the Chinese kindergarten context: ‘Baoyuyuan’ for example, a literal translation would be the aid teachers who serve a more subordinate role to support teachers to make sure the work goes on smoothly. Nevertheless, within the researched kindergarten, some of their responsibilities covered a much more extensive range and two of them even served the role of main teachers, which made the literal translation inadequate to cover its full meaning. Therefore, for those words, I used Chinese Pin Yin⁸ without any translations. It also applied to many other words identified from the data that only existed in Chinese kindergarten or general Chinese school contexts. Thirdly, since the current research was conducted in Shanghai, some teachers also spoke some

⁸ Pinyin: short for Hanyu Pinyin. It is the official romanization system for Standard Chinese in mainland China. It is often used to teach Standard Mandarin Chinese, which is normally written using Chinese characters

words in Shanghai dialect, which made the translation process more difficult. So the researcher talked to the interviewed teachers again through Wechat to make sure the meaning was translated into English correctly.

Before the official data analysis started, the researcher familiarized herself with all the data from the different resources by emerging herself entirely into them, which was crucial as the first step for qualitative content analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mills & Morton, 2013). Specifically, to repetitively read through the transcribed texts for several times in order to obtain the sense of the data, that is, to learn what is, 'going on', before breaking them down into smaller meaning units for the systematic analysis, as described by Bernard (2006), who wrote that 'you live with them, handle them, read them over and over again ... and eventually get a feel for what's in them' (p. 406). During this process, the researcher also kept writing notes including her reflections and thoughts while going through all the data again and again and those notes have contributed to more in-depth analysis in the final analysis process. At the same time, the researcher also went through all the memos and notes that were written during the data collection process in order to gain a complete picture of the data.

4.5.2 Organizing phase

Overall, the process of an inductive approach to qualitative content analysis consists the following five procedures: 1) Selecting the units of analysis; 2) Open coding 3) Preliminary codes formulation 4) Creating categories; 5) Creating levels of the categories.

4.5.2.1 *Selecting the units of analysis*

The definition of a meaning unit is that it is the smallest unit that includes some of the insights the researcher needs, and it is the constellation of the sentences or paragraphs containing aspect that is related to each other, answering the questions set out in the aim. Selecting the units of analysis is an essential step for reduction. Researchers must plan which data to analyze by focusing on a selected aspect of material based on the research questions. They may be a part of or all the text data, such as transcripts of interviews, observation notes in the formats of specific words, sentences or paragraphs containing aspects related to each other through their content and context, all relating to the same central meaning (Graneheim & Lundman, 2003). It is of value to fully describe the meaning unit of the study

when reporting the analysis process in order to enable readers to evaluate the trustworthiness of the analysis (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004).

To answer the main research question of the current research project— what the specific strategies teachers have applied to promote peer interactions between children with and without SEN. First of all, from combining all the literature review results focusing on the definition of strategies that promote children’s social interactions, we have synthesized the following definition to construct the unit of analysis for the current study. Specifically, ways teachers devise that are both preventative and interventive in nature and be actively involved in careful planning and preparation with creativity and reflections and providing opportunities from the classroom environment level; the curriculum and activity level and the individual level to promote children’s social interactions. After deciding what the analysis meaning units mainly consist of the current research project, with the support of Atlas.ti, I started the open coding process.

4.5.2.2 Open coding

As soon as the open coding process started, I read each transcript from both the interview and observation notes word by word and line by line. This open coding process consisted of repetitive procedures of deciding the relevance of specific contents from the data to the researched question and once it matches either the descriptive or analytical characteristics of the unit of analysis, a code was thus created to label this segment of data (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). According to Coffey and Atkinson, the application of the semi-structured interviews (1996, p. 32) ‘codes are tools to think with’ and ‘heuristic devices’ since giving a label to a condensed meaning unit with a code allows the data to be understood and reflected in potentially new and different perspectives. During the process, it is recommended to use a code list containing the explanation of the codes so that minimized cognitive change would be expected during the analysis process, which in a way contributes to more reliability (Catanzaro, 1988; Morse & Richards, 2002).

Since the study applied an inductive data analysis process, this code list remained changed continuously as more data were involved and analyzed along the process. What is more, it constantly happened to the researcher that the interpretations of the meaning units were sometimes distinct but also sometimes

complicated and confusing. In those situations, it was essential to go back to the general definition of strategies synthesized from previous literature to refresh and regain more sense and directions to the central research question. Secondly, it is essential for the researcher to remain open-minded while encountering new aspects of information from the data and embrace uncertainty in the inductive analysis process. Specifically, it took the researcher quite some time to decide several codes. Those strategies originated only from the researched kindergarten and were not identified from the previous literature studies. For example, teachers required BYYs to support children with disabilities to play with their peers during the ‘free play’ session; or teacher Liu involved ‘shadow teacher’ to get child B to exchange his play experiences with his classmate after the ‘mixed-age group activity’ session taking place every Thursday.

Among the many definitions of shortening the text, the concept of condensation was selected to explain the next stage of the data analysis because it refers to a process of shortening while still preserving the core of the meaning unit (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). This process of condensation is often needed when data are based on interviews and when the latent content analysis is to be carried out. This process is also valuable because sometimes some meaning units cover some sentences or words indicating one simple central theme, which are necessary to shorten for more effective data analysis process for the next stage called ‘abstraction.’ By condensing the long meaning units, it is easier to abstract the code out of the condensed meaning units because they contain less unimportant information, fewer abstractions. One example for the condensation process: the meaning unit was ‘so we want to suggest this change of bringing one new toy per week instead of bringing new ones every day to parents in order to create more chances for children to interact with others. After condensing the unit, we had the following: ‘cooperate with parents to allow the children to bring fewer toys for more social interactions’.

4.5.2.3 Formulating preliminary codes and revising the codes

The formulation of the preliminary codes out of data was conducted after the completion of the open coding process. When I encountered data that did not fit the existing codes, I added new codes and then combined them to the ongoing code list. I needed to check and make sure that all aspects of the data had been covered or given a code in relation to the aim of the current research (Burnard, 1991). As to the

unmarked texts (the “dross”) that still could not be identified from the data, the researcher needed to decide whether to include them by deciding whether they would add value to answering the researched question (Burnard, 1991; 1995). This decision-making process was of difficulty since everything from the data resources seemed to be relevant when the researcher was deeply into them. Thus, it was suggested to keep a distance from the data in order to attend to them with a fresh or new perspective or to let go of those contents that did not serve the aim of the current research (Bengtsson, 2016).

All in all, the process of coding was circular, recursive and iterative: I went back and forth to refine the codes, sometimes starting randomly at some pages of the text and carrying out the same procedures I did before for increased stability and reliability (Downe-Wambolt, 1992). Although the application of the program Atlas.ti did speed up the whole analyzing process by systematically assigning relevant codes to certain meaning units and systematically storing all codes for establishing an ongoing code list, I needed to make many decisions on my own that were key to the data analysis process as the software did not do the analysis itself (Flick, 2002; Patton, 2002).

4.5.2.4 *Developing categories*

By following the above three steps, a complete code list indicating teachers’ specific strategies was created both from the observational and interview data. The researcher integrated the data from the observation and interviews through shared categories: specifically, teachers’ comments during the interview and their specific actions observed were compared against each other to inform shared categories. While during the comparison process, some of the codes identified from the two sources of data were found to indicate the same perspective and some were not. The process required so much moving meaning units back and forth between categories and I also kept on writing reflections and notes to track those changes, which all contributed to the more progressive development of the category outcome. In the end, different categories were created: specifically, code like ‘small-group strategy’ and code ‘mixed-age’ group strategy can be both put under the category of ‘creating different formats of grouping in activities.’ The names of those categories were summarized in a self-explanatory and brief way, which was valuable for the researcher because it gave the researcher more definite and concrete understanding

of each of the individual code, enabling the researcher to make fewer cognitive changes during the coming data analysis process. It also, in the end, contributed to the enhanced reliability of the data analysis process (Catanzaro, 1988; Downe-Wambolt, 1992; Morse & Richards, 2002).

Further revisions, redefinitions were made and checked to determine whether the ultimate collection of all categories developed were mutually exclusive and exhaustive (Krippendorff, 1980; Crowley & Delfico, 1996, p. 20). During the process, it was also of importance to ensure that no data fell between two categories or be placed in more than one category. At the same time, no data related to the purpose should be excluded due to lack of a suitable category (Krippendorff, 2004; Patton, 2002). In the end, there were fifteen categories of strategies identified both from the interview and the observational notes (Burnard, 1991).

4.5.2.5 Developing different levels of categories

While taking a closer look at those categories, some shared the same or similar nature of focusing on strategies from the same level while others differed in the scopes the strategies they targeted at. Specifically, for example, for the same level of categories of strategies: the category focusing on ‘change of the physical environment’ and the category focusing on ‘change of the social-emotional environment’ both talked about the same level of strategies on ‘changes in the classroom environment.’ On the other hand, the category of ‘character education’ talked about how teachers embedded character education in the daily lesson plan, which differed from the category of ‘peer support’ focusing on how to support individual children with and without SEN to interact with each other.

By following the above procedures, different levels were created based on what specific scope each category of strategies mainly targeted at. In the end, there were five exclusively different levels being created: they were categories of strategies focusing on the ‘teamwork’ level; categories of strategies on the ‘changes of classroom environment’ level; categories of strategies focusing on the ‘curriculum design’ level; categories of strategies focusing on activity design’ level; categories of strategies focusing on ‘children with individual needs’ level.

At the same time, from each level of the strategies, even though sometimes some specific strategies may resemble each other, they differed from each other in the specific context and targeting groups. One

example to illustrate this situation: there were both strategies involving parents' support from the first level focusing on 'teamwork' and the third level focusing on 'activity design,' they, however, meant quite different strategies in both specific contexts. At the teamwork level, parents' support covered a much wider range of strategies compared to their involvement as part of the activity design, in which parents' involvement was mainly 'to continue the same game or activity or stick to certain social rules at home as the teachers do in the classroom.'

Table 3 provides an example of how the categorization of strategies were developed through the above five steps.

Table 3: An example of how the categorization of strategies was developed

Meaning unit	Condensed meaning unit	Code	Strategy	Category
'So we want to suggest to parents that their child only bring one new toy per week instead of bringing new ones every day. In this way, we can create more chances for children to interact with others'	Suggest parents to let children bring one new toy per week, not per day, for more social interactions	Suggest parents make changes to increase children's social interactions	Cooperation with parents	Teamwork on the community level

4.5.2.6 *Developing the second research question*

The observation phase was only two weeks long for each of the four inclusive classrooms and so it was impossible to reveal a complete picture of teachers' practices on a daily basis. Nevertheless, 200 hours of general observation and 20 sessions of intensive observations could contain some quite reliable data revealing a relatively convincing picture of teachers' actual performances. By applying the same procedures that were used to analyze the strategies from the observational notes, I was able to identify strategies teachers have claimed to apply or think they would apply from the interview data. So for each teacher, two word-documents were created, both containing strategies from observation notes and interviews from the five different levels.

For the research question one, while trying to integrate the data both from the observation and interviews through shared categories, there were also some discrepancies identified from the two sources, indicating a possibility for inconsistency between what teachers believed and what they practiced. Thus, the second research question came into being: to explore how much the strategies identified from the observational data agree with the interview data among the seven teachers. More specifically, to what extent do teachers' strategies to promote the interaction between children with and without SEN observed agree with the strategies they claim they have applied from interviews? This line of inquiry is of value to the current study because by doing this, the researcher would gain a complete picture about what teachers think (their teaching beliefs) and what they do in daily teaching in reality (their practices).

The specific analysis process for the second research question went as follows: first of all, comparison of the strategies from all the five levels both from the interview and observational notes for each teacher was conducted. After coordinating all the strategies identified from the two different data sources for each individual teacher, I established seven word-documents for the seven teachers to write down the comparison of strategies about what they perceived and what they practiced in promoting children's social interactions. Then I went through and examined the seven word-documents at the same time, trying to examine the potential patterns of those comparisons among the seven teachers. In the end, as to reply the second research question that to what extent teachers' strategies to promote the interaction between children with and without SEN observed agreed with the strategies they claimed in interviews, three different categories of consistency were developed to indicate the different extents. Specifically, those are a category of strategies showing high consistency, category of strategies showing some consistency and some inconsistency, and category of strategies showing high inconsistency. To be more specific, category of strategies that showed high consistency containing those strategies that were often observed in all teachers' daily practices to promote children's social interactions and were also frequently mentioned during their interviews. For the second group that showed both consistency and inconsistency: some specific strategies showed consistency and some strategies showed inconsistency from the observation and the interviews. The third category where high inconsistency was identified were strategies that were mentioned in the interview but were not observed at all or seldom observed

from the observational data, or observed from the observations but were not mentioned not all or rarely mentioned in the interviews.

5 Results of the first research question

5.1 Introduction

The current study explores what specific strategies teachers applied to promote peer interactions in the inclusive Chinese preschool and examines how children's different ages and disabilities may influence teachers' application of specific strategies. The researcher further explores the consistency and inconsistency between what teachers believe and practice regarding their strategies to promote children's social interactions. The current research serves as one of the very few efforts applying a social constructivism approach to explore how teachers in practice perceive and deal with children's social interactions in its natural context. Seven teachers from four inclusive classrooms were recruited in the current study. Both participatory observation and semi-structured interviews data were collected, enabling the researcher to gain a thorough perspective of the researched context.

By applying qualitative content analysis and mainly an inductive process, the researcher identified the strategies teachers applied to promote peer interactions. In chapter five, I will mainly focus on presenting the results in the following structure. Section 5.2 presents a table of the five different levels of strategies. Strategies from the level of teamwork will be addressed in section 5.2.1. Then in section 5.2.2, we will focus on strategies from the level of the classroom environment. Section 5.2.3 targets at strategies from the level of curriculum. Strategies from the level of activities will be presented in section 5.2.4. In the end, strategies from the level of individuals will be discussed in section 5.2.5. In the end, a summary of the results of the first research question will conclude this chapter (section 5.3).

5.2 Strategies applied to promote peer interactions

The guiding philosophy while exploring the researched phenomenon during the two-month research stay is the construction of an inclusive community or an inclusive culture perspective. The current research intends to examine the phenomenon from a holistic approach: it not only focuses on what teachers did explicitly on individuals with and without SEN but also on what activities and curriculum plan teachers planned as well as learning environment they created within and outside the researched kindergarten.

Table 4: Five levels of strategies

Level	Category	Specific Strategy
1: Teamwork	On the community level	– Cooperation with the professor
		– Cooperation with parents
	On the kindergarten level	– Cooperation with the shadow teacher
2: Classroom environment	On the classroom level	– Cooperation with the principal
		– Cooperation with the special educators
	On the classroom level	– Cooperation with the other main teacher (or intern teacher)
3: Curriculum design	Classroom physical environment	– Cooperation with the BYY
		– Space change and adaptations within the classroom
	Social and emotional environment	– Certain decorations
4: Activity design	Social skills in the curriculum plan	– Changes to public spaces outside of the classroom
		– Flexible use of the exit and entrance spaces
	Character education	– Creates a sense of belonging to the classroom
5: Focusing on individuals with SEN	Apply different formats of activity	– Creates a sense of belonging to the classroom
		– Resolving conflicts in class
	Create different new activities	– Teaching the concept of friendship
5: Focusing on individuals with SEN	Change the rules of certain activities	– Dealing with negative emotions
		– Treat children with SEN like ‘little brothers/sisters’
	Involve parents into certain activity design	– Assign tasks
5: Focusing on individuals with SEN	Encourage children	– Mixed-age group activity
		– Create more small-group activities
	Certain social skills teaching	– Create ‘share and exchange’ activity
5: Focusing on individuals with SEN	Peer support	– The ‘toy exchange’ activity
		– Being flexible about the existing rules
	Peer support	– Change the rules according to children’s abilities
5: Focusing on individuals with SEN	Peer support	– Parents gave certain classes
		– Parents continue certain activity at home
	Peer support	– Encourage children to cooperate with their peers
5: Focusing on individuals with SEN	Peer support	– Encourage children to join in the play
		– Encourage children to share with their peers
	Peer support	– How to follow the classroom social rules
5: Focusing on individuals with SEN	Peer support	– How to join in a play
		– How to communicate with peers properly
	Peer support	– Little teacher
5: Focusing on individuals with SEN	Peer support	– Other peers
		– Other peers

As regarding research question one to identify the concrete strategies teachers apply to promote peers' more social interactions in the Chinese inclusive preschool, there are, as indicated from table 4, five different levels of strategies being identified from the researched kindergarten from the observational data. Specifically they are strategies focusing on teamwork with different stakeholders; strategies on the classroom environment; strategies from the curriculum plan level; strategies focusing on specific activity design, as well as strategies targeting at individual children with and without SEN.

5.2.1 Level one: Strategies focusing on teamwork

The first level discusses intensively on teachers' teamwork with different stakeholders who play a role in influencing how children interact with their peers both within and outside the kindergarten, targeting at examining teachers' concrete strategies from a holistic approach. To be more specific, three different categories have been identified within this level: (1) from the community, (2) the kindergarten and (3) the classroom. Under each category, different strategies teachers applied to promote children's social interactions were identified. While examining all the strategies from the three categories, one common theme appeared: the strategies teachers have applied on this level mainly were in the format of cooperation between the main teachers and different stakeholders. What's more, the main teachers were often in charge of that cooperation, whereas the different stakeholder was in a subordinate role. There were several exceptional cases identified from the community level where some stakeholders took the initiatives to cooperate with the main teachers.

5.2.1.1 On the community level

One strong characteristic identified based on all the strategies teachers applied to promote peer interactions is its community-based nature: the kindergarten receiving support from the community. First of all, 'Chang Ning Special Education Center' provides regular support to the kindergarten. It not only offers inclusive and special education training to the teachers but also provides all staff with various types of seminars and lectures for knowledge on inclusion, in hope to prepare the kindergarten ready to implement inclusive education. At the same time, the center also sends professionals, for example, doctors from the community hospital to regularly examine children's general health conditions and to give lectures to teachers and parents on how to deal with children with certain health problems. Based on

that, further efforts have been invested in constructing an ‘expert team,’ consisting different stakeholders (teachers, professors, doctors, principals, parents, community leaders), as an exploration of establishing ‘an inclusive community.’ The center organizes regular meetings for the team members to exchange and visit different kindergartens within the district for systematic assessment of inclusion practice.

1) Cooperation with the professor

Professor Zhou is an expert in early childhood inclusion from East China Normal University and has established long-term cooperation with the researched kindergarten. She intends to improve the perceptions teachers have towards inclusion and empower them with concrete strategies in implementing inclusive education. At the same time, she also tries to show teachers concrete strategies to improve more inclusion practice. ‘Our teachers really like to work with Professor Zhou. She always brings us experience of how inclusion works in other cultures as well as her in-depth understanding of what challenges our teachers are facing’ said the principal in the interview (interview with the principal, 31/10/2017). ‘She knows what we are most afraid of,’ said teacher Chen in her interview (interview, 23/10/2017), ‘she spends so much time in the classroom with us, so she knows how we are doing daily and what we find challenging.’

The professor has also been actively cooperating with the main teachers (filed notes of inclusive class two, 13/09/2017): one time, Professor Zhou was observed in inclusive class two when the ‘small group life-skill’ activity was on, and the children were busy peeling the ‘beans’ for the kitchen. Child E was not interacting with his peers, observing and showing interest. Professor Zhou saw him and bent down on her knees ‘this looks fun!’ then she waited until E responded to her, ‘yes,’ said E slowly. ‘Look, she seems to have difficulty in putting the bean skins in the bowl because her hands are too full. Would you like to help her by passing her the other bowl?’ ‘Okay,’ said E but he did not push the bowl. ‘See, like this, push it like this,’ encouraged teacher Liu. Professor Zhou then pushed the bowl gently lying in front of E a bit and E also started to imitate her by pushing the bowl further to the girl. ‘Exactly, you are doing great!’ commented Professor Zhou. ‘Thank you,’ said the girl, smiling at E. Then she invited E to join her in peeling the beans together. During the process, teacher Liu supported Professor Zhou when it was needed and she also did not interrupt them even though the session was already over. Instead, she let

Professor Zhou finish the process. In this type of cooperation, teachers play a subordinate role and Professor Zhou plays a leading role.

2) *Cooperation with parents*

Parents play a crucial role in supporting more social interactions to take place between children with and without SEN. Specifically, some parents are actively involved in teachers' activity design that targets at promoting the social interactions of children with SEN. Teacher Liu, for example, from inclusive class two asked child E's parents to continue the 'pretend play' that was carried out in her classroom during the 'free play' session, seeking to enhance child E's interest to play as a doctor. This continuation of efforts would, in the end, contribute to E's interest in the 'role-play' session, potentially promoting his interactions with his peers. Teacher Chen, on the other hand, talked to child F's parents to stick to the 'social rules (strictly implemented in the classroom)' at home: which was to have the same requirement for child F's certain social behaviors as for his peers, during, for example, a conflict situation. Through emphasizing that child F should try to ask his peers nicely first before grabbing their toys, teachers' cooperation with parents directly contributed to F's fewer challenging behaviors.

3) *Cooperation with the shadow teacher*

Thirdly, shadow teachers are the ones that parents of children with SEN employed to support their children to learn and participate in an inclusive classroom, starting from when they enter the kindergarten until when they finish primary school. The concept of 'shadow teacher' first appeared in many NGOs (non-governmental organizations) specifically for children with autism in cities like Shanghai and Beijing (Huang, Jia & Wheeler, 2001). Their primary responsibilities include: accompanying children with autism to learn and participate in general school settings; carrying out regular assessment of children's development; giving children extra 'one-to-one' language or social-emotional skill training after school. Because there are very few trained special educators in most Chinese kindergartens and primary schools, some parents would have to employ shadow teachers to fulfill the special educators' role. Most of the shadow teachers are students majoring in special education from different universities and they thus have relatively more knowledge of special and inclusive education and experience with children with disabilities.

Within the researched kindergarten, two shadow teachers are employed by the parents of child E. One usually comes on Thursday to support E during the ‘mixed-age’ group activity while carrying out her usual assessment on E’s participation and involvement in the classroom. Another one picks him up every day after kindergarten to do one-to-one training that mainly focuses on promoting his social and emotional skills. They usually only communicate with E’s parents and there seems to be quite little communication with the main teachers from inclusive class two. It was also observed that they usually spent time with child E. Specifically, the teacher would often sit next to E during the class time, or stand next to him during the outdoor activity time, trying to communicate with him or support him to finish a specific task.

Nevertheless, some interactions between the shadow teacher and the main teacher were identified, as an effort to promote the social interactions between child E and his peers. Firstly, main teachers seeking opportunities to exchange with them regarding how to improve social inclusion when the shadow teachers were present in the classroom. They were often observed to consult the shadow teachers for certain strategy they need to deal with children’s specific problems. For example, teacher Chen was observed to consult the shadow teacher about the method of ‘social story’ in order to deal with child F’s aggressive behavior against his peers (field notes in inclusive class two, 14/09/2017). Secondly, it was also observed that they tried to involve shadow teachers in certain classroom activities to encourage children to interact with their peers. For example, before the ‘exchange and share’ activity, teacher Liu was observed to discuss together with the shadow teacher about how to encourage child E to share with his peers about his ‘ball-playing’ experiences from the ‘mixed-age’ group activity. (Field notes in inclusive class two, 14/09/2017).

5.2.1.2 On the kindergarten level

This category focuses intensively on the involvement of professionals within the kindergarten, who are officially employed by the kindergarten compared to the level of stakeholders within the community. Specifically, it mainly talks about the active involvement of the principal and special educators.

1) *Cooperation with the principal*

Every morning, the principal has a routine of taking a tour walking around different classrooms and be a helpful hand whenever teachers ask for it. Because there are no special educators in the general classrooms, extra help is always needed to promote more inclusion practice. Even though some teachers showed doubt and felt being ‘watched’ or ‘supervised’ by the principal, some teachers, on the other hand, treated principal’s support as an opportunity to finish their work more effectively.

The following situation serves as one example of how teachers cooperated with the principal to increase children’s social interactions with their peers. During the morning session, while principal Zhang was in inclusive class one, she stopped by child C, who was playing Legos all alone. Teacher Cai saw this and also joined them by sitting down together, ‘Hey, C, what are you playing there’ asked principal Zhang, C did not reply but looked up a bit. ‘This looks really fun, can we also take a look?’ asked teacher Cai. ‘Here you go,’ said child C. Meanwhile, some other children came to join them. ‘Would you like to show them what you are playing, look, they are all very interested,’ suggested principal Zhang. ‘Here you are’ said child C to one boy, ‘can you tell me how to build this?’ asked another girl, ‘it is like this...’ As they saw more children were joining, principal Zhang and teacher Cai withdrew themselves slowly. (Filed notes in inclusive class one, 20/09/2017).

2) *Cooperation with the special educators*

There are four special educators from the ‘Qizhi’ class, which serves as the transitional class for children with diagnosed disabilities who are first enrolled in the kindergarten and waiting to be transferred to the general class based on their progress. There are, in total, ten children with a wide range of disabilities enrolled in this class and the four special educators are responsible for daily teaching and one-to-one intensive training including language therapy and social-emotional skill training. The four teachers usually teach in the ‘Qizhi’ class and will only go to the inclusive classrooms to accompany individual children with SEN during the partial inclusion activities.

From the observation, during the partial inclusion activity times when special educators presented themselves in the inclusive classroom, some teachers also initiated cooperation with them in order to promote children’s peer interactions. Specifically, teacher Gao from inclusive class four was observed to talk

with special educators before the ‘mixed-age’ group activity session to arrange an activity for child A to participate by changing the ball-playing rules. They required children to use chopsticks to transport the ball with their mouth and child A could participate since it did not require her to stand up and move around. Other children were also attracted to join them because they found it new and exciting. (Field notes in inclusive class four, 28/09/2017). Therefore, by cooperating with the special educator, teacher Gao managed to engage child A in the game playing with her peers.

5.2.1.3 On the classroom level

1) Cooperation with the other main teacher (or intern teacher)

Teamwork has been quite often emphasized within the kindergarten. In the researched kindergarten, cooperation among teachers is of key value for the successful inclusive teaching and it has been an unspoken but well-shared value. It often happens when one main teacher is occupied by some sudden events (e.g., fill out some formats), another teacher takes the responsibility to continue the current teaching or the ongoing activity without being asked to. Specifically, with regard to promoting children’s social interactions, teachers also cooperate to enable more peer interactions to take place. From the observations, they were always observed to encourage children with SEN to participate in a particular activity. In another situation, main teachers from inclusive class one being observed to discuss together how to promote children’s peer interactions in the design of some activities to play at the ‘outdoor session.’ (Field notes in inclusive class one, 19/09/2017). In inclusive classroom three, teacher Li was on medical leave and an intern teacher was appointed. Teacher Yao allocated tasks to the intern teacher to support the learning and participation of children with SEN and had regular communications and exchanges with her. (Field notes in inclusive class three, 05/09/2017). It was often observed that the intern teacher participating in different seminars focusing on learning special and inclusive education.

2) Cooperation with the BYY

Baoyuyuan’s (the aid teacher) responsibilities mainly contain the following aspects: maintain the classroom, arrange for lunch and snack time, and support the organization of classroom activities. As presented in table 5, they are all female aging ranges from 45 to 65 and three of them have experience with children with autism and one with children with physical disability. Apart from the basic tasks they all share, BYY one from inclusive class one and BYY three from inclusive class three tend to have more

responsibilities compared to the others, such as, support the main teachers to implement different learning tasks and activities, supervise children when the main teacher has urgent organizational tasks to finish (mostly in free-play sessions). BYY three from the inclusive class three sometimes also serves as the leading teacher and seems to have more credit and trust compared to the intern teacher. Even though all BYYs have not received formal training with special education or inclusive education, they have often taken the leading role of taking care of and supporting children with SEN in different activities.

Table 5: Demographic information of the BYYs (aid teachers)

BYY	Age	Gender	Experiences with children with SEN
<i>BYY one from inclusive class one</i>	65	Female	Children with autism
<i>BYY two from inclusive class two</i>	55	Female	Children with autism
<i>BYY three from inclusive class three</i>	55	Female	Children with autism
<i>BYY four from inclusive class four</i>	45	Female	Children with physical disabilities

The kindergarten tries to get every BYY in the inclusion process since they serve as a valuable source for cooperation to promote more inclusive practices. The cooperation between BYYs and the main teachers was quite commonly observed. Specifically, some teachers have communicated with the BYYs regularly concerning how to encourage more participation from children with SEN in daily activities or learning tasks. Moreover, they also reflected together on how to improve cooperation after specific activities. During the outdoor free-play session, teacher Cai and BYY one were observed together to invite child C to join in the ‘ball-throwing.’ ‘Hey, C, do you also want to play the ball with us’ suggested teacher Cai after seeing child C was left alone. ‘This looks really fun, C, and look how Gui gui is doing it’ BYY one encouraged C further. Child C started to observe child Gui gui and how he interacted with teacher Cai, then she also joined them playing the ball. Teacher Cai and BYY one first played with the two children but then they slowly withdrew themselves. (Filed notes in inclusive class one, 21/09/2017).

Another example to illustrate this cooperation is as follows: during the ‘mixed-age’ group activity, BYY two encouraged child F to imitate his peer during the activity that requires children to lie down and use their legs to transport balls from one basket to another. Child F seemed quite interested but was just

standing there watching. Teacher Liu saw this and immediately kneeled down and talked to F ‘you always like balls right’ ‘yes, they are fun. However, this looks quite difficult’. ‘But I heard from your mother that you also start to play football, maybe you can still manage’ encouraged BYY two further. ‘Okay, I will give it a try,’ child F lied down and started to transport the ball with his legs. Other children standby were cheering for him. As he successfully finished the task, some of his peers also praised him: ‘you did it pretty well, F’ said one boy. ‘I think so too, F. That was not so easy. How did you manage?’ commented another girl. ‘Thanks. You should always concentrate on the ball,’ smiled F to the two. (Field notes in inclusive class two, 13/09/2017).

5.2.2 Level two: strategies in the classroom environment

Tomlinson (2003) emphasized on how the learning environment relates to both the operation/physical environment and to the tone or atmosphere in which teaching and learning occur. Based on this, the researcher further developed two levels of classroom environments based on which teachers’ strategies were developed for the current study: specifically, strategies focusing on the physical environment and strategies focusing on the social-emotional environment.

5.2.2.1 Classroom physical environment

The first group of the strategies are the ones that mainly relate to changes or adaptations of specific physical feature within the classroom: space changes and adaptations within the classroom, specific decoration of the classroom. The second group applies to the public spaces outside of the classroom: changes to the public playground, flexible use of the exit and entrance spaces of the classroom.

1) Space change and adaptations within the classroom

First of all, teachers made adaptations and changes to the physical space in their classrooms: the average size of a classroom from the kindergarten is relatively small for a group of students from 28 to 30, which usually poses challenges to conducting high-quality learning activities with small-group formats. Therefore, many teachers made small adaptations to the classroom spaces and were flexible in preparing certain corners for different activity and learning purposes. For example, they made the corner that was previously used only for ‘pretend-play’ session available for some other activities. Therefore, instead of letting all children squeezed together during a particular activity session, they arranged some children

to go to the ‘pretend-play’ corner to do the same activity. Children were observed to have more interactions with each other in smaller groups. (e.g., field notes in inclusive class one, 19/09/2017; filed notes in inclusive class three, 06/09/2017).

2) *Certain decorations*

Secondly, many teachers also have applied strategies on the decoration of the classroom: there are photos of children with and without SEN playing and learning together in different activities hanging on the wall within and outside of the classroom. The purpose is to show children the positive experiences of children with and without SEN playing together, which would potentially foster a more welcoming environment for children with SEN and encourage more children to interact with their peers with SEN. Another strategy that goes along with those pictures are the slogans teachers designed and put under, beside or above the pictures as advocacy for specific positive social behavior. Usually, those slogans are very brief, rhythmic, and easy to be remembered: for example ‘we all learn happily together’, under the picture of a child playing with another one in a wheelchair; or ‘we are all different, we are all the same’ under the picture of one child with down-syndrome playing together with his peers. Teachers put those pictures and slogans together all over the kindergarten, trying to blend them naturally in with other decorations. Meanwhile, we also see a number of books in the ‘reading section’ in every classroom, focusing on different stories of children playing or learning together with their peers. Some of them target specifically on how to play with their peers with SEN: for example, one book talks about how a girl with a physical disability is involved and included in her school.

3) *Changes to public spaces outside of the classroom*

Many teachers have also mentioned the changes to public spaces outside of the classroom. Specifically, some have adapted the size of certain play materials: like the wood they usually use to construct bridges for children to walk on the public playground. Since many of them were pretty narrow and teachers made changes to broaden some so that child C could also easily walk on them. So for children who want to challenge themselves more, they can still choose to walk on the narrow ones. By adapting the existing materials of the kindergarten playground, teacher Cai created some opportunities for child C to interact with her peers socially.

4) *Flexible use of the exit and entrance spaces of the classroom*

Another strategy is that teachers use the public spaces outside of the classroom for different activity purpose. To be more specific, during the transitional period when the classroom has to be cleaned or prepared for the next session, teachers would send the children to the outside of the classroom for short break instead of keeping them in the small classroom. In this way, children would have more spaces to move around and socially interact with each other. Peer interactions were often observed during the session: some chose to share the toys they brought, some decided to play ‘doctor-patient’ with each other. (Field notes in inclusive class one, 19 /09/2017; field notes in inclusive class four, 26 /09/2017). In order to make this happen on a sustainable basis, teachers from different classrooms also have agreed to take turns to use public spaces.

5.2.2.2 Social and emotional environment

Apart from making changes and adaptations to the classroom and kindergarten physical environment, several strategies have also been identified, focusing on the social-emotional environment construction that contributes to more peer interactions. Those include: creating a family within the classroom; creating a strong sense of belonging to the classroom.

1) *Creates a family: no one is left behind*

It is often being observed from many classrooms that most of the teachers paid attention to not let children be left alone learning, playing, eating as well as in many other contexts. During one observation session, while the lunchtime session where five to six children would be arranged to share one table, some children were eating relatively slower than their peers and ended up being the last ones sitting at the table. Teacher Gao noticed this and asked them to join other children who still had not finished their meals. (Filed notes in inclusive class four, 26/09/2017). Another example took place in the inclusive class two: Child Shi always came to the kindergarten a bit later than other children. After he arrived, he would always sit by one of the tables, observing his classmates playing instead of joining them. Teacher Liu observed this for some time and noticed that he checked the ‘pretend-play’ section and started to encourage him to join his peers to play in the section. At the same time, she also asked other children to invite Shi to join them. (Field notes in inclusive class two, 12/09/2017). Meanwhile, teacher Chen from inclusive class two also talked about the importance of being patient for the children who are a bit slower

compared to their peers in passing the balls around during one group activity. (Field notes in inclusive class two, 14/09/2017).

Apart from teachers sparing no efforts to enabling children to learn and play together, many of them also emphasized the importance of enabling children to have the basic awareness of ‘never leaving their peers alone,’ striving to create a ‘family culture’ within the classrooms. It should be a culture where all children would be cared for and supported, especially children with SEN. In order to realize this goal, many teachers have tried several strategies. First of all, activities like ‘caring for the younger’ observed (field notes in inclusive class three, 05/09/2017; field notes in inclusive class two, 13/09/2017): all children from the classes of the four-year-olds and five-year-olds were asked to serve as volunteers to guide the little ones, who started their first days in the kindergarten. So every Monday the selected ones would wear the red armband, standing at specific places (like, in front of the stairs leading towards the playroom or in front of the public outdoor playing area) to support the young ones. Their responsibilities covered a wide range from guiding the younger children whenever they needed help, to support them in different plays. The selected children would also feel happy and honored for being selected as the volunteer that day.

Another strategy that was often identified was to send children from the other classrooms to visit the special classroom in order to spend time with children with SEN. During the visit, which usually took place at the ‘snack’ or ‘free-play’ sessions, children from the general class would play or eat with their peers with SEN. According to the principal of the kindergarten, this is called ‘inclusion from the other way around’. Specifically, instead of sending children with SEN from the special classroom to the general classroom, teachers also sent children from the general classroom to the special class in hope for ‘normalizing the special classroom.’

2) *Creates a sense of belonging to the classroom*

While observing inclusive class two, many occasions where teacher Liu tried to engage F in different play and learning activities were identified: specifically in the morning session for free play (field notes in inclusive class two, 12/09/2017), Liu encouraged F to play as the traffic policeman with his two peers. In the beginning, Liu stayed with F for some time to make sure F felt assured to be in full charge of the

responsibilities of being a traffic policeman and then Liu retreated herself from the play and stayed in other areas, while still occasionally check how F was doing. After some time, F started to show more confidence by clearly stating the traffic rules to his peers and more social interactions took place between them. Teacher Liu is enabling F to socially interact with his peers by letting him be part of the play by giving him specific responsibilities so that he can contribute to the play. This sense of classroom belonging is thus created by engaging F into playing and learning with his peers.

Another example took place on the occasion when all children were watching the national parade in the indoor playroom where teacher Liu encouraged child E to take part in the group activity so that he would feel he belongs to the class. At the end of the parade, there was a 'Q&A' session intending to ask children questions focusing on the contents of the parade. It was difficult to be picked up to answer any questions because there were almost two hundred children and only seven questions were designed. Teacher Liu was observed to encourage E to raise his hand and fight for his chance, but she also did not want the host teacher to pick up E to answer the question on purpose. After two rounds, E was still not picked up and seemed to be very low in spirit. 'You must be quite tired. Do you want to take some rest now; you can raise your hands for the next round,' comforted teacher Liu. At the sixth round, E was picked up to answer the question and did it correctly. Two kids sitting next to him, turning around to him and asking curiously, 'You must have been to Beijing, right?' 'Last summer, with my parents' answered E, smiling. (Filed notes in the indoor playroom, 06/10/2017).

5.2.3 Level three: strategies focusing on the curriculum design

This level addresses strategies from the curriculum design. Section 5.2.3.1 targets at teachers' strategies improving children's specific social skills, including how to resolve conflicts, teaching the concept of friendship as well as dealing with negative emotions (frustration, anger). Then, section 5.2.3.2 talks about character education.

5.2.3.1 Social skills in the curriculum plan

1) Resolving conflicts in class

Teacher Liu always observes children in her classroom: specifically how they play and react to each other. She then develops or adapts her teaching and activities based on the observations. The following

example vividly illustrates how she uses what she has observed to guide children to resolve conflicts with their peers. Specifically, she observed how two children deal with conflicts in the ‘small group’ activity and then she talked about the situation with the class during the lunch break time. ‘I noticed that today there were two children who almost had a big conflict and then they tried to communicate with each other to resolve the conflicts all by themselves. So I want to invite them to the front and share with us about how they managed the conflicts.’ Then came the two children, holding each other’s hands. ‘Would you like to share with us about today, what was the conflict and how did you two manage to resolve the conflicts?’. ‘We are good friends and so when there is a conflict, we always try to talk with each other or we take turns to play with the same toy. She is my best friend and so I will not quarrel with her’ said one girl and the other smiled at her. ‘Kids, have you heard what she said now. They always first talk, communicate, or they take turns to share the same toy and in this way, they can resolve the potential conflicts very well. Here I would love to advocate that in the future when you are about to have a conflict with others, try first to communicate or to take turns to share.’ ‘Yes, teacher, we will try’ answered the children. (Field notes in inclusive class two, 11/09/2017). In the coming days, conversations like those were heard ‘you can first play the toy and then I can play, like what Liu told us to do’; ‘okay, let me see, so now you first have this playdough but you played already for quite some time, would you let me play for a bit’. (Field notes in inclusive class two, 14/09/2017 and 15/09/2017). So we can see that after what Liu taught the children how to resolve potential conflicts in the classroom, children tried to communicate with each other or take turns to play toys with each other during the kindergarten day.

2) *Teaching the concept of friendship*

There are some books (e.g., ‘the little girl at the window’) focusing on friendship in each classroom. Moreover, in each classroom, there is a ‘story-telling’ session embedded as part of the lesson plan, and teachers would design the specific topic each time. Usually, those topics would be more focused on developing children’s cognitive abilities: strengthening their language skills for example. Nevertheless, to teach children social skills and support them to achieve better social development is also one of the five main developmental goals set up by the general guiding book. Thus some teachers try to design the ‘story-telling’ topic focusing on developing children’s social competence. Even though lacking specific

methods to design such sessions, some teachers try to figure it out by applying different ideas. One example is to teach students the concept of friendship. As it is observed from the inclusive class three, teacher Yao picked up one book that focuses on friendship and designed a PPT to illustrate the story with background music (other formats such as applying songs, or ‘role-play’ were also identified from other classrooms). Teachers try to use diverse ways to make the story-telling work since children would quickly forget the stories if teachers directly tell them. After the presentation, she started some small questions based on the story for an open-group discussions. ‘Who can tell me what Xiao Ming’s best friend’s name is from the story’; ‘Who can tell me what happened with Xiao Ming and his best friend’ ‘What did Xiao Ming do to stop the conflict’; ‘What can we learn from this’; ‘What will we do if we have the same situation as Xiao Ming’. Many children were responding to the questions quickly, and some of them also started to talk to each other. (Field notes in inclusive class three, 05/09/2017). So by telling the story of Xiao Ming and his friends for how they support each other as friends, teachers intend to show all children a good example of how friendship looks like. Later during the group discussion by asking them those questions, teachers create a platform for children to reflect on the story and try to achieve their understanding of friendship.

3) *Dealing with negative emotions (frustration, anger)*

Teachers, in general, encourage children to share their emotions with them, especially when the emotions were relatively negative. Teachers from the four inclusive classrooms were often observed to attend to children when they showed upset or unhappy feelings. It was observed that one morning child C came to the classroom, almost about to cry, and teacher Cai immediately went to her and comforted her. After that, she tried to talk with child C and found out that C’s mother scolded her at home. Later she was also observed to talk with the mother when she came to pick child C up. (Field notes in inclusive class one, 19/09/2017).

At the same time, they also try to encourage children to express their negative feelings out. In inclusive class two (field notes, 11/09/2017), teacher Chen was observed to encourage child Pang in her class to express negative emotions out since child F poked at him for many times: ‘Pang, tell me immediately next time when F is doing something like this to you. Okay. Do not always hide it in your heart and did not speak it out. Tell me when you feel not okay about it.’ So we can see from many of the classrooms,

teachers pay much attention to how children are dealing with their negative emotions on an individual basis. Moreover, it was also observed that some of them have also started systematically introducing the topic of dealing with negative emotions into the curriculum design: specifically, many teachers have embedded ‘dealing with the negative emotions’ into their lesson plans and designed concrete sessions to introduce the concept.

Teacher Chen focuses on the importance of creating an environment where children are encouraged to express their negative emotions openly. In order to motivate the children, teacher Chen started setting up good examples by expressing her feelings while interacting with the children on different occasions. For example, the following situation is an example of how she told children that she felt disappointed for their behaviors: after one group activity called ‘passing the ball around’ designed to teach children how vital cooperation and patience were in group work. Specifically, children were supposed to pass the ball around to the next and when the music stopped, the child having the ball would do a small performance (be it a song or tell a riddle). Teacher Chen kept changing the paces of the music, and so it became very exciting for some children but child F was often slower than the others, and some children started to blame him for being too slow. Teacher Chen talked with the class openly after the game about how disappointed she felt when she saw that: ‘I am not so happy today. Actually, I found today some kids were blaming others for being slow during the game. We know that everyone is different: some kids may think and move a bit slower or may need a longer time to react compared to others. The game is designed to enable you to know how important teamwork is.’ Children then started to talk about how sorry they felt towards child F and explained they felt more stressed when others were rushing. Quite several children nodded their heads too, agreeing. ‘Now you see, I am happy that some of you let me know that you felt the same way as I did. This makes me really happy! Please let me and your peers know how you feel because, in this way, we will know what is going on and understand you better.’ (Field notes in inclusive class two, 13/09/2017).

In another situation, after the ‘story-telling’ session, teacher Cai planned to ask the children some questions regarding the story and she did not only pick up the children who raised their hands first. ‘I want to give a chance to the children who always come up with the answers a bit slower than their peers, not always the quick ones. I also want to encourage them’, said she. During the session, some children came

up with the answers immediately and sometimes they even spoke out the answers, which left no possibilities for other kids who may need a longer time to figure out the answers. Teacher Cai talked with all children immediately after the session: ‘I noticed today that some children spoke out the answers before others could even talk, which I find quite disappointing because if you do this and other children would have no chances anymore even to participate. I suggest you hide your answers in your heart and not say it out loud immediately, and give your classmates a bit more time and chances’ ‘But I will feel really sad when I am not picked up the teacher to answer the question’ explained one child. ‘Me too, and I feel sorry that I said the answer so quickly, I will not do it again,’ said another child. So by talking first about her feelings, teacher Cai created a relatively open environment where everyone is welcomed to express their feelings, their fear, their worry. ‘I want to let them know it is okay to feel bad about themselves and it is cherished if they could face their negative emotions more directly,’ commented Cai in the end. (Field notes in inclusive class one, 20/09/2017).

5.2.3.2 *Character education*

The predominant nature of character education is to encourage certain values and conduct (Molnar, 1997), which is also identified from the current researched kindergarten as to teach children to have good manners and to behave well in the kindergarten. According to many teachers, one of the standards to examine whether a child is well behaved or not is whether he or she is obedient to the teachers. Therefore, the researcher observed a number of occasions where children were supposed to keep quiet, stand still and follow the lines. Those were during the ‘flag-raising’ ceremony taking place every Monday (an important event taking place at every level of Chinese schools), during the ‘outdoor play’ session, and during waiting for the meals and snacks in the classroom.

1) *Treat children with SEN like ‘little brothers/sisters’*

Another large part of the character education observed from the researched kindergarten resembles the concept of moral education (Lickona, 1991; Revell, 2002). Specifically, teachers keep on presenting the idea of children with SEN as children who are younger and weaker and thus need care and support from their peers. Instead of directly explaining their specific disabilities to children without disabilities, teachers explained that children with disabilities are like little brothers and sisters. To protect and care for the

younger is deemed as one of the essential and highly regarded morals in Chinese culture. Therefore, it is necessary for children without disabilities to care and support their peers with disabilities.

Based on this fundamental perception towards children with SEN, many teachers start to find one or two ‘little teacher (s)’ to regularly support the learning and activity participation for children with SEN. According to the teachers, those children need to match the following three standards: first, they have a younger brother or sister at home so that they would understand their responsibilities; secondly, they need to be highly disciplined; thirdly, they should be the ones who enjoy helping others. Among the tasks teachers assign to the ‘little teachers,’ some of them focus mainly on involving children with SEN in different social activities: specifically, a little teacher from the inclusive class three was given the task to support B to participate in the ‘pretend-play’ session. The little teacher went to a group of three children and asked nicely, ‘can we join you guys in the play?’ ‘Okay, but we are about to finish cooking for our children, would you like to be our children. Then we will cook for you guys.’ ‘We would love to, right? B?’ ‘We would love to’ answered child B immediately. (Field notes in inclusive class three, 07/09/2017). So in this situation, we see that little teacher introduced herself and child B into the play naturally by taking the initiative to ask to join in the play together with B.

2) Assign tasks

Meanwhile, teachers also assign the whole class with some responsibilities to take care and support children with disabilities, from which some social interactions also take place. Specifically, teacher Yao from inclusive class three assigned little tasks to children without disabilities to check on child B in daily rituals so that they could potentially interact with each other: ‘Yang, can you go outside and check whether B is drinking the water. He is like your little brother and may need your support with that.’ Child Yang went out immediately and asked B, ‘Hey, how are you doing?’ B was busy with the water tap and could not completely switch it off. ‘Let me help you.’ Yang went to him closer, ‘You should use more strength in one direction like this. Do you want to try more?’ ‘Yes, is it like this?’ ‘Exactly.’ After this, they went back to the classroom together and were observed to share one book on cars later. (Filed notes in inclusive class three, 06/09/2017).

5.2.4 Level four: strategies from the activity design

One predominant characteristic of teachers' activity plans is that some teachers design them based on what they have observed of children with SEN: like what their interests are and what their skills are. Nevertheless, some of the activities are designed spontaneously, mostly taking place at the scene. The following two scenes provide a thorough explanation for this perspective.

Scene one

During the 'free-play' session, when teacher Liu came to the 'block-building' section, she noticed that child E was very much engaged in the blocks building and after he finished, teacher Liu asked him what kind of building he built. 'An aquarium' answered E; then teacher Liu drew all other children's attention asking them to come to the 'block-building' section to check what child E built up. 'Wow, what is that, E? It looked so cool!' commented some children. 'It is an aquarium' answered E. 'Kids, do you also want to know how E managed to build this? E, can you show us how to do this' 'okay. However, it is quite complicated.' 'I see, but maybe you can try to explain to your peers. We have enough time'. Then E started to explain, and the other children listened to him carefully.

Scene two

In inclusive class one, during the 'free-play' session, C was observing her peers in the section of 'pretend play' where three girls were playing 'mother-daughter.' Teacher Cai saw this and went to the section, trying to knock on the 'door.' 'Dong dong dong' mimicked she, 'who is there' asked one of the three girls, 'May I come in, I am so hungry, and I saw you had cooked something that looks so delicious.' Asked the teacher while looking at C intently. 'Of course, please come in.' As she was invited, teacher Cai immediately went closer to C who was still standing outside of the section, suggesting: 'maybe you can also ask them as I did. Tell them you are hungry too'. 'What if they will not invite me,' said C, obviously quite worried and uncertain. 'You can try it first. However, do not worry. It will be okay'. 'Excuse me, I am so hungry and can I also get some food from you guys.' 'Of course, what do you want to eat? We have everything here,' 'I want a big apple.' 'Here you go,' said one girl, 'please also come in to join us, we are going to have a big dinner, and you can eat with us.'

I will first present teachers' strategies of applying different formats of activity in the section 5.2.4.1. Then in section 5.2.4.2, strategies on creating different activities will be discussed. I will further talk about strategies on changing the rules of specific activities in the section 5.2.4.3. In the end, section 5.2.4.4 focuses on strategies involving parents in certain activity design.

5.2.4.1 Apply different formats of activity

During the observations, teachers often tried different formats to organize activities in order to increase the social interactions between children with and without SEN. Specifically, those different formats can be briefly summarized into two categories. The first format is the ‘mixed-age’ group activity, which takes place every Thursday morning from 10:00 to 11:30. The ‘mixed-age’ group activity format is newly adopted from the beginning of this semester, as an effort to create opportunities for children from all classrooms, regardless of their different ages and abilities, to play together and interact with each other in various activities. It is planned that all children from the seven classrooms (four inclusive classrooms, two general classrooms, one special classroom) can choose from five different types of activities, which differ monthly and mainly are designed by a central teaching group (consisting of three main teachers and one special educator). The second format is the ‘small-group’ activity format. Due to the large teacher-children ratio (usually 1:12 to 1:15) in each classroom, teachers will have to apply whole-group teaching that requires a large group activity format to accommodate all children. It is always challenging for teachers to apply ‘small-group’ activity format even though it is beneficial to create more chances for children to interact with each other socially. While fully recognizing the value of ‘small-group’ activity format, some of the teachers start to try to apply ‘small-group’ format for particular sessions, ‘life-skills learning’ session, for example. We can thus conclude that teachers fight hard to find a balance between ‘applying mixed-age groups or small groups to create more social interactions’ and ‘managing the large group and intensive whole-day schedule.’

1) Mixed-age group activity

As one of the efforts to promote the social participation of children with SEN from the special classroom and the inclusive classroom, the newly developed and implemented ‘mixed-age’ group activity first took place in the kindergarten one year ago. This activity is designed because of its flexible format, which allows children to play in different classrooms for different activities and they can always flexibly choose the activity they want to play and the classroom they want to go. Moreover, there are more chances for children to get to know other children from the kindergarten, which can contribute to more social interactions. Every Thursday morning, all teachers from the kindergarten are busy preparing the

five different activities, each activity aiming at improving children's different physical strengths. Teachers prepare children ready by first introducing them what the five activities are and then emphasizing on some basic safety issues. In the end, they would assign the aid teachers specific tasks to support the children during the activity. Children from the younger class (like inclusive class one) and special class are usually accompanied by children from the older classes (also known as 'play buddies'). The tasks of the 'play buddies' are to support the play and participation of younger children or children with SEN. During the activity time, they could also serve as the 'role models' since they have much well developed cognitive and social-emotional skills.

Specifically, by socially interacting with them, children with SEN can learn how their 'play buddies' communicate with others as well as to learn socially appropriate behaviors. For example, child E was accompanied by one older child named Wei in the 'mixed-age' group activity. After asking where he wanted to go, child Wei and E went to join other children in the ball-playing section. As E arrived, he directly went to the front of the line, Wei went to him and told him patiently 'Look, other children were also waiting and they also want to play as we do. However, we first need to be waiting in the line as everyone does'. E looked back and saw all the children, and he went back to the end of the line, waiting together with Wei. 'Which ball would you play,' asked Wei the child standing behind him. 'Oh, the red one maybe, but the blue one is also nice, how about you?' 'Also not quite sure, E and I also feel uncertain about which one' commented Wei. 'Oh, E, so you are also not sure which one,' asked the child, 'yes. Not sure at all. Want to try different ones,' said E, 'But I heard we can only choose one,' said the child. The three continued their conversations until it was E's turn to play. (Field notes in inclusive class two, 14/09/2017)

Moreover, they could also learn from their 'play buddies' about how to resolve potential conflicts with their peers. Teacher Liu assigned child Feng to be Child F's 'play buddy' during the 'mixed-age' activity. They first went to the 'net playing' section to watch how the others were playing. F saw this and was eager to try, so he walked directly towards child Li and took his place while Li was talking with another child. When Li came back, he asked F to go away. F did not move at all and he pushed Li away forcefully. Feng immediately went to stop F 'You should first ask Li whether you can also play because he was here first. Look, there are also many other children waiting to have the chance to play. So let us wait

together with them, okay.’ ‘I want to play now,’ said F, ‘I know, me too. However, everyone only plays two minutes, and soon it would be our turn! It will not take too long’. ‘Okay’ said F. ‘F, I know you did not mean it to push Li, right, I think you should let him know that you are sorry for that,’ suggested Feng. ‘I am sorry, Li. I was trying to play,’ apologized F. ‘It is okay, F. I will soon be finished and so you and others can play too.’ said Li. (Field notes in inclusive class two, 14/09/2017).

2) *Create more small-group activities*

Apart from ‘mixed-age’ group activity, many teachers also try to apply ‘small-group’ activity format in their daily teaching process. Even though fully recognizing its importance, some teachers could only apply this activity format in limited sessions (e.g., ‘life-skill learning’ session). The reasons are as follows: first of all, the whole-day schedule is very intense and ‘small group’ format usually requires a bit more time to arrange compared to ‘large-group’ activity. Secondly, the existing physical space of each classroom is quite limited for ‘small-group’ activity format.

The topic of the ‘life skill’ session differs every week, and the contents are mainly decided according to the teacher guidebook and the kindergarten plan. For example, in the following context, the topic was to ‘support the kitchen to prepare for the meal.’ Teacher Yao first arranged six tables in her classroom and grouped the children to sit around the tables. She then first informed all the children that they would help the kitchen to take care of the beans today and then gave each group the beans to start. She then said to child B: ‘You can always ask your peers sitting next to you for help if you do not know how to do it.’ When they started, Yao was walking around the classroom but at the same time kept an eye on child B all the time. B first tried to take the beans out of the shell himself but failed to do so. After several times of trying, B still could not manage it. ‘You should always first hold one end firmly and then take the beans out like this’ said the girl sitting left to him. ‘Like this?’ asked B, ‘exactly, and now you can try to open it with more strength, like this.’ B observed again and managed in the end. The two looked happy and started to talk about how they would help their parents to prepare the beans at home. (Filed notes in inclusive class three, 05/09/2017).

‘Small group’ activity format was also observed in some classrooms during other sessions. Specifically, teacher Cai from inclusive classroom one created more small groups during the ‘free-play’ session so

that children could have access to more different play sections. Specifically, since there were too many children playing in the ‘role-play’ section and it became quite crowded. Teacher Cai decided to create a ‘flexible section’ for children to do ‘role-play’ too. In this way, more small groups were created and children could interact with each other more freely. (Filed notes in inclusive class one, 19/09/2017).

5.2.4.2 Create different new activities

Apart from trying to apply different activity formats to increase more social interactions between children with and without disabilities, many teachers also designed some new activities to promote the social interactions between the two groups. In this section, we are going to talk about two new activities: the first is the ‘share and exchange’ activity that focuses on giving children time to talk about what and how they have played. The second activity is the ‘session for toy exchange,’ aiming at creating an activity where children can socially interact with each other while exchanging the toys.

1) The ‘share and exchange’ activity

While examining the whole-day schedule, children have only one session where teachers give them relatively more freedom to choose what they want to do, with whom to play or learn. This session is called ‘free-play’ session. Teachers decide to have the ‘exchange and share’ session immediately after the ‘free-play’ because they have identified that many children, even children with SEN, tend to more likely talk about their experience with their peers during free play very frequently. The ‘exchange and share’ activity usually lasts around 15 to 20 minutes. The way teachers carry it out differ a bit when we take a look around in each classroom. However, they all do it in a circle format. Specifically, all children sit in a circle, and he/she who wishes to share and exchange his /her play experience is encouraged to come to the center to talk about it. After the sharing, the child would then have around 4 to 5 minutes to interact with their peers and answer their questions. Teachers would also jump in at appropriate times. Specifically, while the child starts to talk about the experience, the teachers would comment in case there are no responses from other children or they would try to involve other children by asking them to contribute some ideas.

In inclusive class two, child E is often playing alone in the Lego section and he usually builds something well. Based on this, teacher Chen and Liu decide that the ‘share and exchange’ session may allow E to

socially interact with his peers by introducing what E has built. So in the following situation, we can see how teachers managed to do this. Specifically, teacher Liu came to E and praised the thing he has built: 'E, this looks amazing. Other children want to take a look too. See, two of them also came to you while you were building it. Do you want to share it with them more?' 'Okay' answered E. Chen saw this and immediately introduced E to his peers, 'Oh, I think today E wants to share something he has built with us.' 'Yes, teacher Chen. I want to talk about the tunnel I built up.' 'Go ahead. If you like, you can also go to the Lego session and tell us from there so that everybody can see the tunnel better'. E ran to the Lego section happily, 'This is the tunnel and here you can see the mountain cave and the train can go through it like this.' Other children were listening to him tentatively while some of them also started to ask E some questions. 'E, what is this?' asked one boy, 'This is the controlling room.' 'And this?' asked another girl while pointing to the red cube. 'This is the swimming pool.' (Filed notes in inclusive class two, 14/09/2017).

In inclusive class three, teacher Yao observed that child B was always drawing some houses during the 'free play' session, and he was talking to himself about the houses. Based on the fact that B seldom drew from the past observations, teacher Yao decided to talk with B's mother. After the talk, teacher Yao came to know that the family went to the summer palace in Beijing recently and she decided to let B to exchange and share his Beijing experience with his peers. B gladly said yes after teacher Yao suggested 'It was really cool and we went through the summer palace together. It took us almost the whole day. We have seen a lot of different palaces, the jade palace, the Kun Palace.' 'Have you seen the one with the dragon head on it?' one child asked curiously. 'Yes, the dragon palace.' 'Kids, who also have been to the palace? Moreover, maybe you can also tell B how you feel'. B waited a bit and then one child raised his hand 'I was there too but it was so hot sometimes, so we had the really tasty ice. Have you also had them? B' 'No, but I also feel so hot all the time, we have to drink all the water up.' 'Hahaha' other children were laughing when they heard this and also started to talk with each other. While B was telling about his experience in the summer palace, many of his classmates highly concentrated on listening to what he said, since B could remember so many different names of the palace. (Field notes in inclusive class three, 05/09/2017).

While many other teachers actively apply ‘exchange and share’ activity to create a platform for children with SEN to interact with their peers, some teachers use this activity to provide children with SEN the ‘peer model’: specifically to learn how their more capable peers socially express themselves and interact with others. It was observed that teacher Cai would often invite children who appear to be more communicative and are willing to play a more leading role in a play to ‘exchange and share’ their experience. During the observation in her class, she first asked all children whether anyone want to share what they had played. Child Ping stood up immediately. ‘Me, me, teacher. Please pick me’. Teacher Cai immediately asked her to come to the center to share. Before Ping started, teacher Cai told all the children, looking specifically at child C, ‘all my dear children, please listen to Ping carefully about her role-play experience. It is so nice that someone who wants to share their experience with us. I encourage all of you to do like she does. To share your joy with us’ After Ping shortly introduced to the class that she was playing the ‘princess’ with her friends, Cai asked her shortly, ‘then why did you give your dress to another girl?’ ‘Oh, teacher. I thought I could play later when she finished. I still got the chance to play the ‘blue princess’ anyway.’ After hearing this, teacher Cai suggested C whether she also wants to play the ‘princess’ ‘Maybe I could try, teacher Cai’ said child C quietly. ‘It is great you may try but what would you do if you and others all want to be the blue princess.’ ‘I would then take turns like Ping and her friends did’ ‘Great, C. In this way, you will all have the chance to be the princess.’ (Field notes in inclusive class one, 19/09/2017).

While trying to enable children with SEN to participate fully in the ‘exchange and share’ activity, sometimes it is difficult for some children to remember what they have played or managed to build during the activity. Some teachers start to take pictures or short videos and present it on the projector at the same time while children are sharing their experience. By showing those images, children could memorize and share their experiences with more details. This way turns out to be very effective for other children to learn what their peers have experienced more vividly.

2) *The ‘toy exchange’ activity*

Though having the same nature of creating different opportunities for children to interact with their peers in a naturalistic setting, the activity ‘toy-exchange’ differs from the ‘exchange and share’ activity

since it is naturally embedded in the already existing transitional sessions of the whole day teaching plan. Specifically, there are two main transitional sessions during the kindergarten day in each classroom: between the time when children first arrive kindergarten and the official first activity starts; between the time when children finish their lunch and teachers send them to bed. Teachers intend to carry out the 'toy-exchange' activity during those two transitional sessions. Especially, teachers from all classrooms require all children to bring their toys to the kindergarten. In the beginning, there were no limits to the number of toys, but later teachers had observed that children who brought fewer toys tended to exchange their toys with their peers more since they had fewer choices to play. Therefore, they decided to ask each child to bring only one toy per week, in which case they would have no options but to exchange with their peers for a new toy.

During those sessions, children also need to be courageous enough to approach someone whose toy (s) they find interesting. They also need to be able to present their toys to their peer so that they can persuade their peers to exchange the toys with them. It is during the process that children would learn how to reason and how to negotiate with their peers. During this exchange and sharing process, their language skills and social interaction skills would also develop. What is more, they also need to learn how to play with other children's toys, and they need to value other children's toys by not breaking them and give the toys back to their peers in time. It is a complicated process that children can learn a lot from. The teacher will provide support when they see children need help.

In inclusive class four, after lunch, teachers asked all children to take out their toys and play with their peers. 'You can always exchange your toy with others' encouraged the teacher. 'So you could also play something new.' Teacher Gao saw child A was reading her book but she also looked around all the time, very curious about what others were playing. 'Your book looks quite interesting! What is it about?' asked the teacher Gao. 'It is about a little girl who is willing to help others.' 'This sounds fun. Would you like to share it with your classmates? I am sure they will also find it interesting.' 'I am not sure whether they will share their toys with me' 'Maybe you can give it a try.' encouraged the teacher. 'Okay, I will try.' Then A asked the girl sitting close to her 'Would you like to take a look at my book?' 'What is it about?' 'It is about this girl who loves to help others' 'Oh, she is really nice, I would love to read it.

Would you then like to play the doll I brought?’ ‘Yes, please, what is her name?’ (Field notes in inclusive four, 26/09/2017).

5.2.4.3 *Change the rules of certain activities*

Compared to their peers, children with disabilities may encounter more difficulties and challenges when participating in the same type of classroom activity. Therefore, relative adaptations and changes should be made in order to increase their social participation in different activities, which could potentially increase the opportunity for them to interact with their peers. While examining the changes and adaptations teachers have made, one of the most frequently appearing perspective is the change of the rules for some activities. Most of the time, those adaptations of the play rule take place very spontaneously. It requires teachers to be very flexible about the implementation of a particular activity.

1) Being flexible about the existing rules

In inclusive class one, during the outdoor-exercise session, before all children started to play, teacher Duo already showed to them how they were supposed to play the ball: they can either throw the ball to each other in pairs or throw the ball against the floor when playing alone. Child C held the ball firmly and carried it to her peers instead of throwing to them. However, teacher Duo did not stop her or correct her when she saw it. C was playing happily with her peers and they also started to talk. Teacher Duo let the children continue. (Field notes in inclusive class one, 19/09/2017).

2) Change the rules according to children's abilities

Meanwhile, in inclusive class three, teacher Yao also changed the rule for ‘ball-playing’ in order to increase child B’s interactions with his peers. In the beginning, teacher Yao told the class that all children needed to pair up to play the ball with each other. She then saw child B was holding the ball, standing in the corner alone and observing his peers. Teacher Yao went to him and asked, ‘can you pass me the ball.’ B was very happy and he immediately threw the ball to teacher Yao. After some time, another two children were watching them play. ‘Do you want to join us?’ asked Yao. ‘Yes, I would love to.’ Then the four started playing. By allowing flexible playing rules for the ball-playing, teacher Yao also created the opportunity for B to interact with his peers socially. (Field notes in inclusive class three, 05/09/2017).

5.2.4.4 *Involve parents into certain activity design*

Parents play a critical role in the researched kindergarten. It is often emphasized among the teachers that parents are an essential part of the successful implementation of inclusion in the kindergarten. Under this advocacy, many teachers also start to engage parents in different parts of their teaching. Specifically, some of them start to involve them in particular activity design.

1) *Parents gave certain classes*

At least once per semester, each class will invite some parents to come to the classroom for a talk or teach children some practical skills, which serves as one way to get them involved in the teaching activity. Specifically, teacher Liu and teacher Chen have started to get the parents from E and F involved in their daily teaching for a long time. During the observation, the mothers of the two children were sometimes seen in the classroom. Specifically, E's mother is a nurse in the hospital and so Liu and Chen once asked her to do a little introduction about her work during the lunch break session. All the children were very excited to hear from her and after that session, some children went to ask E some questions about his mother and whether he had been to hospitals where his mother worked (field notes in inclusive class two, 14/09/2017). The same example also was identified from inclusive class three where teacher Yao asked child B's mother to hold one session showing and guiding children in her class to sing better for their 'new semester celebration' ceremony because B's mother is a professional singer. After that, some children went to B to ask about his mother (field notes in inclusive class three, 06/09/2017).

2) *Parents continue certain activity at home*

Another way some other teachers have applied is to ask parents to continue some activities they usually carry out with children with SEN to be implemented at home. Specifically, teacher Liu observed that child F had problems in expressing his thoughts and feelings out in a more socially appropriate way and so she started to sit down and talk with child F patiently, trying to find out what might lead to his aggressive behaviors. 'I feel like if I do not grab him, he will not listen' explained F to teacher Liu. 'But he does not like to be grabbed. Just imagine that someone tries to grab you when they need something. Maybe next time you can start to try to ask them nicely'. Teacher Liu shared with parents about the talk she started with F and genuinely hoped that F's parents could also sit down and talk with him. 'Try to

tell him to ask other children nicely whenever he wants to have something and praise him if he does so. Please try to encourage him to use more words to express his feelings instead of immediately give him the things he wants when he shows aggressive behaviors'. (Field notes in inclusive class two, 12/09/2017 and 13/09/2017).

5.2.5 Level five: strategies focusing on individuals with SEN

Among all the strategies teachers applied in the researched kindergarten, the last category of strategies focusing specifically on supporting individual children with SEN is most frequently identified from the observations. In general, there are three categories of strategies at this level: encourage children with SEN to share and join their peers in different activities or learning tasks; teach certain social skills; use peer-support to support more social interactions.

5.2.5.1 Encourage children

1) Encourage children to cooperate with their peers

It was raining today and so the outdoor activity was carried out in the big indoor playroom. Inclusive class two and four shared the same activity. During this session, children were asked to build different bridges with the woods and plastic materials together. At the end of the activity, teachers asked children to put all materials back to where they belonged. F was wandering around, observing his peers. Teacher Chen saw him and suggested to him 'F, look, Li is carrying the big wood that we used to build the bridge and it looks really heavy. Would you like to help him to carry the wood?' 'Yes, of course! I would love to. Teacher.' F immediately went to Li and carried the other end, 'Thanks, F' said Li. 'No problem.' 'Do you still want to put the others back with me as well?' asked Li. 'I would love to.' The two smiled at each other, finishing carrying all the woods back to its place. Another two children also joined them during the process and the four were talking happily. (Field notes in indoor play room, 12/09/2017).

2) Encourage children to join in the play

During the outdoor play, teachers were showing the children how to play with different types of ropes. Later almost at the end of the play, child C was feeling tired and went to take a rest on the bench. As she went there, instead of joining the others at one end of the bench, she walked alone to the other end and sat alone. Teacher Duo saw this, and at first, she did not do anything. After two minutes, the group

sitting at the other end started to play a little game and a lot of others also joined them, all laughing. Child C looked at them, eagerly to join but did not make any movements towards them. Teacher Duo went to her and kneeled ‘Hey, C, how are you doing? I saw that you were checking on your classmates. Do you also want to join them to play?’ ‘Yes, teacher Duo, it looks quite fun. However, I am afraid they won’t allow me to play’. Said C in her small voice. ‘Don’t worry; you can first go to them and ask them what they are playing. Then you can try to ask them nicely if you can join them.’ ‘Okay, I can try. However, what if they say no’. ‘No worries, then you can always come back to me, we can play something together.’ ‘Okay, that is also great!’ Then C went to the group, and she asked carefully ‘excuse me, what are you guys playing?’ ‘Oh, this is a Yoyo ball Dan brought, and she allows us to take turns to play.’ ‘The color is very beautiful. Mine has a different color.’ ‘Really, you also have one like this. Can you bring it next time so that we can exchange?’ asked Dan. ‘Of course, I would love to.’ Smiling the two. ‘Do you want to try mine now?’ asked Dan, ‘I would love to.’ (Field notes from outdoor play, 19/09/2017).

3) *Encourage children to share with their peers*

Teacher Chen has observed that child E read a lot of bilingual books (Chinese and English). One day, as E was reading the book he brought to the kindergarten and practiced the words at the same time, teacher Chen went to sit close to him, ‘wow, you know so many words both in Chinese and English. That is very impressive. Do you want to show your peers your book and maybe teach them some words in English?’ E was too concentrated and did not respond and he continued reading his book, Teacher waited a bit and then she further encouraged him, ‘E, why not show others how many words in English you know, many of our classmates do not know any.’ E looked up ‘Maybe they will not think my book is interesting.’ ‘You never know that. Maybe some of them would find it very interesting. You can try to find out by yourself.’ E turned around, and there was child Feng playing his little rabbit toy with himself. ‘Feng, do you want to learn some English words?’ ‘I know a few words, like some fruits and animals.’ Said child Feng, ‘Oh, cool! This book E is reading talks about more words, do you want to learn more from him?’ suggested teacher Chen. ‘Oh, that would be great!’ said Feng. Then Feng came closer to sit together with E and they checked the words for quite some time. (Field notes in inclusive class two, 14/09/2017).

5.2.5.2 *Certain social skills teaching*

1) *How to follow the classroom social rules*

To follow specific social rules is of importance for everyone to have peer interactions with others, and it can be very challenging for children with SEN to do that. It is observed that teachers show children with SEN how to behave more socially appropriately by telling them to follow the rules as their classmates do: for example, to always raise the hands properly before teachers pick them up to answer the questions instead of standing up to answer or utter the answer without being picked. During the 'learn a skill' session, teacher Liu was asking children about the words they had learned about the traffic rules from yesterday. Child E was eager to answer those questions, without raising his hand to be picked up to answer the question. Instead, he uttered the answer before any child would have a chance to answer. Teacher Chen came to him, kneeling towards him slowly, talked to him in a calm but low voice 'you know, E, this is really great that you know so many of the words, but please raise your hands properly like the others and wait for the teacher to call your name. It is really not so nice for your classmates if you just utter the answers out because they would never have an opportunity to answer those questions.' 'But what if the teacher won't pick me and then I would not be able to answer the question' 'But then your classmate may also be able to participate, isn't nice! They may also know the answers.' 'Okay, I will try to raise my hands now, teacher Chen.' 'Good boy!' It was then observed that E sometimes tried to raise the hands, but it was quite difficult for him. It was observed that once he stood up and said the answer but he felt quite sorry and sat back to his seat immediately. (Field notes in inclusive class two, 14/09/2017).

2) *How to join in a play*

In inclusive class three, in the 'pretend-play' session where three girls were doing role-playing. Child C watched them curiously and leaned her body towards their direction but did not ask to join them to play together. Teacher Cai saw her and went to her quietly 'This looks quite fun and do you also want to play?' 'Yes, I would love to.' 'You can first go to ask, and maybe suggest something you can also play? Probably as the cook to prepare something for them or as the hairdresser. In this way, they may allow you to play with them.' 'Okay, maybe I will first ask them whether I can join' C went to the girls and they said yes immediately but were discussing what role C should play as. 'Maybe as a hairdresser, can

you do that?’ asked one girl. ‘Yes, of course. I can do that.’ (Field notes in inclusive class one, 20/09/2017).

3) *How to communicate with others*

Child F was observed to act physically challenging towards his peers. Teacher Liu and teacher Chen spent much time to teach F how to communicate with his peers more appropriately. ‘You can look into their eyes and tell them what you want to say, F.’ ‘If they sometimes do not reply, maybe it means that they do not want to be disturbed or they are busy with something. Then you can wait for them a bit’; ‘I know you sometimes want to tell others that you are interested, but instead of grabbing them, but you can ask them nicely.’ F also started to gradually try to make some little changes in the ways he communicates with his peers. Even though sometimes it is still difficult for him, but teacher Liu and teacher Chen keep on instructing him and praise him if he does it correctly. (Field notes in inclusive class two, 11/09/2017 and 14/09/2017).

5.2.5.3 Peer support

Peers play an essential role in promoting the social interactions of children with SEN. Specifically, we will talk about two types of peer support identified from the researched kindergarten: the first one are peers called ‘little teacher,’ and the specific standards to select them were described in details in section 5.2.3.2 while describing character education. Those little teachers take the predominant role in supporting children with SEN as compared to children from the second type of ‘peer support.’ The second type of peer support targets at all other peers who also offer support to children with disabilities on different occasions. Little teachers usually have more responsibilities and tasks compared to other peers. Their support is well planned by teachers while other peers’ support takes place more spontaneously. While taking a closer look, it is easy to identify a very unbalanced peer relationship between little teachers and children with SEN. Little teachers have a more guiding role compared to a supporting role. Most of them also assume the authority to themselves regarding supporting children with SEN.

1) *Little teacher*

Apart from matching three necessary standards to be selected as ‘little teachers’, little teachers also receive regular tasks and responsibilities from teachers. Teachers would communicate with them every

week for reflections and come up with plans for future changes. Because teachers lack enough support and are likely to be overwhelmed with their daily teaching, they rely on little teachers for including children with SEN in their classrooms. The tasks of ‘little teachers’ cover a wide range, sometimes they also differ among the little teachers. Apart from supporting children with SEN to socially participate in different activities and finish specific learning tasks, most of them also need to initiate social interactions with them when there are no other children interacting with them. The following two scenes can illustrate their roles and responsibilities very well.

Scene one: The little teacher supports child B to play

During the indoor free activity time, child Pan saw child B was observing the other children while they were trying to go through the ‘mountain’ by grabbing the ropes hanging from the ceiling. ‘Do you also want to give it a try, B?’ ‘Yes, it looks quite cool.’ ‘Then let us go.’ Then they held each other’s hands and went to the play section. ‘Wow, it looks so high, I may not be able to grab even the longest one.’ ‘I will try to lift you up and then you will have to grab the ropes with all your energy, okay?’ ‘Okay, I will try.’ Then Pan tried to lift but she could not stand still. Two children saw them and asked whether they could help. ‘It would be great if you can help B too.’ Then the three stood together to lift B and B finally touched the rope and held it firmly. ‘Okay, B. Now you should try to move to the next rope. But don’t fall or you will have to restart from the beginning,’ said one boy. ‘It is okay, B. You can try,’ said the other boy. B listened to them and tried to move to the next rope ‘Do not worry, B. We are here for you in case you fall’ encouraged Pan. ‘Yes, we are’ said the other two too. B was trying his best and then finally he managed to catch the second shorter rope. The two boys stood together with the little teacher Pan until B finished them. When B finished, they all held each other’s hands, celebrating and cheering.

Scene two: The little teacher explains about child B’s social behaviors

During the lunchtime, B was playing with the chopsticks all the time: repeatedly hitting the desks with the chopsticks, making many voices. Teacher Yao came to ask him to stop and he did stop for

a while, but then he continued to do it again. Then two children sitting together with him asked 'hey, B, why are you not listening to teacher Yao and stop making the noise. We are not supposed to make so much noise while the others are eating' 'He can't really understand that' commented the little teacher. 'He can't understand as we do. He is like our little brothers who do not understand so many things. And that's why he continued even though teacher Yao told him not to'. Explained Pan. 'Oh, I see' nodding the two children.

2) *Other peers*

Compared to peer support from 'little teachers,' peer support from other peers takes place much more spontaneously and flexibly. Teachers usually ask peers to support children with SEN based on how the current situations look like. The following examples would illustrate this aspect. Specifically, during the 'mixed-age' group activity time, teacher Gao saw child A was left alone in the corner. At the same time, she also noticed that child Wang was wandering around A for quite some time, checking her wheelchair. 'Would you like to walk together with her to the ball section and wait together with her?' 'I would love to,' answered Wang gladly. 'I am not so sure how to help her to get up from the wheelchair later cause I am too small' 'Don't worry, the assistant teacher will come back soon, and she can lift her. So you may wait with her a little bit and keep her company'. 'Okay, that sounds great!' Child Wang went to A and asked whether she wanted to go to the 'ball section' and offered to help to push her there. 'Okay, thanks.' Said A. 'This chair looks cute! It has many birds on it,' said Wang excitedly. 'It was made by my grandpa, all by himself.' Answered A proudly. 'Wow, I wish I also can have one.' They both smiled at each other. Then they went to the 'ball section' and waited together in the line for their turns. (Field notes in inclusive class four, 29/09/2017)

At inclusive class three, after the outdoor activity, teacher Cai saw C went to sit on the other end of the bench. After some time, she was checking the boy who sat in the middle of the bench: teacher Cai went to the boy and encouraged him to sit closer to C. 'There is more shadow to protect you from the heat at the end of the bench, and you can also sit together with C', encouraged Cai. Then they were sitting closer and after some minutes, the two started to talk. C first looked at the boy's ball and was interested,

the boy did not want to share it 'this is my ball!' 'Can I take a look?' C was reaching out to touch it, 'it is my ball,' she took her hand back and said, 'I want to check the color. I really like it' 'Really, what is your favorite color?' the boy was less angry and showed more interest to know C's answer. 'It is blue, and yours?' 'It is blue too. Do you want to play with it' asked the boy? 'Sounds great!' smiled C. (Field notes in inclusive class one, 18/09/2017).

5.3 Summary

This chapter talks about the five levels of strategies identified among teachers to improve the social interactions between children with and without SEN in one inclusive preschool in China. In the next chapter six, I will first discuss how children's ages and disabilities influence teachers' applications of particular strategies. Then I will focus on presenting the three categories of consistency between teachers' beliefs and practices to promote children's social interactions.

6 Results of the second and the third research questions

6.1 Introduction

In this section, I will present the results of the second and third research questions. Section 6.2 will mainly address how teachers' specific strategies differ according to children's different ages. Then, 6.3 will underlie how teachers' strategies vary according to children's different disabilities. In the following section 6.4, I will present how teachers express in the interview differ from observed practice. There are three categories of consistency between the two data sources. Section 6.4.1 describes the first category of strategies that reveals high consistency between teachers' beliefs and practice; section 6.4.2 touches on the category of strategies that show some consistency and inconsistency while section 6.4.3 presents the third category of strategies showing high inconsistency. Section 6.5 will be a summary of this chapter.

6.2 Age differences and teachers' strategies

While examining all the strategies from the five levels that were identified from the kindergarten, differences of strategies from some levels were identified from different classrooms. Specifically, for the middle-aged inclusive class two and four and the older-aged inclusive class three, there was no difference of strategies identified from them and so we will merge the middle-aged group and the older class group as the older class group in the following analysis. Some strategies were exclusively only identified from the inclusive class one (children aging from 2 to 3) and some were identified from the older class group (children aging from 4 to 6).

6.2.1 Strategies from the teamwork and classroom environment

All strategies from the first level focusing on teamwork and the second level focusing on classroom environment level were all identified from the four inclusive classrooms, which means that children's different ages seem to not play a role in influencing teachers' strategies on the teamwork and classroom environment levels.

6.2.2 Strategies from the curriculum design

Teachers' strategies identified from the third level targeting on the curriculum design showed differences between the two class groups. Specifically, under the category of 'social skills in the curriculum plan,' all the strategies were more frequently applied by teachers from the older class group. The specific strategies of 'resolving conflicts' and 'dealing with negative emotions' were unanimously only applied by teachers from the older class group. Character education has been both widely applied by two class groups but in different ways. Specifically, in the young class group, teachers tend to use more fun and interesting ways to present the idea of caring and supporting children with SEN; on the other hand, teachers from the older class group tend to use more explicit and direct ways to explain to children about the importance of 'caring and supporting' their peers with SEN.

6.2.3 Strategies from the activity design

The application of strategies on the fourth level focusing on the activity design differs between the two class groups. First of all, under the category of 'applying different activity formats,' while 'mixed-age' group activity was identified in both class groups since it targets at children from the kindergarten, the other strategy 'creating more small groups' was only identified among teachers from the older class group. Under the second category of 'creation of new activities,' teachers from the older class group were observed to apply 'share and exchange' activity strategy more frequently. On the other hand, the other strategy 'toy-exchange session' was only identified among the teachers from the young class group. For the third category of strategies targeting at 'change certain rules for activities' and the fourth category on 'involving parents into the activity design,' there were no differences identified among teachers' application of the strategies with children from the two different class groups. Teachers from all the classes have adapted specific activity rules in order to enable children with SEN to participate and interact with their peers, and they both tried to get parents involved in different activity designs.

6.2.4 Strategies focusing on individual children with SEN

Strategies from the fifth level focusing on individual children with SEN were relatively seldom identified from the young class group compared with the older class group. Specifically, the category of strategies targeting 'peer support' was only identified in the older class group.

6.3 Children's different disabilities and teachers' strategies

While taking a systematic look at all the strategies from the five levels, children's different disabilities seem to not play a role in influencing teachers' strategies to promote children's social interactions from the teamwork and classroom environment levels.

6.3.1 The third level: Social skills in the curriculum plan

Some differences in the application of certain strategies were identified from the curriculum design level. Specifically, under the category of 'social skills in curriculum play,' the specific strategies 'focusing on solving conflicts better' and 'dealing with children's negative emotions' were observed much more often from teacher Liu and teacher Chen with children E and F from inclusive classroom two. They often applied story-telling to the class or held little group discussions regarding how to resolve conflicts or deal with children's negative emotions. They constructed the story or group discussions based on their observations of children's activities during the day. One example would be to discuss how to resolve conflicts based on discussing one of the conflicts that took place between children F and his peers. Through the story-telling or open group discussions, teacher Liu and teacher Chen hope to set good examples for children E and F to learn how to resolve conflicts and better deal with their negative emotions. (Field notes in inclusive class two, 13/09/2017).

6.3.2 The fourth level: the activity design

Some differences among the strategies from the activity level were also observed. To be more specific, under the category of 'change the rule of activity', the two concrete strategies were predominantly identified more often in inclusive classroom four with the child A. Due to her physical disability, A could only move around in a wheelchair and could not stand, let alone participating in most of the usual physical activities. Therefore, in order to increase the possibility for her to participate and interact with her peers, teachers from inclusive class four made many changes to the rules of some existing activities or plays that usually required children's specific physical abilities. So instead of only focusing on children's physical competences, for example, who can run faster or who can jump the higher, teachers tried to focus on children's other developmental competences. (Field notes in inclusive class four, 25/09/2017 and 28/09/2017).

While taking a closer look at those changes, it is found out that they were mainly made to the activities that were not designed as regular daily activities but usually some weekly activities taking place much less frequently, for example, the ‘mixed-age’ group activity. Teachers changed the ball-playing rule that required children to use their hands to transfer the balls to run from one place to another place that is ten meters away. The new activity required children to use chopsticks to transport the Ping Pong ball with their mouth from one basket to another that is only half meter away. So instead of focusing on who can run the fastest, the new rule values children’s concentration and patience to carefully use their mouth to transfer the Ping Pong ball safely. (Field notes in inclusive class four, 28/09/2017).

6.3.3 Strategies on individual children with SEN

Children’s different disabilities seem to influence teachers’ application of strategies targeting at individual children with SEN much more compared to strategies from the other four levels. Specifically, all strategies under the category of ‘encourage children’ were mostly present in inclusive classroom two, which teacher Liu and teacher Chen frequently applied with child E. Child E was observed to be alone, reading a book or building different staff using Legos. Even though sometimes some of the peers showed initiative to interact with him, he would still withdraw himself and prefer to be left alone. Meanwhile, when he wanted to participate in some social play with his peers, he would never make the first step to ask to join his peers. Therefore, teacher Chen and teacher Liu mainly applied strategies that ‘encouraged’ him to socially interact with his peers, specifically encouraging him to join in the play, to share his book with others, to introduce what he built with Lego, as well as to cooperate with others to finish one task together. (Field notes in inclusive class two, 11/09/2017 and 13/09/2017).

The application of strategies from the category of ‘certain social skill teaching’ was more frequently identified from teacher Liu and teacher Chen with child F compared to other teachers. He sometimes demonstrated improper social behaviors while interacting with others. Even though F showed keen interest to play with his peers, it was always difficult for him to join in one play or to have a stable playmate. So teacher Liu and teacher Chen mainly focused on applying strategies that could show him how to interact with others. So under the category of ‘certain social skills teaching,’ both teachers taught F to

communicate with his peers in daily conversations; showed him how to ask his peers in order to join a play; pointed out the improper behaviors and tried to intervene them. It was observed that both teacher Liu and teacher Chen always had conversations with F about his improper or sometimes challenging social behaviors. (Field notes in inclusive class two, 12/09/2017 and 13/09/2017).

6.4 Consistency and inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and practices

While looking at the strategies identified from both data resources, pronounced differences and similarities among the strategies were identified, which triggered the next research question to examine how consistent teachers perceived and practiced to support the peer interactions between children with and without SEN. In general, as shown in table 6, there are three categories of consistency and inconsistency among teachers' strategies identified from the interview and the observational data. The first category describes strategies that are consistently identified both from the interview and observational data. The second category of strategies are the ones that both show consistency and inconsistency from the two data sources. The third category of strategies are the ones that are highly inconsistently identified from the interview and the observational data.

While taking a systematic look at all the strategies from the three categories in the following table, strategies from the second, third, the fourth levels scatter across the three different categories of consistency and inconsistency. Strategies from the first level fall only into the first and the third categories: showing either high consistency or high inconsistency. Strategies from the fifth level lie only in the first category and the second category, either showing high consistency or somewhat consistency and inconsistency between what teachers said and did.

Table 6: Three categories of consistency and inconsistency

Level of strategy	Strategies that show high consistency	Strategies that show some consistency and some inconsistency	Strategies that show high inconsistency
<i>1: Team-work</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Cooperation with the principal – Cooperate with the other main teacher (intern teacher for one class) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Cooperation with shadow teachers – Cooperation with the special educator – Cooperate with BYY

2: Classroom environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Decorations advocating more social interactions (photos, slogans, books) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Adaptations of playing ground 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – All strategies from the category of social and emotional environment
3: Curriculum design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Embed teaching the concept of friendship into a part of a class – Use different formats: games, songs singing, theater playing – All strategies on character education 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Embed teaching specific social skills in classes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – How to deal with conflicts – How to deal with children's negative emotions (frustration, anger)
4: Activity design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – New activity: create 'toy exchange' session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – All strategies on change the rules of certain play /activity – Strategies on creating different formats of activity (mixed-age and small group) – New activity: create 'share and exchange' session 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Strategies on the involvement of parents' participation
5: Focusing on individuals with SEN	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Strategies from the category of certain social skills teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Strategies on encouraging children – Strategies on peer support 	

6.4.1 The first category of strategies: high consistency

The first category of strategies are the ones that are identified consistently both from the interview data and the observation data, showing what teachers said about how to promote peer interactions in their interview agrees highly with the observed practices. In general, we can see that from each level, there are some strategies that show this high consistency.

6.4.1.1 First level: Team teaching

1) Cooperation with the principal

We have identified high consistency of how teachers perceive the principal and how much they try to cooperate with the principal on a daily basis. From all the interviews, we can see that to cooperate well with other colleague is perceived as one of the most critical aspects for all teachers to improve more inclusive practice, especially to support the interactions involving children with SEN. The role of the principal from the kindergarten is very much diversified and part of it is to collaborate with the main

teachers flexibly. Facing the big challenge of implementing inclusion daily, some teachers cherish the opportunities to work together with the principal and perceive it as essential for making inclusion work. ‘Our principal has practiced inclusion for more than 15 years and so I value her support a lot. She sometimes also shows us how to promote more inclusive practice and peer interactions. The strategies she showed us before also worked very well’ commented teacher Cai in her interview (interview, 25/10/2017). ‘She has been working with so many children with SEN, and so she knows how to deal with them.’ added teacher Liu (interview, 23/10/2017).

From the observation, we also observed much cooperation between the main teachers and the principal taking place on multiple occasions. Specifically, during the outdoor activity session, principal Zhang saw child D was left alone, sitting on the bench and teacher Cai and Duo were busy with other children. She immediately went to him, sitting quietly beside him. ‘It is quite hot today, right. So nice to sit here in the shades. Feels so cool here’, ‘Yes, it is. Principal Zhang’ answered D, still watching the two boys playing the stone with each other. ‘That looks fun. Why don’t you join them,’ asked Principal Zhang. At the same time, teacher Duo saw them and came closer, waiting for opportunities to offer her support. ‘I am afraid they do not want to play with me,’ said D. ‘I understand.’ Answered the principal. ‘Maybe you can show them what you can do with the stones, and they may be interested to know how you do that’ suggested teacher Duo. ‘Really? Will they be interested?’ D expressed uncertainty. ‘That is a great suggestion from teacher Duo; maybe you can try whether it will work,’ said principal Zhang. After hearing both the encouragement from principal Zhang and teacher Duo, D finally decided to give it a try, ‘okay, I think I will ask them first then.’ (Field notes in inclusive class one, 20/09/2017).

2) *Cooperate with the other main teacher*

High consistency has also been identified regarding how teachers perceive their co-teacher and how they cooperate with them daily. ‘I think of teacher Duo as my best cooperation partner. She is there for me, and we can always make it work’ commented teacher Cai about her co-teacher (interview, 25/10/2017). ‘I think teacher Liu is the most experienced teacher I have ever worked with. She helps me to better deal with E and F. Since I have not had many experiences of dealing with children with SEN, I feel more assured about working together with her. She knows them so well, and I can learn it from her,’ said Chen when asked about her co-teacher Liu (interview, 23/10/2017).

From the observations, it was often observed while working together with the other main teacher, they have very clear co-working structure: divided tasks and responsibilities for each side, regular communications with each other, as well as being available and accessible to each other. They were also frequently observed to plan the whole day activity together. As long as uncertain situations occurred: for example, one teacher was asked to fill out some forms, the co-teacher would automatically continue the ongoing teaching or the activity. The two teachers share an excellent and supportive working relationship with each other. It was also often observed that the relatively more experienced teachers would regularly communicate with the new teachers, aiming at supporting them to improve their current practices. For example, teacher Liu was often seen to talk with teacher Chen, who started to teach in the researched kindergarten at the beginning of this semester. Teacher Chen was also observed to seek teacher Liu's help when she did not know how to deal with child F's challenging behaviors. (Field notes in inclusive class two, 12/09/2017 and 13/09/2017).

6.4.1.2 Second level: classroom environment

1) Decorations advocating more social interactions

As part of the physical environment, teachers claimed to frequently use photos, slogans to decorate their classroom as well as to have more books focusing on peer interactions so that more social interactions between children with and without SEN would take place. 'If they see those pictures every day and they will feel it natural to play with them (children with SEN)' commented Liu in her interview (interview, 23/10/2017). 'As you have seen already, we have all those different types of slogans everywhere in our classrooms to advocate equality, respect for children with SEN. The central idea for inclusion in our kindergarten is to accept the difference and treat them equally like the slogans show' talked Yao in her interview (interview, 26/10/2017). From the observations, we have seen the pictures, slogans everywhere and teachers also kept on updating them every month. Sometimes, during the break session, some teachers were observed to explain those pictures to some children. Moreover, there were also books advocating peer interactions in the reading session in the classroom, and teachers also kept updating the selections.

6.4.1.3 *Third level: Curriculum design*

1) *Embed teaching the concept of friendship into the class*

As part of the strategies that are embedded in the curriculum plan, teaching the children the concept of friendship is highly valued. Teachers usually use a story to tell the children the importance of it. ‘We sometimes use a story-telling to teach children the concept of friendship so that they would learn how to better interact with their peers,’ said Huang in her interview (interview, 27/10/2017). ‘We hope the story would give our kids some good examples about how to treat their friends and to reflect what they could do in the future when a similar situation, like a conflict, take place during the discussion session’ continued Huang. At the same time, many also mentioned that story-telling would be more effective when it is presented in diverse ways. Specifically, as teacher Cai mentioned in her interview (interview, 25/10/2017), ‘one key thing that makes story-telling really work is that we need to apply diverse ways to tell the story since children would easily forget the stories if we just tell them the stories. That is why we use ‘theater-play’ or ‘song-singing’ to tell the stories.’ ‘Moreover, many teachers also come up with ideas to teach children about the concept of friendship spontaneously, based on what they have observed from the children. Even though we lack specific guidance as to how to carry out our daily teaching to improve children’s social skills, we try to figure out more by ourselves’ said Liu (interview, 23/10/2017).

High consistency regarding the story-telling on friendship was identified from the observations: specifically, as it is observed from the young class group, teachers applied various ways (PPT and theater play) to illustrate the story and finished it with a big group discussion regarding what the children could learn from the story. Many children were responding to those questions actively, and some of them also started to talk to each other. From the observations, it was also observed that sometimes teachers came up with ideas to teach children friendship based on what they observed from the children. For example, teacher Cai once designed one activity to learn specific friendship skill based on her observations: improvising a session to teach children specific friendship skills based on one conflict situation between two children. (Field notes in inclusive class one, 19/09/2017).

2) *Use different methods: games, song- singing, theater- play*

From the interviews, many teachers mentioned that while trying to embed social skills in daily curriculum plan, they often applied various methods to implement a particular activity or learning task:

specifically, games, song-singing, theater-play were all used across the inclusive classrooms as mentioned by teachers. ‘If we tell them to do this and that directly, they may not really listen to what we say. So we try to apply different interesting methods so that children would also be more willing to participate and interact with each other’ said teacher Gao (interview, 24/10/2017). Specifically, ‘for example, last week, we saw F was poking one child even though he wanted to play with him. Instead of directly telling him to stop doing that, which we have tried many times before. Teacher Liu and I made a little theater-play showing a similar situation. After the play, we initiated an open discussion with our children to exchange their thoughts and talked about how they could deal with the situation. Most of them felt bad for the child who could not properly express himself and suggested there should be more communications between the two sides; some of them mentioned that teachers should show the child how to interact with his peers appropriately. So by involving our children in the theater-play and discussions, child F received a lot of helpful tips while not being exposed,’ explained Chen in her interview when asked to give a concrete example of how this might work (interview, 23/10/2017).

High consistency was identified from the observations, we see that across the classroom, teachers often applied different methods to implement some activities or learning tasks when embedding social skills in the curriculum plan: theater-play and music were relatively more frequently applied compared to games. In addition, some technology (PPT and loud-speakers) were also used in specific daily activity plans to motivate children to participate and socially interact with each.

3) *Character education*

Apart from teacher Chen, who is newly employed to work in the kindergarten, all other teachers showed high consistency in what they expressed in the interview and their daily practice from the observations regarding character education. ‘We teach children to treat their peers with SEN as someone younger, weaker and thus needs their protection and care’ explained teacher Yao in her interview (interview, 26/10/2017). ‘We also encourage our children to actively initiate social interactions with their peers with SEN because they are less ‘able’ to do so’ said teacher Chen in her interview (interview, 23/10/2017). From the interview, we can see that teachers perceived the ‘caring for the younger,’ one core value in

Chinese culture, as of crucial importance and agree that this is the way all children should treat their peers with SEN. In daily practices, they were observed to be highly consistent with this belief.

Another high consistency has also been identified as to how to carry out the character education. There have been seldom specific classes designed to talk about character education, and instead, they are embedded in daily activities or in the classroom environment subtly. To be more specific, some books focusing on how to care for the younger scattering in the classroom so that children can have access to read. A group of pictures showing how older children support younger children also hanging on the kindergarten walls; songs have been taught to children focusing on how to care for younger children during the lunch break.

6.4.1.4 Activity design

1) New activity: the 'toy exchange' session

Bearing the same nature of creating different opportunities or platforms for children to interact with their peers more in a naturalistic setting, 'toy exchange exists in the already established transitional sessions,' added Liu (interview, 23/10/2017), 'it could be so naturally embedded in the ongoing curriculum.' As to the specific time for this strategy to take place, 'we have planned two sessions during which the 'toy exchange' with their peers could take place: they are between the time when children first arrived kindergarten and the official first activity started; the time when children finish their lunch and teachers send them to bed.' Added Liu.

Teachers were observed to carry out 'toy exchange' regularly during those two sessions in every classroom. 'I know it is frustrating that sometimes some parents would forget (to only allow their children to bring one toy per week), but we should continue to encourage them to stick to the plan;' talked teacher Cai with teacher Duo during the lunch break session (field notes in inclusive class one, 18/09/2017 and 20/09/2017). In inclusive class four, after lunch, teachers asked all children to take out their toys and play with their peers. 'You can exchange your toy with others' encouraged the teacher. 'So you could also play something new.' (Field notes in inclusive class four, 26/09/2017). Teachers would also encourage children regularly when they find it difficult for them to initiate the exchange with their peers. (Field notes in inclusive class two, 15/09/2017).

6.4.1.5 Individual level

1) Certain social skills teaching

From the interviews, teachers all agree that children with SEN need individualized, one-to-one teaching time for specific social skills. ‘You sometimes have to teach them face to face on an individual basis so that they can understand’ commented teacher Chen (interview, 23/10/21017). ‘Sometimes, you need to repeat the same rules for many times so that F can really understand that it is not okay to poke at others’ said teacher Liu (23/10/2017). From the observations, teachers were frequently observed to teach children with SEN specific social skills. Like she mentioned in the interview, teacher Chen was observed to repeatedly teach F how to interact with others and explain why his certain social behaviors were not acceptable (field notes in inclusive class two, 13/09/2017). Other teachers were also observed to teach children with certain classroom social rules, how to communicate with their peers as well as how to join a play. (Field notes in inclusive class four, 27/09/2017).

Though teachers having one general guidebook indicating social skills as one of the most critical skills that children need to acquire from their kindergarten time, there was no specific guidance as to how to teach children social skills on an individual basis. Thus, teachers needed to be creative: ‘we need to think of ways to teach them social skills by ourselves, sometimes I would discuss with teacher Duo, and we will decide together.’ Moreover, ‘children’s ages also play a role in influencing our teaching goals, for our children from the younger class, to teach them concrete social skills is not the main teaching goals, maybe later, when they enter the middle class.’(Interview with teacher Cai, 2510/2017). From the observations, we can see high consistency as to how some teachers taught children specific social skills, which was carried out quite spontaneously. Some teachers also improvised new formats to teach children specific friendship skills.

6.4.2 Second category of strategies: some consistency and some inconsistency

While taking a systematic look at the second category of strategies, no strategies from the first level were identified in this category, and some strategies from all the other four levels were identified as somewhat consistent and inconsistent from the interview and observation data.

6.4.2.1 Adaptations of the kindergarten physical spaces

As part of the strategy belonging to the physical environment adaptations, many teachers mentioned that they made some adaptations to the playing ground during the interviews. Specifically, some teachers have adapted the size of certain play materials: like the wood teachers usually use to make bridges for children to walk on. ‘They are usually quite narrow, and some children find it difficult to walk on, like child C, who is afraid to walk on it’ Said teacher Cai in her interview (interview, 25/10/2017), ‘so teacher Duo and I came up with the idea of expanding the bridge a bit, make it wider so that C would also walk on it. Meanwhile, the woods are like add-ons, so for children who want to challenge themselves more, they can choose to walk on the narrow ones. In this way, C can also participate in playing with her peers and interacting with them more naturally’ commented Cai. Teacher Chen (interview, 23/10/2017) mentioned the application of the public spaces within the kindergarten for classroom activity due to the limited spaces of the classroom, ‘it is a great way to make use of the public area and also children get more spaces to interact with each other instead of waiting in the corner and doing nothing.’ In order to make this happen on a sustainable basis, teachers also mentioned that they agreed with each other to take turns to use the public spaces.

From the observations, we also saw some extra wood pieces were added to expand the walking surface during the outdoor time and child C, as well as other peers, were observed to try it many times. Moreover, children were also seen to be sent out during the transitional sessions in the open public area for a short break when the classroom was to be cleaned or rearranged for the next session. Moreover, peer interactions were sometimes observed during the session: in some classes, teachers also gave children some freedom to do whatever they preferred: some chose to share their toys they brought with their peers, some decided to play ‘doctor-patient’ with each other, some shared a book. (Field notes in inclusive class one, 18/09/2017 and 19/09/2017).

However, the change or adaptation to the playing materials was only exclusive to some materials, most of the materials were not adapted to accommodate children’s needs. So for most of the time, children with SEN were observed to have no access to most of the play materials. Like the sizes of the balls, they share all the same size and for child C, it would be difficult to play with because her body is relatively smaller than her peers. Secondly, even though the application of the open spaces was also observed, but

it was sometimes carried out in a hurry and only for the sake of quickly preparing the next session. Thus the high-quality social interactions teachers mentioned in the interviews as the primary purpose for the public spaces were rarely observed. (Field notes in inclusive class one, 21/09/2017).

6.4.2.2 *Embed teaching specific social skills in daily routines*

During the interviews, many teachers emphasized that there were relatively few specially designed learning tasks or activities to target developing children's social development. It is, on the contrary, embedded in the daily routines: "I have not designed a specific one lesson or activity to target at children's social development. Instead, it is more likely to be embedded in daily routines. During the lunch session, for example, toilet time, and other transitional sessions throughout the whole day. They were usually carried out through the format of song-singing or speaking out some slogans." said Liu in her interview (interview, 23/10/2017). Some other teachers further explained that they did it more spontaneously, "I do what my experience told me to. I trust what my experience tells me. Of course, I also check how the whole day may proceed. I need to be very observant during the process and be flexible to change. For example, sometimes, when there is a conflict taking place, I will change the song prepared for the transitional session to conflicts-resolving discussion," said Cai (interview, 25/10/2017).

During the observations, it was widely observed that children sang some songs about friendship during the transitional sessions and teachers did make some slogans that focused on telling children to treat their peers nicely: such as, 'hand in hand, let's not fight; hand in hand, let's play all together'. Children need to speak this out loud while being gathered around for some activities and it serves as a way to discipline them. Nevertheless, while examining it closer, it is not difficult to find out that some teachers carried out those sessions very superficially. During the song-singing part, only several children could remember the lyrics, and it was mostly the teachers singing and children looking around, not engaged (field notes in inclusive class four, 26/09/2017). The same situation was also observed from other routine sessions, like during toilet time. For most of the time, only two or three children were speaking the slogans out and most children were not participating. Teachers also did not try to engage more to take part and instead they rushed the children to finish and start the next session. (Field notes in inclusive class one, 21/09/2017).

6.4.2.3 Activity design

1) Different new activities

During the interview, the most often applied strategy mentioned by all teachers to promote children's social interactions was the creation of new activities in daily teaching. Furthermore, even though teachers explained that they would apply different new activities, they share some of those new activities at the same time, as part of the effort to 'explore the effective way to promote more peer interactions' (said by teacher Liu in her interview, 23/10/2017). From the observation, the 'share-exchange' session that intends to encourage children to share their activity or play experience with peers, the 'little theater' or 'little story time' sessions for children to act out how they feel when they prefer not to talk, as well as the 'mixed-age' group activity designed for creating an open space for children to interact with peers from other classes, have all been identified to promote more peer interactions across different classrooms. Nevertheless, a closer look from the observation reveals some inconsistency in the application of specific new activity and activity formats.

Firstly, the 'mixed-age' group activity is created as an activity to enable children from different classes with different levels of abilities to interact with each other. The aim of the 'mixed-age' group activity was very clearly stated and understood by all teachers from the interviews: to create an inclusive and open environment for everyone to play and participate, especially for children with SEN. Nevertheless, a high inconsistency was identified while the activity was carried out from the observation. Most of the time, children with SEN were observed to be accompanied by adults (be it the intern teacher, the BYY, or the main teacher) instead of by their peers. So instead of interacting with their peers, they were observed to be interacting mainly with the adults, which in the end prevented many peers from actively interacting with them.

Secondly, for the activity of 'sharing and exchange,' there was also some inconsistency being identified. It was observed that all teachers applied this strategy across different classrooms. Usually, after the free play session, teachers would start this session by either circling the children around and carrying it out formally or letting children stay where they want to. Nevertheless, the following several aspects identified from the observation indicated some inconsistency (field notes in inclusive class three, 07/09/2017;

field notes in inclusive class two, 13/09/2017): first of all, some teachers did not plan it so well or it was constantly interrupted during the sharing process. Thus, sometimes teachers and children were not listening to the child who was sharing. Secondly, the standards to select the children to share were also very exclusive. Usually, teachers tended to select those who acted quite obedient or those ‘smart ones.’ This contradicted sharply to what teachers claimed ‘everyone can have the opportunity to participate’ in the interview. Specifically, E was only selected once to share what he built with the Legos. Apart from E, the other children with SEN from other classes were seldom selected to participate in this session from the observations. Therefore, we can see, contrary to the original purposes of promoting more peer interactions, those activities were implemented very differently in different classes, some of them even leading to more exclusions for children with SEN.

2) *Different formats of activities*

There was also some inconsistency identified in the strategy of creating more ‘small-group’ to carry out activities to promote more peer interactions. In the interviews, all teachers agreed that the purpose of applying ‘small group’ was to enable children with SEN to have more opportunities to have more peer interactions with their peers. From the observations, it was also seen that some teachers applied the ‘small-group’ format for the life-skill learning activity and very active peer interactions took place. Nevertheless, this activity usually lasts only 10 minutes, and it takes place only twice per week, which takes a small percentage of the whole activity and learning tasks. Moreover, a closer examination from the observations, we only see that this format was only exclusive applied during the ‘life-skill’ session (field notes in inclusive class four, 27/09/2017). Thus, we still see that the predominant activity format teachers have applied is the ‘whole group’ format, during which children all sit together in a big group, passively listening to teachers. Usually, the children would sit on their chairs arranged in three different parallel lines, leading to some children who sit at the edge of the line or in the third line being likely left out and neglected.

6.4.2.4 *Fifth level: focusing on the individuals with SEN*

1) *Strategies on encouraging children*

From the interview, Chen mentioned encouragement as one of the main strategies to promote more social interactions of children with SEN with their peers: ‘I often not only encourage children E and F to interact with their peers but also encourage their peers to interact with them on different occasions. For example, the other day, I encouraged F to invite others to play with him when he took his new toy out. Also, I encouraged E to share his new bilingual book with another child,’ said Chen during the interview (interview, 23/10/2017). She further mentioned that, for most of the time, the encouragement would not work immediately, ‘E would rather prefer to read alone with his book instead of sharing with his peers and F would also be denied sometimes by his peers when he asks to join in a group. However, I think it is all normal.’ Explained Chen further, ‘It can be a long process, and so we need to be very patient and keep trying.’ For encouraging other children to play with E or F, ‘Sometimes I am around, I would also talk to the other kids and ask them nicely whether E or F can play with them? They would sometimes say okay, but we will not force them of course. It is sometimes not that easy.’ Explained Liu in her interview (Interview, 23/10/2017).

From the observation, teacher Liu and teacher Chen were observed quite often to encourage E or F to play with others or to share something with their peers. Nevertheless, a closer examination of the encouragement from the observation, I find out that sometimes teachers’ encouragements were quite direct and forceful, usually starting with ‘why not try to play with someone’ or ‘you should go to ask someone.’ Sometimes they may potentially interrupt some children’s ‘book-reading’ time or force them to interact with their peers even though they preferred to be left alone. Same applied to their encouragement for other peers to play with children with SEN. The encouragement sometimes worked, but for most of the time, they led to very superficial and unwilling interactions among the children, which ceased to be continued as far as the teachers were gone. (Field notes in inclusive class two, 14/09/2017 and 15/09/2017).

2) *Strategies for peer support*

The importance of peer support in promoting more peer interactions is highly recognized by all teachers during the interviews. ‘They serve as role models for them, from whom children with SEN can learn how to communicate, how to interact with others, and how to make friends. They are usually more

competent children,' said Gao in her interview (interview, 24/10/2017). 'At the same time, they could also become good friends. They play together and grow to be quite depended on each other,' commented teacher Yao (interview, 26/10/2017).

From the observations, it was very often seen that in each class, there were always some peers asked by teachers to support the children with SEN to finish one task, or to support them to participate in one activity. Some of them were quite fixed, being called 'little teacher,' like the case of inclusive class three (filed notes in inclusive class three, 07/09/2017). Some of them were quite randomly selected based on the concrete situation, like those in other inclusive classes who were assigned a particular task to support child C to finish drinking the water together and put the cup back to the wardrobe or to participate in the 'singing' activity (filed notes in inclusive class one, 19/09/2017).

Nevertheless, inconsistency has also been identified. Firstly, during the interviews, teachers emphasized that the little teacher and the child with SEN should naturally like each other, which deemed as the fundamental principle for selecting the 'little teacher' among them. 'They both need to like each other, or hit it off with each other (Touyuan in Chinese); the arrangement should also be natural without forcing either side,' explained teacher Liu (interview, 23/10/2017). Nevertheless, during the observations, the 'little teachers' must match certain standards before they were selected and the 'natural hit-off' seemed to be not so crucial since some teachers were observed to force some children to serve the role of the 'little teacher' in certain situations. (Field notes in inclusive class two, 13/09/2017 and 14/09/2017).

Secondly, the relationship between 'little teacher' and child with SEN also seemed to differ when we compare the data from the interview and the observations. From the interviews, we can conclude that the relationship between the little teacher and child with SEN is equal. From the observations, though some little teachers were observed to have a relatively good relationship with children with SEN, this relationship was also quite unbalanced. Specifically, the little teacher from inclusive class three was very different as other little teachers even though she had the most stable relationship with B. She, at the same time, also showed more controlling over child B's behaviors, sometimes even deciding what he should or should not do. Moreover, she was sometimes also observed to be the only one child B was

interacting, which totally went against what teachers perceived about peer support. (Field notes in inclusive class three, 05/09/2017).

6.4.3 The third category of strategies: high inconsistency

From the third category, we can see that, apart from all strategies identified from the fifth level that showed no high inconsistency, certain strategies from each of the first four levels show very high inconsistency, indicating differences between teachers believed in promoting peer interactions and what they did in practice.

6.4.3.1 Level one: Team teaching

1) Cooperation with the BBYs

The central role of BYYs is to support the daily organization of the classroom and support teachers to realize their teaching goals. ‘Our BYY always supports me to go through the day smoothly. She is of help considering the large number of children in our class,’ said teacher Chen in her interview (interview with teacher Chen, 23/10/2017). During the interviews, many teachers treated BBYs as a potential resource for cooperation in order to execute their particular strategy to promote the peer interactions of children with SEN. ‘I sometimes talked to our BBY before the children arrived. I told her that we need to cooperate sometimes so that child C could interact more with her peers. For example, we were doing the outdoor exercise the other day and I told BBY to support C to do the exercise and later to encourage her to communicate with her peers’, Cai talked about how she cooperated with BBY in her class (interview with teacher Chen, 23/10/2017). From those interviews, we can see that teachers consider BYYs’ support as a vital source for cooperation so that more social interactions between children with and without disabilities would be promoted. Meanwhile, there also seemed to be good communications between teachers and BYYs to make this cooperation work continuously.

From the observations, BYYs were sometimes seen to stand close to children with SEN, supporting them to participate in some activities or finish one specific task. Nevertheless, it was seldom observed that they cooperated with teachers to support children to interact with their peers. Moreover, during the observation period, it was seldom seen that teachers and BYYs talked together regarding BYYs’ supporting children to interact with their peers. What is more, some BYYs were sometimes observed to

interrupt teachers' teaching during specific sessions. Sometimes, instead of encouraging and supporting children with SEN to interact with their peers, they interrupted some ongoing social interactions. Thus, contrary to what teachers talked about the supporting and cooperative role BYYs have, we see from the observations, they seemed to act on their own and sometimes even interrupt and prevent children from having more social interactions with their peers.

What is more, some teachers mentioned that the BYYs are convenient to gain support from and they also understand children quite well. 'I think our BBY knows the girl's disability very well and she can adapt to her special needs very well' said teacher Gao in her interview (interview, 24/10/2017). However, from the observations, it was so often observed that many of the BYYs did not know what to do in some situations when there were children with SEN involved. What is more, they also acted not so sensitive about children's disabilities: openly talking about their disabilities in front of other children in a very negative tone. 'Oh, yes, he is the one who has autism. That is why he can not look at others in their eyes.' explained one BYY to the researcher in one situation; '(to have) a boy or a girl does not matter. The main thing is not to have a disabled child' said another BYY to the researcher in another situation. Sometimes they act as if they do not have any knowledge or understanding of those children's disabilities. (Field notes in inclusive class two, 12/09/2017).

2) *Cooperation with the shadow teacher*

Due to the lack of special educators in each inclusive classrooms, main teachers always lack the confidence to deal with children with disabilities. 'I feel I am not professional enough to do anything. I am not quite sure what autism is, and I have not learned anything about it from the university.' This concern expressed by teacher Chen is shared among other teachers even though some of them have had some inclusion and special education training (interview with teacher Chen, 23/10/2017). Facing such a lack of confidence, they usually would welcome any person who possesses the knowledge and skills. Shadow teachers are the group of teachers parents of the children with SEN appoint privately to do one-to-one support for their children in the kindergarten or primary schools. In the interviews, teachers expressed very positive perceptions about them since they could learn from them. They further recognized the

importance of potentially cooperating with the shadow teacher to improve children's social interactions and learning.

It was once observed in inclusive class two that teacher Liu was cooperating with the shadow teacher to encourage child E to share his play experience from the 'mixed-age' group activity (field notes in inclusive class two, 13/09/2017). Apart from this, the cooperation between the two sides was very seldom observed. Instead, shadow teacher always accompanied the children with SEN by standing beside them, supporting them to participate in one activity or to finish some tasks. They were seldom seen interacting with other children, and very few communications with the main teachers were observed. Therefore, we see that even though some teachers mentioned the importance of cooperating with the shadow teacher to ask for their professional ideas or concrete methods of promoting children's more social interactions, there was almost no cooperation going on between the two sides.

3) *Cooperation with the special educators*

From the interviews, we see that teachers fully recognize the competencies special educators have while dealing with children with SEN. They also expressed their appreciation for special educators for their support to make inclusion take place in the kindergarten: 'We can learn so much from them since they know the children with disabilities very well. They are the experts' mentioned teacher Duo in her interview while being asked about her perceptions of special educators (interview, 25/10/2017), 'I feel really reassured when they are there. You know. Like during the 'mixed-age' group activity. They were there to take care of children with SEN. I do not know whether it will be possible for me to manage all the things if they were not there'. Furthermore, many of them also showed a strong intention to cooperate with special educators. 'I wish to learn more from them about how to deal with children with SEN. Inclusion will only work if we work together. I am always trying my best to communicate with them more, like during lunchtime.' Said Liu in her interview (interview, 23/10/2017).

During the lunchtime, teachers always talked with each other about their work and personal lives. Even though it was observed for quite several times that teachers from the inclusive classrooms were communicating with the special educators, mainly expressing their complaint about how difficult it was to have a child with SEN in their classes. Seldom did they ask for how to tackle the challenges. Moreover,

it was observed that during the activity time, for example, during the ‘mixed-age’ group activity, there was very few cooperation in any kind between the two sides. For most of the time, the two sides worked separately: special educator being the one taking care of the child with SEN and main teachers taking care of the rest of the class. Even though sometimes some general teachers saw the child with SEN needed some support and they were free at that moment, they would still ask the special educator to take care of it. (Field notes in inclusive class one 19/09/2017; filed notes in inclusive class three, 07/09/2017).

6.4.3.2 The second level: social-emotional environment

1) Caring and supportive environment for children with SEN

Specifically, all teachers perceive it of value to create a welcoming and interactive environment for all children: ‘we are trying to include every child by creating a welcoming environment and all children are encouraged to participate in every activity; and they also have the freedom to choose from different activities’ said teacher Gao (interview, 24/10/2017). ‘In this environment, children are given a lot of freedom and all we need to do is to provide them with proper materials and support,’ added Huang in her interview (interview, 27/10/2017). From the interviews with the teachers, an open, supportive, and communicative environment was described as an ideal environment teachers worked hard to establish for all children.

Very high inconsistency was identified from the observation. First of all, for most of the time, it was seen that some children did not have so much freedom to choose whatever they wanted to play or do as claimed by teachers. Teachers would instead decide for them about where they should play during the free play sessions, specifically for children with disabilities. Teachers were also not so often observed to encourage children to choose what they wanted to play or to interact more with their peers. Most of the time, most teachers were observed to be fully occupied by trying to accomplish the whole-day schedule and various organizational staff. There was seldom time left for them to truly interact with children, let alone to accommodate the needs of children with disabilities. For example, in inclusive classroom two, teacher Chen was only observed to be attentive to children E and F when they interrupted the class or had conflicts with other peers. Moreover, she was only observed to initiate some social interactions between children F and his peers, however, those social interactions tended to be very forced and could

not last that long. (Field notes in inclusive class two, 14/09/2017 and 15/09/2017). A lot of similar situations were identified among children with SEN in other inclusive classrooms: sometimes they were denied by their peers, and teachers seldom reacted to the situation. They either ignored or chose not to deal with it. (Field notes in inclusive class four, 29/09/2017 and 15/09/2017). So the supportive and caring environment teachers talked about in the interviews was not so often seen in every classroom.

Secondly, what was frequently mentioned as key to this environment by some teachers was the constant and open communications teachers had with children with and without disabilities. Some teachers mentioned that they created more chances for both sides to understand each other, to more positively interact with each other. Specifically, ‘regular communications with child A were carried out talking about her concerns to communicate with others.’ explained teacher Gao in her interview (interview, 24/10/2017); ‘We also talk openly with their peers, explaining that child A may be a bit different than them, and sometimes she could not be as quick as them. By having constant conversations with both sides, we hope both sides would understand each other better, which hopefully would build a very good basis for more peer interactions to take place in the classroom,’ commented teacher Gao.

Those constant communications teachers created with all children to establish a better understanding among children was very seldom observed from teachers’ daily practice. For example, a closer look at different activities designed within the inclusive classroom one (field notes, 18/09/2017), we find that most of the children with disabilities were playing alone, not so often interacting with their peers. Teacher Cai and teacher Duo were not that often seen to communicate with children nor encourage any peer interactions. In inclusive classroom two (field notes, 12/09/2017), teachers were also seldom observed to communicate with other peers about E and F’s ‘differences,’ and only very few communications between teacher Liu and child F were observed. Nevertheless, those communications were usually about criticizing F’s challenging behaviors or forcefully asking him for a change.

2) *A broader definition of inclusion: being different is accepted*

From the interviews, we can see that the second most often mentioned element perceived as key to the classroom environment was that children’s differences were entirely accepted and welcomed by the teachers and their peers. ‘Here we welcome every child and their differences are fully accepted.’ said

Cai in her interview (interview, 25/10/2017). Yao (interview, 26/10/2017) further mentioned ‘children in my class all understand that B is different from them and are all friendly to him. Whenever he shows improper behaviors, our children would understand. They are all very tolerant’.

Nevertheless, it was observed that being different was treated very negatively than what teachers mentioned in the interviews. Specifically, in inclusive classroom one (field notes, 19/09/2017), there was one boy who cried quite often, and teacher Cai was observed many times to publically criticize him without really looking into the reasons that led to his crying. Another time (field notes in inclusive class one, 20/09/2017), teacher Cai was observed talking with teacher Duo complaining about D being different compared to his peers, ‘why is he not talking like others? Moreover, it is so hard to get him to eat anything’. Same situations were also observed from inclusive classroom two where teacher Chen was complaining to teacher Liu about one girl for her hair being too messy ‘she needs to take care of her hair so that her peers would possibly play with her. Why can’t she be like other girls?’ (Field notes in inclusive class two, 14/09/2017). As to their peers, it was frequently seen that children staring at B with big shock in their eyes while seeing B shook his head constantly without stop; Child C being pushed by her peers at the ‘bridge walking’ for being too slow at it; child F being denied into a play because of his ‘improper’ behaviors.

3) *Understand children’s disabilities*

In their interviews, all teachers agreed not to explain children’s disabilities directly to their peers and instead, they would explain that those children are younger than them, like ‘little brothers and sisters’ and so they may act differently and also need their caring and support. ‘The day B came to our classroom, I told the children that we had a new friend joining our class, but he was relatively younger than all of them, so they should take care of him,’ explained teacher Yao (interview, 26/10/2017). When children asked teachers about some child’s certain improper behaviors, they would never explain about his/her disability to them, ‘if a child asks me how come that E never wants to play with them, I would never tell them that E has autism and that he is not able to interact with others. We will not teach our children to think in this way,’ said teacher Liu in the interview (23/10/2017). When asked about why they chose to do so, they further explained: ‘If you tell children that some kids are disabled, it would be a shock for

them, and then it would be impossible for them to play with those children anymore. This is how Chinese people perceive disabilities', explained teacher Cai (interview, 23/10/2017). In addition, they further explained that they were also trying to treat children as the 'normal younger' children instead of someone with disabilities.

Meanwhile, some teachers also expressed other rationales for not explaining children's disabilities. First of all, they did not see the needs to explain to other children because they considered that children with disabilities could play well with their peers: 'We haven't talked about disabilities at all, children C and D could play very well with their peers, we did not see the needs to talk about it with our children and parents, to further explain that they are different' (interview with teacher Cai, 25/10/2017). From the observation, the way teachers dealt with children's disabilities was different than they claimed from the interviews: specifically, teachers were seen in various situations publically and negatively talking about children's disabilities and their improper behavior as a result of their disabilities. For example, teacher Chen was observed to complain about F's 'aggressive behaviors' as a result of his social-emotional disability in front of other children (field notes in inclusive class two, 12/09/2017). Moreover, some teachers even talked about children's disabilities negatively with people from outside of the kindergarten: one example was that during the regular tooth-examination session, while E would not open his mouth for the doctor. The doctor pointed at E while asking teacher Chen loudly whether he was the special child. 'Yes, he is. He is the child with autism.' (Field notes in inclusive class two, 13/09/2017).

Secondly, during the interviews, teachers mentioned many times that one of the reasons that they chose not to explain children's disabilities was that they wanted to treat those children with disabilities equally like their peers. From the observations, we see that some teachers did indeed seldom mention about children's disabilities in some conflict situations. Nevertheless, we can see that the reasons for not mentioning their disabilities were because they did not have time to explain, rather than trying to treat children with disabilities equally.

Apart from the above aspects, during the observation, there were constant interruptions in all the classrooms: sometimes teachers from other classrooms came and directly talked to the teacher during some

ongoing activities; sometimes the principal came to talk with certain teachers during the classroom activities. Children in those situations were mostly left unattended. To sum up, so instead of constructing a welcoming and interactive inclusive environment, the environment the researcher identified from teachers' daily practice was mostly stressful, loud, unwelcoming, sometimes even selective and exclusive. Teachers were observed to use direct rewarding and punishing for maintaining or decreasing children's certain behaviors, and it seemed that to be obedient was the only way to be included.

6.4.3.3 The third level: curriculum design

1) How to deal with children's conflicts

To start with, conflicts are very much likely to take place when children socially interact with their peers. Teachers emphasized in their interviews that whenever conflicts took place, they would try to identify what might cause the conflicts. 'Sometimes some kids grabbed other's toy without first asking. We usually went to the children and understood what the problems were before we took any actions', said Chen in her interview (interview, 23/10/2017). 'It is of key importance to find out what might lead to those challenging behaviors. Sometimes, it could reveal a lot. Like child C, the other day, pushed one boy so hard when he tried to take her toy away. If I did not try to explore what the causes were, I would have stopped that conflict without really knowing that C was having a big fight with her mother,' added Cai in her interview (interview, 25/10/2017). Nevertheless, in the observations, teachers were observed to tend to ignore most of the conflicts: most of them were observed to prepare the whole day with different activities, being occupied with many other different tasks while attending to the needs of almost 30 children. When there was a conflict, we saw teachers did not come to the children to ask what happened as they indicated from the interviews. Specifically, for most of the conflicts, they did not attend to them and were irresponsive to children's potential conflicts, allowing the conflicts to continue to happen even though the involved children were calling for help. Even though some teachers intended to resolve some conflicts, they were often seen to directly go to the children to stop the conflict without any intention to listen to what happened or what caused the conflicts. (e.g., field notes in inclusive class one, 18/09/2017).

Secondly, in their interviews, teachers also talked about how they would support children to better deal with conflicts in the future by having an open talk and discussion with them. ‘Two children started a fight over one toy, or another child being pushed while walking on the wood bridge. For those conflict situations, I will talk about it with the rest of the class because I think maybe other children may have the similar problems or conflicts as they do,’ said Yao from the interview (26/10/2017). ‘After I introduced this conflict by not mentioning the names of the children and asked openly how they would deal with them if they are faced with the situation, children would usually start to share their ideas and thoughts. Then, in the end, I would summarize it and add my own comments.’ Teacher Cai was observed to openly talk about the conflict situation she had observed from two children with the whole class (field notes in inclusive class one, 20/09/2017). By telling the scene she observed, she intended to teach the children how to respect each other as friends, how to give in for each other, and how not to get into a fight. Nevertheless, it was observed that Cai occupied all the time by illustrating the situation and there was no time left for children to communicate with each other or to express their ideas, which was claimed as the core of having this session from all teachers’ interview. Moreover, during the process, Cai did it in a very hurried way, and most of the children were not even listening. She quickly finished it and moved to the next session, leaving many children a bit confused in the end.

Thirdly, some teachers further mentioned in the interview that they would sometimes prefer to give some children with disabilities more time to see whether they can resolve the conflicts by themselves. ‘I will always try to wait a bit to see how E would react to the conflict and to see whether he would come up with some methods to resolve the conflict. In this way, they would be able to learn how to communicate with their peers like a normal child’ said Liu (interview, 23/10/2017), ‘even try to learn how to negotiate and argue with their peers and how to defend himself in a conflict situation.’ Nevertheless, from the observations of a conflict situation, if there were children with SEN involved, teachers would always first go to children with SEN: be it to take them directly away to stop the conflict, or directly blame them for causing a conflict without understanding what happened. Moreover, they sometimes even asked the children to stop the conflicts from another corner of the classroom without going closer to them to figure out what happened. Those situations we saw teachers tried to attend to were also

exclusive to those when the conflicts became very serious, or one child started to cry out loudly (field notes in inclusive class one, 20/09/2017).

2) *How to deal with children's negative emotions (frustration, anger)*

In the interview, many teachers talked about the importance of identifying and dealing with children's negative emotions. Specifically, Yao talked quite often that whenever there were individual children showing negative emotions, she would always first directly go to them and ask them carefully what happened. 'So if we ask them patiently and nicely, they would share their emotions and feelings more with us as compared with their parents'. (Interview, 26/10/2017). Liu talked about how important it is to deal with children's negative emotions in time, 'for me, it is important to be observant about children's negative emotions. I always try my best to identify them and talk with children immediately'. (Interview, 23/10/2017). What is more, some teachers mentioned that they had designed a session specifically targeting at dealing with children's negative emotions: 'we have one class called-I will not be angry focusing on telling children about how to control their temper or adjust their emotions when they are angry. To make the class more interesting, we delivered it in the format of a song-singing so that children can sing it and learn it by heart,' added Yao (interview, 26/10/2017), 'sometimes it was also delivered in a small-scale role play'. 'In this way, we can ask some of our children to act the situation out to the whole class.' At last, they also mentioned sometimes they would have big group discussions with the whole class to talk about the negative emotions. 'I would gather all children together and then design it as part of a big group activity, they would directly talk about the problem with the children involved in this and tried to resolve it directly with the whole class. I would usually let children talk about their opinions, and then I would make some suggestions in the end.' Said Yao. (Interview, 26/10/2017).

During the observations, the researcher did not observe any occasions during the teaching or activity time that focused on dealing with children's emotions. High inconsistency was identified from the observations; both teachers were not observed to design any activity nor hold any open communications with children about dealing with certain negative emotions. For example (field notes in inclusive class one, 19/09/2017), teacher Cai perceived children's crying very negatively, instead of dealing with it actively as she mentioned from the interview. She perceived the child's crying as a way to only get

teachers' attention and thought her crying as 'looking ugly.' She even mentioned to cry all the time is considered as bad luck (likely to destroy the kindergarten's Feng Shui⁹).

6.4.3.4 The fourth level: activity design

1) The involvement of parents' participation

Even though teachers differed in their experience of working with parents, they all perceived the involvement of parents' participation as very important to promote children's peer interactions. 'We always want our parents to actively participate in our kindergarten activities so that the children can learn something by heart. If parents are doing something opposite to what the kindergarten have taught the children, all our efforts would also be in vain', said Cai in her interview (interview, 25/10/2017). While all planning to strengthen the cooperation with the parents, some teachers perceived them as highly cooperative and supportive while others as distant and distrusting. None of them denied the value and necessity of involving parents as a part of their activity design so that they could extend their efforts to promote more peer interactions among children with disabilities further.

What is more, from the interview, teachers also mentioned quite some activities that could involve parents as an active partner to work together with them as a part of the continuing effort for extending what the kindergarten intends to promote children's more social interactions with their peers. 'Some of them gave the children one class on a certain topic: for example, 'fireman day' is when one mother from one class took her working clothes as a firewoman and introduced children about her work,' talked teacher Cai (interview, 25/10/2017).

Apart from this, teachers mentioned that they all have their ways of involving parents into their daily teaching activities as an extension of their efforts to promote more social interactions between peers with and without SEN. To be specific, Liu introduced in her interview that parents play a vital role in

⁹ Feng shui: also known as Chinese geomancy, is a pseudoscience originating from China, which claims to use energy forces to harmonize individuals with their surrounding environment (Matthews, 2018).

the activity design for children E and F. She involved parents in her daily activity design, specifically asking parents to imitate the playing setting, playing rule, conflicts situations from the kindergarten at home. ‘The parents were supposed to act as the teachers from the kindergarten. In this way, the family is becoming a place where the interventions implemented at the kindergarten will continue consistently, which involves family participation in the process of enabling children more positive social behaviors and interactions’. (Interview, 23/10/2017). Cai further mentioned in her interview that she would always try to involve parents into some of her activities design, for example, during the activity ‘bring one toy every day.’ ‘I asked the parents to make this change and to get them totally on board by also trying to give their kid at home one toy per week, even though some parents felt difficult to stick to the plan, I still, through Wechat, tried to encourage parents to continue to do so. I would ask them every week in the Wechat group about how they were doing, and how their children were reacting, try to encourage them to stick to the plan together with me, with the kindergarten’. (Interview, 25/10/2017). ‘I asked the parents to do a role play with their children and treat them as their classmates would do to learn friendship skill,’ said Chen in her interview (interview, 23/10/2017). They all further emphasized that the involvement of parents in activity design should also stay consistently and continuously.

There is high inconsistency as to parents’ involvement in teachers’ main activity design to promote peer interactions of children with SEN. To be specific, first of all, parents seldom came to the kindergarten, and grandparents were the ones to send and pick up the children every day. Usually, they would not communicate with teachers that often. They were also the ones to attend the parent meeting. The only platform for the regular communications between teachers and parents is the Wechat group teachers from each class established.

Moreover, from the observation, we can indicate very strong distrust and complaints between the teachers and parents. Cai was observed to mention quite often about the families from C and D, most of the time, the general understanding and perceptions of them were quite negative. She often blamed the parents for not taking their children’s situations seriously, especially D’s parents. ‘Of course, they want to communicate with me later through Wechat about their children, but it is not my working time anymore. I feel so tired after the work every day, and feel unable to do these communications after work

every day, parents should understand more' complained Cai to teacher Duo one day after she said good-bye to child C. (Field notes in inclusive class one, 20/09/2017).

Moreover, very few of the strategies teachers mentioned to involve parents in the activity design from the interview were observed. The mother of E was spotted two times to pick E up- she usually would talk with the teachers for some time, mainly asking how E was doing for the morning (field notes in inclusive class two, 12/09/2017 and 14/09/2017). There was also no presence of parents in any activity design part during the observation session in inclusive class two. Considering that some parts teacher Liu talked about concerning parental involvement in the daily activity design are difficult to be observed (continue the 'doctor-patient' role play at home), so we do not know whether parents have been doing what Liu told them or not.

6.5 Summary

This chapter further reveals how children's different ages and disabilities influence teachers' specific strategies. It then presents the three categories of consistency and inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and practices to promote the peer interactions of children with and without SEN in an inclusive preschool.

7 Discussion

7.1 Introduction

The current research study explores teachers' concrete strategies to promote peer social interactions in an inclusive Chinese preschool by applying a constructivism qualitative case-study approach. It further examines how children's different ages and disabilities influence teachers' specific strategies, and how teachers' beliefs and practices regarding peer social interactions consist with each other. Both participatory observation and open-ended interviews data were collected from two-month fieldwork.

Corresponding to each research question, I presented rich analyses in chapter 5 and chapter 6. First of all, there are, in total, five different levels of strategies being identified from the observational data. Specifically, (1) strategies from the teamwork level; (2) strategies from the classroom environment level; (3) strategies from the curriculum design level; (4) strategies from the activity design level; (5) strategies from the individual children with SEN level. Secondly, the different ages and disabilities of children with SEN influence teachers' frequency of applications of specific strategies from different levels identified from the first research question. At last, there are three categories of consistency developed to present how much the strategies identified from interview data agree with the ones identified from the observations. The first category represents strategies that show high consistency between the two data sources; the second category shows some consistency and inconsistency, and the third category contains strategies that show high inconsistency. In this chapter, I will mainly focus on exploring what the research findings from the current study mean in relation to existing literature and theoretical ideas.

In general, we can conclude that teachers, from the current study, seem to agree with the importance of children's social interactions and that social interactions can contribute to children's better social development. Most of them also know the value of peer interactions to children's social-emotional and cognitive competencies, consistent with what was well recognized from a number of theories and empirical research studies (e.g., Guralnick & Neville, 1997; Odom, McConnell, & McEvoy, 1992a; Harper & McCluskey, 2003).

Nevertheless, teachers from the researched kindergarten find it challenging to promote children's peer interactions on a daily basis. In China, the general development of early childhood education has the

following characteristics. First, a lack of a central curriculum focusing on providing teachers with updated and comprehensive theories on children's general development, and concrete and applicable teaching methods to implement certain pedagogical ideas consistently (Hu, & Szente, 2010). Secondly, it focuses only on children's cognitive development, which emphasizes predominantly on preparing children ready for the highly selective school system starting from the primary school level.

Thus, even though the researched kindergarten is required to implement a more child-centered and teaching-through-play approach according to the Shanghai Education Administration's advocacy, active teacher-centered practice and more cognitive-development orientation in the curriculum plans and activity design have been identified. Children's social interactions do not necessarily serve as one of the essential indicators of ECE (early childhood education) program quality as in many other inclusive pre-schools in the international context (e.g., Hestenes & Carroll, 2000).

Within the researched kindergarten, it is often observed that children with SEN in inclusive classrooms have relatively fewer peer interactions with their same-aged peers compared to others (e.g., Diamond & Hong, 2010; McConkey et al., 2013). They are often seen to be playing alone or being denied to join their peers, having relatively lower social status compared to their peers (Skinner, Buysse, & Bailey, 2004). For most of the time, teachers keep on telling children that they should be treated as someone who needs special protection and care from their peers (Janson, 2001; 2007; Meyer, 2001).

Even though feeling challenged to promote children's social interactions in the current researched kindergarten on a daily basis, some of the teachers are observed to implement inclusion in daily practice, dedicating to involving children with SEN in daily activities. They try to apply different strategies to increase the social interactions of children. They are open to trying different methods and intend to involve parents in the process. They recognize that parents play a crucial role in the inclusion process and try to involve parents as much as possible. At the same time, they also understand the importance of team-teaching. They show a good understanding of children's social development and seem to have some concrete strategies to promote more peer interactions. Nevertheless, those teachers also genuinely express they lack capability and knowledge of children with SEN, and show keen interest to access more professional training on how to promote more social interactions of children with SEN.

In the following sections, we are going to focus on the following several aspects mainly: first of all, in section 7.2, I will address the five levels of strategies identified from the current study and compare and contrast them with the strategies identified from previous literature. The section 7.3 will target at how children's different ages and disabilities influence teachers' strategies to promote children's peer interactions from the previous research studies and see how the findings of the current study differ or resonate. In section 7.4, the focus will be on exploring the factors that potentially play a role in influencing the gap between teachers' beliefs and practices. Section 7.5 will be a little summary of this chapter.

7.2 The five levels of strategies

The present study further confirms the critical role of teachers in supporting the social interactions of children with SEN with their peers in an inclusive setting (e.g., Stanton-Chapman, Kaiser, & Wolery, 2006). As Hartmann and Brougère (2004) pointed out, without teachers' support, many children with SEN are less likely to initiate interactions with their peers, and some of them even withdraw themselves from social interactions with their peers. Different from the previous research findings indicating that children without SEN tend to interact with their peers with SEN more often when teachers train them how to initiate and respond to each other (Koegel, Vernon, Koegel, Koegel, Paullin, 2012; Banda, Hart & Liu-Gitz, 2010; Harper, Symon, Frea, 2008; Bass & Mulick, 2007), the current study reveals relatively mixed findings. Specifically, in some classes, children without SEN show less tendency to interact with children with SEN after the teachers' guidance. Some also show reluctance to interact with them. For those who do interact with their peers with SEN, those interactions sometimes last very short and are somewhat superficial. Part of the reason could be that teachers applied different strategies (e.g., initiate interactions; respond to social cues) to children without SEN to initiate and respond to each other and so children may respond to those strategies differently. Some teachers showed some intention to force some children to play with children with SEN.

Teachers generally agree with the philosophy of inclusive education, which was also identified from many research studies (e.g., Hu, 2009; Li, 2007). Nevertheless, some relatively young teachers expressed the lack of positive experience with children with disabilities also pose a challenge to implement

inclusion on a daily basis, and especially to initiate strategies to promote peer social interactions. Same reasons were also given among teachers from Beijing and Shanghai preschools (Yan, 2008).

Consistent with previous research studies focusing on exploring strategies teachers applied to promote peer interactions in inclusive preschool settings, both preventive and interventive strategies are identified in the current study (Harjusola-Webb, Hubbell & Bedesem, 2012; Hestenes & Carroll, 2000). Expanding on prior research studies that identified mainly three different levels of strategies (McEvoy, Odom, & McConnell, 1992; Meadan, & Monda-Amaya, 2008), there are five levels of strategies being identified from the current study. Specifically, apart from classroom environment level, curriculum level and individual with SEN level, the current study identified teamwork level focusing on the cooperation among different stakeholders and the activity level focusing on different activity formats and new activities creations.

7.2.1 The three levels of strategies identified from previous literature

For the three levels of strategies from the classroom environment, the curriculum plan, and the activity design, similar strategies are identified compared with previous research studies, but different ones from each level also appeared. First of all, on the classroom environment level, both strategies targeting at the physical and social environmental perspectives are identified from the current study. Organizational changes and features (Kemple, 2004) and adaptations of physical spaces (Brown, Fox, & Brady, 1987) are applied by teachers in the current study, as part of the strategies focusing on the physical environment changes. Meanwhile, agreeing with Kontos and Wilcox-Herzog (1997) emphasizing on establishing affective, emotional climate and opportunities for peer interactions, some of our teachers also pay attention to create a supportive and open climate within their classes. To be more specific, similar to what Pavri and Monda-Amaya (2000) advocated, teachers from the current study applied strategies that focus on developing children's friendship skills, conflict-resolving skills as well as other cooperation skills, which contribute to a more supportive social environment.

Secondly, on the curriculum plan level, similar to what previous literature have suggested, strategies that apply role-play, story-telling, songs and games to create more chances for social interactions to take place are also identified (Twardosz, Norquist, Simon & Bodkin, 1983). Meanwhile, as advocated by

Brown, McEvoy, and Bishop (1991) and Odom, Zercher, Marquat, Sandall and Wolfberg (2002), incidental teaching of social skills is also applied among some teachers in the current study as a strategy to promote children's social interactions. To be more specific, teachers are sometimes observed to model appropriate social skills during children's ongoing play in order to help shape the ongoing interactions of children with disabilities and their peers.

Thirdly, from the level of individual children with SEN, agreeing with what Terpstra and Tamura (2008) who stated that children with SEN need specialized and individualized support in order to have more peer interactions, teachers from the current study also have applied a number of strategies focusing on individual children with SEN. The specific strategies are convergent with not only with what McConnell, Sisson, Cort, & Strain (1991) and Ladd (1981) suggested as child-specific intervention strategies but also with teachers' systematic use of prompting children for engaging in social interaction and reinforcing the interactions proposed by Stanton-Chapman, Kaiser and Wolery (2006) and Craig-Unkefer and Kaiser (2002). Moreover, teachers in the present study also apply similar strategy as advocated by Goldstein and Wickstrom (1986) and Chapin, McNaughton, Boyle, and Babb (2018) that requires teachers to apply 'peer-mediated' interventions focusing on teaching children without SEN to socially interact with their peers with autism.

While focusing on the specific ways teachers apply the 'peer-mediated' intervention strategies, teachers from the current study show a substantial difference compared to teachers from previous studies. First of all, they have specific standards to select peers as 'little teachers' instead of randomly assign tasks to every peer. Secondly, the peers being selected have more responsibilities for children with SEN. Thus, more than being taught to engage in more interactions with their peers with SEN (Chapin, McNaughton, Boyle, & Babb, 2018), many of the 'little teachers' are asked to take care and support the learning of the child with SEN, sometimes even sacrificing their own play and learning time. Even though we also see from previous literature indicating that peers sometimes provide support and care for children with SEN (Wolfberg et al., 1999), but it all came voluntarily and spontaneously from the peers themselves. In the current study, however, they are sometimes forced to do so. The potential reasons are, first of all, the attitudes towards children with SEN is to treat them like they are younger and weaker, which justifies the responsibilities teachers assign to 'little teachers' to take care of children with SEN. Secondly, the

large class size, the lack of special educators and limited support teachers receive leads to the initiative of ‘little teachers’: any support that may potentially decrease teachers’ burden will be welcomed and used.

7.2.2 The two new levels of strategies

First of all, the current study contributes to separating the strategies from the curriculum design and activities plan, and push the boundaries of strategies between the levels further, which enable us to have a clearer perspective on the different characteristics of strategies from the two levels. From the previous literature review, strategies from the curriculum plan and activities design were often combined as strategies from one level (e.g., Kemple, 2004; Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008). The current study identified an individual level of strategies focusing on the activity design level. Specifically, it has developed four different categories under this level: different formats of activities, different new activities, change rules of certain existing activities and involvement of parents in activity design. Some of those categories of strategies were also identified from the previous literature. For example, as noted by Kemple (2004), new types of activities (e.g., ‘share and exchange’ and ‘toy exchange’) and new formats of activities (‘mixed-age’ group activity and ‘small-group’ activity) are also applied in the current study. The current study contributes two new categories of strategies that focus on the changes of the existing activity rules and the involvement of parents in the activity design to literature studies exploring teachers’ strategies to support more peer interactions in the inclusive setting.

Secondly, strategies from the teamwork level involve cooperation among different community stakeholders, which is consistent with previous literature that advocated drawing on all the abundant human resources available in and outside the school to collaboratively provide a quality inclusive education for all learners (e.g., Brownell, Adams, Sindelar, Waldron, & Vanhover, 2006; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006; Meadan & Monda-Amaya, 2008; Loreman, 2007; Lilian Lomofsky & Sandy Lazarus, 2001). This level of strategies further recognizes the value of the involvement of stakeholders from the community (e.g., Gómez-Zepeda, Petreñas, Sabando, & Puigdellívol, 2017). Specifically, governments, teacher training institutions, schools, teachers, parents, and the school community need to be committed to participating in the school’s process of moving towards a more inclusive future.

7.2.3 Same strategies appear on two levels

7.2.3.1 *The strategy of involving parents*

This strategy appears both on the teamwork and activity design levels. Specifically, on the teamwork level, the cooperation with parents target at a broader range of perspectives compared to the one identified from the activity design level. Secondly, the relationship between the parents and the teachers also vary from the two levels. On the teamwork level, teachers' cooperation with parents does not automatically mean that teachers have more power over their parents. While examining the specific cooperation between the two sides, we see that sometimes they both share equal power in cooperation, and sometimes, parents even play a more dominant role compared to teachers. Compared to this, the involvement of parents on the activity design level shows, most of the time, that parents play a subordinate role compared to teachers. For example, teachers would give instructions to parents on how to continue the particular activity they have designed and conducted with children in the kindergarten to promote their peer interactions to be implemented at home context.

7.2.3.2 *Social skills teaching strategy*

The same strategy of teaching children social skills is identified both from the curriculum and the individual children with SEN levels. The first difference is that the target group is different: on the curriculum level, social skills are implemented in the curriculum and belong to part of the teaching and learning for the class. However, on the individual level, the strategy is only applied with children with SEN from each class. Secondly, on the curriculum level, this strategy covers a broader range of aspects and are more diversified, explicitly focusing on conflicts resolution, dealing with children's negative emotions, teaching the concept of friendship. Nevertheless, on the individual level, it only focuses on teaching children with SEN communication skills and specific conflict-solving skills. At last, on the curriculum level, this strategy requires teachers to plan before applying because they need to consider to implement it and whether it responds actively to the general teaching goals. On the other hand, on the individual level, teachers act more spontaneously when applying this strategy with individual children with SEN.

7.3 Children's different ages and disabilities and teachers' strategies

In this section, we will explore how our findings agree or disagree with previous research studies focusing on exploring the influence of children's ages and different disabilities on teachers' teaching practices. Moreover, we will examine how the findings from the present study contribute to the research field, focusing on exploring how children's different characteristics influence teachers' inclusion practices in preschool settings.

7.3.1 Children's different ages and teachers' strategies

For the two classes that have the four-year-olds and the five-year-olds, there was no difference in strategies identified. Therefore they will be merged as the older class group in the analyses below. Some strategies were exclusively identified from the young class (class of three-year-olds), and some were identified from the older class group (children aging from 4 to 6). Teachers' strategies both from the teamwork and the classroom environment levels do not seem to differ in the two groups. Children's different ages seem to influence teachers' application of specific strategies targeting on the curriculum design, the activity design, and individual children with SEN.

7.3.1.1 *On the curriculum design level*

Under the category of 'social skills in the curriculum plan,' the specific strategies of 'resolving conflicts' and 'dealing with negative emotions' are much often applied by teachers from the older class group. Firstly, for the strategy 'resolving conflicts,' children are asked to resolve a conflict in a role-play situation with the skills teachers taught them that requires children's individual executive network for better self-regulation, which is more often identified among children in middle childhood and beyond (Posner, Rothbart & Tang, 2013). As Mendez, McDermott, and Fantuzzo (2002) argued, older preschool children show stronger skills to regulate their own emotions, teachers thus also show children from the older class group how to deal with their negative emotions much more frequently.

Character Education seeks to encourage specific values and conduct (Pritchard, 1988; Wynne, 1988; Kilpatrick, 1992; Molnar, 1997). The specific learning objectives of character education are to encourage children to appreciate and value a particular and specified interpretation of morality (Benninga, 1991, p. 8). In the researched kindergarten, this interpretation of morality lies mainly in protecting and

caring for the younger children, part of the essential values of Confucius thinking ‘respect the old and care for the young.’ Specifically, within this kindergarten, teachers explain to children that their peers with disabilities are younger and weaker, like the little brothers and sisters (‘Xiaodidi’ or ‘Xiaomeimei’), and thus all children need to care and protect them. Teachers from both class groups have applied strategies from the ‘character education’ category, and they regard character education highly. Nevertheless, a closer examination reveals that teachers differ in specific ways to implement character education according to children’s different ages, which is convergent with Revell’s (2002) study indicating marked differences in the way that these values were communicated and presented to the different age groups. Specifically, in the young class group, teachers tend to use a fun and simple way: such as song-singing or story-telling to tell children how to support and take care of others. On the contrary, teachers from the older class group talk about the values more explicitly and directly with the older children: such as group discussion or one-to-one communication.

7.3.1.2 *On the activity design level*

Specific strategies ‘creating small groups’ and ‘creation of share and exchange activity’ were only identified among teachers from the older class group. Those two strategies both require children to have relatively advanced level of language skills, higher levels of interaction skills to take the initiative to approach ongoing social events, which resonates with previous research studies (Mendez, McDermott & Fantuzzo, 2002). Teachers from the young class group seem to apply those strategies seldom since young children are often engaged with themselves and tend to be disconnected from ongoing play activities, as is often indicated from previous studies (e.g., Mendez, McDermott & Fantuzzo, 2002).

7.3.1.3 *On individual children with SEN level*

Strategies from the individual children with SEN level were rarely identified from the young class group and much more frequently identified from the older class group. The category of ‘peer support’ was only identified in the older class group since it requires children to serve as little teachers and to take care and support children with SEN to participate and learn, which is demanding for children from the young class group. Prior research shows that teacher reports of anxious-withdrawal behavior are more often for younger preschool children (LaFreniere & Dumas, 1996), and similar findings were identified from the current study. Specifically, as to the category of ‘encourage children,’ teachers try to encourage

children to interact with their peers with SEN more, but they usually withdrew themselves and did not do as the teachers said.

7.3.2 Children's different disabilities and teachers strategies

Teachers' strategies from the teamwork and the classroom environment levels were equally frequently applied among teachers from the inclusive classrooms regardless of children's different disabilities, which means that children's different disabilities seem to have no role in influencing the application of teachers' strategies from the teamwork and the classroom environment levels from the current study.

7.3.2.1 Child F with emotional and behavior disorders (EBD)

Children's different disabilities seem to influence the application of teachers' certain strategies on the curriculum level. For children who are diagnosed with EBD, they experience challenges to develop and maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships for demonstrating lack of prosocial behavior patterns and inappropriate behavior or feelings under normal circumstances (Gresham, 1998; Gresham, Cook, Crews, & Kern, 2004). Thus, aligning with what the previous literature suggested, teachers from the current study have more frequently applied strategies that target at improving child F's skills to resolve conflicts and more effectively deal with his negative emotions. Meanwhile, during the process of teaching child F to better deal with his negative emotions, teachers also pay attention to build F's self-management skills, through which he can better regulate his emotions, echoing previous studies showing self-management is critical for promoting the academic and social behaviors of children with EBD (Hughes, Ruhl, & Misra, 1989; Nelson, Smith, Young, & Dodd, 1991).

7.3.2.2 Children B and E with autism spectrum disorders

To start with, the strategy teachers have applied to increase children's interactions and participation in the inclusive classrooms is that they often emphasize more on what children with autism can do instead of what they can not do while striving to minimize their differences with their peers (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011), similar strategies have also been identified from the current study. Teachers have applied different formats of activities in order to increase children B and E's interactions with their peers. Specifically, those included to create the small-group activity and the 'share and exchange (one to one)', echoing what Lindsay, Proulx, Scott and Thomson (2014) suggested that to apply different types of

grouping strategies would be potentially beneficial to enable children with autism to learn and participate, instead of grouping them based on their abilities or disabilities.

Secondly, from the researched kindergarten, we can see that the involvement of parents plays an essential role in the strategies teachers apply to promote the social interactions of children with SEN. They serve as essential partners to work with for teachers to make more inclusion to take place. An examination reveals that this cooperation is much more frequently identified with parents of children B and E, resonating with previous studies (Finke, McNaughton, & Drager, 2009). Specifically, aligning with the principles of ‘inclusive pedagogy’ (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011), teachers from the study try to have regular communications with parents and to work together to build an essential connection between homes and schools. Moreover, they try to build a strong rapport with the parents by having regular home visits and exchanges.

Thirdly, the category of ‘encouraging children’ that focuses on encouraging children to make initiations to interact with their peers, is regarded as key to creating stable friendships and relationships from a number of previous research studies (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Howlin, 2000; Stewart, Barnard, Pearson, Hasan, & O’Brien, 2006; Strain & Schwartz, 2001). Like what DiSalvo and Oswald (2002) indicated, to encourage children to initiate social interactions with children with autism frequently so that they would be involved in more interactions, each of which provides an opportunity for reinforcement for appropriate social responding. As they become the recipients of more frequent initiations from peers, they are likely to become more efficient and more appropriate responders to their peers. Specifically, in the current study, teachers encourage children to make initiations to ask their peers to join them to finish a particular task, to join in a play, or to share books or toys.

Fourthly, resonating with previous research studies that advocated for active recruiting and training typical peers in order to interact with children with social difficulties (Chan, Lang, Rispoli, O’Reilly et al., 2009; Koegel & Koegel, 2006), teachers from the current study also teach children how to socially interact with children B and E, such as how to make initiations, requests, and comments to them. Meanwhile, similar to what previous studies focusing on the peer-oriented strategies (Garrison-Harrell & Kamps, 1997), there are specific standards to select the children to be the ‘peer support.’ Specifically,

teachers from the previous studies selected peers for a peer networking intervention based on the social status of the peers (i.e., their popularity) while others select the peers based on certain teachers' recommendations or peers' gender (Center & Curry, 1993). Teachers in the current study, however, select 'little teachers' with very different standards. To be more specific, the concept of 'little teachers' resembles a bit like 'peer tutoring,' which was suggested as one of the peer-based instruction strategies from previous literature (e.g., Rogers, 2000; Gonzalez-Lopez & Kamps, 1997). Little teachers also have more fixed responsibilities towards children B and E. Moreover, while feeling very honored to be selected as the 'little teachers,' some of them also express frustration when they sometimes need to sacrifice their play or learning time.

In the end, the current study also reveals that teachers, consistent with previous research studies (Gonzalez-Lopez & Kamps, 1997; Morrison, Kamps, Garcia, & Parker, 2001), teach children B and E much critical social skill: e.g., how to share, imitate, ask for help, greet, and respond to conversation while playing with toys. Meanwhile, previous literature suggested that to incorporate the autistic child's ritualistic and circumscribed interests into activities to improve their social interactions with peers (Klin, Danovitch, Merz, & Volkmar, 2007). In the current study, teachers have also applied the same strategies with children B and E. Specifically, during the free time session, teacher Chen always encourages E to show and teach his peers some English words since he knows many English words. She even creates a new role for him as the little 'English teacher' for his peers. Same goes for teacher Yao while involving child B, who is very interested in playing piano into classroom activities. Teacher Yao tries to involve B in the 'share and exchange' session to play for his peers, creating opportunities to participate in classroom activities.

7.4 Potential Contextual factors that influence the gap between beliefs and practice

Guided by Vygotsky's and Leont'ev's 'cultural-historical activity theory' that emphasizes the critical value of considering the contextual factors while exploring the relationship between teachers' beliefs and practices (Robbins & Stetsenko, 2002; Fang, 1996), the current study has explored and identified five key contextual factors. They potentially shape and form the consistency and inconsistency of teachers' beliefs and practices to promote the social interactions between children with and without SEN in

the researched inclusive kindergarten. In the following sessions, we are going to present the five potential factors in details and try to explore how they relate to other study findings or theoretical framework.

7.4.1 Factor one: the complexity of the classroom

First of all, consistent with previous literature studies showing that complexities of classroom life can cause conflict and constrain teachers' abilities to stay faithful to their beliefs and provide instruction that aligns with their theoretical beliefs (Fang, 1996; Paris, Wasik & Turner, 1991; Roehler & Duffy, 1991), similar finding has also been identified from the current study. Moreover, it has also identified similar elements consisting the complexities of the classroom when compared with previous literature (Ajzen, 2002; King, Shumow & Lietz, 2001; Cronin-Jones, 1991): children's certain challenging behaviors, limited time, space and materials, as well as full-day schedule and content.

7.4.1.1 Children's challenging behaviors

To start with, while teachers hold strong beliefs to support more peer interactions between children with SEN with their peers, some of them also talk about how their motivation goes down when children with SEN demonstrate challenging behaviors towards their peers, which negatively influence how those children perceive and interact with them (Wilson & Lipsey, 2007). For most of the time, children would avoid child F in their group or refuse him whenever he asks to join the play. So we can see that even though teachers holding the belief that it is of value to engage child F to different social interactions, it is nevertheless often observed that teachers seldom encourage him to such social interactions.

7.4.1.2 Big class size and limited spaces

According to the standards advocated by the Guideline for Kindergarten Education (Ministry of Education, 2001), there are two main teachers and one aide teacher (BYY) who help out with routine care and cleanup. A regular quality kindergarten usually has 35 to 45 children per classroom, compared to the relatively smaller number of 20 to 25 children within the researched kindergarten. A large number of children creates difficulties for teachers to have enough energy, time for each child, let alone accommodating the needs of children with SEN (Hu & Roberts, 2011). So the teacher has limited opportunities to provide individualized feedback during informal interactions, consisting of the research results from the study carried out by Hu, Lim, Boyd (2016). Apart from that, the physical space in each classroom is

rather small, which poses a challenge for teachers to flexibly arrange teaching tasks and activities that can positively promote more peer interactions, leading to more inconsistency between their beliefs and practices (Sendil & Erden, 2012).

7.4.1.3 Full day schedule and content

The schedule of a typical kindergarten day is quite full in Chinese kindergartens: children need to start their kindergarten day around 8 in the morning and finish around 16:30, whereas, in many western countries, some children attend half-day kindergartens. The long hours often lead to a full-day schedule and contents. Specifically, there are five different domains of children's development that teachers need to take into considerations while designing daily activities and learning tasks. They can hardly manage the daily plans, let alone engage with the social interactions of children with SEN at the same time (Richardson, 2002).

7.4.2 Factor two: the overwhelmed teachers

As Brown and Melear (2006) argued, the current study also identifies that extra administrative duties for teachers play a role in the identified inconsistencies between their beliefs and teaching practices. Specifically, many teachers mentioned that apart from planning and designing whole-day schedule and mandatorily taking part in different meetings during lunch break, they also need to take care of administrative work of various kinds. Specifically, during the data collection time, the kindergarten was trying to apply for the best 'exemplary inclusive kindergarten in Shanghai', which created more administrative work for teachers. Many teachers explained that they would invest more time and energy to engage more social interactions of children with SEN if they do not have the administrative work at the same time.

7.4.3 Factor three: a 'whole-group' and 'teacher-centered' teaching approach

Convergent with what previous studies indicated from Chinese preschools (e.g., Li, Hu, Pan, Qin, & Fan, 2014), a whole-group teaching approach is also identified as the standard form of teaching in the researched kindergarten. Even though being well recognized for its potential drawbacks of discouraging children from being active agents to exercise autonomy and develop independent skills from previous studies (Hu & Szente, 2010), the large children size and limited classroom space from the researched

kindergarten lead to more ‘whole-group’ teaching. Moreover, consistent with what teachers from previous studies indicated as rationales for applying ‘whole-group’ teaching (e.g., Li et al., 2014), many teachers from the researched kindergarten explain that ‘whole-group’ teaching would promote instructional efficiency and foster a sense of community and belonging (Li et al., 2014; Hu, Vong, Cheng, & Li, 2015).

The dominating ‘teacher-centered’ practices, together with ‘whole-group’ teaching, rank as the top two reasons that some Chinese teachers do not wish to implement inclusion, although agreeing with the philosophy of inclusion (Hu & Roberts, 2011). From the researched kindergarten, we can frequently see teacher-centered practices. Even though strong advocacy for a more child-centered approach was issued from the Shanghai Administrative Education Department, we find some teachers struggling in this paradigm shift process and show some fear of losing power.

7.4.4 Factor four: unsupportive parents

Resonating with other studies (McMullen, 1999; Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006), unsupportive parents potentially lead to the gap between teachers’ teaching beliefs and practices. Some teachers mention that they find it of difficulty to continue implementing some strategies to promote more peer interactions if parents are not supportive. Teachers perceive parents as one of the most reliable sources of support for them to continue more inclusive practices. Specifically, their efforts of promoting more social interactions of children with SEN are extended to the home environment: parents would try to implement the same strategy as teachers to help children adjust to the social norms (Henderson & Berla, 1994). Attention to how children demonstrate competence through their play across both home and school settings provides more opportunities to reinforce and support emerging skills.

7.4.5 Factor five: a strong academic-performance orientation

In addition, our findings echo with the previous studies indicating that strong academic-performance emphasis plays a role in explaining teachers’ inconsistency of their beliefs and practices (Fromberg, 1990; McClintic & Petty, 2015; Parker & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2006). From the current study, it is encouraging to note that the teachers view children’s social interactions as part and parcel of later social development. Nevertheless, many teachers indicate that they do not see the necessity of embedding

children's social development in the curriculum or teaching goals since the social development has not been given the same degree of value as children's cognitive development. In China, the strong academic-performance orientation in teaching leads to the general lack of interest in the importance of children's social development on all levels of schooling. As Parker and Neuharth-Pritchett (2006) found out, teachers' strong emphasis on children's cognitive competence may speculatively be attributed to external pressure to prepare children for standardized testing and the first-grade curriculum.

7.5 Summary

This chapter first compares and contrasts the five levels of strategies identified from the current study to the existing strategies from previous research studies and indicated new and different strategies from the current researched kindergarten. By referring to previous literature, it further examines how children's different ages and disabilities influence teachers' certain strategies. In the end, agreeing with previous research studies, five factors were identified to play a role in leading to the inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and practices to promote peer interactions in the researched kindergarten.

8 Conclusion and implications for research and practice

8.1 Introduction

The current study serves as one of the first endeavors to explore how teachers are dealing with children's social interactions in an inclusive preschool setting. In chapter one, I addressed the research focus by first examining the historical development of LRC (learning in the regular classroom) as a format of developing early childhood inclusion in China based on its social, cultural and political contexts. While looking into the previous research studies carried out to explore early childhood inclusion in China, none of them have focused on teachers' daily practice and how their daily practice influence children's social interactions. In chapter two, I listed the strong theoretical and empirical evidence to support the importance of focusing on exploring teachers' practice and their relationships with children's social interactions. Chapter three addressed the methodological issues, I argued for the application of a constructivism approach based on the study's explorative nature. Then I introduced the research design and how I addressed trustworthiness and ethics issues. In chapter four, I carried on to illustrate how I systematically collected and analyzed the research data. In chapter five and six, results regarding the three main research questions were presented. Then in Chapter 7, I further examined what the research findings meant in relation to existing literature and theoretical ideas.

In the next section 8.2, I will first address the specific indications for future research of the current study. Then I will discuss mainly in section 8.3 what specific indications for future practice the current study has. In section 8.4, the limitation of the current study will be discussed and in section 8.5, an epilogue is presented to conclude the study.

8.2 Indications for research

Previous research studies tend to apply questionnaire surveys focusing on exploring teachers' attitudes and beliefs towards inclusive education, but very few of them target at teachers' actual practices on a daily basis and explore how their practice would resonate or differ from their beliefs. The current study applies a social constructivism paradigm to explore how teachers deal with the interactions of children with and without SEN in the naturalistic setting and collects in-depth data from interviews and observations to explore how their beliefs and practice consistent with each other. Thus, it contributes to an

authentic understanding of how inclusion is practiced on a daily basis in China and provides insightful guidelines for future research targeting at improving teachers' practice on promoting children's social interactions in an inclusive setting.

The research process is documented in a transparent and honest way: striking a balance between sticking to western ethical procedures and considering local understanding from the teachers and the community. The researcher also shows the process of how to negotiate the access to the researched group, how to explain and gain the consent forms from the teachers, how to deal with the multi-faced identity, as well as how to build emotional rapport but at the same time maintain professional distance to the researched. Thus, it provides some valuable perspectives and specific strategies for future international researchers who want to conduct further research studies focusing on inclusion in the Chinese preschool or school context.

What are the implications of this research for international literature on inclusive education? The previous sections discussed above (section of 7.2, of 7.3 and 7.4) have, in details, presented much strong convergence, expansions as well as contradictions when compared with studies conducted in other cultural contexts. If inclusion is to be sustainably developed in the international context, contextual and local variations of a specific culture must be considered and accommodated in developing inclusion within that culture. In an effort to seek for potentially different ways of developing inclusion in different countries, it is of great value to recognize and remember that 'the northern contexts' are not 'advanced' in developing inclusion compared to the 'southern contexts'. Instead, we need to more frequently refer to our shared vision of 'learning from each other while pursuing and fighting for high-quality education' worldwide (Wang, 2016).

From the researched kindergarten, five levels of strategies are identified among teachers to promote the social interactions of children with SEN and their peers within an inclusive Chinese preschool, indicating the key important role teachers play in influencing children's social interactions. After comparing and contrasting with strategies identified from previous studies in other countries, I identified a number of new strategies. Specifically, a new level of strategies focusing on teamwork between teachers and

other various stakeholders from the community is identified. The active involvement of various community members in the researched kindergarten plays an essential role in promoting more social interactions between children with and without SEN to take place. This ‘community-based nature’ of support emphasizes on the need for intersectional collaboration and cooperation of vital role players in the school and the community members to promote inclusive education (Rouse, & Florian, 1996; Turnbull, Turnbull, Erwin, & Soodak, 2006), which provides further guidelines for future teacher training programs to promote inclusive practices in other Chinese inclusive preschools or preschools in other countries. Nevertheless, future research should focus on exploring whether similar ‘community-based’ support also exists in other Chinese inclusive preschools so that a more comprehensive understanding about the role of ‘community involvement’ in the inclusion process within Chinese inclusive kindergartens can be achieved.

The current study has discussed how children’s different ages and different disabilities influence teachers’ application of specific strategies, which, on the one hand, underlines the importance of making pedagogical decisions that are developmentally appropriate for children. It may, on the other hand, potentially risk signaling individual children out, enhancing the risk of social exclusion (Lindsay, Proulx, Scott & Thomson, 2014). Therefore, we recommend that future research studies to focus more on exploring strategies that target at evaluating possible environmental manipulations that may be less intrusive in the daily inclusion process to implement for promoting the social interactions and development of children with SEN (Koegel, Vernon, Koegel, Koegel & Paullin, 2012).

The researcher has explored five different potential factors that may play a role in leading to a different degree of consistency between teachers’ beliefs and practices regarding children’s peer social interactions. Nevertheless, a more prominent and representative sample is needed to validate those factors and how they influence teachers’ beliefs and practices. What is more, more future research studies should be carried out to explore other possible internal or external factors that may influence Chinese preschool teachers’ beliefs and practices, which would enhance the literature and best inform educators working towards improving the current inclusion research.

8.3 Indications for practice

Through a thorough literature review, we see big lack of teacher preparation programs in China to prepare general education teachers to work with children with disabilities (Liu & Zeng, 2007; Yan, 2008; Zhang, 2003, 2006). In fact, there are only a few universities in China, preparing teachers to work with special needs population and fewer programs specializing in early childhood inclusion (Liu & Zeng, 2007). Our current study reinforces a lack of knowledge, skills, and resources as a common theme among inclusive preschool teachers. Specifically, from the current study, we have identified a substantial lack of theoretical understanding and concrete strategies to promote peer interactions among teachers. Some teachers show incompetency to deal with children's negative emotions, to deal with children's conflicts situations, as well as to create an interactive environment. Therefore, a teacher training program should be designed to target at improving teachers' understanding of the importance of children's social development and their strategies of promoting children's social interactions (Slee, 2001; Mulvihill, Shear, & Vanhorn, 2002).

8.3.1 Knowledge in the teacher training program

Based on the findings of the current study, the following several indications are proposed to be integrated into future in-service preschool teacher training programs that target at supporting teachers to better promote more social interactions between children with SEN and their peers in inclusive preschools. We will first talk about what knowledge needs to be recognized or taught. To start with, the designers of the training program need to enhance teachers' theoretical knowledge and understanding of children's social development. Secondly, teachers need to acquire more knowledge about the child-centered teaching approach. Thirdly, teachers' existing knowledge should also be recognized and valued in the process.

8.3.1.1 Teachers' better knowledge of children's social development

First of all, the future training program should target at improving teachers' theoretical understanding and knowledge about children's social development. Even though being officially advocated as one of the vitally important areas of development from the teacher guiding book and being relatively well recognized by teachers, children's social development and social interactions are very much neglected

when teachers design daily activities and learning tasks. They put a very strong focus on fostering children's cognitive development. Moreover, they treat increased cognitive performance among children with SEN as the most crucial standard for successful inclusion. This general neglect for children's social development and interactions can be partly explained by the academic-performance orientation existing in the researched preschools, as section 7.4.5 already illustrates in details. Moreover, we also identified that a lack of theoretical understanding of children's social development and concrete strategies to promote more social interactions serve as another reason for the neglect.

Specifically, teachers first need to know what the definitions of children's social development and social interactions are. They need to be attuned to levels of children's social adjustment, have an awareness of how children process social information, know different stages of social development as well as what specific social skills are needed to develop more social competence. Moreover, they also need to know the basic characteristics of friendship: its reciprocal nature between two children (Staub, Schwartz, Galucci, & Peck, 1994) and both parties have something to contribute to facilitating the reciprocity of the relationship. In addition, a thorough understanding of the fundamental value of peer relations and social development on children's development (Harper & McCluskey, 2003) and how it can also negatively influence children's development if it is not strengthened (Wentzel, 2009).

8.3.1.2 A more child-centered teaching approach

To start with, the future training program needs to introduce the substantial differences between a 'child-centered' approach and a 'teacher-centered' approach and what influences each approach has on children's development. Based on the introduction, a more child-centered teaching approach should then be recommended to be embedded in teachers' daily teaching (Ajuwon, 2008). The program should encourage teachers to learn to listen to children's voice, in a way, also to 'learn about' them. I further propose the designers of the training program to integrate 'inclusive pedagogy' (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011) to enable teachers to listen to children's voice in order to challenge their deterministic beliefs about disabled children and the imposed special educational thinking and practices. To encourage teachers to seek space for inclusion in the performative preschool culture and reduce the oppressive effects of Confucian charitable beliefs of children with disabilities.

8.3.1.3 Valuing teachers' existing knowledge

During the training, it is of key value to emphasize and understand the knowledge the preschool teachers already possess. From the current study, we have identified teachers feeling overwhelmed and showing fear towards promoting the social interactions of children with SEN. A closer look at this fear reveals that they treat inclusion as a rather new concept that requires them to give up previous knowledge and learn new ones potentially. Therefore, in the future teacher training, it is suggested that the program to emphasize the knowledge and skills teachers already possess and to fully recognize its value while presenting teachers with new knowledge and strategies.

8.3.2 Skills in a teacher training program

After recognizing teachers' existing knowledge and enabling them to acquire a sound understanding of the developmentally appropriate practice, we need to focus the training on teaching them concrete skills to apply to promote peer social interactions in the inclusive setting (Sendil & Erden, 2012). To be more specific, the training program first should present teachers skills about how to establish a trusting and cooperative relationship with different community members, especially with parents. It also needs to show teachers how to research their daily practice to be more reflective about their teaching so that more sustainable, inclusive practice would take place.

8.3.2.1 Cooperation skill: building a trusting parent-teacher partnership

The training program should further emphasize the critical role of involving different stakeholders, especially parents from the community in the inclusion process. In order to do that, teacher preparation programs must target at enhancing preservice teachers' knowledge, attitudes, and skills to build up a trusting school-family partnership (Bridgemohan et al., 2005; Young & Hite, 1994).

Firstly, theoretical knowledge regarding parents' important role and the value of involving them in the inclusion process should be introduced, which would contribute to better awareness and positive attitudes towards parents (Bailey et al., 1998). It is of value since Chinese society has traditionally viewed teachers as authority figures and parents seldom get involved in the school teaching process, let alone to recommend or suggest different ideas. It is sometimes even considered disrespect for teachers if parents get too involved in the teachers' teaching process. Nevertheless, when it comes to teaching children

with special educational needs in China, teachers are always hesitant to admit that they lack instructional expertise but parents, on the other hand, know their children the best since they have taken the sole responsibility for educating children with disabilities. Therefore, during the training, teachers from the preschool should first recognize parents' role and its value in the inclusion process. Furthermore, teachers must also understand not only the characteristics of the child, but also the "structural, functional, and external characteristics of the family" in order to be able to cooperate with the parents (Johnson & Kastner, 2005, p. 507). In addition, they also should learn to offer emotional support to families who have children with disabilities: understanding the stages of emotional adjustment (Vacca & Feinberg, 2000) the families go through, their stress over the years, which is much higher than parents of typical developing children (Smith, Oliver, & Innocenti, 2001).

Since social stigma toward disabilities still widely exists in China, while engaging parents in the inclusion process, parents may be hesitant about shifting some of their responsibilities to the school. Moreover, kindergartens have not previously welcomed children with disabilities; parents may thus have feelings toward school may be a mixture of appreciation, distrust, and criticism. The cooperation from the two sides are new, and each party needs guidance and support in order to benefit the children to the fullest potential. Therefore, apart from presenting teachers with theoretical knowledge showing them the value of involving parents and fostering a more positive attitude, a trusting relationship between the two sides will then be possible when teachers achieve concrete methods and strategies to actively involve parents in their daily practice (Haines, McCart, & Turnbull, 2013).

During the training, it should first focus on developing different formats of parental involvement. The traditional format of involvement mainly is kindergartens organizing 'parents meeting' and parents participating. We propose the training program to offer new formats of parental involvement based on what the current kindergarten has started. Specifically, within each classroom, teachers have already created a Wechat group, including all parents to share information. Therefore, we propose that the group become an online platform for parents to get more involved in teachers' teaching practices on a more regular basis. In this way, more interactive exchanges between the two sides would take place. Secondly, in order to enable the cooperation to function, we need to invite parents to the classroom to observe and

learn. Specifically, as part of the existing cooperation strategy, some teachers and parents try to implement the same strategy both at home and in the classroom. However, this could be difficult if parents lack a good understanding of the strategy or specific skill to teachers have applied. Therefore, in order to promote the effectiveness of this cooperation, we suggest that parents should come to the classroom and observe how teachers implement specific strategies and extend the practices in the home setting (Mendez, McDermott & Fantuzzo, 2002). By doing this, the two sides would enable the children to have a sense of connection between their home and kindergarten environment (Raffaele & Knoff, 1999). At the same time, we also advocate the training to include parents to participate (Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull, Hill, Haines, & Gross, 2016): specifically, to create opportunities for parents and teachers to sit down together and openly express each other's concerns for working together. Moreover, the trainer should also encourage parents to contribute ideas for being involved and discuss those ideas openly with teachers.

8.3.2.2 Research skills: train teachers as researchers

Another focus of the training program is to develop teachers' research skills, which will enable them to be reflective and motivated about their practice. The key value of teachers being researchers have been widely discussed in many research studies (e.g., Etherington, 2006). Specifically, through conducting action research in their practice, teachers would be able to initiate potential educational changes in the preschool environment (Kincheloe, 2003). Meanwhile, doing research could also support their teaching in a way that children's learning would also be enhanced (Kincheloe, 2003). It could also help teachers to identify and address problems from their practice (Brookfield, 1995). Based on its fundamental value, we propose that the future teacher training should provide teachers with opportunities to become familiar with research methods, research findings, as well as opportunities to conduct their action research projects in classrooms, which might further inform their choice of instructional approaches.

8.3.3 When to deliver the training

In the end, based on the findings of the current study, we know that it is of importance to decide the right time to carry out the teacher training. Teachers have expressed strong dissatisfaction and stress about the time for the existing seminars or lectures that are intended to provide them with knowledge

and skills to promote more inclusive practice. Those training usually start during the lunch break session when teachers feel tired from the busy morning sessions and worry about the preparation for the afternoon session. Meanwhile, the existing training programs often takes teachers' lunch break, which also explains why many of them feel unmotivated to learn. Therefore, we make strong suggestions that in the future training program, the program designers should sit down together with teachers to decide the best time for them to participate.

8.4 Limitation

Although explanations and relations were explored to interpret the underlying assumptions and beliefs, this research did not seek to assert accurate predictions, causal relationships, or empirical generalizations. One caution with case studies is the degree to which findings are generalizable or transferable to other settings, which also serves as the first limitation for the current study. The current study utilized a sample from the pilot inclusion kindergartens in Shanghai that represent high-quality early childhood programs. Therefore, cautions must be taken when generalizing findings because these kindergartens are not representative of early childhood programs that have received lower quality ratings in Shanghai, nor do they represent kindergartens located in other regions of China, particularly those in rural China. Thus, future research must examine the training needs for inclusion of special needs children in regular kindergarten classrooms in different cities, areas (rural, suburban, and urban China), and among kindergartens of different quality levels. Nevertheless, a case is usually representative in some way, either through its typicality or atypicality, of a broader group of cases, and it is not unusual to find general understandings from particular cases.

The second limitation of the current study is that it presents somewhat consultative research on teacher's voice, instead of a participatory, collaborative, or action research approach. Our knowledge about teachers and their role in inclusion practice would be hugely advanced if teachers are the ones who take up leading roles to research their own lives. Nevertheless, this type of research requires the researched kindergartens to make huge adaptations and changes to their daily schedules, which is of difficulty considering that the researcher is a student and an outsider to the researched kindergarten. The author, by

all means, holds high respect and appreciation for all participating teachers who made their best efforts and offered sufficient opportunities for me to learn from them.

The third limitation is the relatively short data collection time: specifically, for the observation-data collection phase, the researcher only spent one week in each classroom, which poses a challenge to reveal a complete picture of how teachers' daily practices look like. The researcher, however, designed 200 hours of general observation from the morning sessions, which can still show quite some robust data indicating teachers' actual performance.

8.5 Epilogue

The current study is one of the few research studies applying a social constructivism paradigm to target at exploring how teachers promote children's social interactions on a daily basis in a Chinese inclusive preschool setting. By collecting in-depth data from interviews and observations, the current study first talks about teachers' strategies to promote the peer interactions of children with and without SEN from five different levels. Those levels include strategies from the community, the classroom environment, the curriculum, the activity design as well as individual children with SEN. Then the study identified how children's different ages and disabilities could play a role in influencing the frequency of how teachers apply certain strategies. While exploring the two sources of data (interview and observations), three categories of consistency and inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and practice to promote children's social interactions were created. In the end, based on Vygotsky's and Leont'ev's 'cultural-historical activity theory', it further indicates critical factors that may influence the inconsistency between teachers' beliefs and practices, which provides insightful guidelines for the future research and teacher training programs targeting at improving more inclusive practice.

Regardless of the obstacles such as academic-performance orientation, teacher-centered and whole-group approaches as well as unsupportive parents appearing from the researched kindergarten, we still see some teachers' and the principal's strong determination to continue their inclusion journey. Inclusion is a never-ending journey and it requires every teacher to implement it consistently until one day,

every child, regardless of their differences in learning and participating, would reach their fullest potential. This journey would have fewer obstacles if teachers receive in-service training or support that would equip them with adequate knowledge and skills to implement inclusion on a daily basis.

Meanwhile, the current study is also of great value for the following aspects. First of all, it fills the gap existing in current research since it is the first to look into how teachers promote children's social interactions in Chinese inclusive preschools as well as the first to contribute to the literature on designing Chinese teachers' training on promoting children's peer interactions. Secondly, it will raise the awareness of the importance of children's social interactions and social development, since a very strong emphasis on children's cognitive development prevails in preschools due to the ingrained performance-oriented assessment system in Chinese public primary schools. Furthermore, this line of inquiry can help professionals to understand better how they deal with children's peer interactions so that they can better adapt and improve their future teaching. Thirdly, the kindergarten in this study is one of the pilot inclusive kindergartens in Shanghai. Therefore the findings may contribute to a better quality of inclusion practice in the pilot preschools, which would enable them to serve as better models for potential national implementation of inclusive education in the near future.

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Appendix A: Consent letters

Consent letter for teachers

Dear teacher,

My name is Run Tan, a Ph.D. student majoring in Educational science at Bielefeld University, Germany. The topic of my dissertation focuses on the social interaction of children with SEN in the inclusive classroom setting and teachers' role in the process. Through my research project, I wish the current inclusion practice in Chinese kindergartens could be improved. Your participation in this current research is of value and I genuinely appreciate your effort.

During the data collection process, I plan to carry out regular observations in your class and at the end of the observation, we will also have one interview based on the observations from your class. All the data will be collected anonymously and your information will be well protected. During the process, if you feel intruded or do not wish to continue, please keep in mind that it is your right to quit any time during the data collection process.

If you are willing to participate in the current study, please sign your name below.

If you are interested in this research or have any further questions, you can also contact me directly at any time.

Thank you so much for your support

Date

Signature

Consent letters for parents

Dear parents,

My name is Run Tan, a Ph.D. student majoring in Educational science at Bielefeld University, Germany. I am going to conduct a research study about education in the kindergarten and the headmaster and teachers have agreed to participate in this study.

Your child will not be directly involved in the research. My plan is to observe children's interactions with their peers in the classroom and within the kindergarten. No photos of any kind will be taken and all the children's names will be replaced by a pseudonym in reports.

If you are willing to let your child participate in the current study, please sign your name here.

If you have any concerns, please feel free to talk with the teachers or directly with me.

Thank you so much for your support!

Date

Signature

Appendix B: Interview materials

Interview guide

Dear teacher,

Thank you so much for your participation. Before we started our interview, please fill out the following formats. All information will be well protected and is only used for the current research. Thank you again for your support!

i. Demographic information:

Age

Gender

Years working in the kindergarten

Years working in this profession

Educational background

Have you ever received any special education training? If yes, what kind of training?

Have you ever received any inclusive education training? If yes, what kind of training?

Have you worked with children with special needs before? If yes, would you like to share it with me?

Have you had any experience with children with special needs before? If yes, would you like to share it with me?

ii. Interview questions:

1. What is the basic understanding of children's social development and skills?
 - 1) What is the meaning of inclusive education? Who could benefit?
 - 2) What could children with special needs benefit from inclusive education?
 - 3) What could children without special needs benefit from inclusive education?

- 4) What do you think about the effects of inclusive education on children's social development?
2. What are the strategies?
 - 1) In general, how do typical peers perceive their peers with disabilities? Are there any activities or teaching sessions focusing on improving their understanding of children with SEN?
 - 2) What is the role of parents in the process? Have they been involved in promoting peer interactions of children with and without SEN?
 - 3) As to the basic kindergarten infrastructure, are there any changes or adaptations made to accommodate children's different needs?
 - 4) How do you perceive the social interactions between children with and without disabilities in your class? Are there any changes or adaptations aimed at improving their interactions?
 - 5) Have you tried to create some opportunities for children with SEN to interact with their peers? If yes, what are they?
 - 6) As to the training you have received regarding inclusive education, has any of them focused on improving the social interactions between children with and without SEN?
 - 7) As to the child (children) with SEN in your class, has the kindergarten done anything to improve their social skills? If yes, what are they?
 - 8) As to the typical children in your class, have you ever specifically trained or taught them to interact with their peers with disabilities? If yes, what are they?
 - 9)

Thank you so much for your participation!

Do you still have anything to add in the end?

Appendix C: Observation materials

Observation protocols

Whom to observe

All the seven teachers from the four inclusive classrooms from the researched Kindergarten.

When to observe

Each time the duration of the observation will last depend on the type of the inclusion activity, lasting from 30min-60 min (this kindergarten has three different time-slots for inclusion to take place: sport (physical health and social emotionally oriented time; curriculum activity(cognitively and socially oriented activities); snack and middle-day nap, socially-oriented activities). In addition, participatory observation will also take place during the kindergarten’s weekly (mainly for inclusive ‘mixed-age’ sports event) and monthly (with different themes, e.g. to raise basic awareness of disabilities) activities for promoting inclusion.

How often to observe

For the general observations, the morning was observed in each classroom, specifically, I sat in the corner of the classroom and made notes of teachers’ specific strategies they have applied daily. As to the outdoor time, the researcher also went out together with the class and sat or stood in the corner of the public playground and took notes.

For the intensive observations, it would usually last around half an hour: five minutes of observation as a unit, break for about five minutes, and so in total five sessions. Usually the breaks took place after the second session: for example, the first intensive session took place around 05:09-10:09; second at 10:09-15:09; then five minutes break.

The following example shows the format to take notes of the relevant data:

Class three: for the first week from 04.09-08.09

Type of activity	Monday (from when to when)	Tuesday (from when to when)	Wednesday (from when to when)	Thursday (from when to when)	Friday (from when to when)	Weekend
Sport						

Appendix C: Observation materials

Snack and middle-day rest						
Curriculum activity						
Other types of activities ()						
Weekly mixed-age group activity one						
Weekly mixed-age group activity two						
Weekly mixed-age group activity three						

Observation sheet for the intensive observation

Observational protocol

Which teacher:

Which class:

Date:

Observer	
Place	
Specific time	
Which activity	
Observed person	
Classroom introduction (how many students with and without disabilities)	
People at the observed occasions	
Occasion of observation	
Observation type	
Context/situation description	
Further clarifications	

Observation sheet for general observation

Observation protocol

Date: Key questions:

Teacher: Classroom: Time: Observer:

Number of the class: Observation person (s):

Time and place	Situation descriptions	Memo (hypotheses; questions, interpretations, paraphrase, categorizations)