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Aspects of socio-emotional learning in Taiwan's pre-schools: an exploratory study of teachers' perspectives

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Abstract

This paper explores the attitudes and practices of kindergarten teachers in Taiwan related to socio-emotional learning in children aged 3–6. Unlike in Western countries where socio-emotional learning is an important aspect of life in pre-schools, such learning has been given little attention in Taiwan until recently with the publication of new curriculum guidelines for kindergarten aged children. Based on an internationally recognised definition of socio-emotional learning, 1:1 interviews were conducted with 27 teachers in two urban areas in Taiwan. The study attempted to illuminate how teachers interpret their role in supporting children's socio-emotional learning. Even in the public sector it was found that the relatively new curriculum guidelines were only casually referred to in the teachers' professional practice though several teachers recognised that children's socio-emotional learning in the kindergarten was now essential. However, in some pre-schools more attention was paid to developing other areas of the curriculum such as language and math, rather than to developing social and emotional skills. In the private sector, which provides two-thirds of Taiwan's kindergarten places, the guidelines were almost completely ignored. Many teachers considered children's socio-emotional learning in the kindergarten to be incidental even when children express negative emotions such as anger. In Taiwan's traditional culture, the family is the dominant socialising unit for children's early learning. Teachers hitherto have not regarded children's socio-emotional learning as their responsibility. The authors maintain that this tradition now needs to be challenged and propose that programs of both initial and in-service training should be given priority to improve children's socio-emotional learning and suggest ideas from an on-going initiative in the US.

Keywords: Pre-school, Social emotional learning, Teachers, Children, Kindergarten

Introduction

The ability to manage one's socio-emotional behaviour is one of the most important characteristics of a civilised society. *It is defined by CASEL (The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning) as: 'Socio-emotional learning is the process through which children and adults undertake and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships and make responsible decisions'* (CASEL 2019). Ensuring that children learn, develop,

and practise skills they need to create and maintain positive relationships is a major challenge for educators. Such a challenge has been recognised by Western educators working in early childhood settings for some considerable time and is now reflected in national curriculum guidelines in many Western countries.

The arguments in support of this position emerge from four inter-related sources. First, there are several early longitudinal studies, mainly in the US, the findings from which report on the long-term effects of pre-school intervention programs initiated in the 1960s (for example, Berrueta-Clement et al. 1984). The findings consistently show that young children's experience of high-quality pre-school services has a long-lasting positive effect on their later opportunities. Such studies have subsequently been used to support the expansion of early childhood education in many countries, including Taiwan. Second, and more specifically, there are studies that address the economic benefits of early childhood education particularly in terms of productivity and economic efficiency in the work-place (Heckman 2011). Third, recent developments in neuroscience, particularly social cognitive neuroscience, provide evidence that socio-emotional competence develops as a function of changes in the dynamic interaction between regulatory processes that lessen such reactions like stress and anxiety (Zelazo and Lyons 2012). Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, is the research and scholarship in the field of health, both mental and physical health. The early work of Gardner (1993) and Golan (1996) and subsequent studies, for example, Maggi et al. (2010) not only maintain that emotional intelligence is crucial for social competence but show that socio-emotional learning in early childhood is critical for becoming a well-adjusted person and for maintaining mental stability in a challenging world. The long-term effects of early intervention have also been shown to prevent disease and to promote health throughout life (Campbell et al. 2014; Conti et al. 2016). Taken as a whole, the authors maintain that this vast body research and scholarship makes an overwhelming case for pre-school education becoming universal as is now the situation in several European countries such as France, Sweden and the UK.

In Asian countries, largely as a consequence of the different social construction of childhood (Stauffer 2014), linguistic and mathematical aptitudes together with the acquisition of knowledge have been regarded as the keys to subsequent success in life. *In Asia, childhood is regarded as a 'tabula rasa' phase in the human life-span during which children need to acquire propositional knowledge as a priority, whereas in Western countries childhood is regarded as a time for development and maturation.* Hengartner et al. (2013) have suggested that there are detrimental effects on children where there is an overriding belief that intellectual excellence and technical prowess are the answer to success in life. He provides evidence that as children grow more able in terms of their intelligence quotients (IQ), their emotional intelligence is reduced. For reasons related to having more material benefits and longer schooling, the average IQ score for American children has risen 24 points since 1918. Nevertheless, a huge survey of parents and teachers across all socio-economic groups showed that overall, children are growing 'more lonely and depressed, more angry and unruly, more nervous and prone to worry, more impulsive and aggressive' (Ugoani and Akuezue 2013).

Some academicians and politicians are keen to follow the methods from Asia that have produced positive academic results. However, at least one of these countries has

started to reconsider its values which have been biased towards attainment and the effect that this approach was having on society. Japan is an example of a country that is rightly proud of its students' high academic standards, but in 1995 it began to consider a new model for education (Deng and Gopinathan 2016). This move was the result of an urgent need to face problems linked with lack of creativity, excessive competitiveness in the examination system, bullying, and refusal to attend school (Sawhney 2015). A recent study in Japan (Hegde et al. 2014) explored kindergarten teachers' beliefs and practices regarding developmentally appropriate practices. It concluded that the teachers interviewed considered physical and social development to be of the 'utmost importance'.

In Hong Kong, the vast majority of parents expect their children to go to university. Parents believe that, to achieve this, an early start in a good kindergarten based on academic reputation at the age of three is essential. Most children in kindergartens receive homework, mainly in writing and number skills. Both Chinese and English reading and writing in over 90% of these pre-schools is introduced to children on entry at 3 years old. Little attention is paid to personal, social, and emotional areas of learning (Aubrey and Ward 2013). There are some worrying consequences: research shows that, compared with similar groups in the West, pre-school children show higher levels of dependency and anxiety, display more temper tantrums, suffer more eating problems, and have greater difficulties with relationships (Slone and Mann 2016). As children move into the primary sector, studies show that they display high levels of materialism together with little sense of personal responsibility or honesty. Many Chinese children do not appear to value themselves (Winters 1998). Moreover, because pre-schools have emphasised propositional learning, children find it difficult to think for themselves or be creative. It seems that in these circumstances the Asian education methods have valued academic achievement while damaging other aspects of children's growth which help them to live and prosper in society.

In Taiwan, especially in some kindergartens in the private sector which provide two-thirds of the places for 3–6-year olds (MOE 2013), children are given homework, tests, and lists of Mandarin characters to memorise. The pedagogy is often based on a prescribed textbook. Young children face the stress of competition, as success, even at the age of three/four, is measured by scores on pencil and paper tests (Jaekel et al. 2015). It seems that many parents want this for their children and are willing to pay high fees. In the public sector where the competitive pressure on children is not so acute, kindergartens are now required by law to implement the relatively new national curriculum guidelines (MOE 2013). The guidelines, based on extensive research, are applicable to children aged 2–6 in annual stages and specify six learning domains: Physical Education and Health, Cognitive Development, Literacy and Language Arts, Social Development, Emotional Development and Aesthetics. Two examples of specific learning goals in the Emotional domain are: 'Understanding the reasons why the main characters in a story have emotions' and 'Use waiting or change of mind strategies to regulate the motions of self. The aim of this domain is to nurture young children's capacities in becoming aware, recognising and understanding emotional states in self and others for them to regulate their emotional behaviour encountered in social contexts.

In the West, there is now less argument about pedagogic approaches as most early childhood educators would agree that play-based and more structured approaches

both have a place in a pedagogic repertoire. Furthermore, experienced and knowledgeable early childhood educators see play and structured methodologies as inter-linked (Wood 2014). They recognise that effective play always involves some structure, if only in ensuring what choices are open to children in the activities. Moreover, good structured group work and instruction will involve an element of playfulness and fun. Whatever method they use, knowledgeable adults recognise that a mark of its effectiveness is that children enjoy learning, want to learn more, and start to be independent in resourcing their own learning (Hass et al. 2014).

The overall purpose of this small study was to explore pre-school teachers' (and childcare staff's) attitudes and practices in relation to young children's socio-emotional learning in Taiwan. It is during the early years that children learn about themselves and how to relate to others. Most professionals working with young children are aware of this fact, but exactly how they approach such matters in Taiwan has not been explored. The study attempted to ascertain what importance pre-school teachers attach to socio-emotional learning and what steps they take (if any) to support such learning by the children in their care. In pursuing the purpose of the study, four research questions were articulated to provide a focus. They were:

- What priority, if any, do teachers (and day-care staff) give to children's socio-emotional learning in the pre-schools in Taiwan?
- What issues in children's socio-emotional learning do teachers (and childcare staff) regard as important in Taiwan?
- How proactive are teachers (and day-care staff) in promoting children's socio-emotional learning in Taiwan?
- Are there differences between public and private kindergarten teachers (and childcare staff) in supporting children's socio-emotional learning?

Socio-emotional learning: some key issues

The socio-emotional learning referred to in this paper concerns children's emotions expressed in social contexts either in response to others' actions or as proactive social behaviour. This includes self-awareness, self-esteem and the management of relationships with others. In a world that demands so much of them, children need to become confident from an early age. It is necessary not only for their early success in life but also for their future.

Some studies have found that socio-emotionally confident children are better prepared for the transition to pre-school and subsequent future success in life (Kluczniok et al. 2016). Moreover, children acquire the many skills needed for school readiness through their relationships with parents/siblings, teachers, and peers (Degol and Bachman 2015). Children who are socio-emotionally confident have increased socialization opportunities with peers, develop more friends, have better relationships with their parents and teachers, and enjoy more academic and social success.

Self-awareness

It is now well established that children become aware of themselves by the age of two (Dowling 2000; Cunningham et al. 2014). Such awareness is foundational for the emergence of a child's identity. As the child's learning extends into the pre-school years other significant people, both adults and children, contribute to a child's developing identity. Through their different behaviours and interactions with the child, these people help a child to establish an identity (Sturm et al. 2014).

At 3 and 4 years of age the family can provide the child with a sense of personal continuity, security, and stability. Regular reading of stories to children and re-visiting past family events play key roles in forging a more mature sense of identity. These shared experiences and concerns help them to have a greater sense of self within the larger family (Miller et al. 2005).

Self-esteem

A sense of self-esteem is an essential part of socio-emotional learning. It has a powerful influence on a child's subjectivity and helps to regulate a child's interactions with her or his social world. It is therefore important that a child's socialization process transmits a positive self-esteem (Dowling 2000). Without this, a child is susceptible to mental health issues and will seek reassurance from others as she or he cannot seek it from within.

When children constantly demand attention or boast about their achievements, this is sometimes wrongly interpreted as an over-developed self-esteem. However, it is important to recognise that self-esteem is not conceit and that this type of behaviour is more likely to reflect a lack of self-regard and a basic insecurity (Albert et al. 2015).

Living and learning with others

The development of relationships has always been a fundamental aspect of early childhood education, especially in Western countries. Considerable social learning is involved in adapting to a group situation when a child first attends a kindergarten and this forms a major part of the pre-school experience (Hetherington et al. 2014).

Children with high social intelligence are capable of reappraising the situation and selecting a more thoughtful and socially acceptable behavioural strategy, such as indirect aggression (Loflin and Barry 2016). Educators recognise that the development of close links between the home and the kindergarten is above all else in the interests of the child (Vuorinen et al. 2014). Given the social experiences young children will have had prior to coming to kindergarten, it is likely that many relationships will have been established since babyhood and will have emerged from the interaction with significant adults in their lives such as parents.

Kindergartens and schools are social communities, where making friends is very important to the children. Some studies suggest that the first 6 or 7 years of life are critical for the learning of social skills (Craig et al. 2016). Programs that seek to promote children's socio-emotional learning benefit from encouraging children's understanding of the external causes of emotions to improve overall social behaviour (Ornaghi et al. 2014; Ornaghi et al. 2015). The fact that most young children in the kindergarten make friends easily and quickly sometimes makes us overlook the complexities involved in establishing good relationships.

In addition, some studies have found that the shared nature of conversations supports children becoming aware of others' viewpoints (MacQuarrie et al. 2015). Everyday parent–child and teacher–child conversations not only serve as a rich source of information facilitating children's appropriation of and active participation in the cultural values of their socio-cultural communities, but also serve as an active and powerful mechanism for emotional regulation. Through such processes, children learn how to regulate their feelings and the expression of these feelings in a way that is consistent with their temperament, their need for security and stimulation, and their capacity for self-control (Gross and Thompson 2006; Moilanen and Manuel 2017).

Methodology

To explore the research questions the interpretive paradigm in educational research was adopted (MacNaughton et al. 2001) as it was considered the most appropriate paradigm consistent with the research questions. The methodology relevant to such a paradigm is essentially qualitative. Therefore, the particular methodology selected was structured 1:1 interviews using a pre-designed interview schedule.

Participants

Twenty (10 in Taipei and 10 in Tainan) kindergartens and day-care centres participated in the study. The composition of the sample was based on the national distribution of pre-schools in Taiwan (MOE 2015). Individual pre-schools were identified by colleagues in universities in Taipei and Tainan (two large metropolitan areas in the north and south of Taiwan, respectively). The pre-schools were identified to provide a diversity of types of early childhood education provision in Taiwan: public kindergartens (for children 3–6), private kindergartens (for children 2–6) and public day-care centres (for children 1–6). Each pre-school principal (or director) was contacted by colleagues in universities in Taipei and Tainan inviting her to participate in the study. All principals (and directors) accepted the invitation.

The pre-schools in the sample were all located in urban areas. The number of children enrolled varied considerably from nearly 100 to 500. Children attended on a full-time basis from around 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., though many pre-schools had an after-school facility for children with both working parents. The children were grouped into age-related classes with two trained staff members in charge based on a 1:15 staff/student regulation. The private kindergartens were autonomous establishments with little, if any, contact with the local authority except for registration. The public kindergartens were all attached to an elementary school though with varying autonomy in the school. They had regular contact with the local authority. The child-care centres were also separate establishments where referral for admission came from the social services departments of the respective local authority.

The teachers and day-care staff in each pre-school selected for interview were identified according to the age of the children. Three age groups were chosen: 3–4 years; 4–5 years, and 5–6 years. In total, 27 teachers and day-care staff were interviewed in the study. These interviewees also came from different types of kindergartens: eight from public-sector kindergartens, 12 from private kindergartens, and seven from public day-care centres.

The interview schedule

All the kindergarten teachers and day-care staff were interviewed in their own pre-schools. The semi-structured interviews consisting of *closed and open-ended questions, the latter being included to allow the respondents the opportunity to elaborate on their responses and/or to provide justifications for their initial responses*, aimed to provide a better understanding of the teachers' perspectives in relation to young children's socio-emotional learning in Taiwan. The interview questions were constructed by the researchers on the basis of previous studies about socio-emotional learning with young children.

The schedule consisted of four sections with a total number of 34 questions as follows

- A. Background of the interviewee (Four questions; example: 'Why did you choose to work with pre-school children?')
- B. Priorities in the curriculum (Six questions; examples: 'In your view, is there one field of children's learning that you spend more time on than all the others? If so, which and why?'; 'Is the curriculum in your pre-school based on National Guidelines? If not, why not?')
- C. Children's social learning (Ten questions; example: 'How would you describe the key features of children's social learning during their time at pre-school?')
- D. Children's emotional learning (14 questions: example: 'Do you use characters from stories in books to discuss human emotions such as happiness, love, disappointment, sadness with your children? If so, how do you relate these matters to your children's personal experiences?')

The schedule was piloted with a kindergarten teacher in a public kindergarten who was fluent in Mandarin and English. On the basis of her responses a number of amendments were made.

Data collection

All sections contained questions consisting of both open and closed questions, depending on the issue being pursued. The interview was a three-way process between the interviewee, the researcher, and a translator fluent in Mandarin and English. The interviewee was provided with a copy of the interview schedule in Mandarin prior to the interview.

The translator then took the interviewee through each question in turn in Mandarin and translated the response into English. The response was recorded in writing in English by the researcher. On several occasions the researcher requested clarification or elaboration via the translator. This was readily provided. Each interview lasted approximately 1 h. In Tainan, the interviews were conducted in Mandarin. All interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed to provide detailed information regarding the teachers' perspectives on young children's social emotional learning.

Data analysis

Given the qualitative nature of the study and the relatively small sample, no statistical tests were conducted. Instead, the verbatim transcripts were read and discussed by the researchers. The analysis was undertaken at two levels. First, a qualitative analysis was carried out to ascertain the 'stories' that emerged from each section of the interviews. What were the respondents telling us in the context of the research questions? Second, for the quantitative aspect of the analysis, the researchers tried to establish how extensive were the respondents' perspectives across the whole sample. For each response to each question, keywords that represented the teachers' attitudes and practices in relation to young children's socio-emotional learning were used as a basis to code the responses. For each question the range of responses across the whole sample was first established. Then for each question the responses were coded as per the range of responses provided by the respondents to each specific question.

The coded responses to each question were totalled first for all the respondents and second for the public- and private-sector respondents separately. The totals for the whole sample for each question were then allocated to one of four percentage quartiles, viz UQ (upper quartile); UMQ (upper middle quartile); LMQ (lower middle quartile) and LQ (lower quartile) according to the wording of each question, respectively. These quartiles were then used to augment the qualitative data by providing an indication of the proportion of the respondents with particular perspectives. The findings are reported below in terms of selected verbatim responses and their quartile location.

Findings

Priorities in the curriculum

All those interviewed (UQ) were unanimous in their response to being asked how the curriculum is decided in their pre-school. Before the start of each semester (there being two semesters per year) all the staff set the curriculum for the coming semester for all the classes in the centre. In Taiwan, the kindergarten curriculum is to a large extent under the control of professionals working in the centre. The six areas of the new national curriculum guidelines in Taiwan played a varying role in the various centres. Some centres adhere to them quite closely (particularly in the public sector) whilst others use them as a reference (*We use them 50% of the time*). A minority (LQ) ignored them altogether!

On the issue of priorities in the curriculum, responses varied considerably. Several of those interviewed (UMQ) regarded all areas of the curriculum with equal priority whilst others (LMQ) had different priorities:

I spend most time on Mandarin and social relationships to (particularly in the private sector) (teacher 1108). I spend much time on the fields of mathematics and language (teacher 1121). I spend much time on maths and Chinese phonics. Children must have these two basic skills when they are students in elementary school. In addition, parents have a requirement for their children to learn maths and Chinese phonics (teacher 1105).

Of those areas of the curriculum regarded as relatively low priority were science and gymnastics, though nearly all the teachers in the public sector reported that they spent equal amounts of time on all fields in their curriculum.

Interviewees were then asked to reflect on the experience of their own training. Almost all of those interviewed (UQ) with more than 10 years' experience of working in pre-schools had difficulty remembering much about their training. Of those trained more recently some interesting responses emerged. When asked which areas of the curriculum were given priority:

They were given equal importance. But in society at large (especially with parents) knowledge is most important. We spent most time on Mandarin, science, and learning through play (teacher 1121).

In terms of least priority during the training of each childhood staff member:

The social development of children was given least priority. Yes—children with special educational needs (teacher 1115).

Supporting children's social learning in the pre-school

All interviewees were first asked to reflect on what they regarded as the key features of children's social learning in the pre-school. It was clear that many (UMQ) of those interviewed had not really thought through in any comprehensive way those aspects of children's social development that are crucial at this stage of their education. However, most interviewees (UQ) regarded the importance of the pre-school as supporting children to be less selfish and be able to share toys, and so on with others:

Sharing and relationships are very important and dealing with children's egos! (teacher 1106). How to interact and make friends are very important. They should learn to be independent, courteous, and confident (teacher 1108). They should learn self-control (teacher 1112). They don't know how to share with people. They are self-centred and lack patience (teacher 1122).

When asked what sorts of activities the interviewees provided to help children's social learning, responses differed between those who specifically planned activities (LQ) and those who regarded such matters as incidental (UQ):

There are routine classes in a week in which we teach children the ways of good interaction with people. We eat cakes in a birthday party and have connections for children's social behaviour (teacher 1109).

The most common type of activity was playing games:

We play games—the one who wins can choose say to dress up (e.g., as a princess). If one cheats we discuss it one to one. Later I may talk about this with the whole class. I also use stories to illustrate how to behave (teacher 1103).

Others saw children's social learning as part of the daily routine of the pre-school:

In everyday goings on, I deal with these matters incidentally (teacher 1116).

Where the interviewees regarded keeping children's social learning primarily on an incidental basis such matters occurred frequently throughout the day. Where the interviewees took a more formal position, such matters were addressed on average once per week. The interview then pursued interviewees' approaches to encouraging children to be more sociable, particularly with those children who are shy. The vast majority (UQ) reported using group work, games and/or stories.

I use some children's behaviour to teach others. In groups I use picture books to teach what kind of behaviour we love. We also have a reward system for sociable behaviour (teacher 1108).

I take an individual child into a group of others. He/she can then begin to make friends and I will teach them the skills of group life (teacher 1114).

The interviewees were then asked whether they purposefully encouraged children to cooperate with one another. Again, playing games was the most common response: *Yes. Playing with bricks—we encourage children to work together to make a building (teacher 1124).* And the games were often competitive: *Children like to have a competition so we have, say, two groups and the groups compete. But to do this they must cooperate within the groups (teacher 1127).*

The interview then turned to the matter of the management of children's anti-social behaviour, for example, hitting, kicking, and so forth. Almost all the interviewees (UQ) intimated that they used warm, physical contact (for example, hugging) with the offending child in the first instance. They would then try talking with the child on a one-to-one basis to discover the reason for the behaviour. If the behaviour persisted the parents would be consulted. But in some instances the parents would blame the kindergarten and not attribute any reason to family circumstances/events.

On the matter of pre-schools having written guidance for staff in explicitly setting out how to manage children's anti-social behaviour, not one single pre-school had such a formal policy. Staff were also asked how they helped children to make friends—almost all the interviewees (UQ) reported inviting outgoing children to play with introverted children and using stories about 'friends'.

Finally, in this section those interviewed were asked to reflect on their own practice in relation to supporting children's social learning. Interestingly, all but one teacher (UQ) intimated that they were *a little dissatisfied—there's more I could do.*

Supporting children's emotional learning in the pre-school

As with the previous section, the interviewees were first asked to describe those features of children's emotional learning during their time in the pre-school. Responses varied but several responses (LMQ) focused on children's anger: *With young children they need to be helped to be more emotionally stable and less angry. We have a problem solving anger (teacher 1118).* Interestingly one kindergarten teacher in the public sector had thought about this matter quite extensively: *To address children's happiness, sadness, loneliness, insecurity, being upset and jealous (teacher 1108).*

Also rather interesting was the fact that many interviewees (UMQ) regarded it as important to let children express their emotions: *The most important thing is to let*

children express their emotions. Then I try to get them to understand their emotions—that is, by focusing on why children get emotional. I let them learn that to express their emotion is the best way—even anger (teacher 1112).

When teachers who took this position were pursued further regarding any limits to the expression of anger, it was quite clear that only verbal anger was tolerated. Throwing of toys or tearing things was taboo. The interviewees were then asked how important it was that children should be helped to feel good about themselves: *It's very important—but too many parents put pressure on their children* (teacher 1115). Others reported a more cautious approach: *So-so. Children these days are self-centred so we won't emphasise this too much* (teacher 1109).

When asked about how the interviewees supported children to feel good about themselves, a common response (UMQ) was: *I encourage them to make presentations or to be assistants in the class. They try to believe they can do everything well, so they will like themselves and have achievement during the process* (teacher 1123).

Linked to the 'feel-good' factor is the matter of self-confidence: *building self-confidence is essential* was a common response (UMQ). One interesting response when asked how to help children's self-confidence was:

I share my personal experience with children at first. Then I said 'I couldn't draw pictures and use scissors when I was a little child. But now I can do it because of continuous learning. If you keep learning, you will perform much better than me.' I show the instruction personally to students and let them finish a job step by step. I encourage them when their jobs are done. During the process they build up confidence and have achievement. Children are not afraid to try something (teacher 1108).

Clearly, encouragement and praise are crucial in this matter, but one teacher cautioned: *This is important but not very*. The interviewer then explored the sensitive issue of a child who is emotionally upset. Clearly many of those interviewed (UMQ) met the feeling of being upset with warmth and affection in most cases:

I will give him a hug. I use funny body language to have a mutual interaction with him. Then he can get rid of his sombre mood or have some space or I give him some time to calm down. Now encouragement of positive language is essential (teacher 1103).

Equally sensitive is the issue of respect for others' feelings and needs. All those interviewed (UQ) regarded this as crucial, but when pursued further on this matter in relation to cultural pressures in Taiwan for childcare 'to be the best', responses varied considerably. For example, some teachers when faced with a child who always wanted to be 'first' would deliberately counter such emotions by purposefully moving the child to be last, whilst others would simply try to explain to the child that such expression of their emotion should be subdued:

I tell the children what not to do and to respect others. I often put children at the end of the line if they always want to be first (teacher 1117).

Interviewees were then asked how they used stories to illustrate different emotions in terms of recognition (for example, sadness) and expression (for example,

excitement). With the older children, interviewees (UQ) were very aware of the power of stories: *Yes, I deliberately choose stories to illustrate human emotions* (teacher 1105). *Yes, we discuss the emotions of each character in the story in detail or role play the story* (teacher 1103). But with younger children the common response (UQ) was less positive.

Finally, as in the previous section, the interviewees were asked to reflect on their level of satisfaction with how they addressed children's emotional learning. Three teachers (all in the public sector) reported that they were satisfied, while the remainder chose: *I'm a little dissatisfied, there's more I could do*. None of the interviewees were dissatisfied to a great extent on this matter.

The last item in the interview offered the opportunity to indicate whether they wanted to elaborate on the issue of children's social and emotional learning in the pre-school. Reference to parents was the most frequent: *We need to educate parents to be good parents*. Many of those interviewed (UMQ), particularly in the private sector, took the view that: *The relationships in a family and the social and emotional development of children are really important*. Others saw the age of the child as an issue: *Children in the bottom class easily express their emotions. In contrast, children in the middle and top classes don't*. A teacher in the private sector regarded the problem in a wider context: *Due to the declining birth rate, there is now only one child in many families. The social and emotional development of children in this generation is worse than in past generations*.

Discussion

The first research question focussed on the priority given to children's socio-emotional learning in Taiwan's pre-schools. From the interviews, teachers' active planning and organizing of children's socio-emotional learning has not been regarded as important, therefore little attention has been placed on the promotion of such learning. This is because it is considered that, traditionally, children must learn math and languages, such as Mandarin, and develop knowledge during their early education. Previous studies have also revealed that the more effective program interventions at the right stage, guide policy makers to incorporate socio-emotional learning into their school curriculum. (Stauffer 2014; Parvari et al. 2017). Moreover, many parents expect the pre-schools to teach in a traditional way. This is similar to previous research findings typically showing that the learning styles of pre-school children are highly related to parents' perspectives (Aubrey and Ward 2013; Jaekel et al. 2015; Slone and Mann 2016). In Taiwan, even at the pre-school level and especially in the private sector, children's education mainly consists of being given homework assignments and being tested on what they have learnt. There is thus a lack of attention paid to socio-emotional learning. Despite the new curriculum guidelines none of the pre-schools had any specific formal policy on promoting socio-emotional learning. Not surprisingly, the previous curriculum guidelines published over 29 years ago (MOE 1987) made no reference to such learning.

However, a minority of pre-school teachers almost entirely in the public-sector kindergartens recognised that they have a responsibility to support children with such learning even prior to the publication of the new curriculum guidelines (MOE 2013) which provide guidance on supporting socio-emotional learning. On the other hand, a significant number of teachers regarded such activities as 'incidental', particularly in the private

sector. Even before the new guidelines were published, it appears that very few pre-school teachers in Taiwan were proactive in terms of promoting children's socio-emotional learning in any kind of planned or sequenced way. This is because most children in kindergartens receive homework which aims to develop their writing and numeracy skills. Therefore, the children are unable to develop the interpersonal skills required to develop confidence, to interact with others, to learn effective communication skills, or to be able to express themselves in public. It was clear that many of the interviewed teachers did not have an in-depth understanding of children's social development, something which is crucial at this stage of their education. Many of the teachers had introduced some game activities into their classes with the aim of increasing the children's social behaviour in class, but many of them felt that they could do more to help the children in this area.

Clearly the findings from this part of the study raise fundamental issues regarding the challenges to traditional culture such as that found in Taiwan from more liberal interpretations of Education. Traditionally, Education in Taiwan is regarded as a process through which children predominantly acquire knowledge and are able to demonstrate their knowledge through an extensive series of tests. Such traditions can be traced back to the Chinese philosopher, Confucius who many regard as the founding father of Education in Chinese culture. Confucius advocated that the acquisition of knowledge bestowed virtue on the learner (Tan 2015). Even today, many young people seek help from the spirit of Confucius when faced with difficult examinations.

In the modern world, if educational institutions such as kindergartens are being encouraged to adopt a more proactive role in children's socialization, parents need to be persuaded that such a policy and practice are justified and not an incursion into their parental responsibilities. Kindergartens can be pivotal in this respect but require the overt support of the State. Taiwan is undergoing major changes almost certainly initiated by the introduction of a political democratic system and the ending of Martial Law in 1987 and subsequent encouragement for engagement with international agencies. As Taiwan transforms from a conservative and highly hegemonic social structure into a modern liberal democracy (for example, the legalization of same-sex marriage as from 24 May 2019) educational reforms are required to sustain and progress liberal ideological principles. Education systems and processes belong to what Althusser refers to the Ideological State Apparatus (Althusser 2006). Kindergartens are at the cutting edge of this transformation. As such the State should become more proactive in helping kindergartens to engage more meaningfully with parents. Pointers as to how this might be achieved are shown in the work of Robinson and Diaz (2006) in Australia.

In response to the second and third research questions, it was found that the issues regarding children's socio-emotional learning which the teachers considered to be important include helping the children to share, cooperate and to take turns. This study supports many earlier studies' findings that children's socio-emotional learning is positively associated with teacher attitudes and behavior (Kluczniok et al. 2016). Some teachers also want to help the children become more confident and to learn to dissipate their anger. By letting children express their emotions freely the teachers let them know that such expression is acceptable even when it involves a negative emotion such as anger. Teachers also reported that they comfort children when they are faced with complicated

situations in their lives. This is a key point because, for children to be able to learn appropriate social and emotional behaviour, they must learn how to interact with others, regulate themselves, express their ideas, develop self-confidence and become independent. This claim is supported by the research of Loflin and Barry (2016) who found that those children who already understood more about learning useful skills were more satisfied with their social intelligence and intended to live and learn with others.

On the fourth research question, that is, the difference between the public and private sector kindergartens, there is clearly a divide in the teacher's perceptions of their roles. As a whole, though with some exceptions, private sector kindergartens are unwilling to accept the new curriculum guidelines in Taiwan and reluctant to adopt any guidance from the State. This is in sharp contrast to the situation in many Western countries where the private sector works in partnership with both local and national government agencies. In Scotland, for example, working parents are entitled to Working Tax Credit to off-set the cost of sending their child to a private kindergarten (Wilkinson 2003). As a result, the private sector readily adopts the national curriculum guidelines as well as scrutiny by the relevant authorities. Private-sector kindergartens in Taiwan often regard themselves as a profit-making business in a neo-liberal market place economy which de facto means they have to be responsive to parental wishes to survive successfully. In a more liberal democratic society there is little place for neo-liberal practices. The authors maintain that it is now time to review this issue. Given that Taiwan's private kindergartens charge parents high fees to for their children to attend such kindergartens, access is almost exclusive for children from upper socio-economic families. Parents with considerable social and cultural capital will readily transfer their child to a different kindergarten if they are unhappy with some aspect of the particular kindergarten they originally selected.

When the respondents were asked to elaborate on their responses, virtually all of them made reference to parents, many regarding the family as the place where socio-emotional learning for young children should be addressed. For such respondents, the primary agency for socio-emotional learning in early childhood is, to a large extent, the family. In Taiwan the family is the strong and hegemonic social unit that provides support and nurturing, both emotionally and economically, but also control, to virtually all its members.

However, the social composition of the family in Taiwan is undergoing a metamorphosis. According to the statistical data from the Ministry of the Interior (Ministry of the Interior (MOI) 2014), Taiwan now has one of the lowest birth rates in the world. In 2013, the fertility rate was 1.07 (MOI 2014) which is a result of many couples choosing not to have children or to have only one child. One teacher commented that a child with no siblings is more likely to experience socio-emotional problems. In addition to the low birth rate, the incidence of divorce in Taiwan is very high. In 2013 it was 36.3%, a decrease from 49.1% in 2009 (MOI 2014).

Research has consistently shown that changes in family structure such as divorce can have a negative impact on children's learning (Amato and Anthony 2014; Bernardi and Radl 2014; Mandemakers and Kalmijn 2014). In a review of the empirical literature in Taiwan, Shih (2008) found that divorced single-parents' children do not learn as well in pre-school. Further, Fergusson et al. (2014) also concluded that most studies showed

a more negative effect on children when parents' divorce occurs early in childhood. It would seem that many children in Taiwan have the experience of insecurity which accompanies family breakdown and which affects their learning. As such, the authors claim that there is an even greater urgent necessity to give more attention to children's socio-emotional learning in the pre-schools in Taiwan.

Another feature about families in Taiwan is involvement of grandparents. Many grandparents regard it as their moral duty to assist in childcare (Sun 2008). It is estimated that about a third of young children spend long periods in the care of their grandparents (Chen 2016). Such a trend has emerged largely for economic reasons. In many families either one or occasionally both parents find work away from the family home or the parents spend a great deal of time each day at their local work-place, where some parents spend up to 14 h per day 6 days per week. In such situations the assistance of grandparents is vital. Whilst the literature points to significant positive effects on the grandparents themselves for such an arrangement, there is little research on the actual impact of grandparents on young children's socio-emotional learning. Given that many grandparents have had a minimum of formal schooling it is likely that grandparents will unconsciously transmit their own social behavior to their grandchildren.

In light of the above, questions also need to be asked as to whether the new curriculum guidelines for kindergartens in Taiwan will be sufficiently powerful to change professional practice in regard to helping children learn how to manage their socio-emotional behaviour. The findings of this study raise serious doubts. The authors of this paper maintain that a new initiative in Taiwan is now required. First and foremost, initial and in-service courses need to be modified to include modules on children's socio-emotional learning. Ideas about the content of such modules can be drawn from the experience of activities in other countries. An example of such an initiative is the RULER project in the United States (Castillo et al. 2013). RULER is a theoretically based approach for developing emotional intelligence in pre-school children and the key adults involved in their education. The approach concentrates on helping children recognise their own emotions, understand the causes and consequences of emotions, label emotions using a sophisticated vocabulary, express emotions in socially appropriate ways, and regulate emotions in a manner that is conscious, controlled, and orientated toward a personal goal. The initiative was recently scrutinized by Rivers et al. (2013). Rivers concluded that RULER was able to create a comprehensive and appropriate approach for developing the emotional skills of children and the adults who educate them. Pre-schools in Taiwan have much to learn from this initiative.

Authors' contributions

In terms of the individual author's contributions to the study, the principal author (JEW) generated the initial ideas for the study, submitted a successful application to the funding body and was the grant-holder for the duration of the study. The funding body played no further role in the execution of the study. The respective roles of the two authors of the manuscript were: JEW conducted half of the interviews, analysed most of the data and prepared the first draft of the paper. The second author (K, C-P) conducted the other half of the interviews, contributed to aspects of the data analysis, the literature review and the second draft. Both authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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Competing interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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