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Parents' play beliefs and engagement in young children's play at home

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ABSTRACT

Play is a fundamental concept in early childhood development and education. As partners in the child's learning, parents play a crucial role in how play is defined, valued, and practised. The present study explores the constructs of parents' beliefs about and engagement in young children's play in two coastal cities in China. A sample of 483 parents of children aged two to four years ($M = 36.48$ months, $SD = 4.86$) completed a newly developed instrument, the Chinese Parent Play Beliefs Scale (CPPBS), to assess their beliefs on play, and two other scales to report on the parents' and children's play engagement at home. Factor analyses confirmed two factors in the CPPBS – *Play for Learning* (PL) and *Play for Fun* (PF). Mediation models found two patterns of parental engagement in children's play: parent involvement mediated the relationship between their PL beliefs and children's engagement with (pre)academic-related play, but did not mediate the relationship between their PF beliefs and children's engagement with entertainment and fantasy play. This finding indicates Chinese parents might support young children's play as teachers, rather than as playmates.

KEYWORDS

Play; young children; parental beliefs; parental engagement; Chinese parents

Introduction

Play is critical to early childhood development, and has been declared the right of every child by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR 2006). However, the meaning and value of play vary across cultures and contexts (Roopnarine 2011, 2015). For instance, Confucian heritage culture (CHC), which has dominated Chinese society for 2000 years, tends to view play as frivolous or even harmful because it diverts children from (pre)academic learning (Luo, Tamis-LeMonda, and Song 2013). In contemporary China, however, a series of recently instituted Early Childhood Education (ECE) reforms advocate a child-centred approach and promote play in early educational settings. This paradigm shift has forced Chinese teachers and parents to transform their traditional beliefs, and to 'reconceptualize' their ideas about children's play (Che and Yan 2008; Liu, Pan, and Sun 2005). These changing beliefs may have an

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indirect but far-reaching influence on child outcomes through parent–child interactions and home–school cooperation within the ‘developmental niche’ (Harkness and Super 1992; Super and Harkness 1986). However, the limited existing research has relied heavily on either qualitative studies (e.g. Rao and Li 2009), or on quantitative surveys using a translated questionnaire of unproven validity (e.g. Jiang and Han 2016; Lin and Yawkey 2013). This has made the unique constructs underlying contemporary Chinese parents’ play beliefs still unknown. Without a reliable instrument for assessing Chinese parents’ play beliefs, studies of the beliefs-practices interface have been lacking. To address the limitation, this study first developed, revised, and validated the CPPBS, in collaboration with indigenous parents and ECE experts, and then explored the relationships of parents’ play beliefs to their play engagement in the everyday home context.

Conceptualizing early childhood play

Play is a fundamental concept in early childhood development and education. It takes many different forms in the ECE context, including imaginative play, free-flow play, rough-and-tumble play, socio-dramatic play, constructive play, heuristic play, guided play, and games, all of which involve a wide range of behaviours and activities, resulting in varied developmental and learning outcomes (Wood and Attfield 2013). However, most play-related research has heavily relied on researchers’ observations of children involved in an activity that is presumed to be play, based on scholarly definitions. There has been, to date, limited research directly investigating how parents define children’s play, although a few studies have used parents’ beliefs about the value of play as a focal variable (e.g. Fogle and Mendez 2006; Manz and Bracaliello 2016). As parents perceive play in different ways than do play experts (Fisher et al. 2008), it is imperative to obtain a more accurate understanding of what activities and behaviours constitute play, from a parental perspective (Singh and Gupta 2012).

Moreover, research into play has long been framed in ways that privilege Western cultural practices, rather than seeing play as socio-culturally specific (Rogoff 2003; Vygotsky 1978). A wider lens is, therefore, needed to describe the play experiences of young children in multiple non-Western cultural contexts overlooked in contemporary play research (Gaskins, Haight, and Lancy 2007). Previous studies using Chinese parents’ self-reports to measure the value of play have relied upon modified questionnaires; however, the absence of a psychometrically sound measurement tool is a methodological problem in these studies. As parental beliefs are unique and specific to a certain time and context (Sigel and McGillicuddy-De Lisi 2002), Chinese parents themselves should participate as fully as possible in identifying, portraying, and valuing their child’s play in authentic contexts (Jiang and Han 2016).

Chinese parents’ changing beliefs on early childhood play

Chinese culture features a rich tradition of highly valuing academic achievement, behavioural control, conformity, and discipline (Rao, Ng, and Pearson 2010); in words of the Three-Character Classic, ‘diligence yields rewards, while play goes nowhere’. This emphasis on diligence and the acquisition of academic knowledge has led Chinese people to view

learning as a serious, rather than playful, activity (Luo, Tamis-LeMonda, and Song 2013). However, since the end of the twentieth century, as more exposure to Western ECE practices, an ECE paradigm shift away from didactic, adult-directed, and academically oriented education, towards child-centred and play-based teaching has been occurring in China (Tobin, Hsueh, and Karasawa 2009). Given the tension between traditional Chinese values and imported ones (Li and Chen 2017; Rao, Ng, and Pearson 2010), beliefs regarding more structured early academic training may take precedence over play, or at the very least present a cultural paradox to parents, who are the ECE consumers and the significant adults in children's early years.

A review of the literature on how Chinese parents perceive and value children's play suggests a typical dichotomy – play is important for children's development, but not for their academic preparation. For example, Lin and Yawkey's (2013) study revealed that, while recognizing the contributions of play to their children's development, Taiwanese parents preferred to involve them in academic learning (numbers or letters), rather than in play. This dichotomous belief about the play and (pre-)academic learning was also found among upper-middle-class Chinese parents in mainland China, and Chinese immigrant parents in the United States (Jiang and Han 2016). However, due to the lack of reliable instruments in these large-scale studies, the key constructs underlying parents' play beliefs are still unknown.

On the other hand, Rao and Li (2009) found that Chinese parents in Shenzhen (a mainland city neighbouring Hong Kong) tended to accept the concept of 'eduplay', a fusion of play and pre-academic learning, rather than see them as dichotomous activities. The parents in their case study (Rao and Li 2009) accorded much attention to the form of play-based education in early childhood, and believed early literacy and arithmetic concepts could be embedded in play. Again, case studies in other coastal cities in China, such as Shanghai and Fuzhou (Lin 2013; Lin and Li 2014) revealed the notion of 'eduplay' had been well-embraced by parents of young children. The parents in the studies (Lin 2013; Lin and Li 2014) differentiated between the concepts of *youxi* (structured play) and *wanshua* (unstructured play), believing early learning occurred in *youxi*, rather than in *wanshua*, as *youxi* could be directed by or engaged with the adult, whereas *wanshua* was neither structured nor directed. This study will examine this dichotomy with large-scale data from other Chinese cities.

Parental play beliefs and play engagement in daily home context

Previous studies have shown that, if parents believe in the functions of some types or elements of play, they integrate such play into culturally appropriate everyday activities (Roopnarine 2011). For example, Parmar, Harkness, and Super (2004, 2008) compared Asian (Chinese, Korean, Indian and Pakistani) and Euro-American parents in terms of their beliefs about play and involvement in their children's play, with specific attention to two contrasting roles: playmate and teacher. It was found that parents from the two cultural groups encouraged different kinds of children's daily activities, both through their actual participation and their organization of children's daily living contexts, from the types and number of objects in the home (i.e. toys and books), to loosely or formally arranged daily routines and social interactions (Parmar, Harkness, and Super 2004, 2008). Accordingly, Euro-American children in that study were reported to have more

opportunities for free play than their Asian counterparts, who spent a lot of time engaging in early academic preparation at home.

Based on the above understanding and the central role of parental beliefs in determining parental engagement and routines that are part of children's daily lives (Harkness et al. 2011; Harkness and Super 1992; Roopnarine 2015), it is critical to link parental beliefs about the value of play with children's actual play engagement in everyday contexts, to observe both direct and indirect parental influences on children's play experiences.

Research questions

The primary objective of this research was to develop and initially validate a scale for measuring Chinese parental beliefs about children's play, to address above-mentioned knowledge gap. Its second objective was to understand the relationship between parents' beliefs and practices, to test whether parental involvement mediates the relationship between parents' play beliefs and their children's play occurrence at home. Accordingly, the following two questions guided this study:

- (1) What are the major constructs in parents' beliefs about children's play?
- (2) What patterns exist in parents' engagement with play at home?

Methods

Participants

The study was conducted in Fuzhou and Shenzhen, both of which are in south-eastern China, adjacent to Taiwan and Hong Kong, respectively. We restricted our investigation to parents of pre-kindergarten children aged two to four-years-old. This age group precedes kindergarten education, and is the time in which parents' values and beliefs carry the most weight in arranging and initiating play in a child's life. Participants were recruited through centres and kindergartens mainly serving middle-class families, as determined by community characteristics and moderate tuition rates. In the first wave of data collection, participants were solicited from playgroups in one public kindergarten and two ECE centres in Fuzhou (neighbouring Taiwan). Of 155 questionnaires delivered, 128 were completed, yielding an 83% response rate. A second wave of data collection, conducted two months later, involved recruitment of parents from playgroups in two kindergartens and five ECE centres in Shenzhen (neighbouring Hong Kong). Of 401 questionnaires delivered, 355 were completed, yielding an 89% response rate. Overall, 5%, 10%, and 72% of questionnaires were completed by fathers, mothers, and both fathers and mothers, respectively, with the remaining 13% failing to respond, resulting in a total sample of 483 in the two waves of recruitment.

Demographic information about the participants was collected in two waves (see Table 1). The mean age of the participants' children was 36.48 months ($SD = 4.86$). The sample included more boys (55.1%) than girls (44.9%), and, in most cases (76%), there was only one child in the family. More than half of the responding parents were university graduates or postgraduates (43.5% and 17.7%, respectively); 24.4% had completed high school or higher technological college, and 14.3% had less than a middle school education. The majority (69%) of the sample population had medium household incomes, based on local levels.

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of the sample used for the CPPBS development.

Characteristic	EFA <i>n</i> (%)	CFA <i>n</i> (%)
Child age (M ± SD)	35.6 ± 4.13	36.8 ± 4.89
Single child		
Yes	59 (84.2)	141 (73.4)
No	11 (15.8)	51 (26.6)
Child sex		
Male	37 (52.9)	109 (56.8)
Female	33 (47.1)	83 (43.2)
Parental education		
Postgraduate	28 (21.9)	65 (18.3)
University undergraduate	56 (43.8)	153 (43.1)
Higher technological college	29 (22.6)	89 (25.1)
High school and below	15 (11.7)	48 (13.5)
Household income ^a		
High	26 (37.1)	61 (31.8)
Medium	30 (42.9)	89 (46.3)
Low	14 (20.0)	42 (21.9)

Note: The EFA subsample had 128 participants (68 mothers and 60 fathers), and the CFA subsample had 355 participants (180 mothers and 175 fathers). There were 70 children in the EFA, and 192 in the CFA. Both the child's parents were given the CPPBS. Participants who provided data for the EFA were not included in the CFA.

^aHigh-, medium-, and low-income households in the two cities are based on census data from the *Fuzhou 2013 Statistics Yearbook* and *Shenzhen 2014 Statistics Yearbook*.

Measures

Chinese Parent Play Beliefs Scale

In collaboration with parents and ECE experts in China, we developed, revised, and piloted the Chinese Parent Play Beliefs Scale (CPPBS) to create a measure of Chinese parental beliefs about play. First, individual interviews were conducted with 24 parents (14 mothers and 10 fathers) of pre-kindergarten children, who were asked to describe children's play they observed at home. Each interview lasted approximately 20 min. Parents reported a broad range of child behaviour and parent-child activities as play. All interview responses were transcribed verbatim and then analysed, categorized, and discussed by the two authors, to generate an initial inventory of play activities in the home context. Second, a group of experts in the child development and ECE fields reviewed the items to ensure the list was comprehensive and inclusive, and satisfied a range of theoretical definitions for early childhood play. Third, the scale was piloted with a convenient sample of 42 parents to refine the scale items; parents were asked to comment on the inventory's wording, suitability, and content. This scale development process facilitated eliciting sensitive information from the target population, and prevented the misapplication of relevant concepts due to an over-reliance on expert-driven procedures (Fogle and Mendez 2006). Finally, 26 play activities were subjected to later data analysis. Parents used a five-point scale, ranging from 'not at all important' to 'extremely important', to assess the developmental salience of the 26 play activities.

Parental Play Involvement Questionnaire (PPIQ)

Parents were presented with a list of play activities in PPIQ (identical to those in the CPPBS) and asked, 'How often do you initiate each of these play activities/join playing with the child in each of these play activities?' Parents used a five-point response scale, ranging from 'never' to 'always', to indicate the extent to which they were directly involved

in each of their child's play activities. The measure in this study demonstrated high internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of .84.

Home Play Activities Questionnaire (HPAQ)

The principal informant was the primary caregiver most familiar with the focal child's daily activity. The questionnaire was used to rate the frequency of the child's engagement in each of the play activities in the home, as reported in the CPPBS. Primary caregivers were asked to rate the frequency of specific play activities in the home, using a seven-point response scale ranging from 'less often/never' to 'three times or more every day'. The measure in this study had satisfactory internal consistency, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.71.

Procedures

The participating ECE centres and kindergartens in the two cities served as participant access points. Permission was sought from the principals of the centres and kindergartens. Parents were recruited through a letter explaining the purpose of the study and requesting their consent. Survey packets were hand-delivered to the selected educators, who forwarded them to the parents who had agreed to participate. The survey packets included the demographics questionnaire, the CPPBS, the PPIQ, and the HPAQ. Parents returned the completed questionnaires in person or via their child's school bag, after which the educators contacted the principal investigator to arrange pick-up. Small gifts were distributed to all the families who participated.

Results

Exploratory factor analysis

Exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted to discover the factor structure of CPPBS, using IBM SPSS21.0 software. The factor structure was explored with a sample of 128 parents from Fuzhou, through principal component analyses employing both orthogonal (varimax) and oblique (promax) rotation methods. The principal criteria used to determine factor solutions (Cattell 1966; Cudeck 2000; Gorsuch 1988) were that solutions should: (1) consist of factors with an eigenvalue larger than one; (2) explain a substantial proportion (i.e. more than 10% of the total variance); (3) have an item communality value of .40 or greater; (4) demonstrate adequate internal consistency (i.e. Cronbach's alpha coefficients are .60 or higher); and, (5) have meaningful and interpretable item content. A two-factor solution was selected for retention for its best meeting the criteria described above. Five items were removed because of unacceptably low communalities; two items were removed due to their lack of significant loadings on either of the two factors; finally, one was excluded due to cross-loadings among factors.

As shown in Table 2, the first factor consisted of nine items describing play or play-like activities related to (pre-)academic skills enhancement, such as parent-child reading, letter naming, and numeracy games (so-called academic play). Given the nature of the items, the factor was labelled *Play for Learning* (PL), and indicated the value parents assigned to play with a (pre-)academic goal. The second factor included nine items depicting play activities

Table 2. Structure and loadings for exploratory principal component analysis with varimax and promax rotation of the CPPBS.

Scale item	Factor 1	Factor 2
<i>PL (alpha = .85)</i>		
Playing games of matching words with pictures	.83	-.09
Playing flash cards with Chinese characters, alphabets or arithmetic concepts	.78	.01
Singing and listening to Three-Character Classic or other Chinese classics	.74	-.03
Recognizing Chinese characters in children's story books	.71	.10
Playing arithmetic and alphabet games in children's picture books	.68	.09
Using electronic products that say words, letters, or numbers when touching buttons	.65	.05
Giving performances (e.g. reciting classics, singing, and dancing) to family or friend	.65	.00
Playing with puzzles or construction toys	.64	.17
Watching educational programmes on TV or DVD	.56	.00
Having a book read at bedtime or other time	.39	.33
<i>PF (alpha = .78)</i>		
Jumping and tumbling on bed or sofa	-.01	.77
Playing with funny toys or everyday objects as toys (e.g. keys, containers, and tissues)	-.01	.69
Playing with sand and water	.06	.65
Running and chasing around for no particular reason	-.06	.63
Pretending with kitchen sets, doctor's kits, or child-size tools	.14	.63
Doodling or painting	.12	.60
Riding a tricycle or child's car in the neighbourhood	-.12	.59
Going out for a walk	.09	.48
Playing with playground equipment (e.g. slide, swing, and seesaw)	-.11	.40
Going to visit friends	-.18	.31
Playing games with iPad or iPhone	.12	.19

Note: Salient factor loadings >.40 are in bold. Scale items are presented in abbreviated and/or paraphrased forms.

that primarily focused on fun and sometimes involved imagination/creativity, such as make-believe, physical and motor play, and home and out-of-home entertainment (so-called entertainment and fantasy play). This factor indicated the value parents assigned to play with imagination/creativity and physical movement, and was named *Play for Fun* (PF). These two factors accounted for 47% of the total variance (28% and 19%, respectively). Cronbach's alpha coefficients were .85 and .78, respectively. PL and PF had a negative but non-significant correlation of $-.02$.

Confirmatory factor analysis

Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was carried out (using AMOS 18.0 software) on a sample of 355 parents to test the factor structure explored by the EFA. The model specification constrained items to load only a single factor, and allowed for inter-factor correlation (Albright and Park 2009). One item was deleted due to non-significant loadings on either of the two factors. The model fit indices of the CPPBS and two subscales, and the range of item loadings are presented in Table 3. The results indicate a model-to-data good fit: $\chi^2_{(116)} = 227.67$, $p < .001$; GFI = .93 AGFI = .90; CFI = .94; NFI = .91; and RMSEA = .053.

Table 3. Model fit statistics for CFA of CPPBS and two subscales.

Scale	No. of items	Item loadings	Model fit statistic				
			Chi-square	RMSEA	CFI	GFI	NFI
PL	9	.60–.78	$\chi^2_{(26)} = 61.13$	.062	.970	.962	.950
PF	8	.48–.79	$\chi^2_{(19)} = 59.26$	.077	.945	.960	.922
CPPBS	17	.48–.79	$\chi^2_{(116)} = 227.67$	.052	.943	.930	.907

Although fit indices with higher values are desirable, the levels obtained here are regarded as more than satisfactory (Brown 2015). The internal consistency statistics ranged from .83 to .87. The results of the CFA support the coherence of our conceptual model for the two constructs underlying Chinese parents' beliefs of the value of play.

Raw scores on the PL factor ranged from 18 to 45, with a mean of 35.50 ($SD = 5.09$). Raw scores on the PF factor ranged from 20 to 40, with a mean 30.61 ($SD = 4.14$). The mean item scores for PL and PF were 3.95 ($SD = 0.46$) and 3.82 ($SD = 0.51$), respectively. Given that item rating ranged from 1 to 5, mean item scores for both of PL and PF were fairly high in the overall sample. Additionally, parents had a higher value on PL than did on PF, but the differences did not reach the level of significance, $t(354) = 1.93, p = .06$.

Mediation models

The HPAQ and PPIQ were utilized to report frequencies of children's and parents' engagement with the play activities identified in the CPPBS. The correlations indicated statistically significant relationships between the factor scores in the CPPBS (i.e. PL and PF) and the equivalent composite scores of the other two scales (see Table 4). Correlations between parental beliefs of PL and both children's and parents' engagement in academic-related play were moderately positive and statistically significant ($r = .35, p < .01$; and $r = .58, p < .001$). Correlations between parental beliefs of PF and both children's and parents' engagement in entertainment and fantasy play were also moderately positive and statistically significant ($r = .40, p < .001$; and $r = .41, p < .001$, respectively).

The mediating effects of parental play beliefs (i.e. PL and PF) on children's play engagement through parent participation were further tested, using SPSS PROCESS (Hayes 2013), with participants' demographic variables (i.e. child age, sex, household income, and parent education) set as covariates. The results of the mediation model analyses are reported in Table 5.

The total effect coefficient c of each of the two parental play beliefs (i.e. PL and PF) on child play was statistically significant. Next, in each of the two models, the effect coefficient a of parental play beliefs to the hypothesized mediator – parent play involvement, was significant. Finally, the coefficient b and c' were estimated for each of the model PL and the model PF. Once the mediator was included in the model PL, the direct effect coefficient c' of parental beliefs fell substantially to below significance, whereas the coefficient b (relating parent involvement to child play) maintained a significant association. However, when the mediator was introduced in the model PF, the direct effect coefficient c' of parental beliefs on child play was still significant, in light of parental involvement. The mediation effect ab of parental play beliefs (i.e. PL and PF) on child play through parent involvement were further tested, using bootstrapped confidence approach. The results show that significant mediation effect was found in the PL model, but not in the PF model.

Overall, as presented in Figures 1 and 2, parental involvement completely mediated the effect of parental beliefs about PL on children's academic-related play, but no mediating role of parental involvement was found for the effect of parental beliefs about PF on children's entertainment and fantasy play. The findings suggest the two constructs of parents' play beliefs – PL and PF – relate to children's play engagement in the home through different pathways.



Table 4. Correlations among variables in CPPBS, PPIQ, HPAQ, and demographics.

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.
1. Child sex	1.000									
2. Child age	.009	1.000								
3. Household income	.079	.120	1.000							
4. Parent education	.046	.054	.201*	1.000						
5. Parent beliefs PL	.009	-.048	.255**	.021	1.000					
6. Parent beliefs PF	.058	.136*	-.008	.166*	-.017	1.000				
7. Parent play involvement I	.096	-.029	.175*	.083	.584***	.067	1.000			
8. Parent play involvement II	.053	.115	-.025	.053	.017	.414***	.378***	1.000		
9. Child academic play	.083	-.151*	.111	.154*	.354***	.112	.570***	.250**	1.000	
10. Child entertainment play	.165*	.049	-.043	.103	-.026	.395***	.149	.390***	.317***	1.000

Note: Correlations were computed with two-factor scores of the CPPBS (PL and PF) and the equivalent composite scores of the PPIQ and HPAQ.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; and *** $p < .001$.

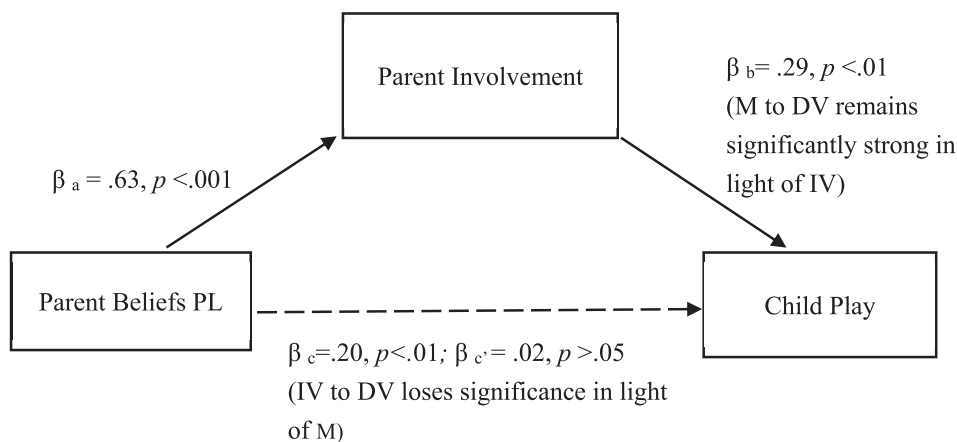
Table 5. Mediation model analyses of PL/PF on child play via parent involvement.

	<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>c'</i>	<i>c</i>	<i>ab</i> +	<i>se</i>	95% CI
Model 'PL'	.630***	.294**	.018	.203**	.185**	.034	.124, .255
Model 'PF'	.512***	.027	.301***	.311***	.013	.023	–.039, .054

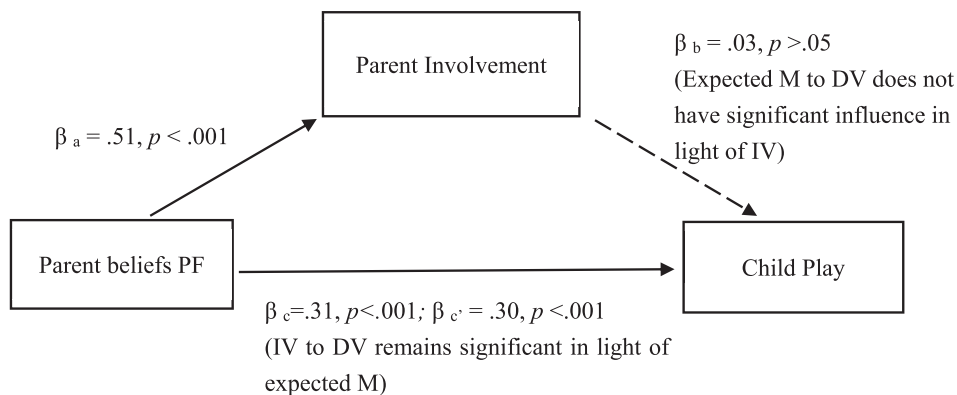
Note: The mediation effect was tested controlled for demographics in the models. *a* = the direct effect of IV on M; *b* = the effect of M on DV; *ab* = the indirect effect of IV on DV through M; *c'* = *c* - *ab* (*c* = the total effect of IV on DV). IV = independent variable; DV = dependent variable; and M = mediator.

+Bootstrapped confidence approach was used for statistically testing the mediation effect.

p* < .01; *p* < .001.

**Figure 1.** Direct/indirect effects of PL on child play.

Note: The mediating role of parent involvement was tested controlled for demographics in this model. IV = independent variable; DV = dependent variable; and M = mediator.

**Figure 2.** Direct/indirect effects of PF on child play.

Note: The mediating role of parent involvement was tested controlled for demographics in this model. IV = independent variable; DV = dependent variable; and M = mediator.

Discussion

The present study developed the CPPBS in collaboration with indigenous parents and ECE experts in China. The survey data resulted in two reliable constructs of parents' beliefs

about the value of play – PL, and PF. In addition, two different patterns of family-based practices (types of play activity) were identified, with a focus on two parental roles in child play: playmate and teacher.

Two constructs of Chinese parents' beliefs on early childhood play

The first factor (PL) includes items of play or play-like activities with early academic enhancement goals, such as learning Chinese characters and classics, numbers, letters, and basic arithmetic concepts. A PL high score indicates the parent assigned a high value to this kind of play activity, and emphasized play that enhanced children's (pre-) academic skills. Chinese parents have high expectations of their children's academic performance, even in very early childhood (Luo, Tamis-LeMonda, and Song 2013). The emergence of this factor suggests parents' views on play might be transforming from traditional (e.g. academic knowledge achieved through diligence, repetition, and drill practices) to more contemporary (e.g. play-based learning, or play as a powerful instrument in early learning). This finding is consistent with Rao and Li (2009), who found that four Chinese parents in Shenzhen tended to believe in the concept of 'eduplay', a fusion of play and early academic acquisition. Although very few cases were considered in that study, the authors were able to triangulate data sources, including responses from interviews, field notes, and videotaped observations in pre-kindergarten settings (Rao and Li 2009). The findings of Rao and Li (2009) and the present study jointly suggest that the academic value of play is a unique and important construct underlying contemporary Chinese parents' play beliefs.

The second construct (PF) is derived from the CPPBS items describing children's behaviour in the pursuit of fun, including imaginary play, fantasy play, physical or rough-and-tumble play, and home/outing entertainment. Fairley PF high scores in the overall sample indicate most parents ascribed great significance to these kinds of play activities in early childhood. This may reflect contemporary notions of 'free' play, 'child-centeredness', and early childhood-appropriate practices introduced by the ECE experts and authorities in China for over two decades. The lack of significant differences in the CPPBS scores of the two factors suggests Chinese parents not only favour structuring their child's play to enhance their (pre-) academic knowledge and skills – as emphasized in PL – but also value free playtime during which children can pursue their own interests, fun, and amusement.

Two patterns of Chinese parents' engagement in children's play

It is widely believed parental beliefs guide parents' decisions on childrearing (Sigel and McGillicuddy-De Lisi 2002). Therefore, two more scales, the HPAQ and PPIQ, which included the same items as the CPPBS, were used to examine the correspondence between parents' play beliefs and their child's daily play in this study. As expected, a significant relationship was found between parental beliefs about the importance of play, and the actual occurrence of such play at home. This is consistent with the existing literature exploring such a link (Harkness et al. 2011; Tudge et al. 1999, 2006) – some of which demonstrated a positive correlation with parents' involving themselves in children's relevant activities (Blevins-Knabe and Musun-Miller 1996; Musun-Miller and Blevins-

Knabe 1998), while others suggested parents structure a home environment that potentially contributes to children's play (Parmar, Harkness, and Super 2004, 2008). This study, therefore, examined whether parents' direct involvement mediated the relationship between parental beliefs about the importance of specific types of play, and the opportunities for such play they provided at home.

The results partly support this hypothesis. When parental involvement was introduced, a new pathway between parents' beliefs about PL and the occurrence of children's play was created, serving to offset the effects on children's play. However, parents' beliefs about PF remained strongly related to play occurrence, even when the variable of parental involvement was introduced. In other words, the pathways through which parental beliefs about play value influenced the occurrence of such children's play were different for the two kinds of play activities identified via the CPPBS. This suggests parents who emphasized play's importance for academic learning involved themselves to enhance their children's play engagement, while parents who emphasized play just for fun increased their children's play engagement in various ways – e.g. planning their child's play space, providing toys and play materials, or organizing play dates with other children – rather than directly engaging themselves in their children's play.

This two-pathway model of parent's involvement is sensible, perhaps because parents would choose a mode of interaction based on children's ongoing play interests, styles, and activities (Johnson, Christie, and Yawkey 1999). Another possibility might involve the traditional emphasis on parental authority in Chinese culture. This is supported by the findings of Parmar, Harkness, and Super's (2008) research, which revealed that European-American parents emphasized parents' role as children's play partners, whereas Asian-American parents emphasized parents' role as academic coaches or teachers. Influenced by Confucianism, which has long dominated Chinese society, parents might view their engagement in children's play as inappropriate; moreover, even if parents played with their children, they might not know how to disengage from teaching and tutoring mode. Therefore, the parents in this study tended to be their children's teacher rather than playmate.

Implications

The present study has both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it provides a culturally relevant measurement through the inclusion of parents themselves in the scale development process. Further, the interaction between parental beliefs and different types of family-based play practices (i.e. educational play versus entertainment play; parent-structured versus child-chosen) was revealed, yielding valuable insights into the mechanisms that contribute to children's play experiences in multiple cultural contexts, an area overlooked in contemporary academic research.

Practically, the CPPBS could be used as a basic tool to implement preventive interventions that aim to promote children's play and outcomes at home. By referring to different pathways for the constructs in the CPPBS, two patterns of parent play engagement were identified – involving themselves in their child's play, and planning settings for it. According to Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2009), children learning through play involves two elements: first, a planned play environment that provides enriched objects and toys for experiential learning; and second, adults' intentionally participating in play by co-playing, asking questions,

and suggesting, to help children explore materials they might not have thought of by themselves. Parents can provide different materials and toy functions, as well as arrange a play environment that encourages children to explore new experiences (Scarlett 2005). Meanwhile, it is important that parents use the most suitable strategies and roles for involving themselves in different types of play activities – as both playmates and teachers – based on the context, and accounting for the child's own abilities and dispositions (Johnson, Christie, and Yawkey 1999).

Transferable lessons

The findings of the present study, although Chinese focused, are valuable for understanding the place of play in the ever-changing early years context. Over the past few decades, China has launched a series of ECE reforms to import a child-centred approach for replacing the teacher-directed pedagogy prevalent in Chinese preschools. ECE experts and authorities have proclaimed the value of play by primarily focusing on children's choices, exploration, freedom, and autonomy, which obviously conflict with China's deeply rooted Confucian cultural heritage (Li, Rao, and Tse 2012). The findings of the present study, however, show the participating Chinese parents were flexible, in that they tended to modify, rather than completely surrender, their values and beliefs. They were found to have a balanced view of the play, in terms of its academic purposes and the child's interests, fun, and freedom, and integrated Western ideas on child-centred play with Chinese traditions of adult-direct learning into their practices at home. The data suggest parents might have their own views and agendas regarding play and its value in their children's learning and lives. These agendas are complex and sometimes contradict the advice of ECE policymakers and practitioners – who may, therefore, wish to incorporate more extensive discussions of play into their parent education efforts. It is important that education authorities reflect on how to preserve the meaningful aspects of children's 'developmental niches' (Harkness and Super 1992; Super and Harkness 1986), while still incorporating necessary changes, which are likely to become even more pronounced in this global era.

Future research directions

This study has several limitations that should be noted, and that could be addressed in future studies. First, it used a sample of urban Chinese parents who were generally of middle and upper-middle socioeconomic status (SES). The findings, therefore, cannot be generalized to other subpopulations or socioeconomic backgrounds. Additional studies should be conducted with parents from other subpopulations, especially those with lower SES in less-developed regions in China. Second, in this study, parents self-reported their beliefs and practices about their child's play; stronger evidence of the scale's construct validity could be found by examining the CPPBS in relation to observations of children's play and parents' behaviour during their children's play at home. Third, the present study explored Chinese parents' play beliefs, based on their CPPBS ratings. While the emergent factors in the CPPBS might have been evidenced in other cultural groups, the two constructs in the CPPBS were descriptive in nature, and of limited generalizability for comparing Chinese parental play beliefs and those found in other

cultures. Therefore, a cross-cultural comparison of play beliefs between Chinese parents and those in other cultures is highly desirable. Finally, Chinese parents who adhered more to traditional values believed that connecting with their children as a playmate might reduce their position as authority figures. Is this specified in Chinese culture or universal in CHC? Future studies examining the relationship of CPPBS to other cultural beliefs, especially those surrounding parents' cultural values and culturally appropriate roles, are really needed to address this question.

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