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Home-School Cooperation in Rural Kindergartens: A Survey Study with Chinese Kindergarten Teachers

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Abstract

Home-school cooperation in children's education is complex. It could be even more complex in rural contexts, due to the potential contributions of isolated location, insufficient resources, a lack of teachers' professional competence, parental absence or parents' limited understandings about education. A questionnaire survey was designed to explore the views of 1526 Chinese rural kindergarten teachers on home-kindergarten cooperation. The purposes of the study were to analyse 1) how the rural teachers perceived and experienced home-kindergarten cooperation; 2) what personal and professional factors influenced teachers' perspectives and experiences; and 3) similarities and differences of teachers' views. Two results emerged from the study. Firstly, common themes concerning teachers' regular communications with parents were identified. Secondly, it is also the case that home-school cooperation was subjected to limited cooperative activities and a lack of organisational structures in the kindergartens. The study concludes with a discussion of some implications of the positive and challenging factors for encouraging cooperative home-school relationships in rural kindergartens.

Keywords: *rural kindergarten, China, home-kindergarten cooperation*

Introduction and Research Significance

Home-school relationship is often conceived as a cooperative practice wherein families and teachers work together to support children's learning through mutual engagement and sharing beliefs and practices. In China, the home-school relationship is mainly initiated by teachers with cooperation of parents. Teachers are commonly regarded as professional experts with knowledge and experience to direct children's learning and guide home-school relationships (Cheung, Pomerantz, Wang & Qu, 2016; Guo, 2005). In a way that teachers play a leading role in cooperation, "teachers' views, attitudes and beliefs about working with parents and the extent to

which they were prepared for working with parents ultimately contribute to their experiences of working with them” (Mandarakas, 2014, p.21). Therefore, it is critical to understand the perspectives and experiences of kindergarten teachers regarding their cooperative relationships with parents. This is especially important in rural contexts. There has been increased recognition of the disadvantaged positions of parents and a growing number of underperforming children in Chinese agrarian areas, mainly due to their limited knowledge about education (Muijs, 2015). It has been stated that rural children would benefit significantly from a collaborative home-school relationship (Meng, Gray, Bradt & Roets, 2018).

The rural population in China is 50.32%—more than half of the country’s total (Roberts & Hannum, 2018). Increasing urbanisation and rapid modernisation in contemporary Chinese society have seen great gaps in life qualities and educational opportunities between rural and urban citizens (OECD, 2016). According to Roberts and Hannum (2018), “*examining the rural in China provides an opportunity to investigate the processes through which rurality is marginalized in the relentless move to modernity*” (p.13).

Education is considered as the key means to addressing the gaps in rural regions. It is proposed in the Action Plan for Revitalizing Education (Chinese Ministry of Education, 1999), the first initiative that the Chinese government made to improve rural education that the country. It called for new versions of policies and practices which aimed at developing families’ and children’s capabilities for learning through enhancing their financial situations and the educational opportunities in rural schools. Since then, a perennial question in Chinese rural education is: how can children and their families gain equal access to educational resources and opportunities in the same way as those in the urban regions? (OECD, 2016).

This research gains momentum from these intensifying pressures in the field of Chinese education to universalise education. The rise of children’s enrolments in rural preschools provides further rationale for such research. A recent study shows that 90% of rural children attended preschools in China (Yue et al., 2018). While an increased focus on rural early childhood education can be found in the literature (McGettigan & Gray, 2012; OECD, 2016; Semke & Sheridan, 2012), given the new efforts to support children’s education through home-school cooperation (Meng et al., 2018), the topic needs to be further developed in relation to the work of teachers with parents. We are also compelled to explore regional differences in home-school cooperation in Chinese rural preschools, due to the large size of the country and the diverse contexts. The growing outmigration in parts of rural China constitutes a phenomenon of parental absence (Hu, 2019). This research also attempts to see whether this has been reflected in teachers’ views and experiences.

The data for this paper were derived from a survey study, the purpose of which was to explore how 1526 Chinese rural kindergarten teachers across three regions perceived and experienced the home-school cooperation in their services. The primary research questions addressed are:

1. How do teachers perceive and experience home-kindergarten cooperation in rural kindergartens?
2. What are the influences of teachers’ perspectives and experiences?
3. Are there differences in the home-kindergarten cooperation in the eastern, central and western regions in China? What are they?

The use of the term ‘cooperation’ in this study deserves some comment. In the Chinese tradition, parents tend to involve themselves in their children’s education in a way that they help children’s learning in their own homes. This tradition seems to be maintained by most Chinese parents in the current modern era (Cheung et al., 2016). Lau, Li and Rao (2012) found that “*Chinese parents are passive with respect to most school-based involvement and tend to trust and respect teachers’ decisions regarding school matters*” (p.408). While many terms have been used to describe home-

school relationships, with collaboration, cooperation, partnership as the most common three (Rouse, 2019), cooperation has been considered the most suitable type for the current study. If we take the view that collaboration means working together to create something new, cooperation is to share information in support of each other and partnership involves equal relationships in the production and decision making (Rouse, 2019), we could see that home-school practice in many parts in China might still focus on cooperation. In their study on Chinese parents' involvement in early years education, Lau et al. (2012) point out the establishment of Home-School Cooperation committee in the schools' efforts to work with parents. The current nature and characteristic of the relationship between homes and schools in China legitimise the use of 'cooperation' in the present study, in order to generate meaningful results.

Literature Review

Home-School Cooperation: Western Perspectives

In the Western world, much has been written in an attempt to conceptualise home-school relationships in children's learning. The current research draws on these insights into understanding what is expected of home-school cooperation and what are the contributions and challenges to these practices.

There is converging evidence in the educational literature that quality home-school relationships positively contribute to children's learning and development (Hill & Taylor, 2004; Hill & Tyson, 2009; Khajehpour, 2011). For example, in a recent book entitled *partnerships in the early years*, Rouse (2019) claims that "*outcomes for children are enhanced when educators, families and communities are connected and engaged in effective relationships*" (p.12). Even so, studies have also provided insights into the issues of home-school relationships. A particular issue is the inappropriate involvement of parents (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Hill and Tyson (2009) claimed that parents' assistance in completing children's homework had a negative impact on children's learning. Similarly, Froiland and Peterson (2012) stated that parents who checked their children's homework created undesirable consequences for children's learning.

Other studies have suggested that little contact between parents and teachers, underdeveloped parent-teacher communication, parents' lack of confidence to work with teachers, teachers' lack of professional competence, and limited educational resources in schools all made home-school cooperation difficult (LaForett & Mendez, 2010). It is also stated that the economic situations of a family directly affect parental involvement (Lao, Li & Rao, 2012). If the family's living conditions are poor, parents often have less time and energy to communicate with children's schools. Hill and Tyson (2009) claimed too that factors such as parents' education, occupation, attitude to children's learning, and parents' expectation and parent-child relationship were all significantly related to parents' involvement in children's learning.

Home-School Cooperation: Rural Perspectives

The literature on parents' school participation in rural contexts is very limited, when considering the topic from an early childhood perspective. An intensive literature search identified a notable absence of research in this category but several studies were located in the school sector.

The complexity of parent-teacher relationships in rural educational contexts was noted in Eppley's study (2015) in the United States. After exploring the organisational structuring of the school and expectations and experiences of rural parents, students and teachers, Eppley reported a number of interrelated factors which included: teachers' professional development that could not easily happen due to the distance from colleges and universities; the size and relative isolation of the community leading to overlapping relationships between teachers, parents and students that generated some confusing roles and responsibilities; school-community boundaries functioning unclearly that led to the school being treated as a community

service and this contributed to a difficult positioning of the school in relation to the wider educational communities. Eppley (2015) wrote: *“the participants’ sometimes conflicting description of the purposes of education mirrored tensions between local and global concerns in rural education and invited important conversations about the place of rural education in local and global contexts”* (p.81).

Other researchers such as McGettigan and Gray (2012) and Hornby and Witte (2010) have respectively focused on parents’ perspectives and school perspectives on parent school involvement in the UK and New Zealand. While highlighting close school-community bonds as the facilitator of home-school relationships in rural schools, their studies pointed out a lack of school resources, parents’ low aspirations for children’s learning and limited professional development for teachers as potential barriers in home-school relationships.

A systematic literature review on family-school connections concluded that *“quality relationships between home and school in rural settings and meaningful involvement of rural family members in educational decision making are often difficult to achieve”* (Semke and Sheridan, 2012, p.24). Consistent themes in the relationships between rural schools and families are the influence of rural ecology (e.g. geographic isolation), family conditions (e.g. busy or poor parents), teachers’ professional competencies, and educational resources. For them, these factors were interdependent and nested within each other and they together developed particular characteristics and dynamics of the home-school relationship in rural regions.

Home-School Cooperation: Chinese Perspectives

In China, the concept of home-school cooperation has emerged for some time with current policies in early childhood education that support the active participation of parents in children’s school education (OECD, 2016). In practice, the notion, however, is not perceived in the same way. One of the main problems is the unequal status between teachers and parents. Parents are generally in a passive position (Gu, 2011; Zhou, 2014). Some other major problems are that cooperation is often superficial (Ge, 2008); the share of responsibilities is unclear between kindergartens and families (Zhou, 2014); the main focus of communication is on children’s learning problems (Gu, 2011; Zhou, 2014); children are not included in the process (Ge, 2008); and home-school cooperation is often informal and poorly planned (Gu, 2011).

Effective strategies of home-school cooperation were also identified in past studies. According to Zhou (2014), parental participation in parent meetings and communication with teachers about their children’s learning enable the parents to establish good relationships with teachers. For many, effective communications between parents and schools are the most essential component of home-school cooperation (Zhou, 2014), but such an idea has been questioned and challenged by Lau et al. (2012). They claim that home-school communications imply the exchange of information about children’s learning and thereby indicate *“a passive form of parental involvement”* (p. 407). Instead of talking about home-school cooperation through a focus on communications, Lau et al. (2012) emphasise an active form of parent involvement *“in which parents volunteer in the school or participate in school governance”* (p.407).

Research into home-school cooperation in Chinese urban contexts is especially significant in drawing attention to the practices and issues and emphasising the crucial importance of adequate involvement of parents in children’s school education. While early childhood policies have given priority to children’s education in rural preschools and disadvantaged parents are to be found in agrarian rural areas (Meng et al., 2018), research evidence about home-school cooperation in rural areas is limited. It is uncertain how rural kindergartens work with parents and vice versa.

Methodology

This research involved 79 rural public kindergartens in 12 provinces in China, including Gansu Province, Guangxi Province, Guangdong Province, Guizhou Province, Henan Province, Hubei Province, Hunan Province, Yunnan Province, Jiangxi Province, Shandong Province, Zhejiang Province and Chongqing City. The sampling process of provinces and kindergartens was based on statistics from the Chinese Educational Statistic Annual Report 2016 (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2016). On this basis we chose places with large numbers of rural kindergartens. Among all of the kindergartens, 25 came from Eastern China (31.65%); 32 kindergartens came from Central China (40.50%); and 22 kindergartens came from Western China (27.85%). The research questions are:

1. How do teachers perceive and experience home-kindergarten cooperation in rural kindergartens?
2. What are the influences of teachers' perspectives and experiences?
3. Are there differences in the home-kindergarten cooperation in the eastern, central and western regions in China? What are they?

Relying on a combination of stratified sampling, random sampling and cluster sampling, researchers conducted a questionnaire survey on a sample of 1600 teachers, aged from 25 to 50. 1536 responses were collected. The main sample was made up of 1520 females and 16 males. This population was an illustrative sample of rural kindergarten teachers within these selected regions. Surveys were distributed to all the kindergarten teachers who were responsible for classroom management in their services despite their professional backgrounds, qualifications and employment conditions. The refusal rates by the kindergartens and respondents were low. All the settings were willing to participate and helped distribute the surveys to the teachers. The small sample size of males did not allow for the exploration of the effect of gender differences on teachers' perspectives. We were not surprised at this phenomenon due to the fact that very few males were working as kindergarten teachers in rural areas.

A questionnaire was considered to be an appropriate instrument to collect data for this research due to the large size of samples and because "*questionnaires allow for confidentiality and are therefore deemed to provide more accurate answers*" (Hadley, 2012, p.41). The 1536 rural kindergarten teachers were surveyed about forms of home-kindergarten cooperation, parents' attitudes towards cooperation, content of cooperation, frequency of cooperation, and the roles of parents and teachers in cooperation. The questionnaires requested teachers' backgrounds. We have also included items with multiple response options and rating scales (See Appendix 1).

To test the appropriateness and effectiveness of the survey tool, the research team conducted a preliminary survey on a sample of 68 kindergarten teachers in the Jilin Province. The analysis concluded that the reliability and validity coefficients of the survey were all above 0.80, the alpha coefficient was 0.192, the half-point coefficient was 0.815, 6 factors total 86 items, and the cumulative results explained 68.601% of the total variance. The correlation coefficient matrix and confirmatory factor analysis both reached acceptable levels. These indicated that the tool was good and could be used in this research. SPSS 20.0 statistical software was employed to analyse and process the data.

In line with the ethical rules of the Research Institute of Rural Education in Northeast Normal University, the funder of this research, an information notice was included in this survey-based study to inform kindergartens and respondents about the aims of the study and seek their consent. Respondents were asked to provide their consent before taking the survey.

Results

The study brings together participants' responses with the intention of building an understanding of rural kindergarten teachers' perceptions and experiences of working with children's parents. In generating and co-assembling the responses, we draw on the three research questions, looking at teachers' perceptions and experiences, the influences on their perceptions, and experiences and similarities and differences of teachers' perspectives across the regions. From the data, three main results were identified as particularly relevant to these questions, including: 1) home-kindergarten communications; 2) educational activities that involve parents; and 3) home-kindergarten cooperation organisations.

Home-kindergarten Communications: Circumstances that Require Communications with Parents

In response to the question of when teachers contact parents for communications (Table 1), the highest response (90.1%) was when a child had physical or health issues. The proportion of teachers who answered 'when a child has behaviour problems' and 'to learn about a child's behaviours at home' was similar (88.0% and 87.1%, respectively).

Table 1: Proportion of Teachers who Contact Parents in Various Situations

When do teachers contact parents?	Number of People	Proportion (%)
To learn about a child's behaviours at home	1338	87.1
When a child makes progress	1187	77.3
When a child has learning problems	1253	81.6
When a child has behaviour problems	1352	88.0
When a child has physical or health issues	1384	90.1
Other	110	7.2

Across the regions (Table 2), the proportion of teachers choosing to communicate with parents was higher in the east than in the other regions.

Table 2: Proportion of Teachers who Contact Parents in Various Situations Across the Three Regions

When do teachers contact parents?	Eastern		Central		Western	
	Number of people	Proportion (%)	Number of people	Proportion (%)	Number of people	Proportion (%)
To learn about a child's behaviours at home	403	92.6	353	83.3	581	85.8
When a child makes progress	352	80.9	329	77.6	505	74.6
When a child has learning problems	376	86.4	340	80.2	536	79.2
When a child has behaviour problems	402	92.4	362	85.4	587	86.7
When a child has physical or health problems	396	91.0	387	90.7	598	88.3
Other	34	7.8	21	5.0	55	8.1

Teachers' Support of Parents' Understanding of Kindergarten Curriculum

In response to the question of whether you help parents understand the curriculum in the kindergarten, the majority of teachers (66.2%) chose the option of 'always' and 33.2% answered 'occasionally'. Only 0.1-0.5% of the teachers 'seldom' or 'never' did this.

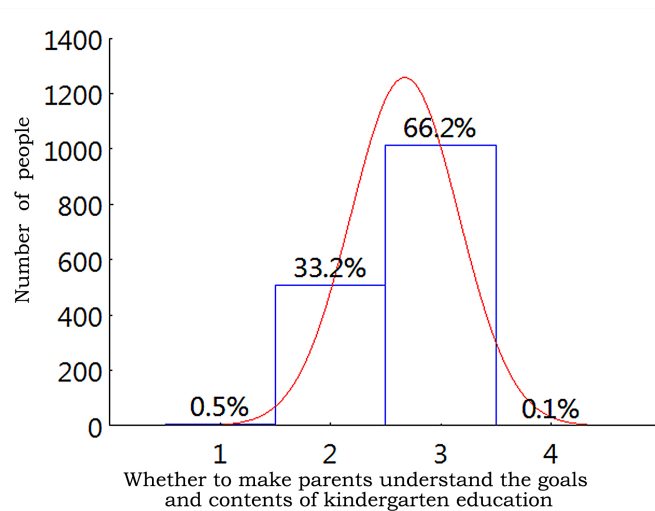
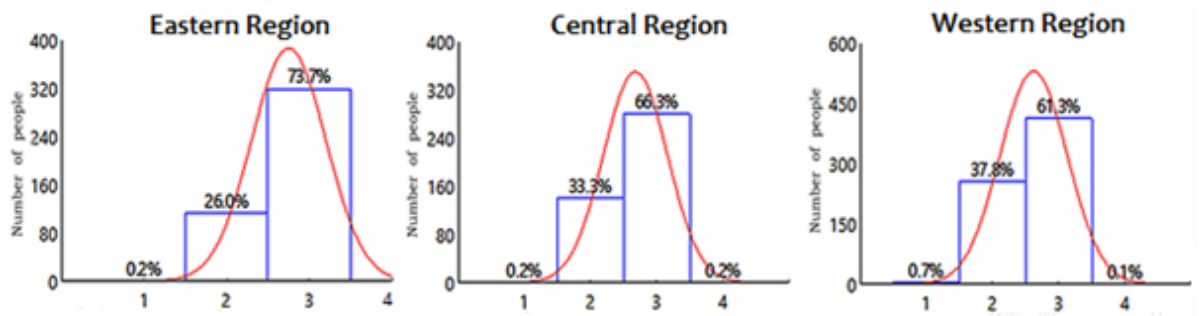


Figure 1: Teachers' responses to 'Do you help parents understand the curriculum in the kindergarten?'

Looking at the data across the regions, the proportion of teachers choosing 'always' in the eastern region (73.7%) was significantly higher than the other regions. 0.7% of the western teachers seldom or never helped parents understand their curriculum, which makes the highest number among all the three regions.



In the figure, x-axis depicts the teachers' options in answering how often they help parents understand the kindergarten curriculum: 1-never, 2-occasionally/sometimes, 3-always/most of the time, 4-all the time; y-axis depicts the number of participants.

Figure 2: Proportion of Teachers' Responses Across the Three Regions to the Question of 'Do you help parents understand the kindergarten curriculum?'

Results of rank correlation tests of nonparametric statistics indicated that although teachers' first degree, major of first degree and professional title had little influence on whether they tried to 'help parents understand the kindergarten curriculum'; while teachers' age, monthly income, marital status, major of highest degree and their teaching experience significantly impacted teachers' work in this area.

Table 3: Factors Influencing Teachers' Work that Helps Parents Understand Kindergarten Curriculum

Factor	Rank Correlation Coefficient	Factor	Rank Correlation Coefficient
Duration of teaching experience	0.1858*	Major of first degree	-0.0141
Age	0.1580*	Having children	-0.1446*
Monthly income	0.1383*	Current professional title	-0.1286*
Major of highest degree	0.0060	Region	-0.1069*
Marital status	0.1529	First degree	-0.0197

* indicates that the rank correlation is significant.

Frequency of the Communication Between Teachers and Parents

Results indicated that most teachers (70.54%) spoke with parents twice a day. 13.17% of teachers communicated with parents more than four times a day (including four times or more), and a few teachers (1.49%) spoke with parents than once a day or less.

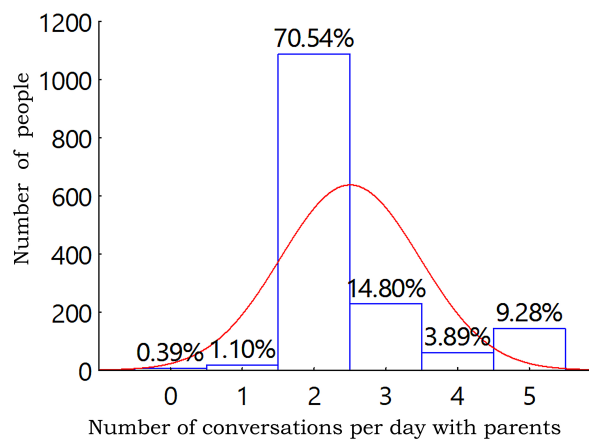


Figure 3: Number of Conversations with Parents Every Day

The analysis of the number of conversations between teachers and parents in different regions showed that although the proportion of teachers who spoke with parents in the eastern region (65.83%) was lower than in the central (75.06%) and western (70.69%) regions, the proportion of teachers who had more than five talks with parents per day in the eastern region (16.74%) was much higher than in the central (4.24%) and western (7.66%) regions (Figure 4). The proportion of teachers who communicated with parents less than once a day in the central region (3.06%) was much higher than those in the eastern (0.92%) and western (0.89%) regions

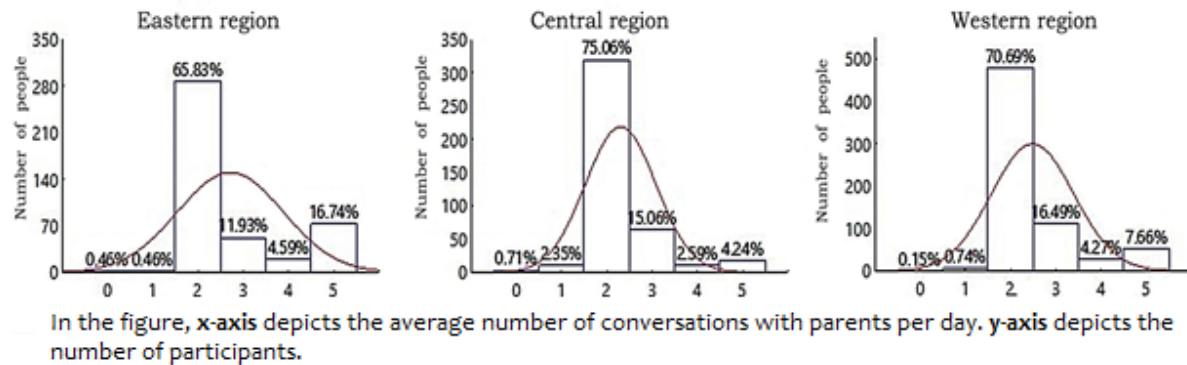


Figure 4: Number of Teachers' Conversations with Parents per day by Region

Correlation coefficients are presented in Table 4 and reveal that teachers' monthly income, duration of teaching experience, marital status and age are positively related to the frequency of their daily conversations with parents. However, their daily conversations were not enhanced by region, professional title and their own parenting experience. The result indicates that the teachers who tended to have more conversations with parents were married and senior in age and had a higher monthly income, or longer teaching experience.

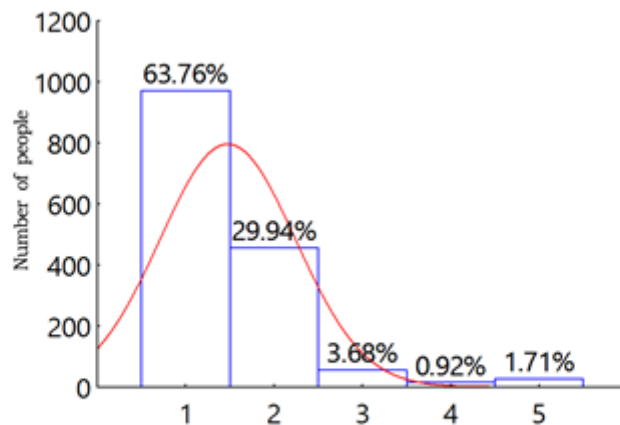
Table 4: Analysis of Factors Influencing the Frequency of Teachers' Daily Conversations with Parents

Factor	Rank Correlation Coefficient	Factor	Rank Correlation Coefficient
Monthly income	0.1271*	First degree	-0.0521*
Duration of teaching experience	0.0521*	Having children	-0.0476
Age	0.0136	Region	-0.0416
Marital status	-0.0050	Current professional title	-0.0413
Major of first degree	-0.0323	Major of highest degree	-0.0339

* indicates that the rank correlation is significant.

Communication with Parents About Children's Learning in the Kindergartens

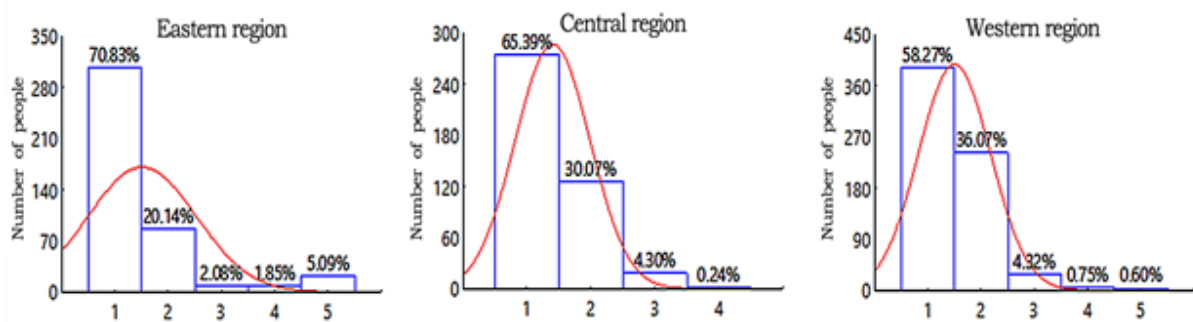
The analysis of the teachers' communications with parents about children's learning in the kindergartens showed that most teachers (63.76%) consistently implemented this practice (Figure 5). Findings revealed that 29.94% of the teachers talked to parents often while a very small number of teachers occasionally, seldom or never did this (<5.00%).



In the figure, x-axis depicts the teachers' options in answering how often they communicate with parents about children's learning in the kindergartens: 1- consistently, 2-often, 3-occasionally, 4-seldom, 5-never. y-axis depicts the number of participants.

Figure 5: Teachers' Communications with Parents About Children's Learning in the Kindergartens

Analysis of the data in the regions (Figure 6) found a relatively higher number of eastern teachers either consistently (70.83%) or never (5.09%) communicated with parents about their children's learning in the kindergartens. They are both higher than the responses in the central and western regions. In comparison, a relatively large number of western teachers often communicated with parents (36.07%) and this is closely followed by the teachers in the central region (30.07%).



In the figure, x-axis depicts the teachers' options in answering how often they communicate with parents about their children's learning in the kindergartens: 1- consistently, 2-often, 3-occasionally, 4-seldom, 5-never. y-axis depicts the number of participants.

Figure 6: Teachers' Communication with Parents About Children's Learning by Regions

Analysis of the correlation between teachers' backgrounds and their responses to the above question showed (Table 5) many positive coefficients and a few negative coefficients. Teachers' region, marital status, their own parenting experience, major of highest degree and major of first degree made important contributions. Teachers' communication with parents regarding children's learning however was not positively related to their years of work, age, monthly income and the first degree. As the table indicates, teachers' own parenting experience and marital status are the greatest influences on their communications with parents about children's learning. To some extent, this could mean that the teachers who were married or parents themselves took children's learning more seriously and they were more likely than their unmarried peers to communicate with parents about children's learning.

Table 5: Analysis of Factors Influencing Teachers' Communication with Parents About Children's Learning in the Kindergartens

Factor	Rank Correlation Coefficient	Factor	Rank Correlation Coefficient
Having children	0.0569*	Duration of teaching experience	-0.1488*
Marital status	0.0886*	Age	-0.0963*
Current professional title	0.0511*	Monthly income	-0.0774*
Major of first degree	0.0454	First degree	-0.0570*
Major of highest degree	0.0301		

*indicates that the rank correlation is significant.

Educational Activities that Involve Parents

As shown in Table 6, most teachers (74.3%~88.1%) believed that the kindergarten activities in which parents participated primarily included watching kindergarten activities, participating in their own child's activities and providing learning materials. A small proportion of teachers (17.6%~18.7%) thought that parents participated in management and decision-making, and 32.9%~40.7% of teachers believed that parents organised learning activities and participated in volunteer events.

Table 6: Teachers' Responses of Parent Participation in Educational and Teaching Activities

Option	Number of People	Proportion (%)
Watching kindergarten activities	1292	84.1
Participating in own child's activities	1354	88.1
Providing materials	1142	74.3
Organising activities	626	40.7
Participating in management	271	17.6
Participating in decision-making	287	18.7
Volunteering	506	32.9

Analysis of the data based on the regions (Table 7) showed some key differences. The proportions of parents participating in management, decision-making and volunteering in the western region were similar (18.9%~23.8%). However, in the eastern region (23.7%~49.4%) and the central region (8.9%~30.6%), there is great variability in the parents' involvement in management, decision-making and volunteer activities. In addition, nearly half of the parents in the eastern region had participated in volunteer activities while the proportion in the central and western regions was relatively low.

Table 7: Parent Participation in Educational and Teaching Activities Across the Regions

	Eastern		Central		Western	
	Number of people	Proportion (%)	Number of people	Proportion (%)	Number of people	Proportion (%)
Watching kindergarten activities	383	88.0	355	83.5	553	81.7
Participating in own child's learning	407	93.6	381	89.6	566	83.6
Providing materials	367	84.4	287	67.5	487	71.9
Organising activities	239	54.9	141	33.2	246	36.3
Participating in management	103	23.7	39	9.2	128	18.9
Participating in decision-making	117	26.9	38	8.9	132	19.5
Volunteering	215	49.4	130	30.6	161	23.8

Further analysis of the influence of teachers' backgrounds on their responses showed (Table 8) that teachers' monthly income, marital status, years of teaching, and major of first degree were positively related to the results. Teachers' general educational background, professional title, major of first degree, first degree, age and own parenting experience did not make important contributions to their involvement of parents in the educational and teaching activities in the kindergartens.

Table 8: Analysis of Teachers' Backgrounds on their Involvement of Parents in Educational and Teaching Activities

Factor	Rank Correlation Coefficient	Factor	Rank Correlation Coefficient
Monthly income	0.0894*	Major of first degree	-0.0305*
Marital status	0.0156	Current professional title	-0.0020
Duration of teaching experience	0.0018	First degree	-0.0294*
Major of highest degree	0.0004	Age	-0.0097
		Having children	-0.0029

* indicates that the rank correlation is significant.

Home-Kindergarten Cooperation Organisations

As shown in Table 9, the highest response to the question 'What home-kindergarten cooperation organisations are available in the kindergarten?' is the parent committees (71.26%). This is followed by parent-child activity centres (35.21%) and parent schools (31.97%). The proportion of kindergartens with parent-teacher committees was relatively low (18.19%), and 12.62% of kindergartens did not have any type of home-kindergarten cooperation organisations.

Table 9: Proportion of Kindergartens with/without a Home-Kindergarten Cooperation Organization

	Number of People	Proportion (%)
Parent committee	1101	71.26
Parent school	494	31.97
Parent-teacher committee	281	18.19
Parent-child activity centre	544	35.21
None	195	12.62

When analysed by the regions (Table 10), data showed that the majority of eastern and western kindergartens had at least one type of home-kindergarten cooperation organisation. Only 4.35% eastern kindergartens and 10.87% western kindergartens did not have a home-kindergarten cooperation organisation. However, nearly a quarter of the kindergartens in the central region did not have a home-kindergarten cooperation organisation.

Table 10: Home-Kindergarten Cooperation Organisations Across the Regions

	Eastern		Central		Western	
	Number of people	Proportion (%)	Number of people	Proportion (%)	Number of people	Proportion (%)
Parent committee	386	88.33	216	50.70	498	73.13
Parent school	183	41.88	98	23.00	213	31.28
Parent-teacher committee	93	21.28	55	12.91	133	19.53
Parent-child activity centre	158	36.16	133	31.22	252	37.00
None	19	4.35	102	23.94	74	10.87

Analysis of the influences of teachers' backgrounds (Table 11) showed that teachers' monthly income, years of teaching and age were not positively related to their responses on the availability of home-kindergarten cooperation organisations. A positive relation was found between the result and all other factors.

Table 11: Analysis of Factors Influencing the Choice of Home-Kindergarten Cooperation

Factor	Rank Correlation Coefficient	Factor	Rank Correlation Coefficient
Professional title	0.1125*	Monthly income	-0.1638*
Major of first degree	0.0901*	Duration of teaching experience	-0.0662*
First degree	0.0641*	Age	-0.0407*
Having children	0.0554*	Region	0.0401*
Major of highest degree	0.0405*	Marital status	0.0143

* indicates that the rank correlation is significant.

Discussion

The purpose of the study was to explore 1526 Chinese rural kindergarten teachers' perceptions and experiences of home-school cooperation, teachers' personal and professional factors that influenced their perspectives and experiences and the commonalities and differences of the results between the three study regions.

We identified mixed responses from the participants. Results suggest that the teachers' work with parents is a diverse and complex practice, similar to those reported by studies in other countries (e.g. Eppley, 2015; Hornby & Witte, 2010). Teachers' experiences have been uneven and there were some obstacles to progress. Involving and communicating with parents and providing parents with cooperative activities and resources appeared to make home-kindergarten cooperation complex in most of the study contexts. However, the study also reveals some areas where positive aspects of cooperation seemed to be taking place.

The role of teachers' qualification, employment condition, work experience and professional competence have been highlighted in the literature as key factors that affect home-kindergarten cooperation, having a profound impact on their work with parents and acting as an important catalyst for creating active involvement of parents in children's learning (Dong & Wang, 2015). This sentiment is echoed in the study reported in the current paper where the impact of teachers' personal and professional factors such as their professional backgrounds, education and their employment conditions (e.g. monthly income) seemed to have the potential to develop home-school cooperation.

It is important to note, however, that overall, teachers' marital status was positively associated with all the home-school cooperative practices. More specifically, married teachers were active co-operators with parents and they had positive attitudes and effective strategies to engage parents in communications. Our results add to the growing literature indicating that married teachers are more committed to rural education than single teachers (Boylan & McSwan, 1998; Pishghadam & Sahebjam, 2012). From this, we could infer that it is their settlement and commitment to the rural lives that made a positive difference in rural teachers' professional practice.

In the data, we have also noted that the organisation and type of home-kindergarten cooperation in the participating kindergartens were limited, occurring primarily in the form of parent committees. Some kindergartens did not even have a kind of home-kindergarten collaboration organisation. This result is echoed in other studies. In their research on teacher quality in Chinese rural schools, Dong and Wang (2015) stated that a lack of educational resources and issues of learning inequalities in rural schools made teachers' work difficult.

The analysis of the results indicated that parents' involvement in the kindergarten activities was mainly in the form of watching or participating in the parent-child activities organised by kindergartens. Parents were less involved in the management and decision-making of kindergartens, which was consistent with the results of previous research (Zhou, 2014). In addition, home-kindergarten communications tended to focus on problems that appeared in children's learning.

We are therefore concerned about the opportunities that occurred to involve parents in the kindergartens. LaForett et al. (2010) have argued for both school affordances of parents' school participation, and parents' own choices to determine how they participate. Undoubtedly, teachers in this study were making attempts to include parents into the kindergarten environment by providing parents with the activities, organisational structures and teachers' times and contacts, but the critical feature of this inclusion was that parents were passively involved and their cooperative experiences were directed and led by the teachers.

In addition, data analysis across the regions shows that, on the whole, teachers in the eastern region generally have better views on current home-kindergarten cooperation than those in the central and western regions. That is to say, in the aspects of cooperation attitudes, parental roles, cooperation activities, and communication frequency, the teachers were more confident about the quality of their home-school collaboration. This finding of home-school cooperation as a contextualised practice is supported by other studies (Kroeger & Lash, 2011). Research increasingly endorses such contextualised practice as a common phenomenon in relation not only to home-school cooperation but to many aspects of children's learning and development. We could also see this as the result of the developed economy in the eastern region, and the professional quality and professional development opportunities teachers receive. According to Dong and Wang (2015), some rural schools in China have difficulties developing their capacity to support children's learning, since economic advancement and associated educational resources are disproportionately concentrated in other advanced areas. The imbalance in the opportunities, teachers' professional competencies and educational resources between the eastern and other areas contribute to some differences in teachers' work with parents.

As is also evident from teachers' data, parental absence due to outmigration was not mentioned. Within the context of home-school cooperation, it would be possible that teachers perceived their work only with the parents who were available. In Chinese culture, family is a broad umbrella concept that includes many members, and this is especially so for those in rural communities or under disadvantaged circumstances for the purpose of maximising resources (Tang & Li, 2021). As such, grandparents or other family members might have worked with teachers in the absence of children's parents. Due to the research design that treated family as an undefined term, we acknowledge a significant gap in our understanding of how teachers worked with diverse types of families. This gap has also pointed in a possible direction for future research.

Future research directions

As the first phase of a larger project on home-school cooperation in Chinese rural kindergartens, the current research represents an initial attempt to generally explore teachers' perspectives. The results of the study therefore needs to be interpreted with caution. Limitations of the study include the selected sample, settings, and the use of only one research method. The following questions could be explored in future studies:

What makes married teachers better teachers in rural education?

The current research shows that teachers' marital status is positively related to their work with parents. Previous literature has demonstrated the importance of teachers' settlement in rural lives as a key factor of their commitment to rural education (Boylan and McSwan, 1998; Pishghadam and Sahebjam, 2012). Within the context of Chinese education, it is important to raise this question and investigate the reasons why married teachers are better teachers in rural education.

How do rural parents and children understand and experience home-school cooperation?

This study involved only rural teachers. Future investigations could involve rural parents and children. Including the opinions of parents, children and other family and community members in the research would provide a greater reliability and generate more statistically and qualitatively significant data. It would also be interesting to compare their perspectives to identify the needs, expectations, and aspirations of different people about working with each other.

What are the differences of home-school cooperation between urban and rural kindergartens and what are the reasons for these differences?

Another study that we propose for the future is a comparative project that examines the differences of home-school cooperation between urban and rural kindergartens. It is a significant attempt to identify how contexts make a difference to teachers' work with parents.

How do teachers work with the parents who are physically absent in children's lives due to outmigration?

The landscape of current rural context in China presents a unique opportunity for future research on teachers' work with the parents who are physically absent in children's lives due to outmigration. From our vantage point, setting up kindergarten policies and practices to support parental involvement could improve parent-school relations and increase children's capacity to learn well. However, present conditions in some if not many rural families suggest against a heavy reliance on parents' school participation to support children's learning. There might be school system that implicitly privileges children whose parents are able to be involved in school. Given that "millions of rural Chinese children grow up in the absence of one or both parents due to work migration" (Hu, 2019, p.641), the practice of home-kindergarten cooperation needs to be considered more individually, contextually, and broadly by putting aside preset values and expectations. Further work is needed to look at how teachers work with the parents who are physically absent due to outmigration to provide necessary support to them all, including teachers, parents and children.

Conclusion

Whist the limitations of the study are recognised, the research nevertheless yields important evidence that provides a useful empirical basis for future directions of research on home-school cooperation in rural kindergartens. A strength of this survey study lies in how it reveals some strategies and issues which are associated with participating kindergarten teachers' home-school practices. We have also seen the effects of teachers' personal and professional backgrounds and employment conditions on home-kindergarten cooperation. Although general and broad in nature, the research findings highlight a need to improve teachers' commitments, rural kindergarten practices and resources in the pursuit of quality educational provision for children and parents in relatively isolated communities. Future research is required to explore the reasons why marital status was a positive contributor to their work with parents. Detailed perspectives from teachers, parents, children and rural communities in more regions are needed too. Future investigations should also focus on teachers' work with parents who are physically away due to work migration.

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Appendix 1: Questionnaire Items for Rural Kindergarten Teachers

Teachers' Background information

1. Sex
2. Age
3. Year of teaching in early childhood education
4. Year of teaching in the current kindergarten
5. Location of the kindergarten
6. Average monthly income
7. Marital status
8. Having own children or not
9. First Higher Education qualification and the year in which it's obtained
10. Major of the first Higher Education Qualification
11. Major of the highest qualification
12. Current professional title

Home-kindergarten cooperation

When do you contact parents for communications? (Multiple answers can be ticked)

- To learn about a child's behaviours at home
- When a child makes progress
- When a child has learning problems
- When a child has behaviour problems
- When a child has physical or health issues
- Other

How often do you communicate with parents?

- More than five times a day
- Four times a day
- Three times a day
- Twice a day
- Once a day
- Less than once a day

Do you help parents understand the curriculum in the kindergarten and if so, how often? (Tick whatever is suitable)

- Consistently
- Often
- Occasionally
- Never

How often do you communicate with parents about children's learning in the kindergarten?

- Consistently
- Often
- Occasionally
- Never

What educational activities do you provide for parents' involvement in the kindergarten? (Multiple answers can be ticked)

- Watching kindergarten activities
- Participating in own child's activities

- Providing materials
- Organising activities
- Participating in management
- Participating in decision-making
- Volunteering

What home-kindergarten cooperation organisations are available in the kindergarten? (Multiple answers can be ticked)

- Parent committee
- Parent school
- Parent-teacher committee
- Parent-child activity centre
- None