



What Can Children Learn Through Play? Chinese Parents' Perspective of Play and Learning in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

The value of play has been highly valued and promoted in early childhood education in New Zealand and the modern Western countries. However, this concept has recently been challenged by Chinese parents who believe children's academic achievement as being far more important than play in early childhood education. This review of a selected portion of a vast array of literature on play intends to examine Chinese parents' perspective of play and compare it with the mainstream theory of play. A series of themes emerge from the literature, and in addition, my experiences of being both a Chinese parent and an early childhood teacher educator will add light to discussion and to promote thinking about the cultural differences in beliefs about play when supporting student teachers.

Key Words: Play; Early childhood education; Learning through play; Teacher's role; Play and culture; Parent's perspective

Recent developments in early childhood education have highlighted the need and value of play in early childhood education (Claiborne & Drewery, 2010; Ministry of Education, 1996; Santer, Griffiths, & Goodall, 2007). The New Zealand early childhood education framework, *Te Whāriki*, strongly positions play within the context of children's learning (White, Ellis, O'Malley, Rockel, Stover, & Toso, 2009). In modern Western countries such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, play is considered as a cognitive process (Santrock, 2009) and "a vehicle for defining, producing and transforming knowledge" (White, O'Malley, Toso, Rockel, Stover & Ellis, 2007, p. 100).

However, few writers have been able to draw on Chinese perspectives of play in early childhood education. Chua (2011) argues that play has no role in the learning process and learning through play is still not widely accepted by Chinese parents. Most Chinese parents believe that academic achievement is far more important than play in their child's education (Chang, 2003; Roopnarine & Johnson, 2001). In Hong Kong, "play was viewed as an instructional tool for maximizing direct teaching" (Pramling-Samuelsson & Fleeer, 2008, p. 177). Consequently, instead of play, many Chinese children are sent to out-of-school programmes to reinforce what they have learnt at school or to take lessons in extra curricula, such as a second language or music, in order to be successful (Chang, 2003).



As a result, many Chinese parents believe that an education setting should be a place for their children to “learn” rather than “play”. Chinese parents, especially new immigrants, are often eager to find out what their child learns at an early childhood centre, and expect teachers to “teach” rather than letting the children play most of the time (Gao, 2006; Li, 2001; Liao, 2007; Yang, 2011; Wu, 2009).

Play and Education in Chinese Context

Education has an important place and is highly valued in Chinese society (Wu, 2003). It is believed to be a ladder to the achievement of higher social status, and therefore, providing education is thought to be one of the most important parental responsibilities (Chang, 2003; Wu, 2003). In addition, almost every Chinese child is told that one should endeavour in their learning and not to waste too much time in; they are also told that effort and hard work are more important than innate ability (Santrock, 2009; Wu, 2003).

Confucius is regarded as the Greatest Teacher by Chinese people and he promoted that every person is educable. Being influenced by Confucianism for a long time, Chinese parents believe that their child is like clay which is malleable and children need to be educated as early as possible. This is also why Chinese parents expect their child to work hard to learn rather than play. Didactic instruction and 3-R (reading-writing-arithmetic) approaches are still commonly used in Chinese education system (Chang, 2003).

There is an historical basis to Chua’s (2011) assertion that modern Chinese parents do not widely believe that learning occurs through play. “During the Sung dynasty (960–1279), play was ‘depreciated in favour of a strict curriculum that valued a rigorous examination system’” (Pan, 1994, as cited in Chang, 2003, p. 280). Children do not have much time to play as they are often sent to out-of-school programmes to take lessons in arts, maths, abacus, computing, music, English, etc. (Chang, 2003). A study conducted in Taiwan found that Taiwanese mothers while encourage pretend play, they use it to practise proper conduct; for example, to teach children appropriate social routines (Smith, 2010). As most Chinese parents do not think of childhood as a time for children to enjoy playing and exploring in the world around them, the relationship between play and curriculum is incompatible (Chang, 2003).

The above discussion indicates that play is not valued in Chinese societies (including China, Hong Kong and Taiwan) due to the Chinese cultural background and the intense competition between children. According to Chang (2003), “Children’s play is the product of the interactions of multiple factors embedded in different contexts” (p. 295). These contexts include classroom, society, history and culture.

Although play is not important for most Chinese parents, one question that needs to be asked, however, is whether Chinese children do play in their childhood. A collection of old Chinese paintings of children’s play displayed in the National Museum in Taiwan shows that young Chinese children engaged in a range of play activities long ago, and these activities and toys were endowed with cultural features (Chang, 2003). For example, in these Chinese paintings, children were playing with lanterns during the Lantern Festival and with toads during the Dragon Boat Festival – activities still popular in Taiwan today. Another important finding



was that Chinese children played outside a lot in the past, according to these traditional Chinese pictures. They might play in their garden, play hide and seek outside with their friends, or catch fish from a stream (Holman, 2007). These historical pictures of children's play illustrate that Chinese children did enjoy play and that a lot of their play activities involved nature.

Play and Culture

Play can be seen as both an effect of and on culture because children's play reproduces and also changes culture over time. Children in rural and agricultural societies have less time to play as they must do domestic chores in order to help adults. In addition, children represent in their play the activities they see adults doing and the values that are important for their society.

Play can also be interpreted as training for adult life as well as a substitute for formal education. Smith (2010) argues that the way adults from a given culture see play has an influence on the interactions between parents and children, the stimulus given to children, and the availability of toys or spaces for play. As an Asian early childhood teacher, I am particularly interested in what European children do during their play and how their parents play with them, and I compare this with my own Asian background. I have observed that European fathers play much more with their children than Asian fathers do. This difference can be explained as a reflection of the father's role in different cultures – traditionally, Chinese men carry the responsibility of supporting the family financially and leave the household duties to the women, including the rearing and educating of the children.

Another significant cultural difference between Chinese and Western societies is that modern Western societies place a high value on play and the role of play in learning. In some countries such as the United States and New Zealand, play is seen as the preferred way to promote competence and academic success. Teachers are encouraged to play with children and use play as a means of teaching (Smith, 2010).

A study conducted in the United States highlights that parents from different cultures have different expectations of their child's mathematics achievement. This research concluded that American parents consider their child's mathematics success is due to his or her innate ability, whereas Asian parents believe that effort and training is the key to achievement in mathematics (Santrock, 2009). This finding enhances our understanding that Asian parents are more likely to expect their children to play less so they have time to put more effort into academic learning.

Each culture has different ways of transmitting cultural knowledge. Within New Zealand, play is associated with ideas about "freedom" (Claiborne & Drewery, 2010). On the other hand, for Māori, play is traditionally seen as a mechanism for acquiring skills for cultural survival and a "connecting link" between the centre and the dimensions of the child. Besides this, play can also involve cultural rituals, events and tereos (White et al., 2009).

It is interesting to see how people from different cultures perceive education. Roopnarine & Johnson (2001) compared the beliefs of parents from the United States, Japan and China when responding to the question "Why should a society have preschool?". Sixty-seven per cent of



the Chinese parents in the study indicated that academic goals should be in the top three priorities for preschools in society, whereas only 25% of the Chinese parents gave “opportunities for playing with other children” in their top three reasons (Roopnarine & Johnson, 2001). The result of this study confirms that Chinese parents see academic achievement as being far more important than play in early childhood education.

Interestingly, when comparing this finding with other research, the teachers in the United States have totally different ideas on what four-year-olds should learn at preschool. According to Lee (2006), teachers in the United States believe that preschoolers should have fun and learn through play. Moreover, they should be encouraged to explore and discover their own environment and not be hurried to learn academic subjects. The results of Lee’s (2006) study reflect what most mainstream early childhood teachers believe children should be doing at their early childhood centres.

Children’s Perspectives of Play

The discussion above was intended to focus on parents’ and teachers’ perspective of play from Asian and Western cultures. However, the children’s perspective also needs to be considered. Research conducted in 2001 (Cook & Hess, 2001, as cited in Santer, Griffiths & Goodall, 2007) reports that four- and five-year-olds believe that it is important to have playmates and to meet other children. In addition, they like to have spaces and opportunities for play as well as being allowed to do something they want to do rather than being told what to do.

Another important finding was that for children, play is a natural activity and is part of their daily lives (Stamatoglou, 2004). Although adults think play is children’s work, the children themselves are not aware of the difference between play and work. Surprisingly, learning was presented in children’s play although they are not aware of it. Also, children showed interest for literacy and numeracy through their play activities. These findings are useful when explaining to Asian parents the benefit of play and the effectiveness of using play to promote learning.

Although it is a challenge for educators to advocate for preserving play in early childhood classrooms in the face of increasing demands for a focus on academic skills (Bodrova & Leong, 2010), it might be useful if early childhood teachers understand the benefit of play and are able to plan effective play activities in order to promote learning through play.

What Do Children Learn Through Play?

The idea of play as the centre of early childhood education is challenged when it is introduced to Asian countries. Chinese parents’ beliefs about education have been influenced by their image of children as mouldable clay. As a result, most Chinese parents and teachers believe that everyone is educable, and training and didactic instruction are valued as effective methods in education (Chang, 2003). Although the constructivist approach to learning is favoured in Western pedagogy, some experts in educational psychology believe that many effective teachers in fact use both constructivist and a direct-instruction approach rather than using either exclusively (Santrock, 2009). However, children from all societies have their



own ways of representing the world; for example, through the observation of the adults or interaction with other children (Smith, 2010).

The Western world considers play as a cognitive process, and mainstream early childhood centres in New Zealand encourage learning through play and relationships with people, places and things. *Te Whāriki* promotes that children learn “by doing, by asking questions, by interacting with others, by setting up theories or ideas about how things work and trying them out, by the purposeful use of resources” (Ministry of Education, 1996, p. 82), as well as by talking about their play and, in so doing, developing reflective skills. Through working and playing together, children develop a sense of responsibility for the well-being of others and their environment (Ministry of Education, 1996).

In addition, children have the potential to develop spatial knowledge and cognition through play without adult interference (Ortega, 2003; Gregory, Kim, & Whiren, 2003; White et al., 2009). Another example of how children learn through play can be when children attempt to have a conversation in the sandpit, or try to communicate with each other, following rules such as taking turns to speak (Claiborne & Drewery, 2010, p. 160) – this is when they start developing their language skills. Therefore, “play is a means of becoming a social agent, a vehicle for defining, producing and transforming knowledge” (White et al., 2007, p. 100).

ECE Context in New Zealand

In *Te Whāriki*, the national early childhood education framework, “play has been strongly positioned within the context of learning” (White et al., 2009, p. 23) and the value of play is recognised. Hill (2005) identified four cognitive contexts that might be challenging for early childhood practitioners when planning for children’s play and learning. “These contexts are ages and stages, areas of play, family and school and the partnership inherent in the Treaty of Waitangi” (p. 23). For instance, Hill argues that an early childhood education setting would not be able to reflect children’s interests and background if its play areas were full of monocultural equipment and resources. Furthermore, when working with families to prepare children for school, can early childhood teachers resist readily available “preschool” activities, and work with families and schools in order to foster children’s ability to make decision and choices?

Moreover, if *Te Whāriki* mainly linked with “ages” and “stages”, there is not much space left for early childhood teachers to take a bicultural stance and enable children to experience the partnership (Hill, 2005). White et al. (2009) promote that early childhood teachers should make connections between the physical and spiritual aspects of the whole child. When a child enters the early childhood environment they also bring with them their “whakapapa, their history and the hopes their family had for them in the future” (White et al., 2009, p. 41). As early childhood teachers, do we always remember this and incorporate it when we plan for children?

The Role of Adults When Facilitating Free Play

“Within a sociocultural framework, the adult’s role can be seen as ‘more expert other’ alongside a child’s play which may require some degree of intervention in order to meet the adult’s expectation” (White et al., 2007, p. 97). Free play does not equate to just letting



children play by themselves. Yang (2000) found that children between the ages of three and six often do not pay much attention to the play activities they have selected and require adult support to help them to reflect upon their choices.

Adults have a significant role when planning and facilitating free play that promotes learning through play. Firstly, besides providing a wide range of appropriate play activities for children to choose from, adults need to support and extend children's play but not to interrupt or dominate. Secondly, some responsive interaction is necessary when facilitating children's play. Through meaningful support, adults can scaffold children's learning to their next level. In addition, when not interacting with children, teachers need to use observation to assess and plan for supporting children's learning and development. Lastly, early childhood teachers need to have some literacy education in order to recognise children's play with sounds and rhythms and to extend their learning in early literacy (Ministry of Education, 1996; Santer, et al., 2007; White et al., 2009). It is important that early childhood teachers remind themselves that "play is not a break from the curriculum; play is the best way to implement the curriculum" (Nourot, 2007, p. 2). Consequently, play is not a "New Zealand tradition"; instead, it is an opportunity to learn more about the complex world of the child when we work with them (Hill, 2005).

Conclusion

This essay has argued that play supports learning if the play is carefully planned and facilitated. One of the more significant findings to emerge from this literature review is that Asian parents might agree with the concept of play if they are aware of the benefit of play. The review has also shown that there is a relationship between play and culture and that they influence each other. The evidence from the review suggests that children's perspective of play needs to be considered and the early childhood teachers' role in facilitating play needs to be emphasised in order to enable learning to happen through children's play.

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