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TAIWAN

Studies on play and toys in Taiwan: Images of toys created by kindergarten contexts and teacher and parent beliefs about play.

Background

Taiwan is a mountainous island ('Island China') in the South China Sea with rugged and thickly-forested mountains and numerous rivers running from the mountainous center to the seacoast. It is located in the Tropic of Cancer and its size is 36 thousand squared kilometers, with a population now over 22 million. Portuguese sailors came to the island in 1590 and named it 'Formosa' ('a beautiful island'). In 1949, the Chinese Nationalist government moved to Taiwan when Chinese Communists defeated Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalist forces. Today, Taiwan is a vibrant democracy with a fast growing economy. It is one of the 'Four Asian Tigers', along with Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea.

Confucian heritage rivals Christianity in its influence upon peoples of the world.

Confucianism, although not a religion in itself, has had a profound impact in Taiwan and on other Asian people. The Confucian ethics system has been observed for more than 2,500 years. This belief system includes "the ethic of filial piety" which is most influential in guiding family life and education. Filial piety means that children have to follow whatever the parents say, want, or expect. Generally speaking, there are several duties that need to be carried out, including obeying one's parents, conducting oneself so as to bring honor to the family, and striving for academic excellence (Ho, 1994).

Education is valued very highly in Chinese cultures because it has been considered from earliest times as the major way of upward mobility in society (Sue & Okazaki, 1990). There is an old Chinese saying, "every walk of life is not as prestigious as that of being a scholar." In traditional Chinese society, teachers are one of the so-called "Five Human Relationships", with heaven, earth, monarchs and parents. Accordingly, one can imagine that education, to this day, holds an extremely important role for the Chinese.

Chinese, from tradition, often think that children are like an empty vessel; and the adults are like a bottle full of water. Teachers and parents are as repositories of knowledge and children are as vessels to be filled all the time (Ho, 1994). A didactic "mimetic" or training approach, as opposed to a "transformative" or playful approach, is best fitting to education in Taiwan and Mainland China (Gardner, 1989). This training approach to instruction fits the need to learn the Chinese language system, which requires learning to memorize thousands of shapes of characters, pronunciation of characters, their meanings, and the order of strokes in writing each one. Diligent work and educational achievement are expected from an early age. Taiwanese

parents place great stress on education. In general, they have been very effective motivators, with many successful children finishing college.

However, there is also concern that too much pressure is placed on students in Taiwan today. Liberalization and diversification of choices have occurred in Taiwan with its developing democratic government and capitalistic market economy (Chen&Teng,1995). Influenced by Western ideas about education and play, for example, many kindergarten programs for young children are no longer exclusively academic or mimetic in orientation, but have added a more progressive “playful” component. The hope is that the new generation will be less anxious and more creative and imaginative, as well as remain academically excellent.

Kindergartens in Taiwan serve children from ages four to six years, but also children as young as two years old when mothers work or when parents, especially if they have an only child, want a head start for their child (Pan,1992). Most kindergartens are private (about 70%) as opposed to public, which means they are influenced by market demands. About 40% of these private kindergartens maintain a traditional academic curriculum and training instruction due to parental pressure for this kind of early education. Usually these private kindergartens serve less educated, less wealthy families

Problem Statement

Although play has been considered as an important component of early childhood program in developed Western countries, it is not a sanctioned school activity in some private Taiwanese kindergartens. Here is presented a case study comparing a progressive public kindergarten with a traditional Taiwanese kindergarten in order to demonstrate the deprivation of children’s play in an early childhood program due to the emphasis of academics. The results of this comparative case study will be organized with respect to differing “images of play and toys created by classroom contexts” in the two Taiwanese kindergartens under study.

Children’s rights to play is closely related to adults’ beliefs about education and their expectations for their children. Adults’ beliefs and arrangement of activities for their children are responsive to the requirement for successfully surviving in the cultural and social context of Taiwan. In the second part, therefore, are presented some findings concerning the “beliefs and attitudes about play” held by parents and teachers of young children in Taiwan. In conclusion, the influences of parental and teacher beliefs on children’s learning and play are discussed in relation to historical cultural impacts and contemporary societal forces in Taiwan today.

Images of Toys Created by Kindergarten Contexts

Two kindergarten classrooms were observed for six weeks, the Efficient Learning Classroom(traditional/private) and the Exploratory Learning Classroom(progressive/public).

The Efficient Learning School had a curriculum divided into different academic subjects of learning. Ms. Yeh taught classes to help her 34 children learn basic math, use the abacus, do mental math, use computers, and recognize and write both Chinese characters and phonics. Textbooks and worksheets were the main learning materials. Children were expected to be quiet, to sit still, and to work hard on workbooks all the time. As a result, opportunities for play and social interaction were not given. In addition, written homework was assigned every day. In each semester, there were two tests administered in paper-pencil format for evaluating children’s acquisition of academic skills and basic concepts. There were no playground and free play time provided. The only toys and play equipment available were a basket of small blocks, two slides, and some tricycles. Children seldom played with these toys and play equipment. They were allowed to play only when extra time left from structured lessons and when children behaved well.

The Exploratory Learning School included many chances for social interaction and play. There were 30 five- and six-year-old children enrolled in the class of the Exploratory Learning School with two teachers (Ms. Fu and Ms. Liou) and one in-service teacher (Ms. Shen). This national public kindergarten located in an elementary school was affiliated with the Teachers College of the city. The kindergarten was in session from 7:40 a.m. until 3:40 p.m. Monday through Friday except Wednesday, when school ended at 11:50 a.m. The kindergarten director (called kindergarten department head) was designated by the faculty members of the Teachers College. Teachers of this school, unlike the teacher in the private Efficient Learning kindergarten, were allowed to plan curriculum on their own.

The curriculum of the Exploratory Learning kindergarten used the project approach. Teachers usually began by discussing with the children experiences related to the topic chosen. During the discussion, teachers jotted down children's questions, interests, or suggestions, and many ideas given by the children were extended and incorporated into the forthcoming curriculum. The classroom environment was furnished with a variety of resources for children to construct their knowledge. Children's learning was not limited to the indoor environment but extended to a nearby community park, local stores or institutes, and even children's houses.

Findings. On-site observations and recordings of children's behaviors were made during free play time at the Exploratory Learning School. In contrast, a regular free play time was not sanctioned in the Efficient Learning School. The researcher (first author) only recorded two short free play times (about fifteen minutes each) in a nearby park when children were allowed to play because extra time were left from structured lessons. In addition, some play behavior was recorded when the teacher was busy preparing materials for subsequent classes or working on checking worksheets and was therefore unable to be attentive to the children.

Another difference was the play equipment and space. Children in the Exploratory Learning School had both indoor and outdoor playground equipped with a variety of facilities which include seesaws, slides, swings, tricycles, jumping ponies, a sand pit, balls, and so forth. However, children in the Efficient Learning School did not have playground. The only play equipment that could be seen were two slides and some tricycles. The spaces where the slides stayed were quite small, making it difficult for children to have physical play. Children were not given time to play with the slides or the tricycles. An example of the influence of the physical contexts of the two classrooms on children's play is provided as follows.

On each day, children in the Exploratory Learning had around one and a half-hour free play time in the morning and fifty minutes in the afternoon. They were allowed to choose where and what to play. The classroom provided rich materials for them to explore and to construct their knowledge. Constructive play was found to evoke more social interactions because children tended to compare their constructive play products. For instance, the boys liked to compare their toy objects (e.g. cars, rockets) constructed with blocks or clay. Social comparison further fostered their creative ideas (e.g., to make a more unique style after comparing with peers) and also further promoted their constructive play competency (e.g., peers taught each other how to make things). On the other hand, when play materials did not accommodate children's needs, they spontaneously used raw materials to make things fitting to their needs. As a result, their play was enriched by their self-constructions. They were not limited to use materials in a specific area but could move materials from one place to another to meet their needs in play. Consequently, play did was not limited to one setting but occurred across the classroom. It was the free, wide, and rich play environment that allowed the children to initiate and continue their play across different areas of the classroom.

In contrast, a good child in the Efficient Learning School was the one who behaved well, which included sitting still, being quiet, finishing assignments on time, and following teachers' instructions. Play was not a sanctioned activity in this school. Children were given the chance to play only when the teacher finished schedule lessons early and when the children behaved quite well on that day. The only toys available in the classroom was a basket of small blocks.

Children did not have freedom to do what they wanted to do or even leave their seats because they were under the teacher's control all the time. Moreover, , because of the paucity of play materials in the classroom, toys were used as bait to draw children's attention or to maintain their interests on the academic content being studied. For instance, the teacher would throw a small ball to a child and required him or her to answer a question or to repeat a phrase after her. Children expected and were very excited to get the ball even though some did not know what the answer was that they were supposed to give.

In the Exploratory Learning School, children were free to interact with peers and the interactions among peers were opportunities to refine their skills (competition over whose constructions were more unique and delicate), to generate creative ideas, and to develop and sustain friendships. It was the free social context that produced these chances for social interactions and through which children played, learned and developed. Teachers were strong supporters of children's learning through play. They frequently interacted with children in playful ways, such as pretending to be someone else by using mimed voices or gestures. The following vignette illustrates the playfulness of the teachers

T: [Mimed the voice of a young kind and talked to] Mom, I want to make a bird costume.

C: No, I am sleepy.

T: Mom, Please help me [with begging voice]. I want to wear it to the celebration party of Christmas.

C: Okay, how do I make it?

T: We can go to read some books to get ideas.
(Observation#4, lines 59-61, Dec. 18, 1999)

In contrast, children in the Efficient Learning School did not have much freedom to interact with each other. When they talked to each other, their voices were usually quite quiet so as not to be punished with a time out. As a result, social interactions among peers were not encouraged in this kindergarten classroom. The teacher was the person who controlled the class. Children were not provided with opportunities to express their ideas. The tone the teachers used to speak to the children revealed the hierarchical relationship. Teachers' tone was either one of giving a command or blaming.

Beliefs and Attitudes About Play

Interviews of parents and teachers

From the fourth week, the researcher(first author) began interviewing parents and teachers. Eighteen parents (nine from each school) and four teachers (three from the Exploratory Learning School and one from the Efficient Learning School) were interviewed. Seven of the parents were interviewed at their houses with the remainder interviewed by phone. In-person interviews were audio taped but the content of phone interviews were quickly jotted down by the researcher during the process. Almost all the questions were the same for the participants except some were framed to elicit parents' or teachers' opinions specifically. The average time for each interview was about one and a half hour.

One of the main criteria parents used to choose kindergartens was the curriculum or activities provided. It was quite clear that most of the parents sent their children to the Efficient Learning School because they expected their children to master academic skills (e.g., recognition of Chinese phonics and characters, basic math, etc.) so as to become better prepared for elementary school. Parents' desire for academic-excellence in their children caused them to emphasize work over play. So it seems that play or its lack in early childhood program is related to the purpose of early childhood education according to parental expectations.

Although the teacher and parents in the Efficient Learning Kindergarten indicated that play was helpful for children, their understandings of learning through play seemed to be

extremely restrictive. Ms. Yeh's articulation of learning through play was limited to using toys to elicit children's attention (e.g., the teacher threw a ball to a child and required him or her to repeat a vocabulary word said by the teacher). Likewise, parents seemed to have little understanding about the value of play in children's learning. Most of them did not believe that children could learn solely through play. Their perception of learning meant providing structured lessons or using textbooks and worksheets for children to practice. Play had no relationship with learning and children could not play until they had finished their assignment.

Teachers and parents in the Exploratory Learning Kindergarten, on the other hand, saw more connection between play and cognitive development. The teachers and several parents said in the interviews that play in kindergarten children was valuable because it is linked to creativity and imagination and thinking skills. Parents of children in this kindergarten, but not in the Efficient Learning Kindergarten, also mentioned constructive competence and physical development as important functions of play and use of toys.

Discussion

The result of this study reflected that children's play is deeply influenced by classroom contexts. Furthermore, the influences are related to the forces outside of the classrooms. That is, children's play is not just affected by the immediate classroom environment; the interactions of different contexts beyond the classrooms affect their play behavior and learning experiences.

Children's play behavior varied in classrooms with contrasting structures. Children were enrolled by parents into the two different classrooms. Interactions of factors embedded in larger cultural context affected parents' selections of schools for their children. Thus, one can conclude that the role of play in kindergarten classrooms is related to issues regarding the values of education and the goals of early learning. Parents had their concerns, expectations, and personal experiences. These affected their selections of schools and arrangement of activities for their children. The parents' beliefs and actions are influenced by cultural, historical and societal contexts.

Within the cultural and historical context, the role of education in traditional Chinese culture is one of the factors that causes the narrow definition of success and the emphasis of hard work over play. Moreover, the long history of didactic instruction as the effective way of learning causes the failure to understand the benefit of play in learning. The traditional image of children as clay (the belief of malleability) is another force that triggers the emphasis of work over play and the practice of didactic instruction. In addition to the cultural forces, the most influential force within the societal context is the exam-oriented educational system in Taiwan. These forces influence parents' beliefs about schooling and the practices in kindergartens.

The exam-oriented educational system in Taiwan causes parents to judge children's success or failure based upon their performance and achievement on school-related tasks. Parents seem to have a very narrow definition of success since they tend to believe that failure in school is failure in life (Chen & Teng, 1995). Urging children to be successful on school work begins during the early years of schooling. As a result, quite a number of parents favor kindergartens focusing on the acquisition of academic skills. Direct didactic instruction, rather than play, is believed to be the more effective way to help children begin to master academic skills.

The child's play is related to parents' beliefs about the purpose of kindergarten education and these parental beliefs are not only influenced by cultural values, and are also responsive to contemporary societal forces. Parents today in Taiwan believe that without a good education, children will not have a bright future (Liou, 1997). Parents tend to judge children's success or failure based upon their performance and achievement on school-related tasks. This phenomenon (narrow definition of success) appears as early as children are in the preschool

years (Barclay, 1989). Academic excellence is highly valued and becomes a distinguishing culture facet (Liu & Chien, 1998). With the powerful value of “Wan tsu chen lung” (wishing the son to become a dragon or the daughter to be the phoenix), parents are greatly concerned about children’s education. The belief in obtaining as much education as possible is passed on from generation to generation (Gow, Balla, Kember & Hau, 1996). Every child is instilled with the idea that nothing is more important than obtaining a high education and achieving a diploma.

Another idea that influences parental beliefs about education is the image of children as moldable clay education. Taiwanese parents believe that children can work hard to acquire higher education and achieve higher social status in the future. Every child is believed to be educable and training and didactic instruction was valued as effective methods in education (Barclay, 1989; Stevenson & Lee, 1996). In the traditional Chinese culture, children learn from being told what to do or showed how to do something by skilled models (e.g., adults). Parents who learned in this more didactic way themselves when they were young tend to believe that it is the best way for their own children to learn. Consequently, these parents fail to understand the benefit of learning through exploration or play behaviors in kindergarten.

Because of the high value of education and the belief of malleability in traditional Chinese culture, parents do their best to provide all kinds of learning experiences. According to Chen and Teng (1995), Taiwanese parents never seem to have any complaints about the amount of financial support or energy they spend on their children’s education. Parents believe that providing education is one of the important parental responsibilities (Liou, 1997). Recently, because of the better economic ability, quite a number of parents today can afford arranging extracurricular activities for their children as a part of their educational goals.

Interviews with parents in the present study showed that children’s play time was deprived because of the activities arranged by parents. Parents at both schools had similar ways of preparing children to either perform successfully in academics or to master artistic competency. After the school hours, children were sent to the out-of-school programs to take lessons in the arts, math, abacus, computer, composition, and English. Some parents who did not send their children to the out-of-school programs still had tight schedule set for their children. This mother’s statement reveals the importance of work is over play:

“ He spends too much time on play thus he needs to return to his work as soon as possible...it is important to finish daily routine (writing assignment, playing the piano, reviewing Chinese phonics, reading storybooks, memorize nine multiplication tables) before play” (April 10, 2000)

Because of the high value of education in traditional Chinese culture, parents do their best supporting children’s acquisition of higher education. Under the exam-oriented educational system in Taiwan, equipping children with academic skills needed for academic tasks at the next grade level is the implicit goal at each grade level (Sun, 1993). This phenomenon is similar to the view of education with utility value held by Malaysian parents (Hewitt & Maloney, 2000). Without question, such a phenomenon occurs in kindergarten education. Quite a number of kindergartens in Taiwan focus on the learning of the 3Rs(reading, writing, and arithmetic) and use a traditional approach to teach because parents expect children to excel in the 3Rs. According to the result of a research conducted in 1987 by Hsin-Yi Early Childhood Education Foundation, 75% of the private kindergartens in Taipei city emphasize the learning of the 3Rs. The Efficient Learning School in the present study is one clear example of a program not only aimed on helping children learn academic skills, but also one which ignores the value of play in children’s learning.

The two classroom structures and the classroom cultures created different images of play and toys and shaped children’s understanding of the meaning of play and their rights to play. Some children in the Efficient Learning School were found to interpret play as “not good”

behavior and to believe that to be good children are meant to follow adults' commands. It was fortunate that some resilient children were found in this school whose playfulness were not beaten down the by regimented classroom structures and the authoritarian teachers. What about those children who were not resilient? Their play behavior was not seen and their voices were to weak to be heard.

Final thought. Kindergartens began in Bad Blankenburg near Erfurt over a 175 years ago and have now spread to the far corners of the world. Friedrich Wilhelm Froebel, its founder, believed that *The plays of childhood are the germinal leaves of all later life (The Education of Man.)*. Would Froebel be dismayed by some distortions that have occurred in his original plans for young children? Would any such concerns be ethnocentric?

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Images of Toys Created by Classroom Contexts in Two Taiwanese Kindergartens

| <i>The Efficient Learning School</i> (A private academically-oriented kindergarten) | Context Influence | <i>The Exploratory Learning School</i> (A public kindergarten with more open-ended curriculum) | Context Influence |
|---|---|--|---|
| Toys as a Bait used by teachers | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The curricular context drove teachers' focus on the learning of academic skills and used toys as a bait to draw children's attention to lessons. 2. The physical context that made toys unavailable to children and thus could be used to elicit children's temporary interests in class. | Toys as a Chip exchanged among children | <p>The social context allowed social interactions and negotiations among children. Thus children used the toys as chips to exchange and maintain friendship.</p> |
| Toys as an Oxygen pursued by children or a Lifeboat taken by children | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The curricular context evoked children's needs to relax after or between structured lessons and long seating work. 2. The restriction of the physical context stimulated children's creative uses of the materials in the surrounding environment (e.g., transformed a string into a phone line). | Toys as a Tool for learning and development | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The physical context allowed children construct their knowledge by approaching any area of the classroom and accessing all kinds of learning materials. 2. The social context provided opportunities for social interactions which further facilitated the development of creative ideas and constructive competency. |

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| <p>Toys as a Conditional Gift given by teachers</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The interaction between curricular context and physical context caused the ignorance of providing a variety of opportunities for children to play. Children's opportunity to play with toys (blocks were the only ones in the classroom) was given by the teacher when extra time was left from structured lessons or when children behaved well. 2. The social context (the regimented atmosphere constituted with teacher authority and the powerless children) deprived children's right to play with toys. | <p>Toys as a Vehicle for children to fulfill their needs and realize their dreams</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The physical context allowed children to weave their dreams and create imaginative worlds across the classroom. 2. The social context enabled children to be imaginative and pretending with peers or teachers. 3. The curricular context (teachers' positive value toward play) supported children's needs to play. |
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