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Cultural Differences: An International Perspective on Early Childhood Education

Early childhood is a period of great potential for human growth and development. Children's physical and psychological development is shaped by their experiences during the first years of life. While early development can be summarized in terms of universal general principles, development pathways vary and are linked to individual capacities and economic, social and cultural circumstances. For example, many western experts are interested in emotional and self-regulatory factors, relating these factors to the developmental aims of early childhood programs. Many eastern cultures place more value on academic achievement, preparing their children from their early years. Meanwhile, public and political interests and elaborate national policy frameworks in countries in the East have initiated a move to more universal and equitable provision of developmentally appropriate early childhood programs. Following the global trend, early childhood education programs in many countries are reflecting on programmatic elements such as learning through play and child-centered curricula. These new approaches also blend with traditional cultural emphases and with the recognition of the importance of accountability. We therefore invited Australian, Canadian, Pakistani, and Hong Kong scholars to investigate early childhood education from different culture perspectives.

Sue Dockett and Bob Perry investigated young Australian children's perceptions of school and learning, as expressed through drawings and conversations about school. They collected data from children in preschools and during the early years of school. They found that play pervaded children's comments and drawings. Children paid particular attention to the school playground and to opportunities for play. They were, however, clear that school was different from kindergarten, and indeed anticipated the changes that the move to school afforded. They distinguished between academic activities and

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play, with an overall preference for play, but without strong aversion to academic tasks. They also reported a number of activities that they did not like at school, including particular academic tasks as well as unfamiliar physical activities. In their study, all the children identified friends as important at school.

While play is viewed as important in western culture, it is seen as less important for development in eastern cultures. Almina Pardhan examined Pakistani kindergarten teachers' perceptions of children's learning and teachers' classroom practice. She found that children engaged mainly in academic-oriented, teacher-directed tasks that were heavily focused on writing, drill and practice activities. At the kindergarten level, the curriculum was predominantly structured with such a focus. Teachers felt that it was easier to handle the class by having children sit at their desks and work individually on worksheets or in their exercise books. There had been an attempt by the school, at the kindergarten level, to break the existing cycle of the teacher-directed, "chalk and board" academic syllabus by including one period a week for unstructured play in learning areas. Teachers stated that they perceived children to learn best through direct experience, by using real objects. However, they also expressed deeply espoused views that academic-oriented, teacher-directed tasks through writing, drill and practice were important ways for children to learn. Teachers believed that they bore a responsibility to be well-informed, so as to meet children's academic learning needs.

As in Pakistan, in China, play has long been considered unimportant for children's development, and sometimes even a waste of time. Zhu Xi (1178/1976), a famous educator whose ideas have influenced Chinese people for thousands of years, stated that young children should stay far away from crowds, should not gamble, should not raise small animals such as birds, dogs, or cats, and should not waste their time playing with balls, flying kites, or other useless things. Over 800 years later, Zhu's thoughts still have a strong impact on education in China. Chinese educators have only recently begun to see the importance of play in children's development. As an example, the Hong Kong government adopted "learning through play" as a central tenet of pre-primary pedagogy in 1986 (Education Commission, 1986). However, many teachers in today's China were taught and learned in a didactic mode. They did not have concrete experiences of "play." Doris Pui-Wah Cheng followed two teacher candidates for one year to understand early childhood teachers' conceptualization of "learning and teaching through play." She found that although teachers valued "play" in the teaching and learning of young children, their early conceptions of "play" were somewhat simple and superficial. Although Cheng's teachers could effectively articulate the significance of play for the development of young children, they were challenged to demonstrate a clear theory of contextualized practice and to identify and be prepared to face the difficulties of enacting "play."

When they heard the term “play” in the course, they immediately conceptualized it as an ideal teaching and learning strategy. During Cheng’s year-long investigation, early childhood teachers struggled between the “rhetoric” and the “practical reality.” Cheng suggested that an appreciative system and proper “supports” should be provided to help pre-service teachers, who find it hard to practice new methods within the existing teaching culture simply through “transmission” of the best theories.

Parents’ active engagement in early learning and development is associated with better developmental outcomes and academic achievements. Parents’ direct participation in early education programs can increase their engagement and amplify opportunities for early learning in the home environment. Family literacy programs in North America and England have enjoyed widespread public and political support. Antoinette Doyle’s paper provides a comprehensive review of varying theoretical perspectives related to intelligence and learning, of the research on the early influences on children’s literacy development, and their impact on current models of family literacy programs. She concluded that family literacy programs have been shaped by three major influences: developmental theory, research on emergent literacy and the involvement of parents, and sociopolitical developments. Doyle also reviewed the family literacy programs in Canada and England, reporting that family literacy programs have been found beneficial in helping children from low income families with their reading and writing development. The paper suggests that there is a need for parental support programs to enhance children’s school performance, showing that the degree of program impact depends on the type of involvement. In the U.S., England, and Canada, different program models have been utilized to varying degrees, influenced by political and social shifts over time.

In China, parent involvement mostly takes the form of parent education, often as free-standing programs. These are sometimes intended to fill gaps where formal nursery and kindergarten programs are less available, such as in rural regions and economically disadvantaged areas. The number of parenting centers and drop-in centers has grown rapidly in the last ten years. Despite the ubiquity of these programs, there appears to be little information about them or their effectiveness. They have not been a focus of academic literature or official record keeping. In China, parents are often willing to pay for quality kindergarten programs and other services. It meets the utilitarian aims of parents and of the state in investing in children, since kindergarten is seen as the basis of education, and in turn the foundation of economic and social success. At the same time, rapid social and economic change also leads to social dislocations. Migrant and ethnic-minority parents may bring young children to urban areas where they are less likely than “native” children to have access to services. Alternatively, migrant parents may leave their young children behind to be cared for by

grandparents or other relatives. Family literacy programs can be particularly beneficial for such families. In order to implement family literacy programs in China, thoughtful approaches to funding and personnel resources, and program evaluation, are needed. Experiences from the countries that Doyle reviewed will be helpful to inform family literacy program designs and implication in China.

To conclude, the articles in this issue explore teachers' and children's perceptions of teaching and learning from an international perspective. China's early childhood education system has made tremendous progress in the last few decades. The spirit of experimenting in and evaluating new ideas among teachers, researchers, communities, and governments could profit from investments at a policy level and better monitoring and data to guide further action plans.

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