

Doris Pui-Wah CHENG

The Relation between Early Childhood Teachers' Conceptualization of "Play" and Their Practice: Implication for the Process of Learning to Teach

Abstract For centuries, educators and psychologists have advocated "play" as the ideal activity for the development of young children. Actually, play has been found currently to be the central pedagogy in the learning of young children in 21 countries in the world. However, the quality of play-based pedagogy is becoming a key concern across countries. Scholars found that play is either too loosely framed to result in children's optimal development; or it is too "teacherly" and loses the essence of play. The recent report released by OECD highlighted its concern about play in early childhood education and, urged international researchers and educators to make efforts to bridge the gap. Hong Kong is not an exception on the issue of play enactment. Though resources have been put in for the professional upgrading of early education teachers in the last two decades, the learning and teaching style is still didactic and there appears to be a misinterpretation of play-based pedagogy. The present paper attempts to explore the issue through early childhood teachers' conceptualization of "learning and teaching through play" with the aim of understanding the problem and shedding light for better ways to prepare teachers in this sector.

Keywords theory and practice, teacher's thinking, learning to teach, learning through play, early childhood education

Introduction

The Issue in Play Enactment in Hong Kong

Following the global trend, Hong Kong government accepted the suggestions of the overseas visiting panel (Llewellyn, Hancock, Kirst, & Roeloffs, 1982) by

Doris Pui-Wah CHENG (✉)

Center for Childhood Research and Innovation, Hong Kong Institute of Education, Hong Kong, China

E-mail: doris@ied.edu.hk

adopting “learning through play” as a central tenet for pre-primary pedagogy in 1986 (Education Commission, 1986). However, the quality of its enactment has always been problematic. Opper (1992) found that early childhood teachers had failed to alter their pedagogies because teachers’ teaching methods remained didactic and stressed mainly on rote learning. A decade later Cheng (2001, 2008), Cheng and Stimpson (2004), and Cheng and Fung (2009) found that there was a great discrepancy between the front-line teachers’ intentions and actions in implementing learning through play in classroom. Unfortunately, the study suggested that it was likely for the informants to perpetuate the superficial, technical mastery of play-based pedagogy because they were not aware of the predicament.

Though there is a huge percentage increase of in-service and pre-service professional upgrading from 14% in 1982 (Llewellyn et al., 1982) to 96.6% in 2008 (HKSAR Government Education Bureau, 2008), the government’s quality assurance inspections keep reporting disappointing percentages of the learning and teaching in this sector. The seven Quality Assurance Inspection (QAI) annual reports published between the years 2000–2001 and 2006–2007 all described a general picture in which the learning and teaching in this sector was mostly teacher-centered that deviated from the government’s recommended pedagogy. As the notion of play has been found to be the core in the teacher education program, the above mentioned studies and QAI reports paradoxically showed the otherwise. This paper, therefore, aims to illuminate the development of the conception of “play-based pedagogy” in two pre-service student teachers during their first year teacher education program. It is hoped that the reveal of their process of learning helped to narrow the theory-practice gap.

The Review on the Inquiry of Teaching and Learning through Play

Understanding Play-Based Pedagogy

The nebulous nature of play makes it hard for practitioners to get a firm hold on the principles of learning through play or even to fully take it on board. Researchers in this area found it difficult to give a definition to play especially when it involves with learning and teaching (see e.g., Aliwood, 2003; Cheng, 2001; Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 2005; Pramling-Samuelsson & Asplund-Carlsson, 2008; Pramling-Samuelsson, Sharidan, & Williams, 2006; Siraj-Blatchford, 2008; Spodek, Saracho, & Davis, 1991; Wood & Bennett, 1997). Play has appeared in different forms in its implementation in classroom, for example playing with structured “gifts” in the Frobelian kindergarten model (Allen, 2006); using play

areas as in the High Scope program (Schweinhart & Weikart, 1997); or exploring artistically or creatively, as in Reggio Emilia (Edwards, Gandini, & Forman, 1993).

Rubin, Fein and Vandenberg (1983) argued that "play" is intrinsically motivated and that the participants are concerned more with activities than with goals, it requires the active engagement from the learners which is free from imposed rules. The complexity of the notion of play is also discussed by Gadamer (1993) who pointed out that "play" has a general connotation of "not being serious." Yet at the same time, an individual must be seriously focused so as to actualize play. The contrast between the superficial meaning of unserious play and the serious engagement of an individual in worthwhile play is, perhaps, the answer to some of the issues of play because laymen find it difficult to distinguish the superficial and the embedded meanings and it is difficult for them to see the link between them.

In this connection, teachers are challenged when adopting play as their pedagogy because there is a tension of control between the teacher and children in classroom. Johnson, Christie and Yawkey (2005) found in preschools with highest quality, there were the interplay of play, work in the curriculum where the themes coming up in children's play were picked up naturally by the teachers as the curriculum work. The process is what Pramling-Samuelsson and Asplund-Carlsson (2008) described as a "developing pedagogy." Thus, play-based pedagogy demands flexibility in the curriculum where the teacher has great sensitivity on young children's behavior so as to capture, sustain and extend children's playfulness and weave it with the object of learning of the curriculum. It demands an extremely high professional competence from a teacher as far as pedagogy is concerned.

The Inquiry on Teaching

Research on teaching was strongly characterized by a behaviorist stance in the late 1960s. However, during the last two decades, there has been a growing dissatisfaction with the narrow focus of behaviorist studies (see e.g., Calderhead, 1996; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999; Connelly & Clandinin, 1985, 1988, 1990; Elbaz, 1983; Shulman & Sykes, 1986; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Hence, researchers have turned their attention to highlight the most tacit and idiosyncratic nature of teacher's knowledge, namely, theories-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1974); personal practical knowledge (Connelly & Clandinin, 1985, 1988, 1990); pedagogical content knowledge (Shulman & Sykes, 1986), knowledge-in-practice (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999) as well as "knowledge-in-action" (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). All of the above terms are of similar nature pointing at the complexity of the knowledge system influencing a teacher's practice.

Schommer (1990, 1994), introduced two categories of epistemological beliefs:

“naive” and “sophisticated,” each has their own characteristics in their belief of knowledge. Echoing that, Paulsen and Feldman (1999) maintained that students with the naive belief is found to have a simple structure of knowledge and are less likely to have an intrinsic goal orientation, they are less likely to appreciate the value of learning tasks and to have an internal control over learning when compare with the sophisticated learners. King and Kitchener (1994), however, found that an individual who has more sophisticated epistemological beliefs may have a better understanding of an issue on the basis of the available evidence, and is more likely to believe that alternative solutions may be constructed to solve problems.

Regarding early childhood education, there were studies carried out on early childhood teachers’ beliefs and practices on principles derived from “developmentally appropriate practice” (DAP) (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; National Association of Education for Young Children [NAEYC], 1990). The result indicated a moderate, statistically significant positive correlation between self-reported teaching beliefs and self reported practices. Calderhead (1991), however, alerted us to the fact that teachers can espouse particular knowledge and beliefs which conflict with those implicit in their real classroom practice.

Thus, we would not be surprised to find that there are inconsistencies between the relationship of epistemological belief and conception of teaching and learning in the study of Hong Kong primary and secondary pre-service teachers by Cheng, Chan, Tang and Cheng (2009). They noted that there was not always an automatic relationship between underlying beliefs and observable teaching approaches and recommended in carrying out longitudinal studies on student teacher development throughout the teacher education program especially, the teaching practices on the beliefs and conception of teaching of student teachers. This paper aims at adding to the piece of the picture by reporting the conceptualization of teaching and learning through play in pre-service kindergarten teachers’ course of study.

The key research questions of this study are:

- What is the conception of teaching through play as understood by the pre-service student teachers?
- How does the conception of teaching through play develop with the experience student teachers receive in his/her course of teacher education program?

The Setting

As mentioned earlier, over 80% of the kindergarten teachers were untrained during the 1980s. Among the 5,300 kindergarten teachers, only one in seven had received some sort of teacher training (Llewellyn et al., 1982). Before 1996,

there were only two types of teacher training courses offered to kindergarten teachers. Teachers might enroll in a two-year part-time (about 360 hours) Qualified Kindergarten Teacher (QKT) Training Course program, or a 12-week (about 120 hours) part-time Qualified Assistant Kindergarten Teacher (QAKT) training course. All were done in a part-time mode and thus, in other words, teachers could teach without any prior training. In the early 1990s, there was increasing public interest in and demand for more government intervention to upgrade the quality of kindergarten education. Thus in 1999, a part-time in-service advance Certificate of Kindergarten Education course for graduates of the QKT course, and a three-year full-time pre-service Certificate of Early Childhood Education for secondary school graduates were set up.

Regarding the content of the programs, students in the pre-service certificate course have to take 90 credits plus 12 credits for supervised teaching and field work while the in-service only need to take 60 credits building on their previous 30 credits taken in the Qualified Kindergarten Teacher Education Course (QKT). Both courses encompass four domains, namely professional studies, subject studies, general education and teaching practice. There are 18 weeks of teaching practice including supervised teaching and fieldwork spreading across the three-year pre-service program. There are also observations of teaching between peers within the same field placement, discussion with course-mates after school visits, compilation of lesson plans as well as reflective journals to help student teachers to develop their critical and reflective attitudes in applying theory to practice (Hong Kong Institute of Education, 2008).

The Methodology of the Present Study

Means to Track the Conceptualization of Teaching and Learning through Play

As mentioned earlier, play-based pedagogy is a "developing pedagogy" and is highly tacit in which a practitioner might not be able to tell how he/she makes sense of it. The nature of the present research problem is related to how teaching and learning through "play" is constructed in a teacher's cognition and how he/she would put his/her own constructed "knowledge" in actions. It is a highly personal and subtle process which fits very well in the qualitative research paradigm by employing a case study method, where diverse means and evidence can be embraced. Moreover, the employment of diverse means enable the researcher to take account of many variables through the triangulation of multiple sources of evidence.

Regarding the present study on understanding the development of play-based concept among pre-service student teachers, the researcher not only had to use

means to uproot the embedded conception but also had to track the development of the conception of play-based pedagogy during the course of teacher preparation. Schon (1983, 1987) stated the notion of reflection which according to him has the power to discover specific connections. He brought forward the idea of tapping into the interplay of “reflection-for-action” (reflection in the pre-active stage), “reflection-in-action” (reflection in the active stage) and “reflection-on-action” (reflection in the post active stage). As the conception of play-based pedagogy embraced the notion of “play” and its implementation, it is thus necessary to tap into the informants’ conception of play enactment. Thus, the three phases of reflection was adopted along the informants’ course of study in the teaching education program to track the on-going development of the above conceptions. Semi-structural interviews focusing on tapping the reflection of the informants were conducted in four phases of time during a year. They were in the beginning of the program to capture their prior conception. Two months after the commencement of the course to track their conceptions in the pre-active stage. Immediately after the informants’ field experience to track their conceptions in the active stage and to access their conceptions in the post active stage at the end of the semester.

Besides, the informants’ lesson plans, assignments and their own reflective journals of their field experience were also used to make sense of the development of the informants’ tacit knowledge. These diverse sources of information could also supplement and triangulate the data collected from the reflective interviews.

As mentioned earlier, the informants’ views on teaching and learning through play as well as their brief life histories were tapped after they had finished watching a video-clip of a current local practice¹ at the beginning of the term. Since there was not much active stage in the program as there was no block teaching practices in the first year teacher education program. Whenever there were opportunities for the informants to lead activities during their school attachment were used to tap into their reflection on active stage. Moreover, the informants’ reflection on their own school visits and the play assignments were used to tap their sense making in the active stage. The post active stage was conducted at the end of the first year of the program; informants’ view on play-based pedagogy was brought up again for discussion to tap on their

¹ The video clip was a 30-minute teaching and learning episode of thematic time and small grouping time on the topic of “summer holiday.” The teacher first introduced a class of five years olds to the story of the three little pigs and advised children not to be lazy and to spend their summer holiday meaningfully. Then, there was small groupings time. The children were to finish four activities: 1) planning their summer activities; 2) choosing a sheet of paper from a box with a summer activity written on it and reading it out to a teacher assistant; 3) a mathematics worksheet and; and 4) the writing of Chinese characters. The group activities would last for an hour and the teacher had to make sure that the children had done the activities properly.

conceptualization of play-based pedagogy.

Data Analysis

The set of interview transcriptions were analyzed using coding suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994). The coding centered round the conception of play and its enactment in classroom. After the coding, the researcher was able to identify themes and particular features emerging from the data. Following the emerging features, the researcher was able to categorize the features and placed into a matrix. By employing case writing as suggested by Richardson (1998), the researcher was able to pull together informants' development of play-based pedagogy in different stages. The case also helped to organize the data so as to understand the development of the conception of "learning through play" more clearly.

The Informants

The informants were recommended by their teacher educator as those who were "teachers with potential." Both of them were students graduated from the Hong Kong Advanced level and were around 20 years old. The following was the findings from the investigation.

The Findings

The researcher is going to describe the conceptualization of play through the informants' experience in the teacher education program.

The First Informant: Anna

Anna was the class representative of a first year, pre-service student. She aged 20. She said that the reason why she joined the program was because she liked children, especially the younger ones. Yet, she asked for transferring into the primary section in the beginning of the course because she worried about the future prospects of a kindergarten teacher who was not protected by a mandatory salary scale.

Development of the Conception of Teaching and Learning through Play

i) Early conception of play: A restricted, teacher-centered conception

Anna was not familiar with the teaching and learning episode shown in the

video nor did she know it was a common practice in the field. However, the theme and the small group activities were programs she expected because she was taught that way when she had had her early year's education. She thought that children should "learn through play" because it made children motivated and was also the approach advocated in the Institute.

When referring to the video clips, she acknowledged children learn through play with particular reference to the children in the small group activities. However, Anna's conception of "play" seemed to be very restricted and teacher-centered as she was reserved about the kind of freedom the children were enjoying and she worried about the discipline in class. Exploring this further, it was found that Anna's conception of "play" was very much influenced by her own learning experience as she had a rather negative educational experience in her school years:

... in fact, I was very afraid of teachers before because I was scared to be scolded by them. It was because I would like to scold others back [then I took up teaching] teachers have supreme power; they can scold the kids and what they need to do is just marking the assignments which is rather simple (initial interview of Anna)

She uttered the above reflection which showed an inbuilt negative image of teaching held by Anna. However, Anna said her perception of a teacher had been changed through the influence of her course mates who were very enthusiastic. So, she began to perceive herself differently, she described herself as a "tree" protecting the tiny flowers which refer to the children. Yet, a superior role could be captured in Anna's early identify of being a teacher.

ii) Reflection before the informant's practical experience: Play is framed in a highly teacher-centered manner

Since there was no teaching practice in the first year of the pre-service program, Anna's reflection in the active stage was captured by her interpretation on the playful experience she encountered and her assignment.

Anna's framing of "play" could be tapped through her experience with her nephew when she taught him how to write the letter "b." Anna said, "by telling him that there was a big tummy in the letter 'b' helps my nephew learn it" (initial interview of Anna). Thus, Anna said that "play" was definitely a means to learning. An instrumental view of play was demonstrated.

Anna said she could witness "learning through play" in action during her school visits. However, when asked to give examples of learning through play, she failed to describe a coherent scene. Anna had difficulties to describe "play" in action and was confused when asked to elaborate it:

Well ... I think the group activities can [make children learn through play], however, there is not much to be developed in the aspects of communication and interaction ... I think it is a kind of low level play because it has no interaction among and between children and the teacher ... I think high level play requires children to be involved and show that they are happy (interview after Anna's school visits)

According to Anna, "learning through play" represented a harmonious learning atmosphere when the routines were good, the teacher was in control and the children were on task in the context. To achieve that, Anna counted on a good teacher-children ratio, purposely-built premises and adequate resources. "Of course, it is good to bring a lot of aids to school and show the children all kinds of aids while we are introducing things to them ..." she asserted (interview after Anna's school visits). Subtly, Anna treasured the motivational value of play; however, she had difficulties identifying the other values of "play" e.g., children have to be active learners.

Failing to see the vital component of play, Anna found the provision of choices for the children in the group activities strange to her. She said, "I have not heard of children choosing their own activities. It is totally new to me." (initial interview of Anna). Anna was too obsessed with the learning part and failed to see the real meaning of children's "participation" in the whole teaching and learning process.

iii) Reflection after the informant's practical experience-play is reframed in a superficial manner

According to Anna, an activity could be considered as "play" if the children were happy and the discipline was good. Having this assumption, Anna considered the activity on experiment was unsuccessful while the musical activity was successful when she was given the opportunity to lead two activities. They were described as follows:

The first one was an experiment to show the process of water absorbency in different materials. The target children were three years old. Anna started the experiment by laying different materials, like foil paper, tissue paper, newspaper, etc on the table systematically. She started the activity by telling the children that the table was wet and asked how they could dry it. Then she introduced the different kinds of material and made the children explore the absorbent effect of the materials. However, Anna was disappointed after the activity. She explained:

I find myself bad when compared with the teacher in the kindergarten ... I am nervous ... I can see that the children were actually losing their patience, they talked ... the children found the experiment boring at the end (interview after Anna's trial teaching)

The second activity is musical. Anna started it by linking the songs together, for instance, when you woke up, you had to “wash your hands,” then the song came after that, you had to brush your teeth, combed your hair and went to play in the garden; then came the subsequent songs.

Anna found the musical activity more successful than the experiment because she could manage the process and involved the children. She directed her thanks to the Headmistress and her mentor who had given her advice on how to link up songs in practice.

iv) Reflection at the end of the semester-play is reframed inconsistently

Anna often reflected an unsettled and doubtful emotion during interviews after her field experience and during the process of the investigation. She would articulate complaints like:

It is out of my expectation that it is so difficult and so professional [to be an early childhood teacher] because at the very beginning, I just thought that it was very simple and easy to deal with young children ... the more I know, the more pressure I feel ... After trying the teaching myself, I begin to realize that there are many difficulties [in teaching] ... I think I am confused ... (interview after Anna’s trial teaching)

Apart from the above, a changeable state could be captured in Anna’s reframing of play. She articulated her worries:

Well, theories are perfect while there are limitations in real practices, like the size of the classroom, the ratio of teacher and children ... I don’t know, I just think one day when I go out and face the adverse situation, can I achieve what I have learnt here or will I just ignore all the theories and let the situation lead me ... All I can see is that teachers [in the field] were not very motivated ... (interview after Anna’s trial teaching)

Anna reiterated the above issue in the last interview with the researcher; however, she seemed to have conformed to the reality by then. She justified herself and said:

I believe that there is always discrepancy between ideals and realities. Of course, it is good to bring a lot of aids to school and use them while teaching. However, it is not that easy because teachers are really very busy ... (interview after Anna’s trial teaching)

Anna’s expression reflected her awareness of the complexity in teaching and yet she was not ready to face these challenges. Anna was very much in need of someone to support her in her process of learning to teach. Unfortunately, it was not provided. Anna left the preschool course and joined the primary program

after her first year of study.

The Second Informant: Becky

Same as Anna, Becky was a first year, pre-service student aged around 20 who had just finished the Hong Kong Advanced level examination. She went directly into the course for early childhood teachers. Different from Anna, Becky admitted that she did not like children, especially the younger ones right at the beginning of the study. Requiring her to babysit children to support the family, Becky found young children very n troublesome. Thus, she preferred to go to the primary stream to teach older children. However, it was because she was not admitted into the primary course, then she took the present pre-school course. She was looking for opportunities to go back into her initial priority because she worried about her future prospects and the security of being a kindergarten teacher.

Development of the Conception of Teaching and Learning through Play

i) Early conception of play: Upholding its importance

After watching the video clips, Becky thought the teacher in the video could make children "learn through play." The story of the "three little pigs" and when the children picked up pieces of paper from a box and reading it out were considered by Becky as "learning through play." She thought that children should learn through play because that was the approach she learnt from the course.

Regarding her role as a teacher, Becky said she was definitely not a direct transmitter of knowledge, "children are in the centre and I would be by their side ... The children are the ones to lead and I will help whenever needed" she stressed (initial interview of Becky). A child centered identify could somehow be captured from Becky's initial reflective interview.

ii) Reflection before the informant's practical experience: Play is inconsistently framed

Becky upheld the value of play by referring to her personal experience. She highlighted:

I think play is very important. It is because I do find that children feel happier at school when they have more chances to play ... I do find that those [my ex-classmates] who are interested in studying do have better academic results. (initial interview of Becky)

Also, Becky's belief in "play" could be reflected in her critique of a piece of literature written as an assignment. She noted:

... learning has to be a process of meaning construction by the learners themselves. In order to change the situation of didactic learning, we have to change the didactic teaching mode of the teachers. The way to realize it is through “play.” In play, children can be scaffolded. (reflective journal of Becky)

Her commitment to “play” was not only reflected in the above but also in what she said after her school visits: “Because I can’t see ‘play’ in real life, doesn’t mean that it is not important. It may just be difficult to implement or the schools haven’t tried it out” she asserted (interview after Becky’s school visits).

Identifying the issues in implementing play, Becky said if she was going to design the curriculum for young children, she would give them choices:

... it has no need to be a lot, it can just be two to three kinds of choices per day ... It is because children would be more committed and involved in the activities they choose. The power of choice is great. (interview after Becky’s school visits)

Becky continued: “children do not feel the writing of Chinese characters interesting, they just do it reluctantly. However, they might feel better if they can have free-choice activities after they finish the writing” (interview after Becky’s school visits). Becky was able to articulate the important element in realizing play by giving choices to the children, however, “play” was perceived as a reward after work. She was not able to see or devise links between play and learning.

Following the school visit, Becky was asked to design a “play” activity for the three year olds as an assignment in her reflective journal. It was clear from the analysis of her reflective journal that Becky was not able to negotiate the element of choices into the curriculum; she missed it in her design. The activity was designed as follows: The teacher will put four hoola hoops on the floor and in each one there was a matchbox. Each child had to jump in the hoola hoops and picked each match-box up. After picking four match-boxes up, the child would have to put it back and lined up again for another go.

Paradoxically, the activity Becky designed was very structured and Becky failed to see the similarities between her “play” activity and the curricula designed by the front-line teachers which she had criticized.

iii) Reflection after the informant’s practical experience: Play is reframed in a traditional way

Like Anna, who was placed in the same school, Becky was asked to implement a musical activity and an experiment during her placement. These were the activities assigned by the schools and she just carried them out according to the suggestions of her mentor. Becky started the former activity by

leading the children to do some sorts of vocal exercise. Then, she asked the children to clap their hands while listening to the music. Children were then led to imagine themselves as tails of "fish" by waving a piece of paper and "swimming" accordingly. Becky considered herself unsuccessful because she failed to manage the discipline of the class:

... quite chaotic, the children continue even when they should stop ... Some say others tumble them down while others say their hands are twisted ... it is too chaotic ... I find it hard to control the discipline of the children ... so, I just tell the class to stop because they are bad. They are too messy and naughty. (interview after Becky's trial teaching)

In the experimental activity, Becky however found herself successful in carrying out "learning through play" because the activity was carried out smoothly and the children were attentive and disciplined. There were different kinds of materials on the table like towels, pieces of newspaper etc. and children were led to test the different levels of absorbency of these materials. Becky thought the systematic guidance of questioning helped children to be attentive and she explains:

I use questions to elicit children's interest like "what will you do if you spill water while drinking?" Then, I will ask them to try different kinds of material on the table. I tend to speak less and mainly use questions to lead them. I find that they are attentive ... I choose to let children experience instead of me demonstrating. I think it promotes interest. It is quite successful. (interview after Becky's trial teaching)

The immediate response of the children made Becky thought that the activity was successfully implemented. She uttered, "this time the activity can be considered as 'play' because children can try different materials by themselves and they are happy" (interview after Becky's trial teaching).

Again Becky seemed unable to frame what she considered as important into her classroom actions and was incapable of identifying the crucial element embedded in her teaching which made it successful. Instead, she directed her attention to the systematic running of the activity and the discipline of the children. To the researcher, the success of the second activity was mainly due to the teaching strategies Becky adopted in eliciting children's curiosity by her questions which enabled the children to connect their past experience with the here and now context.

iv) Reflection at the end of the semester: Reframing of play is vulnerable to changes

After her placement, Becky became more accommodating with the reality.

There was a dramatic change in her attitude towards the front-line teachers. She became sympathetic with them by expressing:

... I think to implement play depends not only on the teaching strategies of the teachers but also the objectives of the school ... the thought of the Headmaster is vital. For example, if the Head thinks the academic performance of the children is the most important, then the teachers have to follow, don't they? (interview after Becky's trial teaching)

In line with the above, a question on the teaching of writing, which Becky had commented on critically, was raised to discuss again. Becky's answer was different:

The teacher demonstrates, then children just follow and draw in the air with their magical pens ... I feel bored; however, there is no rejection from the children. May be everyone is like that when he learns to write, no "play" can be derived. It is not possible to elicit any change. They have to be serious to learn the strokes in order to write, don't they? (interview after Becky's trial teaching)

Becky vacillated her reframing on "play" and conformed to the traditional practice after encountering with the reality. During the year's contact, Becky appeared to be articulate, active, open and responsive. Regarding the development of Becky's conception of "play" she migrated from being an upholder of "learning through play" to a conformist at the end of a year.

Discussion

Though both Becky and Anna valued "play" for the teaching and learning of young children, their early conception of "play" were simple and superficial, e.g. by telling the children that letter "b" had a big tummy and by asking children to read a sentence drawn from a box. With the course input on the value of play, they had good articulation on the significance of it for the development of young children, yet, they did not have a clear perception of the theory in context nor were they able to identify and be prepared to face the difficulties of enacting "play." Thus, they were frustrated to find that there was hardly any implementation of "learning through play" during the initial field visits.

Failing to transform the constructivist's conception of play, the informants were not able to form an overarching theory for them to cling onto when meeting the challenges of the reality. Thus, they floundered in their professional development and were susceptible to be influenced by the dominant culture of the field. It was

disappointing to find that the informants yielded to the traditional practice once when they encountered difficulties in their learning process. Their professional development, unfortunately, proved Rust's (1994) observation to have ground as he identified a growth in the initial student teachers' quite child-centered views to progress into a more control-oriented beliefs of teaching and learning when faced with the constraints of reality.

Finding suggested that the pre-service teachers' professional development was adrift and flounder in which dramatic changes were identified when the informants were faced with the constraints of reality. Being taught and learned in a didactic mode, Becky and Anna did not have any concrete experience on "play" but they acknowledged "learning with interest" as the most desirable learning mode. When they had heard the term—"play" in the course, they immediately caught hold of it as an ideal teaching and learning strategy. However, this conception could not be sustained as it was held vulnerably by the informants because Chinese culture value "diligence" not "play." It was seen that the informants constantly wrestled between the "rhetoric" and the "practical reality" during the year's investigation, yet, there was no sign showing how they could further their inquiry into this problematic situation. Informants tended to avoid "frustration" and "uncertainties" in their teaching by resorting to lessons they had learned from their own learning experience and being absorbed by the prevailing culture of teaching. They ceased to inquire for quality teaching but passively settled in joining the majority of the teaching force by directing their focus on the technicality of teaching like, the obsessive hunt for teaching aids, the high demand on children's discipline. They lacked persistency to pursue and verify the "public" theory in their teaching context and jumped onto the bandwagon of the teaching force because they were not prepared to face the challenges of the implementation of "play." Huberman (1995, p. 206) warned the teaching professionals:

It is not simply by trail-and-error, observation and verbal exchanges with colleagues that complex skill learning occurs ... nor is practice in isolation an adequate solution, not only because it "grooves" errorful activity, but also because it affords so little opportunity for conceptual clarification allowing teachers to make sense of their cumulative experience.

The above evidence shows that without an overarching theory, an appreciative system and proper "supports" and "challenges" to help the pre-service student teachers, it is hard for them to combat with the existing teaching culture simply by the transmission of the best theory.

On the other hand, the findings show that there is close inter-relations of a teacher's learning pattern with their teaching competence. Teacher educators

should then do away from the conception of passing a set of “given theories” on to the student teachers to inform their practice, they, however, should focus their attention more on the learning of the student teachers. Teacher education has to pay due attention the meta-learning process of the teachers in order to enhance its effectiveness. McIntyre (1993) put forward this kind of shift in teacher education by quoting what Alexander (1984) asserted, “that the task of teacher educators was to concentrate less on what the student should know, more on how he might think” (cited in McIntyre, 1993, p. 40).

Teacher educators should have confidence to face the dilemma as to re-structure the teacher education programme from “what” student teachers should know to “how” they know it in order to help student teachers to develop an overarching sophisticated conception of knowledge from the public theory.

The successful experience of the practice in Reggio Emilia tells us that, “reflective dialogue,” a process of bringing to conscious awareness of the teaching and learning process, leads teachers to become meta-aware of their teaching and learning condition (Hoban, 2002; Moyles, Adams, & Musgrove, 2002) so as to have intentional effects. So, efforts can be paid by teacher educators on helping student teachers to be aware of their “back talks” and to improve their practice by amalgamating “the back talks” with the contextual knowledge gained through their experience. Having a language or “pattern of discourse” to describe the concepts and patterns of language which is to be learned is vital if learners are going to transform the information into their own (Hoban, 2002).

Having mentioned from the above that reflective dialogue is a useful methodological tool for promoting teacher’s thinking and development, it does not mean that any kind of the above dialogue can bring forward its potential benefits. In fact, practitioners have to adopt reflective practice with cautions because the findings show that the reflection, which is not carried out systematically at directing the attention of the practitioners to the underlying intellectual and motivational processes of the learners and fails to integrate the practitioner’s personal theories with the social influences, was not productive (Shulman, 1998; Hoban, 2002). Paradoxically, it will reinforce the self-indulgent belief and solidifies it, making it even more difficult to unpack as what has been identified from the informants. Calderhead and Gates (1993) alerted the teaching professionals of the danger of making reflection too process oriented, they stated, “reflection of its own sake may be unconstructive and even debilitating. The content and the context of reflection are also of importance, and these consideration ought to inform the design of the teacher education curriculum” (p. 9). Thus, means to guide student teachers to work within professional communities to construct local knowledge, examine their practice by the research of others and their own, need to be established with urgency in Hong Kong.

Implication

Based on the findings from the above, insights for quality teacher preparation were highlighted as follows:

Need to Meld Local Research with Teacher Education

The present study highlights the need to meld the local research with teacher education. The findings show that the teaching culture of the Hong Kong pre-school education is overwhelmed by a taken for granted conception of "play" which has been interpreted or perhaps, misinterpreted in a mechanical, piecemeal and teacher-centred mannered. This teaching culture acts like a self-fulfilling prophecy making its beholders to perpetuate the undesirable cycle of practice without noticing it. Besides, the belief that "diligence yields rewards while play gets nowhere" is embedded in the Chinese psyche (Cheng, 2001). Thus, in order to address the issue of the implementation of play, "learning and teaching through play" need to be put forth to the student teachers in an issue-based approach in order to stop the continuation of the predicament. Local research is crucial because what seems to be the "best" practice, in other countries, might not necessarily be able to address the specific needs in our unique context.

Need to Have Exemplified Practice in the Context

As action speaks better than words, there is an urgent need for a collaborative research agenda linking pre-school teachers and teacher educators in the Institutes/Universities to work on the exemplified practice in the field. These exemplified practices can serve both as a second order learning platform for the pre-service teachers and provide some variation models for the novices to combat with the traditional taken for granted practice in order to support both the pre-service teachers and in-service teachers on-going pursue of "uncertainties" in their life-long professional development.

Conclusion

Having a traditional teaching culture that is so different from a child-centred constructivist conception of teaching and learning, future research might enter into the debate around issues when teachers adopt the above knowledge in the curriculum. How far can the "play-based pedagogy" been achieved in a curriculum with lots of external prescriptive objectives? What are its possible means and forms? As teacher educator, I believe that by paying more attention

onto the learning process of student teachers help to identify real issues in the field. Thus, appropriate measures can be done to improve the quality of the teacher education programme to cater for the needs and demands in the ever changing context.

References

- Alexander, R. J. (1984). Innovation and continuity in the initial teacher education curriculum. In R. J. Alexander & J. Lynch (Eds.), *Change in teacher education: Context and provision since Robbins* (pp. 103–160). London, England: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Aliwood, J. (2003). Governing early childhood education through play. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 4, 286–299.
- Allen, A. T. (2006). The kindergarten in Germany and the United States, 1840–1914: A comparative perspective. *History of Education*, 35(2), 173–188.
- Argyris, C., & Schon, D. A. (1974). *Theory in practice: Increasing professional effectiveness*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.
- Bredenkamp, S., & Copple, C. (Eds.). (1997). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Calderhead, J. (1991). The nature and growth of knowledge in student teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 7, 531–535.
- Calderhead, J. (1996). Teachers: Beliefs and knowledge. In D. C. Berliner & R. C. Calfee (Eds.), *Handbook of educational psychology* (pp. 709–725). New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Calderhead, J., & Gates, P. (Eds.). (1993). *Conceptualizing reflection in teacher development*. London, England: Falmer Press.
- Cheng, M. M. H., Chan, K. W., Tang, S. Y. F., & Cheng, A. Y. N. (2009). Pre-service teacher education students' epistemological beliefs and their conceptions of teaching. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 25, 319–327.
- Cheng, D. P. W. (2001). Difficulties of Hong Kong teachers' understanding and implementation of “play” in the curriculum. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 17(7), 857–869.
- Cheng, D. P. W. (2008). Meta-learning ability: A crucial component for the professional development of teachers in a changing context. *Teacher Development*, 12(1), 85–95. doi:10.1080/13664530701827764
- Cheng, D. P. W., & Fung, C. K. H. (2009, July). *Views of the stakeholders on “learning through play”: Consensus or discrepancy?* Paper presented at the PECERA 10th Annual Conference, Manila, Philippines.
- Cheng, D. P. W., & Stimpson, P. (2004). Articulating contrasts in kindergarten teachers' implicit knowledge on play-based learning. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 41(4–5), 339–352.
- Cochran-Smith, M., & Lytle, S. (1999). Relationships of knowledge and practice: Teacher learning in communities. In A. Iran-Nejad & D. P. Pearson (Eds.), *Review of research in education* (Vol. 24, pp. 249–305). Washington, DC: American Educational Research Association.
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, J. (1985). Personal practical knowledge and the modes of knowing: Relevance for teaching and learning. In E. Eisner NSSE Yearbook (Ed.), *Learning*

- and teaching the ways of knowing* (pp. 174–198). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, J. (1988). *Teachers as curriculum planners. Narratives of experience*. New York, NY: Teachers' College Press.
- Connelly, F. M., & Clandinin, J. (1990). Stories of experience and narrative inquiry. *Educational Researcher*, 19(4), 2–14.
- Education Commission. (1986). Education commission report No. 2. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Government Printer.
- Edwards, C., Gandini, L., & Forman, G. (1993). *The hundred languages of children: The Reggio Emilia approach to early childhood education*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Elbaz, F. (1983). *Teacher thinking: A study of practical knowledge*. London, England: Croom Helm.
- Gadamer, H. G. (1993). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsmeier & D. G. Marshall, Trans.). New York, NY: Continuum.
- Hoban, G. F. (2002). *Teacher learning for educational change*. Buckingham, England: Open University Press.
- Hong Kong Institute of Education. (2008). Programmes offered by Faculty of Education Studies. Retrieved December 20, 2010, from <https://www.ied.edu.hk/fes-prog/index.php>
- Huberman, M. (1995). Networks that alter teaching: Conceptualizations, exchanges and experiments. *Teachers and Teaching*, 1, 193–211.
- Johnson, J. E., Christie, J. F., & Yawkey, T. D. (1987). *Play and early childhood development*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.
- King, P. M., & Kitchener, K. S. (1994). *Developing reflective judgment: Understanding and promoting intellectual growth and critical thinking in adolescents and adults*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Llewellyn, J., Hancock, G., Kirst, M., & Roeloffs, K. (1982). A perspective on education in Hong Kong: Report by a visiting panel. Hong Kong: Hong Kong Government Printer.
- McIntyre, D. (1993). Theory, theorizing and reflection in initial teacher education. In J. Calderhead & P. Gates (Eds.), *Conceptualizing reflection in teacher development* (pp. 39–52). London, England: Falmer Press.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Moyles, J. R., Adams, S., & Musgrove, A. (2002). Study of pedagogical effectiveness in early learning. Retrieved October 11, 2002, from <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/>
- National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). (1990). NAEYC position statement on school readiness. *Young Children*, 46, 21–23.
- Opper, S. (1992). *Hong Kong's young children: Their preschools and families*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Pajares, F. (1992). Teachers' beliefs and educational research: Cleaning up a messy construct. *Review of Educational Research*, 62, 307–332.
- Paulsen, M. B., & Feldman, K. A. (1999). Student motivation and epistemological beliefs. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning*, 78, 77–80.
- Pramling Samuelsson, I., & Asplund Carlsson, M. (2008). The playing learning child: Towards a pedagogy of early childhood. *Scandinavian Journal of Educational Research*, 52(6), 623–641. doi:10.1080/00313830802497265
- Pramling-Samuelsson, I., Sharidan, S., & Williams, P. (2006). Five preschool curricula: Comparative perspective. *International Journal of Early Childhood*, 38(1), 11–30.
- Richardson, L. (1998). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Collecting and interpreting qualitative materials* (pp. 345–399). Thousand Oaks, CA:

SAGE.

- Rubin, K. H., Fein, G. G., & Vandenberg, B. (1983). Play. In E. M. Hetherington (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology* (Vol. 4, pp. 693–774). New York, NY: Wiley.
- Rust, F. O. (1994). The first year of teaching: It's not what they expected. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *10*, 205–218.
- Schommer, M. (1990). Effects of beliefs about the nature of knowledge on comprehension. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *82*, 498–504.
- Schommer, M. (1994). An emerging conceptualization of epistemological beliefs and their role in learning. In R. Garner & P. Alexander (Eds.), *Beliefs about text and about text instruction* (pp. 25–39). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Schon, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Schon, D. A. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner: Toward a new design for teaching and learning in the profession*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Schweinhart, L. J., & Weikart, D. P. (1997). The high/scope preschool curriculum comparison study through age 23. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *12*(2), 117–143.
- Shulman, L. S. (1998). Theory, practice, and the education of professionals. *The Elementary School Journal*, *98*, 511–526.
- Shulman, L. S., & Sykes, G. (1986). *A national board for teaching? In search of a bold standard*. Hyattsville, MD: Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy.
- Siraj-Blatchford, I. (2008). Understanding the relationship between curriculum, pedagogy and progression in learning early childhood. *Hong Kong Journal of Early Childhood*, *7*(2), 6–13.
- Spodek, B., Saracho, O. N., & Davis, M. D. (1991). *Foundations of early childhood education: Teaching three-, four-, and five-year-old children* (2nd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Wood, L., & Bennett, N. (1997). The rhetoric and reality of play: Teachers' thinking and classroom practice. *Early Years*, *17*(2), 22–27. doi:10.1080/0957514970170205
- Zeichner, K. M., & Liston, D. P. (1996). *Reflective teaching: An introduction*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.