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The Need to Look at Play in Diverse Cultural Settings

Educational reformers have long recognized the value of learning that is culturally contextualized. They have often argued that the recognition of the unique contributions of diverse cultural groups and multicultural activities in general could only serve to foster respect for individual differences while simultaneously enhancing cultural pride and children's self-esteem. It was not until quite recently, however, that issues pertaining to intracultural and intercultural variations in young children's cognitive and social development eased their way to the forefront of American society.

Over the last two decades we have witnessed the emergence of societies such as the Association for the Study of Play. Its journal, *Play and Culture*, explores the content of play itself and its cultural and developmental underpinnings (Chick & Sutton-Smith 1988), cross-national comparisons of children's achievement and parental values (Stevenson 1988), and an emphasis on

antibias curriculum (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey 1993). We have also seen the push to adopt multicultural approaches to educating young children in the United States and Canada (Ogbu 1981; Ramsey 1987; Saracho & Spodek 1990), and newer conceptual frameworks within education and developmental psychology that consider the cultural ecology of child development (Bloch & Pellegrini 1989; Lamb, Sternberg, Hwang, & Broberg 1992; Roopnarine & Carter 1992).

In this volume we have attempted to extend our cultural realm of understanding on a key aspect of young children's development, namely, play. Adult-child play and peer play have been linked to the acquisition and refinement or extension of a wide range of cognitive and social skills (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey 1987). Several issues motivated us to compile this volume: (a) the changing demography in countries such as the United States, the population movement to urban centers in developing countries, and the diverse social-structural familial organizational patterns that are evident in preschool-age children and their families in the United States and abroad; (b) the increased emphasis on early childhood stimulation through play for young children prior to kindergarten and the establishment of national preschool/day-care programs in a number of countries in the world; (c) the need to broaden our theoretical understanding of the cultural context and developmental dynamic in young children; and (d) the need to expose and educate early childhood professionals so that they become sensitive to cultural issues both in and out of the classroom. Let us examine these issues more closely.

THE CHANGING ECOLOGY OF CHILDHOOD

In most Western industrialized societies a large number of mothers are employed full- or part-time outside of the home. Similarly, in the developing nations of the world women have begun to challenge patriarchy and in growing numbers are joining the ranks of their male counterparts in the labor market. At the same time, familial structural organizations have been changing in some developing nations where couples are now marrying for companionship, as opposed to institutional practice, and are choosing to live in nuclear units. The influx of women into the paid labor force worldwide, women working double shifts, and the decrease in extended family units and network support for child care especially

in urban areas of developing countries have created a demand for alternative child care arrangements for very young children (Lamb et al 1992; O'Connor 1988; Roopnarine & Carter 1992). In industrialized nations some form of day care or home-based care exists in which there may be a formalized curriculum. By and large, these caregiving arrangements have play objects and equipment and children are encouraged to play. By contrast, in developing nations day care or crèches are still rare and parents rely on relatives or friends to provide supplemental care. In most accounts of developing societies, play occurs in children's groups but is rarely encouraged (Bloch 1989; Roopnarine, Ahmeduzzaman, Hossain, & Riegraf 1992; Whiting & Edwards 1988).

The changes in the structural organization of families in wide-ranging societies and the emphasis on early childhood education prior to formal schooling have placed children in contact with peers very early in their lives (e.g., infant day care; group-rearing situations such as the kibbutz in Israel). This may suggest that the peer group and peer play interaction would assume a burgeoning role in children's social and cognitive development. Indeed, researchers have demonstrated the contributions of peers and peer interactions in different dimensions of play to cognitive and social development (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey 1987). However, despite the fact that the societies discussed in this volume are, in some cases, introducing changes in their approaches to educating young children by introducing bilingual education and native ideas, their approaches to doing so vary quite a bit. While we should not lose sight of this, we believe that, regardless of the nature of early caregiving patterns, play is an integral part of parent-child and peer relations in diverse societies and as societies move to implement massive preschool and kindergarten programs, play can assume a pivotal role in this endeavor. The challenge may be in being culturally sensitive to issues relevant to the needs of specific societies, native themes and practices, and shared cultural knowledge regarding schooling and childrearing practices. For instance, in the United States educators are struggling to develop and provide culturally appropriate practices for Native Americans, mainland Puerto Ricans, African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans. In India and other developing nations educators grapple with the notion of how to modify Western conceptions of early childhood education to fit prevailing cultural beliefs about children and their educational needs.

THE NEED TO BROADEN CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS ON PLAY

Play is biologically based and is sustained as an evolutionary contribution to human development. Taxonomies of play forms and discussions of the significance of play have typically been based on studies of Western children and have assumed a global orientation. Obviously, in order to achieve a more comprehensive, coherent, and integrated account of play, it is necessary to incorporate sociocultural factors in theory construction. Steps in this direction have been taken and this volume builds upon contributions that have been made within the cultural-ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner 1979; Jipson 1991; Ogbu 1981; Tobin, Wu, & Davidson 1989; Whiting 1980).

Cultural-ecological models of behavior and development stress the importance of three interacting layers of environmental influence on play: (1) physical and social aspects of children's immediate settings; (2) historical influences that affect the way adults (and children) conceptualize play; and (3) cultural and ideological beliefs relative to the meaning of play for subgroups of children. Hence, the overall environment of influences is defined widely and includes social and economic realities that have an impact on families as mediators of children's experiences. Children's immediate settings are determined, in other words, by larger forces that include societal norms, class, caste, and gender ideologies, geography, climatic characteristics, and a culture's history. Developing children not only experience the family's tradition or cultural mores, but are also exposed to extrafamilial agents (e.g., peers, media, marketing forces) who acquaint them with cultural variations that teach children about cultural meaning of majority and minority status and the like. Children's play, then, is an outcome of being a participant within a particular cultural or subcultural milieu. Cultural-ecological frameworks subscribe to the notion that the kinds of immediate contexts that children experience is also constrained and moderated by broad cultural forces and available toys and other play items within the culture.

Cultural-ecological and developmental contextual models explicitly recognize the bidirectional influence of children and the environment. These directional relations are seen as a set of feedback systems forming a closed loop suggesting dynamic processes within the system. In other words, play behaviors and

cultural products in general are formed from individual traits and processes that are in turn influenced by overall societal structures. Play, a dominant activity of children in all cultures, is viewed to be both a cause and an effect of culture. Play is an expression of a particular culture; play is an important context or vehicle for cultural learning/transmission, as well as an indicator and reflection of child development (Schwartzman 1978). Structure-function relations are reciprocal and are culturally contextually bound in play as in other important human behaviors or experiences.

This volume is predicated on the belief that contemporary theorizing, stemming primarily but not exclusively from the cultural-ecological framework, is needed to extend our conceptual outlook on children's play in the modern and postmodern world. Both inter-individual or intergroup comparative work and intra-individual and intragroup analysis are required to illuminate the internal meaning of play within and across cultural settings. Our goal is to further an understanding of the relationship between play and the larger cultural and social ecology (cf. Jipson 1991; Roopnarine et al 1992; Schwartzman 1978).

TEACHING AND PLAY IN A DIVERSE WORLD

This volume intends to shed light on play as a universal and culture-specific activity on the theoretical side, but also to draw attention to the applications of the topic for parent education, teacher preparation, and in-service training. The chapters of this volume, with the exception of the accounts of the play of Puerto Rican and Yup'ik children in the United States, focus upon play behavior in *culturally continuous* contexts, which for some individuals means that the child's family has lived in its current broad ecological context for at least two generations (Slaughter & Dombrowski 1989). Of increasing concern will be the need for information about the behavior of children in *culturally discontinuous* contexts (i.e., play of immigrant, refugee, foreign student family, or migrant children). Moreover, many children live in families disenfranchised from the mainstream dominant majority society and hence may perhaps best be described as residing and participating in "continuous but unassimilated" cultural or subcultural contexts (i.e., the underclass, the homeless, oppressed minorities, learning new language, etc.). Of course to

become culturally assimilated into the dominant culture is not an option or a goal of some ethnic/cultural groups. The present volume intends to sensitize us to diversity and variation as it now exists in the play of children from select regions around the world in the hope that it will prepare us to deal more effectively and humanistically with important differences that confront us daily on our own shores as well as abroad.

That the challenge to address these issues is gaining import, witness the urgency with which educational critics are calling for curricular reform to include greater attention to issues of equity and cultural diversity, sensitivity, and responsiveness (see recent volumes by Lamb, et al. 1992; Gibson & Ogbu 1991; Swadener & Kessler 1991). In the field of early childhood education, for example, revisionists seek a better understanding of different countries and cultures as a way to enlightenment regarding one's own situation and greater insight into alternative possible conceptions of theory and practice, including potentials for achieving common goals (Saracho & Spodek 1990; Tobin, Wu & Davidson 1989).

To conclude, then, the present volume hopefully will add to the vision and mission of education that is multicultural by expanding the knowledge base of researchers, teachers, educators, and parents. The scope and limits of our information about children's play, adult roles, culture, and educational practice is in a dynamic state, as the chapters of this volume attest.

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