

COMPLETION REPORT

Play has been widely acknowledged as a means to promote children's learning. Yet, the Western concept "learning through play" has left largely undefined as if early childhood educators in different societies share the same meaning and can implement it without difficulties. In fact, misconceptions and belief-practice dissonance have been constantly reported in past literature. Cognizant of these problems, the current study aimed to investigate the similarities of and differences between early childhood stakeholders' perceptions and practices of "learning through play" in two Asian societies, Hong Kong and Tokyo. A mixed-method approach with questionnaire survey, classroom observation and interview was used to investigate teachers' and parents' perception of play and learning, as well as the actual implementation of "learning through play" in preschool classrooms. In total, three typical preschools of Hong Kong and Tokyo were included in this study.

From the questionnaire survey, both Hong Kong and Japanese parents considered "happiness" and "friends" as the most important elements of early childhood play. However, while Hong Kong parents explicitly linked "learning" with children's cognitive and literacy development, Japanese parents perceived it as involving social interactions and relationship with friends. To be specific, Hong Kong parents frequently mentioned the term "reading books", while Japanese parents consistently mentioned "play" and "friends" when they were asked about what learning is. In other words, the sampled Japanese parents' perceptions on play fitted well with that on learning, and group play was considered equivalent to learning. This finding echoed with the dynamics observed in Japanese preschools where children indeed spent most of their time on different types of play, for instance, outdoor free play with materials in nature. This showed a congruency of parents' perception on play and learning with teachers' actual practices. In contrast, Hong Kong preschoolers spent most of their time staying in classrooms on teacher-directed or academic activities, and they did not have chance to engage in outdoor free play or play with materials in nature. This observed pattern was partly congruent with parents' perception on early childhood learning because there were relatively little play, more teacher-directed activities, and academic activities focused on the training of literacy skills in preschools. Yet, despite that parents regarded reading as important to learning, children did not have time to read books at school. These findings were further supported by teachers' interview responses. The inseparability of play and learning rooted deeply in Japanese teachers' and parents' belief, and this belief was transformed into actual classroom practices and embodied as the abundance of chance for play in preschool. In contrast, the separation of play and learning in Hong Kong parents' belief, together with the worry on the transition from preschool to a more academic primary school life, created a back-wash effect on preschool curriculum. Together with the focus on academic and literacy training, children's chance of play in the observed preschool was hampered.

Despite that "learning through play" was a concept coined explicitly by the West and imported to the East, with differences in implicit conceptualization of this concept, Asian societies reacted differently, showing the diversity in early childhood theories and practices among different "Eastern" cultures. To promote children's learning through play in preschools, it is unrealistic to abruptly change the whole education system or the deeply-rooted beliefs in stakeholders of a particular culture. Instead, the change in schedule and environmental setting in preschools would be more feasible remedies to the observed phenomena.

Publication of the Results of Research Project:

Verbal Presentation (Date, Venue, Name of Conference, Title of Presentation, Presenter, etc.) Chau Nga Lei. <i>Play and learning in the early years: A comparison of kindergarten classrooms in Hong Kong and Tokyo. (tentative title)</i> World Organization for Early Childhood Education (OMEP) Conference 2013 (9th – 13th July, 2013), Shanghai, China.
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