

Special Issue: Power of Play in Young Children's Growth and Learning

Guest Editor's INTRODUCTION

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The reason to choose "Power of Play in Young Children's Growth and Learning" as the theme for the Special Issue of the Asia-Pacific Journal of Research in Early Childhood Education is to emphasize the importance of play in the early years, and also to encourage ECE professionals in the Asian Pacific region to offer young children more child-initiated play opportunities both indoors and outdoors, even though child-initiated play has been gradually pushed out in the Asian region, especially in big cities, because of population density and much popular thinking about the co-curriculum such as literacy, mathematics, science, etc.. In addition to the trend emphasizing the co-curriculum, most parents who are living in the Asian region except Australia and New Zealand have strong aspirations to teach their children English as early as possible, which puts enormous emotional pressure on young children. Many ECE professionals worry that might cause a decrease in child-initiated play opportunities and in the overall development of young children.

The first manuscript, by Grieshaber, analyzed this phenomena in Asia clearly. She found an important phenomenon in play and policy in the Asian-Pacific region, especially in Mainland China, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region and Australia, based on her careful observation for several years. According to Grieshaber, these three Asian countries have been sharing the Western value of play in theory and in government-level policies, but not in practice in kindergartens and care centers. She assumed that the prevalent

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Confucianism which emphasizes the academic achievement drives parents and some teachers more and more to adopt the co-curriculum over the child-initiated free-play. There is an everlasting conflict regarding free play in the region. She described how even Australia is heading to that direction. Play-based teaching and learning or teacher-guided learning are offered more than in the past. However, Grieshaber is more concerned about other Asian countries that are practicing teacher-directed teaching in kindergarten classrooms because of parents' resistance against even learning through play.

Grieshaber observed that ECE professionals in the Asian region feel a conflict between offering a child-initiated, child-centered approach, or a free-play approach to young children. However, Grieshaber observed that some teachers struggle to incorporate the Western notion of child-initiated play with teacher-guided learning. So the author agreed with British researcher, Siraj-Blatchford, who thinks teacher-guided learning would be no harm for young children if teachers could improve children's cognitive challenges without dominating young children's intentional and free activities. Grieshaber thought that the importance of the child-initiated play which is written in the government national curriculum documents in various Asian countries will change parents' academic oriented notion into child-initiated free play, which is not yet presented in this region.

In the second paper, by Shin, 46 publications, which were published on the outdoor plays in the past 10 years in Korea, were analyzed to see what kinds of themes were studied. Shin found several themes and tried to find what each of the teachers who participated in the 46 researches thought of them. She found that the teachers understood well the importance of outdoor play in terms of child development because it gives young children opportunities to explore various natural materials freely so that they can create and enjoy more in an unstrained atmosphere, but generally they reported that it is rather difficult to give more quality outdoor play because of the inappropriate settings, safety, and insufficient outdoor play opportunities and equipment teachers could offer.

Shin is also concerned about the quality of outdoor play in Korea. Shin thinks that offering young children either free play or teacher-guided learning is not actually a big issue. Shin considers that there should be someone who can interact with young children whenever the need arises since it is not enough for young children just to be outside to play. The ways in which the teachers and children interact while they are outside are more

effective in producing the associated outcomes. And Shin also recommended that the outdoor environments and outdoor activity programs, which have to be continuously improved by teachers, are needed to give young children quality outdoor play. However, an astonishing finding of this research was that almost all of the child care centers which participated in this study do not have outdoor play space while all the kindergartens do. This situation requires political action in Korea.

The third manuscript, by Hong, Kim and Jeon, is a study on the objects that would give young children a feeling of happiness. The researchers wanted to find out what kind of objects make young children from 3 to 5 happy, which had not been studied before in Korea. Young children value little things such as stones, broken parts of a machine, little marbles etc., but adults have little idea of the objects that children like. Most parents are not aware of them or even ignore them. Hong's team was interested in what kind of objects practically give young children happiness in everyday life. The researchers interviewed and asked 163 children ".....what you'd like to put in it (an amazing storage). What is the reason?" They gave children plenty of time to think and answer.

The results were divided largely into two parts; living things (24.3%) such as human, animal, and even plant, and inanimate objects (75.7%). Researchers divided again the inanimate objects into playthings (31.9%) such as toy, doll, mini-car, block, and robot, and others (gaming instrument, school supply/book, accessory, food, property, etc.). As Friedrich Froebel had suggested to the kindergarteners at that time "From a very early period, therefore, children should never be left too long to themselves without some external object to occupy them." (Froebel, 1974). According to the individual object, young children showed their preference in order of playthings (31.9%), human (12.3%) and school supply/book (10.6%). The children liked these things because they could fulfill their desire to play, have practical and emotional satisfaction, esthetic satisfaction, moral satisfaction and an opportunity to create something with the objects by themselves. Young children feel happy not only when they can have inanimate things they like, but they feel happy whenever they can be near someone they like and interact with them.

The other three authors whose manuscripts were published in this special issue studied teacher-guided learning through play. Robertson studied the complexity of preschool children's dramatic play behaviors and play styles in Australia, Hao and Flerer tried to

encourage parents to interact with their four-year-old son in exploring a scientific concept through play, and Wee, Kim and Kim researched the effectiveness of role-play in teaching kindergarteners multicultural and ethnic awareness. The researchers of all three topics wanted to find the balance between child-initiated free play and teacher-guided learning.

Robertson started her research since the constructs of play in Australia, child-initiated or free play, which used to be based on Western constructs, have recently started to move away from this traditional notion of play. Robertson's 111 subjects aged from 4 to 6 were observed in both indoor and outdoor play for four months and analyzed to find out the new trend integrating child-initiated play and learning.

The author found in the study that the quality of dramatic play had declined and the overall level of children's dramatic play was low as well. Children's dramatic behavior was at a low to moderate level and they did not perform in a mature way. And also the dramatic play displayed a moderate level of make-believe action with objects as well as low frequency of role play. Robertson concluded that this lower quality of dramatic play in Australia is due to the reduced amount of opportunities for, and exposure to play, even though the Australian national kindergarten curriculum aims to afford vast opportunities to play dramatically.

Robertson thinks that young children's dramatic play behavior which appeared in her study was different from the way children played in the past. However, Robertson concluded that the children who participated in her study showed their need to have someone nearby, who could stimulate their imagination, which is necessary to extend their episodes, etc.

Hao and Fleer studied the effectiveness of parent involvement in stimulating their 3 year-old son's exploration of an abstract scientific phenomenon such as Earth's rotation and revolution. The purpose of this study was to understand how families could create playful conditions which could help a young child to be scientifically conscious even though the concepts are rather difficult to understand. An astonishing finding of this research was the child's determination to play his own way creatively instead of following the way planned or initiated by his parents, which caused his parents to change their teaching attitudes. They started to think and interact with the child's perspective and assisted him instead of teaching him directly with their preconceived ideas. Finally, the three year-old boy became

more actively involved in his scientific play after his parents changed their pedagogical practice.

The aim of the last manuscript of Wee, Kim & Kim was to explore the possibility of developing positive notions of racial diversity and human equality, and also of changing Korean kindergarteners' negative attitudes toward multicultural aspects by negotiation and communication in the process of the role-playing activities. The researchers case-studied 25 five year-old children and their parents, and teachers as well. They performed this study since Korea has been changing into a multicultural and global society but there are still many people who have negative attitudes towards racial diversity. Wee, et al. thought that mere exposure to diversity is not enough to change the racial biases of children. Specifically the researchers would like to cultivate a positive attitude in children before a negative feeling is established. Before starting role play the children had to listen to eight stories containing racial diversity and then a discussion followed. After three months of experiment the researchers found that the role-play activities functioned as a medium to foster the children's emergent understanding of racial diversity, social attitude, social justice, and equality. The researchers suggested that the ECE field needs improved multicultural education not only at home and in kindergarten, but in the higher level schools and community as well. The authors suggested that parent education is needed to continue the positive notion of racial diversity.

Across all of the articles published in the APJRECE special issue, there are unifying themes: happiness of young children, good quality interaction either with teachers or parents, the necessity of balancing free-play and teacher-guided learning. I would like to sum up all the researchers' conclusions in this special issue. "PEDAGOGY is the ANSWER."

It was a wonderful experience for me to find that in all the researchers' minds, happiness and developmentally appropriate learning for young children are the most important aspects, which have been the most difficult project for the philosophers who believed in child-initiated education throughout history. As we all know all the philosophers who dreamt of child-initiated education failed in their time and still it is not achieved yet. It is our responsibility to balance young children's free-play and learning in their classrooms.

We have to seriously think of the importance of child- initiated play again because the brain scientists found that the amygdala and hippocampus are brain parts functioning

actively to form children's emotional and social development in their early years. So they start warning us to provide a positive rearing atmosphere at home and a developmentally appropriate educational environment in the kindergartens and care nurseries since emotional attachment and social competency are developed and formed in the early years, which they call the "critical period". Attachment and social relationship are formed well ahead of their cognitive development. Angular Gyrus, which is in charge of learning literacy, mathematics, and science, is developed in later childhood, they found.

Without having any knowledge of brain development Froebel declared that "Play is the highest phase of child development." While young children play with peers, their inner energy will be represented and expressed, and they will grow as an intelligent whole mature person.

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