

Perceptions among Hong Kong parents on Play in Early Childhood: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This qualitative study aimed to explore parents' perceptions of children's play in Hong Kong. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to ask how parents defined and valued play. Data analysis from forty participants' qualitative quotes revealed that participating parents had a positive view toward the importance of enhancing learning through children's play. In addition, some participating parents defined play as a broad spectrum encompassing four themes: innate in nature, free from rules or constraints, self-directed or spontaneously initiated, and age-appropriate. Also, some parents highlighted play as having various benefits for children's cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development. The findings of this study add to the existing knowledge base by identifying parents' diverse perceptions about play and learning. It also reflects a growing parental consensus of viewing play as a multi-dimensional concept valuable for whole child development.

Keywords: Parental perceptions, children's play, whole child development, young children, qualitative study

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Introduction

Play is essential for children's development, especially in their early years. Play is a means for providing children with stimulating experiences to foster sense-making of the surrounding environment, facilitate brain cell connections, and actualize brain potentiality (Banham, 2016; Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008). Thus, play is indispensable for children's learning and development. Unlike in Western culture, the interconnectedness of play and learning remains ambiguous in Chinese parents' understanding of play (Lin & Li, 2018; Wu et al., 2018). However, under the influence of Confucian culture, Hong Kong parents attach great importance to academic learning, viewing "play" as instrumental for children's education (Keung & Fung, 2021; Siu & Keung, 2021).

Indeed, the roles and functions of play are changing, as the importance of developmentally appropriate learning in play has been highlighted in recent kindergarten education documents and policies in Hong Kong (Cheung, Keung & Tam, 2021; Mak, Keung & Cheung, 2018). For instance, the Hong Kong Curriculum Development Council (2017) has stated in the recent Kindergarten Education Curriculum Guide (hereafter Guide 2017) that play is an effective way to learn what "best suits the developmental characteristics of children" (p. 64). Recommendations were made to provide professional development support for teachers to develop a play-based curriculum and effective pedagogy in classroom settings. The Guide 2017 also suggested offering play experiences for parents through home-school co-operation and encouraging parental involvement in children's play at home and in kindergarten.

While promoting "play" is emerging in such policy documents, it remains unclear whether the recent curriculum changes can alter parents' understanding of play as developmentally appropriate learning for young children. In addition, there have been limited studies on understanding parents' perceptions of play at the time of curriculum implementation. It is believed that investigating parents' play beliefs is important for understanding their dispositions and expectations as well as how those influence the play opportunities they offer to their children and their children's participation in play. With this in mind, this study aims to understand how parents perceive play. The research questions addressed here are: (1) What are parents' perceptions of children's play? (2) How do parents describe the benefits and functions of children's play?

Definition of play

Play is considered an essential part of a child's life and is natural in the foundation years (Siu & Keung, 2021; LaForett & Mendez, 2017). Huges (2010) suggested that play should be "intrinsically motivated, freely chosen, pleasurable, nonliteral, and actively engaged in by the participants" (p.33). Garvey (1990) delineated that play is enjoyable, spontaneous, and voluntary with active engagement and no extrinsic goals. There is also another perspective on play as "the basic medium for child development" (Oers & Duijkers, 2013, p.514) that encourages children to playfully participate in adults' world and to learn through imitation of their behaviors and activities and subsequently attain proximal development. Some scholars like Wood (2012) stressed that the focus of play should be enacted by the players (children) rather than the adults (teachers or parents). Furthermore, play is not static, but malleable. As argued by Zosh et al. (2018), play is better conceptualized as a spectrum from free play to direct instruction with playful elements; similarly, the extent of children and adults' initiation and direction of play experiences as well as explicitness of learning goals also vary across the spectrum and depend on different functions of play. Moving across the spectrum, direct instruction tends to be more effective in content knowledge acquisition, while free play is more beneficial for social development. As Brown (2014) pointed out, defining children's play requires a multi-layered perspective that considers "children and adults, animals and humans, both process and product, positive and negative forms, structured and unstructured forms, immediate and future benefits, passivity and performance, and fleeting moments and long-lasting periods" (p. 11). To nurture whole child development, letting children engage in different contexts and experiences across the spectrum of play is necessary, and aligning genres of play with the needs of children can provide more developmentally appropriate play experiences.

Play beliefs in Hong Kong and Chinese societies

Parents across and within cultures indeed also have different lenses to view play (e.g., LaForett & Mendez, 2017; Roopnarine, 2011). For example, a study showed that Euro-

American parents generally believed that letting children explore freely during play was beneficial for enhancing their development in different domains (Parmar et al., 2004). Australian parents showed diverse notions of play where some linked play to learning and preparation for formal schooling, but some did not (O’Gorman & Ailwood, 2012). Most Taiwanese parents were shown to value the importance of play for children’s development, but some still prioritized academic learning rather than play. Based on the Confucian tradition, Hong Kong parents make great efforts to ensure that their children receive a quality education, and their expectations of academic pursuits usually begin in early childhood (Hsue & Aldridge, 1995; Rao et al., 2014). In this context, most Hong Kong and Chinese parents believe that academic achievement is more important than play in children’s education, which is illustrated by the traditional Chinese idiom “qin you gong, xi wu yi”(勤有功，戲無益) (meaning that diligence has its rewards and play brings no advantage) (Lin & Li, 2018; Wu et al., 2018). While some parents view play and learning as two distinct concepts, a growing body of literature has started to re-examine Chinese parents’ play beliefs. Rao and Li (2009) observed four toddlers in pre-kindergarten programs and interviewed their teachers and parents. They found that teachers and parents strongly emphasized Eduplay, believing that children’s learning should be integrated into play. Another recent study conducted by Lin and Li (2018) used the Chinese Parent Play Beliefs Scale to assess parents’ play perspectives. The results of the factor analysis confirmed that two constructs constitute the meaning of play according to two groups of parents: “play for learning” with embedded early academic goals and training and “play for fun” as children’s activities in the pursuit of enjoyment.

Importantly, parental belief on play significantly influenced parenting practices and the organization of children’s play and learning environments (Jiang & Han, 2016; LaForett & Mendez, 2017, Muhonen et al., 2019; Siu & Keung, 2021). The results of a study conducted by Parmar et al. (2004) showed Asian parents from China, Korea, Pakistan, Nepal, and India appeared to place more emphasis on their children’s early academic life Asian children spend conceivably more time playing with educational toys, such as number games, and their parents tend to attach educational learning goals in play activities (Muhonen et al., 2019). In this point of view, the types of play that encourage parents’ facilitation and participation are influenced by parents’ understanding of their roles and functions Hence, understanding

parents' perceptions of children's play is critical for providing them with support in preparing developmentally appropriate play environments for children that in turn facilitate whole child development.

Method

In this exploratory study, we used a semi-structured interview to ask Hong Kong parents' open-ended questions about their perceptions of play. Given that participating parents may perceive children's play differently, this method can elicit different proximal responses to understand parents' perceptions of children's play.

Participants and procedures

Data collection started after receiving ethics approval from the university where the researchers are affiliated. Participants were purposefully recruited through a kindergarten participating in a university and school partnership project. The chosen kindergarten is located in the Tsuen Wan District, a low socio-economic area of Hong Kong with a growing number of mainland Chinese immigrants (Census and Statistics Department, 2018). This kindergarten is privately run but received the Government's subsidies under the Pre-primary Education Voucher Scheme. It was established in 2008, with six classrooms offering Pre-K through K3 levels. The kindergarten had 14 registered teachers for about 140 children. One of the key school visions was to support the holistic development of children and make the most of each child's potential, focusing on building a happy childhood. In accordance with the recommendations of the curriculum guides, kindergartens incorporated playful elements into the school-based curriculum, and teachers used various strategies to promote play-based learning.

Participants were recruited through the coordination of the kindergarten principal and one head teacher. Researchers of this study had no direct contact with the invited participants, and their participation was on a voluntary basis. After the recruitment, a total of forty participants were interviewed at the kindergarten. Of them, thirty-eight parents of children

aged 2 to 6 and two grandparents as caregivers participated in this study. Among those participants, 82.5% were mothers. According to participants' reports, 9 children were enrolled in Pre-K, 11 in K1, 13 in K2, and 7 in K3 at the time of the interviews (i.e. Pre-K refers to the preparatory year for children aged below 3, K1 is for children aged 3 and 4 during the calendar year, K2 and K3 are for children aged 4 to 6). There were 18 boys and 22 girls. This study was conducted in the spring of 2017.

Before the interviews, participants were asked to complete a self-reported questionnaire on demographic data. In this small sample study, we aimed to understand how parents defined play and what values they attached to children's play by asking two open-ended questions (i.e. "What is play in your understanding?" and "What are the benefits/functions of play for children?"). The interview protocol was reviewed by early childhood experts and piloted with a convenience sample of two university colleagues to ensure the validity of the content. All interviews lasted approximately 20 to 30 minutes and were conducted in a quiet room at the kindergarten. The interviews were conducted after verbal consent was given by each participant. All interviews were audio recorded.

Data analysis

All interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis techniques described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Three researchers reviewed all transcripts to obtain an overall conception and identify the initial codes of the participants' responses. NVivo-10 qualitative analysis software was used to identify the relevant codes and organize the data during the coding process. When all play definitions were classified, the different categories were compared. Themes were checked against each other and the original dataset. Three researchers discussed the coding scheme and emerging themes before the themes and sub-themes were applied to all transcripts. Participants' responses were described based on the themes emerging from the interviews, with illustrative quotes taken as examples. From an initial review of the qualitative quotes, the researchers realized participants used terms such as "games" and "play" (玩遊戲) interchangeably during the interviews. This overlap is based on the language itself— in both spoken and written Chinese, these two words (or two characters) for "play" are indeed identical to "games." This could be one limitation in this

study, and future research could explore the definition of these two words for the purpose of concept clarification.

Findings

The findings of this study revealed that participating parents also had a diverse understanding of play and recognized play in many forms. Our participating parents defined play as child-led activities, considering children's play on a broad spectrum, which included characteristics such as innate in nature, free from rules or constraints, self-directed or spontaneously initiated, and age-appropriate. Additionally, three aspects related to the benefits or functions of children's play were identified from the interview data, including cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development. Cognitive development is defined as thinking, reasoning, and knowledge acquisition, such as writing letters, names, and counting. Social and emotional development is defined as interacting and relating to others and expressing and understanding emotions and feelings. Finally, physical development is defined as using small and large muscles and hand-eye coordination. The following section illustrates the findings on parents' perceptions of these developmental categories.

Understanding play

When we analyzed the data, four themes of play emerged from participating parents who shared child-focused views on the definition of play. First, some participating parents stated that play or games were natural for children and that they were part of childhood. Examples included the following: "play is important because they are born with it" (Mother of K1 child-A28) and "for her, playing games is innate in nature" (Mother of Pre-K child-A07). Second, some participating parents perceived that there is no single definition of play. As one parent said, "play can be a lot of things that I can do with her... a lot of things can be games" (Mother of K2 child-A20). In a similar vein, several participating parents with child-led beliefs also commented that play is unbounded by forms and rules. Children can choose to play with any material where, when, and how they want. By following their imagination, they can create

an infinite variety of games. As one parent put it, “games have no form” (Father of K3 child-A37) and “there is no need to follow rules...she can do whatever she wants to do. Games can be without rules. During play, she can set her own rules” (Father of K3 child-A21). Third, interview data also revealed that some participating parents understood children’s intrinsic motivation, such as the importance of “free choice” and their “own initiative” in play. Those parents’ perceptions of play focused on stimulating children’s motivation. They believed that children’s ideas and interests guide the game. For example, “I think games allow her to play freely, she can do whatever she wants to do as long as she is interested” (Father of K3 child-A21) and “he is engaged to do what he wants to do. Play can be something he takes the initiative to do” (Father of K3 child-A37). Fourth, parents with child-led beliefs also paid attention to the child’s stage of development or age-appropriate play when defining play. For example, “play is aligned with the stages of development” (Mother of Pre-K child-A30) and “that depends on her age; see what sort of play suits her” (Mother of K3 child-A07). At their age, being “happy” and having “fun” are the foundation of children’s play. Some participating parents described play this way: “play is basically for making my child happier” (Mother of K3 child-A29), “play is something that the children find fun” (Father of K3 child-A37), and “play is having pleasure at the moment” (Father of K3 child-A37).

The findings of the study also echoed with the previous studies that parents viewed play as an educational tool to teach children something. “Play is a way for him to learn or to be educated” (Mother of K2 child-A04), “it is about imparting general knowledge through play” (Mother of K3 child-A32), “play has to be integrated with learning... he has to learn what exactly he is playing... it is about cognitive learning” (Mother of Pre-K child-A40), and “the kinds of games that I would get for him are those with educational value; he can learn something like word recognition...it is more academic in purpose” (Mother of K3 child-A06). Nevertheless, our interview data reflected that some parents referred to play as non-academic. They mentioned the following: “it has nothing to do with academic or word recognition” (Mother of Pre-K child-A08), “I think... it is not necessary to have academic goals” (Mother of K2 child-A39), and “it doesn’t require the child to sit still, and it is not about reading books neither” (Father of K3 child-A21).

Benefits and functions of play for young children

When asked about the benefits and functions of play, participants in this study shared that play could enhance children's cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development. As for cognitive development, 28 out of 40 participating parents perceived play as promoting the development of important thinking abilities and early academic skills, such as learning the alphabet, recognizing words, and understanding basic arithmetic concepts. Some participating parents said, "I think that their intellectual development can be improved, and that cognitive knowledge can be acquired through play" (Mother of K1 child-A34), and "through play, they can learn progressively, which improves their cognitive abilities, and that is important" (Mother of Pre-K child-A40). Other participating parents viewed play as a gentle way of imparting knowledge to children: "Take animal toys for example. When I play with a set of zoo toys with her, I can teach her the names of different animals" (Mother of K1 child-A28) and with "building blocks, for example, children can create different shapes. Through play, they can recognize a square or a rectangle" (Mother of K2 child-A19). Another parent said, "play can let her learn in an unconscious way" (Mother of K3 child-A32). In addition, three participating parents stated that children's concentration and problem-solving skills can be enhanced through play. One parent said, "play is a good way to keep her focused...to get her attention and encourage her to participate in activities" (Mother of Pre-K child-A30). Two other parents saw play as a way to encourage children to engage in the inquiry process and become curious to explore the world. They commented, "she is encouraged to explore the environment, which stimulates her inquiry process" (Mother of K2 child-A39), and play allows her to "explore the environment" (Mother of K2 child-A31). One parent also mentioned that play allowed her child "to learn how to solve problems" (Mother of K1 child-A18).

As for social-emotional development, 30 out of 40 participating parents mentioned that play could promote the expression of inner feelings and emotional stability and could be an effective way to regulate emotions so as to improve the child's behavior. Two participating parents mentioned play as "a function of emotional relief" (Mother of K2 child-A15 and Mother of K1 child-A35). Other parents said that play could "improve his behavior or help regulate his emotions" (Mother of K2 child-A04) and that play "allows him relieve

emotions...[and] build up happy life and positive emotions” (Grandmother of K1 child- A11). Two participating parents also agreed that play was a way to let their children relax. Here are some examples: “play has a definite value...[for] making children relaxed” (Mother of K2 child-A14) and “children are happier to play in a more relaxing atmosphere” (Mother of K1 child-A18).

Another social-emotional benefit of play recognized by the participants is building better peer and parental relationships. Some participating parents observed that children could more easily make friends and form relationships with others. They mentioned the following: “play helps [children] to find a play mate and establish a relationship” (Grandmother of K1 child-A11), “through playing with other children, one can learn how to get along with others” (Mother of K1 child-A12), and “they can learn to socialize when playing in a group” (Mother of K1 child-A18). Other parents took the view that play could develop children’s social skills. For example, “it motivates her to express herself and teaches her to play along with others” (Mother of Pre-K child-A02) and “interpersonal skills can be improved” (Mother of K2 child-A39). Our interview data also revealed that parent-child interactions could be enhanced when parents are involved in children’s play. Here are some examples: “the most important thing is parent-child time. The relationship between the child and you (parent) will become stronger” (Mother of K3 child-A07) and “as a parent, by playing with her, our relationship can become stronger” (Mother of K2 child-A25).

Interestingly, some parents mentioned the importance of play in helping children understand the concept of competition and how to cope with losing. They explained the following: “through play, he can learn the concepts of winning and losing. There is always a winner and a loser in a game...one cannot always win, and you have to learn to accept losing in games” (Mother of K3 child-A06) and “they must accept the outcome, no matter whether they win or lose. They need to learn to win and lose because sometimes children want to win all the time. Especially in the beginning, they must learn to accept losing in games” (Mother of K1 child-A33).

As for physical development, our interview data also showed that 13 out of 40 participating parents considered play as a way to develop children’s physical health through exercise. They noted that “it is about developing physical abilities” (Mother of K2 child-A13) and “improving her gross and fine motor skills” (Mother of Pre-K child-A16). Encouraging play

could be an exceptional way to increase children's level of physical activity, which is considered an important approach for resolving the obesity epidemic. One parent said that "without play, children don't get to move a lot and hence they decrease their metabolism, which is not good for their health" (Mother of Pre-K child-A40). Three parents shared the same views that play can enhance hand-eye coordination. One participant, for example, said, "there are some games that motivate him to think and improve his motor skills and hand-brain coordination" (Grandmother of K3 child-A03).

Discussion

Regarding parents' understanding of play, the findings show that some parents were more likely to appreciate a child-centered approach and emphasize the importance of children's interest and intrinsic motivation to play. These parents were likely to encourage free play conceptualizing play towards one end of the play spectrum with less adults' guidance and pre-determined learning goals (Zosh et al., 2018). Such perceptions of play beliefs among this group of parents reflected the current reform in kindergarten education, emphasizing children's autonomy and free exploration in play. The evidence from this study suggests that parents showed their understanding of the concept of "child-centeredness" as respecting children's individual needs, echoing with the Guide 2017, which argued that "children are not limited by the rules or preset goals established by adults" (p. 119).

Despite having child-centered views on play, most participating parents tended to hold an education-oriented belief toward the benefits and functions of play. They focused on early learning through play and endorsed play as a means to help their children learn concepts and acquire various practical skills, consisting of cognitive, social-emotional, and physical skills. In alignment with these parents' learning-oriented expectation, most of the play or games were guided by adults and structured with specific goals. Some parents even linked play to knowledge acquisition and conceptualized it as learning through play with an academic focus. These parents emphasized the educational benefits of play to learn and achieve whole child development, especially at a young age. These findings are consistent with previous studies describing that Chinese parents strongly focused on helping children to learn attitudes and

skills that could promote their academic performance, such as behavioral regulation and problem-solving (Hsue & Aldridge, 1995; Rao et al., 2014). Also, the findings illustrate how Hong Kong parents living in a cosmopolitan city are still influenced by the Confucian tradition of viewing learning as a priority of early childhood education. This phenomenon may also be explained by high competitiveness in Hong Kong, where the competition is serious even for primary school places (Ng et al., 2017). In fact, the parents interviewed in this study tended to emphasize the other end of the play spectrum on explicit learning goals by offering play experiences to learn specific information with adults' purposeful support (Zosh et al., 2018).

The current study revealed that Hong Kong parents demonstrated diverse perceptions of play across the play spectrum, as suggested by Zosh and her colleagues (2018). They understand the notion of child-centeredness and the importance of pleasurable play for children, but they are still inclined to pursue their children's early learning and explicit goals. In fact, the nature of play is malleable and plastic— perfectly congruent with the principles of children's learning and development (Cantor et al., 2019). Different genres of play along the spectrum can serve various functions for whole child development in accordance with individual developmental needs in different contexts. For example, letting children have ownership of their playtime (without any extrinsic goal) and encouraging children to stack blocks to build up an understanding of the concept of balance (with extrinsic goal) are both valuable play experiences for children. Nonetheless, the most critical point is the balance of different genres of play activities as well as the balance of beliefs relating to education-oriented and child-led. This is because different types of play have been shown to provide varied outcomes and affordances across time and context (Zosh et al., 2018); this also mirrors the parents' comments in the interview that play can have different benefits and functional goals for children. Hence, it is important to target the needs of children and the characteristics of each play moment to offer an optimal experience for enjoyable exploration and learning. Many studies have indicated that parental involvement positively promotes children's social, emotional, and academic growth (e.g., Boonk et al., 2018; Green et al., 2007). Teachers' efforts to promote play should thus be extended to the family so that parents understand the essence of play for child development (Samuelsson & Carlsson, 2008; Whitebread, 2018). In doing so, kindergartens could organize a variety of parent education activities, such as parent

talks, videos, and other events to promote the importance of joyful and balanced child development as well as children's play. It is believed that with the appropriate involvement of parents, play can have multiple benefits in providing playful experiences for children.

Last but not least, this exploratory study contributes to the current knowledge base by using interview data from a small group of Hong Kong parents to understand their perceptions of children's play. It is worthwhile for future research to extend this study by investigating the variations in parental beliefs across different socio-cultural contexts. Future studies could look into the duration of children's play at home, such as the average number of hours per day or week. Observation data could be collected to analyze parent-child interactions during playtime. Furthermore, children's perceptions of play and experiences at home may be possible factors that influence parents' conceptualization of play. Hence, children's perspectives of play could be explored and compared with divergent views among parents, while discrepancies could help to better define and determine the value of play.

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