Chapter 1
Cross–Cultural Psychology of Play and Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

Play is a universal form of human behavior that has been observed across all cultures and constitutes a fundamental role in children’s development. This chapter summarizes theory, research, and practice of play in early childhood education from a cross-cultural perspective. Even though there are common qualities of play, there is a great deal of variation within and across cultures. In the multicultural environment of globalizing world, early childhood professionals need to make better use of play from an intercultural perspective. Effective utilization of play in early childhood education needs a thorough understanding of scientific theories and cross-cultural research on play. Quality early childhood education programs incorporate play as a central element in the curriculum with consideration of both individual- and group-level differences. Developmentally and culturally appropriate practice in early childhood education demands the assessment and utilization of individual and cultural characteristics of children in the planning and implementation of play-based interventions.

Birds fly, fish swim, and children play.

Garry Landreth (2012, p. 27)

INTRODUCTION

Play is a natural activity for humans, especially for children, and it constitutes a pivotal role in our learning and development. As a universal human characteristic, play is observed in every human culture and extensively studied by researchers in psychology and related fields. Cross-cultural researchers investigate

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types, outcomes, and functions of play in different cultures. Early childhood educators focus on play as an important element and activity in their practice. In the multicultural environment of globalizing world, early childhood professionals can make better use of play from an intercultural perspective. This chapter provides definitions of key terms on the topic, summarizes theory and research from the literature, and provides recommendations for researchers and practitioners.

BACKGROUND: DEFINITIONS

Even though the concepts of play, culture, and early education are used extensively by various stakeholders, a lack of common definition makes it harder for a mutual understanding. Varying usages of the same term by researchers and practitioners contribute to the disconnection between theory and practice. It is therefore essential to provide a common definition of the terms of interest to create a shared understanding and effective application.

Defining play is not a “child’s play.” In contrast to the colloquial reference in some languages to children’s play as an easy task, defining play is not that easy. Many definitions of play show that the construct of play is ambiguous, dynamic, and complex. In general, play is defined as a natural, voluntary, and spontaneous activity that does not have clear goals, involves repetition of learned behaviors, and includes “play signals” such as special voice tone and exaggerated movements (Cardwell, 1999). Different forms of play share a common quality of being fun and other basic elements such as anticipation, surprise, pleasure, understanding, strength, and poise (Eberle, 2014).

Culture is a term that is widely used and more commonly agreed upon. Scholars from different disciplines provide definitions of culture from different perspectives. Culture may refer to the characteristics of a group of people, time or location including knowledge, beliefs, values, and norms. For psychologists, culture is essentially an intentional and collective world of symbols that humans bestow on things in their environment (Shweder, 1990). Various approaches in psychology including cultural, indigenous, cross-cultural, and international psychology provide a cultural study of human behavior with varying theoretical and methodological frameworks (Greenfield, 2000).

Early education is a set of services offered to children from different age groups and their families. Child care provided to infants and toddlers, early childhood education in the forms of preschool and kindergarten, after-school programs for school-age children, and parenting education for parents of young children can be listed among the variety of early childhood education services (New & Cochran, 2007). Early childhood education system is composed of multiple stakeholders including children, teachers, families, administrators, researchers, and policymakers.

THEORIES OF PLAY

Several theoretical frameworks have aimed to explain children’s play. Classical theories of play that came around 19th and 20th century are more philosophical in nature, whereas modern theories of play that were developed after 1920s are more empirical (Saracho & Spodek, 2003). Classical theories of play such as surplus, recreation, pre-exercise, and recapitulation theories emphasizes physical and instinctive qualities of play. On the other hand, modern theories of play, which includes psychoanalytic, arousal modulation, metacommunicative, and cognitive theories, focus on developmental functions of play.