

Integrate Play into Chinese Early Childhood Education

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ABSTRACT

Play is an essential educational concept of early childhood education. Through play, children develop physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively. ‘Learning through play’ is recommended as the mode of learning for children in Western countries. This concept has been introduced to Chinese kindergartens, but it has not been successfully implemented because it is incongruent with Chinese education tradition. This paper conducted a literature review on play and education, compared the education system of Western countries with that of China, and concluded possible suggestions that best resolve the conflicts between Chinese culture and play-based pedagogy. To fully integrate play into Chinese early childhood education, government officials need to evenly distribute educational resources, regulate after-school tutoring programs, provide parents educational programs and teacher’s training programs, and ensure open communication between schools, teachers, parents, and students.

Keywords: Chinese Early Childhood Education, Play, Learning, Play-based Pedagogy, Education reform

1. INTRODUCTION

In July 2021, the Chinese government released new guidelines to prohibit for-profit after-school tutoring institutions from teaching core school subjects and limits school’s worksheet assignments [1]. The guidelines aims to reduce the burdens for students and alleviate the cost of education. However, it did not receive support from many parents [1].

In China, after-school tutoring class service an important role. Chinese children begin to attend after-school classes as early as kindergarten [2]. Even in kindergarten, children are only allowed to play after they have completed their assigned worksheets [3]. Most Chinese children only get less than thirty minutes of playtime in kindergarten which is considerably less than their peers in Western countries [4]. Literature has established the critical role of play in various aspects of child development. The recent guideline is a step towards addressing this issue, intending to ease the workload of children and help children gain more playtime.

However, to fully solve the problem—the lack of playtime—simply implement the new rules will not bring desirable results because play-based pedagogy is incongruent with Chinese education culture [5]. Without addressing this central conflict, parents will only find new ways to circumvent the rules[2]. The Western approach of ‘learning through play’ conflicts with

Chinese cultural tradition in twofold: (1) With the competitive pursuit of education, Chinese parents are eager to give their children a ‘head start’ in academia, and (2) Chinese culture values hard-working as opposed to playing. This paper will discuss these two conflicts in detail by analyzing the current research studies and news articles on the topic. The rest of this paper address two core conflicts between Chinese cultural tradition and play-based pedagogy, and also aims to suggest some complimenting possible courses of action to the new guidelines to address each conflict and help China adapt to play-based pedagogy.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Play and learning are interrelated. Play not only brings joy but is also an important vehicle for children’s learning and development as Piaget said, ‘play is the work of childhood’ [6]. Academically, play is related to reading and math skills as well as the cognitive abilities that are integral to enhance academic skills. Children demonstrate and develop advance oral skills, gain phonological awareness, and acquire print awareness during play [7]. Moreover, through free play, young children build understandings of foundational mathematical concepts such as patterns, forms, and dimensions [8]. Furthermore, guided play is more effective for children’s mathematics learning than the traditional instructional approach.

Play is also critical for children's social, emotional, and physical development [4]. When children are engaged in unstructured play, they learn about how to work with others in groups [9]. Through playing together, children are aware of the perspective of their playmates which enables social enhancement. They will learn how to negotiate with others, take turns, and solve conflicts. In addition, play is an important way of developing self-regulation [4]. For instance, children need to learn how to manage their emotions when they are frustrated because the rules of the game do not match their will. Overall, the skills developed via play serve as building blocks for children's learning readiness which further enhance their academic performance. Drawing on the literature, play is a powerful tool that provides a multifaceted learning experience for children and should be indispensable in ECE worldwide.

In Western countries, the benefits of play and its relationship to child development have been highly recognized and widely accepted. In the United States, play is thought to be necessary for child development and crucial for life success [10]. In Norway, teachers play the role of playmates as opposed to supervisors. In Germany, rather than following a fixed schedule, kindergartens focus on social learning where children learn from their natural daily interaction with the environment and others through play [3]. According to a study, German kindergarteners spend 51% of their sessions on indoor free play [3]. Likewise in Finland, play is core for ECE because it is motivating and creates joy; as stated in an old Finnish saying, 'those things you learn without joy you will forget easily' [11]. As an example, Finnish kindergarten teachers do not push students to read at a certain point in time, instead, they help children build groundworks of literacy development through guided singing and chanting. Similarly, Finnish teachers do not teach mathematics through mundane worksheet practices; they guide children to learn basic arithmetic when they need to calculate the price for their pretend ice-cream shop for instance [11].

Yet, the emphasis on 'learning through play' in ECE is far from universal. In Eastern countries, the value of play has drawn scholars' attention but it has not been fully recognized by parents and teachers nor given proper priority in the curriculum [12]. Play-based pedagogy has encountered resistance in Eastern countries because play and learning are traditionally viewed as distinct or even contradicting concepts in Eastern culture [10]. As demonstrated by the old Finland saying mentioned above, the 'learning through play' concept is consistent with Finnish cultural beliefs. Whereas in China, the old saying 'excessive indulgence of playing saps ambitions in work' clearly illustrated that play-based pedagogy is alien to Chinese education tradition which makes prioritizing play in Chinese ECE difficult [12].

3. 'LOSE AT THE STARTING LINE'

3.1. Parents

In Chinese society, education is highly valued as it is believed to be the ladder towards higher social status. Parents believe providing education and give their children a 'head start' in academia is their top priority [10]. Getting a 'head start' is a central Chinese education philosophy [10]. Every Chinese child grew up hearing the phrase 'you cannot lose at the starting line'. This ideology incited China's \$100 billion for-profit tutoring industry [2]. Chinese parents dedicate much of their time and money to send their children to after-school classes from a young age to get the 'head start' at the expense of their playtime. Many parents reported they want their children to live a stress-free childhood, however, they feel responsible to not let their children fall behind when everyone is pushed into a vicious cycle already [2]. Banning for-profit tutoring is the government's move towards breaking this cycle, nevertheless, if the 'head start' mindset does not change, parents will just find other ways to exacerbate the cycle like hiring private tutors [1] or using foreign online tutoring programs [2].

Therefore, parental education is critical in addition to regulate after-school tutoring. The Ministry of Education should organize parent talks and publish media content about how 'lose at the starting line' does not equal to lose at the finish line. As explained by the ECE professor emeritus Nancy Carlsson-Paige, there is no solid evidence that shows children who learned reading earlier received long-term benefits from their 'head start' [13]. Children who began to read later will eventually catch up to their peers and ultimately demonstrate comparable reading skills [11]. As an example, a Finnish teacher only teaches students reading and math when the students are willing and ready to learn [11]. Yet, Finland has gained a reputation for having one of the best educational systems in the world because of the high scores Finnish students receive on international tests such as the PISA [14]. Thus, as demonstrated by the achievement of Finland students, Chinese parents should not be worried that their children will fall behind if they did not provide their children a 'head start' through after-school classes.

3.2. Education resource and entrance system

One of the biggest reasons that parents feel obligated to get their children a 'head start' is due to the unevenly distributed educational resource and the test-based school entrance system [1]. In China, administration to schools is based on proximity. However, in many cities, the education quality and fundings vary greatly. Gradually, test-based admission to better schools became a common practice. Such exams usually include

advanced reading and mathematics questions that after-school test-prep classes target. Even if parents realize failure to get a ‘head start’ does not correspond to failure in the future, the entrance exams curtail the time student have for catching up in the long-term. Without sending their children to after-school test-prep lessons to learn systematic academic early, their children might fail the entrance exam for good-quality schools. While in Finland, there is very little standardized testing for students nor competition among schools after the mandated testing system that blocked students from getting equal access to knowledge was abolished [14]. So, there is no pressure on Finnish students to learn certain materials before a certain time [14]. Finland principals and teachers also have adequate time to share knowledge which ensures equal education quality [14].

Hence, to lighten children’s academic stress and parents’ anxiety, the Chinese government should work towards evenly distribute educational resources. The Ministry of Education should work with school principles to provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate and discuss curriculum and ensure a flexible system that permits the best practice among all schools. When educational resources are evenly distributed, there will less incentive towards any ‘good-quality’ schools. When passing the entrance exams are no longer necessary for a good education, parents will not feel the obligation to push their children to learn advanced materials through after-school programs, and children will have more leisure time to play.

4. PLAYING HARD = WORKING HARD

The Chinese cultural emphasis on hard-working is also incongruent with learning through play pedagogy. Confucius teaching imposes a sense of discipline, self-control, hard-working on children. Yet play carries negative connotations and is seen as a barrier to academic achievement [4] because play means relaxation which is the opposite of hard-working. A Chinese saying, ‘work is accomplished in diligence and neglected in play’, perfectly illustrated the paradox between hard-working and play in the traditional Chinese mindset. Chinese schools are expected to teach children self-discipline, diligence, and inhibition of play from a young age through repeated mundane activities.

In kindergartens, children are only allowed to play for a short amount of time if and only if they finished their worksheets early [3]. However, this is problematic, as explained earlier in this paper, playing hard is working hard for children because they learn and develop through play. In fact, the lack of play and excessive learning can even hinder academic performance. Cognitive capacity is enhanced through clear-cut changes in activities; simply change a class subject is insufficient for the needed clear-cut change in cognitive effort [9]. Inadequate playtime limits

children’s ability to store new memories which result in inefficient learning. Furthermore, although Chinese students spent the longest time study in comparison to OECD countries, Chinese student’s mathematic, reading, and science ranking is not commensurate with their study time. Yet, even after play-based pedagogy has been introduced to Chinese kindergartens, play-based activities often give way to traditional worksheet practices in which the idea that ‘practice makes perfect’ dominates [12]. The difficulty of implementing play-based pedagogy in Chinese schools comes from two major places: parents and teachers.

4.1. Parents

Parent’s ideology of play and learning has remarkable impacts on children’s behavior in school [10]. The Western learning through play ideology is alien to Asian parents’ traditional beliefs and attitudes. In American schools, when children are offered playtime, Asian American children usually choose activities that are quieter and more academic-related such as drawing and reading because of parental and cultural influence [10]. For children to fully engage in play and receive the most benefits from play, changing the parent’s beliefs should be one of the top priorities. The Ministry of Education should work with school principles to offer parent education workshops that will give parents a comprehensive understanding of the current research on play. Such workshops should also acknowledge parents with detailed information on how the school will integrate play-based learning into their children’s curriculum.

4.2. Teacher

In addition to parents’ beliefs, teachers’ views also impact children’s play behavior. Learning through play pedagogy and its benefits has been theoretically introduced to some Chinese teachers; however, it might not be reflected in actual classroom practices because they lack the ability to implement play-based curriculum [12]. In Hong Kong, a play-oriented curriculum was first introduced in 1986, profoundly earlier in comparison to mainland China. Nevertheless, the play remains superficial in many classrooms [5]. On the other hand, one of the main reasons for Finland’s education success is its outstanding teacher preparation [14]. Therefore, the Ministry of Education should also provide free mandatory teachers’ training programs in addition to parents’ education programs that not only help teachers connect learning with play theoretical but also provide teachers with various examples on how to incorporate theories into practice in different situations. School principles should also provide teachers with enough freedom and trust to apply national standards in idiosyncratic ways that are the best for their classes. Teachers should meet and discuss how they would

revise their current curriculum gradually to implement more play-based activities.

5. CONCLUSION

Research has shown that play has long-lasting effects on a person's social, physical, emotional, and cognitive development and should be valued in the early childhood education of all cultures. Due to Chinese traditional values, it is difficult for Chinese schools to focus as much time on the play as Western countries. The new guideline that ban after-school tutoring is one such effort to free children for more playtime. However, just banning tutoring programs alone, without considering the other aspects will likely not make much of a difference and might even increase the stress of parents because the emphasis on getting a 'head start' and hard-working has been so deeply rooted in Chinese culture. Thus, reformers who are interested in integrating play into Chinese early childhood education need to find a balance between traditional Chinese pedagogy and play-based pedagogy by working with parents, teachers, and school leaders and target both after-school instructions and public school. Yet, this paper has a few limitations. Since the guidelines are newly released, there are no statistics or data on parent's reactions, the only sources come from news and media. Secondly, the research on play and learning has been largely conducted on Western populations, the same result might not generalize to the Chinese population even after the cultural conflicts have been resolved. Moreover, further research should also discuss the possibility that though cultural influences and educational practices, students' extrinsic motivation for studying turned to intrinsic motivation.

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