

The Journal of Educational Issue of Language Minority Students, V. 15, Winter 1995. Boise State University.

Play and Cultural Diversity

Michael Rettig

Michael Rettig, PhD, is an associate professor in the Department of Education at Washburn University in Topeka, Kansas.

Play and Cultural Diversity

One of the most common elements of childhood across cultures is play. Early childhood educators must recognize the importance of play in the lives of young children and make use of play as a means of promoting cultural awareness. This paper will discuss a number of topics relevant to an understanding of play and cultural diversity.

An examination of the relationship of play and cultural diversity is important for at least three reasons. First, a rapidly growing population of young children from culturally diverse backgrounds is entering schools. Second, play is a way for children to learn about the world around them and to learn cultural values. They not only learn about themselves but also about differences in other people. And finally, early education programs must work to enhance a positive awareness of individual differences and cultural diversity as a whole. Play experiences may serve as an excellent way to help teach children about the differences in other people and that these differences are not bad.

This discussion will focus on each of these three concerns and will include discussions of the role of play in socialization, awareness of individual differences, reported deficits in imaginative play, and strategies to enhance cultural awareness in early education classrooms through play-based activities.

Growing Populations

Even if early childhood teachers do not currently have many children from culturally diverse backgrounds that will likely change. For example, Ramirez (1988) indicates that by the year 2000, 40% of all public school students will be from ethnically diverse populations. He also notes that at the present approximately 50% of all kindergarten students in Texas are Hispanic. Kagen and Garcia (1991) indicate that 20%, or approximately 93,000 of Head Start's population, come from non-English dominant homes. Other figures indicate that the Hispanic population is the fastest growing of all groups, and by the year 2020, it will be the largest minority group in the nation (Bouvier & Davis, 1982). These figures provide an important rationale for becoming aware of cultural diversity.

Play and Cultural Values

Communicating cultural values to young children is a part of every society. Swick (1987) notes that cultural influences on children come from many sources including the family, neighborhoods, child care centers, and the media. He also stresses the importance of young children developing a sense of pride in themselves and a sense of understanding of people in various cultures. Matiella (1991) indicates that it is important to teach children that differences in people do exist and that these differences are not bad.

Play is a way for young children to learn about the cultural norms and values of a society. Ivic and Marjanovic (1986) indicate that traditional games, especially games with rules, generally form an integral

part of a culture in that they provide a means of communication for social norms, assist in the assimilation of group members, and allow for differentiation among group members. The games children play and the playthings they use in play are often tied to the culture in which they live and provide a way for children to practice skills needed as adults. Play then, serves an important role in enculturation.

Several examples serve to show how culture and play are related. Swick (1987) discusses how children in New Guinea play games in which neither side wins. A game will end only when the two sides achieve equality. This differs from games in the United States which typically stress competition. Shigaki (1991), in a study involving 50 children between 6-36 months, noted that Japanese day care providers communicate different cultural values to children than do American day care providers. Shigaki notes that in Japan care givers act in a manner which incorporates the child in shared or group experiences. Importance of the group and interdependence of group members are stressed as opposed to independence and self-expression.

As another example, Cliff (1990) examined the relationship between games, religion, myths, and ceremonies in the Navajo culture. She noted an interrelationship between play and other aspects of Navajo culture. Many games and the use of toys in play activities, for example, are interconnected with or founded in religious beliefs. She also discusses that cheating in games is not viewed negatively. It is seen in the same way as Euro Americans view pranks on April Fools Day. However, individuals caught cheating may face reprimands. Cliff also indicates that exposure to Euro American culture has changed the play of Navajo children somewhat, but that in many instances they have modified the activity to fit their own gaming practices.

Play is also a way for young children to practice the roles and skills they will need as adults, and these specific play behaviors may vary from culture to culture. For example, Fortes (1976), in an article reprinted from 1938, discussed play by children of the Tallensi people of North Africa. Fortes found that the play of children in that society tended to reflect the culture as a whole. Since farming and hunting were important parts of the culture, boys tended to play hunting games and practiced bow and arrow skills as a way of mastering the skills needed as adults. This type of play could be contrasted to present day United States where little girls may play with Barbie dolls, and little boys debate who is the best Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle. However, Fortes noted that some play behaviors were observed which could occur anywhere. Children were observed running and jumping, engaging in parallel play, and showing signs that their play was egocentric.

Fraser (1966), in her dated but still relevant book on the history of toys, describes how toys and playthings reflect the culture in which children live. She notes that the toys and playthings available for children sometimes have religious significance, may often be related to the materials or skills of the people, and will reflect the time period in which children live. For example, she notes that Eskimos made ivory toys because ivory was readily available; those peoples who lived near water often made toy boats, and astronaut toys in the United States were not available until the late 1950s with the advent of space travel. Some play materials such as toy animals or balls appear to be common among children everywhere.

Learning About the World Through Play

Thus far this article has discussed the growing number of young children from culturally diverse backgrounds who will be entering early childhood programs and how play is linked to the cultural values of different peoples. Based upon this rationale, the specific role of play as a means to promote cultural awareness will be discussed. The remaining discussion will focus on several different components that are important to an understanding of the role of play and cultural awareness.

Awareness of Differences and Playmate Preferences

Several studies are available which have focused on when children become aware of differences in other children. This research is important to a discussion of play and cultural diversity because it gives an

indication of when and how children may play with each other. Hirschfeld (1993) provides an excellent discussion of different theories as to how and why children notice or are aware of differences in other people.

In general, the literature indicates that young children are aware of differences in other children based on such variables as gender or race. For example, York (1992) describes several stages in racial awareness that begin with an awareness of self as a toddler to exploring cultural identity and being able to identify stereotypes by five to six years of age. There are, of course, a number of ways in which we differ from each other, and children will gradually become aware of these differences. Awareness of gender differences appears first, followed by awareness of racial differences, and then by awareness of handicapping conditions. Hirschfeld (1993) notes that perceptual cues may be important to this awareness but that discussions with children may also be important.

One of the first differences children are likely to be aware of are gender differences. This awareness generally occurs anywhere from 18 months of age on. Fagot and Leinbach (1989) found that some boys and girls could correctly label boys and girls as early as 24 months and found that the mean age of passing a gender labeling task was 28 months of age. Honig (1983) indicated that gender identity is achieved before three years of age even though some toddlers between 18 months and two years can label other children correctly by sex. York (1992) notes that two-year-olds learn the names of colors, identify words like "me" or "you," and classify people by gender.

Sometime between age three and four children become aware of differences based on racial or ethnic background. While Porter (1971) noted there is no exact age where racial awareness is present, it appears somewhere between 3-4 years of age. She notes that the fourth year of life seems to be a crucial age in terms of racial awareness. At four years of age a child may not fully understand racial differences, but has begun to realize that color differences have social meaning. York (1992) notes that three and four-year-olds are better at noticing differences in other people than younger children, but they are also susceptible to believing stereotypes.

Other research suggests that the awareness of racial differences may be present at three years of age (Lederberg, Chapin, Rosenblatt, & Lowe-Vandell, 1986). Lederberg et al. noted that three-year-olds are sensitive to other children's ethnicity and prefer to play with children who belong to the same ethnic group as themselves.

Several studies have investigated not only the racial awareness of children but how that awareness influences the playmate preferences of young children from different ethnic backgrounds (Durrett & Davy, 1970; Finkelstein & Haskins, 1983; Rohrer, 1977). Durrett and Davy (1970) studied the racial awareness of young Black, Anglo, and Mexican American children. Anglo and Black dolls were used, and children were asked to choose the doll which most looked like them and which they would prefer to play with. Results indicated that 80% of the Mexican American children chose the Anglo dolls when asked which looked most like them. This compared to 96% for the Anglo children and 76% for the Black children. When asked which doll they preferred to play with, 83% of the Anglo children and 48% of the Black children chose dolls of their own race. Eighty percent of the Mexican American children chose the Anglo doll. Results of this study were compared to a similar study conducted in 1958. The 1958 study showed that only 33% of Black children identified with their own race doll. The White-based or Eurocentric preferences by minority children have been referred to as race dissonance (Spencer, 1984).

A preference for play with same-color playmates was also found in research reported by Finkelstein and Haskins (1983). In their study with Black and White kindergarten children, they found that children preferred to play with same color playmates. The children were observed at play both in the classroom and on a playground. Further, when teachers did not encourage play or exerted little control over playmates' preferences the tendency to play with same-color peers was greatest.

The findings regarding same-color playmate preferences by children of different races are not dissimilar to research studies that have investigated integrated preschool classrooms with nondisabled children and children with disabilities. Several studies have shown that without intervention, nondisabled children will tend to play with other nondisabled children and will choose them more often as playmates (Peterson & Haralick, 1977; Guralnick, 1980).

Children will also gradually learn about differences in other children based on disabilities. This awareness may occur between four and five years of age. Gerber (1977), for example, found that preschool-aged children, ranging in age from three-and-one-half to five years of age, were aware of the disabilities of other children. Gerber noted that the awareness of each disability was related to the severity of the disability in as much as children were aware of highly visible disabilities earlier. Jones (1967) suggested that by age four children can already recognize limitations due to physical disabilities. Of particular concern is that young children may reject a child who is disabled because of fear of the disability or stereotyping (Derman-Spinks, 1989).

In summary, the literature on awareness of differences shows that young children are aware of differences in other children, and this awareness seems to follow a pattern from an awareness of gender, to racial differences, to disabilities. Consistent across this literature are indications that children tend to play with peers who are similar to them. How children become aware of differences in other children is an important consideration to play intervention and may be based on more than just visual cues. Hirschfeld (1993) found in a study involving three and four-year-old children, that more racial information was recalled by young children after listening to a verbal narrative than by viewing a visual one.

Differences of Deficits in Imaginative and Sociodramatic Play

In recent years there has been some controversy regarding whether children from low income homes have deficits in imaginative and sociodramatic play or just differences in play. Interest in this topic is due in part to Smilansky's 1968 work in which she indicated that children who lived in low socioeconomic status (SES) homes in Israel displayed lower levels of sociodramatic play than did middle-class children. Smilansky's findings, however, were contradicted by Eiferman (1971) who suggested that no such deficits were present. The central issue of controversy is whether children from low socioeconomic, non-Western homes have underdeveloped imaginative play skills (Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1987).

A number of research studies have suggested that there are differences in the sociodramatic or imaginative play of children from low SES homes as compared to middle-class children (Griffing, 1980; Rubin, Maioni, & Hornung, 1976; Udwin & Shmukler, 1981). For example, Rubin, Maioni, and Hornung (1976) investigated the free play behaviors of young children from lower-class and middle-class homes. Using an observation scale based on the works of Piaget and Parten, Rubin et al. observed the free play behaviors of three-year-old children in an indoor setting. The results indicated that the children from middle class homes exhibited more constructive, associative, and cooperative play than did the children from lower class homes. Further, the middle class preschoolers displayed significantly less parallel and functional play than the low-income children. Udwin and Shmukler (1981) reported in their investigation of the influence of sociocultural, economic, and home background factors on imaginative play, that the overriding variable was socioeconomic status. Lower levels of imaginative play were found in children coming from lower socioeconomic homes. In another study, Griffing (1980) compared sociodramatic play of Black children who attended two different schools. These two schools either served primarily low socioeconomic-status children or middle-class children. Results indicated that the children from middle class families showed consistently higher scores in sociodramatic play. In addition, Griffing found that maternal education level was a predictor of play for boys but not for girls.

Even when children from different ethnic backgrounds come from middle class homes differences in play may be observed. Yawkey and Alvarez (1986) studied the free play behavior of five-year-old Hispanic and

Anglo children from middle class homes. Findings indicated that Hispanic boys displayed greater amounts of simple functional play than did the Anglo boys, and Anglo boys were found to engage in significantly more fantasy play than the Hispanic boys. In addition, Hispanic girls were observed to engage in more reality-oriented play than Anglo girls.

Though this research does not seem to suggest that differences in imaginative play may be present when children come from non-Western or low socioeconomic homes this research has been questioned by a number of authors. Rubin, Fein, and Vandenberg (1983) note, for example, that the majority of studies conducted on this topic have been conducted in school settings not home settings, and Johnson, Christie, and Yawkey (1987) indicate that some researchers have confounded race and social class or culture and social class which has made it difficult to know which variable is most significant. Schwartzman (1984) adds that a number of variables could influence the findings on imaginative play of children in different cultures. For example, such variables could include who is doing the observing or the race or ethnic background of the observer.

Strategies to Enhance Cultural Awareness Through Play

Early childhood educators must increasingly be aware of the effects of cultural diversity in their classrooms and incorporate diversity into their curriculum. To address these concerns a number of general considerations can be discussed.

First, it is important for teachers to get to know their students' cultural backgrounds and language (Jalongo, 1992). Morine-Dershimer, Lay-Dopyera, and Graham (1981) stress how important it is to be aware of the language and communication styles of the children. One way to learn the cultural backgrounds of students is to understand the communication styles in the home. Teachers should strive to know enough of children's language to carry on a conversation with them (Saracho, 1983). However, it may be nearly impossible for a teacher to learn the languages of all the children in a classroom; further some parents may request that the child speak only English while at school.

Second, it is also important that teachers bring the outside world into the classroom (Jalongo, 1992) through the use of materials and activities. Derman Sparks (1989) stresses that teachers should not provide just token materials or choose images of people of the past, which frequently happens with the study of Native Americans.

Third, teachers should use literature to enrich play and an understanding of cultural pluralism. They should select books that discuss the universality of human emotions, pride in an ethnic heritage, or how it feels to be different. Derman-Sparks (1989), in *Anti-Bias Curriculum Tools for Empowering Young Children*, suggests several ways that books can be evaluated to be sure they are free of negative stereotypes. She suggests that teachers look at the illustrations, the story line, note the copyright date, and watch for loaded words. Kendall (1983) stresses that books and language arts materials must be chosen carefully. Because young children can not easily distinguish between fact and fantasy, the books chosen must present realistic information about different peoples. Further, the vocabulary of the book as well as how people are portrayed are both important to examine. Teachers should also determine if characters are stereotyped according to color or gender or if children can identify with the street scenes.

Suggestions for Play Interventions

The dramatic play area may be a good place to enhance cultural awareness. In this play area, children can easily explore what it is like to live in another culture. Kendall (1983) suggests that the materials in the dramatic play area be changed periodically to reflect different styles of living. She suggests that we should not have the same old kitchen materials in the dramatic play area everyday. Different types of clothing that reflect different cultures can easily be provided in the dramatic play area. During dress-up play children could be given clothes from different cultures for dress up and role play. Even the same kinds of clothes

could be used in different ways such as a scarf being used as an Egyptian veil. Kendall notes that dolls may be one of the first abstract symbols to represent a sense of self. She suggests that both boys and girls need to have dolls that look like them. In addition, by observing children at play with dolls, teachers may get some idea of how children perceive other racial groups.

Cooking and music are both good ways to promote cultural diversity. A multicultural approach to cooking and music can give children a connection between cultural heritage, how meals are prepared, and how music and musical instruments are different. Families of children in a class may be an excellent source of recipes, music, or art.

Kendall (1983) developed a 16 item checklist for teachers to help ensure that their classrooms have a multicultural focus. This checklist includes items in language arts, social studies, blocks, dramatic play, music, games, and cooking. For example, are the accessories in the block area representative of various cultures? Are there stories about persons from different cultural backgrounds? Do cooking experiences encourage children to experiment with foods from other cultures? Are the dolls in the dramatic play area multiracial? Kendall also lists a number of organizations that could provide information and multicultural materials.

Recent toy catalogs have shown an increased availability of multicultural toys. Constructive Playthings, for example, has a catalog with a variety of items such as multiracial dolls, puzzles, games, and books. Hand in Hand First Step Limited also has materials such as books, dolls, and music which reflect different cultures. In addition, show and tell may provide an excellent opportunity for children to display materials about their home life or heritage. Children should be encouraged to bring play things that represent unique aspects of their culture that they can share and talk about with other children.

Two resource books can assist teachers in promoting an awareness of culture and disability. Browne, Howard, and Pitts (1984) have developed an excellent resource book for teachers that focuses on cultural diversity in many areas including language, holidays, foods, clothing, and child rearing practices. They note that all cultures have common needs for food, transportation, and clothing and that these themes can be used and adapted with play materials. In addition, pictures that illustrate people in different cultures could be cut out of magazines. These pictures could then be pasted onto cardboard with a base and used for dramatic and imaginative play activities. Froschl, Colon, Rubin, and Sprung (1984) provide an excellent resource book for teachers who wish to provide activities to increase disability awareness in their classrooms. They provide suggestions for creating an inclusive, nonsexist, multicultural environment that stresses disability awareness. They provide suggested activities, materials, and resources for visual, hearing, and mobility impaired children, such as providing glasses without lenses in the dramatic play area for children to play with.

Conclusion

A final consideration regarding the enhancement of cultural awareness through play is that cultural diversity needs to be seen in a broader context than just racial differences. Children can differ from each other in many ways, and an awareness of differences should include an understanding of differences based on such variables as gender, disability, religion, or geographic region. The most important factor is to encourage children to interact with each other, and play may be the best way to foster this interaction.

References

- Browne, G., Howard, J., & Pitts, M. (1984). Culture and children. Texas State Department of Human Resources. (ERIC Document Reproduction Services number ED 262897)
- Bouvier, L. F., & Davis, C. B. (1982). The future racial composition of the United States. Washington, DC. Demographic Information Services Center for the Population Reference Bureau.

- Cliff, J. M. (1990). Navajo games. *American Indian Culture and Research Journal*, 14, 1-81.
- Derman-Sparks, L. (1989). *Anti-bias curriculum tools for empowering young children*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Durrett, M. E., & Davy, A. J. (1970). Racial awareness in young Mexican American, Negro, and Anglo children. *Young Children*, 26(1), 16-24.
- Eiferman, R. P. (1971). Social play in childhood. In R. E. Herron & B. Button Smith (Eds.), *Child's Play*. New York: Wiley.
- Fagot, B., & Leinbach, M. (1989). The young child's gender schema -internal organization. *Child Development*, 60(3), 663-672.
- Finkelstein, N. W., & Haskins, R. (1983). Kindergarten children prefer same color peers. *Child Development*, 54, 502-508.
- Fortes, M. (1976). Social and psychological aspects of education in Taleland. In *Play: Its role in development and evolution*, J. S. Bruner, A. Jolly, & K. Sylva (Eds.), pp. 474-483. New York: Basic Books.
- Fraser, A. (1966). *History of toys*. Delacorte Press.
- Froschl, M., Colon, L., Rubin, E., & Sprung, B. (1984). *Including all of us: An early childhood curriculum about disability*. New York: Educational Equity Concepts.
- Gerber, P. J. (1977, June). Awareness of handicapping conditions and sociometric status in an integrated pre-school setting. *Mental Retardation*, 24-25.
- Griffing, P. (1980). The relationship between socioeconomic status and sociodramatic play among Black kindergarten children. *Genetic Psychological Monographs*, 101, 3-34.
- Guralnick, M. J. (1980). Social interactions among preschool children. *Exceptional Children*, 46, 248-253.
- Hirschfeld, L. A. (1993). Discovering social differences: The role of appearance in the development of racial awareness. *Cognitive Psychology*, 25(3), 317-350.
- Honig, A. S. (1983). Sex role socialization in early childhood. *Young Children*, 38, 57-70.
- Ivic, I., & Marjanovic, A. (Eds.), (1986). *Traditional games and children of today*. Belgrade-OMEP Traditional Games Project. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service number ED 285643)
- Jalongo, M. R. (1992). A resource for multicultural education. In E. B. Vold (Ed.). *Multicultural education in early childhood classrooms*. NEA Early Childhood Education Series, pp. 52-66. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service number ED 345865)
- Johnson, J. E., Christie, J. F., & Yawkey, T. D. (1987). *Play and early childhood development*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman and Co.
- Jones, R. (1967). Early perception of orthopedic disability. *Exceptional Children*, 34, 42-44.
- Kagan, S. L., & Garcia, E. E. (1991). *Educating culturally and linguistically diverse preschoolers: Moving the agenda*. Office of Educational Research and Improvement: Washington, DC.

Kendall, F. E. (1983). *Diversity in the classroom. A multicultural approach to the education of young children*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Lederberg, A., Chapin, S., Rosenblatt, V., & Lowe-Vandell, D. (1986). Ethnic, gender, and age preferences among deaf and hearing preschool peers. *Child Development*, 57(2), 375-385.

Matiella, A. C. (1991). *Positively different: Creating a bias-free environment for young children*. Network Publications, Santa Cruz, CA. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 338949)

Morine-Dershimer, G., Lay-Dopyera, M., & Graham, P. (1981). Participant perspectives of classroom discourse. Part V: Attending to the discourse of classmates in play settings. Final Report. California State University, Hayward. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 210106)

Peterson, N. L., & Haralick, J. (1977). Integration of handicapped and nonhandicapped preschoolers: An analysis of play behavior and social interaction. *Education and Training of the Mentally Retarded*, 12, 235-245.

Porter, J. D. (1971) *Black child, White child: The development of racial attitudes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ramirez, B. A. (1988). Culturally and linguistically diverse children. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 20(4), 45-46.

Rohrer, G. (1977). Racial and ethnic identification and preference in young children. *Young Children*, 32(2), 24-33.

Robin, K. H., Maioni, T. L., & Hornung, M. (1976). Free play behaviors in middle- and lower-class preschoolers: Parten and Piaget Revisited. *Child Development*, 47, 414-419.

Saracho, O. N. (1983). Essential requirements for teachers in early childhood bilingual/bicultural programs. *Childhood Education*, 60(2), 96-101.

Schwartzman, H. B. (1984). Imaginative play: Deficit or difference? In T. D. Yawkey & A. D. Pellegrini (Eds.), *Child's Play: Developmental and Applied*. Hillsdale NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, pp. 49-62.

Shigaki, I. (1991). An examination of social interaction and play activities of infants and toddlers in Japanese day care. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 338419)

Smilansky, S. (1968). *The effects of sociodramatic play on disadvantaged preschool children*. New York: Wiley.

Spencer, M. B. (1984). Black children's race awareness, racial attitudes and self-concept: A reinterpretation. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 25(3), 433-441.

Swick, K. J. (1987). *Readings on multicultural learning in early childhood education*. Little Rock, AR: Southern Association On Children Under Six. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 309863)

Udwin, O., & Shmukler, D. (1981). The influence of sociocultural, economics, and home background factors on children's ability to engage in imaginative play. *Developmental Psychology*, 17(1), 66-72.

Yawkey, T. D., & Alvarez, D. J. (1984). Comparisons of free-play behaviors of Hispanic and Anglo middle class SES five year olds. The Pennsylvania State University. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 274460)

York, S. (1992). *Developing roots and wings: A trainer's guide to affirming culture in early childhood programs*. Rainier, MD: Gryphon House.

[Return to JEILMS v.15 Table of Contents](#)

The HTML version of this document was prepared by NCBE and posted to the web with the permission of the author/publisher.

[go to HOME PAGE](#)

www.ncela.gwu.edu

[an error occurred while processing this directive]