Rethinking the Role of Play and Work in Early Childhood Curriculum and Pedagogy

重思「遊戲」與「工作」在幼兒教育課程和教學方法上的角色

LAU Grace
Department of Early Childhood Education
The Hong Kong Institute of Education

Abstract
This paper attempts to discuss how teachers understand the concept and the role of play in early childhood curriculum in response to the education reform initiated by the Hong Kong Government. Collaboration action research was conducted with 18 teachers in two pre-schools for a period of two years. It was found that the project teachers have different views on work and play as the goal of educating children. To facilitate analysis of data, the researcher has classified play and work into different categories of learning activity. The research revealed that what is considered as play and work depends on the extent to which the child feels free to follow his/her own desire or the extent to which this self is subordinated to the authority of the teacher. As the boundary between play and work becomes blurred, early childhood educators should rethink the role of play and work in early childhood curriculum and pedagogy.

摘要
本文旨在回應港府於幼教課程改革上的倡議而探討各教師們是否理解「遊戲」及「工作」在幼教課程上的角色。十八位來自兩所幼兒學校的教師參與了為期兩年的協作式行動研究。研究者因著教師對「遊戲」及「工作」所持不同意見而設計了一個「遊戲/工作」分類學習表以便於分析數據。研究結果顯示「遊戲」及「工作」的界分視乎幼兒視活動仍出於自願或受制於老師。幼教成員實有需要在課程和教學方法上重思難於分辨的「遊戲/工作」角色。

Background and Aim of the Research
Historically, in Hong Kong, there was little government intervention in preschool provision. It was only in the latter half of 1990’s that the government of Hong Kong began to reform the school curriculum in response to the need to enhance Hong Kong’s competitiveness in the world. The Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum issued 2006 reiterates and reconfirms the 10-year old ECE curriculum reform proposal by adopting play for facilitating the “child-centred” concept of children’s learning. In this latest issued Guide, play is recommended as a learning strategy to be incorporated into different learning areas and to be used to plan the curriculum through an integrated approach (2006, p.41).

On the issue of assessment, it was recommended that Pre-primary institutions should assess children’s learning and development continuously throughout the year and informally, without adding pressure to the children. This form of assessment has connection with that recommended by Drake (1993) in which she mentioned how to carry out assessment for children while they are engaging in “Transdisciplinary” integration activities (超學科綜合活動) such as “Project Approach”, “Reggio Emilia Approach”, and the “do” part of the “High Scope” Approach. Hence, it is fair to say that what the EDB recommends for the Pre-school sector are “play” activities and not the rule-bound
As an educator in the early childhood field, I observe how practitioners have different interpretations of the notion of play. I was indeed puzzled by the apparent contradiction exhibited by those "progressive" practitioners who espoused the merits of play advocated by Piaget and Dewey but what they practised was a different thing. The 'play' curriculum which they practised was far from the notion of 'authentic' or 'real' play advocated by the constructivists and the pragmatists. The cause of this divergence can be explained by the gap existing between the espoused theory and the practice of the practitioners concerned. Since 'play' forms a core part of education reform propounded by the Government, the contradiction between what these practitioners believe and what they practise has a profound implication for the implementation of the reform. The purpose of this report is to share my research findings conducted between 1999 and 2001 on the cause of this contradiction.

The Benefits Accrued to Play
Psychoanalysis believes that play is necessary for mastering emotional traumas or disturbances. Psychosocialists believe it is necessary for cognitive growth. Maturationists believe play is necessary for competence building and for socializing functions in all cultures of the world. Neuroscientists believe play is necessary for emotional and physical health, motivation and love of learning. Research on the brain demonstrates that play is a scaffold for development, a vehicle for increasing neural structures, and a means by which all children practice skills they will need in later life (Sheridan, 1999).

But First of All, What is Play?
To provide a basis for the study, it is necessary to have an understanding of the meaning of play to young children and its role and function in a child’s development. The understanding of the concept of ‘play’ by the practitioners is crucial since the application of it has direct impact on children’s learning.

While we are all familiar with the activity of play, a review of the literature on children’s play suggests a lack of consensus among scholars and researchers on the definition of play.

In early childhood education, some influential figures like Friedrich Wilhelm Froebel (1782-1852) and Susan Isaacs (1885-1948) brought further confusion to the notion of play when they said that play was “the work of the child”.

Approach of the Study
To achieve my research goal of finding out the cause of the contradictory behaviour of practitioners in adopting the notion of play in school curriculum without any prejudgement of the outcome, I adopted Coulter’s (2002) form of educational “action” research, which is designed along the line of Adrent’s transformation of Aristotle’s concept of praxis (1958, 1998). Unlike poisies, whose goodness can be determined by judging the quality of the product or the end achieved, praxis does not aim at any predetermined end. This quality of praxis has established its link to eros. It is essentially a kind of passion with feelings and emotions that cultivates a kind of “force and push” movement, like the ‘to-and-fro’ movement of play which has no end.

I have also adopted Elliot’s revised version of Lewin’s model of action research (Lewin, 1946, 1948 cited in Kemmis, 1980) for this research. See figure 1 for a revised version of Lewin’s model of action research by Elliott (1991).
Figure 1

IDENTIFYING INITIAL IDEA

RECONNAISSANCE
(fact finding & analysis)

GENERAL PLAN
ACTION STEPS 1
ACTION STEPS 2
ACTION STEPS 3

IMPLEMENT ACTION STEPS 1

MONITOR IMPLEMENTATION & EFFECTS

'RECONNAISSANCE'
(explain any failure to implement, and effects)

REVISE GENERAL IDEA

AMENDED PLAN
ACTION STEPS 1
ACTION STEPS 2
ACTION STEPS 3

IMPLEMENT NEXT ACTION STEPS

Cycle 1

Cycle 2

MONITOR IMPLEMENTATION & EFFECTS

'RECONNAISSANCE'
(explain any failure to implement, and effects)

REVISE GENERAL IDEA

AMENDED PLAN
ACTION STEPS 1
ACTION STEPS 2
ACTION STEPS 3

IMPLEMENT NEXT ACTION STEPS

Cycle 3

MONITOR IMPLEMENTATION & EFFECTS

'RECONNAISSANCE'
(explain any failure to implement, and effects)
Under this model, the general idea should be allowed to shift. Reconnaissance should involve analyses as well as fact-finding and should constantly recur in the spiral of activities, rather than occur only at the beginning.

The action research was conducted in a Catholic and a Buddhist Kindergarten. The principals of the two kindergartens participated in this research gave their consent to participate because they had experienced a ‘disorientating dilemma’, a challenge which they faced in using the traditional practice of the ‘work curriculum’ instead of the newly advocated ‘play curriculum’ in the midst of educational reform in Hong Kong. 18 teachers were involved as project teachers. They were chosen because they were actually involved in the classroom teaching.

The school visits were divided into four sessions over a period of two years from 1999 to 2001, each lasting for six months. At the end of each session, a collaborative workshop was held for the schools to facilitate sharing of the findings. Altogether four such workshops were conducted in this collaborative manner. In these workshops, I acted as a co-ordinator and facilitated the exchange of views among the teachers. At times, I would share with the teachers my observations on their findings. The research was divided into six phases. The data collected in each phase was fed into the next stage of research. The entire flow of research was dependent mainly on the data gathered in the preceding stages. The research took the graphical form of a spiral from one research step to another while at times reverting to the previous research steps, such as ‘reconnaissance’ and ‘the shift of the general idea.’ if necessary. The methods and techniques used in this research involve some kind of judgements in a particular research context, based on pragmatic consideration in the light of the procedural principles governing a democratic inquiry process. To serve this end, diaries, profiles, photographic evidence, tape/video recordings and transcripts, interviewing, checklists were used. The findings are presented as connected case studies of individual teachers’ classroom practices in each school followed by cross-site comparisons.

The Findings

A. Using the notion of eros to demarcate the play ‘curriculum’ and the ‘work curriculum’ in the early childhood classroom.

Eros is an ancient Greek word (erasthai) representing that part of love constituting a passionate, intense desire for something (May 1969, p.88). It is only when the self has fully utilized eros in play that the play is real play.

The children at the two kindergartens all said that play was important and it was fun. As Frost and Sunderlin observes (1985, p.47), ‘play meant fun’ seemed to be an essential element in the children’s ideas about play. The following statements were made by the children:

The Catholic kindergarten
“IT’s fun to play. When you play, you feel very happy”. “I have never experienced unhappiness at play”.

The Buddhist kindergarten
“Everybody likes to play. Its fun”. “If I cannot play, I feel unhappy”.

The research found that to young children, ‘play’ is fun because in play children are free to follow their eros. Since children like to play, one naturally expects that an effective way to motivate children to learn is through play. However, if children are given too much freedom to play, they will go wild and play ‘badly’

In phase two of the research, an one hour ‘free play’ time was set for the project children
to do whatever they like to. In this ‘free play’
episode, the children were found initially to play in
an ‘orderly’ manner. After about ten minutes,
they began to play ‘wildly’ and throwing things
to each other. What they did match exactly what
Dewey observes, ‘play changes to fooling and if
habitually indulged in it is demoralizing’ (1916;
1944, p.203).

What is ‘play’ to one child may be
‘work’ to another, and vice versa. This
understanding is gained when children were asked
to classify the activities as to how they have seen
the activities as play, work or learning.

Categorization of play by children of the Catholic
Kindergarten

Within the same school, some children classified
the following activities as play: playing with lego,
playing ball games (ping-pong ball and basketball),
driving toy cars, listening to language machine,
playing with gifts, playing chess, playing socio-
dramatic play in the home corner. For other
children in the same school, the categorization
of play, work and learning became blurred for
the following activities: doing warm-up exercise,
playing with teaching materials, playing in the art
and craft corner.

Categorization of play by children of the Buddhist
Kindergarten

Some children regarded the following as play:
playing with lego, block building, crossing the toy
tunnel, throwing of ball, playing in the toy house,
playing socio-dramatic play in the home corner,
attending a birthday party, playing basketball,
walking on a balancing bar, toy gun shooting,
playing with toy cars.

While some children in the same school
regarded the following activities as play, while the
others regarded them as work or learning. In other
words, the categorization of play, work and learning
became blurred for the following activities: playing
chess, drawing with board, singing songs, role
playing, attending Putonghua lessons, attending
English lessons, using lego to construct a triangle,
driving a toy car, playing with teaching materials.

The research findings show that what is
considered as ‘play’ or ‘work’ depends on
whether the children feel free to follow an eros-
driven self or they are subordinated to the authority
of the teacher. What can be observed is that when
children choose willingly to do a task, even though it
may be difficult for them, they will still feel happy to
do if it is their choice. The children will only choose
things that they like to do, which could be play or
work. If it is their choice, they will do it well.

To work is very important. It is only through
work that you can learn something… that’s
why I like work.
(Children of the Buddhist kindergarten)

I prefer to do some writing instead of playing
aimlessly, for I understand that if I work hard
now, I could buy a house and take good care of
my parents in the future.
(Children of the Catholic kindergarten)

If children are asked to do a particular task
unwillingly, then no matter whether the task is
described as ‘play’ or ‘work’ to them or to
the teacher, they will regard the task as ‘work’.
The following apparently ‘self-contradictory’
statements given by children of the two
kindergartens, shows that what the teacher considers
as play is just the opposite to the children:

I have finished ‘doing’ the art work now,
could I go and play in the play corners?

I feel unhappy if I am forced to play.
“Work” in this paper means the activity is teacher-directed and not child-initiated. The child has the obligation to finish the task as a fulfilment of his responsibility to the teachers. As a child from the Buddhist kindergarten says, "To work is very important. It is because I will be scolded by teachers if I don’t work. If teacher does not punish me, I will not work". Another child from the Catholic kindergarten says "I will set priority to do things. For example, I will complete my work first, then, I will revise my text book and last of all, I will play".

Although the child may not be willing to do the task, he will and has to do it anyway, with the abandonment of 'self'. This kind of curriculum is aimed at achieving a predetermined learning outcome of the children and is defined as a 'work' curriculum for the purpose of this paper. What falls outside the definition of 'work' is regarded as 'play' and its respective curriculum is termed as 'play' curriculum. The 'play' curriculum is not so much aimed at a predetermined learning outcome of the children, in a way similar to the notion of 'eros' and 'praxis'. The learning outcome is acquired in the process of the activities. Because of the nature of 'play', the kind of curriculum associated with it is regarded as a form of 'informal' education.

To facilitate the demarcation between 'real' play and 'real' work, I classified play and work into different categories of learning activities according to the degree of teacher's directed or children's initiated activities. Table 1.1 (a) and (b) was designed during my reflection on the data while doing the research.

The general term 'play' activities are broadly divided into two types: one that involves a more active role of the teachers in directing play and a more passive role of 'self' on the part of the children, the other involves a more passive role of the teachers in facilitating play and a more active role of 'self' on the part of the children. The former type of play is a kind of work compared to the genuine play of the latter type. Each of the 'work' and 'play' curriculum is further divided into three categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role of Teacher/Children</th>
<th>Forms of Play/Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Teacher instructs, child to follow. Teacher to discipline the child, child to forgo his 'self'.*</td>
<td>High form of Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Teacher invites child to express his opinion, but eventually teacher will decide for the child. Teacher to discipline the child, child to forgo his 'self'.*</td>
<td>Medium form of Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Teacher invites child to express his opinion, child to follow the rules set by the teacher. Teacher to discipline the child, child to forgo his 'self'.*</td>
<td>Low form of Work (Game)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* On some occasions, child will discipline himself in order to 'abandon' his 'self' and to abide to what is required by the teacher-(authority). Although "Low form of Work" was put under the category of "Work Curriculum" as teacher still plays an active role in it, children in this type of activities could, however, enjoy the activities and treasure it and therefore it could be named as a game as well.
Table 1.1 (b) Child-initiated Play activities (Play Curriculum)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role of Teacher/Children</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) Child initiates an idea to play, teacher yields to his request without setting</td>
<td>High form of Play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hindrances. Child will discipline himself so as to achieve what his ‘self’ desires.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) Child initiates an idea to play; child will regulate his own behaviour in play.</td>
<td>Medium form of Play (Game)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child will be disciplined by the rules he agrees to abide to so as to achieve what his</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘self’ desires.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(3) Child initiates an idea to play; child’s behaviour is to be regulated by his play</td>
<td>Low form of Play (Game)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>peer group. Child will be disciplined by his peer group so as to achieve what his ‘self’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>desires.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

B. The Realization of Play curriculum was influenced by tradition, cultural, philosophical influences of society and personal beliefs of individuals

Although it was found that ‘play’ was much valued by children, it is, however, observed that many teachers, parents, and to some extent the children prefer “work” to “play” (though the children’s choice may have been influenced by the parents and teachers). The preference for a ‘work’ curriculum is due to a combination of factors, including tradition, cultural, philosophical influences of society and personal beliefs of the individuals. Due to the operation of these moderating factors, it is found that in reality it often happens that what the teacher aspires does not match with what she practises in the classroom. This disparity between theory and practise affected tremendously, the realization of the ‘real’ play curriculum and this situation did not just happen at the beginning of the research. The notion was sustained even at the final phase of the research.

For example, despite the understanding and consent of the project teachers of what is considered as real play from the children’s perspective, towards the final phase of the research, it was found that the majority of the project teachers still preferred to have the ‘work’ curriculum as exhibited by their choice of self-edited play episode which they claimed was valued most. It was found that the majority of the self-edited episodes of play were more akin to games with rules than play itself.

Let us use Eva’s atypical case in the 10 cases of the Buddhist kindergarten as an illustration. Eva was the class teacher of K3 children. It was found that in the later phases of the research, Eva’s teaching practice sided with work than play. From what could be seen of the self-selected play episode of Eva, the teaching practice of Eva could be categorized as a “Medium form of work”. This identification could be traced from her teaching practice as observed: the activity was by nature a game and a learning task; the ‘play’ activity had provided chances for children to learn some mathematical concept, musical concept and social interaction with peers. Eva suggested that she did not give instructions all the way through the game but would only tell the children what the game was about at the start of the game. Eva expected the children to obey what she told them. An interview with the 10 children who participated in Eva’s activity by Celia, a colleague of Eva, recorded
that nine children agreed that the activity was a 'learning' activity even though they still felt extremely happy in doing it. There was only one child who thought that the activity was 'play' and that he felt extremely happy about it. See table 2.1 and 2.2 for a modified graphical representation of the record of the interviews with the children of their preferences adapted from Greig and Taylor (1999, p.118).

Table 2.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Play</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Learning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Extremely happy</td>
<td>Very happy</td>
<td>Happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Faces showing different emotions](image)

The data collected from the 10 children shows that the same activities could be regarded as both play and learning by different children. Learning could be referred to as “learning to play” or “learning to work” by children. Eva’s reason for preferring this ‘work’

Table 2.2

<table>
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![Faces showing different emotions](image)

curriculum for her K3 children was to “sustain the academic curriculum for the satisfaction of the parents”. As a child from Eva’s class says, “Going to school is important. I have never thought of escaping from school. I want to have a good future. My mother told me to work hard for it.”

Eva’s case explained that teachers could not go too far to have the eros-driven child-initiated play because of pressure exerted by parents. Eaton & Dembo (1997) tried to link the parental expectation to the inherited cultural pragmatic views with the motivation of the Chinese tradition that parents would usually expect their children to acquire as much academic knowledge as possible and as fast as they could in formal school education for fear of failure in society and in their career when they grow up. This desire is so strong and so entrenched among Chinese parents that they are willing to have their children receive the traditional didactic teaching methods stressing rote learning, conformity and uniformity instead of a play curriculum even though they know that play is the natural desire of children and that a play curriculum
would be more enjoyable to the child.

Apart from this cultural pragmatic practice, we can understand from Eva’s case that there is the existence of the cultural philosophical practice, which has its root in Confucianism. Under the influence of the Confucian ideas, LeVine (1997) observed that parents raise their children to have qualities that are valued by the society in which they live. Confucian ideas emphasize filial piety and academic achievement (Ho, 1994). This explains why those parents who send their children to the Buddhist school still aspired to and expected the school to follow the Confucianism value of education. The parents in Eva’s class were obviously subjected to this societal influence.

The personal belief of Eva that parents should have a say in the desired form of curriculum for their children helped explain why the ‘play’ curriculum was unable to be realized in her classroom. With this firm belief system, Eva eventually left the school when the project was coming to the end. Rokeach (1968, cited in Pajares 1992, p. 59, 61) says that “beliefs are unlikely to be replaced unless they prove unsatisfactory, and they are unlikely to prove unsatisfactory unless they are challenged and one is unable to assimilate them into existing conceptions.” Following on this discussion, an observation can be made that Eva is unlikely to change her belief unless she has experienced fundamental change in her belief system.

Teachers at the Catholic kindergarten have no doubt that play should be valued by what they have found in the action research. Despite these findings, these teachers did not choose to incorporate the espoused child-initiated play into their curriculum. They have chosen to abide to their principal’s choice of a “work” curriculum. It is interesting to note that the principal of the school decided to emphasize work rather than play has its root in her Christian ideological belief. Since these teachers accepted the value system of the principal even against the empirical evidence, they could not realize their ‘indicated’ espoused theory in their actual teacher-directed practice.

**Reflections and Recommendations**

At the outset, as could be found from the data of this research, the boundary between play and work has become blurred, there is no definite rule to adhere to while determining which activity is genuinely considered as ‘play’ or ‘work’ for the children. Teachers should not prejudge the preference of the children in respect of what is considered as ‘play’ or ‘work’ as long as the activity is within the realm of good ‘eros’, in Rousseau’s term amour de soi as contrast to amour propre. Amour de soi is considered by Rousseau as a dynamic force with intention, aimed at the preservation of life (Rousseau 1716; 1995, p.212-213). On the other hand, the notion of amour propre, or literally self-love, is usually represented as a quality of being and made of perception that is predisposed to mastery over others (or things which will limit our acts). When viewing eros in this way, Dewey’s notion of ‘playfulness’ (Dewey, 1909, 1933) and Freire’s notion of surmounting the limit-situations (Freire, 1970, p.8) bears the characteristics of Rousseau’s notion of amour propre.

When analyzing data on a second reflective layer, it could be found that the typology of play and work classified in this research suggests that ‘play’ is not the same as ‘work’. ‘Play’ is determined by the ‘self-determined’ element - the eros while ‘work’ is determined under the direction of teachers. Thereby teachers should rethink the notion advocated by Froebel and Issac that “Play is the work of child”. When learning is being directed by teachers instead of by the children, ‘learning through play’ could be re-interpreted as ‘adding the elements of game to learning’ in order to make it more enjoyable to children instead of blurring the division between ‘play’ and ‘work’. Following on this argument, the Chinese adage of “work is work” and “play is play” could
better represent the situation. If we accept this Chinese traditional view, we should pay attention to the cultural aspect that underpins the curriculum practises for preschool education.

References
Curriculum Development Institute (1996). Guide to the Pre-primary Curriculum. Education Department, Hong Kong.