

“But They’re Only Playing”: Interpreting Play to Parents

Good practice in early childhood education, as defined by the progressive educators whose voices dominate the profession, emphasizes the role of play in a child’s learning. This concept of play-based education is in conflict with the ideas that many parents have about the kind of education their children should have. Parent perspectives on play vary and are largely based on their own educational experiences, social class, and cultural norms and values.

African-American parents typically have very fundamentalist values when it comes to the education of their children. Both parents who were successful and those who were unsuccessful in school themselves are skeptical of educational innovations that appear trendy or lacking in substance. School is for work; and if you work hard, it can help you get ahead.

Immigrants from Mexico, Central America, and South America often share a view of “the *educación* of their children, that is, raising them to be responsible members of society as they understand it.” (Valdés, 1996, p. 180)

School, in this value system, is not for playing around. It is where you practice obedience, respect, and the work ethic. In both African-American and Latino cultural models, play is considered an amusing part of childhood; but it isn’t viewed as part of the learning process.

In an increasingly hostile nation, parents from oppressed groups are suspicious of anything that may reduce their child’s competitiveness in the job market. In families that view play as *messing around*, there is scant acceptance of play as a legitimate part of curriculum. (Cooper, 1996, p. 94)

For good reasons, parents from one cultural background may be uninclined to trust a teacher from a different background to have their child’s interests at heart. “How can she really know what’s best for my child?” It takes a leap of faith to trust a teacher who tells you that play is important but can’t demonstrate why this is so, or how play will benefit your child in the future. If you want parents to trust you as an educator, you’d better be able to demonstrate the importance of play in a convincing manner. This requires strong curriculum building and planning, designing play environments that support learning and then explaining to parents how they work. (Cooper, 1996, p. 94)

Strong observational skills are crucial. As a teacher, I often stood next to a parent as we observed her

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child, discussing what we were seeing in terms of problem solving, motor skills, or language development. Parents were often enthralled; I was a trained observer, they were not, and initially they didn't see what I saw. However, as I shared my observations with them, they began to develop a new appreciation for play skills and to see play with new eyes. As a result, they not only began to trust me as an educator, as someone knowledgeable about and committed to their child's growth, but they also began to understand their child's learning process. Parents' own memories tend to recall school as important but boring. If they can discover learning as fun as well as substantive, they will be willing to accept a play-based curriculum.

They will accept it with more confidence if some of the trappings of school are present, even in classrooms for four and five year olds. A writing center which offers spontaneous practice with school tools — paper, pens and pencils, crayons and markers, scissors and staplers — can include letter and number stencils, *key word* cards, blank books to create stories in, note pads, and clipboards, and an attentive adult ready to listen to children's stories and write them down. Manipulatives with built-in shapes and colors, puzzles, even simple worksheets that can be used to *play school* without having to meet too-demanding expectations for accuracy — these things look like school. Books, too, are familiar parts of school, and children to whom adults read often will also *read* to each other playfully, practicing page turning, left-to-right sequencing, and story memory as they do so.

More vigorous play may require interpretation to parents in terms of skill learning. When children are exploring sand, water, woodworking, blocks, what skills and concepts are they developing? A teacher can report her observations to parents, adding details about language development and social problem solving and cooperation. Pay attention to what parents value and look for examples of those behaviors by their child, in order to assure them that this school supports their values and values their child.

This isn't always easy. As one example, adult-child ratios may make it easy to ignore individual children, especially those a teacher finds unrewarding for reasons of language, appearance, cultural or personal style. It is difficult for most teachers to admit that they are *put off* by certain children entrusted to their care. Teachers are human, however, and they are products of a society that targets certain groups with abundant negative stereotypes. It is healthier, and more accurate,

to be open to the idea that you have been affected by such negative stereotypes and biases. Once confronted, biases can be changed. Bias that is denied continues to develop.

The jockeying for position and friendship that goes on in any peer group may work against a child from a non-dominant cultural group who doesn't know the rules of their *game*. Some children simply withdraw; others do whatever is necessary to get attention from other children and from adults. As children try to establish themselves in a peer group, showing off is frequently an effective strategy to get other children to pay attention to oneself. Teachers may disapprove — but even negative adult attention can be more satisfying than no attention. Some children are more noticed by teachers when they misbehave than they are when they are doing what they should do.

A strategy I used in the classroom, that was a concrete useful way to monitor the type of interactions I had with the children I worked with, was to have a set of index cards with a child's name on each card. At the end of the program day, by myself or with my co-teachers, we would go through the cards and determine whether this child was interacted with today. What kind of interaction was it? Instructive? Corrective? Collaborative? This system helped us ensure that each child got quality, pleasant interactions from everyone. This can be done quickly, or with a long discussion focusing on each child in depth when you have more time.

Differences in cultural and physical styles often create misunderstandings. Everyone's memories of school include an emphasis on being still and quiet. Few young children are capable of still and quiet, nor do they learn much without being physically and verbally engaged. And four year old boys may represent the height of human activity levels! Hale, in her book *Black Children* (1986), has reminded us of the high kinesthetic skill levels typical of African-American young children:

"Harry Morgan (1976) points out that Black children are motorically precocious. They are more active and have more physical energy to expend than white children. Morgan maintains that the schools do not support the natural energy level of Black children. He suggests that Black children need an active environment for successful learning, particularly lower-income children whose grandparents emphasize survival skills rather than conformity, docility, and quiet manners — more typical of middle-class child-rearing." (Hale, 1986, p. 75)

Middle-class African-American mothers may downplay their children's motoric precocity and not seek to extend

The following strategies may help in supporting both children and parents:

- Observe children as they play, to *catch them being good* — to identify their individual strengths and interests. Give them attention that acknowledges these assets.
- Interpret children’s accomplishments to their parents. Find out parents’ goals for their children and emphasize children’s growth toward those goals in your conversations with parents.
- Keep learning about the development of language and literacy in early childhood — since literacy is at the heart of the elementary school curriculum, the next challenge your children will encounter. Provide many activities for open-ended exploration of language and all the forms of literacy — drawing, building, dramatizing, as well as writing and reading.
- Share with parents, and children, your own belief in the value of education and in their ability to succeed in school. Some working-class parents may not know anyone who has been helped by going to school; you do. What success stories can you tell?
- Be upfront about the rules of the “culture power” (Delpit, 1988). I admire a colleague, Molly Scudder, who featured *playing first grade* in the second half of her kindergarten year. Following rules didn’t replace the critical thinking and problem-solving characteristics of her class; rather, it became a new topic for lively discussion, as she asked children to practice lining up, complete with boys’ and girls’ lines, and being “so quiet that nobody hears us coming.”

“Why?” asked these children, and the question was taken seriously and brainstormed. Learning conforming behaviors because they please people in power, because those things are important to some people, gives children an important set of survival strategies to be consciously exercised if they choose to do so.

it because development in this area might interfere with their children’s school behavior and performance.

But active Black children, especially male children, often have female teachers who are not Black and who have been subtly socialized to be alert to possible aggression from Black males. The likelihood is very high that teachers will be especially aware of, and unconsciously expecting trouble from, the few Black children in a primarily white or otherwise mixed group.

The likelihood that these children, when in need of guidance, will receive mixed messages is also very high. White middle-class women aren’t supposed to act angry even when they are. They’re supposed to stay sweetly reasonable with children. Children accustomed to clearer messages and firmer rules may not understand *soft* discipline and keep pushing to discover where the limits really are in this strange place. (“If you’re my teacher, can you keep me safe?”) Cynthia Ballenger is an experienced European-American preschool teacher who found herself incapable of effective group management (“The children ran me ragged.”) when she began working with Black children from Haiti, whose culture was unfamiliar to her. To become effective, she had to learn to listen to the Haitian adults in their effective interactions with the children. (1992)

We all have much to learn from each other. Effective teaching, when cultural differences make us stumble, requires very close attention to understand what’s going on with a child. Most teachers aren’t open to looking at their own hidden expectations. There is more safety in avoiding children (and parents) whose language we don’t speak, whose cues we don’t catch. When the children catch us at avoidance and make us pay attention, we are likely to overreact and blame the child — or his parents.

The discrimination inherent in our society enables us to stay unaware of these patterns, unless we work at becoming aware of our own biases. The basic focus in early childhood education — identify and build on each child’s strengths — can serve us well here. By observing children at play, we get to know them.

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