RETHINKING PLAY AND PEDAGOGY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

CONCEPTS, CONTEXTS AND CULTURES

EDITED BY SUE ROGERS

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Chapter 7

Play and pedagogy framed within India's historical, socio-cultural, pedagogical and postcolonial context

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In Western discourses of early childhood education, play has occupied a central and defining position. However, more recently it is recognized that cultural differences across nations and communities make it difficult to construct a single definition of play that can be universally applied. For example, Genishi and Goodwin (2007) present a strong argument against the mono-cultural specificity of the guidelines for developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) promoted widely in the USA, since they cannot be applied to the complex lives of children in diverse cultural contexts. A growing international body of work critically examines dominant ways of explaining play in early childhood arguing that there are different manifestations of play within different socio-cultural groups (Rogoff, 2003; Haight *et al.*, 1999; Brooker; 2003; Long *et al.*, 2007); and preferred forms of play look different in diverse cultural contexts (Roopnarine *et al.*, 1998, Haight *et al.*, 1999).

The purpose of this chapter is to examine how play and pedagogy is conceptualized within the Indian cultural context. Drawing on postcolonial theory, I will consider ideas which appear to have shaped the relationship between play and pedagogy within the Indian context. I also draw examples from a study of early childhood teachers' perceptions of play in India. Critically, I will consider the extent to which it is possible or desirable to import a child-centred, play-based pedagogy to the Indian context, without causing other rifts, inequities, and impediments to social justice.

An interplay between the global and the local: postcolonial theory as a conceptual framework

The term 'postcolonial' may literally refer to an historical period that marks the end of colonization and the beginning of political autonomy in a former colony such as India. However, it may be of more use to include also the period of influence from the start of colonization. The idea of colonialism can be viewed as an imposition of an ideological standard of a privileged power against which other less powerful ideologies are measured and found wanting (Macedo, 1999). It is generally quite clear as to what is socially and intellectually appropriate according to these

standards: mostly behaviours that are valued by the socially, racially, and linguistically privileged sections of Western colonizing societies. Thus there is an implicit recognition that if it does not conform to Western standards then it is inappropriate. This has led to frenzied attempts in the developing non-West to deploy adaptations of Western curricula and approaches in systems of education. Colonialism also implies the idea that the 'truth' exists in a place that is inaccessible to the natives of the colonized developing world and within the reach of only a privileged few (Viruru, 2005), thus leaving little scope for understanding the diversity of human thought and consciousness.

Postcolonial theory is concerned with how knowledge is produced, the nature of relationships between the dominant and marginalized, and between the colonizer and the colonized. It allows the examination of the interplay between the colonial and central discourses of education, and the peripheral, more local voices of education. It helps frame contemporary educational issues within the context of underlying colonial experiences, and provides a platform for non-Western critics located in the West to present their cultural inheritance as knowledge. Further, postcolonial theory allows a critical examination of the past in an attempt to reveal 'marginalized' experiences and facilitates an openness to multiple perspectives (Viruru, 2001); as well as a revision of the past to better examine and understand the present (Kaomea, 2003).

The particular ideas that have shaped my own engagement with this theoretical framework includes perceptions of the colonized condition such as it being the inter-cultural negotiation between the ideas of the colonizer and the colonized (Pratt, 1992); a transaction, a two-way dialogue between the philosophies of the colonized and the colonizer (Trivedi, 1993); a phenomenon of cultural hybridity (Bhabha, 1994); a continuing contest between the dominance of the colonizers and the consequent legacies that were created (Alva, 1995); and a powerful interdependence between the colonized and the colonizer (Gandhi, 1998). In earlier work, I applied these ideas to the field of education in a discussion of the interactions between Indian educational ideas and Euro/American educational ideas, the assumption being that the two educational views are located within two different worldviews, each making sense of the world in a different way. A postcolonial framework enabled the understanding of alternative perspectives by lending an ear to the intrinsic 'other' voice of early childhood in a non-western culture (Gupta, 2006). In postcolonial India, two competing discourses of play co-exist in early childhood education. The first derives from historical perspectives of play and childhood. The second derives from dominant Western discourses of play, development and learning contrast sharply with the formal, academic approaches that became prevalent during colonial rule. Further, a discourse of play is re-emerging in India today not only through the influence of Western progressive education ideas but also from pre-colonial local perspectives on childhood and children. This creates an interesting matrix of postcolonial dynamics, as what is today Western or global reflects also what in the past might have been Indian and local, although the cultural textures of the two are very different.

The Indian context: theory and policy influencing play and pedagogy

Historically, play and young children in India have been inextricably linked in mythological, philosophical, religious, educational and literary texts. Extending back more than 5000 years to the Indus Valley civilization when marbles, balls, dice, hunting were popular games among children. Later, during the Vedic period (2500–600 BC) there is mention of chariot racing, swinging, ball games, 'hide and seek' and run and catch. In the Hindu epics, the *Rāmayana* and *Mahabharata*, sports and games such as chariot racing, horse riding, *Chaturang* or chess, wrestling, ball games, hide and seek, *gulli danda*[1], and water sports are described. In other texts such as the *Puranas* discus, *pasi yuddha* (rope fighting), archery wrestling, *udyana krida* (garden sports), and *salila krida* (water sports) are mentioned (Srivastava, 2008).

Several Indian historical texts, folk tales and epics place the child at play at its centre. The common Hindi word for play is '*khel*' and is applied to activities variously conceptualized to include fun and frolic; games and sports; gambling; participating in fairs and celebrations; dramatization of stories; dance, music and rhythm; fierce competition of skills and abilities; and so forth, activities that are structured or unstructured, player centred or externally controlled. Play in its various benevolent and malevolent forms appears to encompass not only preferred skills such as cooperation, sharing, taking turns, following rules, but also survival skills such as harassment, deception, teasing and trickery which are certainly not encouraged in classrooms by any teachers but which are inherent in successfully navigating the world and human relationships.

Today children in India are certainly not deprived of opportunities for play but the degree to which it occurs may vary from urban metropolizes to smaller towns and rural villages across the nation. In large urban centres, where children have access to new technologies, childhood increasingly reflects a lifestyle that is typical of the urban West where children's play is marked by long hours of sitting indoors in front of televisions, computer screens and video games. However, in the smaller Indian towns and villages, and within extended family systems in big cities, children from India's massive middle class are reared along a prolonged child-adult continuum with almost constant human contact and interaction within the home environment: the mother or grandmother or aunt – one of the several mother figures a child in India has – massages the infant, sings rhymes, plays games that stimulate the baby to distinguish the familiar face from the stranger's face. Babies are held, spoken to, rocked and cuddled. Young children are often found with their mother or grandmother in the kitchen playing with pots and pans while the adult is cooking. Young children are always in the company of family members, friends and neighbours. Children play with each other in the neighborhood, visiting each other's homes freely and within mixed-age groups, using materials they find in the home and in the yard. They sing and dance to folk songs and Bollywood music. Most children are familiar with frequently retold stories from India's great epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata,* enacting popular scenes in their pretend play. This picture of play *outside* school is vastly different

from the academic rigor typical of most Indian classrooms. During British colonial rule there was a shift from an emphasis on cognitive and intellectual development to academic proficiency. The imposition of a formal academic pedagogy created a textbook culture tightly controlled by colonial administrators. In turn this served to deny teachers' voice and autonomy (which was prevalent until the mid-1800s), (Kumar, 1992/ 1997). The colonial curriculum was alien to the socio-cultural contexts of both teachers and children and widened the gulf between children's lives inside and outside the classroom. Classroom life became increasingly defined by 'work' whereas 'play' was relegated to children's activities outside the classroom.

In response to this imposed educational system, several nineteenth and twentieth century.Indian philosophers and educators argued for a classroom pedagogy based on 'the play-way method' or 'learning by doing'; for young children in particular and went on to establish their own versions of ideal schools. Notable examples include, Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950) a prominent Indian philosopher and Vedic scholar who believed that education based on academic performance which ignored the study of the human mind would impair intellectual growth. Every child was viewed as being unique, a lover of narrative, an investigator, intellectually curious, with the gift of imagination and every teacher a 'guide', whose role it was to provide an appropriate environment for learning by doing. His ideas formed the basis of the International Center of Education in Pondicherry in southern India (National Council for Teacher Education [NCTE], 1998).

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941), a prominent philosopher, educator and Nobel Laureate, started his own school, Shanti Niketan near Kolkata, and believed that good education was based on the arts for developing empathy and sensitivity, and the importance of nurturing a profound relationship with one's cultural and natural environment. Tagore envisioned education as being deeply rooted in one's immediate surroundings but connected to the cultures of the wider world. His classes were held outdoors under the trees, with nature walks, study of the life cycles of insects, birds and plants and flexibility to allow for shifts in the weather, natural phenomenon and seasonal festivals: all indicative of nurturing an interconnectedness and harmony between the individual and the surrounding world (O'Connell, 2003).

Similarly, philosopher and educator Krishnamurti (1895–1986) also believed that education should work toward the fullest development of a human being. Educating the person as a whole (and not in parts), as well as educating a person within a whole (as part of society, humanity and nature) was the true essence of education, drawing on three principles 1) aesthetics, not only for its pleasing quality but a sensitivity to beauty; 2) special areas of silence so that children could experience a quiet mind and reflection; and 3) an atmosphere deliberately created to foster spiritual growth rather than consumerism and material growth (Forbes, 1997). India's political and spiritual leader, Mahatma Gandhi, also had a distinct educational philosophy called the Basic Education approach. Gandhi outlined his educational ideas for each stage of development, from infancy through secondary education. Gandhi held the belief that for the very young child education should be constructive, creative and in the form of play because for a child everything is play (a speech addressed to teachers at

Sevagram Ashram on February 17, 1946, translated from Hindi). He believed that an infant starts learning from the moment of conception. The first teacher is the mother, the 'mother-teacher'. A teacher should be like a mother to the child, her responsibility is to teach the child about cleanliness, stories from Hindu mythology and epics, history and geography of where they live, geometrical figures, sing and recite verses in the native language, to handspin yarn on the wheel and physical exercises (Gandhi, 1929).

The early childhood educators, Gijubahi Badheka and Tarabai Modak, recognized the need for children to be educated in an environment that would nurture their independence and self-reliance. Both these educators were deeply influenced by Maria Montessori's educational philosophy and worked on implementing her ideas within the Indian cultural context. Badheka established the Bal Mandir in Gujarat in 1920 and demonstrated how to teach subject matter through stories and rhyme that appealed to children. Tarabai Modak started Shishu Vihar Kendra in 1936 in Bombay, utilizing play way methods that could be used by weaving knowledge into stories and games for primary school children (Vittachi, *et al.*, 2007).

In spite of this long history of child-centred educational philosophy, the colonial school system in India firmly established schools as purely academic institutions. Children had access to plenty of unstructured play at home whereas schools were places of formal instruction. With these changes came changes in the expectations of parents and society which persist today. It is only recently that early childhood classrooms in mainstream education are viewed as extensions of the home offering a play-based experience. For educators and policy makes today, re-thinking the early childhood curriculum is influenced in two major ways:

1) renewed interest in the work of Indian educators on the importance of play in childhood by educators and
2) exposure to current Western early childhood debates on the importance of play.

The 2005 version of the National Curriculum Framework (NCF-2005) for India overseen by the National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT) proposed a major shift away from the academic textbook culture of schools and classrooms toward a more child-centred pedagogy based on a constructivist theory of learning, recognizing that children construct their own knowledge through meaningful activities. As part of NCF-2005, research-based position papers provide a comprehensive review of existing knowledge in the field. In an attempt to move toward a more child-centred and play-based approach the Early Childhood Education Focus Group Position Paper has identified several quality indicators for ECE programmes which include an activity-based, child-centred, age-appropriate, contextualized curriculum that will lead to holistic development of children and prepare the young child for the demands of more formal teaching in later years. A special emphasis has been given to play and the arts as the basis for learning and the use of local materials, arts and knowledge, utilizing Indian dance forms and songs to teach children in early education classrooms (see for example Singh, 1999).

According to the 2001 Indian Census, about 60 million children under the age of five years are living in poverty and only about 20 million of them are getting preschool education under the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) provided by the government. Within the private arena, the figures are unclear due to a lack of a comprehensive survey for that domain. At the time of the 2001 Census there might have been about 10 million additional children enrolled in private settings. The ECE Position Paper (2006) details the various categories of early education, pedagogies and classroom practices that may be seen in diverse early educational settings in India. ECCE in India is currently sponsored by three distinct sectors: the government; private schools; and NGOs. Settings include spaces such as *Anganwadis*, *Balwadis*, crèches, slum schools, family day cares, day care centers, preschools, and nursery/kindergarten schools with huge variation between settings. Early childhood settings reflect both play-based experiences and more formal academic-based experiences. However, remembering that a primary purpose of early education in India is to provide children with basic custodial, nutritional and health services, the tendency is towards a formal pedagogy. In the next section I will illustrate practitioners' perceptions on classroom play as shared by some teachers in early childhood settings within urban private schools.

Teachers' perspectives from private early childhood and early elementary classrooms

The objective of private for-profit nursery schools and preschools is mainly custodial and a preparation for elementary schools and their management styles are hierarchical and non-transparent. The majority of private early childhood schools admit children on a competitive basis, to overcrowded classrooms. They often lack adequate supply of play materials and emphasize formal teaching methods. More time is spent on workbooks than on active learning, skills-based competency assessments are used extensively, and children are often given homework. Play materials, where they exist are used more for display than play by the children. Pedagogical approaches vary from school to school as is seen by the contrasting descriptions offered by teachers. Anjani, a Nursery-Kindergarten (N/K) teacher in New Delhi explained: 'Play may be fitted into classroom life by creating some space (removing tables and chairs/benches), by making groups, and by providing an opportunity for each child to do something beyond the textbooks' (field notes, 2008). Surabhi, at the same school reflected: 'Children in schools today are increasingly over burdened with academics. Most parents make all efforts to get them to excel at studies. But all work and no play is not necessarily the best strategy to improve a child's performance . . . For children to grow and develop as healthy individuals there needs to be a reasonable balance between work and play' (field notes, 2008).

Both Anjani and Surabhi teach in a school which has a strong academic focus. Clearly, much effort has to be put into creating time and space for play activities in their classrooms. In contrast, Preeta, a Nursery teacher in another private nursery school, presents an early childhood classroom routine which suggests that implementing an activity-based approach was easier in her school:

> In our classroom children are playing and working with materials and other children . . . have access to various activities throughout the day such as block building, pretend play, picture books, paints and other art materials, and table toys and puzzles . . . Children learn numbers and alphabets in the context of their everyday experiences. Exploring the natural world of plants and animals, cooking, taking attendance, serving snack are all meaningful activities to children.
>
> (field notes, 2008)

All three teachers demonstrate different understanding of a play-based classroom, and their comments are indicative of the relative ease or difficulty for each of them to establish a play-based classroom environment within their own schools. The study showed that several teachers conceptualized play using terms such as 'joyful', 'enjoyable', 'interesting to children', 'free', 'freedom', 'spontaneous', 'of the children's own initiative', 'creativity' and 'imagination'. At the same time there was frequent use of the words 'learning', 'skills development' and 'growth' when referring to play. With regard to the kinds of play children engaged in outside of the school examples cited included football (soccer), jumping, sliding, swinging, cricket, hide n' seek, playing ball, free play or simply running around. Interestingly, one teacher said 'it rains because children need to play with water'. These examples fit in with the kind of play which adults hope will be confined to the playground and were in contrast to teachers' descriptions of potentially educative classroom play. In fact, one of the teachers said explicitly that 'in classroom life one should not allow play which creates noise or indiscipline'. This desire to keep 'chaos' out of the classroom is perhaps understandable in the case of India where typical class sizes range from 35–60 children.

Several teachers considered that a classroom supporting a play-based approach was one which was well-designed, offered hands-on experiences, included the use of colourful teaching aids, and had spaces where meaningful learning was taking place. Play occurred when children were working in small groups, were engaged in active games, were working with educational toys, learning numbers and alphabets in the context of everyday experiences, and 'everyone was smiling'. Rubina, who taught playgroup for very young children, believed that that a play-based classroom was one which was full of educational toys, and that play which leads to 'any kind of indiscipline, like making noise or creating any type of violence must be unacceptable'.

The idea of play being another form of learning was common because some teachers indicated explicitly that in their classrooms play appeared in the form of learning while playing, and learning while chanting rhymes and colouring. Only Bina, a Nursery/Kindergarten teacher, mentioned dramatic play as part of the curriculum but even within that there was an emphasis on the learning of values and preferred behaviours rather than on free play:

> In a group of children playing 'house' for example, different children take on the role of various members of a family and play-act familiar family situations. It is acceptable for the 'grandchild' to be helpful and caring toward the 'grandparents' and it is unacceptable for the 'master of the house' to be rude to the 'domestic help' . . . It is acceptable for the children to display/enact he good moral values that the children imbibe from their families.
>
> (2008)

In addition to learning social, emotional, physical skills, and academic content, the emphasis was definitely on the 'values' learnt by children such as cooperation, sharing, taking turns, social living, tolerance, making friends, compassion, kindness, respect, discipline, speaking the truth, working hard. This was very much in keeping with my earlier research (Gupta, 2006). Although in Western discourse educators would categorize all of these as skills within separate but overlapping developmental domains, teachers in India almost universally referred to them as 'values'. To me it was an important indication of the value or importance that was given to human behaviours that were most prioritized within the Indian worldview.

That free and spontaneous play was important for the healthy development of young children was acknowledged by most teachers. But in their classrooms play almost always took the form of individual and discrete activities rather than a comprehensive pedagogy. An activity-based curriculum was usually understood to be a play-based curriculum. Typically children's spontaneous play was tempered within the classroom because it was linked to the learning of developmental and academic skills and subject to teacher planning and direction.

Postcolonial perspectives on play

As we have seen the policy recommendations in India are drawn from a mix of Indian and Euro-American educational ideas and philosophies: from the emphasis given sensory and practical experiences by Rousseau, Froebel, Montessori and Dewey to the use of play, rhyme, rhythm and different materials promoted by Gandhi, Tagore, Badheka, and others. We are left with the challenge of articulating how a play pedagogy can be defined for the multi-layered complexities of diverse cultural contexts. It is interesting to note that educational settings which offer play-way methods or holistic experiences leading to self-discovery and explorations are categorized as 'alternative' schools because they do not fit into the academic mainstream educational system of India. These include the pioneering institutions of the great Indian educational philosophers Krishnamurty, Sri Aurobindo, Tagore and Gandhi, as well as the hundreds of smaller early childhood centres that are found across India today (Vittachi, *et al.*, 2007).

Nowadays, the terms 'play school', 'play-way methods' and 'play-based teaching' are seen on signboards of the countless private nursery schools appearing across India. These terms are also being used to describe appropriate early education philosophy by school principals and teacher educators in schools and colleges across India. However, implementation of a play-based pedagogy as defined by 'Western' parameters into Indian classrooms is problematic in a system that continues to prioritize textbook knowledge, and where examination scores are used to measure students' success in schools and their admission into higher education. The pressure to strive

towards academic excellence filters down through grade levels to determine pedagogical approaches in early childhood settings. Dominant definitions of play pedagogy, from European and North American perspectives raise important questions about its applicability to socio-cultural-political-economically diverse classrooms and can often be at odds with culturally different worldviews and seem remote and disconnected to non-Westerners.

The views of teachers expressed here seemed to echo western discourses with regard to the value of play in their classrooms. However, in practice their approach clearly reflected an activity-based curriculum that would lead to the learning of required developmental skills and subject knowledge. The teachers nevertheless believed that play was important and most found no problem coupling play with pedagogy. However, this should be contextualized within the private schools they worked in and which prioritized academic excellence. Although there certainly seems to be general agreement about the value of play for young children, teachers are unable to synthesize the dialectic of play and work into a comprehensive pedagogy of play within their schools which continues to prioritize academic excellence. Their teaching, instead, offers a parallel curriculum of discrete activities comprized of either 'play' or 'work' experiences.

Further, the complexities of classrooms in India in general pose a different challenge. There are problems with the expectation that the play pedagogy can be implemented in all classrooms. The core ideals of this pedagogy are rooted in the central tenets of progressive education emphasizing child-centricity and choice in the classroom – each child being able to choose whom and with what to engage, usually within large blocks of free play time, and having the freedom to waive any adult involvement in their activities. There are several assumptions underlying this child-centric approach which may be viewed as prerequisites for the successful implementation of a true play-based pedagogy. These assumptions include:

1) young children in schools are receiving basic requirements of health and nutrition, and that schools are adequately equipped with running water, electricity and sanitation facilities;
2) there are adequate resources in the classroom including materials, time and space: a wide selection of *materials* that enables choice; large blocks of available *time* wherein children can engage in free play and wherein teachers can encourage free play without the constraints of completing a prescribed curriculum; and ample *space* in classrooms to house the material resources and for children to move about freely from one activity to another of their own will;
3) teachers have been adequately trained and prepared in the philosophy and pedagogy of play and child-centred classroom approaches; current teacher training in India is based on the idea of teachers being technical experts and not decision makers. Child-centred teaching with a play-based pedagogy requires teachers to be able to make classroom decisions on a regular basis with regard to the use of classroom materials, nature of experiences provided to children, and the use of classroom time. This would imply that teachers need to be trained under a new system that would foster more teacher autonomy and increased local control within schools, ideas which do not sit comfortably alongside a predominantly examination and textbook culture;
4) teachers are adequately equipped with the tools and time within their classrooms to document children's voices and activities to create the comprehensive assessment portfolio for each child that is a critical tool to assess growth and learning in a play-based and learner-centred classroom. Some assessment techniques recommended for classroom teachers by western proponents of a play-based pedagogy include documentation such as capturing moments of children's play using tools like cameras and camcorders; anecdotal reports; observing and documenting play in all classroom centers such as the block area, book corner, writing center, dramatic play, art center; creating documentation panels to display children's work samples, stories, quotes, photos, and so forth;
5) classrooms have low teacher-child ratios because a play-based pedagogy is grounded in the belief that children choose to voluntarily engage with activities related to their interests and liking; but how the individual interests of 50 children in one classroom can be addressed, how their work can be displayed, and how assessment portfolios can be maintained for each child would be a formidable challenge;
6) children are entitled and able to make choices with regard to their engagement with classroom life and come to school already comfortable with the decision-making skills that are essential to successfully navigate a choice-based classroom. This last one is, perhaps, the most challenging in terms of cultural differences and the nature of the young child-adult relationship within Indian society. The right to choose is based on the individual-oriented view of society which often finds itself out of place in Indian homes and classrooms that are based on a more group-oriented view of society.

Universalizing the expectation that all classrooms must adhere to a play-based pedagogy also raises issues of equity and social justice. In many settings, the primary concern is to provide basic levels of hygiene, care and nutrition to children who come from low socio-economic backgrounds; these are schools where the average teacher-child ratio may be even higher than 50 children per classroom; where the size of a classroom may be as small as seven feet by seven feet; where teachers may have little or no formal training; which have a high level of teacher absenteeism; and which may lack basic furniture, running water and toilet facilities.

Postcolonial perspectives: interplay between the dominant and the marginalized

A child-centred play pedagogy could be viewed as a colonizing condition imposed on early childhood settings that are not based upon western middle-class values or have middle-class resources (Canella, 1997). Child-centred and developmental pedagogy draws on discourses that profess to understand the 'nature' of children but fail to

address the cultural or developmental differences in the 'nature' of children living in different socio-cultural contexts. Further, the nature of children's development itself can be viewed as a 'creation of certain adult minds who were concerned with producing self-regulated citizens within a particular governmental framework . . . children remained un-free as ever and logical reasoning came to occupy its present, almost sacred, place in Western society' (Viruru, 2001, p. 27–28). In other words, even in play-based classrooms of the West, do children truly have the choice to make their own decisions in the classroom? (see for example, Rogers, 2010).

Even though a pedagogy of play might find some support and consideration in the classrooms of the more resourceful private schools in India, can it be implemented as a true pedagogy of play wherein children are engaged in classroom activities voluntarily, spontaneously, and without necessarily working toward an end product? Or will the pedagogy become what it already is in some schools – the prescribed parallel curriculum presented to the children in the guise of activities and play that teachers direct in terms of time, materials and goals. Would this be an imposition of yet another western pedagogical approach on children in India? Can there be a pedagogy of play that synthesizes the dialectics of play and work, one that grows out of the traditions of India and that would also reflect dominant early childhood education and play pedagogy discourse of the West?

Much depends on how the definition of a play pedagogy has been constructed and by whom. One could argue that early childhood classrooms in India are already employing such a pedagogy even if academic teaching occurs in classrooms. Viruru describes her ethnographic study of an urban early childhood center in South India and admits that although learning the alphabet was the obvious and visible focus for the year:

> The daily lived experiences of the children were about many other things such as creating friendships and exploring what school was about. Real life was a part of their classroom: playing, exploring, eating lunch and learning the alphabet as well. Thus the alphabet did not replace anything in their lives: life continued with it as one interesting part of it.
>
> (2001: p. 36)

In my own study of urban early childhood teaching in India, children seemed to enjoy academic work:

> As I entered Vasudha's Nursery classroom of four year olds there was a noisy buzz with sounds of talking, laughing and eating . . . It was break time . . . Forty children were sitting at four large tables . . . ten children at each table . . . After break time, they had a Language class. The letter for that day was 'S'.
>
> Two bowls of crayons in different colours were placed on each table. . . . Vasudha encouraged them to think of things that begin with the sound of 's'. The students responded in different ways – 'sea water', one child said. Vasudha responded, 'very good'. Another child said 'sipper'. Once again the teacher responded by saying 'very good'. The students were talking to each other excitedly, but they were also intently choosing colours and colouring their work sheets. Both teachers walked around the room offering comments and instructions, 'Very good. I want to see nice and neat colouring'. One little boy said – 'Ma'am, look!' and Vasudha affirmed his efforts. There were clear boundaries, with no confusion or chaos . . .
>
> (Gupta, 2006: p.166)

Acknowledging, first and foremost, that there is no typical early childhood school in India, the common defining characteristic of education in India has been its colonial pedagogy which prevails long after the end of colonial rule in India. Would a play-based pedagogy as defined by the West be another instance of educational imperialism? Or could a play-based pedagogy emerge from the Indian context?

Across the globe, early childhood education has been deeply influenced by Western discourses about young children, play and child-centred pedagogy (Canella and Viruru, 2004). The uncritical global application of these ideas essentially ignores multiple ways of being and thinking in diverse cultures. Perhaps we need to educate ourselves about how these terms are conceptualized within societies that are built on different sets of beliefs and world views. My thoughts go back to the teacher who indicated in the survey that 'it rains so that children can play in the water'. To me this was a very telling comment and shed some light on another way of approaching child-centeredness. In her own cosmic understanding she was placing the child at the centre of a universe which revolved around the needs of children. This teacher was not voicing an idea that she had learnt in school or college or in seminars on play. Her perspective stemmed from socio-cultural influences, the culmination of her experiences within a society where spirituality dominates thoughts and actions, where the scarcity of water is a harsh reality, and where the monsoon season is welcomed as a gift from the gods to provide pleasure and relief from the hot scorching heat of the long summer season. The first rains are welcomed joyously and deliriously by children and adults across India. I recall an image of my own sons standing in the monsoon rain one day – faces upturned, exuding delight and wonder, and taking in this very sensory experience of feeling the wet rain, tasting it as the clean raindrops drizzled into their open mouths and onto their tongues, seeing the rainwater wash away the summer dust in little rivulets that formed on the dusty streets, hearing the raindrops beat a pattern against the leaves, and smelling the freshness of rainwater as it mingled with the dry earth. Could this delightful and engaging play experience also be providing a deeper spiritual experience? And was it any surprise that the teacher brought a more cosmic understanding to the meaning of child-centric that was certainly more spiritual than scientific? Would a spiritual conceptualization of play in schools be acceptable as a play pedagogy within global educational discourses?

I urge researchers to work toward comparative studies on early childhood education and play-based pedagogies across the global South, paying special attention to realities such as child-centric, colonialism, citizenship, identity, choice, and subjectivity. A South-South comparison, as opposed to a North-South comparison, will work toward

problematizing the standard use of these terms, and will contribute new dimensions to their usage beyond dominant Western perspectives, to change the frame of reference so that the 'West' does not remain the sole norm against which educational systems measure each other. Educators need to challenge the very way dominant early childhood discourses have been constructed and imposed, and rebuild them 'differently by understanding difference in a different way' (McLaren, 1998: p.230). This would provide a healthy counterpoint to the ethnocentrism ingrained in the widespread belief that scientific knowledge about education is typically Western. Stressing that the Western 'minority' perspective cannot hold true for the 'majority' of the world population situated outside Western Europe and North America, future research on traditional educational theories and practices developed in the majority world is critically important in order to study how they can improve children's schooling globally.

Notes

1 *Gulli Danda* is a popular street game played by children in India. The sport is a variation of the bat and ball game where the *danda*, a sturdy stick about 12–18 inches long serves as the bat, and the *gulli*, about 3–6 inches long and tapered on both ends, serves as the ball.

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