

The Culture of Play: A Personal Perspective

Some time ago, I was approached by a concerned teacher who wanted me to observe a child who, she said, was not engaging in dramatic play. The child, an African-American girl, was five; she was enrolled on a scholarship in a program attended primarily by dominant-culture, upper-middle-class children. The staff had been try-

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ing to find ways to connect the child with the environment and the other children.

When I observed, I saw most of the girls involved in housekeeping play — cooking, cleaning, taking care of the baby. Meanwhile, the child I was observing wandered around, picking up several different items for a few minutes, scanning books, and keeping an eye on the high level of activity. When she finally noticed me, she gave me *the look*. After a few moments, she came closer to me. I smiled and introduced myself. That was the icebreaker. She and I engaged in a lively conversation. I read a story to her, then another. We put a puzzle together. A few children asked me if I was her mother, and I proudly answered, “No, I am her friend.”

When we talked later, the teacher was surprised at how open and involved this child had been with me. She had felt that the child was lacking in social skills. Taking a risk, I asked her, “Have you ever considered that housekeeping may not be play for her?” There was silence. I described some of the information the child had volunteered in our conversation; she described a home life that included many of what we call adult responsibilities. She had many tasks, which sometimes included child care roles. I suddenly realized that housekeeping wasn’t play to her, it was work!

What a powerful thought, that every child does not view play through the eyes of her teacher! This scenario raised several issues for me regarding play: (1) What is play? (2) Who decides that it is play? (3) What is normative play? And, lastly, (4) Whose values are honored as play is carried out?

It seems clear to me that what the teacher had interpreted as play was defined by the child as labor. It yielded no significant product. There was no optimism. That makes perfect sense to me! The real issue was that the teacher had an expectation, according to her value, that play should replicate something, that being in the housekeeping area was normative and being out of the mainstream activities was not. And because this child had a different concept, she was labeled as being deficient, unsociable, and needing *help*.

In an article I have written entitled “Caught Between Cultures,” I describe the disequilibrium that I experienced when I started school. Let me share with you a glimpse of my early school days.

“Space and boundaries were defined in a broader sense at home than at school. We, at meals, watched television, did homework, and entertained friends — all in the same room. Outside, it was not unusual to find a baseball game (using a broom handle and a tennis ball), hopscotch (drawn with a brick), bike riding, hand jives, and relay races concurrently happening in the space outside of my home called the street. We were all in it together, but it was your job to find a space for you and to watch out for cars.

At school, in contrast, I was reprimanded if I squeezed myself in on someone else’s space. There were lines that told me where to go and where to play; everything was supposed to be done in a certain way. Games with already set-up rules were given to me as *play*. If we ran out of balls, I couldn’t throw something else, even though there was plenty of sand. What are the rules of the school game?” (Greer, 1993, p. 61)

When I got to school, I knew how to play, but I *chose* not to play, until I found *my* play group. The activities that others were involved with, in a class in which there were only a few African-American children, didn’t appeal to me. When I tried to involve myself in their play, I was often excluded or relegated to a menial role. I knew that I wasn’t really wanted; I recognized the cues and body language that I was taught at an early age to be adept at identifying.

After a while, though, I found my group. Because they were Black like me, I assumed that we knew how to

play together. In those days, almost every little Black child went to church. When you met someone, the first question was *What church do you go to?* Our play was initiated by that shared experience. In a Black Baptist church, kids saw a lot of things that tickled them — old ladies shouting “Thank you, Jesus!,” preaching, weddings, funerals. But when we played church on the school playground, we got in trouble for all that shouting. There was always something wrong with us, something to be reprimanded for, something to stop doing, something for the teachers to be worried about.

Are we concerned when we see a group of children who are white playing together? Do we carefully watch their play? Do we assume that they don’t know how to play if we don’t see them with other children? Do we stop or question their choices of activities? Does their play give us comfort or make us feel uncomfortable?

James Banks has identified culture as having two main sections. Macroculture is our commonality; we share some national views and beliefs simply by all living in the same country. Beyond that, there is microculture, which is shared by specific group members. All of us belong to many other groups; and within the privacy and security of those groups, we are likely to view and interact with our world in a culturally appropriate manner. Thus, the task is to learn to function successfully and cooperatively within the macro and microcultures (Banks, 1989, p. 11) — to become bicultural.

What does this mean to children? I have described my confusion in my introduction to school. I had been very adept in playing in my own microculture. My play had been innovative, sociocentric, and fun. But when my microculture collided with the macroculture (and many school systems are structured around macroculture values), I did not fit. I was often punished for living, creating, and being myself.

In a working paper entitled “Children Learn Through Play,” Betty Jones states:

“Observers in several parts of the world have described economically disadvantaged or minority-culture children as deficient in play skills. But there is evidence that children in unfamiliar settings both play and speak less freely. Spontaneous play and spontaneous language imply underlying knowledge of the ‘rules of the game,’ broadly defined. Children are competent in play when they are on familiar ground, using familiar

words and materials and sharing a common set of expectations. Because all children are growing up in a multicultural world, play opportunities at school need to reproduce some of the diversity of that world and offer all children contact with both the familiar and the unfamiliar. If the school reflects only one culture and one language, then people not raised in that culture and language will be disadvantaged at school, and children who are raised in that culture and language will get no teachers' help in understanding the unfamiliar. It is important that teachers' help be given *in a play mode*, because that is how young children learn." (Jones, 1987)

Earlier, I cited some questions that I struggle with regarding play. They were my questions and now I would like to make them yours. How do you define play in your setting? Who decides that it is play in your setting? What is normative play in your setting? And whose values are honored in the play that is acceptable in your setting?

As educators, we have a responsibility to truly meet the needs of children, at *their* starting place. I am avidly against the deficit approach in teaching, which implies that children who are enacting their world in the context of their microculture in a macroculture setting need to be *fixed*. It is a model that I have often seen as I visit and observe in schools. Children who do not play within a DAP context, children who have ideas that are not valued, children who have not experienced and internalized the specific macroculture of school structure receive adult disapproval rather than support. It is a model that is sometimes used in parent/family work, primarily with parents and families who are considered minorities.

Our goal should not be *to fix*, our goal should be *to include*. Inclusion means provisioning and enriching the environment in a manner that fosters familiarity and unfamiliarity for each child. It means having an environment that helps children to *feel at home*, materials that they relate to, toys/games that have meaning for them. It supports play that they can invent, play that is valued because it was their choice. It is much easier to manipulate the environment than to manipulate the child.

Inclusion means abdication — giving up your vested power as a teacher and becoming a learner. I love watching children at play; I learn so much from them. Yet I feel a need to extend my knowledge beyond what they show me. If I want the environment to be familiar to them, then I have to know what they are familiar with. What is the cultural context of their play? How do

they use the environment? How do they interact with each other? What do I know about their culture? Besides Erikson and Piaget, what theorists have I studied who have written about cultural and play patterns of non-European children? And lastly, have I viewed all children's play by the same standards? Whose play is assertive and whose is aggressive? Whose play is creative and whose is destructive? Whose play is individualistic and whose play is cooperative? Whose names always come up in staff meetings?

In summary, I challenge you to broaden your definition of developmentally appropriate practice. DAP means age appropriateness. DAP means individual appropriateness. But DAP includes cultural appropriateness — creating an environment that takes into account age, individual, and culture — the way a specific group views and interacts with the world. And that will truly be an environment that strives to meet the needs of all children.

References

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