

American and Japanese Kindergartners' Meanings of Play Through the Use of Photo Elicitation: What Can We Learn From Them?

View play through a child's perspective in culturally diverse early childhood programs.

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We are familiar with adults' play perspectives, but what about children's perspectives of play? What constitutes play for children may differ from that of adults, thus when teachers understand children's perspectives of play, they can provide developmentally appropriate play environments (Rosenow, 2008). For instance, we can see this perspective in the following language sample of American and Japanese kindergartners as they explain the play captured in photos they have taken, the children explain:

"This is an obese chicken."

"I took this picture of chickens because I like them."

"They are jumping and talking to each other, and doing really cool stuff."

This article describes how American and Japanese kindergartners see play and what teachers can learn from them. The examples are based on our study of kindergartners' views when asked to both photograph and explain their meanings of play (Izumi-Taylor, Ito, & Krisell, 2014). We share our findings from analyzing photos and interviews from 44 American children in the southeastern United States and 55 Japanese children in the main island of Japan, all aged five to six years. All of the students attended school five days per week. We invited all children in one American school that prescribed individual instruction, as well as all Japanese kindergartners in one group-oriented school who participated in the study.

In the American classroom, the children engaged in more individual activities than their Japanese counterparts, and the American teachers encouraged students' individual opinions and feedback. In the Japanese classroom, group-oriented play activities and group instruc-

tion were valued, and the teachers encouraged students' cooperation by asking the whole class for its opinions and supported the students' participation during discussions. Although both schools were located in urban areas, the Japanese school had a more spacious natural playground than the American school, and included a small hill, trees, flowers, and bushes. The American school served children from low-to-middle-class families with 93% Caucasian and 7% African and Hispanic American populations, while the Japanese school's children were 100% Japanese from low-to-middle-class families.

All children used digital cameras provided by adult acquaintances, and none of them asked for help taking the photos. Both American and Japanese adult acquaintances gave the same instructions to the children by saying *"I would like for you to photograph what you think is play, and after photographing, I will show your photos to you so you can tell me why you think they are play to you."* After the pictures were taken, the adult acquaintances showed the children their photos and asked the following question, *"Can you tell me why these photos mean play to you?"* Children in both countries had ample opportunities to photograph both indoors and outdoors at their schools without adult presence.

Theoretical Background

Previous American research studies on children's perspectives of play are considered outdated and limited since children's play perspectives came from only interviews (Fein & Wiltz, 1998; King, 1979, 1986; Wing, 1995). Through interviewing, two studies found that

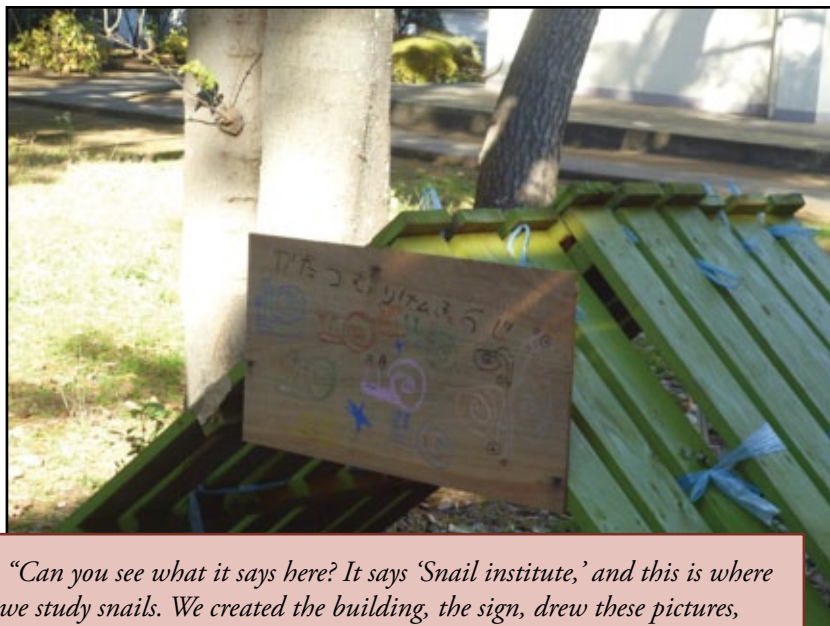


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“Can you see what it says here? It says ‘Snail institute,’ and this is where we study snails. We created the building, the sign, drew these pictures, and also wrote the name,” explained a Japanese girl.

school play time is children’s favorite activity and that children enjoy selecting their own play materials (Fein & Wiltz, 1998; Wiltz & Klein, 2001). Fivush (1984) found children’s play was associated with games, mini-gyms, and playing with other children. When asked, American children said “school was for work” and recess was play (Dockett, 2002, p. 9). American kindergarten and first/second graders preferred play over work (Wing, 1995), and Cunningham and Weigel (1992) found that child-initiated play was considered play, whereas teacher-initiated activities were work.

However, oftentimes young children find it difficult to express their views (Pink, 2013; Thompson & Williams, 2009), and relying on only interviews to understand their perspectives might not be sufficient since their responses could be limited (Einarsdottir, 2005). To address such limitations, children may more freely reveal their meanings of play through their photos (Phelan & Kinsella, 2011; Thompson & Williams, 2009) and may be empowered by this (Prosser & Burke, 2008). Re-

viewing similarities and differences in American and Japanese kindergartners’ views can help improve the design and implementation of early childhood education programs for all children, as well as contribute to cross-cultural studies of early childhood education. As many teachers perceive play as a cultural occurrence (Izumi-Taylor & Ito, 2015), understanding different cultural practices and beliefs broadens teachers’ perspectives of play (Izumi-Taylor, 2013). Because there is a growing global focus on child-centered education and care (Roopnarine, 2015), examining children’s views of play in the US and Japan might provide universal understanding of “global issues of meeting the culturally, developmentally appropriate needs of young children” (Roopnarine, 2015, p. 1).

Understanding Kindergartners’ Views of Play Through Their Photos

Photography can represent and be used as meaningful signs of communication as much as when

we use words (Phelan & Kinsella, 2011; Thompson & Williams, 2009). Photography can amplify children’s explanations of their activities (Ching, Wang, Shih, & Kedem, 2006; Clark-Ibanez, 2004; DeMarie, 2001; DeMarie & Ethridge, 2006; Einarsdottir, 2005; Good, 2005/2006; Kirova & Emme, 2009). Clark-Ibanez (2004) asked children to photograph people or things with “social attachments and meaning” (p. 1522) to explain their lives. Their photos revealed that their most meaningful events were related to playing with others.

Photography allows children to express their social and cultural experiences in various ways and provides them with opportunities to communicate their own opinions (Phelan & Kinsella, 2011). Children’s photos can provide authentic understanding of their views of school activities (DeMarie & Ethridge, 2006). Although there are no known studies of Japanese children’s views of play, there is one study utilizing children’s photos that found photography was a valuable tool when children photographed their favorite items, current interests, and memorable events (Oishi, 2010).

When we asked both American and Japanese kindergartners to take pictures and explain their views of play, most children photographed outdoor play with other children. We found that both American and Japanese children’s play perspectives were associated with social interactions, self-selected environments, and their favorite toys/props. Only Japanese children took photos of toys/props without people. When asked to explain their photos, many American and Japanese children described the contents of their photos, including objects, actions, and subjects, among others.

Play in Relation to Children's Social Interactions

Most American and Japanese children's photos captured active interactions with others, with smiling children in some pictures. This supports findings from other researchers that children's play perspectives are associated with social interactions (Clark-Ibanez, 2004; Dockett & Meckley, 2007). Children generally consider "peer interaction and interactive experiences" to be valuable and meaningful (DeMarie & Ethridge, 2006, p. 1030), and their pictures contained such when they were asked to photograph school images (Dockett & Perry, 2005). For example, a Japanese boy who took a picture of another boy making faces said, *"Isn't this a funny face? This child is good at showing funny faces."* Interestingly, some American and Japanese children included their teachers in their pictures with such descriptions as, "He is my teacher," and "My friend and teacher are talking."

However, only Japanese children explained that some subjects were friends, saying, *"I took this because they are my friends."* A Japanese boy who photographed two boys in yellow caps lazing on the grass said, *"They seem to enjoy each other's company."* Although American children did not describe their friends when they photographed others' interactions, some named children in their pictures to justify their reasons for taking photos: "Playing with Joshua; playing with a football," and "Sean is doing tricks and that is playing to me." Both American and Japanese children's play perspectives seem to be influenced by the fact that these children are encouraged to interact with others positively (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Izumi-Taylor & Ito, 2015; The Ministry of Educa-

tion, Culture, Sports, Science, & Technology, 2008). It appeared that both American and Japanese children captured joyful interactions with others. Likewise, when asked to photograph their images of school, children photographed their friends (DeMarie & Ethridge, 2006; Dockett & Perry, 2005, 2007).

Children's photographs and their comments revealed vital information about their perspectives of play. Through photographic experiences, children of both nations retained new information about their peers and recognized distinctive features of their friendships and classmates. They were attracted to groups of children interacting with each other. To these children, play meant being with their peers.

**Educators
recognize play as a
cultural occurrence.**

Play in Relation to Children's Self-Selected Environments

Children in both nations photographed more outdoor than indoor play. Their outdoor photos included school buildings, skies, trees over the school's fences, and buildings beyond the fences. Two American children's explanations for their photos included, "They are on top of the structure," or "They are playing on a tire swing." These American children's play preferences might be representing their culture regarding the importance of physical activities (Edwards, Bayless, & Ramsey, 2009; Izumi-Taylor, Morris, Meredith, & Hicks, 2012; Pica, 2010).

In contrast, only Japanese children captured photos of places and objects without people, including school buildings, playgrounds, tree tops, sunlight through trees, flowers, frosty playgrounds, gardens, play structures, forts, slides, Jungle Gyms, chickens, chicken coops, and trains. Their reasons for taking such photos were related to what they like at school. Typical descriptions from the children were: "We made these wind chimes to hang on trees, and the sun is shining on them," "I like trains and always watch them over the school fence," and "We have our own forest here where we always play. Birds come here also." These children's play choices might be partially related to one goal of Japanese early childhood education that aims to develop children's interests in nature and environmental relationships (The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology, 2008). It is noteworthy that environmental factors influence children's views of play (Dockett, 2002). Other studies also revealed that children perceived playing in natural environments with trees, flowers, and bushes to be enjoyable (Azlina & Zulkiflee, 2012; Gandini, 2012).

What some children observed, photographed, and said about play had little to do with what adults may consider as the real point of play. What they photographed was related to familiarity and preference. They captured other children's actions in their familiar and preferred environments. They appeared to consider open space, a large room, or spacious outdoors to be important. Such environments can promote cooperation, emphasizing that everyone is welcome to participate.

Play in Relation to Children's Favorite Toys/Props

Many American and Japanese children defined play according to their toys and props as evidenced by their numerous pictures of activities where others were engaged with toys/props. While both sets of children included such objects in their photographs, all of the American children's photos also included people, while some Japanese children's photos contained only the objects as subjects, and their remarks exhibited various emotional responses.

The following explanations from Japanese children about their photos of only toys/props demonstrated their joy. A Japanese boy who photographed many wagons lined up in the storage room boasted, *"I took this picture because we use them for play, and we place sand on these wagons and carry it around."* A girl explained her photo of a hand-made building, *"Can you see what it says here? It says 'Snail Institute,' and this is where we study snails. We created the building, the sign, drew these pictures, and also wrote the name."*

One Japanese boy who photographed the empty bathroom explained, *"This is our urinal, and this size is for children. Did you know that?"* We sensed a tone of pride in his explanation. It is interesting to note that of all the toys and props, he chose this as his subject. Dockett and Perry (2007) also found that some Australian children were fascinated with "out-of-bounds" areas such as the toilets and photographed them (p. 12).

The layout of the Japanese children's photos of only toys/props without people suggested their focus on individual items. A girl took a photo of an egg in someone's hand and explained, *"When we take care of*



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"I took this picture of chickens because I like them," said a Japanese girl.

these chickens, we get to keep their eggs. Did you know that?" These examples of the play choices photographed by Japanese children represent how they are encouraged to create their own props and to take care of common toys/props (Kawabe, 2012; The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, & Technology, 2008).

In contrast, none of the American children took photos of only toys/props. This finding was in keeping with the results of a study in which children were asked to photograph their images of school, and many American children's photos were of "people rather than objects or places" (DeMarie & Etheridge, 2006, p. 103). Another study revealed that children tend to photograph social interactions when asked to photograph their lives (Clark-Ibanez, 2004). Although American children did not mention their favorite toys/props, their photos included these objects with people (monkey bars, swings, slides, tire swings, and classroom toys). An American boy remarked about his picture of children on the swing, *"They are swinging."* These American children's play

options reveal classroom experiences that focus on "community-building opportunities" where children play and work together in conjunction with individualized play activities (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009, p. 151).

Many children in the present study captured various familiar toys/props that were "photo-worthy" to them (DeMarie, 2001, p. 15). Children have a tendency to photograph things that matter to them when asked to capture their images of school (Dockett & Perry, 2005). These items are things they have experienced previously, and they need to explore their own surroundings to understand and discover for themselves (Berk, 2005; Dockett & Perry, 2005). An abstract concept such as play is not easily defined by young children, but they were able to express their perspectives in relation to their favorite and familiar toys/props. Presenting authentic materials/toys enhances children's development and learning (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). Observing their preferences of hands-on and minds-on learning materials and understanding how they utilize them

in play can also support children's problem-solving skills (Van Hoorn, Nourot, Scales, & Alward, 2015).

Conclusion

In the study, children photographed what they perceived as meaningful and preferable as play. Children's notions of play are associated with interacting with others, being in self-selected environments, and engaging with favorite toys/props. Play is related to joyful interaction with friends where children are often outdoors, thus, educators need to pay closer attention to the importance of outdoor activities with others. Also, some children have a preference for play environments in nature; therefore, educators should offer nature-related environments. Favorite toys/props also enhance play, so by asking children about their preferences for these items, educators might be able to augment their play more meaningfully.

Some children's play perspectives appear to be influenced by

their cultures (Dockett & Meckley, 2007) and educational environments (Dockett & Perry, 2005, 2007), and educators must understand these influences. Although both American and Japanese children's play preferences are related to interactions with others, more American children's photos reveal they consider social interactions as vital to play. A possible explanation for this finding might be related to the fact that some American children follow individualized instructions and have less play time with others than their Japanese counterparts; thus, their photos included more interactions with others. Conversely, Japanese children, who have ample opportunities to engage in group activities, photographed items without others present. Also, it could be associated with the fact that the Japanese children were taking photos when the classmates were not present (Dockett & Perry, 2007). Although all children can learn in various environments, their learning occurs best in playful, child-initiated activities with favorite props.

Play is integrated into social and political structures as well as the fundamental values of cultures (Kieff & Casbergue, 2000; Kushner, 2015; Roopnarine, 2015; Roopnarine & Johnson, 1994). Educators need to understand how play influences cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and cultural development in children from different cultures. When educators recognize play as a cultural occurrence, they can appreciate the cultural features of play.

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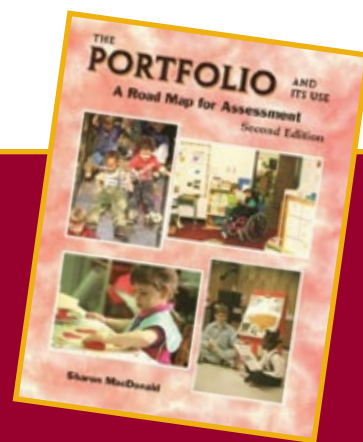
Outdoor play with props can enhance learning experiences.

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