

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN THE 21ST CENTURY



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Early Childhood Education in the 21st Century

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Philosophical and critical issues in early childhood education



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Pedagogical hybridity: Practicing within a postcolonial third space in early childhood classrooms as well as in teacher education classrooms

A. Gupta

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ABSTRACT: This paper is based on a qualitative study conducted with early childhood teachers within an Asian context that questions the use of Euro-Western assumptions to inform the preparation and practice of primary and pre-primary teachers in a non-western context. Conceptualized within the frameworks of postcolonial theory and globalization, the paper offers an alternate perspective on teacher education that will support the development of globally and culturally aware early childhood educators. Globalization works to bring global and local discourses together, with the former often being a western discourse which tends to dominate the latter. This leads to a colonized condition defined by Donaldo Macedo (1999) as being the imposition of an ideological yardstick against which members of weaker communities are measured and consequently fall short. Globalization also has a transactional nature to it and serves to bring diverse cultural elements together with regard to ideas, practices and policies. This transaction results in the creation of what Homi Bahba (1994) refers to as spaces of cultural hybridity. Rooted in the idea of cultural hybridity is the notion of pedagogical hybridity. Essentially this occurs within classroom spaces that are created when diverse pedagogical ideas and practices and policies are brought together. In this increasingly globalizing 21st century it is imperative that teachers are prepared in teacher education classrooms where culturally diverse notions on child development and educational philosophies are explored and acknowledged. In keeping with the theme of this conference of “Finding alternative approaches, theories, practices and frameworks of early childhood education in the 21st century” this talk will be focused on the globalized concepts of pedagogical hybridity and the pedagogy of third space by examining how that may apply to teaching practices in early childhood classrooms, and offering recommendations for teacher preparation programs.

1 INTRODUCTION

Primary and pre-primary education in Asia until recently was approached with an academically rigid curriculum and teacher-directed pedagogy. The 21st century, however, has witnessed a high level of global awareness and competition, and early childhood policy in many Asian countries has markedly shifted toward open classrooms and a learner-friendly pedagogy. Citizens of a globalized 21st century almost certainly need to be comfortable with diversity, flexibility and inclusivity in a manner that recognizes and respects the wider world, and school curricula now must include the diverse ideas and ways of thinking that represent the local and the global. Subsequently, it is imperative that teachers are prepared in teacher education classrooms where culturally diverse notions on child development and educational philosophies are explored and acknowledged.

This paper draws from a larger study of a series of inter-related qualitative inquiries that examine recent trends in EC policies and practices within the specific socio-cultural contexts and world-views of 5 Asian countries: India, Singapore, China, Sri Lanka and the Maldives.

I also draw upon the findings of my earlier study on early childhood teachers' preparation and classroom practice in some private urban schools in India.

In keeping with the theme of this conference of "*Finding alternative approaches, theories, practices and frameworks of early childhood education in the 21st century*" this paper will be focused on the globalized concepts of pedagogical hybridity and the pedagogy of third space by examining how that may apply to teaching practices in early childhood classrooms, and offering recommendations for teacher preparation programs.

2 GLOBAL AND NATIONAL INFLUENCES ON EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

The recent spotlight on the promotion of ECE as a developed field in Asia has been precipitated by global influences such as the United Nations initiatives of Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1990), Millennium Development Goals and Education For All (EFA 2015), Sustainable Development Goals 2030 (of which Goal 4 addresses access to quality ECE, increased supply of qualified ECE teachers), Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) that was first published by NAEYC in 1987 and emphasized the concepts of learning through play, developmentally appropriate individualized learning, and developmentally appropriate child-centered classrooms.

Alongside this global push, nation governments of several Asian countries also promoted the development of a well-defined ECE field in the Global South by drafting national policies to prioritize ECE, with an emphasis on access, inclusion, and quality.

3 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The theoretical lenses utilized to frame this paper are *Globalization* and *Postcolonial Theory*. I view *Globalization* as the "Intensification of worldwide social relations which link localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events happening many miles away and vice versa" (Anthony Giddens as cited in Arnove, 2007). The most recent and current waves of globalization are *neoliberal* in nature, and marked by the "entry of foreign direct investment, and foreign corporations into national markets (Chatterjee, 2016). Additionally, the *globalization of education* refers to the impact that worldwide discussions, processes, and institutions have upon local educational practices and policies (Spring, 2009). Globalization can critically influence core educational decisions such as "what counts as responsive and effective education, what counts as appropriate teaching . . . and who benefits from it throughout the world" (Apple, 2011, pp. 222–223).

The influence and assimilation of "foreign" ideas and practices into local contexts is certainly not a new phenomenon as seen from world histories of colonialism. Currently, a kind of neo-colonialism is being fostered through the neoliberal economic and political hegemonies of dominant powers that become established in nations generally perceived as weaker emerging economies. Thus globalization is closely connected to the notion of colonization which brings us to *Postcolonial Theory*.

Postcoloniality is rooted in the idea of the colonized condition viewed by Donaldo Macedo (1999) as the imposition of an ideological yardstick against which members of weaker communities are measured and fall short. Postcolonial theory addresses the two-way dialogues and transactions between seemingly binary ideas, opposing each other. When these binaries are viewed as cultures with fluid boundaries interacting with each other, then the exchange can appear as a form of cultural translation as ideas from one culture get modified and embedded into another culture (Bhabha, 1994). This process of transformation may lead to the creation of a grey area, a third space of *cultural hybridity*, which holds fresh possibilities (Bhabha, 1994, 2009). This approach further allows for a deeper understanding of the transaction and the knowledge production that occurs within the space of cultural hybridization (Tikly, 1999). In a similar process, when

diverse educational elements of pedagogy and curriculum are brought together a space of *pedagogical hybridity* is created within which a *pedagogy of third space* is practiced. The notion of pedagogical hybridity is thus rooted in Bhabha's notion of cultural hybridity. Postcolonial theory enables an examination of the flow of diverse educational ideas and the curriculum that gets enacted within the space of pedagogical hybridity.

In Asia "the colonized condition can certainly be found in early childhood classrooms when schools in the "non-west" are evaluated by standards of pedagogy and curriculum that are based on an understanding of child development in the context of young children growing up in the "west" (Gupta, 2014, p.4). Early childhood teachers in urban India were observed to navigate between tradition and modernism... their voices in dialogue with the voice of the dominant discourse of the "west" (Gupta, 2006). Discourses not only refer to what is said and thought but also who has the authority to speak and when. Using a "western" discourse to describe educational philosophy and pedagogy undoubtedly provides credibility to schools in the developing world. Much more attention needs to be paid to the impact of globalization on the field of early childhood education and teacher education pedagogy and policy in postcolonial societies of the global South.

4 THE IMPACT OF THE GLOBAL NEO-LIBERAL AGENDA IN EDUCATION ACROSS ASIA

Neoliberal globalization has shaped early education in Asia in two primary ways: 1) by applying the market economy discourse to educational institutions and transforming them into commodities for consumers; and 2) by applying the discourse of the widely used American ECE guide, Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP). These "western" discourses seem to provide credibility to schools in emerging economies. Vavrus (2004) notes the legitimacy that is given to changes in the local systems through the borrowing of language and educational models from external countries. Unfortunately the projects that are selected for funding by world organizations end up having to subscribe to pedagogical practices that are shaped by a dominant Euro-America as "reforms from elsewhere are not necessarily borrowed for rational reasons but for political and economic ones" (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012, p. 4).

Several changes have been observed in the education sectors across Asia that fundamentally alter the definition of education. There has been an increase in the number of private early childhood and teacher preparation programs, along with an explosion so-called international preschools, & "global and world-class schools". Many of the private schools and franchises that have mushroomed under market economy policies are found to be unregulated and of sub-standard quality. Neoliberal forces have influenced the positioning of centers for children as businesses that are then aggressively advertised in market-based language. To keep competitive in the climate of globalization educators from Asian countries are sent on study tours to western English-speaking countries to learn and bring back innovations in education. There has been a movement away from the traditional, academically rigorous, teacher-directed approach toward a more learner-centered and inclusive approach, and significant prominence has been given to the discourse of DAP and a "play pedagogy".

Further, the globalized neo-liberal educational climate is creating additional inequities in educational and schooling experiences for children in Asia. Neoliberalism and market economy structures are shaped by capitalist values of a Euro-American "west" that are based on the ideas of individualism, consumerism, free choice, competition, and efficiency; a shift away from the concept of collectivism. This increased individualism has had a debilitating impact on public policy. Enrollment levels of children in pre-primary and primary schools has certainly risen but at the same time acute shortages in the availability of government-recognized schools and qualified teachers is resulting in overcrowding of classrooms. Teachers are inadequately prepared to handle the increasing socio-economic diversity in their classrooms. Most significantly, cultural and colonizing incursions are seen to occur when a "western" progressive early childhood discourse is viewed as the basis of "appropriate" pedagogy in all Asian classrooms.

Two examples of cultural and colonizing incursions are the problematic assessment of quality, and the application of the DAP-based play pedagogy in Asian classrooms. Both are discussed below.

4.1 *Problematic assessments of quality*

It is troubling that quality assessment of early childhood programs is measured against “western” standards in evaluations offered by external evaluators such as the following: “Preschool education in Sri Lanka has developed a style of its own that is uniquely out of step with the more widely accepted Early Childhood Education theories and practice valued in most developed countries” (King, 2010).

The “traditional teacher directed” EC classrooms observed were marked by tiny spaces, with large number of children who were seated for many of the activities. Despite the congested environment there was a high level of verbal and intellectual engagement marked by curiosity, bubbling eagerness to answer, eagerness to participate in songs and rhymes. This was very different from the more physical energy observed in many progressive Euro-American early childhood classrooms in the west.

This raises a critical question: is physical energy in a classroom more important than verbal and mental energy, and is that a context related decision? How important is the evidence of students’ movements and physical energy in a classroom located within a country where physical and outdoor activities have lower priority as compared to a classroom in the United States where a very high value is placed on sports and outdoor activities? Conversely, are the students in an Indian classrooms, which is characterized by low physical energy but high mental energy, any less engaged, or experiencing a lower quality learning experience (Gupta, 2006/2013)?

4.2 *Applying the dominant discourses of DAP and play*

Inequities are created when dominant global discourses are applied to local contexts. The promotions of a developmentally appropriate early childhood discourse by world organizations of heft have placed a value on play in the early childhood education narrative in Asia and recent policy changes reflect this. This becomes problematic when the word PLAY is given different meanings in different cultural world views. For instance, in the Indian context the word for play in Hindi is “*khel*” which encompasses a range of activities: 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; preferred skills of cooperation, sharing, taking turns, following rules, but also survival skills such as harassment, deception, teasing and trickery which are inherent in successfully navigating the world of human relationships. Thus attempts to implement a play-based pedagogy, and assess an activity as acceptable play using the lens of DAP can be greatly challenged (Gupta, 2011).

Several challenges may be encountered in the implementation of a play-based learner-centered pedagogy in classrooms of the Global South: political contexts unsupportive of the democratic essence of learner-centered education; overcrowded classrooms with class sizes of 40-60 children; scarcity of basic supplies in schools such as furniture, running water, electricity and sanitation facilities; teachers untrained in the pedagogy of play and learner-centered approaches – none of these conditions support the individualized teacher-child interaction which is central to learner-centered pedagogy. Thus it might behoove educators to pause before trying to implement a western policy/pedagogy in a non-western context without adaptations.

4.3 *The concept of hybridity*

Alexander (2000) notes that “Life in schools and classrooms is an aspect of our wider society, not separate from it: a culture does not stop at the school gates. The character and dynamics of school life are shaped by the values that shape other aspects of . . . national life”. Therefore,

when national life begins to reflect globalization and a hybrid postcoloniality then classrooms will surely begin to reflect that hybridity as well. The findings of my earlier study revealed the existence of a postcolonial hybridity in the early childhood curriculum and classroom practices resulting from a transactional exchange of the three culturally diverse philosophical and pedagogical influences: an in-between area that I referred to as a third space of pedagogical hybridity (Gupta, 2006). The three influencing discourses were:

- the British colonial design and content of teacher education programs in India, a legacy which continued to linger long after India gained independence from the British rule;
- the dominant DAP influenced Euro-American discourse of early childhood education that teachers were being asked to implement in some private schools in India; and
- the underlying Indian cultural and spiritual values that deeply influenced the images of the child and teacher in Indian society.

The critical finding in this study seemed to be that teachers recognized the importance of working with the prescribed academic syllabus and helping students develop the skills to succeed in a competitive society. But they also recognized the importance of teaching the whole child and ensuring the development of social, emotional, and moral development. The teachers in this study seemed to have the freedom and flexibility to individually implement a more informal curriculum parallel to the rigid academic curriculum where issues in values, good attitudes, environmental protection, and diversity were being addressed. The teachers recognized that certain aspects of each approach had a place in their classrooms and in the overall success of the child's educational experience, and were comfortable teaching within the space of pedagogical hybridity.

5 CONCLUSION

Globalization is here to stay, and societies are becoming increasingly diverse where the global and local are juxtaposed in classrooms and outside. Thus we need to ensure that teacher education programs also reflect the same postcolonial hybridity that currently exists in schools and society. The goal is for teachers to be prepared with a deeper cultural awareness and sensitivity, and to be better able to address socio-cultural-economic diversities in their globalized classrooms. Teacher education programs can offer a more relevant experience to future teachers by preparing and educating teachers in a multicultural approach to education; by training them in qualitative and quantitative assessments; by deepening their understanding and knowledge of how to implement child-centered teaching within the local context; by exposing them to global discourses and research; by recruiting a more diverse teaching force, and preparing teachers to teach in diverse contexts; by offering teachers richer and more diverse clinical experiences; by holding teachers to higher teaching standards and accountability; and most importantly, by positioning teacher development as lifelong learning which does not stop after graduating with a degree from a teacher education college. This approach to teacher education is sure to result in a more culturally relevant and appropriate pedagogy and curriculum for teacher education and early childhood classrooms.

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