

Chapter 1

Introduction

Abstract As three co-authoring academics from different cultural backgrounds, (Liang Li from China, Gloria Quiñones from Mexico, and Avis Ridgway from Australia) we find combining our different experiences and perspectives gives us courage to develop new ideas that can support making sense of the contradictions and commonalities we encounter in our field of research: early childhood pedagogy and play. Combining research endeavors and interests through our documented narratives of lived experiences, brings inventive energy to this book. By working together in this way we embrace the pedagogical value of play from different cultural and social histories, acknowledge that play has many purposes for children and thereby open the opportunity for re-theorisation.

Keywords Co-authoring · China, Mexico, Australia · Cultural and social histories · Documented narratives · Pedagogy and play · Conceptual reciprocity

We use and acknowledge our doctoral research (Li 2012; Quiñones 2013; Ridgway 2010b) and lived experiences as early childhood education researchers, tertiary educators and parents, to illuminate and illustrate issues we meet in relation to re-theorising play. We frame our research with original readings of cultural historical theory: (Vygotsky 1929, 1966, 1978, 1987, 1994, 1998, 2004) and later expansions (Kravtsov and Kravtsova 2008, 2009; Fleer 2010, 2013; Li 2012, 2013; Quiñones and Fleer 2011; Quiñones 2013; Ridgway 2010a; Ridgway and Quiñones 2012).

Dahlberg and Moss in Taguchi (2010) write about the process of being open to cooperative and collaborative expansion of thought:

These ideas about thought have consequences for our ideas about quality of life; quality of life comes to mean a way of living that is capable of transforming itself in relation with the forces it meets, always increasing the power and potential to welcome new potentials, opening up for creativity and invention (Dahlberg and Moss xvii cited in Taguchi 2010).

Writing together has been thoughtful, playful and a pedagogical act. We found ideas continuously forming and re-forming in imaginative ways through a process

that can only be described as cultural and historical alchemy that crystallized into new conceptualisations of the subject of our research: pedagogy and play. We realise that instead of being thought about separately as ‘*pedagogy*’ (the art and science of education), and ‘*play*’ (variously understood and misunderstood), it is conceptually helpful to think holistically about their relationship, hence we prefer and use the term *pedagogical play* rather than *pedagogy and play*.

1.1 Why Use Cultural Historical Theory for Re-theorising Play?

Our shared scholarship in cultural-historical theory offers us an obvious tool for understanding how learning and playful activity in early childhood are influenced socially, politically, culturally, aesthetically and historically. Scholars of cultural-historical theory (e.g. Lindqvist 2003) see Vygotsky’s original work as foundational to understanding play as the source of the child’s development of abstract and symbolic thinking (higher mental functions).

A child learns to consciously recognize his own actions and becomes aware that every object has meaning. From the point of view of development, the fact of creating an imaginary situation can be regarded as a means of developing abstract thought (Vygotsky 1966, p. 17).

Vygotskian scholars bring their own interpretative skills to expand on Vygotsky’s original works and this is why re-theorising is so important for advancing contemporary thinking about pedagogy and play in early childhood education (van Oers 1999). Cultural historical theory provides us with an interpretative and experimental space and freedom to re-theorise pedagogy and play in contemporary early childhood education which, for us, embraces the upbringing of young children from birth to eight years. In addition, we keep in mind the demands of relevant framework documents provided through governance structures.

In our research with young children we always take the perspective that children are clever.

Hans Christian Andersen, Danish author of many fairy tales and famous for his literary imagination, writes in ‘The Philosopher’s Stone’:

Like all children they loved to hear stories related to them, and their father told them many things which other children would not have understood; but these were as clever as most grown up people are among us (Owens 1996, p. 295).

There are many surprises in *Early Childhood Pedagogical Play*. We take a special interest in babyhood and toddler years and include narrative examples covering the whole early childhood period (birth to eight). In Chap. 10 the playful activity of two babies is closely recorded. Their numerous playful exchanges are used to begin theorisation of *conceptual reciprocity* as a starting point for learning about and developing friendship. We frequently examine play from the child’s

perspective throughout this book and it culminates with an illustrative conceptual diagram to support our experiences of re-theorising play.

In examining play from a child's perspective through rich examples, our contemporary conceptualisations of pedagogical play are brought to life. As the following chapters unfold we invite all concerned with early childhood education to re-theorise the kinds of habitual play pedagogy present in familiar notions such as free-play, maturational play, or themed play. Our research shows that when play is framed pedagogically children's learning is evident throughout early childhood.

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