



Rethinking play: A postcolonial feminist critique of international early childhood education policy



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ABSTRACT

In India, policymakers in the arena of early childhood education are focused on improving the quality of services provided in government run early childhood education and care centers, known as anganwadis, run by India's Integrated Child Development Services Scheme (ICDS). One measurement of program quality is the presence of play, which experts construct as a valuable tool for individualized cognitive development. Drawing on ethnographic data from a 13 month study of anganwadis in three southern Indian states, the author uses a postcolonial feminist lens to argue that in India, unlike in Western nations, play often functions as a tool for the collective good rather than for individual social progress. Broadening the purpose of play leads to more accurate evaluations of the quality of services provision in contexts of anganwadis, where early childhood education programs may be falsely judged as poorly run because they do not conform to standards based on inappropriate, decontextualized notions of play's form and function.

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1. Introduction

Studies repeatedly indicate that throughout the world, exposure to early childhood education leads to positive long term impacts, such as increased academic preparedness, future earning potential, and child survival, as well as reduced probability of anti-social behavior throughout the lifespan (Levine, 2005; Nores and Barnett, 2010; Pence and Marfo, 2008; Rao, 2010; Sharma et al., 2008). Recent data suggests that higher quality interventions lead to more positive and sustained results, including a more lucrative return on investment for governments (Mashburn et al., 2008; Pao et al., 2012; Pence and Marfo, 2008; Sharma et al., 2008). This finding has led to an international interest in raising standards for publicly provided preschool services, and influenced multilateral donors and international agencies to prioritize the enactment of policies designed to increase the quality of early childhood educational programming in the global south (Pence and Marfo, 2008). Problematically, these efforts are predicated on the notion that there is a global consensus about what quality looks like – a notion that, at this writing, remains untrue.

Definitions of quality are dominated by cognitive understandings of childhood, education, and development produced almost exclusively by psychologists from the west (Gupta, 2004; Mashburn et al.,

2008; Pao et al., 2012; Pence and Marfo, 2008; Tobin, 1997). Many international quality standards are derived from those created by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), a US-based institution that specializes in domestic policy (Pence and Marfo, 2008; Viruru, 2005; Tobin, 2005). The disproportionate adoption of these quality standards and their accompanying assessments results in program designs that include unrealistic expectations of resource availability, as well as a fundamental misunderstanding of the concerns of local educators who, for example, may feel less challenged by class size or linguistic diversity compared to their ability to integrate children with special needs or teach subjects like art and music (Gupta, 2004; Pence and Marfo, 2008; Viruru, 2005). Furthermore, the unquestioned adoption of these standards leads to the erasure or exclusion of indigenous knowledge and practices, including contextualized ideas about childhood (Pence and Marfo, 2008; Tobin, 1997, 2004; Viruru, 2005). Troubling assumed truths about quality in early childhood settings is a powerful approach to developing programs that are culturally situated, educationally effective, and respectful of children's and educator's autonomy, agency, and capacity for self-governance. This is especially true of quality standards associated with play.

2. Play as a quality indicator

The inclusion of play as a quality indicator was considered a victory for feminist, progressive pedagogues who wanted to move

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away from previously espoused data-driven early childhood education practices that stifled creativity and critical thinking (Ailwood, 2003; Meier et al., 2010; Paley, 2004; Rogers and Lapping, 2012). Play was valued as an avenue for children to disrupt traditional roles (particularly those associated with gender), interrogate power structures, develop empathy, and test the boundaries of authority (Haas Dyson, 2003; Jones, 2006; Kessler and Hauser, 2000). This may be because throughout American and British history, play had been constructed as children's primary method of rebellion against adult surveillance and control, a notion that made it appealing to critical educators as a tool for raising children's consciousness at an early age (Ailwood, 2003; Chudacoff, 2008; Haas Dyson, 2003; Jones, 2006; Kessler and Hauser, 2000; Paley, 2004). Those who advocated for the inclusion of play in quality standards believed that they were advocating for the rights of children.

In recent years, however, play as a quality standard has morphed into a tool for evaluating and controlling both teachers and students. Scholars who recognize play primarily for its cognitive benefits now argue for its regulation, labeling some types of play higher quality than others, largely through invoking theories developed by western developmental psychologists, most notably Vygotsky (Ailwood, 2003; Brooker and Edwards, 2010; Bodorova, 2008; Canella and Viruru, 2004; Davey and Lundy, 2011; Kessler and Hauser, 2000; Meier et al., 2010; Paley, 2004). For example, Bodorova (2008) claims that Vygotsky has outlined three characteristics of dramatic play: children assume characters or roles, establish rules, and "create an imaginary situation" (p. 359). Bodorova argues that children's play must be structured, assessed, and monitored, and her work is part of a growing body of literature outlining a set of best practices for guiding, evaluating, and otherwise standardizing play (Bodorova, 2008; Martlew et al., 2011). New standards in the UK, for example, characterize quality play as that which includes "planning," "observation," and "adult involvement," followed by a rigorous summative assessment (Rogers and Lapping, 2012, p. 249). These approaches imply that teachers and children must be trained to play correctly so as to increase program quality and, by extension, to mitigate the risk of squandering potential benefits, including returns on investment for governments.

Treating play as a measurable commodity converts it from a child-centered practice into yet another academic mandate, as well as a tool for labeling educators and students as deficient when they resist these forms of control (Ailwood, 2003; Chudacoff, 2008; Davey and Lundy, 2011; McInnes et al., 2011; Rogers and Lapping, 2012). Furthermore, specifying a right and wrong way to play encourages educators to distrust students, an attitude consistent with historical attempts to curb play in the name of preventing children from becoming ungovernable delinquents (Chudacoff, 2008; McInnes et al., 2011). In contrast, feminist and postcolonial scholars argue, play based on choice and freedom can help students learn to advocate for their rights and even provide useful feedback on program quality (Davey and Lundy, 2011; Rogers and Evans, 2007). Classifying certain types of play as superior to others defeats the original progressive vision for its inclusion in classrooms.

Unpacking our views about the purpose and nature of play is instructive not only for reassessing ideas about quality, but also examining our attitudes toward children and their educators throughout the world and, in particular, in the global south. In this paper, I draw on a multi-site ethnographic study of anganwadis, or government run early childhood care and education centers, in three Indian states, to question the purpose and nature of play. I analyze how definitions of play rooted in Vygotskian constructions of cognition and development – and, by extension, educational quality – simultaneously limit our ability to accurately assess

program quality and perpetuate the use of colonial, patriarchal frames in evaluating educators and children. In the following section, I draw on postcolonial and critical feminist approaches to describe the anganwadi system and frame the study's findings.

3. Integrated Child Development Services Scheme

India's Integrated Child Development Services Scheme began in 1975 as a donor funded pilot project designed to address severe malnutrition among children under the age of five years old (Kaul and Sankar, 2009; Levine, 2005; Sharma et al., 2008). The scheme is now fully funded by the government of India, and is run primarily through anganwadis, or early childhood care and development centers that are open to all but are targeted at reaching "un-reached, disadvantaged community groups" including and especially "the urban poor" (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2012c, p.6). According to the government of India, every population of 500–1000 people in urban areas are entitled to a local anganwadi; these requirements are reduced in tribal and rural areas, reflecting the government of India's desire to prioritize service delivery to populations that are considered under-served (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2012c, p. 13). In the past five years, the system has expanded dramatically, signaling a commitment from the central and state governments to address childhood malnutrition and, increasingly, to expand access to pre-school education.

Anganwadis are staffed by women known as anganwadi workers, who are responsible for administering preschool education, keeping track of child outcomes, and generally running the centers. Every center also has an anganwadi helper who opens the anganwadi when the worker is absent, prepares and serves the free midday meal, cleans the center, and supports the worker as necessary. Workers and helpers are recruited from the local community and have some formal schooling, although educational requirements differ between states (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2012a). Currently the Ministry of Women and Child Development, the governmental body tasked with running ICDS, is considering implementing "an accreditation system, to grade AWCs, with defined quality standards" that would raise the minimum educational requirements (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2012c, p. 17). However, the Ministry also acknowledges that some of these standards may not be feasible in rural and tribal areas where there is a shortage of qualified candidates (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2012c). Further, the Ministry is committed to hiring more supervisors who are senior to anganwadi workers and helpers to monitor what is happening in the centers and to ensure quality control.

The Ministry has publicly taken additional steps to regularize and standardize preschool programming, including developing a National Childhood Care and Education Policy, which is a set of guidelines about curriculum and training for states to implement locally (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2012a, 2012b). In this document, questions of quality are central; in fact the "cardinal principles" behind the draft policy include a commitment to "universal access, equity and quality" (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2012b, p. 7). The section that recommends the development of standards includes "play based learning" as an indicator of quality (Ministry of Women and Child Development, 2012b, p. 8). Although the terms "quality" and "play" are not defined in the draft document, they are mentioned repeatedly.

4. Postcolonial and feminist perspectives on early childhood education policies

Canella and Viruru (2004) broadly define postcolonial or anticolonial approaches to education as frameworks designed to

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