

Perspectives of Play in Three Nations: A Comparative Study in Japan, the United States, and Sweden

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Overview

The use of play in early childhood education is highly dependent on culture and the way in which people in different nations view play. This article discusses and explores how three different nations view play, including Japan, the United States, and Sweden. The authors use the perspectives of early childhood educators in each nation to gain knowledge on the use of play in the classroom. They developed six themes related to the meaning and uses of play, including: (1) process of learning, (2) source of possibilities, (3) empowerment, (4) creativity, (5) child's work, and (6) fun activities. Overall, the research from all three nations indicates that the use of play involves and encourages positive emotions.

Perspectives on Play in Japan, the United States, and Sweden

In Japan the use of play in early childhood education helps to nurture the physical, emotional, social, and language skills in children. Early childhood education programs in Japan focus their curriculum on group-oriented environments where children can learn to play with others. The idea that children construct their own knowledge through play by interacting with their environment is what motivates the basis of Japanese early childhood education. In the United States play is regarded as the best mode for children's learning and development. In Sweden, play is the central concept of early childhood curriculum that aims to nurture children as persons and learners. Swedish educators feel that play is important for a child's development and learning. Play is viewed as a positive approach to learning in each nation; however, the three countries differ in some ways with one another when evaluating the use of play-based environments.

Comparing Teachers' Perspectives on Play in Three Cultures

Six emergent themes were found when studying the three cultures perspectives on play: (1) process of learning, (2) source of possibilities, (3) empowerment, (4) creativity, (5) children's work, and (6) fun activities. These themes were found through the questionnaire answered by participants in each country. The five inquiries included: (1) what is play? (2) Tell me about play in your classroom. (3) How do you think play affects students? (4) Tell me of your concept of adult play. (5) Tell me what playfulness is to you.

Findings from the Surveys

Play as a process of learning was the first theme to be found, which defines play as children exploring and creating an understanding about the world around them. This can further be defined through play related to social development and learning. Play as a source of possibilities, was found in the Swedish and Japanese respondents, not the American respondents. This theme states that in play everything is possible. Play as empowerment was seen primarily in Japan, viewing play as a mode of developing the power to live and empowering children to be competent citizens. Play as creativity is seen as the process in which children can think for themselves, create their own ideas, and can fully use their

imaginations. Play as children's work views play along the same lines that adults view work, claiming that when children play they are working hard. Play as fun activities define play as a source of enjoyment, joyfulness, happiness, and amusement.

Reflections on Findings from Japan, Sweden, and the United States

Perspectives on play in each of the three countries vary, primarily depending on culture. Some perspectives of play in the three countries are the same, suggesting some courses of action. First, teachers in the United States and Sweden might benefit from working with Japanese teachers to expand their knowledge of ways to implement play-related activities and promote a group orientation in classrooms. Also, researchers and teachers need to understand play and the way it relates to children's learning. This research is helpful in understanding ways to approach play in the classroom and the community.

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