

Views of Native Parents About Early Childhood Education

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Forty-eight parents from three First Nations communities in Ontario were interviewed about the value of play and the place of play in early childhood programs. Parents valued play as an appropriate activity for young children and as the way of learning in early childhood. In addition, parents approved of play oriented programs in day care centers. Parents made a number of valuable suggestions about child care in general and openly expressed some of their concerns. Issues important to parents were raised such as the amount of parent involvement in centers, day care as an opportunity for cultural transmission, and day care staff training.

Play is believed to be the child's way of learning (Bredekamp, 1987), and as a result free play or self-initiated play has become the predominant curriculum mode in many child care settings (Nash, 1982). Research indicates that through play children make gains in all the developmental domains: cognitive, social and emotional, physical, and communicative and linguistic (Fein & Rivkin, 1986). It is not just any play, however, that is most adaptive, but rather play that stretches the child's capacities (Sylva, 1984). One reason educators study children's play behaviors is to determine whether a child's play diet is rich and varied. In this way educational programming can respond to the needs of the individual child.

Yet there are indications that among some groups and in some cultures play may not be a valued way of learning, and furthermore that not all types of play behaviors may occur spontaneously. Isenberg and Quisenberry (1988) point out, for example, that the right of the child to play is being eroded in a "rapidly changing world characterized by pressure to succeed in all areas" (p. 138). Feitelson (1977) suggests that the ability to pretend, the leading source of development in the preschool years (Vygotsky, 1967), is not a cultural universal, but is found primarily in Western society. Feitelson's thesis is that the style of play is closely linked to the social make-up of any one society and the role of children in it. Not all cultural groups value play as an integral part of education; nor are all children productive players, able to profit from their play opportunities. As a result, the free play of some children may tend to be restricted to a more limited range of social and cognitive play behaviors, and in this way learning opportunities may be limited as well.

An extensive review of relevant data bases revealed no research studies about the play of Ontario's Native children. In addition, the beliefs of their parents about the value of play in early childhood education had not been investigated. Traditional Native teaching styles include mimicry, symbolism, and storytelling (Marashio, 1982), which are also all aspects of play. The use of play as an educational strategy would appear to be consistent with traditional values. Yet whether parents currently value and encourage play was not known.

The Assembly of First Nations (1989) has identified child care as a much needed family support service, and it recommended that child care programs be placed within the culture of First Nations communities. In order to deliver child care programs that meet the needs of the community and that complement parents' involvement in education, there is need to explicate both (a) knowledge about children's play, and (b) parents' beliefs about play and early childhood education.

A two-part study, funded by Health and Welfare Canada, was undertaken to address this need, and the first part is reported in *Play of First Nations Children in Ontario* (Gillis, 1991). In the first part of the study, the play of 58 children, 18 males and 30 females, from 3 through 5 years of age in child care settings was observed and analyzed. Their play showed a developmental progression and was particularly rich in pretend play among the 3- and 4-year-olds.

This article is a summary report of the second part of the study and deals with the question of Native parents' beliefs about the care and education of their young children, and the topic of play was a central focus for discussion.

Method

Site Selection

In order to produce a well-rounded picture of the beliefs of Native parents in Ontario about play and early childhood education, three locales were sought. These were a remote site, a semi-remote site, and non-remote site. An arbitrary definition for *remoteness* was "relative proximity to and opportunities for interaction with non-Natives."

During discussions with Ontario Ministry of Community and Social Services personnel, as well as with Department of National Health and Welfare personnel, three sites of varying degrees of remoteness were identified, all of which had licensed child care centers. Band councils and administrators were contacted for permission to conduct the study in the child care centers under their jurisdiction. Permission was granted in all cases. Communities in which the research took place were small, rural settings of under 2,500 inhabitants. Interviews with on-site community social services and education personnel suggested that the problems that plague Native communities in general such as limited employment opportunities, substance abuse, poverty, and substandard housing were also manifest in these communities.

Participants

Families were contacted to set convenient times for the interview, and the interviews generally took place at the homes of informants or at the child care center. Both audiotaped recordings and written notes were made during the interview, and notes were subsequently checked for completeness against the audiotape. A standard interview schedule was used as a guide for each interview, but there was flexibility in the order in which the questions could be presented. Informants were encouraged to be expansive in their answers. The atmosphere was informal and relaxed.

Results and Discussion

The following questions served to organize the data:

1. What does your child like to play at home?
2. What is play good for?

3. Why did you send your child to the day care center? What did you hope your child would get out of day care?
4. Do you think it is a good idea for children to play at the day care center? Do you like a play oriented program?
5. Do you have any concerns about the day care center? Would you like to see anything else?
6. What is the role of day care in the community?

Play at Home

This was the opening question for the interview. This question served several purposes. First, it helped to establish a rapport with parents by asking them about something with which they were familiar—what their child plays at home. In addition, by permitting parents to talk about play at home, their implicit beliefs about the value of play as an activity could begin to emerge. In this way the central topic, play and early childhood education, was introduced. Finally, the question provided information about what the children in these communities liked to play.

Outdoor play was mentioned more than twice as frequently as the next most frequently reported play type. This included sand and water play, sports, playing in the snow, climbing, riding bikes, building, and fishing and boating. Pretend was the next most frequently reported category, and this play type included house, camping and hunting, superheroes, pets, school, store, telephone, driving, dead, birthday party, farm, and army. Replica play was another frequently mentioned type. When replica play, which probably contained some element of pretend, was combined with pretend play, this combined type was almost as frequently reported as outdoor play.

Although outdoor play was the most frequently reported play type, a few parents complained that their children spent too much time indoors. Television, VCRs, computer games such as Nintendo, and store bought toys were blamed. At one site a parent stated that when she was a child, children played outdoors all the time with toys of their own invention. She felt that this was good for children because it encouraged them to be resourceful in their play and to draw upon what was available, rather than to be dependent on others for their amusement. In any case, the phenomenon described by Isenberg and Quisenberry (1988) of the child who has no time to play or is not permitted to play (Feitelson, 1977) was not in evidence in these communities.

The Value of Play

This was a difficult question for some parents. Initially, parents replied that they hadn't really thought about what play was good for and what advantages play had for children's development. All parents, however, considered play to be a natural part of childhood. One mother stated that she thought her child was sick if she didn't see him playing.

Parents were encouraged to think seriously about this question. In general, parents believed play to be an important aspect of their children's lives, and commented on a variety of advantages in all developmental domains that accrue to children through play.

Parents believed that play was educational because it gave children an opportunity to practice a variety of cognitive activities such as problem solving, imagination, flexibility, and prediction. Parents valued play for the opportunities it gave

their children to learn a variety of games, to learn how to build things, and to explore nature. During building, children learned "what you can do with things," how tools can be used, and how to work things out mechanically. In addition, colors, numbers, and other preacademic skills could be learned through play. Play was a place where children could take risks and learn what was real and not real. It was believed to be an important arena where social development could occur, as children learned to share, to be patient, to take turns, and to respect others during play. It helped children learn to control tempers, and to express feelings appropriately. Other advantages were that it developed gross and fine motor skills, and kept children occupied, thereby giving parents a needed break.

The answers of parents to these questions mirror the beliefs of many educators about the positive aspects of play for young children (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988). During the last 25 years, researchers have been actively attempting to pinpoint the special contribution of play to children's development, and play is believed to contribute to development in a variety of ways. From a theoretical perspective, Pepler (1987) describes how play enables children to investigate new objects in their environment, to practice existing skills, and to experiment. In addition, there is a substantial research literature in which play is linked to the development of a variety of skills including creativity (Dansky, 1980), problem solving (Pepler & Ross, 1981), increases in intellectual performance (Saltz, Dixon, & Johnson, 1977), perspective taking (Rubin & Howe, 1986), literacy (Pellegrini, 1985), gross and fine motor skills, and language development (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988). Pretend play facilitates transition from concrete to abstract thought (Vygotsky, 1967), and social presence contributes to the development of children's social skills and social understanding. This study indicates that parents in Native communities intuitively value play and were able to identify its advantages.

Reasons for Day Care

In response to the question, do you like a play oriented program, responses were consistent. All parents thought play was a good thing for their children. No parents wanted a program entirely devoted to preacademic instruction. Approximately half the parents wanted a program entirely devoted to play, and stated that play is the appropriate activity of childhood. The other half favored a combination of play and preacademic instruction; parents stressed, however, that skills development should be playful. Parents at all sites valued positive interaction between staff and children.

Both the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the Association of Childhood Education International support the use of play as a comprehensive program strategy for young children (Bredekamp, 1987; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 1988). The position taken is that "children learn most effectively through a concrete play oriented approach to early childhood education ... the trend toward early academics, for example, is antithetical to what we know about how young children learn" (Bredekamp, p. 1). In addition Bredekamp maintains that learning occurs through the process of interacting with materials and people, and that it is the role of adults to provide a variety of opportunities for children to communicate. In this way, the parents in this study appeared to be very much in tune with what has been termed "developmentally appropriate practice" for the care and education of young children. Those educators who strongly advocate play in young children's programs, such as Weininger (personal communication, February 1992), would find support in Native communities.

Concerns

The question that asked for expressions of parental concerns about the child care center generally occupied the greater portion of the interview. Parents had a number of interesting and valuable comments to make and these were grouped under the following general categories.

Parent involvement and needs. Some parents in each community were concerned about parents' involvement and expressed a desire for increased communication with staff. Parents wanted to know what their children did all day, and they wanted to feel free to speak to staff about this. Staff members I spoke to felt that they were open to communication with parents, but it was clear from the interviews that some parents did not feel comfortable approaching staff. One parent commented that hers was such a small, close-knit community, she was afraid to voice her concerns. She pointed out that there is no choice about child care; there is only one day care center in town, and parents are obliged to use it. Phillips (1987) suggested that although child care is a joint enterprise between parents and caregivers, there is evidence that caregivers may hold negative attitudes toward parents. The concerns of the parents in this study suggested that parent-staff relationships were an important area to address. Parents also suggested that weekly newsletters, volunteering, and open houses might increase parent involvement. In addition, like many Canadian parents using child care (Cooke, 1986), the parents in this study mentioned the need for sick child care and infant care and for more flexible operating hours.

Staff. The majority of parents expressed concern about staff qualifications. They felt that all day care teachers should have Early Childhood Education (ECE) training. Many recognized that in First Nations communities it is sometimes difficult to get day care staff who have ECE training. Parents stated that they were not interested in bringing in "outsiders" to work with their children. They valued the familiar atmosphere at the day care center where everyone knew everyone else. Nor were parents interested in taking their children away from the community to other day care centers. As a solution, parents suggested ongoing opportunities for staff education in order to upgrade qualifications. In addition, parents were interested in having staff attend workshops or inservice training sessions and in establishing liaisons with other day care centers in order to get new program ideas and to enhance morale. Indeed, provinces such as Manitoba, Quebec, and Ontario are responding to the need for flexible training models for child care workers in Native communities.

Parents believed that staff training would go a long way toward remedying some of the concerns in areas such as programming and in discipline, where parents feel that there are too many "don'ts." Parents would like teachers to encourage and oversee positive interactions between children. Finally, parents expected that trained staff would interact more positively with children, thereby enhancing the development of language competence, preacademic skills, and literacy. Increased positive interaction between staff and children was stressed repeatedly at all three sites.

At two sites informants felt a special need to have teachers trained in counselling and emotional development. They wanted teachers to be able to provide emotional support and to be aware of children's sensitivities. This comment relates to one parent's observations that many children have lives that are disrupted by

alcoholism, neglect, and inadequate home environments. One parent put it this way: she wants her child to get hugs at the day care center.

Informants at all sites mentioned staff supervision and stated that staff should be well supervised. Parents suggested such tactics as spot checks, regular screening of staff by someone outside the community, central provincial registries of qualified teachers, and province-wide standards "so that the lousy teachers can be permanently thrown out of the field." A few parents worried about child abuse and about the fact that untrained teachers might lose patience with their children.

Safety. Child-staff ratio was the main concern here, with parents mentioning that due to fluctuations in day care attendance, particularly during summer months, ratios were not optimal. Cooke (1986) and Phillips (1987) also identified child-staff ratios and group size and composition as important indicators of child care quality.

Physical environment and health. Parents wanted to feel confident that their children were being cared for in a safe, clean environment. Parents whose children attended the two older centers commented on the inadequate physical plants and the quality of outdoor play equipment. The relatively low level play observed in the outdoor observations in Part 1 of this study supports parents' views about the need for more stimulating playgrounds. Parents also felt that day care supervisors should be accountable to parents for how money is spent. One parent suggested that traditional toys, home-made in the village, would be interesting for children and could help with the budget. Comments were made at all sites about needing larger budgets to carry out decent programs.

Special needs. At the three sites a few parents were concerned about specific problems that they observed in their children, such as speech and language problems, and emotional problems. These parents requested assessment and early intervention for their children to take place at the day care center. Parents also expressed a strong concern that there is a problem for many First Nations children in academic achievement. Children simply do not do as well at school as their parents hoped they would. Parents hoped that the day care experience would offer a "better start" for their children, encouraging greater success in school later on. There is a substantial literature on the effects of early intervention on children's achievement, and in general, high quality, stable child care is viewed as an opportunity for positive educational outcomes for children (Howes, 1990).

Program content. One issue that emerged frequently was the cultural content of child care programs. Parents expressed strong opinions and had a number of suggestions to make. In all communities, the loss of their Native language was a focus for the issue, and the number of speakers of the language in the community has become a benchmark for its cultural vibrancy. In the following discussion, I have separated the semi-remote and non-remote sites from the remote site. The urgency with which the groups expressed themselves on this issue differed sufficiently to warrant this treatment.

A majority of parents at the semi-remote and non-remote sites favored the inclusion of teaching about First Nations culture and language in day care programs, and those day care centers have already taken steps and made provision for this. For example, at both sites one full-time Native studies instructor was employed. The role of those instructors was to speak to the children in the particular language of their Native community, and to teach the songs, stories, and crafts of their culture. Both centers included a daily Native craft display activity.

Despite these measures, parents were still concerned about this issue because they felt that their culture was being eroded and that children were losing the knowledge of their language and traditions. These parents wanted more language instruction, either directly and systematically, for some period every day or an immersion program. Parents would like to see a special language teacher in the day care center in addition to the Native studies instructor. Parents felt that greater coordination between the program of the Native studies instructor and the program of the regular day care staff would be helpful to their children. Parents also favored daily teaching of crafts, legends, music, and theater. They mentioned basketweaving, leatherwork, beadwork, porcupine quillwork, making drums and drum sticks, drumming, chanting, making dancing costumes, and dancing. Parents would like to see respect for elders encouraged because this is an important part of tradition. One parent suggested that elders could become part of a supervised program so that children could meet with them, visit them, and hear their stories. Nature study is thought to be an integral part of First Nations life, and parents requested that nature study become a regular part of the program with qualified nature studies teachers. Going to the sugar bush, gathering wild rice, setting up hunting camps, and fishing were traditional skills to be taught.

Parents in these communities, however, were not of one mind about how much Native culture should be incorporated into the day care program. Some parents would like to see traditional religious ceremonies become part of the day care curriculum, and naming ceremonies, sweetgrass, and sunrise ceremonies were mentioned. Drumming and singing would be included. These parents see teaching crafts as only a superficial measure toward solving the problem of losing their culture. A comment was made that there was too much "Dick and Jane" in the day care; another parent feared racism in children's story books. Other parents were interested in a more mixed curriculum, incorporating aspects of both cultures into the day care center program. The point was made that their children have to get along in a "non-Indian world" and day care can be a preparation for "both worlds." One final view expressed by a father was that if learning traditions and culture wouldn't help children get along in the world, there was no point to it. He stated "there may be no point in learning all this Indian stuff ... it's a shame that learning Indian isn't going to get them any place, but who are we to hold back our kids? I want my kids to get a good education and that may not be here [on the reserve]."

Some parents pointed out that there was no point in developing cultural programs that stop after day care, or that consist of 30 minutes a day of teaching time in the public school. Cultural programs must extend throughout a child's school life, both in elementary and secondary school, and must become an integral part of the curriculum. One parent stated that she wanted her children to grow up to be proud of their heritage. She wanted to teach her children to value their culture, past and present.

At the remote site, the issue of the cultural content of the day care program came up much less frequently; only four parents raised the issue. These parents expressed concern about the loss of the Cree language among the children. According to one parent, this was a relatively recent occurrence. She and her contemporaries all spoke Cree. The teachers at the center were also Cree speaking, often spoke to each other in Cree, and spoke to the children in both Cree and English, stating their message first in one language, then in the other. In addition, once in

school, all children will study Cree, and learn to read using both Cree and English symbol systems. Nonetheless, these parents are concerned that their culture is being lost because despite these measures, their children are failing to learn to speak Cree fluently. Concerned parents suggested that the traditional way of life become one focus in the day care curriculum. They would like an emphasis on language and cultural traditions. These included storytelling, history, legends of the James Bay lowlands, skills in hunting, fishing, and camping, and respect for elders.

Day Care and the Community

In response to the question, What is the role of day care in the community? only a very few parents saw day care as a babysitting service. Most parents believed strongly that day care served an educational function for their children, acting as a preschool. Day care, they stated, can "help kids to go further." This view is in contrast to earlier beliefs about day care. For example, one parent recalled that when the day care center opened in 1972, many community members thought it was "a terrible thing" to send their kids away to be raised by others. The belief was that children should be raised at home, parents should be their children's primary teachers, and the extended family take care of its own. But now day care has become an accepted aspect of community support services and can help children and families.

In addition to educating children, some parents believed that day care served an educative function for the whole community, teaching parents about early childhood. The day care center also provided employment opportunities for the village. It allowed people to look for employment, to start small businesses, or to receive job training. Day care also allowed people just to take a break. The importance of this service was stressed, and the point was made that many mothers in the village are very young, and this opportunity for a break from the responsibilities of child care was vital. Finally, the day care center generally brought people closer together; children often saw their cousins and other family at the center. This strengthens the bonds of the community and fosters a strong community identity. Parents who valued the presence of day care in the village wanted day care personnel to promote their services and their professionalism, and to help educate the public about the nature and importance of early childhood education. Parents felt that a well-established day care center, with a decent physical plant and adequate equipment, and staffed by well-qualified workers gave people confidence in the center and pride in their community.

Conclusion

The premise is that play is important for children's development, most specifically a rich and varied play diet that increases in social and cognitive complexity as children grow older. When support facilities are available, the quality of play can be enhanced. This study indicates that First Nations communities support play as a worthwhile activity for their children. Learning through play appears to be consistent with cultural values. In the first phase of the larger study, children often exhibited age appropriate play behaviors, and in the case of pretend play a more mature profile than was expected emerged (Gillis, 1991).

The results of this study suggest a confluence of beliefs in that the opinions expressed by the parents are in accord with the theoretical and empirical research literature: a community where play is valued want day care centers that provide

play oriented programs and encourage learning through play. With increased knowledge day care teachers can enhance play through programming, by interacting with children, by encouraging children's interactions with each other, and by providing stimulating, response play environments. If pursued, the recommendations and suggestions made by parents in this report would go a long way toward fostering exemplary early child care environments.

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