CULTURAL FRAMING OF EXPECTATIONS FOR PLAY

Objectives

This chapter will help you:

1. To understand the shaping force of culture on activity
2. To understand that cultural values shape opportunities for children's play
3. To recognise that cultural values may or may not be aligned between the home and ECEC setting

Culture

Culture can be understood as the ways of being and doing within particular communities that are based upon set(s) of values. Pierre Bourdieu called the acquired dispositions that individuals internalise by participating in culturally-based practices and activities "habitus" (1977). He argued that these dispositions are grounded in family upbringing and institutions, such as school. Sometimes called the 'feel for the game', habitus describes how we fit in to our social situations; it shapes our expectations, understandings and behaviours and can be so ingrained that people can mistake *the feel for the game* as inherent instead of as culturally developed. This can lead to reinforcement of social inequality, since people can assume their own way of doing things is natural (and better) than the way others do things. Part of the purpose of this chapter is to help us recognise that this situation does not support ECEC practice that is inclusive and equitable.

Culture does not only comprise the culture of the country in which people live or their ethnic background. Taken in a wider context, culture may be seen as all the values and behaviours that groups value. Vygotsky (1978) argued that these values are reflected in the material resources that are available and made available to children in play. Thus, a socio-cultural perspective helps us understand that individual activity does not sit outside the context in

which it takes place, but is shaped by the values and the expectations that are associated with it. If we consider play as a child's way into the world or a 'leading activity' (Vygotsky, 1978), it may be interpreted as the way in which children co-construct culture. In this chapter therefore, we recognise that play is both the means and end of children's culture, that is, children produce and co-construct culture through their play. This chapter should help to unpack this idea.

Culture can be understood to 'frame' or 'shape' the activity within a community and between people. Often, the term 'socio-cultural context' is used to describe these ideas, which include social and relational factors, language use and ways of communication, artefacts such as toys and materials, institutional factors such as traditions, certain ways of doing things, and patterns of behaviour. Barbara Rogoff is a leading thinker in the field of socio-cultural theory and development and describes (child) development as transformation of participation in cultural activities, supported by a process of guided participation (2003). The 'guidance' referred to in 'guided participation' involves the direction offered by cultural and social values, as well as social partners (adults, family and peers) and the material resources, that shape development.

The work of Bourdieu, Rogoff and Vygotsky, among others, helps us understand that individual activity does not sit outside the context in which it takes place but is shaped by that context and the values, expectations and demands that are associated with it. This is very important when we think about how children's play is provided for, supported and understood across different cultural contexts. It is important when we compare provision across different countries to remember that the cultural context of different countries, regions and subcultures will frame the expectations of families, practitioners and the children themselves, and that this will shape play provision and participation. This means that we cannot replicate provision in one context and expect it to have the same outcomes in another

context. Sometimes, when policy-makers or advisors recommend that ‘best practice’ is copied from one context to another, we need to question whether the practice is only ‘best’ in specific contexts or for specific children.

When we work with children and families from different backgrounds to our own, it is essential to remember our own habitus may be different from that of others, and to respect different social and cultural practices. We need to remember that there is no ‘natural’ or ‘correct’ way to raise a family, or, indeed to educate a child. However, as practitioners, we are often expected to support children to achieve particular aims, these are usually the outcomes that are valued by the society in which we are working. We need to note, though, that these aims and valued outcomes may not reflect those that are valued within some family units, and this may create conflict for children as they transition between home and school, care or play provision. Recognising cultural context, and being aware of potential cultural conflicts, can help practitioners to understand how best to support children in their play.

Reflection point

Consider this short scenario:

> Dafydd is 4.5 years old and the youngest child in a family of 3 boys; he has joined the reception class, having not attended any pre-school provision. Dafydd’s two brothers (now 11 and 13) were considered ‘difficult to manage’ when they were younger and in primary school, as they both used to start fights in the playground. Dafydd’s dad manages the local gym and teaches boxing. Since both brothers started boxing lessons with him, when aged 8, they have won prizes at local competitions for their boxing skills. Neither of them fight outside of the boxing ring now, except for play fighting with Dafydd, which they do at home.

- How might Dafydd expect ‘play’ be enacted when he joins school?
- How might Dafydd understand the school rules about ‘no fighting’, and the underlying message that ‘fighting is bad’?
- How might the practitioners ease any cultural conflict that Dafydd experiences between home play and school play?

Culture and play

Taking a closer look at the work of socio-cultural theorists can help us understand that development is shaped by both biological and cultural processes; indeed, Rogoff (2003, p. 63) describes humans as being ‘biologically cultural’. An interdisciplinary approach to play brings theories from developmental psychology, cultural anthropology, sociology and human geography together to consider how children play, with whom, with what and where. As a result, we can understand play as a way in which children ‘act out’ cultural relationships that are found within their social and material environments, combining elements from their lived experience with playful, imaginative activity (e.g., Corsaro, 2012; Evaldsson and Corsaro, 1998). Importantly, Vygotsky (1978) asserts that in imaginative play children can take risks with transgressing social norms as well as adopting them.

This chapter examines the way in which play and play provision can be framed by different cultural understandings of key issues. We consider two key themes, gender and risk, to explore how culture frames our understanding of activity. In doing so, we also highlight how cultural conflict may encourage us to reconsider what we ‘take for granted’ about children’s play.

Gender

Play studies demonstrate there is often a binary gender delineation (girls / boys) in children's play that reflects the roles of adults, peers and the available resources within the wider community. This can lead to what may be considered 'gender cues' about what is or is not 'acceptable' play behaviour and what is valued by others in regards to what girls do and what boys do. Both adults and children's peers may consciously or subconsciously reinforce certain gender-based stereotypes. Also, the resources that are available to children in a play setting may contribute to this stereotyping. Consider how LEGO®, for example, has been criticised for supporting binary gender stereotypes with their differentiated construction sets LEGO® City (apparently targeted at boys) and LEGO® Friends (apparently targeted at girls), see Reich et al, 2018, for more detail here. Many formal play settings may try to provide a range of open-ended, gender-neutral resources to allow children greater opportunities for play that is not restricted by binary gendered norms. This is especially important given children's gender identity may not be the same as their sex assigned at birth, and some children will have a gender diverse identity. All children need to be able to play in a manner that allows them to explore gender roles and to feel accepted for who they are. For more about this see the American Academic of Pediatrics [sic] link in further reading.

Traditional gender roles in society can be reinforced or challenged by play behaviours, activities, resources and spaces. For instance, outdoor play settings may have the potential to offer more opportunities for gender-neutral play, primarily due to the lack of gender-specific toys, more free-flowing activity and expectations from outdoor learning staff (Waller, 2010). Activities such as swings, climbing, mud play and 'bug hunts' are available and may be encouraged by staff as appropriate for everyone. However, Waller (2010) observed that there is still the potential for gender-beliefs of both adults (parents and teachers) and children to influence play behaviour outside (see the chapter by Erden and Alpslan in further reading for much more detail). The case study below, taken from the first author's doctoral study

(Rekers-Power, 2020), provides an example of how children's understandings about builders in 'real-life' influenced their approach to the play activity described.

Case study

At a Forest School session in the woods, two 5-year-old boys, Bence and Lee, were mixing mud and water, using sticks and mixing bowls, to make 'cement', see figure 16.1. Bence approached me (the researcher) to ask for their work be filmed with my iPhone. A girl named Chloe, standing nearby, asked if she could join in. Bence looked at me, then said she could reluctantly. He handed her a stick and told her how the mud should be stirred to make cement. Soon another girl tried to join in, by picking up sticks to help stir the mud. Bence pushed her arm away and said, 'No, Shannon! We are making a cement circle!' Lee told Shannon more gently, 'Cause this is our builder thing, just boys allowed.' Then he glanced at Chloe, who had already started mixing: 'And girls,' he added doubtfully.

Bence said, 'No more girls! Just boys!' Nodding, Lee suggested, 'Just one more.' But Bence insisted: 'No! Only boys!' So, Lee said to Shannon, 'See, there's a sign there that says "No girls",' and pointed vaguely off to the trees. Shannon looked around in confusion for the non-existent sign. Then she found another container and a stick and asked, 'Can I do this one?' Bence looked over and said, 'No…I mean yes. You can help with that one. Good job.' Another girl also joined in with the task, and Bence supervised the work.

A few weeks later, when I interviewed Bence and his mother, using the video-recording of the episode to instigate discussion, I asked him about it: 'Can girls be builders too?' He laughed and said, 'No, girls aren't builders.' I reminded him that

one of the Forest School Leaders was building her own house, and he tilted his head to the side and looked thoughtful: ‘I didn’t know that girls could build houses.’

In this example, both Bence and Lee can be seen to struggle a little to allow the girls to join their play, based upon their existing perceptions of gender as criteria for who can join in the ‘builders’ play. The girls, on the other hand, did not consider this activity ‘off limits’ for them. However, the boys can also be seen to understand that at school and at Forest School, there are expectations to not exclude others in their play. The intersection of cultural values can trigger conflict or a transformative learning opportunity. While the episode shows how the girls wanting to make cement presented a conflict with the boys’ understandings of gender-related work; both boys were willing to be flexible to be good playmates. Bence’s thoughtfulness in the interview can be interpreted as his ongoing willingness to reconsider some of his preconceived notions of gender roles, in response to adult inquiry.

[Insert figure 16.1: Making cement at Forest School]

Adults in play and education settings can have an important role in challenging children’s cultural formation of gender stereotypes, as the case study above demonstrates. However, it is important to recognise that children’s home culture may have different values to the education, play or care setting. Sadownik (in press/2021) studied immigrant Polish parents’ perceptions of outdoor provision in Norwegian early childhood education institutions from a cultural formation perspective. She notes that those parents with more traditional gender-related value positions, in line with mainstream Polish culture, found it difficult to understand their daughters taking part in non-gender-specific outdoor play. However, this is considered

mainstream provision in Norway where kindergartens are based upon egalitarian values, including promoting non-gender-specific play (Sadownik, in press/2021).

Levinson's (2005) study of play behaviour in Gypsy communities provides another example of how cultural values can be reflected in relation to gender-specific play. Levinson observed that girls and boys were more likely to participate in play that reflected the roles of adult men and women within the Gypsy culture, along binary lines. He attributes this to the intergenerational and multi-age free play groups that he observed, in which children were encouraged to replicate traditional gender activities as preparation for adult life, with its specific expectations. He also noted that the resources available for play contributed to how the children played and replicated adult activities. Boys had opportunities to take apart a real car engine, for instance, rather than play with toy cars, and girls had the opportunity to take care of babies and younger siblings, which they felt was more grown up and thus preferable to playing with dolls. Levinson concluded that from an early age, Gypsy children appear to be 'apprenticed' into adult life.

Education, care and play practitioners have the capacity to support children transgressing traditional gender boundaries by encouraging equitable access to toys, ensuring that resources and opportunities are open-ended, and responding thoughtfully to stereotypical activity in play, with respect for diverse cultural motivations. The practitioner's self-awareness is also important: teachers and play workers, parents and carers, can reinforce gender stereotyping, if they do not recognise their own biases (Lynch, 2015).

Reflection point

1. Do toys within your setting (or a setting you are familiar with) allow for open-ended, non-gender specific play?

2. Observe some children at play in a setting; what gender roles do you see enacted? Where does this take place? How do you feel about this?
3. How could binary boundaries between what girls play and what boys play impact on children's development?

Risk

Secondly, we will think about how a cultural understanding of risk shapes play provision in different countries. Risk is a noun (a thing) and also a verb (an action). Risk is described in the Cambridge online dictionary as *the possibility of something bad happening* (the noun) and *to do something although there is a chance of a bad result* (the verb). Sandseter (2009) claims that risk characteristics of children's play can be categorised broadly into environmental features of the play environment and the child's own approach to the play. Both of these categories can be viewed through a socio-cultural lens. Risk, as a noun or a verb, is not fixed therefore; this means it is understood differently in different contexts. Here we explore practice in different contexts and notice how risk conception frames practice and underpins taken-for-granted behaviours.

In Sweden it is usual and expected that young children play in natural environments in which 'risky play', such as tree climbing, is accepted. Acknowledging that children sometimes fall and hurt themselves, and that a short term injury is part of growing up, characterises the cultural approach to play. Such a view of childhood is common across the Nordic countries (see Einarsdottir 2006 for a great summary about this), and underpins early childhood policies and curricula. This means that practitioners do not fear retribution if a child is hurt during risky play; their practice is framed by beliefs and values about strong and capable children, who need to be able to challenge themselves in their early childhood play in order to

thrive academically. Of course these practitioners would stop any behaviour that was seriously hazardous, but they prioritise children being competent, capable and able to manage reasonable risk (see also Tinney chapter 9).

In Singapore, on the other hand, there is a very different approach to provision for children's outdoor play. This is driven, in part, by cultural understandings of the child being vulnerable and in need of protection from an environment that can be harmful. In Singapore, there are environmental conditions that impact upon the behaviours of all society and shape provision for children's play. The climate is often hot and humid, which can be uncomfortable, even for those who are used to it, and sometimes the air quality is poor. Indoor environments are often air conditioned and therefore much more comfortable; people tend to spend much more time indoors than outside. The warm and humid conditions mean that infectious diseases are perceived to be transmitted easily and hygiene in educare settings is a very high priority; children and the spaces they play in are kept very clean. Additionally, Singapore is an academically high-achieving nation, and there is an expectation that young children will be academically-focused as part of their early childhood provision. These conditions create a culture of risk aversion in Singapore, as well as an emphasis on academic orientation even outdoors. Therefore, outdoor play in ECEC settings tends to be highly structured, adult-led and goal-oriented.

Importantly, within societies there are multiple cultural contexts, across geographies, communities and families. In this sense, not all societal values or expectations may align with what is considered mainstream. In addition, cultures are not static; cultural understandings and values can shift and develop over time. For instance, in the UK, risky play outdoors has been considered as both *mainstream* and *alternative* over the past 60 years or so. (See also chapter 14 for the overview of the history of adventure playgrounds on this point). In the 1960s and 1970s children were expected to play outdoors, often unsupervised, and it was

generally accepted that bruised knees and scraped arms were inevitable. Risky outdoor play was mainstream. Over time, towards the 2000s UK society became increasingly risk averse and children's play spaces were increasingly restricted, supervised and controlled (Gill 2007). During this time adventure play or risky outdoor play were considered alternative to mainstream provision, largely sitting within the domain of play-work and play schemes (Russell 2018). However, more recently, a growing awareness of the detrimental impact of children's lack of opportunity to roam and play freely without adult supervision has led to adventure play schemes and Forest School becoming more mainstream. Alongside this, there is more understanding of the benefits and opportunities for learning and development that such play offers. Practitioners undertaking a risk/benefit analysis (see Tinney chapter 9), in which developmentally appropriate risks are considered in relation to their benefits for the child, reflect this cultural blending over time in the UK between play culture, education and care cultures. In this way, there is a cultural alignment of what was once considered alternative adventure play provision with mainstream provision.

Reflection point

- How risk averse are you? Why?
- How might this impact upon your approach to risky play in an ECEC setting?
- What are the benefits of being aware of the way in which your own framing of risk might enhance or restrict young children's play?

Conclusion

There can be cultural differences in approaches to play within or between countries and communities that may create conflict for children, parents/carers and practitioners. For example, in Levinson's (2005) study described earlier, he asserts that the ways in which the Gypsy community children played at school created a conflict for the teachers in the study.

Because Gypsy children were more likely to play at home within marginalised spaces, such as wasteland, their play patterns at home included the real-life environment of horses, car parts and scrap materials rather than traditional, representational toys or safe playground equipment. The study noted that when the children played with traditional toys in the school setting, they were more likely to take them apart, discard them after a short time or consider games and toys 'babyish'. This highlights how our definitions of play, appropriate resources, and even notions of age-appropriate play are also culturally-based, and have the potential to be challenged when cultures integrate.

Factors such as time devoted to play can also be considered a cultural construct in relation to play. We can reflect on different cultural approaches to organising children's play in the family and community, outside of ECEC and school settings, as a good example. In some cultures, and particularly across the UK, specific times are set aside for 'play dates' or playtime with friends, and these may be orchestrated by the adults in the family. In other cultures, however, children play as they get the chance within the day-to-day activities of the family and community. These children's play may include imitating or joining adults and other children engaged in the work of the family; young children mimic older siblings who help them to take part in daily tasks such as feeding animals and washing. The activity is playful, but also potentially useful; the youngest children are finding their place within their busy community through playful engagement (see Gaskins 2013, in Brooker and Woodhead in further reading). Being aware of the way in which play is variously shaped through culture globally helps us remember that even the most established understandings are open for question and negotiation.

Institutional practices, resources and social relationships can support or hinder the ways in which children explore their environments, as well as explore their roles in both children's cultures and their roles within wider culture. As we reinforce throughout this book, play is

complex concept without universal agreement. Since adults have the power to plan and implement early years policy, curriculum, daily schedule, activities, school regulations and rules, children's times and spaces etc., their understandings of play may enhance or limit children's ability to (re)produce play culture as they wish. Adults who reflect upon children's home cultures, and consider possible tensions for children and families with the practices of the ECEC setting or school are more likely to be able to support *all* children to engage in play and reap the benefits that such engagement brings.

Reflection point

Read the Brooker and Woodhead (2013) material indicated in further reading.

- What is the purpose of play from different cultural perspectives?
- What does this mean for your practice in ECEC?

Summary

- Culture shapes the activity and values of communities; this includes understandings of, and approaches to, play.
- Play is a universal activity of children, but it takes different forms, and assumes different kinds of importance, in the diverse contexts of childhood (Gaskins 2013).
- Through their play children explore and co-create culture.
- Children, families and practitioners can experience tension, or 'cultural conflict', when cultural values are not aligned between the home community and the ECEC setting.

Further reading:

Brooker, L. and Woodhead, M. (eds.) (2013) The Right to Play. Early Childhood in Focus, 9. Milton Keynes: The Open University with the support of Bernard van Leer Foundation. http://oro.open.ac.uk/38679/1/ecif9the%20right%20to%20play.pdf *Read especially the section on play and culture by Suzanne Gaskins and Liz Brooker (pages 6-10) to unpack further the shaping nature of culture on how we understand the value of play*.

Erden, F.T. & Alpaslan, Z.G. (2017) SAGE handbook of outdoor play and learning Eds: Waller et al. Chapter 22: Gender Issues in Outdoor Play **Chapter DOI:** http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781526402028.n23 *This chapter provides a detailed insight into gender issues in outdoor play generally, contextualised specifically in Turkey; it also introduces the theoretical frames available to understand the issues.*

Gender Identity Development in Children (no date) American Academic of Pediatrics. Available online: https://www.healthychildren.org/English/ages-stages/gradeschool/Pages/Gender-Identity-and-Gender-Confusion-In-Children.aspx *This article and the links from it provide an accessible overview of gender identity in young children.*

Little, H., Sandseter, E.B.H. and Wyver, S. (2012) Early childhood teachers' beliefs about children's risky play in Australia and Norway. Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood. 13(4), pp. 300-316. http://dx.doi.org/10.2304/ciec.2012.13.4.300 *This paper provides an insight into different culturally-framed beliefs about risky play.*

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Levinson, M.P. (2005) 'The role of play in the formation and maintenance of cultural identity: Gypsy children in home and school contexts.' *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 34 (5). pp. 499-532. http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0891241605279018

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Sadownik, A. (in press, 2021) 'Princesses (don't) run in the mud. Tracing child's perspectives in parental perception of cultural formation through outdoor activities in Norwegian ECEs', in Grindheim, L.T., Sørensen, H.V. & Rekers, A. (Eds.) *Outdoor Learning and Play: Pedagogical practice and children's cultural formation*. Springer.

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