

Asian and Euro-American parents' ethnotheories of play and learning: Effects on preschool children's home routines and school behaviour

Parminder Parmar

Pennsylvania State University, Worthington-Scranton,
PA, USA

Sara Harkness and Charles M. Super

University of Connecticut, Storrs, USA

Asian and Euro-American parents of preschool-aged children were interviewed concerning their beliefs about the nature and purpose of play; they also completed two questionnaires and a diary of their children's daily activities. The children's teachers were interviewed and provided information about the behaviour of the children in preschool. The Euro-American parents were found to believe that play is an important vehicle for early development, while the Asian parents saw little developmental value in it. On the other hand, the Asian parents believed more strongly than the Euro-Americans in the importance of an early start in academic training for their children. These contrasting beliefs were instantiated in parental practices at home regarding the use of time and the provision of toys. At preschool, the Asian children were similar to the Euro-Americans on a standardised behavioural measure but they were described by their teachers as initially more academically advanced than the Euro-American children, and as showing different patterns of play and social interaction. The implications of these results for home-school relations and the design of early education programmes are discussed.

Play is a universal activity among young children, but its nature varies across cultures in response to specific constraints and differential degrees of encouragement (Farver, 1999; Gaskins, 1999; Harkness & Super, 1986; Schwartzman, 1978). Among the US middle-class, the importance of play for the development of young children has become part of conventional folk wisdom (Lightfoot & Valsiner, 1992), and this perspective corresponds at least in part to major developmental theories such as those of Piaget and Vygotsky (Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1976, 1978). For the American middle class, play—and the toys that are manufactured to support play—are generally thought to be necessary for the stimulation of cognitive and social development, crucial for success in school and in later life.

Parents' cultural belief systems, or "parental ethnotheories," have been shown to influence the organisation of children's environments of learning and development in many different societies (Harkness & Super, 1992, 1999; Roopnarine, Johnson, & Hooper, 1994; Roopnarine, Lasker, Sacks, & Stores, 1998). Cultural beliefs about play in children's development vary widely, suggesting that the current US emphasis on the importance of play is far from universal. For example, Harkness and Super (1986) found that Kipsigis mothers in a rural African community did not consider themselves appropriate playmates for their children, and the amount of time that children spent in assigned work settings (as opposed to play) rose to 50% by the age of 6 years. In this community, both work and play were intertwined into a virtually seamless fabric of daily life. Rogoff, Mistry, Göncü, and Mosier (1993) report that Mayan mothers did not

consider play to be important for the development of their children. Research with North American, Mexican, and Indonesian toddlers has also shown that American mothers, who valued play for its educational and cognitive benefits, were more likely to join their children's play activities and to provide props and suggestions that encourage expression in pretend play. On the other hand, Mexican and Indonesian mothers, who viewed children's play as just for amusement, did not play with their children or facilitate play (Farver & Howes, 1993; Farver & Wimbari, 1995). Similarly, Farver, Kim, and Lee (1995) found that in comparison with Anglo-American parents, Korean-American parents believed academics to be more important than play, and they engaged in less pretend play with their children.

Asian parents' educational practices with school-age children have been the focus of several major investigations in recent years (Stevenson, Lee, Chen, & Lummis, 1990; Stevenson, Lee, Chen, & Stigler, 1990). Chen and Stevenson (1995) found that Chinese students were assigned more homework and spent more time on homework than Japanese children, who in turn were assigned more and spent more time on homework than US children. Likewise, Huntsinger, Jose, Liaw, and Ching (1997) found that Chinese American parents taught their preschool children in more formal ways, were more directive, and structured their children's use of time to a greater degree than did Euro-American parents. These practices support Asian parents' belief in the importance of a good education for success in life (Chao, 1996, 2000). However, there has been little research that explores how these beliefs relate to the ways that parents think about their

children's development or how parents organise children's environments of daily life at home, especially for preschool children's play and learning. Cross-cultural studies suggest that the organisation of the home environment is generally consonant with parental beliefs, but the directive force of parental ethnotheories is not always evident in such studies because many other factors in the broader environment work together in shaping children's environments of daily life (Harkness & Super, 1996; Whiting & Edwards, 1988).

The cultural beliefs and practices of Asian parents of preschoolers are of particular interest because of wide differences in children's academic performance that have been observed both cross-culturally and within the US, with Asian children tending to excel, especially in mathematics and sciences (Chen & Stevenson, 1995; Stevenson et al., 1990). In the US context, Asian children have presented a different kind of challenge from most other immigrant groups. On the one hand, high-achieving Asian children offer possible models for how American parents and schools could be more effective in educating children. On the other hand, many parents and teachers wonder whether Asian children may be subjected to too much pressure to do well in school, at the expense of other developmentally appropriate activities. The American concept of play as an important developmental context in early childhood may be incompatible with different cultural beliefs about good parenting. In addition, the prototypical American preschool context itself, with its usual emphasis on play, may conflict with expectations of Asian parents and may present difficulties in adaptation to children who may not have had the same kinds of practice in play at home.

The present research, thus, was designed to explore the "developmental niches" of Asian and American preschool children (Super & Harkness, 1999), in which play and learning activities might differ in accordance with differing parental ethnotheories. Specifically, we expected that Asian parents would place more emphasis on their roles as teachers than as playmates, and that these ideas would be reflected in the ways that parents in each cultural group organised home environments and daily routines for their preschool children. We also investigated whether cultural differences in children's developmental niches at home might be reflected in differences in their behaviour in preschool as observed by their teachers. Such differences, we imagined, might ultimately influence both the child's adaptation to preschool and the nature of parent-teacher relationships across these two ethnic groups.

Methods

Participants

Participants in this study were Euro-American and Asian parents of children attending three preschools in northeast Connecticut, and the children's teachers. The 24 target children in each cultural sample ranged in age from 3 to 6 years, with an equal number of boys and girls in each. In order to examine child age effects on patterns of parental response, the samples were divided into younger (36 to 54 months) and older (55 to 72 months) groups for some analyses. In both cultural samples, there were 13 children in the younger group and 11 in the older. Mothers and fathers in both the Euro-American and Asian samples were highly educated (mean years = 17, except Asian fathers = 18), and they held professional

jobs. Hollingshead scores (Hollingshead, 1975) for the two groups were essentially equivalent (Euro-American = 56 vs. Asian = 55). Fathers in the two samples were similar in age (Euro-American = 38 years vs. Asian = 37 years), but there was a small difference between the two groups of mothers (36 vs. 33, respectively). The mean number of children was not significantly different between the groups (Euro-American = 1.7 vs. Asian = 1.5), nor was household size (3.7 Euro-American vs. 3.5 Asian), age of the target child (56 vs. 57 months, respectively), number of hours per week that the child attended preschool (30 for the Euro-American children and 31 for Asians), or living accommodations (54% of the Euro-American families lived in private houses rather than apartments, as did 42% of the Asian families).

The Asian children were from China (6), Korea (4), Pakistan (4), Nepal (4), and India (6). Their parents had been living in the US for up to 10 years, with an average of 6 years' residence. They were new immigrants or were in the process of acquiring permanent resident status; 83% of the Asian children had been born in their country of origin. Although some regional differences were evident among the Asian subgroups (for example, the Nepalese and Pakistani parents appeared least assimilated to US customs, and the Korean parents reported doing more art work and music with their children), there are no significant subgroup differences on the Hollingshead scale.

Measures

In addition to the demographic background questionnaire (results are reported above), two questionnaires were used to gather information about the parents' beliefs and practices related to play and learning. The parents also filled out a daily activities checklist about their child for a week, and they were interviewed in a semistructured format about their beliefs and practices related to children's play and learning. The parent interviews were conducted in the families' homes, which offered the opportunity to take note of how the living space was organised for children's play and learning. All measures were collected within a 4-week period for each family. Finally, the children's teachers also filled out a questionnaire concerning the child's behaviour in the classroom, and the teachers were interviewed about their perceptions of the study children.

The Education Attitude Scale (EAS) by Rescorla (1991) was used to measure parents' expectations and values related to their child's development during the preschool years. The EAS examines attitudes about achievement and performance in three skill areas (academic skills, athletic skills, and artistic/musical skills) and in two social areas (peer relations and compliance). The scale includes 32 statements such as "It's important for my preschooler to learn to be good at recognising letters," "It's important to me that my preschooler is good at playing with other kids," and "I should work at helping my preschooler learn how to get along with other kids," to be rated on a six-point Likert scale from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree."

The Preschool Play and Learning Questionnaire (PPLQ) was developed for this study in order to measure parents' beliefs about the importance of play, learning, and their own role in early development. The initial draft included 25 items such as "Play should be just for fun," "Young children learn social skills through play," "Preschoolers should have more books than toys," "Parents should only play with their

preschoolers when children ask them to do so”, to be rated on a six-point Likert scale from “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree.” Ultimately, 13 of these items were retained in three scales that worked equivalently in the two samples, as described below.

The Parental Beliefs Interview was conducted with both parents together. This interview, developed for the present research, uses eight open-ended questions to explore parents’ beliefs about the importance of play, how play contributes to development and learning in preschool children, how parents structure the home for play and learning, and parents’ expectations regarding preschool or day-care. The interview was conducted by the first author, and took about 30 to 45 minutes to complete. Parents’ responses were recorded verbatim. As part of the interview home visit, the investigator also observed the physical environment in the home and noted the allocation of space for children’s activities, as well as the number and types of toys available to the child.

The Daily Activities Checklist, developed for the present research, was used to assess the ecology of daily life for the study children. Parents kept this checklist for a week, recording the activities related to play and learning that their preschool children were involved in at home each day. For each activity checked, parents noted who was with the child, where the activity took place, and how long the activity lasted.

In order to assess how differences in home experience might influence the children’s behaviour in preschool, teachers were asked to fill out the Child’s Behavior Inventory of Playfulness. This questionnaire, developed by Rogers et al. (1998), is a trait-rating instrument suitable for use by parents and teachers. The inventory consists of 28 items using a 5-point Likert scale for rating children’s play behaviour from “very uncharacteristic” to “very characteristic.” Of the two subscales in this instrument, only the one concerning play was used. This subscale includes questions like “Child invents new games,” “Child pretends a lot,” “Child is imaginative,” and “Child finds unusual way to use toys/objects.”

Finally, the children’s teachers provided qualitative information through a brief open-ended interview about their observations of the children in school and on cultural differences between Asian and Euro-American preschoolers in general.

In summary, the methods used for the present study were designed to assess parental ethnotheories about play and learning, their instantiation in practices at home, and effects on children’s behaviour at preschool. Our methods for studying parental ethnotheories and practices included both structured instruments—questionnaires and forms for noting daily activities—and semi-structured interviews that could be analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Through use of multiple methods, we were able to identify and analyse particular patterns of similarity and difference in the two cultural groups, as well as in relation to age and gender. This approach has long been a hallmark of interdisciplinary research in culture and human development (Harkness, Hughes, Muller, & Super, in press), and it has recently received increasing attention among psychologists who seek to understand development in context (Wachs & Friedman, 1999).

Results

Parents’ cultural beliefs about play and learning were assessed

through two questionnaires (the Education Attitude Scale and the Preschool Play and Learning Questionnaire) as well as the parent interview. The results of these three measures are consistent with our expectations of cultural differences between the Asian and Euro-American parents, and they also suggest some ways in which culture interacts with child age and sex to yield distinctive patterns in each group.

Education Attitude Scale (EAS)

The Asian and Euro-American parents differed in their attitudes about children’s learning and development, as measured by the EAS. A three-way MANOVA (Culture \times Sex \times Age) revealed a significant main effect of Culture, $F(5, 86) = 21.0, p < .001$, and a significant interaction effect for Culture \times Sex \times Age, $F(1, 86) = 3.0, p < .05$. As shown in Table 1, univariate ANOVAs on each of the five subscales indicate that the effect of culture is significant for academics and for arts, with the Asian parents more strongly endorsing the importance of learning in both these areas. In the third skill area, athletics, the Asian and Euro-American parents did not differ significantly. Within the two social areas, the Euro-American parents scored significantly higher on the compliance scale, indicating that they expected more compliance from their children than the Asian parents did.

The three-way interaction appeared only for the social skills subscale: The Asian parents gave more importance to social skills for their sons than for their daughters at the younger age, but the trend was reversed for the older children. In contrast, the Euro-American parents placed more importance on social qualities for their sons in both age groups.

Preschool Play and Learning Questionnaire (PPLQ)

Visual inspection of the correlations among the 25 original items in the initial draft questionnaire revealed three small clusters of variables that corresponded in meaning and had the same patterns of intercorrelations within each of the two cultural groups. Calculations of reliability confirmed this observation, as shown in Table 2. The first cluster, related to the importance of play for development, included five statements endorsing the importance of play for cognitive development, social skills, creativity, and learning. The second cluster, focusing on the importance of early academics for development, included items regarding provision of structured time, practice, and educational toys. The third cluster grouped together items related to the role of parents in children’s play, including bedtime reading, playing with children, and providing a play corner for children. Scales were derived from these clusters by finding the mean value of parental ratings for each.

Table 1
Parental ratings on Education Attitude Scale (EAS)^a

<i>Subscale</i>	<i>Euro-American Mean (SD)</i>	<i>Asian Mean (SD)</i>	<i>p of difference</i>
Academic	4.13 (0.72)	4.77 (0.79)	.001
Art	3.64 (0.59)	4.47 (0.92)	.001
Athletics	3.69 (0.66)	4.21 (0.77)	n.s.
Compliance	4.72 (0.50)	4.28 (0.51)	.001
Social	5.36 (0.71)	5.22 (0.64)	n.s.

^a Rating scale goes from 1 to 6 (very important).

Table 2
Parental ratings on the Preschool Play and Learning Questionnaire^a

Subscale	Euro-American		Asian		<i>p</i> of difference
	Alpha	Mean (SD)	Alpha	Mean (SD)	
Importance of play in development	.69	6.22 (0.44)	.65	5.75 (0.63)	<.001
Importance of early academics in development	.74	4.46 (0.96)	.65	5.15 (0.87)	<.001
Importance of role of parents	.65	6.08 (0.60)	.47	5.66 (0.64)	<.001

^a Rating scale goes from 1 to 7 (very important).

A three-way (Culture \times Sex \times Age) MANOVA on the three scales yielded a main effect for Culture, $F(3, 86) = 13.76, p < .001$. Univariate ANOVAs, as shown in Table 2, indicate that the Euro-American parents placed greater importance on play than did the Asian parents, and they also stressed more their own role in children's play, as partners and as a resource to their children. In contrast, the Asian parents placed greater emphasis on the importance of early academics. There was also an age effect for this scale ($p = .03$), indicating that parents in both cultural groups saw early academic progress to be more important for the older age group.

Parental Beliefs Interview

Two questions from the parental interviews were selected for the present analyses: What is the importance of play for children's development?, and What is most important for development during the preschool years? Parents' responses to these questions were coded for the occurrence of spontaneously expressed ideas as they fell into several inductively derived categories, and the frequencies of occurrence were then tabulated. For these analyses, we assume that the frequency of mentioning a particular idea or theme reflects its salience or importance for the parents.

Regarding the importance of play for children's development, parents' responses fell easily into five categories: Its importance for development in general; for physical development; for cognitive development; for social development; and for individual development. A three-way MANOVA (Culture \times Sex \times Age) was carried out on the frequency of mentions for each of the five categories, yielding a significant main effect only for Culture, $F(5, 36) = 5.38, p < .001$. Subsequent univariate analyses showed that the Euro-American parents

mentioned significantly more than the Asian parents that play is important for development in general, and specifically for children's cognitive development and development as an individual. On the other hand, the Asian parents emphasised significantly more often the importance of play for physical and social development (see Table 3).

These cultural differences are illustrated by two typical responses, the first by a Euro-American parent: "We provide an environment that gives our children opportunities to learn, but we do not 'instruct' our children at home. Play itself develops cognitive and social skills. When our children express a desire to explore topics more in depth, we do so; we wait for our children to initiate. We strive to stimulate a life-long interest and love for learning in our children for their own sakes, rather than to satisfy our need for validation by trying to create child geniuses". In contrast, an Asian parent explained that play "is important, very important for physical development. It promotes circulation and respiration, makes [children] stronger. They learn how to get along with other kids and this prepares them for the future. It helps them to share, respect, and cooperate with others".

Related contrasts were evident in parents' responses to the question of what is most important for their children's development during the preschool years. The answers were grouped into seven different themes: The importance of play, fun, and a variety of toys and experiences; of learning social skills; of good physical development; of developing as an individual; of getting a head start on academics; of cognitive development; and of parents and family. As indicated in Table 3, the Euro-American parents focused their responses on development of the individual self, while the Asian parents emphasised the importance of getting a head start on academics.

Table 3
Group differences in parent responses on interview

Parent responses	Euro-American	Asian	<i>p</i> of difference
Play important for general development	3.91	2.58	<.001
Play important for physical development	0.66	2.12	<.05
Play important for cognitive development	1.83	2.04	<.001
Play important for social development	1.79	1.33	<.001
Play important for individual development	0.29	0.12	<.001
Importance of play for fun, variety	1.70	0.45	<.001
Importance of social skills	2.70	4.58	<.001
Importance of physical development	0.20	0.33	n.s.
Importance of development as individual	1.66	0.62	<.001
Importance of head start on academics	0.62	1.50	<.001
Importance of cognitive development	0.12	0.62	n.s.
Importance of parents and family	0.87	1.20	n.s.

Once again, brief quotations can illustrate nicely the differences in beliefs. A Euro-American parent stated, “Most important is sharing and cooperation with kids her age. She should have lots of fun, and she should be able to play independently. This is the time to explore the world and develop her identity. She should be exposed to plenty of different experiences. This is also a time to develop positive self-esteem”. In contrast, an Asian parent responded to the same question, “She needs lots of love, and a secure environment. She needs books and exposure to alphabets and numbers. She is ready to learn—the earlier the better. If we spend time educating and making her smart now it will be better for her future. This is a time to explore and manipulate the world, and to get knowledge”.

Observations of the environment

Parents in both samples were similar in education and employment, and enjoyed similar living accommodations and community context. Therefore we can assume that the way they organised the physical and social settings of their children’s daily lives are a rather direct expression of their cultural beliefs and values—these are the daily practices of parenting (Goodnow, Miller, & Kessel, 1995). A number of differences were observed (see Table 4). Although children in both cultural groups had toys to play with, the Asian families provided fewer than the Euro-American families, a quarter of whom had over 200 toys for their preschoolers. The Asian families tended to have a special place (box, or portion of a room) for the toys, while the Euro-American families were more likely to have a dedicated “play room” for the child. Children in both groups had a variety of different kinds of toys—for pretend play, physical play, constructive play, for art and music, and for educational play—but only in the latter case was there a significant group difference, with the Asian families having more toys for educational play.

Daily Activities Checklist

Data from the Daily Activities Checklist maintained by parents were analysed for the amount of time spent each week on different kinds of play and learning activities, the different locations in which these activities took place, and with whom children were doing these activities. The activities were grouped into seven main categories: play activities; pre-

academic activities (such as learning alphabets and number at home); watching TV; household chores; art and music; books at bedtime; and visiting the library. A three-way (Culture \times Sex \times Age) MANOVA yielded only a significant effect of Culture, $F(1, 47) = 9.88, p < .001$; univariate ANOVAs revealed significant differences between the two groups on three of the activities. The Euro-American children spent more time on household chores and reading at bedtime, whereas the Asian children spent more time on pre-academic activities and visiting the library. MANOVA yielded no significant differences in the amounts of time that the Euro-American and Asian children spent on overall play activities, $F(1, 47) = 0.07, p < .79$, art, $F(1, 47) = 0.06, p < .79$, and music, $F(1, 47) = 3.28, p < .07$, or watching TV, $F(1, 47) = 1.17, p < .28$ (Table 5).

However, inspired by ethnographic observations, a more detailed analysis of children’s play and learning activities was carried out in order to explore group differences in the *kinds* of play and learning activities involved. Play activity was grouped into six categories: pretend play, physical play, constructive play, board games, simple social play, and organised play or lessons. Univariate analyses (Culture \times Sex \times Age) of each type revealed a significant difference in the amount of time spent on pretend play in the two cultural groups, with the Euro-American children spending more time on this activity. In addition, boys were seen to spend more time than girls in constructive play ($p < .05$; boys average 3.1 vs. 1.7 for girls). Finally, there was a significant interaction of culture and age on the amount of time children played board games or puzzles ($p < .01$), indicating that at the older age Euro-American preschoolers were doing more constructive play than the Asian children. There were no significant main effects or interactions for simple social play or organised sports and lessons (see Table 5).

We further examined the subcategories of the kinds of pre-academic activities in which these children partook (recall that the Asian children spent more time on pre-academic activities in general). Univariate ANOVAs carried out for five kinds of learning activities showed significant cultural differences for each one, although the differences were not uniformly in the same direction: Asian children spent more time on learning letters and numbers, learning early math skills, playing alphabet and number games, and playing and learning with computers. By contrast, the Euro-American children spent more time reading books at bedtime. The magnitude of these

Table 4
Group differences in observed parental practices at home

<i>Measure</i>	<i>Euro-American</i>	<i>Asian</i>	<i>p of difference</i>
Toys			
fewer than 50	1	6	–
50 to 100	7	16	–
100 to 200	10	1	–
200 or more	6	1	<.01
Special place for toys (<i>n</i> of cases)	1	7	.02
Own play room (<i>n</i> of cases)	10	7	.05
Toys for fun/pretend play (<i>n</i> of cases)	18	17	.09
Toys for physical play (<i>n</i> of cases)	1	1	n.s.
Toys for constructive play (<i>n</i> of cases)	13	18	n.s.
Toys for educational play (<i>n</i> of cases)	17	23	.02
Toys for art and music (<i>n</i> of cases)	8	11	n.s.

Table 5
Group differences in children's daily activities at home

<i>Measure</i>	<i>Euro-American</i>	<i>Asian</i>	<i>p of difference</i>
Play	15.96	16.98	n.s.
Pre-academic	5.52	8.55	<.001
Watching TV	4.12	4.90	n.s.
Household chores	1.23	0.18	<.001
Art and music	2.88	2.23	n.s.
Visiting library	0.52	1.22	<.05
Reading books at bedtime	4.02	2.85	<.05
Pretend play	3.96	2.57	<.04
Physical play	5.70	5.80	n.s.
Constructive play	2.24	2.65	n.s.
Board games	0.77	1.15	n.s.
Social play	2.42	2.61	n.s.
Organised sports/lessons	0.94	0.54	n.s.
Pre-academic: letters and numbers	0.60	2.03	<.001
Pre-academic: early math skills	0.11	1.14	<.001
Pre-academic: alphabet and number games	0.26	1.09	<.001
Pre-academic: play/learning on computer	0.65	1.56	<.05

differences was quite striking: for example, the Asian children were spending over 1 hour weekly learning early math skills, compared to only about 7 minutes for the Euro-American children. Overall, the Asian children were spending about 5 hours and 45 minutes weekly on the first four activities combined, compared to about 1 hour 40 minutes for the Euro-American children. (On the other hand, as noted earlier, the Euro-American children were being read books at bedtime more frequently, about 4 hours weekly on average, compared to just under 3 hours for the Asian children.)

Teachers' ratings and observations

Given the pervasive cultural differences between the Asian and Euro-American parents' ideas and practices related to children's play and learning, one might ask how these differences at home might influence children's behaviour at preschool. Although we did not have any direct observational measures of the children in this setting, teachers' responses on the Child's Behavior Inventory of Playfulness provide evidence on their perceptions of the child at school. The teachers' responses to this questionnaire were analysed in a three-way MANOVA (Culture \times Sex \times Age). No significant main effects or interactions were found on the children's overall playfulness.

In addition to this questionnaire, however, 10 of the teachers were interviewed about their impressions of the Asian children by comparison with the Euro-American children, and here some differences did emerge. Not surprisingly, the teachers reported that the Asian children had greater competence in letters and numbers when they first arrived at school. Interestingly, the teachers also commented that the Asian children tended at first to choose art work or quiet activities during free playtime. Asian children were also described as less aggressive, less complaining, and more likely to withdraw from situations where there were arguments or disagreements. All these differences, however, are said to disappear over time as the children settled into the school routines. One teacher commented, "Oh, my! Asian kids when they first arrive in preschool, already know their letters and numbers. I don't

know what their parents are doing at home. Asian kids are quiet and less aggressive, and they complain less when other children hit them. They just smile and get away. They also do not use the words 'thank you', 'excuse me' and 'sorry' a lot. But soon they learn to be like any other preschooler in the class". One preschool director summarised: "Asian kids are very quiet in the classroom settings. I think their parents are very pushy at home and also they have very high expectations from their preschoolers, which I do not think does any good, but we help them to be themselves here".

Discussion

The present research demonstrates the cultural basis of beliefs and practices relevant to early childhood education in the Euro-American and Asian cultures. There are two contrasting patterns of beliefs and practices. As anticipated, the Euro-American parents believed play to be an important vehicle for the early development and growth of the preschool children. They considered play helpful in enhancing physical, social, emotional, and cognitive development. In contrast, the Asian parents did not value play for the development of preschool children. They did not believe play helps children get ready for school. The Asian parents stressed the idea that getting a head start in early academics is important for the cognitive development of children in the preschool years.

There was one unanticipated cultural difference in parental thinking, given the evidence that Asian parents demand more obedience or compliance from their children (Liu, 1986): The Asian parents here scored lower than Euro-American parents on the compliance subscale of the Education Attitude Scale. A closer examination of this subscale, however, suggests it assesses a limited range of behaviours: "saying please and thank you" or "trying new foods". These behaviours may reflect specific, culturally defined polite behaviour rather than compliance, even for American preschool children. The Asian children did not use these terms at home because, as one Asian parent explained, these terms are for respect outside the family,

and to use them at home would imply the children were somehow not part of the family. It was evident from the teachers' interviews that Asian children do not use these polite words when they first arrive in preschool settings. They learn to say "thank you" and "sorry" only after they start.

Cultural differences in parents' culturally shared beliefs about play and learning were instantiated in practices at home related to provision of toys, organisation of the home for play and learning, and the use of time. The Euro-American parents believed play to be an important vehicle for young children's academic and social development and therefore provided far more resources in terms of the number of toys, especially those that were simply for fun and enjoyment. In contrast, the Asian parents bought fewer toys, and those they selected were more typically educational toys. Euro-American parents facilitated their children's play by playing with their children themselves, whereas the Asian parents facilitated cognitive development by serving as teachers and academic coaches at home.

The constellation of related beliefs and practices described in this research provides an example of how the child's culturally structured developmental niche organises the child's experiences and opportunities for learning over the course of development. As Super and Harkness (1999) have suggested, it is the redundancy among different components of the niche—parental ethnotheories, physical and social settings of daily life, and customs and practices of care—that provides the special power of cultural effects on development. Elaborated over time and across settings, these cultural differences in the developmental niches of children can have profound influences on the development of competence.

The present research has documented two contrasting sets of culturally based experience for young children. One is based on Euro-American ethnotheories, and is shared by the Euro-American parents and the Euro-American preschool teachers; for the Euro-American children, this overlap provides the kind of redundancy that is to be expected across settings within a single culture. The Asian parents hold to different ethnotheories, and thus for the Asian children, the developmental niches of home and school were discordant in important ways. In general, US society has favoured "stimulation", advancement, and the maximisation of children's individual potential; thus it is noteworthy that a cultural group that would appear to outperform even the most competitive middle-class parents elicited the disapproval of teachers. The Asian children all appeared to be making good adjustment to school, but the teacher–parent disagreement can presage problems for programmes for culturally divergent populations; the preschool is in effect a cultural intervention. As Harkness and Super (1993, p. 130) have written, "Children's culturally structured learning experiences are set within a larger framework of daily life that is also organized by parents. Successful interventions with families, thus, need to incorporate a reexamination of cultural belief systems and their customary expression in the institutions that serve those families, as well as in the families themselves, so that beliefs and practices throughout the child's developmental niche can support and enhance each other".

In a multicultural society like the modern US, there are many challenges for parents and teachers in understanding and bridging the differences in ethnotheories. All over the world, with increased levels of travel and immigration, many countries are becoming more culturally diverse. The change in the US is particularly profound: No other nation comprises such a culturally diverse population. School policies, educational

institutions, and teachers need to be sensitive to cultural diversity. When children come from cultural backgrounds in which their parents have different educational and socialisation goals from those offered by Euro-American school settings, confusion and conflict will naturally sometimes result. It seems elemental that, under these circumstances, both teachers and parents understand the cultural nature of their own beliefs about early development, as well as the others', and strive to resolve them in ways beneficial to the child.

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