

Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited: China, Japan, and the United States

by Joseph Tobin, Yeh Hsueh, and Mayumi Karasawa. 2009.
The University of Chicago Press.

MARTIN Ron

Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited: China, Japan, and the United States is a sequel to the original *Preschool in Three Cultures* study by Joseph Tobin, David Wu and Dana Davidson (1989). In the original study, the ethnographers filmed a typical day at one preschool in each of Japan, China and the United States, and then used edited video segments as cues in interviews with informants, which included teachers, administrators, parents and early childhood educators from all three countries, to elicit beliefs and values with regard to preschool education. The outcome was a landmark study on cross-cultural beliefs and early childhood education.

In his preface to *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited*, Joseph Tobin wrote that upon viewing a contemporary video of a preschool in China – 15 years after his original footage – he realized that it was “time to do a sequel” to the original ethnographic study (Tobin, Hsueh & Karasawa, 2009, p. ix). The video footage led Tobin to believe that there had been a drastic change in China’s preschool education and consequently led him to question if such a change had also occurred in Japan and the United States. He believed that by conducting a new study at the same three preschools he would be adding a historical element to the original research method. In addition, Tobin, along with his new team of Yeh Hsueh and Mayumi Karasawa, visited another preschool in each of the three countries, each preschool selected as being a representation of the country’s most current approach to preschool education. Therefore, this new study is not a repetition of the former, but rather a valuable extension that provides both an intra-cultural as well as an inter-cultural perspective to the continuity and change in preschool education in China, Japan and the United States.

This new study has taken the original cross-cultural comparison model to a greater depth in two valuable ways. First, by historically comparing the same preschools in each country at two points in time, the authors look at continuity and change within national early childhood education systems and the influences therein. Second, by adding a second preschool in each of the three countries, they provide a basis for comparison in

order to elicit informants' beliefs about "regional, social class, and ideological variation within (their) nation" (Tobin *et al.*, 2009, p. 19). In sum, this ethnography uncovers and informs the reader about how each culture deals with the issues facing modern-day preschool education, but more importantly, it reveals underlying, implicit cultural beliefs of each nation, what Tobin *et al.* call *implicit cultural logic*.

The book is divided into five chapters and includes a preface, references and a topic index. Chapter 1, "Introduction", clearly states the authors' goal of investigating preschool education within and across cultures in relation to education systems, societal pressures and globalization as well as foreshadowing what these challenges mean to each nation. The first chapter also addresses the topic of ethnography, the methods and procedures used in the study, and how the authors' approached the analysis of their data. Chapters 2-4 focus on the filming and post-filming interviews about the preschools in China, Japan and the United States, respectively. Chapters 2-4 follow a relatively uniform approach. Each begins with a short introduction about returning to the preschool of the original study. This is followed by a narrative of the filming of a contemporary typical day at the school. This narrative is followed by a discussion of "then and now", which is based upon observation and a comparison of the 1984 and the 2002 film footage, and focuses primarily on educational practices and outside influences presented by informants, e.g., parents, government policy and globalization. The discussion of "then and now" is followed by a narrative of the filming of a typical day at a second preschool in the same country. The authors then present reflections by the teachers and administrators of this second school. Each chapter closes with a comparison of the two preschools in the same country based upon informant interviews and the researchers' observations about similarities and differences within the country and with a discussion on how outside pressures influence changes in the preschool education system and on teachers' practices in some ways, but not in others. Chapter 5, "Looking Across Time and Cultures", is an analysis of all three cultures. This analysis takes both an intra-cultural approach as well as an inter-cultural approach.

Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited follows the same research methods that were developed for the original *Preschool in Three Cultures*. The investigators did not do long-term field work which is against the traditional definition of ethnography as being research of "people's daily lives for an extended period of time" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2002, p. 1). Instead, they spent only a few days of pre-filming observation at each preschool before filming a typical day (from the start of the school day when children arrive to the end of the school day when children go home) focusing on one classroom. After filming, they quickly looked over the entire amount of footage with the classroom teacher in order to ask a few questions the teacher may not have been able to recall

months later, e.g., why a child was sad on the day of filming. Then the investigators edited the footage from each preschool down to about 20 minutes in order to use the footage as a basis for interviews with informants. This method of using the video segments as a tool to elicit informant comments is known as video-cued multivocal ethnography. This ethnographical hybrid comes from the call by Clifford (1983) to use the multivocal method in ethnography as well as the investigation of the unconscious by Henry (1956) and the “picture interview” used to explore cultural differences by Caudill (1962). The authors also cite the Akira Kurosawa film *Rashomon* (1951) as an influence as the film is centered upon three people’s different explanations of the same event. Thus, the video footage itself is not research data; the information collected from interviews of informants based upon viewing the video footage is the data which the researchers analyzed for it is the richness, diversity and similarity among informant comments that are the key to unlocking cultural beliefs and values.

The 20-minute video segments were shown to five different levels of informants. At the first level was the classroom teacher central to the video. The second level included the director and other teachers at the same preschool. Informants of the third level were teachers and directors from preschools in other cities of the same country. The fourth level incorporated “outsiders”, i.e., teachers, directors, and early childhood professionals from the two other countries featured in the study. The fifth and last level included colleagues of the investigators. It is important to note that informants, whether the teacher in the video or an educator from a different country, were asked questions in order to elicit comments on how and why they do as they do, i.e., informants were not asked to critique or criticize a teacher’s performance, but to reflect upon their own practices and beliefs in relation to the video footage. In addition, the researchers pre-determined their questions and decided that the “cultural outsiders” among them would ask the questions that would seem odd if coming from an interviewer from the same culture as the informant, e.g., the Japanese researcher Karasawa, instead of the American researcher Tobin, asked “an American teacher to explain why children’s self-esteem is an important developmental goal” (Tobin et. al, 2009, p. 16). Thus, informant interviews generally proceeded as follows. The classroom teachers (level one informants) were interviewed three times, once right after the initial filming, approximately six months later once the video had been edited to a 20-minute segment, and a third time during the writing of the respective book chapter. The director and other teachers (level two informants) were shown the 20-minute video and were first asked, “Does this look like a typical day in your preschool?” Directors and teachers at other preschools from the same country (level three informants) were first asked, “Does this look like your preschool?”, “Is there anything in this videotape that surprised you?” and “What do you like and what do

you not like about the preschool in this video?" "Outsiders" (level four informants) were first asked to discuss surprising scenes and what they liked best and least about what they saw.

Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited, like the original study, can be viewed as a cross-cultural study as the original; however, the point of the study is quite different. Because of the addition of the historical element and the addition of another preschool within each of the same countries, *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited* is more about the pressures of globalization and society on early childhood education and how the three cultures accept or reject such pressures. As in the original study, the reader learns about the purpose of early childhood education and what it means to be a child in each respective nation as told through the voices of those in charge of the day to day support of four-year old children as well as those in charge of administrating such support. The researchers show that in China both the purpose of childhood education and what it means to be a child has shifted, in stark ways, over the 20-year period because of the government's move to become a more active global player. In Japan, the economic downturn and the continuing drop in the birthrate are both seen as responsible for a fight in preschool recruitment with schools adding bus and after school services, but the basic approach to the how and the why in teaching practice has largely remained the same. The United States, on the other hand, is in the midst of a national debate with regard to the expected academic outcomes of preschool education, but with regard to what it means to be a child, i.e., an American child, has remained untouched. In addition to synthesizing the resistance and acceptance of pressures each culture is experiencing, the authors discuss two more points, perhaps the most vital discovered in the study.

The first is about implicit cultural logic, the unmarked beliefs in teaching practice that are implicitly transferred from teacher to teacher, from generation to generation. They contend that such practices are not documented or explicitly taught in teacher-training programs, yet are embedded in cultural norms. The authors believe that while explicit mandates can and do change over time, e.g., government policy, implicit cultural beliefs are much more resistant to change, and thus, are more likely to be the true foundation of each culture's approach to preschool education. Examples of these include the following practices.

In Japan, while teachers appear outwardly aloof, they watch and wait during student-to-student arguments and altercations, allowing and even subjecting students to the opportunity to deal with such social situations. Clear representations of this can be seen in the 1984 video with the situation involving the boy Hiroki stepping on another boy's hand and in the 2002 video with the situation involving the girl Nao in a physical altercation with other girls over a stuffed bear. From the perspective of Chinese and

American educators, the Japanese teachers missed an important social learning opportunity, or worse, allowed potentially harmful altercations to ensue. Yet Japanese teachers view fighting as a necessary childhood experience and that only through fighting as children can Japanese grow to become harmonious, empathetic citizens.

In China, criticism of mastery and performance plays a key role in class activities. In the 1984 video, all children silently sit at their desks while the teacher monitors and corrects their work as they put blocks into the same three-dimensional patterns. In the 2002 video, the storytelling activity, exemplified by the boy Ziyu, shows classmates' votes of approval and non-approval as well as verbal criticisms by his classmates about his story telling skills. In such scenes Japanese and American educators expressed concern at the potential damage to a child's growing self-esteem as well as about the amount of teacher control over such activities. For the Chinese, criticism is common in daily life and comes from the Confucian approach to learning. Chinese educators believe that criticism, giving it as well as gaining from it, is essential in building a creative and communicatively constructive society.

In the United States, choice, and specifically students' verbalization of their choices, is paramount whether the topic is mundane or activity-specific. Both the 1984 and 2002 video footage show children who are required to verbally choose which activity they want to do, and throughout the day they are led to verbalize their thoughts and feelings. For the Japanese, this approach does not allow children to be child-like, i.e., to roam freely to do as they please wherever they please. For the Chinese, there has been a shift toward more student initiated activities, yet each is led by a teacher. Americans view choice as a fundamental right of society, and in preschool, choice is an activity, in and of itself, where students learn how to exercise that right.

Thus, in summary of this first point, regardless of the changes (or non-changes) due to societal and global pressures on preschool education, the authors contend that implicit cultural logic, whether it is Japanese allowing children to fight, Chinese criticizing performance or Americans having students make choices, will be slow to change, if it does at all. These undocumented teaching practices say more about how each culture shapes children than current government policy.

The second vital point closes the book. The authors stress the importance of not succumbing to viewing history in a linear manner as a basis for a discussion of good versus bad or even progress. Though it may seem as if a preschool videotaped in 1984 has progressed considerably when compared to practices in 2002, this idea of progress is relative to the local context of the moment and relative to the beholder. Just as ethnocentrism biases one in cultural comparison, viewing the past from the point of view of the present prohibits an objective understanding of both. Moreover, the authors also

discourage any outright comparison between preschools and societies based upon the same calendar year. Because the Internet and globalization have brought the world closer in many respects and the dissemination of information is instantaneous, it may appear that a preschool in Shanghai is “ahead” in instituting changes to meet demands and that a preschool in rural southwest China is on track to “catch up”. Yet there is no “ahead” or “catching up”. That is, a preschool in Shanghai and a preschool in southwest China (or a preschool in any other country) are at a different place and time with regard to educational decrees, the influence of globalization and contextual settings, such as the expectation of parents (or implicit cultural logic).

However, the topic of time is also a weakness of this study. The authors did not provide a clear account of time with regard to the procedural aspects of the study as a whole or even with regard to each individual school setting. As a reader and a researcher, I wanted to know the timing of the filming and the follow up interviews for each school site as well as in all of the schools in relation to each other. I wanted to know how much time had elapsed between the filming of a school and all subsequent interviews, especially with staff members of the school itself. There is a table at the top of page 20 showing that the videos for *Preschool in Three Cultures* were shot in 1984 and that the six videos for *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited* were shot in 2002, but a contradiction to this table exists on page 216, which states that a first screening of three the new videos was shown in January 2002 and that the United States preschool Alhambra was videotaped in 2001. Furthermore, there is only sporadic reference to the timing of the filming, editing, and subsequent interviews for all of the videos. In short, the reader is lost not knowing when events took place and how much time lapsed between filming and the interviewing of informants. A clear, consistent approach to the procedural issue of time would have enhanced the narrative and provided the interested researcher with valuable information.

The audience for *Preschool in Three Cultures Revisited* has become different from the original. Whereas the original study targeted early childhood educators and comparative education specialists, the sequel speaks to a broader spectrum of educators by including policy makers and both the proponents and opponents to the question of academic study at preschool. The sequel would also be of great interest to students and educators of intercultural studies, and of course, those within the field of anthropology. Furthermore, because of its research methodology, ethnographers interested in such a hybrid approach could learn much by analyzing how the authors approached this project.

There is a companion DVD to the book which runs for a total of 1 hour and 52 minutes and includes a menu consisting of an introduction and six chapters, one for each of the schools filmed for this study. All portions of the DVD have an on-going narration

by Tobin about what the viewer is seeing as well as some comments by educators from other countries about certain events that take place. Subtitles in English are provided for the Chinese and Japanese chapters.

References

- Clifford, J. (1983). On ethnographic authority. *Representations*, 1(2), 118-146.
- Claudill, W. (1962). Patterns of emotion in modern Japan. In R. J. Smith & R. K. Beardsley (Eds.), *Japanese culture*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Henry, W. (1956). *The analysis of fantasy: The thematic appreciation technique in the study of personality*. New York: John Wiley & Sons.
- Hammersley, M., & Atkinson, P. (2002). *Ethnography: Principles in practice*. New York: Routledge.
- Kurosawa, A. (Director) (1951). *Rashomon*. [Motion picture]. Japan: Triad Productions.
- Tobin, J. (Producer) (2009). *Preschool in three cultures revisited: Japan, China and the United States*. [DVD]. United States: Joseph Tobin.
- Tobin, J., Hsueh, Y., & Karasawa, M. (2009). *Preschool in three cultures revisited: China, Japan, and the United States*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Tobin, J., Wu, D., & Davidson, D. H. (1989). *Preschool in three cultures: Japan, China, and the United States*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

