

AN APPRAISAL OF THE EPISTEMIC ESSENCE OF PLAY IN EARLY CHILDHOOD LEARNING

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Abstract

Play is a universal phenomenon and generally enjoyed by children. When children are engaged in play they are almost oblivious of every other thing around them. This makes play a serious business for them. Overtime, efforts have been made to distinguish between children's play and that of adults. While adults spend their leisure through "play" which is more of practicing skills as well as relaxing; play for the child is not just relaxation or pleasure but a part of life and learning. Rousseau was one of such early childhood educators who made play gain prominence in early childhood learning. He emphasized the importance of children developing their natural instinct through play. This is also in the sense that play is the natural occupation of children. Following suit, Pestalozzi started the first outdoor education which emphasized that children should continue playing as they did at home in order to learn. By the 19th century, early childhood education had begun to take cognizance of childhood as a discrete and important phase of development. In this same regard, deliberate efforts were made to recognize children's play as quite distinct, important and different from adult play. More especially with the coming to the scene of childhood proponents like Fredrick Froebel, John Dewey, Patty Smith Hill and Maria Montessori, the status of children's play was changed from frivolous to serious work. Play was now seen as important for social, emotional, physical and intellectual development of children. In essence, children's play has its epistemic knowledge worth and educational value.

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Introduction

A first impression of children in play may easily be dismissed as frivolous and unimportant. Perhaps it is in this vein that when adults want to get engaged in their own "serious" activities, see children as distractions and get them engaged in play. On the contrary, play activity for children is a serious endeavor. When children play, they immerse all their bodies in it and engage in it with some seriousness. That is why once a child is involved in a play he is not in a hurry to leave. Could this be why some early childhood educators called children's play work?

Play comes with total absorption, energy and focus. Children engage in play naturally and enjoy it. They do not select play activities because they intentionally set out to learn. For instance, a child does not deliberately choose to arrange building blocks according to size because he is interested in learning seriation and size or does he fill the bucket with sand because he wants to learn the concept of weight and measurement. Children just play! As it is often said, play is what children enjoy doing best. That is why it is often sad to find out that some schools do not favour play approach at the early stage of learning. This may be one reason too why some children do not know how to play. The question is what else should a child know naturally if not how to play as noted by (Buscaglia 1998) "it is paradoxical that many educators and parents still differentiate between a time for learning and a time for play without seeing the vital connection between them" This actually is the crux of this paper. In other words, when children play, they learn and more still in play children learn how to learn. Thus, play should not be seen as if it were relief from serious learning but that when children play, it is serious business because they are actually learning. It is in this context that Maria Montessori described play as the work of children.

Play as a crucial concept in early childhood and development dates back to old Greek philosophy. The Greek idea of childhood is interwoven with play that is, the Greek word for child is "Pais" and the Greek word for play is "Paizo" which shows that the same words have the same root as play is characterized in life of a child. It is in this context that Plato saw play and games as a vital part of children's nature. He saw a connection between children's play and the way they will think and act in their later roles as adults. He therefore recommended play as a way of learning for children between three and six years. Importantly, he noted that play come to children by natural instinct but cautioned that "lawless play" could turn them irresponsible and unruly. He further recommended that children's enthusiasm for play could be used to identify attitudes. In this way teachers can help to prepare the child's future roles in life and skills can be taught to him through play. More importantly, Plato is of the view that those in charge of child rearing must provide children with toys.

Just like in the Greek conception, the Latin word for play is "Ludus" and this same word is used to describe play in school. The Roman saw play primarily as practice and quite similar to the contemporary concept of play as role learning as suggested by Quintilian that play can be used in shaping the children's intellectual capabilities. In the middle ages play was generally seen for both children and adults as a means of practicing skills as well as relaxing and learning about the world. At about 18th century, Comenius called attention to the importance of children's play which he recommended should begin from infancy. He noted that toys should be provided for children's enjoyment and play should be encouraged and not left to chance. He emphasized that with toys children can amuse themselves, exercise their bodies and minds. In play, children are delighted to construct and explore their worlds. This is quite

encouraging as inactivity could be injurious to their minds and bodies. When children interact with their peers, they explore all powers of invention, their wits are sharpened and learn to cultivate right attitude and habits from one another.

Following same trend, Rousseau also emphasized the important of creating opportunities for children to develop their natural instinct through play. As he puts it (1947) "a child's play is his natural occupation and he does not sense any different". Rousseau argued that children learn through the freedom and spontaneity that play provides. Following on from Rousseau's idea of play and at the end of 18th century, Pestalozzi also came up with his own theory of play in early childhood learning. His emphasis was on the essence of play in school as they did at home. This further brought about greater interest in childhood as a discreet important period of development and childhood play as quite distinct, important and different from adult play. Thus, by the early 19th century, a growing awareness of children's play and its effect on the total development of the child was fast gaining ground. This was to contrast the ideas in some quarters that play is unserious, frivolous and the work of devil that could hinder learning.

The Philosophical Perspectives of Play

One of the earliest childhood educators who emphasized the essence of play was Friedrich Froebel. He advocated that play helps children to develop ideas by themselves and in so doing a wrong impression is created which can hardly be erased from their memory because knowledge discovered and acquired by oneself is long remembered and cherished than ideas or knowledge that was forced into the memory. Froebel believed that the harmony of diversity in nature is possible through play. His philosophy was based on a Christian pantheism. A focal point of this philosophy was the reciprocal relationships between God, humans and nature which can easily be understood among children through play. In the kindergarten, Froebel created space for different play activities with both nature and with fellow children. In his kindergarten, spaces for flowers which will attract butterflies, birds and other insects are created and pet animals. Open areas were provided for running, wrestling, ball games and games of war. With these playing activities, unified spirituality and practicality of play are established. Froebel found in play the instinctive activity of the child, the impulse and the method for the child's development "from within outwards". He encouraged that even before school age mothers should cultivate and foster play and fathers should protect and guide it. Because through play the child reveals the future of his mind to everyone who has insight into human nature. For him, play is the highest level of children's development and the spontaneous expression of the child's thoughts and feelings. Froebel philosophy of early childhood education was quite a departure from the rigid schools of his time. The most novel contribution was the introduction of play having coined the word kindergarten or children's garden. He encouraged that the best way to help children learn was not to bend, shape or mould the child but to excite the child to grow through play. Significantly, play meant giving the child opportunity to freely explore his world while learning. Drawing from this philosophy of Unity and Harmony, he believed that play should be in harmony with the nature and the ability of the child. This is today called "developmentally appropriate early childhood education". In Froebel's opinion, through play children learn to use their bodies to learn how to achieve their goals and learn about the external world from the qualities of physical objects, children forms associations with a recognized moral relations, learn

about the right of others and recognises himself as a part of the community. According to Lasckrides & Hintz (2000),

“Froebel believed that play develops the child’s mind and connects the child to the wider world such that in play the child ascertain what he can do, discovers his possibilities of will and thoughts and reveals his original powers”.

In essence, when teaching begins with play and other activities that excite the child especially where there are no unnecessary restrictions and interferences it is most likely that the child develop his potentials to the fullest. It is in this context that Froebel talked about the activities arising from the individual child and being in harmony with the child’s nature. Such activities he termed “self activity”. Today, Froebel perception of play may seem quite symbolic and almost too inflexible. But his idea of play within the context of early childhood learning stood then as a sharp contrast to the prevailing rote learning practices of his day and had set a premise from which the epistemic essence of play especially in childhood learning cannot be dismissed.

After Froebel there was a shift due to societal development and the need for education to move with the technological and scientific era, John Dewey came on board with his philosophy of progressivism. His innovative ideas were based on democratic principles and the scientific method. He advocated for the design of an integrated subjects and curriculum that have meaningful event in the lives of children rather than an isolated academic curriculum. He believed that the role of schools was not only to prepare children for the future, but to prepare them for the realities of the present. Dewey’s philosophy spurred from a radical departure from teacher-directed, memorized and rote learning practice to the child-centered curriculum concept which involves meaningful and playful activities such as carpentry, cooking and sewing. For Dewey, Play and work was considered a means of developing moral and intellectual abilities. The emphasis for Dewey (1930) was “play an industry are by no means antithetical to one another as it is often assumed. In play the activity is on its own instead of having an ulterior result”. Essentially for Dewey, the child in play is an active learner through direct experience which makes him a co-constructor of learning according to Wood & Attifield (1996) “Dewey saw the children as active agent in the shapening of their learning experience and environment”. This no doubt comes from Dewey’s philosophy as in constructivist.

Having laid the foundation of child centeredness in education by John Dewey, his emphasis on exploration, discovery, child initiated activity, freedom and independent, the stage was set for other initiatives like that of Madam Maria Montessori. Montessori in her attempt to see play as serious business, the child’s work made great distinctions between work and play. She argued that play and make-believe are an escape from reality and unsuitable to the child. She sees this as the adult imagination of play, which makes the child a passive recipient but contrary to this Montessori view of play as the a child’s work as an active endeavor that entails sensory development and tasks requiring purposeful effort and work both indoor and outdoor. Also, in ensuring that play is not seen as frivolous, she recommended that children should be provided with the freedom to make choices and to do the real work in this regard, the child also has the autonomy to decide what to engage in, to relate without interruption for as long as he likes to discover solutions and ideas, select his own answers and communicate and shares his discoveries with others. In so doing, the child is not a mere passive recipient of

knowledge but an active constructor of knowledge. Little wonder a key aspect of her pedagogy is the "prepared environment" this is to support her idea of independence and an awareness of the child's ability to do things for herself or himself with little direct help as possible from the adult Montessori (1998). This for Montessori summed her argument that play is children's work.

The Concept of Play and its Epistemic Essence

So far, the central argument has been to establish that play among children is not luxury nor a frivolous activity but that it is natural, a necessity and an intrinsic aspect of a child development beginning from the premise of Elkind (1981) who asserted that a childhood is the most basic right of children. He later ascertained that a playful childhood is the most basic right of the child Elkind (2007).

In every society, even in the most rustic, children play. Children's play may be informal, formal, structured, semi-structured etc. What is crucial is that play has its value for children in every society. Ethnographic studies have revealed that young human beings play in all society (Schwartzner, 1978), even though it was recognised that the types and forms of children's play and the amount of play varies depending upon age, gender, cultural context and ecological characteristics of the play settings (Armitage, 2005; Sutton-Smith, 1997). What is evidence from an anthropological perspective is that play is an activity in its own right where the main motive for children is to come together where the action is. Since the time of Classic Philosophers, play has been considered as the characteristic mode of behaviour of the young child and an expression of the natural spirit of childhood thereby, making play a prominent feature in the definition of childhood. Beginning from the classical theory the focus on play was seen in the light of burning excess energy, recreation, and relaxation as well as replenishing energy after hardwork. It is in this context that Herbert Spencer suggested that play is a mechanism that allows human expand excess energy that is not required for survival, such burning of excess energy in the life of children can be achieved through play.

Modern day theories believed that every child by his very playful nature is not a passive receiver but an active constructor of meaning and knowledge. This is typical of the constructionist theory made popular by John Dewey who hold that through experiential learning children learn best. In other words, through play, children are both physical and intellectually involved. Contemporary theories focused on the relationship of play to diversity and social justice in daily living and knowledge. One thing seem prevalent in all of these theories and that is that play among young learners is not wasted time but rather it is time spent building knowledge from previous experiences. That is why for advocates of the concept play, it is an activity that allows the child makes sense out of his world. This is taken into cognizance that children possess a natural curiosity to explore and play acts as the medium to do so. Specifically, Bruce (2011) play could be described as imagination and as creativity. As imagination, it allows the young individual who is involved to construct, build and create such imagination in his minds, feelings and thoughts. As creativity, play is not about the end product but the process of the play scenario.

From all of the foregoing, there is the indication that play has its inherent value more especially as it comes naturally from the child. Thus, it is seen as a major childhood activity. But as noted by Samuelsson and Johansson (2006), in spite of its importance locating a definition of play can be a daunting task. That is why Tyler (1976) affirms that

play like love defies description. Even at that, there is something about play that keeps even the intellectuals thinking such that even with the various definitions of play and about its nature and purpose no one definition is completely adequate to describe play. As Perryman (1962) aptly puts it "play appears in so many guises and a great variety of forms. Its results are so subtle and far reaching that any one definition or explanation will of necessity be partial and incomplete". Even though they may not be one ready definition of play, there is a broad consensus among proponents of play that it is a crucial aspect of child development in any society. It is on this score that Bergen and Fromberg (2006) described the permeable nature of play as the one that interacts its parallels, represents and integrates physical, social, emotional, aesthetic and cognitive experiences. This may not be far from the assertion in some quarters that could be a distraction, but according to Lindon (2001), Froebel and Montessori who are known innovators of play in early childhood education did not value children's play merely in itself but used the potentials of play for educational purposes which means that play possesses its own epistemic essence.

According to Beaver (1999) play consists of those activities performed for self amusement that have behavioural, social and psychomotor rewards. It is also child directed and as such the rewards come from within the individual child. Thus, as children get to preschool age, they are able to engage in a level of play that can greatly promote their learning of carefully implemented (Bodrova & Leong 2003; Fromberg 2006 & Essa et al 2010). Sharing the same view, Fromberg and Gullo (1992) are of the view that play is an important part of the child's holistic development because it is closely tied to the development of the socio-emotional, cognitive, language and physical behaviours. While Frost (1992) believes that "play is the chief vehicle for the development of the imagination and intelligent, language, social skills and perceptual motor abilities in young children. It is no doubt therefore that when children play, they are in one way or in another promoting their own learning. This also stems from the argument by play advocates that children do not have to be persuaded into playing (Jackman (2011); Lester & Russell (2008)). This is as previously expressed that children are naturally active inquisitive and playful and therefore seems natural to have a play based learning. In other words, as expressed by Bruce (2012), play forms the basis of child's development. Research has also indicated that children learn best in an environment that allows them to explore, discover and play as Samuelsson and Johansson (2006) affirms;

"children learn best when they are captured by something that occupies their involvement in such a way that the surrounding world seems to exist- the child focuses on something that he or she will like to solve or to know more about".

From the foregoing, what the adult may see as distraction in play is focus and concentration. In play, the child has the major intent to solve a problem and the only way to achieve this, is to be focus and involved in the activity. This tends to be a true assertion that play is a children's work.

Play as the work of children has been made popular by Maria Montessori, her expression simply explains that what work is to the adult so play is to the child. In other words, she was trying to make critical distinction between play and work were in the strictest sense for children, play is mostly a self chosen activity by the child rather than the one prescribed by the teacher or an adult. This further makes play a process rather than a

predicted outcome or product. On this view, Lohmander & Samuelsson (2003); Wood & Attfield (2005) have said that one way of overcoming the dichotomy between play and work and play and academic learning is to refocus attention away from argument as to how play serves development to reformulating the playing/working child or play/learning child where disposition and processes common to both playing and learning or playing and working are identified. From the argument, children learn to solve problems, try their hands on new things, invent, create while playing such play becomes purposeful and quality. The idea is that children should be given a sense of independent and an awareness of the child's ability to do things for himself is quite imperative in so doing, he is able to learn for himself. This is in consonance with Frank's submission that;

“during the first five or six years of life, the child is expected to cope with the world, natural or human...no program of teaching and adult instruction could adequately provide for his own personal observation and knowing but will master these many experiences through continued play as we called this seemingly none purposeful activity which is actually the most intensive and fruitful learning in his whole life cycle”.

The implicit epistemology in Frank's assertion is that play for young children cannot be underestimated as Isenberg & Quisenberry (1988) have noted that play is linked to children's cognitive, creative, social, linguistic and affective development. Thus, rather than pressurizing for academic achievement play provides the foundation for skills necessary for achievement and excellent in life while for Levenstein (1985) play and children's intellectual attitudes are closely related. As previously highlighted, nurturing curiosity through play is a vital aspect of the child's social life and academic well being. Generally play can be spontaneous, structured, guided and teacher directed all of this have tendency to give children opportunity for independent development. It is in this vein that a play centered curriculum is quite imperative and has great potentials. According to Van Loon (2011) a play centered programme encourages the use of power of play to foster children's development. Children at the early stages of learning are sent to school to acquire knowledge. Play activities is one sure way where children resolve problems as cognitive and affective processes. In other words, epistemic perspective in academic experiences is not only when individuals encounter new information, skills, attitudes and believes in a transmission process between teacher and learners but also when children are opportuned to experience and explore for themselves through play.

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