

# EARLY CHILDHOOD PEDAGOGY AND EDUCATION: AN IN-DEPTH UNDERSTANDING OF THE PLAY-BASED LEARNING APPROACH FOR PRE-PRIMARY SCHOOL CHILDREN

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## **Abstract**

Ensuring access to quality pre-primary education is a bed rock for improving learning and education outcomes. Pre-primary education covers children that are three years of age until the start of their primary education. During this period, the stimulation and learning that comes from play with their peers and care givers or parents at home and in quality early educational settings are very important. Play in the preschool years enables children to explore and make sense of the world around them and enables them to use and develop their imaginations and creativity. Playful experiences among preschool children exhibit key characteristics: It is actively engaging, meaningful, socially interactive, iterative, joyful, symbolic, voluntary or self-chosen and adventurous and risky. Play in children creates powerful learning opportunities across all areas of development such as motor, cognitive and social, emotional and linguistic skills and this often occurs during ‘corner play’ or ‘centre time’ in the context of early learning. The barriers to integrating play into pre-primary school systems are: the lack of understanding of the value of play as a foundation for academic concepts, the perceived misconceptions of parents and caregivers about play, the adoption of an educational curriculum and early learning standards that do not address play, etc. Therefore, to integrate play-based activities as a useful means of enhancing teaching and learning outcomes in preschool systems the following recommendations are proffered: learning through play for children should involve the use of stimulating materials, there should be adequate training for teachers and early childhood educators, there should be collaborations with families and communities in the context of pre-primary programmes as well as adequate monitoring, regulation and quality assurance.

**Key words:** *Play, pre-primary school, children, education, learning and teaching.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

It is most understanding and important to note that, early learning is deep-rooted in the second target of the Sustainable Development Goal 4, which seeks to ensure that, by 2030, all children have access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education in order that, they may be ready for primary education (UNICEF, 2018).

Pre-primary education is now considered an essential tool for achieving the Universal Primary Education as specified by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). According to Zubairi & Rose (2017) ensuring access to quality pre-primary education is a bed rock for improving learning and education

outcomes as well as the efficiency of education systems.

Shonkoff & Phillips (2000) explained that, the most important period of human development is from birth to eight years of age. During these years, the development of cognitive skills, emotional well-being, social competence and sound physical and mental health, builds a strong basis for success as the child grows into adulthood. Although learning takes place throughout one's life, however, in early childhood, learning takes place at a speed that will never be equaled (NSCDC, 2007). The preschool (or the pre-primary level) education years fall in the middle of the early childhood period and lay the groundwork for success in the primary school and beyond (Kaul et al., 2017).

Pre-primary education is focused on support for learning available to children in formal or organized settings and programs (UNICEF, 2018). It usually covers children that are three years of age until the start of their primary education. Similarly, under the International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) Level programme categorization, the pre-primary education programmes typically focus on interactions with peers and trained educators and the development of logical and reasoning skills, as well as introducing early literacy and mathematical concepts and other school readiness skills. Therefore, it is pertinent to note that, the landscape of pre-primary education provision is complex, with great variety of programs and providers (UNICEF, 2018).

At the age three (3) to five (5) often referred to as the preschool period, children's language, socio-emotional and cognitive skills are said to be rapidly

expanding (UNICEF, 2018). During this period, the stimulation and learning that comes from play, singing, reading and interacting with their peers and care givers or parents at home and in quality early educational settings are very important. Therefore, play in the preschool years enables children to explore and make sense of the world around them as well as enabling them to use and develop their imaginations and creativity. Similarly, play is one of the most important ways in which young children gain essential knowledge and skills that promote opportunities for hands-on learning at the pre-primary school level. This article is therefore intended to provide an in-depth understanding of the play based approach as catalysts to promote learning among preschool children in educational institutions. The article will among others provide insights on the key characteristics of playful experiences, how children learn critical skills and develop as they play, see play in preschool children as an essential strategy for learning and teaching, discuss the barriers to integrating play into pre-primary school systems.

#### **ATTRIBUTES OR CHARACTERISTICS OF PLAYFUL EXPERIENCES AND ITS IMPORTANCE AMONG PRESCHOOL CHILDREN**

Uren & Stagnitti (2009) defined play as a child's natural dominant learning approach that contributes to their knowledge and skills development across the cognitive, social/emotional, creative and physical domains, while also providing a solid foundation for future learning. According to UNICEF (2018) and other authors, playful experiences among preschool

children may exhibit the following characteristics:

- ***It is actively engaging*** – An experience with children while playing, reveals that they become deeply involved, often combining physical, mental and verbal engagement.
- ***It is meaningful*** – It is usually quiet revealing that children play to make sense of the world around them as well as to find meaning in an experience by connecting it to something already known. Through play, children express and expand their understanding of their experiences.
- ***It is socially interactive*** - Play allows children to communicate ideas, to understand others through social interaction, paving the way to build deeper understanding and more powerful relationships.
- ***It is iterative*** - Play and learning are not static. Children play to practice skills, try out possibilities, revise hypotheses and discover new challenges, leading to deeper learning.
- ***It is joyful*** – It creates laughter and smiles among children. Consequently, its overall feeling is one of enjoyment, motivation, thrill and pleasure.
- ***It is symbolic***- Play involves elements of make- believe, where people, objects and ideas may be treated as if they were something else. Children often pretend and imagine when they play. Within play, people and objects

are used as symbols for other people and objects (Dockett & Fler, 1999). Play enables children to: transform reality into symbolic representations of the world; experiment with the meanings and rules of serious life; and try out different ideas, feelings and relationships with people (Kernan, 2007).

- ***It is voluntary or self-chosen***- Play is a freely chosen, personally directed behaviour. Children choose to play. They cannot be made to play. This involves doing what they want to do, as opposed to what others feel they should do (Gray, 2013). Children construct their own play and may change the direction of their play. The control of the play rests with and belongs to the players (children) (Kernan, 2007).
- ***It is adventurous and risky***- Play helps children to explore the unknown. Play can be seen as the main opportunity for a child to take risks without fear of failure (Gordon Biddle et al., 2014). According to Kernan (2007), play can also be linked to the possibilities of exploring risk. This means doing something one has never done before or trying to do something one find difficult.

#### **CRITICAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING AMONG PRESCHOOL CHILDREN THROUGH PLAY**

According to UNICEF (2018), when children choose to play, they are not thinking whether or not that they are going to learn something from the activity. Yet

their play creates powerful learning opportunities across all areas of development. According to Pellegrini (2011) development and learning are complex and holistic and skills across all developmental domains can be encouraged through play, such as motor, cognitive and social, emotional and linguistic skills. Furthermore, in playful experiences, children tap a breadth of skills at any one time and this often occurs during ‘corner play’ or ‘centre time’ in the context of early learning or pre-primary programs. Corner play, when well planned, promotes the child’s development and learning competencies more effectively than any other pre-primary activity. By choosing to play with the things they like to do, children actually develop skills in all areas of development such as intellectual, social, emotional and physical (Gleave & Issy, 2012).

Play sets the foundation for the development of critical social and emotional knowledge and skills in children. Through play, children learn to forge connections with others, and to share, negotiate and resolve conflicts, as well as learn self-advocacy skills. Play also teaches children leadership as well as group skills (Rymanowicz, 2015). Play is a natural tool that children can use to build their resilience and coping skills, as they learn to navigate relationships and deal with social challenges as well as conquer their fears (Burghardt, 2011). Children at play learn how to make a plan and follow through, they learn from trial and error, using imagination and problem-solving skills, they apply concepts of quantity, science and movement to real life, they reason in a logical, analytical manner by

acting on objects, communicate with classmates and negotiate differences in points of view, they derive satisfaction from their own accomplishments and develop creativity and explore aesthetics and artistry (UNICEF, 2018).

### **PLAY AS AN ESSENTIAL STRATEGY FOR LEARNING AND TEACHING IN PREPRIMARY SCHOOL SETTINGS**

According to UNICEF (2018) in an organized pre-primary school setting, play experiences are enhanced when children are provided with reasonable time and space to engage freely within their environment. Play can occur in many forms, such as playing with objects, engaging in imaginary plays, playing with peers and adults, solitary plays, cooperative plays, associative plays and physical plays (Pellegrini, 2011). Play is considered as children’s “work” and it is described as the vehicle through which children acquire knowledge and skills, allowing them to engage independently and with their peers to learn (Ginsburg, 2007). Consequently, the role of teachers and other adults in the class room and the child’s environment is to enable and sustain playful experiences and learning and this requires thoughtful planning (for example, setting out materials to arouse children’s curiosity) and evolving spontaneous interactions to build on natural curiosities and ideas (UNICEF, 2018). Therefore, the provision of children with active and playful hands-on experiences by care-givers and teachers help foster and enrich learning (Hurwitz, 2003).

Furthermore, it is believed that the home environment and the community are

where young children spend the larger and almost all part of their early lives. Here, they interact with their parents, siblings, extended family members, and neighbours. These interactions and relationships have a significant influence over how they understand and experience the world around them (UNICEF, 2018). Nonetheless, the home environments and the community provide excellent opportunities to promote learning through play from the early years through pre-primary and primary years. Primary caregivers, as the children's "first teachers", are the biggest supporters of children's learning, and therefore have an important role in creating the space for learning through play (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000). It is imperative to support caregivers and empower them to take an active role in directing children's learning and development, as well as to facilitate playful learning for their children at home and in the community in their day-to-day experiences.

Consequently, learning through play is not only for pre-school children (UNICEF, 2018). Therefore, in the primary grades, play opportunities enhance children's mastery of academic concepts and build motivation to learn (UNICEF, 2018). In fact, two of the most important things that play can develop are interest and motivation and encouraging these in the early grades brings children to a trajectory that contributes to their own learning (Miller & Almon, 2009). For example, playing board games can strengthen mathematical concepts while building social competence. Book clubs, dramatizing stories, and other reading games, make it much more likely for

struggling readers to move ahead and not give up. Exploration of a wide variety of printed materials and writing tools at a 'writing corner' can engage reluctant writers and help children learn from one another. Furthermore, play fosters creativity and imagination, critical components in enabling one to cope, to find pleasure, and to innovate. Play and opportunities to engage actively in learning strengthens student's creative powers. Letting primary grade students engage actively with materials, issues and topics, opens up the space for inquiry and problem solving (Briggs & Hansen, 2012).

### **Categories of Play among Preschool Children and Significance**

The categories of play described by Parten in 1933 relevant to our present day preschool programmes for early childhood development are:

#### **Unoccupied play**

This type of play is experienced when a baby or young children explore materials around them without any sort of organization. During this situation, the infants' play consists of using their senses to explore their environment (Kearns, 2010). At the first instance, they may rely on others to interact (such as parents or care-givers), pass toys and engage in other activities. However, at the stage at which they become mobile infants (toddlers), they are able to explore a much wider and more different play environments (Kearns, 2010). This type of play begins almost as soon as movement becomes evident in children as they are observed playing with their own bodies. According to Rymanowicz (2015), this stage allows the

children to practise manipulating materials, it also helps them to master their self-control as well as help them learn about how the world works.

### **Solitary play**

This is experienced when a child is observed playing alone in his or her own world with limited or no interaction with other children. Children engaged in solitary play can be absorbed in their own interactions with objects or toys and may seem unaware of other children and may not also notice the presence of other children around them (Frost, 1992). They often execute their own activity without reference to what others are doing (Frost, 1992). According to Rymanowicz (2015) solitary play starts in infancy and is also common in toddlers because of their limited social, cognitive and physical skills and children may engage in solitary play at any age. Similarly, engaging in solitary play allows children to explore freely, master new personal skills and prepare themselves to play with others (Rymanowicz, 2015). Consequently, research indicates that children who have learnt to be comfortable in solitary play are also more likely to succeed in working independently (Gordon Biddle et al., 2014).

### **Onlooker or spectator play**

A child observing another child or children at play but not engaged in playing is best used to describe this form of play (Kearns, 2010). Onlooker behaviour is characterized by the child noticing other children playing and watching them play (Kearns, 2010). In this scenario, the child often talks to the children being observed,

asks questions or gives suggestions, but does not take part in the play (Frost, 1992). This type of play usually starts during toddler years, but can take place at any age. Children learn a lot by watching other. During this period they observe the social rules of play and relationships and they explore different ways of playing or using materials and learn about the world in general (Rymanowicz, 2015). This stage allows the child to choose the activity and may easily move to another level as they become more comfortable.

### **Parallel play**

A child playing close to or alongside other children playing but not playing or interacting with them could best be used to describe parallel play (Hughes, 1995). Children playing parallel to each other sometimes use each other's toys trying to achieve the same activity at the same time in the same space, but each child is still playing separately, always maintaining their independence (Hughes, 1995). Parallel play is usually associated with toddlers, although it may occur in any age group. This type of play is seen as a transition to more social types of play. According to Gordon Biddle et al. (2014), this is an opportunity to work side by side on the same activity, practising skills and learning new methods to engage together. This play is typical of preschoolers and may serve as a transition to engaging in group play.

### **Associative play**

Children being involved in the same play, sharing materials and talking to each other, but not coordinating play objectives or having a common specific plan for the

play can be used to describe this form of play (Fleer, 2013). Associative play usually occurs without any comment and with no attempt to play together in any meaningful way. In the associative form of play, the play of each child remains separate (Kearns, 2010). Children do not set rules and, although they all want to be playing with the same types of toys and may even be lending each other toys, there is no formal organization. Associative play begins during toddlerhood and extends through preschool age. This type of play signifies a transformation in the child. Here, instead of the child being more focused on his or her the activity or the objects involved in play, they begin to be more interested in other players (Rymanowicz, 2015). Thus, associative play allows children to begin to practise what they have observed through onlooker and parallel play. They can start to use their newfound social skills to engage with other children or adults during an activity or exploration (Rymanowicz, 2015).

### **Cooperative play**

As the name implies, it is the play established by the cooperative efforts of its players. In cooperative play, children engage in a play activity that has a shared goal and organizes themselves into roles with the specific goal in mind (Frost, 1992). They engage in meaningful interactions and communications with others about their play. According to Kearns (2010), cooperative play involves the exchange of ideas and the sharing of materials. The play is extended by each child contributing ideas to the play and taking on assigned roles. Cooperative play begins in the late preschool period

(Kearns, 2010). Cooperative play is a more sophisticated type of play because it requires the process of negotiation among two or more children (Gordon Biddle et al., 2014). It is important to note that cooperation is an advanced skill and can be very difficult for young children and, ironically, cooperative play normally often involves a lot of conflict. This is because it is sometimes difficult for young children to share, take turns and negotiate control in these types of play settings (Rymanowicz, 2015).

### **Barriers to Integrating Play into Pre-Primary School Systems**

Why is learning through play not deeply integrated in many countries' pre-primary school programmes? UNICEF (2018), however, has outlined various factors that may contribute to this:

#### **The lack of understanding of the value of play as a foundation for academic concepts**

The use of rote memorization (cramming) and recall of information remain the norm in many settings as students consistently use these methods when they need a faster means of learning (Ali & Zahoor-ul-Haq, 2017). Consequently, education officials and staff, as well as administrators and principals, may not understand the important role of play in building young children's understanding of mathematical, scientific and literacy concepts (UNICEF, 2018).

#### **The perceived misconceptions of parents and caregivers about play**

Many people, if asked, express the belief that play is frivolous and that play opportunities take time away from 'true

learning’ (Ginsburg, 2007). These misconceptions are caused by a lack of understanding of the benefits of play in children’s education, with the result that families might not opt for play opportunities in pre-primary education systems.

### **The Adoption of an Educational Curriculum and Early Learning Standards that do not Address Play**

Many countries have curricular standards yet they seldom include play-based learning activities and teaching methods (UNICEF, 2018). For example, a review of Early Learning and Development Standards of 37 countries conducted by UNICEF revealed that only in one third of the standards, the concept of playful learning was well integrated and ‘play competencies’ are unlikely to be part of stated desired outcomes for children’s development (UNICEF, 2018).

### **The lack of Teacher Professional Development that Focuses on Learning Through Play**

A large number of teachers are not adequately prepared to implement play-based learning in their classrooms. They may think of ‘learning materials’ only as workbooks or charts on the wall, rather than objects that children can explore and use in their learning. In addition, in situations when teachers see the need for such hands-on materials, there are often inadequate resources, and no training to help teachers find or create play materials with low cost-locally available materials. Similarly, a hand full of teachers have not seen learning through play in practice and as a result lack confidence in

implementing this practice in their classrooms.

### **The existence of large Population class sizes that limit children’s freedom to play**

Additional challenges exist when classes are too large as regards the children’s population for care-givers or teachers to control. For instance, when more than 30 children are in a relatively small space, it is often challenging to give children active experiences with materials or even have enough materials for all children. Large classes also make it difficult for teachers to support children’s play through personal conversations and thought provoking questions.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

This article addresses the nature of pre-primary services within the broader concept of early learning. Several definitions of what is meant by play in early childhood, followed by key points of why learning through play builds lifelong learners and supports children’s overall development was discussed. Consequently, the barriers/ challenges that pre-primary advocates/ caregivers face while making a case for play-based methods for teaching and learning were also highlighted. Finally, a proposed systems perspective in advocating for child-centred pedagogy and playful programmes were also enumerated. However, as completeness to this article, the following recommendations are proffered:

1. Learning through play for children for should involve the use of stimulating materials. Notably, the use of stimulating materials should be an



essential feature of the pre-primary curricular development process and this will be appropriate by putting into special consideration varying cultural contexts.

2. The provision of adequate training to teachers and early childhood educators. Teachers and early childhood educators are at the heart of delivering quality pre-primary services. It is relevant that teachers understand the importance of play and child-centred pedagogy in early learning, and be equipped with the necessary skills and dispositions to put into action play-based learning. Similarly, other education personnel (education inspectors, training providers, specialized staff, and directors and principals) should also be sensitized to and embrace learning through play as an effective tool for supporting learning and child development.
3. There should be collaborations with families and communities in the context of pre-primary programmes. It is perceived that when families are active partners in children's learning and development, a shared vision for role of play in pre-primary programme can evolve.
4. There should be adequate monitoring, regulation and quality assurance of pre-primary services. Quality assurance is intended to assess the extent to which standards; desired practices and programme implementation are executed. Therefore, because play-based learning is an essential component of quality pre-primary programmes, it is important to include play-related

components as part of monitoring tools and quality standards in the pre-primary curriculum.

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