DIMENSIONS OF PLAY IN THE 21ST CENTURY PEDAGOGY: LEARNING IMPERATIVE FOR THE NIGERIAN CHILD

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Abstract

This paper sets out to clarify the relevance of play which is an offshoot of creative dramatics in the 21st Century Early Childhood Education. The paper thus addresses the problem of dearth of play, a basic teaching methodology for Early Childhood Education, in Nigerian educational system. It investigates the various techniques through which the youngster could benefit from a matured, organised and coordinated play. The study adopts a combination of the historical, sociological and literary methodologies to gather its data; in other words, extant literatures related to the subject-matter were reviewed. It also draws on the personal experience of the researcher as an early childhood teacher for a decade as well as being an educational theatre practitioner. The study reveals the deficiency of play as a teaching methodology and a dearth of play facilities in Nigeria Early Childhood Education sector. Even where such exists, it is not effectively and efficiently practised. The paper therefore establishes different strategies through which teachers could facilitate matured play in an early childhood classroom. It further advocates play as an important tool of learning in the early childhood education curriculum and the need for early childhood teacher and care-giver to imbibe the play strategies recommended in this paper, to enable the Nigeria youngster get holistic education needed to meet the 21st Century challenges

Keywords: Play Way, Pedagogy, Early Childhood Education, Montessori and Isaacs Theories, The Vygotskian Approach.

Introduction

Learning through play has become a popular axiom among education scholars and reformers today. This is particularly so with the evolution of different theories propounded by developmental psychologists, educational reformers, philosophers, psychologists and dramatists to prove the veracity and power of play in learning among youngsters. This, in turn, gave rise to the **play way method** of learning in the early childhood education of the youngsters. Thus, play and games are invariably pivotal activities in social learning, because, in the social and contextual approach to learning, the expected outcome is for the learner to become socially accepted and be an effective member within a community. This is what is commonly referred to as learning in a community of practice (COP) according to Lave and Wenger (1998:19).

Basically, in the Social and Contextual approach, learning does not occur solely within the learner, but in the group and community in which they work. Learning is a shared process which takes place through observing, working together and being part of a larger group, which includes colleagues of varying levels of experience, able to stimulate each other's development. In this view, rather like cognitivism, individuals only learn from more competent others, but the emphasis is now on being part of a larger system. Crucially, this system includes the learner, other people around them, the equipment they use, the technologies they work with, the procedures they adopt and the overall culture of the workplace. Whether they are conscious of it or not, groups, and individuals within them, learn mainly through social interaction. This happens through discussion, observing and sharing.

Again, the role of the practitioner is one of a facilitator who needs to help focus discussion to maximise key learning points rather than just letting a group tell irrelevant anecdotes. Vygotsky (1962:67) in his Social Development Theory thus coined the term "scaffolding" to

describe the various forms of support that educational providers can offer learners. It might include verbal assistance, questioning, suggestions and directions all aimed at extending a learner's activities where the learner cannot accomplish this alone.

For Vygotsky, learning from others more competent in culturally appropriate skills and technologies was the capstone to his educational theory. Vygotsky suggests that children or students can be guided by explanation, demonstration, and work, and can attain to higher levels of thinking if they are guided by someone who is more capable and competent – a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). This conception is better known as The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The Zone of Proximal Development is the gap between what the learner can achieve on his own and what he can achieve with the support of others.

The ability to attain higher levels of knowledge and understanding depends upon interaction with other, more advanced peers. This unequal interaction facilitates and encourages learning. Through increased interaction and involvement, students are able to extend themselves to higher levels of cognition. Vygotsky (1962:17) defines the Zone of Proximal Development as,

> the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under the guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.

The ZPD is the difference between what students can accomplish independently and what they can achieve in conjunction or in collaboration with another, more competent person. The Zone is created in the course of social interaction.

Play is thus the sole activity of the pre-school child, to the extent that the National Policy on Education "expects that pupils at this stage (preschoolers) should be taught through play" (FGN, 2004:11). Play is a

means of socialisation, which leads to the acquisition of elaborate language and also capable of drawing out the emotionally or physically disturbed child from self-absorption and pity. Through play there is inculcation of morals and courage. Play cannot take place in a vacuum. Play materials have to be provided. Thus the Ministry of Education has specified the basic types of materials the Early Childhood Education providers should acquire for play and learning.

The Problem

In spite of the relevance of play in Early Childhood Education it seems not to be utilised among Early Childhood Education providers in Nigeria. Olubor (2008:3) observes that "none of the sample schools had the full complement of the play facilities ... schools had grossly inadequate play facilities". Many preschool and kindergarten programmes run for a half-day only, and spending time on play seems like a luxury. Maybe they think home is the place where play belongs. In our own memories we see ourselves spending a lot of time playing with our friends, and most of this play did take place outside the classroom. At that time it never occurred to teachers that they should provide any kind of support for children's play: it was taken for granted that most children knew how to play, and those who did not would learn from other children. These nostalgic memories are probably the reason some teachers and school administrators are reluctant to consider play as important a part of the classroom as other activities. However, when asked to describe how children play today, most educators agree that play has in fact changed from what it used to be thirty or even twenty years ago. Nowadays, young children spend less time at home playing with their peers and more time playing alone, graduating from educational toys to video and computer games.

Suffice to mention that the home and classroom experiences of many children may not be sufficient to produce the rich, imaginative play

that has long been considered an inherent characteristic of early childhood. Many factors contribute to this state of affairs. These include:

- Changes in the social context (children spend more time in the company of same-age peers who may not be as effective play mentors as older siblings or friends);
- Increasing academic demands of preschool and kindergarten programmes; and
- The tendency of toy manufacturers to produce ever more realistic playthings.

To combat these negative factors, early childhood teachers and providers would need to support play development at least at the same level as they support the development of fine motor skills or phonemic awareness. Again, it is hard to expect all early childhood teachers and providers to follow this advice because, outside of the early childhood community, play is not universally recognized as a medium for learning. Bodrova and Leong (2003:5) quote a teacher who finds himself in such a dilemma:

> "I am finding myself between a rock and a hard place," admits a former preschool teacher who now writes books for the parents of young children. "Because I work for a publishing company, I need to meet the demands of our customers. However, being an early childhood educator, I know that if I write only what is in demand, it would not be right for the children. All parents want now are worksheets, and they want them in their babies' hands as early as possible."

Research Methodology

The methodology adopted in this study is primarily based on research, re-examining extant literature on the subject-matter; in other words, it adopts a combined sociological, literary and historical methodology. It also draws substantially on the field and personal experience of the researcher, derived from a direct involvement in teaching kindergarten pupils, participation in Children Theatre Projects and observation of

Early Childhood Education and Childcare givers in the researcher's environment.

Theoretical Framework

In practice, the need to promote foundational skills, such as phonological awareness or listening comprehension, in young children and the need to support their play appear to be competing for teachers' time and attention: but in theory it should not be this way. Research on play accumulated over the past several decades makes a convincing case for the benefits of supporting a high quality of pretend play. A number of studies show the links between play and many foundational skills and complex cognitive activities: "such as memory (Newman, 1990), self-regulation (Krafft & Berk, 1998), distancing and decontextualisation (Howes & Matheson 1992; O'Reilly & Bornstein 1993; Sigel 2000), oral language abilities (Davidson, 1998), symbolic generalisation (Smilansky & Shefatya, 1990), successful school adjustment (Fantuzzo & McWayne, 2002), and better social skills (Corsaro, 1988)," as cited in Bodrova and Leong (2003:3).

In many of the recent studies focusing on the relationship between play and literacy, play interventions resulted in an increase in children's use of literacy materials and their engagement in literacy acts, as well as gains in specific literacy skills such as phonological awareness. Not only does play help children develop skills and concepts necessary to master literacy and numeracy, it also builds the foundation of more general competencies that are necessary for the children to learn successfully in school and beyond. Considering what we know about the effects of play on young children's learning and development, the disappearance of play from early childhood classrooms looks even more alarming.

As the opportunities for children to engage in high-quality play outside school become less and less common, early childhood teachers.

might soon be children's only play mentors. The task of supporting play while making sure children meet school expectations may seem impossible, especially given the constraints of a typical early childhood programme. However, we believe it can be done. During my years of work with preschool, educational theatre participants, and as a kindergarten teacher, I found that knowing the characteristics of high-level play and being able to support these characteristics not only results in richer, more imaginative play but also has a positive effect on the development of foundational skills, including cognitive and emotional self-regulation and the ability to use symbols. "These foundational skills in turn make it possible for the children to achieve higher levels of mastery of specific academic content, such as literacy" (e.g. Bodrova & Leong, 2001:55).

The Vygotskian Approach to Play

Our analysis of play is based on the works of **Lev Vygotsky** and his students **Bodrova & Leong** . While Vygotsky's views of play are familiar to the Western educational community, the works of his students, Daniel Elkonin in particular, are relatively unfamiliar in the West. Elkonin [1904–85] is known in the United States primarily through the use of Elkonin Blocks in Reading Recovery and other remedial reading programmes. In Russia, Elkonin's research (1978) on phonemic awareness is only part of his legacy; his study of play is another substantial contribution to the field. Having studied learning in primary grade students and younger children, Elkonin was a strong opponent of lowering the school-entry age in Russia. He argued that not only would it not help increase student achievement, it would also result in pushed-down curriculum and the elimination of play from the lives of preschoolers and kindergartners. As an alternative he developed a highly successful curriculum for the primary grades that allows elementary school teachers to teach all requisite skills and concepts without adding

more academic content to the existing preschool and kindergarten curricula.

Maria Montessori and Susan Isaacs

Similarly, in the first half of the 20th century, two women made invaluable and lasting contributions to child development theory. The Italian physician, **Maria Montessori**, showed that children could learn faster and better if allowed to engage in largely self-directed play from an early age, while the British psychologist, **Susan Isaacs**, conducted experiments into the 'power of play' and showed that children tend to work much better when they are allowed to pursue their own interests and create their own learning environments – with their own patterns of social interaction – rather than having these dictated to them by teachers and parents.

Both Montessori (1966) and Isaacs (1952) left behind significant bodies of theoretical work that have subsequently informed many educators around the world, and Montessori in particular – with the worldwide Montessori schools – has shown that there is an appetite for alternative education methods that avoid the traditional 'hypodermic' method of delivering education as a commodity to be learnt by rote. Before Montessori and Isaacs, the most common theories of education focused on the idea that teachers deliver facts to students who are supposed to learn those facts in a way that emphasises the importance of this type of learning rather than analysis and 'play'. This type of learning was very disciplined and involved teachers being established as figures of authority.

Montessori and Isaacs separately came up with similar theories regarding the importance of allowing children to learn for and by themselves, while being gently guided by teachers. Montessori and Isaacs theories have in no doubt been influenced by Piaget and Vygotsky Child development theory and as well as other learning theories

prevalent in Early Childhood Education. Montessori left behind few attempts to describe her methods, but she approached education in terms of the assumption that children needed to 'learn to learn' by exploring their surroundings, playing (both alone and with others) and not only learning but also gaining an intellectual context for the things they had discovered. In recent years, many studies have demonstrated that children exposed to the Montessori Method around the world tend to perform better in school at both science and humanities subjects, and tend to score more highly on tasks that require a high level of creativity.

DEVELOPMENTAL ABILITIES AND LEARNING CONCEPTS ADDRESSED BY COORDINATED AND MATURE PLAYS

DOMAIN	DOMAIN ELEMENT	INDICATOR
Social & Emotional Development	Self-Concept	* Demonstrates growing confidence in a range of abilities and expresses pride in accomplishments
	Co-operation	* Increases abilities to sustain interactions with peers by helping, sharing and discussion * Shows increasing abilities to use compromise and discussion in working, playing and resolving conflicts with peers * Develops increasing abilities to give and take in interactions; to take turns in games or using materials; and to interact without being overly submissive or directive
	Self-Control	* Shows progress in expressing

		feelings, needs and opinions in difficult situations and conflicts without harming themselves, others or property.
	Social Relationships	* Shows progress in developing friendships with peers
Approaches to Learning	Engagement and Persistence	* Demonstrates increasing abilities to see goals and develop and follow through on plans * Shows growing capacity to maintain concentration overtime on a task, question, set of directions or interactions, despite distractions and interruptions
	Reasoning and Problem solving	* Grows in recognizing and solving problems through active explorations including trial and error, and interactions and discussions with peers and adults * Develops increasing abilities to classify, compare and contrast objects, events and experiences
	Initiative and Curiosity	* Approaches tasks and activities with increased flexibility, imagination and inventiveness * Grows in eagerness to learn about and discuss a growing range of topics, ideas and tasks
Creative Arts	Art	* Gains ability in using different art media and materials in a

		variety of ways for creative expressions and representation * Progresses abilities to create drawings, paintings, models and other art creations that are more detailed, creative and realistic * Develops growing abilities to plan, work independently, and demonstrate care and persistence in a variety of art projects
	Dramatic Play	* Participates in a variety of dramatic play activities that become more extended and complex *Shows growing creativity and imagination in using materials and in assuming different roles in dramatic play situations
Language Development	Listening and Understanding	* Shows progress in understanding and following simple and multi-step directions * Understands an increasingly complex and varied vocabulary
	Speaking and Communicating	* Develops increasing abilities to understand and use language to communicate information, experiences, ideas, feelings, opinions, needs, questions and for other varied purposes * Progress in abilities to imitate and respond appropriately in conversations and discussions

		with peers and adults.
Science	Scientific skills and Methods	*Begins to use senses and a variety of tools and simple measuring devices to gather information, investigate materials, and observe processes and relationships * Develops increased ability to observe and discuss properties, differences, and comparisons among objects and materials * Begins to participate in simple investigations to test observations, discuss and draw conclusions, and form generalisations.
	Scientific Knowledge	* Shows increased awareness and beginning understanding of changes in materials and cause-effect relationships
Mathematics	Numbers and Operations	* Demonstrates increasing interest and awareness of numbers and counting as a means for solving problems and determining quantity * Begins to use language to compare numbers of objects with terms such as more, less, greater than, fewer than, equal to * Develops increasing abilities to combine, separate, and name

		"how many" concrete objects
	Geometry and Spatial Sense	* Begins to be able to determine whether or not two shapes are the same size and shape. * Builds an increasing understanding of directionality, order, and position of objects and words such as up, down, over, under, top, bottom, inside, outside, in front and behind
Literacy	Print awareness and Concept	* Develops a growing understanding of the different functions of forms of prints such as signs, letters, newspapers, lists, messages and menus * Shows progress in recognising the association between spoken and written words by following the print as it is read aloud
	Early Writings	* Develops an understanding that writing is a way of communicating for a variety of purposes * Begins to represent stories and experiences through pictures, dictation and in play
Physical Health and Development	Fine Motor Skills	* Develops strength, dexterity, and control needed to use tools such as scissors, paper punch, stapler and hammer

Source: *Excerpted from the "Head Start Child out-comes framework." The Head Start path to positive child outcomes (Washington D.C: U.S. Department*

of Health and Human Services, Administration on Children, Youth and Families/ Head Start Bureau, 2001) retrieved on-line July, 2013.

Play and Children's Development

Elkonin identified four principal ways in which play influences child development. All four expected outcomes of play activity discussed below are important for preparing the foundations for subsequent learning that takes place in primary grades as highlights in Elkonin (1977; 1978).

Play affects the child's Motivation

In play, children develop a more complex hierarchical system of immediate and long term goals. In fact, play becomes the first context where young children demonstrate their ability to delay gratification, something preschoolers are known to struggle with in most other situations.

Play facilitates Cognitive Ordering

The ability to take other people's perspectives is critical for coordinating multiple roles and negotiating play scenarios. Assigning different pretend functions to the same object involves cognitive ordering. This newly acquired competency will later enable children to coordinate their cognitive perspectives with those of their learning partners and teachers. Eventually this ability to coordinate multiple perspectives will be turned inward.

Play advances the development of Mental Representation

This development occurs as the result of a child separating the meaning of objects from their physical form. First, children use replicas to substitute for real objects; then they use new objects that are different in appearance but can perform the same function as the object prototype.

Finally, most of the substitution takes place in the child's speech with no objects present. Thus the ability to operate with symbolic substitutes for real objects contributes to the development of abstract thinking and imagination. It is important to note that Vygotskians believe that imagination is an expected outcome of play, not a prerequisite for it.

Play fosters the development of deliberate behaviours – physical and mental voluntary action

The development of deliberateness in play becomes possible because the child needs to follow the rules of the play and because play partners constantly monitor each other to make sure that everyone is following the rules. At first, this deliberateness is demonstrated in physical actions (for example, a child moves on all fours when playing a cat or stays still when playing a guard), social behaviours, and changing speech registers in language use. Later, this deliberateness extends to mental processes such as memory and attention.

According to Vygotskians, only when these four outcomes are in place can a young child profit fully from academic activities. If these foundations are missing, the child may experience various difficulties adapting to school, be it in the area of social interactions with teachers and peers or in the area of content learning.

Play in Children's Development in the Twenty-first Century

The kind of play that helps children develop all four foundations is defined by the combination of the imaginary situation children create (a scenario), roles for the people and perhaps objects, and rules about what the players can and cannot do in the scenario (Vygotsky, 1978). Outside the Vygotskian framework, this kind of play is often labelled socio-dramatic play, role play, or pretend play (which are domiciled in creative dramatics) to distinguish it from other play-like activities such as stacking blocks on top of each other, or playing games. By the time children turn four, they are capable of engaging in this kind of complex play with multiple roles and symbolic use of props.

However, in reality many preschool (and even kindergarten-age) children still play at the level typical of toddlers, spending most of their play repeating the same sequence of actions as long as they stay in the same role. We use the term immature play to distinguish this play from mature play that should be expected of older preschoolers and kindergartners. Although mature play does in fact contribute to children's learning and development in many areas, immature play does not provide these benefits. It seems to us that in many instances when parents or school administrators propose replacing play in an early childhood classroom with more academic activities, they are prompted by the fact that the play they see in these classrooms is actually happening at an immature level.

Generally speaking, it is hard to argue for the value of play that is repetitive and unimaginative. However, following Vygotsky's (1978) principle of learning, it will be appropriate to design a system of interventions to scaffold play in children who for some reason did not receive adequate support for their play at home or at school. Each strategy must target one or more characteristics of mature play. This study thus shares some of our insights into how early childhood teachers can promote mature play in this 21st Century. Suffice it to mention that the strategies below have been the accepted canon in the western world.

Children creating imaginary situations

When children create an imaginary situation, they assign new meanings to the objects and people involved: As a result, they practise operations on meanings that are mentally more sophisticated than operations on real objects. It is apparent, however, that the cognitive benefits of engaging in imaginary actions depend on the kinds of props and toys children use: realistic and specific props do not require a great deal of imagination. A good way for teachers to support the development of imaginary situations is to provide multipurpose props that can be used to stand for

many objects. For example, a cardboard box could be a computer in the office, a sink in the kitchen, or a baby crib for a doll in the nursery.

An advantage of these nonspecific props is that children must use more descriptive language when interacting with their play partners: unless they describe what the object stands for and how it will be used, the other children will find it hard to follow the change in meaning of the object from one play use to the other. Another alternative to providing realistic play props is to encourage children to make their own. For example, instead of using real food items in a pretend restaurant, children can make their own play food with play-dough-nut and other art materials. Some children may not be ready to make their own props or to play with unstructured objects. They will not play unless there are some realistic props available. For these children, teachers need to introduce symbolic use of objects gradually; both in the play area and outside of it. In the play area the teacher can start with realistic props to keep play going and then add other materials that are increasingly less realistic. For example, a pretend grocery store can combine realistic props (grocery cart, scale, cash register) with some that are generic (boxes, plastic bags) and some that are open-ended (pieces of paper that can be used for play money, coupons, or shopping lists).

Outside the play area, teachers can use additional strategies to help children create and maintain the imaginary situation. These can be used during group time or in a centre with four or five children. For example, teachers can show the children common objects and brainstorm how they can use these things to stand for something different: a paper plate looks like a Frisbee to one child, a flying saucer to another and a pizza to yet another. After all, the children learn how to transform real objects into pretend ones, the teachers could extend the game by limiting the choice of props to a specific play theme. The paper plate would become something that could be used in a spaceship: an instrument dial, a steering wheel, or a round window. When playing this game, it is important to encourage children to use both gestures and words to

describe how they are using the object in a pretend way. In some cases, teachers can place the objects used for the game in the play area so children can use them in new ways in later plays.

Children acting out various roles

In mature play, the set of roles associated with a theme is not limited and stereotypical, but is easily expanded to include supporting characters. Playing hospital does not mean the only roles are those of doctor and patient. A nurse, lab technician, dietitian, and pharmacist can also participate. Patients can bring their parents or children with them; they can be brought by an ambulance driver or the pilot of an emergency helicopter.

Being able to choose among a variety of roles decreases the number of disagreements that are common when several children want to be the doctor and nobody wants to be the patient. In addition, when children get to play different roles in different scenarios, they learn about social interactions they might not have in real life (following commands and issuing them; asking for help and helping others; being an expert and being a beginner).

The ability of young children to act out various roles depends on their familiarity with what people do in different settings, how they interact with each other, and what kinds of tools they use, and so on. Children are not likely to gain all this knowledge on their own. Teachers can help children expand the number of themes in their play and the number of roles associated with different play themes.

Field trips, literature, and videos are wonderful sources for expanding children's repertoire of play themes and roles. However, taking children on a field trip does not necessarily ensure they will incorporate this new experience in their play scenarios. The most common mistake is to focus children's attention on the actions that happened as part of a field trip or video. What is inside a fire truck or

what happens to the letters when they arrive at the post office? Instead, teachers should point out the people involved in each new setting; the many different roles people play in each setting and how the roles are related to each other. Learning about new roles and the language and actions associated with each of them helps children re-enact these new experiences in their play.

For example, on a field trip to a historic train station, without the teacher's help, all the children notice is the large engine. But with the teacher's help, they can learn about the roles of engineer, stoker, and conductor. They can talk about the passengers boarding the train, stowing their luggage on the overhead rack, and giving their tickets to the conductor. This attention to the people aspect of the field trip will translate into more complex plays back in the classroom. When the focus is on the objects, children's play may be limited by the number of appropriate props. Imagine the difficulty of sharing one engineer's hat! However, when the focus shifts to the people and their roles, children can easily make up for the missing objects by substituting others or simply by naming them: a pupil says, "I am the engineer," as he pretends to put on his engineer's hat and then makes gestures as if he were holding on to a steering wheel.

Children planning their plays

In mature play, children can describe to each other what the play scenario is, who is playing which role, and how the action will happen. During this planning period, pupils discuss how to handle the fact that both of them want to be the teacher. To get children to the point where they can do this mature planning, teachers have to encourage children to discuss:

- Who they are going to be,
- What they are going to play, and
- What is going to happen?

Teachers should set aside time to discuss this before the children enter the centre. The children should focus on *what will be played, who will be which person*, and *what will happen*. At first, the teachers will need to do some prompting, because children are used to discussing what they will play with, or which centre they will play in, rather than the roles and themes of their play. Children who are going to the same centre should discuss their plans with each other. We have found that children begin to use the discussion as a strategy for play itself. The planning helps children maintain and extend their roles.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it should be noted that play does not need to compete for the teacher's attention in an early childhood classroom, because our research shows that an emphasis on play does not detract from academic learning but actually enables children to learn better. "In classrooms where children spent 50 to 60 minutes of a two-and-a-half-hour programme in play supported by teachers' use of Vygotskian strategies to enhance play, children scored higher in literacy skills than in control classrooms" (Bodrova & Leong, 2001:57). There was more productive time to learn, more time to be creative, and more time to have fun, especially in an early childhood classroom. Furthermore, it was observed that there were little fighting, a lot of discussion, and more friendships as children had many more positive interactions with each other as they engaged in co-ordinate mature plays. Thus play does not compete with foundational skills: rather through mature play, children learn the very foundational skills that will prepare them for the academic challenges that lie ahead.

Against this background, this paper, therefore, recommends that play – not just play, but mature and coordinated as expatiated in this paper – should be integrated into the early childhood education

curriculum in Nigeria. It should also be taught by the early childhood teachers and givers, who should be trained in adequate numbers. This is to enable Nigerian youngsters get the holistic education they have always needed, and be at par with their counterparts in other parts of the world.

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