

The diverse benefits of play, especially for young children, have been cited for decades (Barnett, 1990). Policy and curriculum recommendations over the years have focused on creating more learner-centred classroom transactions. The National Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (2013) makes a point for engaging young children in play-based learning. For children in the younger grades, play acquires a place of special significance. In fact, focus on the holistic development of students along with the encouragement of creativity and critical thinking (National Education Policy, 2020) makes it even more necessary for educators to develop deeper insights into principles of play-based strategies for implementation in classrooms. The implementation of play-based learning strategies for young children necessitates a well-planned curriculum and also well-prepared teachers to implement the same. In order to 'teach' young children, one also needs to know how children learn (UNICEF, 2018). This article will focus on the relationship of play with learning and also discuss some specific ways in which play can be used with young children across domains of development and areas of learning.

The context of play

In India, for a major part, the landscape of teaching and learning stands in almost stark contrast to how we conceptualise play-based learning. The reasons for these divergent practices can be many and often emanate from the conceptualisations of curricular practices and socio-economic and cultural contexts of education in the country. First, the textbook-centred pedagogy (Kumar, 1988), a prominent legacy of colonial times continues to dominate classroom transactions, even at the preschool levels. Second, perceptions of quality have become increasingly associated with formal ways of teaching even at the preschool level (Singh, 2019). Third, playway based transactions continue to be perceived as not leading to preparation for primary school (Singh, 2019), which is considered as one of the main goals of preschool. Fourth, time constraints in 'covering' the academic content leave

little room for play-based strategies. These distinct, yet overlapping, factors have only propagated silos between play and learning. This is not to say that play has not been recognised and recommended as a strategy for young children, rather, the relationship between play and learning has not been understood adequately.

While the National Curriculum Frameworks (NCERT, 2005; The National Early Childhood Care and Education Framework, 2013) craft a direction towards constructivism and play-based pedagogies, the desired change in beliefs about pedagogy requires advocacy for teacher agency and autonomy and not only provisions of training, infrastructure and materials (Kaul & Sharma, 2017). Teachers' beliefs about teaching also flow from their own experiences, both personal and professional. These point to the need for activating teacher agency and autonomy and their participation in policymaking for the implementation of play-based strategies.

Play, learning and development

Play is critical for learning and development during the early childhood years. It has an impact on children's social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. Research on early learning and development indicates that supporting children in play contributes to their learning and development and does not have a negative impact (Bergen, 2002). It is, therefore, imperative to understand the specific benefits of play and the ways in which it can be implemented in classrooms. Maria Montessori, an Italian educator believed that play is a 'child's work', implying that children are learning when they are engaged in their day-to-day routines. When children play spontaneously, it provides them with opportunities to explore, experiment manipulate and engage in problem-solving activities, critical for knowledge construction (Early Childhood Education Curriculum Framework, 2013). Given the diversity in play across cultures in the Indian context, it would be especially enriching for the classroom to bring in some of these diversities of play into the curriculum.

In order to understand the relationship between play and learning, it is first necessary to examine the different types of play. Many kinds of play have been identified in the field, such as solitary play, parallel play, group play, functional play, constructive play, exploration, dramatic play, games-with-rules and so on (Rubin, 2001). For the purposes of understanding play-based learning, one can broadly identify two types of play—free play and guided play. *Free play* is typically child-directed and is an act that is enjoyable for the child and could be by oneself or in engagement with others. On the other hand, *guided play* refers to those activities that essentially involve child-directed joyful aspects of free play with the mediation of an adult and therefore, enables the child to extend his or her learning through this scaffolding (Weisberg, et al., 2016). Guided play, thus, involves the agency of young children and also the guidance from an adult. Thus, play can create and provide a context for children not only to explore their interests but also for the teacher to guide their learning to specific goals.

Pellegrini (2006) conducted a research study that indicated that elementary school students who engaged in free play during recess time were more attentive to their work when they returned to the classroom. The study results showed that these children, especially boys, performed better academically in reading and mathematics in comparison with children who did not play during recess. Thus, building on play-based strategies is important for teachers in a classroom because these could be used to teach the academic curriculum in developmentally and contextually appropriate ways. While guided play might be considered more suitable for classrooms, both types of play have benefits for teachers. It is important to understand the multiple dimensions of play and the ways in which it can be used in the classroom and also outside the classroom. The benefits of play cut across domains of development and learning.

Social, emotional and physical development

The diverse nature of play allows children to interact with their peers and engage with them. This engagement, especially for young children, is critical for the development of their social and emotional skills. In our current contexts, the shrinking spaces for physical play and the overuse of technology has

heightened our awareness of the need for young children to go out and engage in physical play for their physical health and social engagement with peers. When children engage in physical play, it provides them with a physical release and ‘may facilitate friendships and promote cooperative pro-social behaviours and attitudes’ (Scott & Panksepp, 2003, p. 549). Children who are able to play with one another are also in the process of learning to work with one another. Play enables children to build relationships and friendships, learn to work and cooperate and resolve conflicts (Blasi & Hurwitz 2012, Pellegrini & Smith 1998). When children play with others, the process enables them to identify themselves vis-à-vis the context in which they are located and also enables them to establish a sense of self. This is because the process of play involves making various kinds of decisions and negotiating with their peers. Often, children’s play also has rules of turn-taking, waiting, leading and so on, which can also empower them to become self-reliant and motivated learners.

Research by Ghafouri and Wien (2009) has provided evidence that child-directed play also enables children to co-construct a social-emotional bond with their peers that sustains their play. This kind of play is important for children to be able to understand and follow rules, negotiate and resolve conflicts, become aware and support the wellbeing of their peers. Children’s play and its relationship with emotional development are well documented. While all kinds of play could provide opportunities for learning and development to young children, children use pretend play as an opportunity to learn and to address their feelings, develop empathy and balanced emotional health (Kwon & Yawkey, 2000). If the teacher and the school support the use of physical play on a regular basis, it provides a powerful model for young children to engage in play in their homes and communities also. This may, in turn, lessen the dependence on technology in the areas of play which is now shrinking playtime for young children.

Language and literacy development

Language and literacy are key modes for children to communicate with one another during play. Communication through language enables children to develop bonds, participate in dramatic play and also navigate through conflicts that may develop during play. Language empowers children to understand that their imagination can enable them to be anyone they want to be. Play contributes

to the development of representational as well as abstract thought processes (The National Early Childhood Care and Education Framework, 2013).

The language and literacy context of our country presents to us two dimensions while discussing the relationship between language, literacy and play. The first is the rich linguistic tradition in the country and an acknowledgement of the diversity of the languages children bring into the classrooms. It is important to keep in mind that our spoken languages are strongly connected with our identities. Hence, it is critical to acknowledge and respect the languages young children bring into the classroom. Second, all our languages are replete with riddles, poems, songs etc, which can be used as resources in the class to engage young children in play.

Children's play and the development of emergent literacy skills are said to be strongly related (Christie & Enz, 1992). Young children's early attempts at using emergent literacy skills find representation in their use of rhyming games, making lists for shopping, pretend reading and so on (Bergen & Mauer, 2000). The researchers found that children who were able to engage in symbolic play in the classroom showed better abilities in reading and writing in the later grades. Toub et al. (2018) conducted two studies in which they examined the role of play in a programme developed for vocabulary intervention among 249 low-income preschool children. Book readings with toys were used as a strategy to present new vocabulary to children. In the first study, children were randomly grouped for free play, guided play and directed play. With the different levels of support from an adult, all children showed gains in the knowledge of vocabulary. Children in the two groups which had adult support gained the most. In the second study, classroom teachers worked with 101 children in place of researchers. The results of the study again indicated gains in receptive and expressive vocabulary. Thus, both studies clearly suggest the advantages of adult support in play-based activities for vocabulary development. In the Indian context, games that encourage the use of the bilingual and multilingual contexts of children can enable children to participate more in classroom processes.

Numeracy and spatial skills

A number of children's games involve numbers,

addition, subtraction and so on. At street corners and playgrounds, we find children engaged in physical play and various kinds of manipulations with numbers. However, we also commonly find young children who have already developed a fear of mathematics. Therefore, the early grades are the time for understanding how young children conceptualise mathematical concepts and also for introducing the same in an engaging manner.

In a study, Seo and Ginsburg (2003) sought to explore young children's naturalistic exploration of mathematical concepts during free play time. The study was conducted with 90 low-income African American, Latino and White children in the age group of 4-5 years from different schools. After observing children over a period of time, the researchers found that children engaged in diverse types of activities which included classification, magnitude, enumeration, dynamics, pattern and shape and spatial relations.

A study by Fisher et al. (2013) with preschool children observed young children as they learned about geometry and shapes. The study was conducted with 70 children in the age group of 4-5 years across scenarios of guided play, free play, and didactic instruction. In the case of guided play, the adult scaffolded the interaction with the child. In the case of free play, children were free to interact with the shapes in whichever way they wished to. In direct instruction, the teacher led the instruction and the children sat and listened to her. The results of the study indicated that children's learning was the maximum in the guided play conditions in comparison with the other two scenarios.

In another study, Ramani and Siegler (2008) sought to understand how playing board games in the form of guided play with 124 preschool children from low-income backgrounds could foster knowledge of diverse numerical tasks. These tasks included numerical magnitude, number line estimation, number identification and counting. Preschool children engaged in the board games for four sessions, each of 15-20 minutes, with the researcher for two weeks and for another session nine weeks later. The researchers found that the gains remained consistent even after nine weeks of the study. Thus, there is ample evidence of ways in which mathematical concepts can be used in a play-based manner with young children in place of the typical paper-pencil measures common across many classrooms.

Conclusion

Changing times necessitate that the transaction of the curriculum in the classroom is one that engages young children, instead of following a one-size-fits-all approach. Many of our classrooms, even for the very young, continue to practise strategies heavily focused on rote learning and memorisation that do not enable children to understand the content of the instruction. In fact, these practices have seeped in so deeply that many stakeholders in the community now regard the filling up of worksheets by children as quality education.

We know that during the early years, children are in the process of understanding their contexts and responding to those in their unique and creative manner. The use of play-based strategies enables children to develop their creativity and critical

thinking skills (NEP, 2020). Further, research evidence from diverse contexts has supported the use of play in classroom transactions. There is evidence of support for free play as well as guided play. It is necessary to examine the types of play and the benefits from them. If we want to enable children's learning and development through play – keeping a Vygotskian perspective of the zone of proximal development – play also needs to evolve across contexts and across classrooms. In order to bring in play-based approaches into the classrooms, it is essential to understand the existing research on play-based learning, create opportunities for in-service learning where teachers could exchange ideas on using these approaches, work with parents and communities to become familiar with the funds of knowledge in the communities and advocate for the same at the policy and curricular levels.

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