

The Fun of Learning and Learning Through Fun

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As a teacher, I have long heard and understood the arguments in favour of learning through play in primary grades. But in most of these views, the examination of the why and how of this has been sparse. In this article, I will try to elaborate on what I have understood about learning through play and how I have adopted this idea. My experience as a primary school teacher has been shaped by my understanding as part of *Eklavya's* primary education programme, *Prashika*.

Why learn through play in early grades?

Children's learning status in primary grades is shrouded in questions. As soon as they enter school, children who have constantly intervened, interacted with and understood the world around them are suddenly labelled as laggards or ones who cannot learn. The method of teaching in schools differs vastly from the teaching-learning process the children are familiar with. In this teaching-learning process, they are *addressed* but not *included* (or are inadequately and infrequently included).

In the primary grades, children learn and expand on skills such as comprehension, reading and writing, observation, expression of thoughts, calculations and so on. The learning of these skills is only possible by being involved. Acquiring these through a teacher's explanations alone often becomes a meaningless, absurd, arduous, and afflictive task for children. Simply repeating what the teacher says may ensure that teaching takes place, but it does not ensure that learning does.

According to my understanding, these skills can only be learnt well when the learner gets the opportunity to utilise her own understanding. This learning should be posed as a challenge such that the learners spontaneously and inevitably accept it. This means that this process should appeal to them. Their participation in this process should give them a sense of either gaining or of missing out on something.

The learning environment in school should be such that children can utilise their innate potential to accept and participate in the challenge (of learning) and, subsequently, present their individual understanding and take delight in doing so. A process such as this is what we call play-learning, activity, or praxis.

Understanding 'learning through play'

What is learning through play? What are its qualities? What can be learnt through them? Learning through play and activities may involve all aspects of play, but they have one hidden objective which we may call an 'educational objective' or 'formal-schooling objective'. Play and activities may be of two types:

1. Those that involve both physical mobility and mental capacity (the use of one's thinking).
2. Those that involve no (or next to none) physical mobility and only involve the mental capacity.

Both these kinds of activities require group or individual involvement. A key element in these activities is, 'let every child be involved'. Involvement means that every child should get an equal opportunity to participate in an ongoing activity or dialogue and this should be followed unequivocally.

Activity 1

In a class, children are sitting in a circle. They are engaged in an activity in which each child has to name a tall and a round object. This is being played with the help of a ball and a song. Children were singing '*Kya hai lamba, kya hai gol, jaldi bol jaldi bol*' (what is tall, what is round, say it quickly). The ball is thrown around and this jingle is repeated. Whoever gets the ball must name one tall and one round object. The name of the objects cannot be repeated. Since the ball could come to anyone, the children should have already thought of their responses. However, they have to constantly think of new objects because those that they may have thought of, may be named by another before them. By analysing this activity, one can see that each

child involved in it is deeply engaged in the process of thinking. Each child is raking through her/his memory in an effort to identify objects that possess the quality of being tall or round. These two qualities do not exist as distinct identities, except as ideas of 'tall-ness' and 'round-ness'. In this activity, children also establish reasons for their choice of objects. For example, a child named a 'pot' as being a round object. When other children interjected that it is also a tall object, the child replied that it has round parts. The teacher lists all the round and tall objects that had been named on the blackboard. Then, looking at the list, the teacher talks to the children about their reasons for identifying something as tall or round.

Often, a play or activity has more than one skill integrated into it. However, a teacher should keep a specific skill in mind during play or while carrying out an activity. The objective of the above activity is not to make children identify tall and round objects. They already possess that knowledge. The objective is to lead children towards grouping or classifying objects based on certain qualities or identities.

Activity 2

In a class of children who are still learning to read and write, the teacher instructs each child to go outside the class and fetch any two objects from the surroundings. After a while, children bring back some objects with them. The teacher makes a table on the blackboard which has three columns: name of the object, its colour and the place it was found.

Then, the teacher instructs the children to give these details about the object each has brought. Children give these details, and the teacher notes these down in the table on the blackboard. While writing this down, the teacher keeps pointing to where the name, colour and the place it was found are being noted. In this way, when the table is completed, all objects that the children brought are collected in one place. Now, the teacher points towards the written text and reads the entire table aloud. Then, one by one, the children are called to the blackboard to point out the place where the name of their object is written. They also have to show where the colour and place it was found has been noted. Then, the teacher makes pairs of children, and each pair has to identify each other's object on the blackboard and read it aloud. After this, the teacher tells them that she would read aloud the name of the place where an object was

found and the students have to tell the name of the object and where it is written on the blackboard.

Though the teacher was teaching how to identify and read the written text in this activity, organising information in a table and understanding a table were also objectives of this activity.

If we examine the two activities mentioned, we can say the following about activities/ learning through play:

- A fragment of some of the concepts/abilities used in the activity was already present in the children.
- During the activity, each child is challenged to apply her own thinking and understanding.
- While participating in an activity, a child receives direct feedback from her peers, which brings clarity to the understanding of that concept.
- This process generates enthusiasm which will boost students' confidence to accept such challenges readily.

Making play relevant for teachers

Understanding children's learning process

Children learn many things at home, such as household chores, some games, putting on 'good' behaviour when meeting a visitor at home or in a new environment. Analysing these examples makes one understand some of the basic principles of a child's learning process. For example, on seeing my mother make *roti*, I felt like making *roti* myself. When I insisted, my mother gave me the task of making the last two *rotis* of the day. Every day, while waiting to make the last *roti*, I would carefully watch the way my mother would roll the *roti* into a perfect round. But when I tried to roll the *roti*, it would stick on the rolling pin. My *roti* would not form into a perfect disc. It would be too thick in the middle and too thin on the sides. But I refused to concede defeat. Under my mother's instructions, coupled with my own practice, I learnt how to roll a perfectly round *roti* in two weeks.

If I analyse the process of my learning how to make a *roti*, I find that the process of learning included observing and understanding, using that understanding, repeating this process, being responsible, being involved, thinking of and creating new ways, accepting the challenge, showing enthusiasm to learn, showing eagerness, daring, being happy and trying again and again. These are the factors that must form the basis for weaving learning through play in children's formal schooling.

Having foundational understanding of the subject

I was able to interweave learning through play with the teaching-learning process because I was able to understand the abilities the subject being taught develops in the children. Language, environmental science, mathematics and science cannot be taught to children in the same way. I came to understand that language is for children to express their original ideas in speech and writing. There were opportunities in my teaching where children expressed their own experiences on an issue.

I created activities in which children would come up with words associated with a certain subject. While teaching environmental studies, I had to take a step back and think whether it would be appropriate to just narrate the sources of water to children or send them to the village to explore and find out how many hand pumps and wells there are in the village and where they are located. In mathematics, I knew that achieving the ability to count meant the ability to find the quantity of an object in a group. For this, I created activities that would require children to count.

Understanding a subject is an issue that requires comprehensive deliberation. Education officers and academicians agree with the ideology of learning through play, but they are used to looking at the idea and explaining it within such a narrow scope that they treat the subject through the lens of purism or as a grammar or rule book. This thought-epidemic reaches the teachers too. The water-tight compartments of subjects need to be opened in the early grades, only then will learning through play become a part of the teaching-learning process.

Teacher's involvement in creating and participating in play

If teachers have not been involved in play and activity themselves, their faith in learning through play remains weak. In the Prashika programme, we created and played many activities during teacher training sessions. Let me introduce you to some of them for reference here.

All teachers sat down in a circle. We were given words which we had to use in sentences. Each teacher had to make a different sentence. For example, for the word 'chair', the first few sentences were utility-based, like 'A chair is used for sitting', 'Chairs are made of wood, metal, or plastic', 'A chair has four legs'. But as the activity progressed, more imaginative and experiential sentences came up. The challenge of making new sentences arises from

the need to use the word in a completely new way. When we were pushed towards thinking of novel sentences, we made new and original sentences. A new language began evolving within us.

The next stage of this activity was to make a sentence using two different words, like, 'chair' and 'sky'. Now everyone had to take turns to make a sentence that used both the words in relation to one another. 'I will sit on a chair as high as the sky', 'God is sitting on sky's chair', 'The sky is for flying, what use does it have for a chair', were some of the sentences made by the teachers. During this activity, we used the creative feature (productive design feature) of language spontaneously. Appreciation for a novel sentence and the creative experiment itself lent this game a feeling of joy and fun.

Another activity was related to mathematics – the understanding of numbers. The teachers were divided into two groups. One group chose a number between 1 and 100. The other group had to guess this number by asking only yes or no questions, such as, Is this number greater than fifty? Is the tens place value of the number greater than two? In this way, the other group had to arrive at the answer using as few questions as possible.

After playing it a few times, we realised how the questions could be framed better. A teacher suggested that the first question could be, 'Is the number smaller than fifty?'

If the answer to this question was a 'no', it meant we could exclude the entire range of numbers from 1-49. This was a really good question which was later repeated as the first question in many rounds of the game. We then learnt to frame the next questions in such a way that the scope of possible answers (numbers) gets narrower. We began considering all identities/properties a number can possess, such as place value, greater than, lesser than, divisibility etc.

We felt and experienced the joy of learning through these activities. In participating in these, we were able to let go of our inhibitions. We learnt new skills through these activities ourselves, such as making poems and stories, acting, novel ways to expressing oneself, experimenting, conducting surveys, understanding numbers in a new sense and so on. We were able to use these games and activities that we had learnt and the experiences we had gained with the children in our schools because we had personally felt the joy and sense of

accomplishment in learning.

Activities in textbooks

An ideal approach towards learning in the early grades to have textbooks in which each lesson calls for an activity. But in the absence of these, teachers need to get familiarised with a lot of activities. Primary school teachers should have a treasure trove of activities through which children can learn. I am mentioning a few activities that we prepared and adopted with children during *Prashika*.

1. Extending a story, making a story from words given, changing a character in a story.
2. Extending a poem or song: '*Hum to so rahe the, humein murge ne jagaya, bola...*', '*Hum to so rahe the, humein billi ne jagaya, boli...*'. Each time this line is repeated, a new object is added to it.
3. Chinese whispers.
4. Drawing a picture while blindfolded.

5. Creating a picture from any given shape such as half a circle, diagonal line, triangle etc.
6. Making objects from clay.
7. Stamping figures using cut slices of potatoes, ladies' fingers etc.
8. Doing simple experiments such as pouring coins in a glass filled with water, observing solubility, rolling objects etc.
9. *Ek jaise, alag-alag* (what is similar, what is different)
10. Walking by following a map.

It is my belief that teachers will be able to implement play and activities in the classroom spontaneously only when they keep an open mind for learning about how children learn, when they have an amicable disposition that believes in children's rationality, when they not only have an understanding of a subject but have acquired for themselves a new meaning of the subject which is free from stereotypes.



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