

Significance of Play in Early Childhood Education Curriculum

Anne Syomwene & Marcella Mwaka

Abstract

Play is integral to children's optimal development. This is because play enhances the holistic development in the four major domains of child development: Physical, cognitive, social and emotional development. This is a concept paper that presents a discussion of play and its significance in early childhood education curriculum. The paper explores definitions and characteristics of play, objectives of early childhood education, theories of play, types of play, the role of the teacher in children's play and the contribution of play in children's holistic development. The paper further highlights a number of challenges affecting children's play in the contemporary society, the effects of play deprivation in children and effective actions in support of children play. This paper recommends that the school environment and curriculum should support children's play in many ways: Provision of adequate time for play; provision of a variety of appropriate materials and activities; enhancement of teachers' support for children's play; and provision of open, safe and adequate space for play. The discussion in this paper enlightens teachers, parents, teacher educators and curriculum planners on the importance of supporting play activities for children's holistic development.

Key words: Play, early childhood education, child development, curriculum

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INTRODUCTION

This paper shall adopt a definition of curriculum by Syomwene, Nyandusi and Yungungu (2017, p. 24) that curriculum can be conceived as: "The intentions of learning; the actions, interactions, and processes elicited and directed by these intentions; and the actual learning that emanates from the prevailing context". The concern of this paper was on the significance of play as part of the learning experiences in the curriculum for early childhood education. Early childhood education can be defined as programs and settings that serve young children from birth through the eight year of life (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; NAEYC, 2009). In Kenya, play is one of the learning areas in early childhood education (KIE, 2003; KIE, 2004). The curriculum for early childhood education also

recommends the use of play activities as a teaching method for other learning areas (Essa, 2011; Follari; 2011; Jackman, 2009; KIE, 2003; KIE, 2004; Syomwene, 2017).

Many scholars have defined play in different ways. Wardle (1987) contends that play involves a free choice activity that is non-literal, self-motivated, enjoyable and process oriented. Bredekamp (2011, p. 120) defines play as “an activity that is freely chosen, initiated and controlled by children and enjoyable”. Jackman (2009, p. 20) defines play as “a behavior that is self-motivated, freely chosen, process oriented and enjoyable and as a natural activity for children”.

From the definitions of play, several characteristics of play can be identified and these include:

- i. Play is voluntary.
- ii. Play is a natural activity for children.
- iii. Play occurs in a variety of settings.
- iv. Play is intrinsically motivated.
- v. In play, children are effectively engaged.
- vi. Play is freely chosen.
- vii. Play is process oriented not product oriented.
- viii. Play is enjoyable.
- ix. Play is controlled by players.
- x. Play involves the use of role play.

The above characteristics of play enhance the understanding of the nature of play and this is important in the concepts raised in this paper.

Play is significant in the optimal development of children in early childhood education (Catron & Allen, 2008; Essa, 2011). Early childhood education caters for children between

the ages of zero to eight years. In this level of schooling, both indoor and outdoor plays are emphasized (KIE, 2003). Play is thus part of the learning experiences that children in early childhood education should be engaged in. Currently, in Kenya the school curriculum has been revised to a competency based one (KICD, 2017). According to KICD (2017), the competency based curriculum in Kenya has seven core competences: (i) Communication and collaboration; (ii) Critical thinking and problem solving; (iii) Imagination and creativity; (iv) Citizenship; (v) Digital literacy; (vi) Learning to learn; and (vii) Self efficacy. Play can effectively enhance all the seven competences based on its characteristics as discussed in this paper. Amongst the learning areas in the proposed Pre-Primary Level of education, play falls under Psychomotor and Creative Activities while in the Lower Primary Level, it falls under Movement and Creative Activities (KICD, 2017). This paper supports the propositions by many early childhood education scholars that play is an effective learning medium and learning experience in early childhood education (Bredekamp, 2011; Catron & Allen, 2008; Essa, 2011; Jackman, 2009; NAEYE, 2009; Syomwene, 2017). However, in the curriculum that is currently being phased out in Kenya, play has been affected by increased teacher work-loads (Syomwene, 2017). In addition, various trends in schools have affected the provision of play to children. Some of these trends include minimal opportunities to natural environments, priority to academic skills, limited outdoor spaces and increased teacher workloads (Catron & Allen, 2008; Follari, 2011; Jackman, 2009; Morrison, 2011; Syomwene, 2017). Play in early childhood education is supported by various learning theories such as Piaget's cognitive development theory, Vygotsky's social cultural theory, Behaviourist theories, Freud's psychoanalytic theory, and Erickson's psychosocial theory (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; Morrison, 2011; Piaget, 1985; Syomwene, Nabwire & Musamas, 2015; Vygotsky, 1978). Both the old and proposed curriculum for pre-primary and lower primary school education adopt play as a learning area. The challenge in Kenya as mentioned earlier is that some factors do influence the provision of play and this can affect the holistic development of children below nine years. This paper therefore

discusses the significance of play in children's lives as an awakening effort for the achievement of the objectives of early childhood education in Kenya and other parts of the world.

Objectives of Early Childhood Education in Kenya

The aim of early childhood programs is to enhance children's holistic development in the four domains of child development: Physical, cognitive, social and emotional developments (Bredekamp, 2011, Catron & Allen, 2008; Essa, 2011; Jackman, 2009; NAEYE, 2009). The following are the specific objectives of Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Kenya as stipulated in KIE (2004, p. x). Early Childhood Education should:

1. Provide education geared towards development of the child's mental and physical capabilities.
2. Enable the child enjoy living and learning through play.
3. Develop the child's self-awareness, self-esteem and self-confidence.
4. Enable the child develop understanding and appreciation of his / her culture and environment.
5. Foster the child's exploration skills, creativity, self-expression and discovery.
6. Identify the child with special needs and align him/ her with existing services.
7. Enable the child build good habits and acquire acceptable values and behavior for effective living as an individual and a member of a group.
8. Foster the spiritual and moral growth of the child.
9. Improve the status of the child's health, care and nutritional needs, and link him / her with health services such as immunization, health check- ups and growth monitoring and promotion.
10. Enrich the child's experiences to enable him / her cope better with primary school life.
11. Develop the child's aesthetic and artistic skills.

The second objective of early childhood education in Kenya is centered on play. In addition, all the other objectives can be achieved through play as a learning medium. This is because play is an effective teaching method in early childhood education (KIE, 2003; Wang & Lam, 2017). It is due to the significance of play in the holistic development of children in early childhood education that this paper was developed to add on valuable literature in the implementation of early childhood education. Without play, early childhood programs would be empty, meaningless, boring and incomplete. Play is the primary mode of learning in early childhood (Bredekamp, 2011; Catron & Allen, 2008; Essa, 2011; NAEYE, 2009; Syomwene, 2017).

Theories of Play

This section discusses some classical and contemporary theories that explain play. The theories of play are proposed by scholars such as Mellou (1994) and Saracho (1991).

Classical theories are the traditional theories of play. They justify the basis for play in human activities (Saracho, 1991). They are mainly centered on the driving forces in children play. They include:

- (i) *Surplus energy theory*. This theory postulates that play uses up retained energy that the body does not need. Children tend to play more than adults because they are not very much involved in work and so they have excess energy to release. When the energy is discharged, a balance is restored in the child's body.

- (ii) *Relaxation theory*. This theory assumes the fact that play recreates or restores the energy that has been used up through work. Play thus serves a relaxation or recreation function in a child's body.

- (iii) *Recapitulation theory.* This theory suggests that through play, individuals transcend primitive phases of life and engage in modern life activities. Play enables individuals to relive their evolutionary past.
- (iv) *Pre-exercise theory.* This theory contends that play prepares children for their roles in adult life. Young children's play activities are comparable to adult experiences, and enable children to rehearse skills that they need as adults.

The classical theories of play however appear contradictory. While the surplus energy theory suggests that play consumes excess energy, the relaxation theory suggests otherwise that play creates new energy. Similarly, while the pre-exercise theory describes play as a means of anticipating the future, the recapitulation theory reflects the past of the individual. According to Saracho (1991) none of the classical theories of play provides a complete satisfactory justification of play. Another scholar, Mellou (1994) opines that although the classical theories have serious weaknesses based on outdated, discredited beliefs about energy, instincts and evolution, they form the basis for the modern theories of play.

Modern theories of play are contemporary theories that explain how play benefits child development. They include:

- (i) *Psycho analytic theory.* According to this theory, play serves a cathartic function, allowing children to communicate thereby getting rid of any distressing feelings. The theory is based on Sigmund Freud's works (Catron & Allen, 2008; Saracho, 1991). Freud in his Psycho Analytic theory implies that through play, children release stress and unresolved conflicts. This enhances their self-confidence and self-control. Freud believed that children can communicate and vanquish their fears and anxieties without raising them to a level of conscious by expressing them

in play. By expressing any negative emotions, children overcome stress and gain control of their lives.

- (ii) *Piaget's theory*. Piaget contends that play allows children to construct knowledge. According to Piaget (1985) through play, children construct knowledge through assimilation and accommodation. Play is a mode of processing information about the outside world and integrating it in the individuals (schema) scheme of understanding which has already been developed through prior experiences. To Piaget, play is a vehicle through which the child learns about the environment.
- (iii) *Arousal seeking theory*. This theory holds that play allows children to engage in continuous information processing activities. Through play children mediate any available stimulation to fulfill an optimal arousal level. Play keeps the body at an optimal state of arousal, relieving boredom and reducing uncertainty.
- (iv) *Vygotsky's theory*. This theory contends that play allows children to reach their actual or potential cognitive developmental level. Play promotes language and thought development in children through the interactions with the older children which Vygotsky refers to as 'More Knowledgeable Others' (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky (1978) play enhances interaction amongst the children and with the More Knowledgeable Others (MKO) that enhances learning.
- (v) *Behaviourist Theories*. Behaviourist theories propose that learning occurs through observation, imitation and practice (Aldridge & Goldman, 2007). The environment plays a significant part in learning according to these theories. The teachers are the role models in children's learning for the children observe and imitate them (Syomwene, Nabwire & Musamas, 2015). The role of the teacher is emphasized in play. Play enhances learning according to Behaviourist theories.

(vi) *Psychosocial theory*. The psychosocial theory proposes personality development in children is determined by social context (Wortham, 2010). The learning experiences provided in school (such as play) affect children's personality development. According to this theory, play enables children to resolve conflicts in their lives (Syomwene, Nabwire & Musamas, 2015).

Types of play

Play can be categorized into many kinds depending on its role in child development or according to its nature. Based on cognitive aspects, play can be categorized as follows:

- (i) *Functional play*. In functional play, children play with and manipulate objects and environments using their senses and muscles for instance through touching, tossing and squeezing. Play with manipulative materials allows children to learn from their sensorimotor experiences (Saracho, 1991). Functional play is also called exploratory play, object or sensory play.
- (ii) *Constructive play*. This is a kind of play in which children use objects to create something new. Children's actions are directed towards an end product or goal e.g. a child may use blocks to construct a storied building.
- (iii) *Symbolic play*. In symbolic play, children use one thing to represent or stand with another. An example is dramatic play in which children engage in imaginative play also called pretend play. In dramatic play, children can assume adult roles. This kind of play makes children to develop socially and emotionally. When two or more children are involved in a co-ordinated pretend activity, it is known as *social dramatic play* (Essa, 2011).

- (iv) *Games with rules.* These are games in which children follow prescribed rules for playing together towards a common goal. The games have fixed, pre-determined rules. In these kinds of games, children learn how to control their behavior.

Piaget related types of play to stages of cognitive development in children (Bredekamp, 2011; Jackman, 2009; Saracho, 1991). He theorized that functional play dominates the sensorimotor stage (0-2 years) and that pre-operational stage (2-7 years) is characterized by symbolic and constructive play. Children in concrete operational stage (7-11 years) tend to play games with rules. At infancy, play is supported by effective patterns of physical behavior. At pre-operational stage, play is characterized by symbolic, dramatic or pretend play.

Parten (1932) cited in Essa (2011, p. 46) pointed out six types of social play. These include:

- (i) *Unoccupied behavior*- In this type of play the child can move about the classroom going from one area to another observing but not getting involved.
- (ii) *Solitary play*- In this play the child plays alone uninvolved with other children nearby.
- (iii) *On looker play*- A child watches others as they play, without joining in. The child is a spectator as others play.
- (iv) *Parallel play*- Children play with similar materials or in similar ways but do not interact with each other.
- (v) *Associative play*- Children interact and share materials during play but they are not engaged in a common activity.
- (vi) *Cooperative play*- children play together in a shared activity.

Role of the teacher in children's play

Teachers are expected to support children's play. Child guided or teacher supported play benefits children in many ways. Vygotsky (1978) idea on scaffolding best explains the role of the teacher in children's play. Through scaffolding, the teacher provides instruction, materials in the environment and other experiences to support the child and enable the child to acquire competences and continue to move to new competences (Berk & Winsler, 1995).

Teachers can be both facilitators and participators in children's play (Morrison, 2011; Saracho, 1991). Saracho (1991, p. 98) observes that 'as a facilitator, the teacher selects, organizes, and presents objects, materials and props and conceives experiences regarding designated concepts or themes'. Jones and Reynolds (1992) describe the teacher as a stage manager, mediator, player, scribe, assessor, communicator and planner in children's play. Teachers can intervene to supplement any critical elements of play that are scant. This intervention can be done by providing suggestions, instructions and demonstrations; asking questions from outside the play and by participating in the play, assuming a role and modeling correct play behaviors. Teachers can initiate children's play by creating settings and stimulating children to engage in a particular type of play. Teachers can also provide materials, play opportunities and can equally suggest some novel ideas and activities. Teachers thus need to provide materials for play and create the necessary conditions for effective play for the children (Morrison, 2011).

Spidell (In Saracho, 1991) proposes that teachers can intervene in children's play: When there is a breach of discipline; when there's a child with a social risk; when children request the teacher's intervention and when the teacher acts to enrich play.

In summary, this paper proposes that the teacher can perform the following distinct roles in children's play:

- (i) *The teacher as a model*- The teacher should play with the children as the children emulate him/her.
- (ii) *The teacher as a planner*- The teacher should arrange the play environment to facilitate play and provide a physically and psychologically safe environment necessary for play
- (iii) *The teacher as an observer*- Morrisson (2011) observes that one of the most important responsibilities of an early childhood professional is to observe, document and assess children during play.
- (iv) *The teacher as a protector*- The teacher has to take charge in case of emergencies, enhance children's security and by appraise the play equipment and materials.
- (v) *The teacher as a mediator*-The teacher should help children settle disputes that may arise during play.
- (vi) *The teacher as a resource person*- The teacher also gives appropriate guidance and provides the required materials.

In Kenya, these are the roles that teachers are required to perform as stipulated in the curriculum (KIE, 2003; KIE, 2004). However, sometimes teachers can fail to perform these roles due to personal and contextual challenges. Syomwene (2017) in her study on teacher support and school environment factors affecting children's play found out that many teachers rarely supported children's play due to time, facilities and resource challenges.

Significance of play in the holistic development of children

Play is an important and significant element in early childhood. Without play, childhood would be empty, meaningless and incomplete. Various early educationists valued the use of play in Early Childhood Education curriculum. These include F. W. Froebel, Dr. Maria Montessori, Jean Piaget and John Dewey. Play is an important principle in child development and learning (Bredenkamp, 2011; Catron & Allen, 2008; Essa, 2011; NAEYC,

2009). Children learn and develop through play. Through play, children acquire most of the skills that they need for effective living. Play allows children opportunity to create, invent, discover and learn about the world (Catron & Allen, 2008; Essa, 2011; Jackman, 2009). Play is an important vehicle for developing self-regulation as well as promoting language, cognition and social competence (Bredekamp, 2011; Jackman, 2009). Play is one of the effective guidelines in the development of Developmentally Appropriate Practice in early Childhood Education (Bredekamp, 2011; Jackman, 2009; NAEYE, 2009). It provides children with joy and understanding of themselves and others. Play is the vehicle that enables optimal development of the young child. Catron and Allen (2008, p. 27) contend "Play directly influences all areas of development by offering children opportunities for learning about self, others and the environment. Play gives children the freedom to imagine, to explore and to create". Play is as essential to child development as food. Denying children play is disastrous and can have very significant impacts in the children's lives. Therefore, play facilitates holistic development in children by stimulating physical, social, emotional and cognitive development in the early years.

Play and cognitive development

Cognition is the development of the mind or intellect. Play facilitates intellectual development in children. Through play, children encounter new experiences, manipulate materials and interact with others thereby acquiring knowledge and forming ideas about the world around them (Catron & Allen, 2008; Essa, 2011). They also acquire and refine problem solving skills. Block building, sand and water play lays the foundation for logical mathematical thinking, scientific reasoning and cognitive problem solving (Armstrong, 2006).

Play fosters creativity, imagination and flexibility in thinking (Armstrong, 2006; Catron & Allen, 2008). In play, children construct knowledge by combining their ideas, impressions and intuitions with experiences and opinions. They create theories about the

world and share them with one another. Children run the contents of their imaginations with contents of the real world and through their creativity they invent something spontaneous, novel and unique. Jones and Reynolds (1992) observe that young children learn the most important things not by being told but by constructing knowledge for themselves in interaction with the physical world and with other children and the way they do this is by playing.

As part of cognitive development, play enhances language development in children. Armstrong (2006) observes that play fosters vocabulary and language skills in children. The child learns to use language to communicate meaning and will pick up new words and grammatical structures. Children expand their vocabulary and improve their receptive and expressive skills by interacting with other children during play situations (Catron & Allen, 2008). Through play children acquire the ability to explain themselves, describe objects and events, express their feelings, ask and answer questions. Children develop complex narratives in pretend play. They generate language for different roles.

Play and social development for holistic development in children

Play has a socializing effect in children's lives (Catron & Allen, 2008). The environment in which a child grows dictates the social behavior of the child. As the child plays he or she interacts with others and establishes the code of acceptable behavior. Pretend play fosters communication, and conversational skills such as turn taking as well as social problem solving skills like persuading, negotiating, compromising and cooperating. This occurs as children take many roles like actors, directors, narrators and audience during pretend play

In play children discover the intimacy and joy of friendship as they explore their own emerging identity. Especially in self-directed play, children acquire self-confidence and feelings of competence. Children learn sharing skills as they share play materials. Plays helps children learn how to get along with others.

Some of the social skills that children acquire in play include ability to make eye contact in communication, ability to empathize, turn taking skills, sharing skills, ability to get along with others, cooperation and self-control skills. Dramatic play helps children to put themselves in another person's place and foster the development of empathy and consideration for others. Play widens empathy and lessens egocentrism (Catron & Allen, 2008).

Play and emotional development

Play enhances a child's emotional wellbeing. During play, children release their fears, joys, jealousies, anger and frustrations as explained under psychoanalytic theory of play. Play enables children cope with distress and frustrations. This facilitates the development of self-control, self-esteem and self-confidence in the children (Catron & Allen, 2008; Jackman, 2009). Play lessens emotional pain and trauma in children's lives. It fosters emotional health as a stress reducer (Catron & Allen, 2008). Through play children learn to accept, express and cope with feelings in a constructive positive manner.

Play and physical development

Physical play enhances healthy physical growth and motor skills development in children. Through play, children develop essential physical skills such as muscles development, eye-hand coordination, eye-foot coordination, fine and gross motor skills. Fine motor skills are skills involved in the use of small muscles of the fingers and hands. Gross motor skills are the skills involved in the control of the large muscles of the legs, arms, back and shoulders (Armstrong, 2006; Essa, 2011). Outdoor play experiences are very effective in motor development in children.

Challenges to play in the contemporary society

Despite the significance of play in child development, there are many challenges in the contemporary societies that deprive children of this important component in their lives.

This is disastrous because as Catron and Allen (2008) observe, in the postmodern society, children are increasingly confronting stressful life events that threaten their development, their physical and emotional health and survival such as societal and family violence, divorce, death, child abuse, insecurity and terrorism. This makes play an increasingly essential ingredient in their lives. Some of the challenges that have deprived children play include:

1. Opportunities to natural environments are minimizing especially in urban settings.
2. Parents are increasingly concerned about the safety of their children thereby denying the children opportunities of outdoor play.
3. Priority to academic skills and activities. Sometimes, the curriculum puts heavy demands on literacy and numeracy experiences at the expense of play.
4. Limited outdoor space especially in some urban early childhood education centers affect child play.
5. Teacher presence, guidance, stimulation and participation in play have been inhibited by increased teacher workloads.

Play deprivation in children can result to various deficiencies in child development such as poor imagination and creativity; lack of self-confidence and low self-esteem; lack of cooperation skills; laziness; poor problem solving skills; lack of empathy; poor physical coordination.; stress; poor health; lack of self-motivation; and poor regard and respect for others.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper has shed light on play and its significance in early childhood education. Play is important to children's lives as food. It's a vehicle for learning and enhances children's holistic development. This paper recommends that the school environment and curriculum should support children's play through provision of adequate time for play; provision of a variety of appropriate materials and activities; teachers should support children's play; and provision of open, safe and adequate space for play. Teachers can

encourage parents to support children's play as well. These recommendations concur with the requirements provided in both the old and new curriculums in Kenya (KIE, 2003; KICD, 2017). This paper thus provides valuable literature that can serve as an awakening gesture in the implementation of the old curriculum for early childhood education in Kenya and in the preparation for the implementation of the new Competency Based curriculum in Kenya.

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