



Children Active Learning through Unstructured Play

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Abstract

The Disposition of most adults to children playing is not encouraging due to the preconceived notion that children who play are often likely to be un-intelligent and hardly succeed in their academic pursuit. As a result, most parents hinder their children from playing, believing that it is an unprofitable venture. This popular notion on children's playing triggers this study, to the extent that most parents as well as educational institutions for young children do not provide a conducive environment for them to play. This study is qualitatively designed; observation was used for data collection where the researchers watched some children aged 3 to 5 playing in their natural setting. In-depth analysis with the observation reveals that unstructured play could make young children learn through cooperation, gain knowledge and experience through imitation as well as gaining insight to new knowledge through trial and error. If the majority of parents, teachers and educators are aware of this, they could provide a comfortable environment for children to play in order to develop them physically, mentally and psychologically.

Key Words: Play, unstructured play, environment, preschoolers, insightful learning

Introduction

Literature Review

The word 'play' is synonymous with children. According to a dictionary definition, engaging in enjoyable and recreational activity could be regarded as play, especially for young children. For some people, play is seen as informal and unserious activity that children engage in to while away their time. However, play is explained differently by many people; their definitions could be considered in order to get a clear idea about the concept of play.

It could be understood that there is no absolute and complete definition of play that covers the demand of all the stakeholders involved in child development activities such as parents, teachers and educationists.

Nonetheless, there is an assertion that says play includes a range of self-chosen activities, undertaken for their own interest, enjoyment and the satisfaction that results for children. More so, the Aistear: the Early-Childhood Curriculum Framework states [1] that play is a method of doing things and gives operational characteristics of play as active, adventurous and risky, communicative, enjoyable, involved, meaningful, sociable and interactive symbolic, therapeutic, and voluntary.

According to the framework, all the above-mentioned characteristics are regarded as the defining qualities of play. The qualities mentioned in the word, "meaningful" require attention, what is meant when one says something is meaningful? The word is derived from "meaning" which also means, demanding understanding and clarification and creating. Invariably, learning should also take place during meaningful play. Therefore, play should be seen as a vehicle for children learning. In addition, the Canadian Council on Learning [2] reports, "play nourishes every aspect of children's development. Play forms the foundation of intellectual, social, physical and emotional skills necessary for success in school and life; it paves the way for learning

cited by Ontario Ministry of Education Viewer's Guide [3] From the literature reviewed, it is apparent that play is an important element that brings about learning among young children. Hence, it is pertinent to review the contributions of play to children's total development and learning.

Contribution of Play to Children's Development and Learning

Educating young children should bring about development in all aspects of children's life. Currently, play is identified as the basic tool that can bring about effective learning and total development in children. Some accepted skills can also be developed through play. Because play is a natural means for children interaction, they learn important social skills as they play with one another, for example, acts of cooperating, taking turn, sharing, listening and negotiating occur during playing [4]. Equally, [5] found that play importantly develops verbal creativity (fluency, flexibility, and originality), graphic intelligence (elaboration, fluency, and originality), behaviours and traits of inventive personality among children. It means that inventive play meaningfully impact on creative thinking among preschool children.

More so, study shows that play contributes to the academic abilities of young children in the aspects of mathematics and literacy, [6]. In terms of higher thinking ability and moral development play serves a pertinent role in child growth. [7] asserts that children who engage in a complex form of play have greater language skills, more empathy and more of a subtle capacity to know the needs of others, are less aggressive and show more self-control and higher level of thinking. In addition, cognition and problem-solving skills are desirable skills which education tries to instill in students.

Play and Physical Outdoor Environment

Physical open-air environment includes the natural setting. physical outdoor environment brings about a special stage for play and can arouse children's play learning and outdoor activities. Equally, the author asserts that collectively, play and the outdoors specifically contribute to the learning of young children. Another study by [8] found that play has significance impact on the ordinary environment and motor development of pre-primary children, meaning that, the large expanse of land, natural environment, and good atmospheric condition make it conducive for children to explore their natural environment. Sawyers (1994) [9] also confirm the above statement in her study when she found that outdoor play help children develop knowledge, social skills and motor skills. Therefore, educators and teachers of young children should create a conducive environment for children to play in order to ensure total development among the children. Most literatures address play as contributing to child development and natural environment as enhancing young children learning, but none has categorically mentioned unstructured play as contributing to children learning. Base on this, the current study wishes to undertake such responsibility by using an observational method to explore how amorphous play could contribute to children learning.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research method. This form of research is especially effective in obtaining culturally specific information regarding the values, judgments, and behaviours of a particular population [10]. Prior to data collection, one of the researchers presented the problem and research questions before the Institutional Review Board which comprises senior researchers of the faculty. After deliberation, the member had approved the study with some recommendations for further improvement.

Design

Action research as well as grounded theory design are adopted. This is because action research has an applied focus [11]. The rationale behind using this design lies in the premise that the present study wishes to highlight methods that could be used to improve students' learning through unstructured play within the field of education. Equally, the aim of the study is to inform and improve practices within the field of education [12]. More so, this form of research is especially effective in obtaining information about and subsequently improve the methods used in an education setting [12]. Action design is used when there is a specific educational problem to solve [13].

At the same time, the design could also be regarded as grounded theory because the researchers want to study the process of unstructured play in relation to some theories. This is confirmed by [14], who states

that grounded theory is used when we want to study a process. It could also be used to describe an action of people [15]. To do this, the researchers carry out this study in order to explain children's unstructured play in their natural setting. However, in order to have in-depth understanding and come up with a profound outcome, the researchers employ a qualitative approach by using observation as the instrument for data collection to this study.

Data Collection

The instrument used for data collection is observation. As explained by [16], what to observe depends upon the topic and the conceptual framework. Observation is used because our area of focus is unstructured play while young children are the participants. We are interested in observing them in their natural setting while playing. As [17] explains, observation takes place in a setting where the phenomenon of interest naturally occurs. The physical setting of the observation is a Saudi school in Kuala Lumpur Malaysia. The place during the observation is one of the big space apartments created for children to play in within the school premises. The space is fully rugged and filled with children playing gadgets and toys. The room is ventilated so that the children can enjoy fresh air. Two teachers are assigned to look after the children as they play so that the level of accident will be minimal. Other things around the room are plastic horse, football, skipping rope, plastic building that can accommodate three to four children of their age group, bouncing table, plastic train, lever, different kind of merry-go-round, etc. This room was purposely made for children playing. The observation commenced at around 10am during break time and lasted for 30 minutes. The observation was done for three consecutive days. The event commenced on Wednesday, 21st and ended on Friday, 23rd of November, 2012. A digital camera was used to video-tape the observation as it progresses. This was done for the whole three days. Equally, the observers jotted down their observation as the events proceeded.

Participants

The children were between the age of 3 - 5 in the Kindergarten class, in a Saudi school, located in Kuala Lumpur Malaysia. The total number of children in this space was almost 30. The place was mainly for playing. Any students above 5 were not allowed to play in the big room it is purposely designed for these young children. The majority of the children were playing in groups. The smallest group we saw consisted of two children. However, there were some children who played alone. Some of the children were bouncing on the bouncing table; some were riding on horse, while some were playing with the lever. There were some children who entered the plastic room while some were playing with a big ball. We also had some children who kept changing their activities. They moved from the plastic house to the bouncing table. They were all engaged in one activity or another until the time for break ended when their teacher guided them to their classroom. The role of the researchers remained non-participant observers.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of bringing order, structure and meaning to the mass of collected data [18]. During the observation, the researchers took notes of the observations. Equally, they video-taped and watched the events and read the observation field notes repeatedly. Themes from the observation, jotted in the field notes were extracted and analyzed according to the research questions and issues identifiable with literature. Two independent researchers were asked to verify the seeming accuracy of the themes derived from the observation and after a discussion with them, minor modifications were made.

ESTABLISHMENT OF CREDIBILITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS OF THE INSTRUMENT

The establishment of credibility and trustworthiness were carried out through the observation field note designed as well as the video recorded. The necessary research modifications were made by a professor at the Department of Educational Psychology, of the International Islamic University Malaysia. In addition, checking of observation protocol through the video recorded was done by an expert in the area of Child Psychology at the Institute of Education, from the same university, after the actual observation had been conducted. The necessary modification was subsequently done in order to take care of the biases and prejudices of the researchers.

Findings from the Study

After careful observation, the researchers made some reflective notes from what was observed and noted. They come up with the following findings:

1. Unstructured play enables young children to learn through cooperation.
2. When children engage in unstructured play, they gain knowledge and experience through imitation.
3. Unstructured play assists young children to learn through trial and error, therefore, new insight is gained.

Discussion

This study highlights the fact that unstructured play among young children could contribute to learning. Careful observation of the participants made us realize the above-mentioned results which will be individually discussed below.

1. Unstructured play enables young children to learn through cooperation.

In the setting where all children were playing, the researchers discovered that learning can take place through cooperation from unstructured play. Two children were playing on balance swinging; one of the two children went to join her mates who were jumping on the bouncing table, and left the other one on the swinging balance. When she left, the swinging was not convenient for only one person to handle because it was made to be used by two people; therefore, the boy who remained also abandoned the swinging balance and joined others. What was deduced from the event was that, some things cannot be done alone; to achieve results it must be collectively done. The swinging balance is not made to be used by only one person but these children did not realize that it was made obvious after one person left to join others that were jumping. Nevertheless, later both came back to the swinging balance and did it successfully. From there the students realized that, without anybody telling them, without cooperation, they cannot do the swinging successfully.

Cooperative Learning

What was exhibited by these two children is regarded as cooperative learning. This is a situation whereby a teacher organizes academic activities as social and collective learning activities ([19], [20]). Children must work to collectively achieve the goal of a given task, ([21], [22]). Vygotsky's method was basically a cooperative learning approach. He produced diverse groups of children (he called them a collective), giving them not only the opportunity but also made them see the need to cooperate on a task given to them that was above the developmental stage of some, if not all of them. Therefore, from the definition of cooperative learning, one can infer that what was carried out by those children in the unstructured play was cooperative learning, since both of them came together to accomplish a given task.

In order to substantiate the above discussion, [23] asserts that play is significant for developing social competence and confidence in dealing with peers, a life skill that is essential for functioning in school. Social competence and confidence in dealing with others could enhance cooperation within children. More so, from most literature on children play it is deduced that play among them enhances cooperation, which in turns brings about learning and higher level of accomplishment [24]. Equally, play among children enhances social understanding and relationships [25], which then increase cooperation. As children develop relationships and encounter problems, they extend their skills by discovering strategies that work and those that do not, how to sustain relationships, and how to solve problems [25]. More so, exposure during unstructured play to the feelings, feedback, opinions, and ideas of peers enables children to go beyond egocentric feeling, to consider the ideas of others. This ability serves as a basis for developing cooperative-

learning skills ([26], [27]). Quality peer relations have also been recognized as an integral part of cooperative learning opportunities in the classroom [27]. Hence, when children play in groups interaction through collective activities is possible. They cooperate to accomplish a task which could not be ordinarily handled by only one person. Therefore, every individual child will learn how to implement such task for this reason they have to learn through cooperation.

2. When children engage in unstructured play, they gained knowledge and experience through imitation.

The scenario which led to this conclusion by the observer was that of a girl riding on a big balloon ball but discovered it was unsuitable for riding because she kept falling from it. Suddenly, she raised her eyes to see her friend easily climbing on a plastic horse so she abandoned the balloon ball and joined her friend on the plastic horse. Invariably, she learnt by observing her friend that something that had a round shape was difficult to ride while something that was balanced on the ground could be good for riding. She learnt this through observing and imitating her friend, which is regarded as learning by observation, imitation or modeling. An experimental study done by [28] on the imitative level of autistic children found that *the children in the experimental group demonstrated increases in imitative play concomitant with decreases in the frequency of non-manipulated self stimulatory behaviour after the training*. Equally, [29], in their experimental study on infants show that social learning occurs among from peers during infancy and also provide evidence for infant imitation from memory.

Observational learning could be regarded as learning that takes place by observing others, also known as model. Albert Bandura (1971) [30], states that children learn to please and discard unwanted behaviour by means of observation. What took place between two children in the study is regarded as observational learning, because the girl watched her friend, waited a bit, and later practiced it. According to Bandura, in social cognitive learning theory [30], there are four stages involved in observational learning: Attention, retention, production and motivation were all visible in those children's activities. Based on, the observation of the children one can conclude that desirable learning can be achieved through observation during children unstructured play.

3. Unstructured play assists young children to learn through trial and error; therefore new insight is gained.

The third category of deduction made from the observation is that children may learn new things through insight during unstructured play. This is deduced when the observer later saw the same girl who left the balloon ball, went back to it after she noticed that it was only suitable for kicking and playing, and then she started throwing it. She had tried to ride it initially but found it unsuitable for riding. Suddenly a thought flashed through her mind. We could see that she was not taught by anybody, nor had she seen anyone doing. She then realized that, if the ball was unsuitable for riding it would be suitable for something else. She arrived at this conclusion during unstructured play, which shows that learning had taken place. Since then, she started throwing it. Hence this is called insightful learning.

Conclusion

It is noteworthy to rethink about some parents' attitudes toward children play. We can see that many benefits can be accrued by children through unstructured play. It is high time for parents, teachers and stakeholders involved in child upbringing not to prevent children from playing, but rather provide safe environment for children to enjoy and develop themselves through playing. Therefore, more facilities should be provided in schools for children by the government. Parents should also create an avenue for children to play in their compound. This will not only develop these children physically but also develop them intellectually.

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