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Enhancing Children's Development through Play: a Task that Must Be Achieved in Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore various ways of enhancing children's development in early childhood education through play. The researcher adopted descriptive study to highlight various categories, stages and values of play and how adults can support children's play activities. It was discovered that the major categories of play are active and amusement play; and the major values being cognitive and social. Finally, some recommendations were proffered.

Introduction

Majority of early childhood care and education (ECCE) programmes in Nigeria have traditionally been operated by private agencies or by agencies supported wholly or in part by federal funds to help the poor, unemployed, working parents, and disadvantaged children. When there was an undersupply of teachers, especially during the decade of the sixties, having children taught by agencies other than the public schools was tolerated. However, during the late 1976s and 1980s, the oversupply of teachers as a

result of Universal Primary Education (UPE) has promoted teachers and their unions to argue for placing early education programmes under the auspices of the public schools. This attracted certified but not qualified public school teachers to assume primary responsibility for many pre-school programmes from 1990s in the federation.

Fortunately, the Federal Republic of Nigeria (FRN) (1977) in the national policy on education spelt out their intention with regard to pre-primary education. This document defined pre-primary education as the education given in educational institutions to children aged 3-5 plus, prior to their entering primary school. There are currently four editions of the National Policy on Education (1977; 1981; 1998 and 2004). With this policy, the government began to show keen interest in early childhood Education (ECE) as:

- effecting a smooth transition from the home to the school;
- Preparing the children for the primary level of education;
- Providing adequate care and supervision for the children while their parents are at work (on the farms, in the markets, offices, etc);
- Inculcating social norms
- Inculcating in the child the spirit of enquiry and creativity through the exploration of nature, and the local environment, playing with toys, artistic and musical activities, etc;
- Teaching cooperation and team-spirit,
- Teaching the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms etc through play;
- Teaching good habits, especially good health habits.

To achieve these goals, government initially (1977) decided to:

- Encourage private efforts in the provision of pre-primary education;
- Make provision in teacher training institutions for students who want to specialize in pre-primary education;
- Ensure that the medium of instruction will be principally the mother tongue or the language of the immediate community and to this end will:

- a. Develop the orthography for many more Nigerian languages and
- b. Produce textbooks in Nigerian languages;
 - Ensure that the main method of teaching in the pre-primary institutions will be through play; and that the curriculum of teacher training colleges is appropriately oriented to achieve this; and
 - Regulate and control the operation of pre-primary education as well as ensure that the staff of pre-primary institutions are adequately trained and essential equipment provided.

However, the current National Policy on Education by the Education by the FRN (2004), noted that early childhood education is seen as pre primary education and defined as the education given in an educational institution to children prior to their entering the primary school. It includes the crèche, nursery and kindergarten. Creche according to who's who Service Directory (n.d) is a facility that cares for the children while their parents take part in an activity within the premises or nearby. It provides care for young children on an infrequent basis for short periods of time. Wikipedia (2008) defined nursery school as school children between the ages of three and five, staff by qualified teachers and other professional who encourage and supervise educational play rather than simply providing childcare. It is generally considered as part of early childhood education. On the other hand, the German word kindergarten according to Wikipedia (2008) is used in many countries to denote a form of pre-school education. It is a form of education for young children which serves as transition from home to the commencement of more formal schooling. Children there are taught to develop basic skills through creative play and social interaction.

From the four editions of national policy on education, it could be seen that the main method of teaching in the pre-primary/early childhood education is play. "Play relieves feelings of stress and boredom, connects us to people in a positive way, stimulates creative thinking and exploration, regulates out emotions and boosts our ego" (Lanreth, 2002). "Play, again, is what children and young people do when they follow their own ideas and interests in their own way and for their own reasons" (DCMS, 2004).

National Children's Bureau (2006) defined play as the activities of children from babyhood until the early teenage years. Play includes a range of self-chosen activities, undertaken for their own interest, enjoyment and the satisfaction that results for children. Play according to Sutton-Smith (2006)

enjoyable activity that elevates our spirits and brightens our outlook on life. It expands self-efficacy. Play according to Brown (2007) is a state of being that is intensely pleasurable. It energizes and enlivens us. It eases and renews a natural sense of optimism and opens up to new possibilities. Finally, play refers to a range of voluntary, intrinsically motivated activities that are normally associated with pleasure and enjoyment (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, (2008). There is evidence from the above definitions that play starts from babyhood to early teenage years; and it is not just carried and for its own interest, enjoyment and satisfaction, but shows the importance of play towards enhancing children's development.

Play according to E – niko Ltd (2004) is considered to be a primary need of every child. Both nature and nurture contribute in the development of the skills required to play effectively. Furthermore, the adult plays a key role in developing successful play in the early years. E-niko (2004) further noted that play has an important role in the physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive development of children and in essence it is a learning experience. It is important therefore for trainees to know the categories of play; types, and their functions in early childhood care and development.

Play can be divided into two definite categories:

1. ACTIVE PLAY

Active play, according to Hurlock (1978) is play in which enjoyment comes from what the children themselves do. Active play requires playmates. The degree of social acceptance children enjoy will determine the length of time spent and the enjoyment they will derive in active play. Active play according to E-niko (2004) takes place when the child is leading the play experience, sets out the rules and boundaries. This type of play will often hold the child's interest longer and children can become engrossed in the activity because they developed it themselves. Active play can take the following forms:

- a. **Free Spontaneous Play:** The children according to Hurlock (1978) do what they want, when they want, and how they want. There are no rules and regulations. Children continue to play as long as the activity gives them enjoyment and then stop when their interest lags. From 3 months to about 18 months of life, Piaget (1951), Hurlock (1978), Encyclopedia American (1996), babies start to explore their toys or anything within their reach. They do this by sucking,

hanging, pulling at them or even by merely looking at them if they are beyond reach.

- b. *Dramatic Play/Discussing:*** Contributes much to children's personal and social adjustments.
- c. *Constructive Play:*** This is a play in which children use materials to make things not for utilitarian purpose but rather for the enjoyment they have from making them.
- d. *Music:*** Music can be active or passive play, depending on how it is used. If children produce music by singing or playing an instrument just for fun of it, or dancing, it becomes active play.
- e. *Collecting:*** Collecting is very important to children. They collect any anything around them like empty cans/tins, leaves, insects, food items, etc. They can use them to play and make believe games like shopping, cooking, teacher teaching the children, etc.
- f. *Games and Sports:*** These help to strengthen the muscles and enhance physical and social development.

2. AMUSEMENTS

Amusements are forms of passive play in which children derive enjoyment with minimum effort from the activities of others. For example, when children find reading difficult, they ask someone to read to them or they amuse themselves by looking at the picture accompanying the text (Hurlock, 1978). Amusement play includes: reading, listening to music, storytelling, riddles etc. Children acquire vocabulary/language and use them for communication. It aids intellectual development. Amusement play can be seen as structured play. Structured play according to E-niko Ltd (2004) is adult led, guided and planned. Structured play tends to be more limiting and minimizes the opportunities to be inventive.

It is important that in a child's development there is a good balance between free and structured play. There are different play activities at various stages of child development. But it is sad to note that teaching method which is play as in the National Policy on Education is not being implemented fully.

Stages of Play

E-niko Ltd (2004) highlighted the following characteristics of play changes as different stages of development are reached. Between 0-2 years children tend to play alone, and there is little interaction with other children. From 2-

2 children are spectators and will watch over children playing but will not join in.

From 2 and half – 3 they are “parallel” players, i.e they will play alongside others but not together and from 3-4 they are classed as “Associative” players as they begin to interact with others in play and start to develop friendships and the preference of playing with certain other children. Above 4 years they become co-operative players, playing together with other children and sharing goals for their play. The above stages of play show the need to encourage children to play from birth so as to enhance their development. This involves provision of different activities to children.

Good quality play provision begins with providing activities to stimulate all areas of development at any age. Play, at any age acts to retain and enhance meaningful context and optimizes the learning process (National Institute for play, USA, 2007).

Values of Play

The value of learning through play was first put forward by Fridrich Froebel in the 19th century. Froebel, a German educator, and the father of kindergarten stressed encouraging the natural growth of a child through action or play. He felt that educational play involved the child in feeling, observing, developing a sense of form, space, time and movement. These practices were reinforced in the 20th century by Swiss philosopher Jean Piaget who said that children learn through their active exploration of a wide variety of objects (Eureka, 2008). Play furthermore is often described as the work of childhood. Play is viewed as a vital part of children’s holistic development.

Play according to Eureka (2008) has both social and cognitive elements. The social elements of play refer to the amount of social interaction that a child is engaged in. The cognitive elements refer to the complexity of a child’s play skills. These elements are interrelated and will often overlap. It is through play that children explore their world, take risks, make mistakes, achieve. It is through that that children learn to use their imaginations and develop creative thinking, they learn to express themselves. It is through play that children build relationships with each other and the adults who play along side them. Children through play learn to develop emotionally, physically, and intellectually. Play offers choice, control and freedom within reasonable boundaries. Play allows children to learn through their own experience, it is intrinsically motivated.

Social Values

Play X play Scotland (n.d) is the universal language of childhood. It is through play that children understand each other and make sense of the world around them. Children learn so much from play; it teaches them social skills such as sharing, taking turns, self disciplines and tolerance of others. National Children's Bureau Library and Information Service (2006) noted that some forms of pretend play are more domestic and allow children to try out adult roles in childcare, cooking or taking on a job role such as fire – fighter or nurse that they could not do in reality. Children also welcome the chance to be involved in daily routines and to be an appreciated helper to adults. In family life as well as play settings such as after school clubs or nurseries, children like to feel a valued “working member” and can learn vital life skills so long as adults will make the space for them. Szymanski (n.d) observed that playing with a toy with a parent or adult helps babies interact with others and aids in language development. Stuffed animals can help a toddler make the transition from infant dependency on mom and dad to more independent play common in early childhood. Preschoolers can communicate problems they are having through their play with toys, even when they can't communicate them directly.

Pre-school children according to National Children's Bureau (2006) need to see that they can cause interesting things to happen when they put their mind to it, and playing with toys helps them accomplish that. Toys also empower children by permitting them to control their environment, at least temporarily. Older kids need to see that they are playing correctly and succeeding. Play allows children to give free rein to their imagination. In pretend games, alone or with play companions, they can be whosoever they want and create an imaginary setting and scenario with a minimum of props.

Intellectual/Cognitive Values

Play enables children to show their mental representations of the world and enables children to interpret their world (Moyless, 1995). Children's lives are enhanced by playing creatively, and playing children learn and develop as individuals; it assists in their emotional and intellectual development and mental health resilience which are core building blocks for their transition years (X Play Scotland (n.d).

National children's Bureau (2006) again observed that children are able to explore intellectually. They can follow their current interests, experiment and find out what will happen. They can make choices and consider

possibilities. Children sometimes use play in a spontaneous way to work through events and feelings what absorb them. They may choose to retell and sometimes rework experiences through their pretend play, story creation and artwork.

E-nik (2004) highlighted the following types of play and their values for child development:

Imaginative Play

Imaginative play includes pretend, fantasy and symbolic play. Imaginative play develops self-experience as well as giving children the opportunity to explore the experiences. It helps children see things from others point of view and develops social skills. Ideal first toys for imaginative play include puppets and puppet theaters where children can create and play out scenes and stories from their imagination.

Construction

Construction is a process of building an end product from a range of materials. Construction and manipulative play is suitable for all stages of play and can be individual activity like a floor puzzle. Not only does construction promote manipulative skills it also encourages children to develop their language skills by talking about what they are doing.

Creative Play

Creative play covers a range of activities from art and craft works to self-expression through music and dance. Creative play offers children the opportunity to develop fine manipulative skills. Adult should refrain from interfering with a child's creative work and the work should be displayed without being altered so that they can feel proud of their work and are not dependent on adult ideas.

Physical Play

Physical play covers any different indoor and outdoor activities. It can involve equipment such as climbing frames or vehicles or no equipment at all. Physical play not only encourages healthy living habits, but results in better eating and sleeping patterns as well as developing self-confidence and physical competence. Physical play develops both fine and gross motor skills as well as muscle control.

How Adult can Support Child' Play

Children need adult support for play activities National Children's. Bureau (2006) noted that adults are to make many of the initial choices about how a play setting is organized, indoors and outdoors, what is available each day and ways to do them. But children cannot benefit from their play if adults over-plan and over supervise the daily events of any setting or the family home. Children benefit from a wide range of play resources, certainly not all commercially produced toys. Different settings can offer a range of materials and resources that enable children to construct and build, from small scale to larger scale chosen projects, often using recycled materials and the scope of the outdoor area as well as indoors. Explore creative activities such as arts and crafts, working with tools, gardening or cooking.

Children can benefit from a choice of play companions. Some children can be directly chosen as a play companion, whereas others may draw together as result of shared enthusiasm in the play. Adults cannot direct children into liking one another. But there is an adult responsibility to help oil the social wheels to ensure that children are not excluded from play for discriminatory reasons. Helpful adults model skills of conflict resolution: Helping children to explore what happened, and what can be done to work this problem out rather than determining as an adult who was to blame and what will happen. Adults can be valued sources of guidance on technique in arts and crafts or use equipment in physical games. Advice can be given in ways that leaves children with wide scope for applying the skills.

Children want adults in play settings and school playground to be responsible adults, to watch out for them and offer even-handed support when there are arguments or bullying. Children also want support to resolve difficulties in play, but they do not appreciate adults who ban lively activities without any discussion. A problem solving approach by adults can help children to resolve the current difficulty shows respect for their perspective and builds experience to enable children to address problems in the future.

Conclusion and recommendations

Realization of the value of play as important and main method of instruction in the pre-primary schools is critical for enhancing children's development. The success of child care and education depends greatly on the attainment of its stated objectives. An attempt has been made in this work to raise some issues in such important factor/teaching method as play. Two categories of play active and amusement were reviewed and discovered that both of them

must be balanced in handling instruction. It was also reviewed that characteristics of play change as different stages of development are reached. Care givers should take cognizance of this so that children from birth should be encouraged to play. It was also reviewed that values of play can be manipulated in social, cognitive, physical and emotional development of any child. There are also roles of the adults or the caregivers towards enhancing children's development through play. It is therefore recommended that:

1. ECE caregivers should be provided adequate professional development through in-service training, seminars and workshops for acquisition of skills and knowledge needed in handling play and use of equipment as method of instruction.
2. Government should ensure that the main method of teaching in pre-primary schools which s play is strictly implemented, and that the curriculum of teacher training colleges is appropriately oriented towards achieving this.
3. In organizing Children's Learning, it should be recognized that children needed play and have enough space for both indoor and outdoor spaces.
4. Caregivers should bear in mind the characteristics of play changes of different stages of development that are reached to enable him/her place the child properly.

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