

AN APPRAISAL OF THE VALUE IN PLAY AND THE PLAYGROUND IN EARLY CHILDHOOD SPORT'S TALENT IDENTIFICATION

Christopher Osas, ALUYA (University of Benin)

christopher.aluya@uniben.edu

+2348033842562

Abstract

The care and education of young children outside the home is not just a contemporary idea. Between the 17th to 19th centuries, proponents of early childhood education like Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel, John Locke, John Dewey and Maria Montessori, visualized learning at this early stage as one that can be achieved through play. This paper appraised the value in play and the playground in early childhood and as a way to identify hidden sports talent in children as they play, for further grooming and development. The concept of play was reviewed and discussed as well as the value in play for young learners. Play in this context is contrary to the misconception in some quarters that it is characterized as a type of activity which is unimportant, trivial and lacking any serious purpose. As a result, Recommendations were put forth amongst which are: The school owners should consider the importance of play and provide attractive play space and equipment for the young learners. In giving permission to the opening of a new school, government should ensure that the school has adequate space for playing and the schools without play space should try and provide one for the young learners, Physical educators should look out for children's playful moment in order to discover the hidden talents of sports in them for further development, Physical activity equipment and facilities should be provided for children in the school environment among others.

Keywords: *Appraisal, play, playground, sports, talent identification.*

Introduction

The care and education of young children outside the home is not just a contemporary idea. It is just like the method of learning and the importance of the ideal learning environment which dates back to the era of Plato. However, in later times, precisely between the 17th to 19th centuries, proponents of early childhood education like Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel, John Locke, John Dewey and Maria Montessori, visualized learning at this early stage as one that can be achieved through play. The methods advocated by these early childhood educators in line with their philosophical belief system laid the foundation for the value and play-way method in early childhood education. Basically, the play-way method is a pedagogical technique rooted in the value and nature of play. Play in this

context is contrary to the misconception in some quarters that it is characterized as a type of activity which is unimportant, trivial and lacking any serious purpose. As such, it is seen as something that children do because they are immature, and as something they will outgrow as they become adults.

Play in early childhood physical education in Nigeria is a topic that has received less attention in the educational sector. The Early years of a child should matter a great deal to physical educators, the government and to parents. According to a recent publication by Allfrica.com (2018) on the topic “Nigeria lags behind in early child development”, it was stated that “250 million children under the ages of five in the world are unlikely to reach their potentials because their development has been stunted by stress, lack of early childhood play and poor nutrition. Nigeria is amongst the top 10 countries contributing to 250 million children under five at risk of not reaching their potentials. As regards early child sports talent identification and development in Nigeria, some schools do not provide young children with adequate sports facilities that can aid play. Physical educators in Nigeria need to bear in mind that play is essential to the whole child growth.

This was why Oduolowu (2004) argued that facilities such as school buildings, classrooms, furniture as well as playground are most times in deplorable conditions in some school settings. In another vein, one finds that attention is mostly focused on improving school buildings, classroom and furniture with little or no attention given to school playground or sporting facilities that can aid play. Worst still, there are some early childhood educational centers that do not even see the need for the provision of playground or sports, facilities. This is sometimes linked to erroneous view in some quarters that playground promotes cases of bullying among children. As such, these schools will rather spend money on expanding classrooms for increased school enrollment (Malone, 2001) perhaps the closest to paying little or no attention to school playground. This could be traced to lack of insight into children's (0-5) years learning behaviour.

In today's world, there is a growing pressure of eliminating play from early childhood development programmes in our society. This may not be far from the undue focus of developing the intellectual abilities of the child thereby seeing play as a distraction. It is a common place to find in our schools much attention given to classroom worksheet activities with little time allocated to play. Worst still, we find some schools without play space and every few play facilities in Nigeria; a scenario where the school compound has so many buildings, leaving little or no space for children to socialize outside the classroom. What seem prevalent in some urban areas in Nigeria are schools situated in what was

originally structured as living quarters for family. Automatically the rooms in such building are turned to classrooms leaving little or no space as playground. This can also be linked to the nonchalant attitude of the need for playground in early childhood educational centers. It is therefore the intention of this paper to examine critically the value in play and the important of the playground as a learning environment for the optimal development of the Nigeria child especially as it concerns early sports talent identification because it is usually said, “Catch them young”.

Competition in sporting activities at all levels nowadays and in years gone by, has been greatly intensified and the overall level and quality of performance improved. One approach focuses on identifying and developing early sports skills or talent in children to become the superstars of tomorrow and this early identification of athletic talent in young children has become increasingly imperative. Talent identification is the process by which children are encouraged to participate in the sports activities in which they find interest and are most likely to succeed in at later life or in the future. It is the first stage in the progression from beginner to successful national and international sports athletes in the future.

The Concept of Play

Play is defined as any activity freely chosen, intrinsically motivated, and personally directed. It stands outside 'ordinary' life and is non-serious but at the same time absorbing the one involved in the play intensely. Play is very vital to learning process; it conditions the harmonious physical, intellectual and affective development of a child. A child who is prevented from playing will likely and be fall ill, physically and mentally deficient in later life. the restriction to play will ultimately have a crippling effect on the human personality of the child. There is an infinitive variety of play activities that children of different abilities, culture and economic backgrounds can engage in, all bearing thee stamp of their specific ethnic and social origin (UNESCO, 1980). It has no particular goal other than itself. Play is the lens through which children experience their world and the world of others. if deprived of play, children will likely suffer both in the present and in the long-term.

Play is most common amongst children and is a pleasurable activity where children are able to explore using out burst of energy. This makes play spontaneous and voluntary, relax and involving no fear or threat. Its sequence may vary and relies on a stimulus to keep going. For instance, if one child finds fun playing with a Lego blocks, another child may join him and thus involve developing a mastery of movement like throwing the Lego blocks, rolling it among others. At this stage, skills are being learnt and talents are

discovered and harnessed. These characteristics help to highlight the importance of play as a tool for learning. In play children do not have to be forced or coerced into it. They do not need to be told that play is good for them, they just enjoy playing. It is no wonder, as far back as philosophers like Plato, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Froebel and more modern-day philosophers like John Dewey, Maria Montessori, have come to recognize the importance of play as a tool for learning. Evidently, one way that sums up how children can learn actively is through play. According to Wood (2007), play is acknowledged as one that supports intellectual development alongside social, emotional and physical development. Play is varied and flexible and there is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to play; encompassing an endless range of play types, which could be active or subdued, imaginative or exploratory, involves others or carried out alone. Hence, play is the *raison d'être* (purpose) of childhood.

Furthermore, it is in this vein that Piaget (1951) describes play as the repeated responses purely for functional pleasure of the child. It is an activity in which the child is engaged in for enjoyment. So, any sort of pleasure-giving activity of the child is called play. Specifically, Piaget believes that play is fun and that children without fun are children without play and children without play are children without childhood. Play is far more powerful for children than many parents and physical educators realize. It's actually the key to learning. Play in an environment stimulates a child's drive for exploration and discovery. This motivates the child to gain mastery over their environment, promoting focus and concentration. It also enables the child to engage in the flexible and higher-level thinking processes deemed essential for the 21st century learner. These include inquiry processes of problem solving, analyzing, evaluating, applying knowledge and creativity. Play thus involves children doing as they wish in their own time and in their own way, and it is this component of play that is key to understanding the positive outcomes of play throughout childhood. Play comes instinctively to all children, without the support of parents, policy makers and the wider community. Play is an essential part of every child's life and vital to their development. It is the way children explore the world around them and develop and practice sport skills. It is essential for physical, emotional and spiritual growth, for intellectual and educational development and for acquiring social and behavioral skills. Thus, play is satisfying, creative and freely chosen by the child.

The Value of Play for Young Learners

Value connotes importance, something that is qualitatively cherished and that provides satisfaction of a sense of accomplishment. This also means that value refers to criteria for determining levels of goodness, worth or aesthetics. In other words, values are standard for determining worth. Furthermore, values can be intrinsic. In this regard, it is something that is good, desirable or worthwhile for its own sake by itself or in itself. This is the value

inherent in play amongst young learners. Play is quite intellectual as well as aesthetic. The value of play in a spacious environment affords variety and to this end, play brings out the innate childhood instinct, that is not only enjoyable but also crucial to the processes of learning and development.

Early childhood educators, philosophers, as well as physical educators agreed that the early years are a critical learning time for children. It helps to develop their cognitive, emotional, physical and social faculties and skills (Katz, 1989). Most of them have come up with the suggestion that children observe their social environment, they are active in their learning and they collaborate with adults and their peers to initiate their own learning experiences. Numerous studies have also suggested the importance of children's interaction and learning exploration and problem solving as ways where they take ownership of and responsibility for their own learning. And their emotional and imaginative needs are met (Hirsh-Pasek et al 2009; Vygotsky 1978; Piaget 1962).

Plato was one of the first to recognize the need for children to play, while Rousseau emphasized the importance of children developing their natural instinct through play. He therefore linked a child's play to his natural occupation. He thought of a situation where children's learning take place through the freedom and spontaneity that play provide.

Following this trend, Pestalozzi further recommended the first outdoor educational school, which emphasized that children should continue playing as they did at home in order to learn. His idea led to a greater consciousness on the importance of childhood as a discrete and importance phase of development. in the same context, childhood play was seen as quite distinct and different from adult. Furthermore, with growing interest on the importance of play in children's development and education, the likes of Friedrich Froebel, John Dewey, Maria Montessori did extensive work in children's play for social, emotional, physical and intellectual development, while Froebel and Montessori emphasized children's play by developing play materials for children's use in prescribed ways. Dewey, expressed the need that children should have opportunity to learn through free play. Specifically, Dewey believed greatly in the educational value of play, noting that children first learn about their world through play. He explains that as play becomes more sophisticated, it provides opportunities for the playful attitude to emerge. The development of this playful attitude is what keeps the child continually growing and learning.

In the opinion of Alakeson (2004) preschool programmes contribute to a large extent in a child's physical, social, emotional and cognitive development. It is in this vein, that the Nigerian government has not only recognized the need for early childhood education but

has further established the early childhood framework which serves to formalize the importance of early childhood education in Nigeria (FRN, 2004). Specifically, the frame reflects an attempt to focus on the context and process of learning with the emphasis on the clear direction for an educational programmes that meets the needs of young learners. This is also an indication that there is a shift in the paradigm of early childhood education in Nigeria from a purely academic curriculum to a less academic and more child centered one which of course is play. As prescribed in the Nigerian early childhood framework there are six areas of learning. These are;

- Aesthetic and creative expression
- Numeracy
- Language and literacy
- Sports talent discovery and motor skills development
- Environmental awareness and
- Self and social awareness (FRN 2004).

These areas of learning are more or less a reflection of interest of young learners. This is in the sense that children at this age are quite curious and would want to explore and interact with the environment. Such learning is not geared towards more child-centered pedagogy but creates opportunity for play and interaction. This further articulates the emphasis on play and play-way method in early childhood education. In other words, it can be argued that play in educational settings is socially constructed and the values and benefits deriving from play in itself. The philosophical thrust in this paper has grown on two grounds namely; the axiological dimension as well as the epistemic which supports the claim on learning through play. As Wood (2007), sums it, a play-based curriculum offers children opportunities to acquire positive attributes and dispositions such as planning and organization, concentration, engagement, reflection involvement and participation all of which are considered essential to learning. This makes the value of play a facilitator of cognitive growth.

Outdoor Spaces Learning Environment

So far, this appraisal has attempted to explain the importance of play in learning amongst young children. It is reminiscent of one theory of play which expresses that children play because they are biologically programmed to do so. In other words, play activities is a part of children's generic heritage. In the early year, children run and chase, jump, go into pretended fighting and all such activities that help develop physical skills, interact with other children in different ways, grow in their ability to become part of a larger group and learn how to lead and follow. In the pre-school years, children had already acquired many

motor skills like walking, running, jumping and climbing. They also attempt to refine gross motor skills as they skip, hop, climb, balance and tumble. Their desire to involve in physical activities, makes the early childhood years an ideal time to involve children on the playground and in outdoor activities. Even though this appraisal focuses on play, the emphasis is on outdoor play where the playground and other outdoor activities makeup the learning environment and for early sport talent identification.

Outdoor play is as important as in door play. This is in the sense that children, like adult, also express stress and tension and these can be relieved through play and outdoor activities. Thus, outdoor activities should not be seen as an impportunity for children to run wild. Basically, learning environment for children can come as indoor space or/and outdoor space. The former can be likened to the classroom where within it, there are learning centers that can accommodate other play types, such centers include library, dramatic play, manipulative play art centers among others. These centers are designed to foster the broad goals of early childhood education programmes as well as meet children's need for play activities, exploration and interaction.

On the other hand, there is the outdoor space which is actually the focus of this paper the intent is to elicit the value in outdoor play and dismiss the misconception that it encourages bullying and does not aid intellectual and cognitive development. Outdoor should function orderly while the children cooperate, communicate, share and work together. Indeed, play of children is often times and strongly shaped and further directed by the environment. A play environment affords children options to choose the preferred play, play materials or play equipment. Above all, play interaction and stimulation has its unique input in children's development process.

As previously mentioned, the emphasis on the learning environment is the outdoor space often refered to as a playground. In their young years, the child's development creates the deepest impact on him. If he has to learn best and develop all the necessary domain appropriately, then there is the need for the provision of the right space, right type of material and equipment for learning, this is in addition to properly plan the play activities. All of these put together, provides the child with dynamic experiences and opportunities for learning while expressing himself. In the same way, play equipment helps children to release their energies, reveals their talents and gives expression to their creative urges (Chowdhury & Choudhury, 2002).

One of the most benefits of outdoor or playground activity is the academic value of play, viz the development of children's physical being and promotion of large and small muscle development and body coordination. Most of the time, when children are out in the playground, play takes the form of gross physical activities which is a vital part of learning at this stage of development. In this regard, children are allowed to participate in the games and activities of their interests and abilities. Ordinarily, the children of preschool or nursery school age have an extremely high energy level, they can run fast and smoothly, stop easily, spin around fast, climb and jump. They sometimes advance in their ability to maintain body balance and equilibrium. They attempt to toss a ball, throw a ball while exerting some force. They can climb and swing sometimes with ease and at other times with little help. In all of these, the effort is to ensure that the children develop gross and fine motor skills.

Besides physical development, outdoor activities also help in language development, social interaction and creativity for children. A well-planned playground can serve as a learning environment for these purposes. In physical activities, children are often happy to play side by side with others. Sometimes, they cooperate in their play but often times when they do not, that is when the need for teaching social interaction, cooperation and tolerance becomes imperative. Again, while out there on the playground, children use words in expressing themselves, this helps to improve their words acquisition and vocabulary development. For instance, on the swing or seesaw as they go to and fro, up and down, they are not only developing rapidly in their physical being, but also improving their sound pattern and sound language and the will to play with language. Above all, many teachers see the delight in bringing the indoor learning environment outdoors. For instance, a teacher may prefer to tell a story outside under the trees or sit on a play environment to dramatize some. While some others may take dramatic play outside the classroom and involve the children of their bodies expressively. By this, it is meant for the ability to show meaning, character, mood and intention through body movement, gestures and physical expression.

Conclusion

From the analysis so far, the value in play and play space cannot be overemphasized. The learning abilities of young children are enhanced through play and playing with others in a playground and this provides a strong base for their academic and sports success in later life. Children should however, be given the opportunity to play when necessary, for it is through play that they reveal their inner, wordless-self which they cannot easily

communicate in words for us to hear. While we watch them play, we identify their sporting talent for further grooming and development.

Recommendations

The school owners should consider the importance of play and provide attractive play space and equipment for the young learners. In giving permission to the opening of a new school, government should ensure that the school has adequate space for playing and the schools without play space should try and provide one for the young learners. Physical educators should look out for children's playful moment in order to discover the hidden talents of sports in them for further development. Physical activity equipment and facilities should be provided for children in the school environment among others.

References

- Alakeson, V. (2004). *A 2020 vision for early years: extending choice; improving life chances*. London: Social Market Foundation.
- AllAfrica.com (2018). Nigeria lags behind in early child development. Retrieved online from <https://www.greenspringschool.com/play-deprivation-can-damage-early-child-development-in-nigeria/>.
- Chowdhury, A. & Choudhury, R. (2002). *Pre-school children: Development, care and education*. New Delhi: New Age International Publishers.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004). *National policy in Education* (4th ed.) Lagos. NERDC Press.
- Hirsh-Pasek, K. Golinkoff, R.M., Berk, L.E., & Singer, D. (2009). *A mandate for playful learning in preschool: Applying the scientific evidence*. Oxford University Press.
- Malone, D.M., & Landers, M.A. (2001). Mothers' perceptions of the Toy Play of Preschoolers with intellectual disabilities. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 48(1), 91-102.
- Oduolowu, E.A. (2004). Maximizing the proximal learning factors in pre-school learning environment: A strategy to reclaim our children from risks. *Journal of Early Childhood Association of Nigeria*, 1(2), 21-30.
- Piaget, J. (1951). *Play, dreams and imitation in childhood*. London: Heinemann.
- Piaget, J. (1962). *Play, dreams and imitation in childhood*. New York, Norton.
- UNESCO (1980). *The child and play: Theoretical approaches and teaching applications*. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, Paris (France).
- Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in society: the development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press.
- Wood, E. (2007). New direction in play; consensus or collision? *Education*, 35(4), 3-13.