
Developing the Child's Potentials through Play: The Police Children's College, Oji River Experience

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Abstract

This study seeks to identify traditional games, its uses and importance to the overall development (physical, mental, social, moral and intellectual) of the child. The study is participatory in approach and qualitative in nature. The work is based on the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud who opined that during play, the child expresses negative emotions which they have no control in their everyday lives. Freud sees play in terms of catharsis- purgation of emotions. It is his contention that playing provides a safe haven for the child to discharge these emotions and gain control, since play is intrinsically motivated. It is supported by the psychosocial theory of Lev Vygotsky, who views play as a significant tool for children's development. According to him, children make meaning of their environment through play and that play helps to develop 85% of a child's brain during the first five years of their life. The data for the study were collected using two methods, namely: practical experiment with the pupils and the participatory approach involving the researcher and primary three and four pupils of Police Children's School, Oji River, Enugu State. The data from the various games played were assessed and analyzed using explanation analysis from the different practical sessions. Ten traditional games were selected and used by the researcher for the experiment. The researcher

concludes that a child's imaginative and problem-solving abilities are enhanced when they participate and play together as a group. The work therefore recommends the application and use of the traditional games in the education of the child as this will invariably lead to the production of a sound individual capable of contributing to the growth of our nation, Nigeria.

Keywords: Play, Child, Participatory, Traditional Games, Catharsis.

Introduction

Every society has a way of living, of educating their young ones, of worship and celebration. The traditional African education was participant based as children learnt through observation and imitation. According to Babs Fafunwa, “every society whether simple or complex has its own system of training and educating its youths” (15). Fafunwa calls it “traditional education where parents and elders educate, initiate or inculcate to their children the traditions, norms and values of the society” (25). He observes that two of the most useful media used during this period were the play method of storytelling and dramatization. This approach, according to him, ensured the preservation of the people’s culture and guaranteed societal growth. Folktales have been adapted, recorded and aired on our national and state television stations. For example, National Television Authority (NTA) has “*Tales by*

Moonlight and *Let's Tell A Story*,” while the Anambra Broadcasting Service (ABS) has “*Egwuonwa*” with the aim of reaching children as well as being used for National Reorientation Programme of the Government.

In our villages and compounds, we see children as they gather to play, building castles with sand and instantly demolishing them; pointing at and claiming all good cars and houses they see as their own. You will always hear them say “this is my car”, “that is my house,” “my house is big”. Most often, you see and hear them quarrel over any counter claim by their peers over their supposed houses or cars. During moonlight, children gather round the village square and family compound to play around. As they play, “they use their imaginative abilities to relive situations and extend those feelings and actions” (Fessenden, etal, 202).

Play is important to the development of a child as his life revolves around play. Children's play is spontaneous and educative. Games

is a type of play. Mark Holochak agrees that “Games, as a form of play, intensify the joy of recognition” (np www.researchgate.net). Play or games will be used synonymously in this write up to mean the same thing as any of them allows the child to not only “practice their capabilities” but also allows them to “come across pleasurable effects” (np). When children are engrossed during play, most of them forget they have not eaten and may never feel hungry until they leave the playing ground. To some, food is a disturbance and will even prefer to be left alone to continue playing than to be disturbed when you bring food to them. Such is the nature of the child.

Play makes the child a happy and balanced individual because it helps to develop the Childs’ capabilities. Peter Slade, submits that play enables the “child to gain emotional and physical control, confidence, and ability to observe, tolerate and consider others”

(105). Continuing, he explained that it affords the child the opportunity to blow off steam. It is also an avenue where adventure and discovery are encouraged. He cautions that child play is not an activity of idleness but the child's way of thinking, working, remembering, relaxing and absorbing, and should be tapped, harnessed and used as a means of educating the child. This, will invariably, put the child into the best frame of mind for learning at school. The good leisure, environment and atmosphere will further help to produce a future adult who will be of value to himself and to the society. This is supported by Bruno Bettelheim when he acquiesced that:

A lack of sufficient leisure to develop a rich inner life is a large part of the reason why a child will pressure his parents to entertain him or will turn on the television set. It is not that the bad of such mass-produced entertainment drives out the good of inner richness. It is that, in a vicious circle, the lack of a chance to spend much of his energies on his inner life causes the child to turn to readily available stimuli for filling an inner void, and these stimuli

then constitute another obstacle to the child's development of his inner life (np, www.theatlantic.com).

Indigenous games by its nature serve to develop our children's innate abilities both physically, mentally, socially, morally to grow as a total individual capable of contributing to the growth of his community and society. From the above, it is no longer contestable that play aids the development of the child. However, these educational values derivable from these games for the development of a total child have been relegated to the background and are on the verge of extinction as a result of urbanization and globalization. This study therefore seeks to locate some of these games, their values and ways of playing them to the overall benefit of the child.

From ancient Greek to the modern times, the call for the use of the play way method for the education of the child has persisted.

This paper is therefore reechoing the call for the use of the play way method in teaching the child. According to Tom Griffilt, Plato recommended that mothers should select and teach their children good behaviors and attitudes through the play-way methods while Aristotle submitted that “imitation of action, exercise, and games are very important” (79). In the medieval period, Francois Rubelais advocated that children’s education must be practical, insisting that children must learn through play by observing things with their eyes and demonstrating with their hands, rather than reading from books. According to Rubelais while describing the nature of education Gargantua received observes that he “learns to ride, fight, sail, and exercise through running, jumping, sparring, swimming, climbing, and weightlifting” (np). Again, Fredrich Frobel in the eighteenth century enthused that the education of the child should involve an

observation of his surrounding, play, games and songs. This assertion is confirmed by Esther J. Kibor when she opined that:

Froebel's kindergarten centered around three procedures: use of gifts, singing of his songs and the playing of various educational games. Discussing these in order, the gifts - consisting of geometrical patterns - awakened the child's power to conceptualize and lead him or her to recognize ultimate truths. Activities such as modeling, drawing, sewing and coloring were... occupations that enabled the child to act out his or her observations of adult life ... They also filled and absorbed the child's mind giving him or her many sided results due to their creative powers... (np, www.biblicalstudies.org.uk).

In a related development, Simone Reinhold, Sharyn Livy and Ann Downton, graphically described Froebel introduction of gifts as an instrument for the “playful” teaching of the child made up of balls cube, cylinder etc. These gifts are to encourage the child to “explore and discover geometric properties of three-dimensional objects, including spatial relations among parts of the gift pieces” (np). According to them,

Froebel developed six gifts, encompassing the growing complexity of the world around us: Gift 1 includes six balls made of different materials whereas Gift 2 includes a variety of solids (cube, cylinder, sphere). In contrast, Gifts 3, 4, 5, and 6 represent the idea of decomposing the cube into smaller units like small cubes, small cuboids/rectangular prisms, triangular prisms of different sizes. For example, Gift 3 consists of a threefold divided cube which (after being cut orthogonally in each direction), produces eight congruent smaller cubes that can be assembled into a variety of (new) arrangements while playing. (np, www.fils.eric.ed.gov).

Maria Montessori improved upon Froebel's ideas. She employed the play-method to its fullest use by insisting that the child be provided with many playing tools and be allowed to manipulate them. She encouraged the use of exercises that are for practical life, sensory training and of dedicative purposes for the education of the child. She carefully categorized these exercises as follows;

1. Practical life exercises to involve how to wash hands, clean their nails, brush their teeth.
2. Sensory training to involve the use of geometrical, insets in metals in woods or of insets drawn on paper for perception,

cylindrical sound boxes, counting different substances for auditory acuity and graded series of coloured wools for colour sense.

3 Didactic exercises to intellectual training.

Ezewu, E.E., Fasokun, T.O., Akpe, C., Oluduro, M.A recall that the “most remarkable feature of her method is the practical activities and the system of individualized instruction which is receiving attention in recent times” (129). It is evident from the above that her postulations centered practically on activities like doing, actions, development of muscular sense of the child and so on.

John Locke employed the play-method to its fullest use by insisting that “parents can teach children practice of dancing”. According to him, the art of dancing “gives children manly thoughts and carriage more than anything” insisting that “the actual development of manners comes from a child’s hands-on experiences–through dancing and interaction”This submission is

in consonant with the objectives of this study which emphasizes the importance of traditional games/exercises to the growth and education of the child.

The study is participatory in approach and qualitative in nature as the researcher participated in the experiment which was carried out at the Police Children's School, Oji River, Enugu State. Ten traditional games were randomly selected and used by the researcher for the experiment. The data from the various games played were assessed and analyzed using explanation analysis from the different practical sessions.

Theoretical Framework

The need to expose the importance of play to the child is the pivot of this study, hinged on the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud. Freud postulated on how play aids the psychological and emotional development of a child. According to him:

play help children “while they are learning to make use of words and to put thoughts together. This play probably obeys one of the drives which compel children to practice their capacities. In doing so, they come across pleasurable effects, which arise from a repetition of what is similar, a rediscovery of what is familiar, similarity of sound, etc., and which are to be explained as unsuspected economies in psychical expenditure” (www.researchgate.net, np).

He concludes that play provides a safe haven for the child to express negative emotions to situations which the child has no control in their everyday life. These negative emotions if bottled up in the child, produces a state of anxiety, confusion and imbalance. The purgation of these emotions (expended through free play) balances the child psychologically and emotionally and places him in a better position to learn

Also, Lev Vygotsky, a psychosocial theorist views play as a significant tool for children’s development. According to him, children make meaning of their environment through play and

that play helps to develop 85% of a child's brain during the first five years of their life. He also believes that a child's development is influenced through interactions with family, friends and environment. He specifically pointed out that children can achieve a mental representation of social roles and rules of the society through role play which entails playing or assuming roles of other characters than themselves and understanding/ evaluating them as to make proper judgment.

This is also in line with the psychoanalytic perspective of Sigmund Freud who submitted that during play, the child expresses negative emotions which they have no control in their everyday lives. Freud sees play in terms of catharsis- purgation of emotions. It is his contention that playing provides a safe haven for the child to discharge these emotions and gain control, since play is intrinsically motivated. According to Courtney in Okome: "The catharsis theory emphasizes play as a safety valve for pent-

up emotions; it is instinct associated with emotions like fighting, anger or hatred, but society may not allow the emotions free reign and the children become inhibited. Play, by allowing fighting can release emotions which will then subside” (217).

Other theories include Herbert Spencer’s theory of surplus energy which stresses the need to restore balance in human body through play. According to him, play is the aimless expenditure of exuberant energy” (112). Human beings he propounded, have a finite amount of energy that is used for work and survival. He examined the nature of the child and opined that children need to be encouraged to play to expend energy since they are not involved in work and manual (survival) activities. He concluded that “by discharging excess energy in the play, balance is restored in the human body” (112). From the above, it is important to

encourage children's play in order to expend energy as unexpended energy in them may be counterproductive.

Play encourages cooperation, social understanding and above all, it is participant oriented. The gains of the participatory theatre have also led to the call for the adoption of the participatory approach in the educational process of teaching and learning and for the abandonment of the teacher centered method where students are not motivated or provoked to make contributions. During play, improvisation, role-play, dance, pantomime, storytelling, adaptation and other dramatic methods act as tools or facilitators to the realization of the playing objectives or themes.

This is because there are no written scripts or direction on how to play. It is "the child that gives meaning to all aspects of the play, the materials, the constructions, movements and gestures, sound effects and language" (Okome 218). What the above means is that

roles must be taken, situations created, language spoken during the playing time. This invariably leads the child participant to break new grounds, gain insight not only into social and political problems but how to react, feel and consequently solve them; become more responsive to his academic work through the reawakening of his imaginative ability and stimulation of his creative ingenuity. Similarly, Akpan submits that “apart from helping to develop skills, exercising the body helps circulation of blood, growth and good health” (149).

The Games and their Educational Implications

There abound many traditional games but for the purpose of this experiment, ten were highlighted because of their didactic and pedagogical values to both the child and the teacher. Below are the selected games and the lessons derivable from such games.

1. **Onye na ako ede, ede mara mma okuko**, (who is planting cocoyam, it is good to plant cocoyam: teaches hard work, the processes of plant cultivation and the importance of agriculture.
2. **Onyega agba egwu** (who will dance with me): builds friendship and aids socialization.
3. **Kpankpan ngolo**: teaches time consciousness, doing the right at the right time.
4. **Ororo, onye m jidere**: teaches socialization and team playing.
5. **Kedu onye ga abu oyim** (who will be my friend?): teaches social interaction and building friendship.
- 6 **Uga**: aids physical and mental development as well as calculative ability.
7. **Onye guru anu na ite ofe** (who took meat from the soup pot?): teaches self discipline and the dangers of stealing.
8. **Onye elele anya na azu** (nobody should look back): teaches a child to adhere to instructions and for physical development.

9. **Ala ncho:** aids the mental development of the child, cooperative and social relationship.

10. **Ndorondoro** (tug of war): aids character development

The Workshop /Experiment

The experiment was of two sessions. The first session was with the teachers, where the aim of the experiment was explained to them. It was more of an interactive session tagged “train the trainers” session. The selected games, methods and benefits of playing them were carefully explained to them. Questions were answered and doubts cleared.

The second session which is the practical session, comprised both the teachers and the students. A total of sixty pupils, aged 9-11 in primary three and four of Police Children’s Primary School, Oji River, Enugu State used for the practical sessions were randomly selected. The experiment took place outside the usual classroom,

during their break period and lasted for three weeks. The choice of the location for experiment outside their classroom is in agreement with the submission of Bergen, Doris, that “Children's learning occurs in many places besides the classroom; even there, it can be best facilitated by playful approaches that draw upon individual interests and the creative, adaptive, and problem-solving functions of the brain” (np.www.udel.edu/bateman/acei)

The researcher had six sessions of two times every week with the pupils. The pupils were divided into three sub groups of twenty pupils each, through a simple way of making them take numbers 1-3. The reasons for the numbers were not disclosed to them as each pupil becomes a member of a group through the number he picked. The researcher was assisted by their class teachers who participated in the train the trainer's workshop to ensure that there is orderliness.

At the beginning of each session, the researcher reads out the games to be played for the day, and allows for five minutes group meeting for groups to arrange and decide which game is to be played first by the groups. The groups' game monitor will now report back to the researcher who writes down their game sequence. This is to give them a sense of belonging and to be part of the decision-making process. This also made them to be fully involved, not feeling that the decision to play any game was imposed on them. Most importantly, it is in line with the method of Dorothy Heathcote which agrees that the themes "had to be drawn from the learners in order to engage them" (<http://eprints.qut.edu.au/83798>). The teachers with the assistance of the researcher, guided the pupils to play in their groups.

Each play lasted for between ten to fifteen minutes before the introduction of a new one. On the average, about three games were played in a day before finally assembling together to evaluate the session. During evaluation, each group appoints a speaker to summarize what they have done. The researcher now discusses each game played, and the values derivable from playing them. The discussion is open and everybody contributes. Questions were asked and the researcher led them to clarify grey areas. This serves as a feedback to both the participants and the researcher.

Findings

The idea of training the trainers (teachers) was a great impetus to the experiment as the teachers fully understood the aim of the workshop and worked assiduously with the researcher to achieve them. Mrs Owoh, a primary four teacher who took part in the workshop attested to this when she said that:

if not for the first meeting (workshop) we held before we started, the transition and free flow of the procedures; even the values of the games to the child would not have been comprehensible to some of us.

Also, Mrs Okoro, another participant confirmed

that we enjoyed the games was because we already knew what we were going to do. Though we are not hearing about the games for the first time, but the way they were introduced to us made them look interesting”

The division of the participants into three groups through taken numbers was done without force or coercion; this made the pupils to relax with the resolution to work for the progress of the game. Apart from meeting and making new friends, the group meetings spurred them to ensure that they excelled. Moreover, participating both in the decision-making process as well playing, instilled confidence in them, boosted their morals and improved their self

concept. It therefore made them more determined, open minded and united in purpose to succeed. This was evident in the tug of war game where elimination method was used to get to the winning group and “keduonyegaabuoyim (who will be my friend)” game which reconciled some pupils who were not on talking terms with one another. Ijeoma, a class three pupils who has not been on talking terms with Ngozi, her classmate because she reported her to their class teacher for drinking her water, had no choice to choose Ngozi as her new friend since they are the only two persons left to play. According to Ijeoma:

it was like they planned it. I have been avoiding Ngozi since she reported me to our teacher for drinking her water, but I had no choice than to pick her as my friend during that game, and we have continued to be friends. Since the game, we have remained friends and became even closer.

Leadership qualities, building of self confidence, language, communication and public speaking abilities; democratic

ideology, cooperative and social relationship among the participants were further developed through the selection of a games monitor (leader) for each group by themselves and a speaker who summarizes the group's activities. The selection is rotated at every session to give room for more students to participate. Again, Akunna, one of the group leaders explains:

Initially, I was shy and never believed I could lead my group but when the games started, I picked up courage and started encouraging my group member and reassuring them that we can do it and indeed our group won in most of the games.

Furthermore, when children engage in play, it “corrects the imbalances between the child's acquisition of intellectual skills at the expense of his feelings and personal responses” (Inyang, 40). This is because, as a creative activity which is completely devoid of any inhibitions, the child freely expresses his ideas as well as reacts to the impression he receives. For instance, Ebuka, a nine

year old boy who participated in one of the games “onye elele anya na azu, mmanwu anyi na ga na azu ” translated as “nobody should look back because our masquerade is passing at the back” stood up and asked the researcher why the face of Chika who started the game was not covered? This elicited laughter but in actual sense, he has bared his feelings and this gave the researcher the opportunity to properly explain the benefits of the play and the role being played by Chika and why his face was not covered. This no doubt relaxed Ebuka and further settled him down for future plays.

Challenges

The initial challenge was time. The school timetable has already been planned for physical and health education to be held only on Friday. During this period, more emphasis is placed on health than physical education. Again, the time allocated for each subject is short as it does not allow for any extensive work. The

researcher appealed to the headmistress of the school, who graciously adjusted the period for the experiment to begin from the last period before break time. This increased our playing time to one hour.

Also, the need to properly carry the teachers along during the experiment necessitated the researcher to organize a train the trainer's session where the games, values and methods of playing them were exposed. This is to give them a sense of belonging and to ensure that the gains of the experiment will be sustained through the teachers who will continue at the end of the experiment to, not only use the techniques learnt in their teaching but to train other teachers who did not take part in the workshop.

Conclusion

This study does not pretend to evolve any new play way method. Its focus is on application of the participatory approach. In this sense, some methods that have been propounded all the ages were tested or applied during the research to find out their workability and effectiveness especially as they affect the child and his development. The experiment, though challenging, was educating to the researcher as the children's contributions during the discussion and evaluation period provided insights into the challenges that may not ordinarily have occurred to the researcher. Thus, the evaluation period which served as an assessment period enabled the researcher to analyze the data (practical experiment) gathered from the games played (participatory approach) through the explanation analysis of each practical session. The researcher was able to conclude that

children's imaginative and problem-solving abilities are enhanced when they play together as a group.

More so, the participatory approaches both in the decision making on matters affecting the pupils and the games played (learning period) culminated in full achievement of the research objective.

The games reinvigorated the interest and eagerness in school attendance as the pupils looked forward to more playing time.

The primary objective of this experiment which used the participatory approach in teaching traditional games transcended to building a total individual. The theories of Sigmund Freud and Lev Vygotsky adopted for the study greatly assisted in the realization of the set objectives. Freud sees play in terms of catharsis- purgation of emotions. It is his contention that playing provides a safe haven for the child to discharge these emotions

and gain control, since play is intrinsically motivated while the psychosocial theory of Vygotsky, views play as a significant tool for children's development asserting that children make meaning of their environment through play and that play helps to develop 85% of a child's brain during the first five years of their life.

The above postulations are true of the nature of a child because, after being involved in the experiment and totally engrossed in the experience; the child is fully conditioned and positioned for academic activity, having let off all steams and bottled emotions which would have distracted him. The full involvement of the child in the whole process of playing has led to the call for the adoption of the participatory approach in the educational process of teaching and learning and for the abandonment of the teacher centered method where students are not motivated or provoked to make contributions. This is the principal objective of this work,

which is participatory in nature and fully involved the child in the learning/ problem solving process.

Recommendations

From the experience of the researcher in the course of this research, it was evident that some people are still ignorant of the importance of the use of the play way methods in the development of a child's potentials. Therefore, there should be an intensified campaign as well as public enlightenment and sensitization on the use of the methods.

Also, there is the need for total review of our policy on education to cater for the overall development of child and for the adoption of the play way method of teaching in preference to the teacher centered method of teaching in our schools. Furthermore, curriculum planners should allocate more time to physical education which is the only child friendly time or create a playing

period in the school timetable to enable the child to express himself.

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