

[Received no. 13. 06. 2012/04. 04. 2014](#)

[REF. NO. IJES-441](#)

(Always refer our Reference No. for all correspondence)

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KEYWORDS Teachers, promoting, indoor and outdoor play, foundation phase, elementary school.

ABSTRACT This study investigated the ways in which foundation phase teachers used both indoor and outdoor play in their teaching. The study used a questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions to collect mainly qualitative data which required the respondents to reflect on their classroom practices. The sample comprised seventy-two (72) foundation phase (elementary school) teachers drawn from nineteen schools. The research locale was the Empangeni school district, KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. The results indicated that teachers made use of a variety of play activities to teach numeracy, literacy and life skills. For numeracy, these included use of market stands and playing shop; use of bean bags – to promote counting; use of building blocks; playing mathematics games – e.g., touching eyes, ears, knees and legs to promote counting in pairs/twos. With regard to literacy, story-telling, role-playing, rhymes and singing, as well as dialogue; learners taking turns playing games; learners drawing pictures about song or rhymes; learners imitating animal sounds, word matching games and acting out stories; word games, phonic wheels, reading games; making letters with dough; the alphabet story/song, such as Sammy snake, fireman Fred. Life skills were developed through play activities related to weaving and kneading; pretend play / role playing; matching different types of foods, charts, stories and story-telling; collecting litter games; plays calling for help; painting, colouring, handwork; music; thinking and reasoning games; plays involving rendering sympathy and empathy to others; poems- on how to cross the road.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, play has been seen as the only mode of education for young children, and this view “has underpinned early childhood programmes since the initial kindergarten developed by Froebel” (McInnes, 2011, p.4). McInnes goes further and observes that “this tradition has continued, albeit in different guises, through the work of pioneers in early childhood education such as Montessori” (p.3). To this end, McInnes (2011, p.4) avers that “within the realm of early childhood education play is viewed as essential for learning and development.”

McInnes (2011) traces the theories of play back to the surplus energy theory which was credited to H. Spencer in 1873. According to this theory, play was seen as “a product of superfluous energy left over after all other basic needs have been met” (McInnes, 2011, p.3). Verenikina, Harris and Lysaght(2003) expand on this by stating as follows:

Surplus energy theory contends that humans have a finite amount of energy that is used mainly for work and survival. Children tend to play more than adults, as children are not so involved in work and survival activity, and therefore have greater amounts of energy to expend. By discharging excess energy in play, balance is restored to the human body.

Thus, the purpose of play was merely to exhaust the excess energy which the children had, aplenty. This theory is credited for the introduction of break time and recess on the school timetable and school year, respectively, on the basis that children needed ‘timeout’ to reduce their surplus energy. Children’s restlessness and inattentiveness were taken as evidence for the need for break time and recess.

Then came the ‘renewal of energy’ theory in terms of which play was meant to “alleviate boredom while the natural motor functions of the body are restored” (Verenikina, *et al*, 2003, p.6-7). This was followed by the ‘recreation / relaxation’ theory which took the view that play was “an activity which occurs after work in order to relax and build up further energy” (McInnes , 2011, p.3). Another way to look at this was that play was there to restore “energy that is expended at work” (Verenikina, et al., 2003, p.7).

The ‘practice for adulthood / recapitulation’ theory of play was “one which saw the function of play as cathartic” and posited that “through playing children acted out evolutionary stages”, against the pre-exercise theory of Groos which “explained play as an opportunity to

practice adult activities and prepare for adult life” (McInnes, 2011, p.3). Verenikina, et al (2003, p.7) see this theory of play as focusing on the importance of affording children “opportunities to develop skills necessary for functioning as adults.”

According to McInnes, although the above theories are generally referred to as ‘classical theories’ – and, as such, may be regarded as old theories, she nonetheless contends that the types of play activities which undergirded these theoretical perspectives can still “be seen in children’s play today and many early years practitioners will justify play in the curriculum in this way” (McInnes, 2011, p. 3).

Subsequently, the ‘psychoanalytic’ theories of Freud and Erikson have defined play “as providing a cathartic function enabling children to explore socially unacceptable and aggressive impulses in a safe context thereby gaining mastery over traumatic events” (McInnes, 2011, p.3). As Verenikina, et al (2003, p.7) point out, from the psychoanalytic theoretical point of view, “play reduces anxiety by giving children a sense of control over their world and an acceptable way to express forbidden impulses.”

On his part, Piaget’s theory of play, derived from his concepts of assimilation and adaptation, was an extension of his work on intellectual development – thereby reflecting levels of play in relation to corresponding levels of intellectual development (Verenikina, et al., 2003; McInnes, 2011). Thus, Piaget’s characterisation of play places his theory under cognitive theory. To this end, Verenikina, et al., posit that from Piaget’s cognitive point of view, “play consolidates learning that has already taken place while allowing for the possibility of new learning in a relaxed atmosphere” (p.7).

According to McInnes (2011: 3), Berlyne’s ‘arousal theory of play’ “attempted to explain the relationship between internal motivation, exploration and play and significant work.” McInnes goes further and explains that other researchers advanced Berlyne’s thinking and “focused on the process of play enabling behavioural flexibility or ‘combinatorial flexibility’ (p.3). Thus, McInnes (2011, p. 3) explains that:

Within the safe context that play provides, children are able to explore new combinations of behaviours and ideas without worrying about the consequences. Through this they may develop new behaviours which may be used in other, less safe, contexts.

The ‘arousal modulation’ theory saw play as serving the purpose of keeping “the body at an optimal state of arousal, relieving boredom and reducing uncertainty” (Verenikina, et al., 2003, p.7). They further explain that Bateson’s ‘communication’ and ‘meta-communication’ theories, expounded in 1976, saw play as promoting the “ability to comprehend multiple layers of meaning”, while Mead’s ‘theory of self’ which was presented earlier, in 1934, envisioned play as centred on promoting the “sense of self in terms of personal identity and social relations with others” (Verenikina, et al., 2003, p.4).

Like Piaget, Vygotsky “also saw play in relation to intellectual development however, he emphasized pretend play and the importance of language and social interaction in play” (McInnes, 2011, p.3). Indeed, as Verenikina, et al., aver, Vygorsky’s ‘socio-cultural’ theory views play as promoting “abstract thought by separating meaning from objects and actions.” Thus, this theoretical perspective contends that, through play, abstract thought is further enhanced by using actions and objects in symbolic ways – thereby providing for children to reach beyond their actual development in their cognition and self-regulation. Further, it is envisaged that, through play, “children achieve a mental representation of social roles and the rules of society” (Verenikina, et al., 2003, p.7).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Many authors and experts hold the view that play is of great value to learners (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997; de Witt, 2009; Emslie, 2008; Gordon & Brown, 2004). It is regarded to be so, as play is taken to involve all the developmental areas of the child, namely: emotional, physical, social, personal and cognitive (Huizinga, 2003; Sturges, 2003). However, in South Africa, there hasn’t been much research done in this area – in particular, finding out the extent to which play is used by teachers at the foundation phase (elementary school) level (i.e. school grades R-3). South Africa’s National Curriculum Statement (NCS) strongly recommends the use of play as a vehicle for learning in these early school grades (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2011). In particular, it is important to mention that the new Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS) emphasizes play in all the grades of the foundation phase (DBE, 2011). More specifically, sections 2 and 3 of the CAPS: Foundation Phase Course Materials for Grades R-3 prescribe play activities for both indoor and outdoor in all the learning areas (DBE, 2011). It is, therefore, important to investigate whether or not this is happening – and if so, what strategies are being used.

AIM

This study sought to investigate whether or not foundation phase (elementary school) teachers used both indoor and outdoor play as an integral part of their teaching practices.

RESEARCH METHODS

This was a survey of foundation teachers' use of play as a teaching medium for numeracy, literacy and life skills. Simple random sampling was used to identify participating schools. Altogether, nineteen (19) schools participated in the study. All foundation phase teachers in the sampled schools were requested to participate in the study as resource persons, resulting in a research sample of seventy-two (72) foundation phase teachers volunteering to participate in the study. This represented about 70% of all possible participants from the selected schools.

The foundation phase curriculum is organized around three themes: numeracy, literacy and life skills. Accordingly, the researchers sought to find out how the participating teachers promoted play in their classes with direct reference to these three learning programmes. This was done by way of a questionnaire comprising open-ended questions which required the respondents to reach into their own classroom practices and share their experiences. Thus, the data generated were largely qualitative, and were analysed qualitatively from the statements given by the respondents.

RESULTS

As stated above, the foundation phase curriculum in South Africa is organised around three main learning programmes: Numeracy, Literacy and Life Skills. Accordingly, the results below are organised around these three learning programmes.

Teaching Numeracy through Play

The following direct quotations represent some of the typical responses collected from the respondents:

We use stones and beans when doing numeracy.

We make use of games like construction blocks, unifix blocks and maths games.

I use bean bags to teach counting. I also find that playing shop teaches my learners many mathematical concepts, such as counting, addition, subtraction, multiplication and division. This is helpful because the learners use familiar objects like the Rands, litres, and measuring in metres and centimetres.

Using building counters from building blocks teaches learners not only to count but also to appreciate patterns.

Playing skipping rope (jump and touch head), number games, flash cards and counting blocks are all the approaches I use to teach my learners the concept of creating patterns.

I use a number of plays to teach the concept of measurement: Run using sack, put bottle of water, heavy or light, short and long; the learners actively take part in number rhymes and songs.

I find that learners enjoy counting games like touching eyes, ears, knees and legs when counting in twos.

Thus, in putting the above statements together, it may be reported that the teachers in the research sample made use of a number of play activities to teach numeracy (mathematical knowledge). These were mainly the use of market stands, play shops (using Rands [South African currency], litres, and centimetres), to address various aspects of numeracy, including number patterns. Furthermore, the teachers reported using bean bags to promote counting; asking learners to build counters from building blocks; asking learners to play mathematics games – such as touching eyes, ears, knees and legs to promote counting in twos; using number games, flash cards and counting blocks, to promote the creation of number patterns; running – using sacks, measuring out water and putting it in water bottles, using heavy and light objects, short and long objects, to develop the concept of measurement; engaging learners in actively taking part in number rhymes and songs, to promote the development of concepts related to measurement.

Literacy

Below is a sample of the direct responses obtained from the respondents:

I use story-telling, role-playing, rhymes and singing songs and dialogue to teach literacy

In my class, learners take turns in playing games. This teaches them to speak the language and reciting passages

I ask learners to draw pictures about song or rhymes.

In some plays, I ask learners in my class to imitate animal sounds. It is both fun and educative.

One way to teach literacy is to use word matching games, and ask learners to act out stories.

Stepping stones word games are very useful in teaching literacy.

I use word games to teach vocabulary. I also use phonic wheels, reading games, acting stories and dialogues,

I ask my learners to make letters with dough. This teaches them both letter making and creativity.

I make my learners communicate using the language. They draw and write poems.

I teach literacy through the alphabet stories such as Sammy snake, fireman Fred.

In summarising all the responses given by the participating teachers, it may be reported that they used plays in the teaching / learning of literacy (language development) through a number of play activities. These included story-telling, role-playing, rhymes and singing, as well as dialogue; learners taking turns playing games; learners drawing pictures about song or rhymes; learners imitating animal sounds, word matching games and acting out stories; word games, phonic wheels, reading games; making letters with dough; the alphabet story/song, such as Sammy snake, fireman Fred.

Life Skills

From the responses obtained, many respondents used play to teach life skills. The following direct quotations represent the typical responses given by the respondents:

I include play in my Life Skills lessons like when the learners are weaving, kneading, and during pretend play.

During Life Skills lessons my learners use charts and stories and sorting and matching all types of food. It is all done like a game.

I ask learners to tell stories about fresh foods.

I ask my learners to use role-plays, e.g. mom and dad, baby, brother, and sister as part of developing different concepts in life skills.

Some of the ways I teach Life Skills is asking learners to take care of the environment: collecting litter game.

I make learners play games.

I use play like calling for help.

Acting, painting, colouring, handwork are all Life Skills activities which can be played out.

I use thinking and reasoning games as part of Life Skills.

They socialise when playing.

We teach them to sympathise with others as part of Life Skills.

I ask my learners to tell happy and sad stories.

In my class I teach learners poems on how to cross the road.

In my class, art and craft and music always go together.

Thus, in summing up the above responses it may be said that the teachers promoted life skills (broad cross-field competencies needed in life, in general) through play using weaving, kneading and pretend play / role playing (e.g. mom and dad, baby, brother, and sister); matching different types of foods, charts, stories and story-telling (including happy and sad stories); activities around environmental management (e.g. collecting litter games); plays

calling for help; painting, colouring, handwork (art and crafts); music (songs); thinking and reasoning games; plays involving rendering sympathy and empathy to others; poems- on how to cross the road.

DISCUSSION

To some people play, as a construct, connotes a teaching approach – as Emslie (2008: 9) puts it, “play is an example of an effective teaching strategy because it matches the ways that children learn best”. In contextualising the results within the literature, one challenge is that a number of writers discuss the importance of play in the development of the child in a holistic way, and not with regard to individual competences such as those associated with Numeracy, Literacy and Life Skills – individually. For instance, Puro (2010) contends that play helps children grow in terms of (a) problem solving and social development; (b) language; and (c) mathematics and science. Likewise, Ginsburg (2007: 182) hold the view that “play is essential to development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children and youth”. On their part, Gordon and Browne (2004: 165) contend that play is intrinsically motivating and naturally satisfying to children, and go further and posit that play promotes learning for the whole child, and that a wide range of learning opportunities is inherent in any single play activity. In these authors’ opinion, all play activity holds the potential for growth and learning, for the child.

To Fromberg (1990: 223) play is the "ultimate integrator of human experience". This means that when children play, they draw upon their past experiences things they have done, seen others do, read about, or seen on television, and that they use these experiences to build games, play scenarios, and engage in activities. Furthermore, children use fine and gross motor skills in their play; they react to each other socially; they think about what they are doing, or are going to do; they use language to talk to each other or to themselves and they very often respond emotionally to play activities. The integration of all these different types of behaviours is key to the cognitive development of young children.

According to Gordon and Brown (2004: 122) the movement exploration done by children enhances children’s ability with regard to (a) problem solving, (b) exercise of divergent thinking, (c) responding at their own age and developmental level, (d) learning to cooperating with others, (e) becoming more aware of others’ viewpoints and ideas, (f) sharing, (g) the notion of taking turns, (h) being self-expressive, (i) being creative, (j) gaining confidence, (k) developing strong muscles, and (l) refining motor skills.

On the use of blocks to enhance the understanding of Numeracy, Spodek, *et al* (1991:198) contend that children learn all sorts of things playing with blocks. They begin to use physical coordination and eye-hand coordination. Through these block building activities, children learn many concepts – including mathematics concepts as they balance their structures. Such mathematical concepts may include informal measurements of length, area and volume since blocks are representational.

With regard to Literacy, BabyClassroom (n.d.: 2) explains that experts agree that fostering strong oral language skills and literacy awareness in early years is more important than teaching letter sounds and word recognition. Songs, poems, stories, and age-appropriate videos all help foster the child's language development, but the best way to teach the child about language is simply by engaging her/him in meaningful conversations. Thus, the reported use of story-telling, role-playing, rhymes and singing, as well as dialogue by the teachers constituting the research sample in this study should be commended. This is supported by Simpson (as quoted by BabyClassroom: 2) who contends as follows:

In play, children are using symbolic language. When they pretend that a block cylinder is a bottle of soda and they're going to drink from it, that's a symbol of something, and once children understand symbols, then they can start to understand that letters stand for a word and that a printed word stands for something they understand.

BabyClassroom further postulates that "when children are exposed to a variety of interesting objects, they begin thinking about relationships like bigger and smaller, more and less, longer and shorter, heavier and lighter" (p. 2). In concurrence, de Witt and Booysen (2007: 122) aver that play promotes the preschool child's understanding of certain concepts. They illustrate this by explaining that through play the child, for instance, learns what the concepts of up and down, hard and soft, and big and small are. Thus, they further contend that play contributes to the child's knowledge about construction, as well as promoting his/her creative abilities, understanding of sorting and classification, exploration and search for solutions and answers.

On the development of key concepts in Life Skills, a number of approaches involving play were also reported. The area of Life Skills represents many skills, ranging from emotional growth to the development of concrete skills, such as being able to make a basket for

catching fish. According to de Witt and Booysen (2007:123) through play the preschool child learns to express and understand his/her emotions; that play teaches the child to control his/her environment, which has great emotional value for him/her in the sense that the child uses his/her imagination and makes his/her own choices and decisions.

Staying with Life Skills, Gordon and Browne (2004: 419), see play as the cornerstone of learning, for the reasons that it (a) develops the child's self-confidence and self-esteem, (b) makes the child to learn to take or appreciate different viewpoints on a matter, (c) helps the child to resolve inner fears and conflicts, (d) allows the child to build trust in self and others, (e) helps reveal the child's real personality, (f) encourages autonomy, (g) makes the child learn to take risks, (h) helps the child act out anger, hostility, frustration and joy, (i) helps the child gain self-control, (j) helps the child to become competent in a number of ways, and (K) teaches the child to take initiative. Indeed, in this study, the teachers reported using story-telling and 'acting out' as some of the ways they taught Life Skills. This is in line with the literature.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study have shown that most respondents used play to teach numeracy, literacy and life skills. This is an important result considering the importance that South Africa's CAPS places on play as a vehicle for learning in the foundation phase ((DBE, 2011). The results reported here were based mainly of self-reporting by the respondents. Thus, with regard to future research, it would be very important to carry out classroom-based observations in order to validate these findings – and advance the centrality of play in the interpretation and implementation of CAPS.

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