

### Role of Play in Early Education

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**Abstract:** This literature review stresses the importance of play for all early learners. The review begins by discussing the history of play and its impact on the evolution of family dynamics over time. Studies have shown that playing provides a safe and necessary way for young learners to be able to practice and experience a variety of life skills, including problem solving within a peer group while gaining and enhancing language skills. Through daily play, young children gain valuable life experiences through a variety of roles that will support growth and ultimately translate into adulthood. According to research, play is an essential aspect of the development of key skills including social, behavioral, language, and cognitive. These skills developed through play as young learners will grow into beneficial and essential skills used not only throughout childhood, but also into adulthood. Due to the essential developmental benefits that play provides children, it is critical that educators, administrators, and families are provided with specific research to support the need for play as well as the benefit provided by play to the young learner.

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**Introduction:** This action research project emphasizes the recognized influence of play on children's social, emotional, and cognitive growth. The researcher explored how play-based learning strategies contribute to students' development, drawing insights from existing literature. The research used mixed methods to analyze the impact of play-based learning on social, emotional, and cognitive development in a sixth-grade classroom. The researcher collected data over six weeks. Initial findings showed the effect of play-based learning on students' development. The baseline data in this action research project showed that this group of students enjoys playing inside, outside, independently, or in a group. The researcher found that these students crave that time for creativity and fun in their daily schedules. Students had a difficult time regaining focus following free play and no play. However, the researcher observed that students engaged in free play were more inclined to invite others to play with them. The researcher observed that students were more willing to work with people outside their friend groups in the third week of this intervention. Research shows that when students are engaged in meaningful, play-based activities, they are more open to all kinds of learning. This action research project provides information on the many benefits of play-based learning on students' cognitive, social, and emotional development.

An early childhood education setting should be a place where children discover a love for learning

through a variety of play experiences. Current research shows how play has changed and even been eliminated in many early childhood settings. The benefits of play are crucial to allowing a child to develop appropriately. Children's early years should be about fostering and developing their curiosity through a wide variety of play experiences. Understanding why play is important in early childhood development allows individual to understand the true meaning of play. The history of play has changed and decreased through out the decades. This decrease in free play has caused children to struggle academically. Through daily play, young children are able to gain valuable life experiences through a variety of roles that will support growth and ultimately translate into necessary adulthood skills. According to research, play is an essential aspect of the development; key skills including social, behavioral, language, and cognitive are all experienced through play opportunities. These skills developed through play as young learners will grow into adulthood. Families, educators and administrators need to become advocates for the importance of play for early learners.

The concept of play has attracted societal attention or requirements. Though play is challenging to measure, it is easy to recognize. Play is any freely chosen, organically motivated, and personally focused activity. It exists outside of 'regular' life, is non-serious, and completely captivates the youngster. It has no defined objective but to exist.

It is one of the most crucial ways for kids to learn and grow. It increases self-esteem by helping children recognize their abilities and feel good about themselves. Children are frequently engrossed in what they do because it is entertaining. However, not all children have the opportunity to play, which may impact their development. For instance, the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the landscapes of daily living (Paguirigan et al., 2023), making some activities virtual. Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory, included in the play, focuses on children's intellect, ability to reason, and memory process. Play promotes cognitive growth in several ways. It helps children develop their creativity and memory, which are required for thinking about the past, present, and future (Klein et al., 2003).

#### **Review of Literature:**

Mendez (2020) determined that play is crucial in a child's life because it provides a primary foundation for learning, exploring, problem-solving, and understanding the world and one's role in it. Children learn through play by imitating what they see and practicing skills. Play allows them to express their creativity, experiment, and learn how to interact and communicate with others, particularly their parents. Similarly, Theobald et al. (2015) observed that play is a fundamental requirement for children's development. Play is an identifiable activity that begins in early childhood and extends throughout adulthood across various cultures. It provides an educational space that promotes holistic growth. When young individuals engage in play, they gain communication skills, which allow them to express their needs and emotions, share their knowledge of the world around them, and gain new experiences. Play is free of expectations and highly motivating. Playing is a naturally occurring activity that provides significant developmental benefits to children. Furthermore, according to early Theories of Child Development, as cited by Mendez (2020), play is a primary source of learning as well as a means of promoting healthy social-emotional development, and a vast body of literature demonstrates play's importance in children's cognitive, verbal, physical, and emotional development. When children can guide their play, they use their decision-making abilities, move at their own pace, discover their areas of interest, and thoroughly engage in the activities they enjoy. Above all, while playing is easy, it is a treasured component of childhood (Ginsburg, 2007). Piaget and Vygotsky believed cognitive development results from ongoing interactions and environmental factors (Ashari et al., 2013). According to Wathu (2016), Vygotsky's

theory of socio-cultural development states that play is crucial for acquiring social competence. This further indicates that children learn through play, positively impacting their social development and behavior. Studies have shown that playing is becoming extinct in many childhood settings worldwide (Singer et al., 2009; Bento & Dias, 2017), even though playing is one of the most important ways for children to learn and develop. Despite the wealth of research highlighting the universal importance of play, there remains a paucity of data addressing its impact within specific cultural and geographical contexts, such as Ilocos Sur in the Philippines. The region's unique sociocultural dynamics and economic constraints may shape children's access to and engagement in play, influencing their developmental outcomes. While global studies (e.g., Klein et al., 2003; Mendez, 2020) have established play's role in fostering cognitive, social, and emotional growth, little is known about how these findings translate to the lived experiences of Filipino children aged 4–7—a critical developmental period characterized by rapid cognitive and socio-emotional growth.

#### **Benefits of Play**

The benefits of play are complex and indirect. Play contributes to the development of a diverse array of capacities in the young child. From ages 2.5 until age 5, social dramatic play and make believe play emerges and evolves (Berk, 1994). As the child ages, the play also changes. The interactions begin to last longer, they show more involvement, and tend to interact with a variety of peers and become more cooperative. Children who are involved in social dramatic experiences are more advanced in general intellectual development, as well as an enhanced ability to understand the feelings of others (Berk, 1994). The list of benefits of make-believe play is extensive. The known benefits include strengthened mental abilities, improved memory, as well as promotes language and storytelling skills. In addition, make believe play allows the child to expand their vocabulary. Make believe play also allows children an opportunity to reason through seemingly impossible situations, which enhances their problem solving skills and allows them to gain confidence in their decision-making skills. All of these benefits combined have proven to lead to higher test scores compared to children who did not participate in make believe play experiences (Berk, 1994).

#### **THE BENEFITS OF PLAY TO THE CHILD**

Play allows children to use their creativity while developing their imagination, dexterity, and physical, cognitive, and emotional strength. Play is important to healthy brain development (Reivich &

Shatte, 2022). Simply put, play helps to develop neural structures which results in forming synaptic connections, creating significant number of neural links. It is through play that children at a very early age engage and interact in the world around them. Play allows children to create and explore a world they can master, conquering their fears while practicing adult roles, sometimes in conjunction with other children or adult caregivers. As they master their world, play helps children develop new competencies that lead to enhanced confidence and the resiliency they will need to face future challenges (Hurwitz, 2020; Frost, 1998; Barnett, 1990; Tsao, 2002). Undirected play allows children to learn how to work in groups, to share, to negotiate, to resolve conflicts, and to learn self-advocacy skills. When play is allowed to be child driven, children practice decision-making skills, move at their own pace, discover their own areas of interest, and ultimately engage fully in the passions they wish to pursue. In contrast to passive entertainment, play builds active, healthy bodies. In fact, it has been suggested that encouraging unstructured play may be an exceptional way to increase physical activity levels in children, which is an important strategy in the resolution of obesity (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016; Burdette & Whitaker, 2020). Above all, play is a simple joy that is a cherished part of childhood. Children's developmental trajectory is critically mediated by appropriate, affective relationships with loving and consistent significant adults (caregivers, parents, senior siblings) as they relate to children through play. When parents, for example, observe their children in play or join with them in child-driven play, they are given a unique opportunity to see the world from their child's vantage point as the child navigates a world perfectly created just to fit his or her needs. The interactions that occur through play tell children that adults are fully paying attention to them and help to build enduring relationships (Tamis-LeMonda, Shannon, Cabrera & Lamb, 2014; Tsao, 2002; Henry, 2012). Parents who have the opportunity to glimpse into their children's world learn to communicate more effectively with their children and are given another setting to offer gentle, nurturing guidance. Less verbal children may be able to express their views, experiences, and even frustrations through play, allowing their parents an opportunity to gain a fuller understanding of their perspective. Quite simply, play offers parents a wonderful opportunity to engage fully with their children. Play is integral to the academic environment. It ensures that the school setting attends to the social and emotional development of children as well as their cognitive

development. It has been shown to help children adjust to the school setting and even to enhance children's learning readiness, learning behaviours, and problem-solving skills. Social-emotional learning is best integrated with academic learning; it is concerning if some of the forces that enhance children's ability to learn are elevated at the expense of others. Play and unscheduled time that allow for peer interactions are important components of social-emotional learning (Elias & Arnold, 2016; Zins, 2014). Despite the numerous benefits derived from play for both children and parents, time for free play has been markedly reduced for 21st century children. Too often, the centrality of play in children's lives is misunderstood and ignored, and perceived as "deficit" time, better filled by adult-directed, purposeful activities (Bodrova, 2008). This trend affects preschool aged children all over the world who have had free play reduced in their schedules to make room for more academics (Pellegrini & Bohn, 2015). Currently, many primary schoolchildren as well are given less free time and fewer physical outlets at school in an effort to focus on reading and mathematics. This change may have implications on children's ability to store new information, because children's cognitive capacity is enhanced by a clear-cut and significant change in activity. Some children are given less time for free exploratory play as they are hurried to adapt into adult roles and prepare for their future at earlier ages. Parents are receiving carefully marketed messages that good parents expose their children to every opportunity to excel, buy sophisticated toys and electronic gadgets, and ensure their children participate in a wide variety of activities. Children are exposed to enrichment videos and computer programs from early infancy as well as specialized books and toys designed to ensure that they are well-rounded and adequately stimulated for excellent development. These tools and programs are heavily marketed, and many parents have grown to believe that they are a requirement of good parenting and a necessity for appropriate development. As a result, much of parent-child time is replaced by special after school organised activities or transporting children between those activities. In addition to time, parents are ready to make financial sacrifices and invest to ensure that the children have what are marketed as the "very best" opportunities. It is clear that organized activities have a developmental benefit for children, especially in contrast to completely unsupervised time. Some research substantiates that for most children, benefits increase with higher levels of participation. In addition, it has been

suggested that because this lifestyle is associated with middle-class families, it may have a benefit in maintaining social class or in creating upward mobility (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2023; Luthar, 2013). It is less clear, however, at what point a young person may be “overscheduled” to their developmental detriment or emotional distress. Free child-driven play known to benefit children is decreased, and the downtime that allows parents and children some of the most productive time for interaction is at a premium when schedules become highly packed with adult-supervised or adult-driven activities. It is left to parents to judge appropriate levels of involvement, but many parents seem to feel as though they are running on a treadmill to keep up yet dare not slow their pace for fear their children will fall behind. A careful look at the Nigerian situation would reveal that a majority of Nigerian preschools adopted a dangerous trend of pushing small children too hard and too fast, using learning concepts well beyond their age and capacities all in the name to grow intelligent pupils (Elkind, 2001; Omoera, 2013). Although most highly scheduled children are thriving, some are reacting to the associated pressures with anxiety and other signs of increased stress. In this regard, highly scheduled children have less time for free, child-driven, creative play, which offers benefits that may be protective against the effects of pressure and stress. As trusted child advocates, ECCE professionals are ideally suited to help parents consider the appropriate balance between preparing for the future and living fully in the present through play, child-centred organized activities, and rich parent-child interaction (Kadiri, 2022).

#### **FACTORS RESPONSIBLE FOR DECREASED OPPORTUNITIES TO PLAY**

Researchers from different countries agree that free play of today’s children is not simply different from the play of the past, but that it has declined in both quality and quantity. Level of involvement in play activities among preschoolers is drastically reducing (Bodrova, 2008 as cited in Awopetu & Ossom, 2018). Several key factors had been identified responsible for decreased time for free play in childhood. Presently in Nigeria, here are more families with a single head of household or two working parents and fewer multigenerational households in which grandparents and extended family members can watch the children. Therefore, fewer families have available adult supervision in the home during the workday, which makes it necessary for children to be in child care or other settings in which they can be monitored by adults throughout the day. Parents receive messages from

a variety of sources stating that good parents actively build every skill and aptitude their child might need from the earliest ages. They are deluged in the media with a wide range of enrichment tools and activities that tout their ability to produce super achieving children. They meet other parents who go to extreme efforts, at great personal sacrifice, to make sure their children receive the best academic training at the expense of free play time. The tertiary institutions’ admission process has become much more rigorous in recent years. Parents receive the message that if their children are not well prepared, well balanced, and high-achieving, they will not get a desired position in future. Even parents who wish to take a lower-key approach to child rearing fear slowing down when they perceive everyone else is on the fast track. The pressure for admission to select schools begins for some families long before secondary education. Selection for private preschool programs can even be competitive, and parents may need to consider how best to “package” their preprimary children. There is a current trend in Nigeria of nowadays to focus on the academic fundamentals of reading and arithmetic, and one of the practical effects of the trend is decreased time left during the school day for recess, creative arts, and physical activities (Omoera, 2013) This trend may have implications for the social and emotional development of children. Also, many after-school child care programs prioritize an extension of academics and homework completion over organized play, free play, and physical activity. The decrease in free play can also be explained by children being passively entertained through television, computer/video games and many other electronic gadgets. In sharp contrast to the health benefits of active, creative play and the known developmental benefits of an appropriate level of organized activities, there is ample evidence that this passive entertainment is not protective and, in fact, has some harmful effects.

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