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**COURSE NAME:
Master's Degree
(Play-Based Learning in Early Childhood
Education)**

**ATLANTIC INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY
March 2024**

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Introduction

Play is used as an ‘umbrella term’ to embrace a wide range of activities. It is one of many teaching strategies for learning in Early Childhood Education. According to Wood (2008) play is the child’s work and its defining characteristics that include ideas such as:

- play is child-chosen and child invented
- pretend but done as if the activities were real
- focuses on the doing (process not product) but children may choose to create a product
- done by the players, not by the adults
- active engagement and involvement (bodies, emotions, mind)
- free from imposed rules, but may be organized by children’s rules
- fun
- about children’s meanings and intentions.

Wood (2008) also states that play underpins all areas of development and learning in young children. It is through playful experiences that children develop intellectually, creatively, physically, emotionally and socially.

How much do we really know about play and to what extent are children restricted, as well as supported by our culture or social context? It is through play that all areas of a child's development can be explored and be enhanced thus helping him/her to develop holistically. It has been proven that children learn best through play and by playing it allows children to be imaginative, solve problems, resolve conflicts, come up with new ideas, experiment, develop the brain and also their physical abilities. It is through play that children at a very early age engage and interact in the world around them Berk (2007).

In the past century there has been a large body of research on the relationship of play and children's development and learning. Play has been devalued because many researchers have continued to ignore the need of play in educational settings. Hence, many educators have not understood what play really entails or how to use it effectively Smith (2018). Kuper (2018) claims that play is legitimate and it needs to be accepted in its own right for it to be used effective. In reviewing academic literature play can be viewed as a waste of a child's time, unimportant trivial and and lacking in purpose Costanza (2014) , However, the value of play is increasingly recognized by policy makers, educators and researchers. Hence, there

is a correlation between play, intellectual achievement and emotional well-being Johnson & Williams (2019).

.Doris Bergen (1998) in her book entitled ‘Play as a Medium for Learning and Development- A Handbook of Theory and Practice she skillfully mentioned that there has been advances in the way that play has been interpreted and there has been improvement in methodologies that have made play research “more “empirically manageable and more scientifically respectable.” She further emphasized that a body of research has been collected over the years and this serves as a catalyst for extending play research in new directions. Bergens also posits that there are many conceptual and methodological problems in the research literature on play. Nonetheless, many researchers who includes philosophers, theorists, psychologists and educators have promised to further expand the knowledge about play and will provide information that will greatly improve education practices.

This essay seeks to define play as it relates to child development and learning, next a discussion two theories of play that are significant to the development of children. Then, the functions and benefits of play to the young child's health will be examined and lastly the evidence supporting the effectiveness of play based learning in Early Childhood Education and its impact on child development will be explored.

Definition of Play

Play is a concept that is of utmost importance and it helps with a child's growth and development. It also promotes a child's engagement, inclusion and holistic skills. The significance of play is outlined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the power of play has long been recognized Burns (2007). Play is considered to be one of the highest achievements of the human species alongside language, culture and technology Burns (2007). Play is considered as being difficult to accurately define. So why play has become a topic of much interest, debate and current research? In Early Childhood Education, there has been a challenge to justify the use of play in programmes for children as well as those used to justify themselves as professionals whose concern is child's play.

Bergens (1998). Additionally, play is legitimate, it needs to be accepted in its own right for it to be used effectively Burns (2007). The critical skills that children acquire through play in the preschool helps to build blocks of future complex 21st century skills Taylor & Wood (2005).

TABLE 1.1 Definitions of play

Theorist or play scholar	Definition
Froebel	'Play is the highest expression of human development in childhood, for it alone is the free expression of what is in a child's soul. Children have an innate ability to be curious and to investigate and to play to find things out' (1887, p.55).
Huizinga	'Play is a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious", but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner' (1955, p.13).
Freud	'Children repeat everything that has made a great impression on them in real life, and that in so doing, they recreate the strength of the impressions and make themselves masters of the situation' (1961, p.11).
Montessori	Regarded play as 'the child's work' (1967, p.180).
Bruner	'Play ... a means for acquiring information about and experience with the environment' (1972, p.699).
Erikson	'The growing child's play is the training ground for the experience of a leeway of imaginative choices within an existence governed and guided by roles and visions (1977, p.79).
Piaget	Described play as a 'happy display of known actions' (1962, p.93).
Vygotsky	'Play is an adaptive mechanism promoting cognitive growth. It creates the zone of proximal development. In play a child always behaves beyond his average age, above his daily behaviour; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself' (1978, p.102).
Rubin, Fein & Vandenberg	'Play is a behavioural characteristic that occurs in describable and reproducible contexts and is manifest in a variety of observable behaviours' (1983, p.698).

Theorist or play scholar	Definition
Lifter & Bloom	'Play is the expression of intentional states—the representations in consciousness constructed from what children know about and are learning from ongoing events—and consists of spontaneous, naturally occurring activities with objects that engage attention and interest' (1998, p.164).
Albon	'A free-ranging voluntary activity that occurs with certain time and place limits, according to accepted rules. Play is accompanied by feelings of tension and joy and an awareness that it differs from ordinary life' (2001, p.357).
Sutton-Smith	'Play is a pleasure for its own sake, but its genetic gift is perhaps the sense that life, temporarily at least, is worth living' (2008, p.122).
Uren & Stagnitti	'Play is a child's natural dominant learning approach and contributes to their knowledge and skill development across the cognitive, social/emotional, creative and physical domains, while also providing a solid foundation for future learning' (2009, cited in Jay, Hesterman & Knaus, 2014, p.3).
Smith	'Play is a spontaneous, voluntary, pleasurable and flexible activity involving a combination of body, object, symbol use and relationships. In contrast to games, play behaviour is more disorganised, and is typically done for its own sake (i.e., the process is more important than any goals or end points)' (2013, p.2).

(Adapted from Sluss, 2005, p.7)

Jean Piaget's theory of Cognitive Development

In the words of Jean Piaget cited in Berk (2007) his theory highlighted that children engage in different types of play that reflect their level of cognitive and language development

Piaget proposed that children are active participants in their own learning and children's cognitive development progresses through a series of stages that unfolds in a definite sequence. For children to construct new knowledge and mental models of the world around them. Piaget's theory is built on four stages of cognitive development based on the way children play. The stages include sensorimotor stage, the preoperational stage, the concrete operational stage and the formal operational stage.

Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development has four stages of play: functional play, constructive play, symbolic/fantasy play, and games with rules. The four stages of play should not be confused with Piaget's four stages of cognitive development. The stages of play are part of how children learn about the world as they move through the stages of cognitive development.

Functional play is when very young children explore objects using their senses.

Constructive play is when children take those objects they have explored and start to use them with purpose. Instead of mouthing or gathering markers, a child begins to draw with them. Instead of banging or throwing blocks, a child starts to constructively stack and build objects or shapes.

Symbolic/fantasy play is when children incorporate objects into pretend play

Imaginative ideas can be as simple as using a block as a phone. More complex symbolic play includes role-playing for instance pretending to be a mother in the home. Children can move beyond concrete thinking and can use their imagination to expand their play and this can also be therapeutic.

“Games with rules” is when children can understand and follow different types of rules. “Games with rules” is often part of group play but can also be part of solitary play. The rules are used as guidelines on moving forward with an activity Bergens (1998).

According to Slavin (2005) four (4) main implications drawn from Piaget's theory of play are:

1. A focus on the process of children's thinking, not just the product.
2. Recognition of the crucial role of children's self-initiated, active involvement in learning activities.
3. Acceptance of individual differences in the developmental process.
4. A de-emphasis on practice and at making children adult like in their thinking.

Additionally, with Mildred Parten's theory, these stages progress through early childhood. A child will build play skills as he/she moves through each stage but still participate in earlier stages.

Mildred Parten's six (6) Stages of Play

Bruce (2006) outlined Parten's 6 Stages of Play Theory.

She further states that Mildred Parten's social stages of play theory (known as *Parten's Stages of Play*) covers play progression for children from newborn to age six. This theory is comprised of six (6) stages which are unoccupied play, solitary play, spectator/onlooker play, parallel play, associative play, and social/cooperative play. Parten's theory was part of her dissertation in 1929. By carefully observing young children, Parten created a framework for understanding how children's play becomes more complex as they grow older. Infants and young toddlers are focused on their own sensory experiences. As they age, their play becomes more social, complexed and interactive with peers.

1. Unoccupied Play - Birth to 3 Months

Unoccupied play is when infants play, seemingly without purpose or needing interaction from others. While very young children are dependent on caregivers, they are alone and exploring the world around them using their senses during unoccupied play.

“Unoccupied” refers to playing alone without obvious objectives, not that they are not playing and learning.

Example: A baby tightening and unclenching a soft toy, looking out, and turning his/her head towards sounds in the environment.

2. Solitary Play - 3 Month to 2 1/2 Years

Solitary play is when children play alone with no particular goal except to explore objects, the environment, and the impact they can have on objects and the environment.

Children are motivated to explore objects and toys that interest them. This type of play is essential because it gives toddlers a chance to understand how their bodies and the things in their environments function.

· *Example:* A toddler filling up and pouring out sand from a pail over and over again.

3. Spectator Play - 2 1/2 to 3 1/2 Years

Spectator/Onlooker play is when children watch other children as they play nearby. While playing, children may interact for a moment and then step out to merely observe. At this age, children will begin practicing entering and exiting group play.

During this stage of play, a child may seem to be “lonely” or “isolated.” Caregivers should appreciate that a child learns and observes lots of information while watching others. What they learned can be used in their own play later. Aren’t humans just incredible social beings?

Example: A three (3) year old child at a playground climbing to the top of a slide and observing while others play.

4. Parallel Play - 3 1/2 to 4 Years

Parallel play is when two children play side-by-side, often with the same materials. The children may engage in a short conversation or onlooker play. One child may mimic the words or behaviors of the other

To caregivers, it may appear that the children are not playing together. In reality, children are collecting information from one another and building social skills.

Parallel play becomes a safe way to practice entering more complex play.

·Example: Two children sitting together at the table with their own paper and paint. One child says, “A mess!” The other child repeats the words and continues painting.

5. Associative Play - 4 to 4 1/2 Years

Associative play is when children begin interacting more while playing but are still focused on their own goals and interests. The interactions, collaboration, and sharing of materials are more complex than parallel play. Still, each child focuses on his/her own interests and motivations.

·Example: Two children taking blocks from the same box but building their own creative model. Each child talks aloud about what he/she is creating and may respond to one another.

6. Cooperative Play - 4 1/2 Years and Up

Cooperative/social play is when children's play becomes the most complex and interactive. In this stage of play, children build social bonds and establish friendships that are more exclusive. Children practice collaborating and communicating. Children get to take turns practicing leadership roles.

· *Example:* A group of children building a sandcastle on the beach.

Therefore, with these two theories of play in mind it is essential for parents, caregivers and educators to provide the necessary space, environment and stimulating materials for young children to explore, grow, learn and develop.

Thus, becoming a 'lone scientist' and develop competence and participate in self-discovery activities as they play. There are many benefits of play in the life of a child. It is crucial to all areas of a child's health. This begins in infancy and continues throughout life.

Health Benefits of Play

From a health perspective through play children build strong muscles, improve bone - density and strengthen cardiovascular functions. Play increases physical

activities, which can decrease childhood obesity. Furthermore, some other functions and benefits of play to the young child's health includes giving him/her the opportunity to improve his/her reflexes, movement control, develop fine and gross motor skills, balance which includes hand-eye coordination, fosters the development of each child's imagination, cognitive, physical, social and emotional ability Kuper (2018) & Wood (2008).

Also, Johnson & Williams (2019) adds that play is important to healthy brain development. Play also allows children to learn how to cooperate in groups, resolve conflicts, to share, to build resilience and learn and appreciate self-advocacy skills in childhood memory skills that are developed. Play helps with the development of language, mathematics and social skills and studies have shown that play helps children cope with stressful situations the would encounter in their life as children play and explores their senses.

It is important to note here that gender identity is important in play episodes as children get prepared for adults role. For example girls play with dolls and kitchen sets and by imaginative play it prepares them to be mothers. However, on

the other hand the boys are seen as aggressive as they are engaged in rough and tumble play. The rough and tumble play prepares the boys to protect themselves. This type of play can be viewed as aggressive and the child can be punished for his/her behavior which might include kicking, pushing, and wrestling Bergens (1998).

Play-Based Learning

According to Smith (2018) play-based learning is an educational approach where children play as they learn. This is distinct from broader concepts of play. (Burns (2007) has expressed that play-based learning has gained much recognition in Early Childhood Education programmes instead of focusing on traditional teaching methods. Johnson & Williams (2019) further emphasized that play-based learning embraces the innate curiosity of young children to improve their growth and development. By using this teaching strategy children learn best by active engagement and exploration which is meaningful and enjoyable. As children play they use their imagination, take risks and learn problem solving skills to support their development.

Moreover, play-based learning is teacher supported and child initiated Smith (2018) . The role of the teacher is mainly to guide and facilitate learning as the child explores his/her environment through discovery. For instance, if a child is working at a learning centre with clay dough and he/she is creating a shape or model the teacher can give support by asking open-ended questions such as:

- a) Tell me about the shape or model you are creating?
- b) Why did you choose the clay dough?
- c) What do you think you will create next?

Hence, in order for children to benefit from a play-based curriculum these five (5) elements should be incorporated. The activities should be self-chosen,/self – directed. enjoyable, unstructured, process-oriented and imaginative Berk (2007)

In addition play-based learning linked 21st century learning skills which include collaboration, communication, content, critical thinking, creative innovations, confidence, social and emotional development, language development and an improvement in mathematical skills Burns (2007). Therefore, it is essential to integrate play in the child’s learning process as it is considered to be effective.

Effectiveness of Play-based learning in Early Childhood Education

Debbie Cole (pg 20) posits that child-centred, play-based learning and reflective pedagogical approach which facilitates qualitative, educative, informative, and practical learning environments are beneficial for children all-round development. As stated, " Promoting play-based learning requires an adult to rethink their notions of play and develop programmes that integrate play and learning into the curriculum". Furthermore, Smith (2018) highlights some benefits of play-based learning which include the following:

1. It fosters creativity and imagination.
2. Promotes language development.
3. Creates a positive disposition towards learning.
4. Improves motor skills.

Therefore, with these benefits in mind by actively participating in play-based learning a young child can develop academic content in the core areas of Mathematics , Language Arts and Science.

Reflection

As a classroom teacher for many years with experience teaching Kindergarten, Grades 1,2 and 3 which are considered as the Early Childhood classes on Montserrat, I must say that the play element is indeed necessary for young children to grasp concepts taught. For example, suppose I am teaching the concept addition without regrouping in Mathematics. It can be meaningful and helpful to use a board game as this can be constructed in a way to learn the number facts while playing, having fun and learning at the same time. As children play the game repeatedly it helps to cement or reinforce the concept taught. Furthermore, children are able to use manipulatives and recheck their answer. As an educator, I thoroughly enjoyed reading and researching information about this interesting topic on play and play-based learning and my objective is to incorporate the ideas and theories learnt into my practice in the early years classroom and even write academic literature on this topic as I observe young people grow, learn and develop in our school system.

Conclusion

Although the concept of play is a complex phenomenon that is often difficult to define, it is a pedagogy native to preschool and congruous to primary school learning. Play in various forms hold great value in molding and shaping the minds of young children in the early years as they learn and develop. Learning through play is developmentally appropriate as it also ease and gives a smoother transition between Preschool and the Kindergarten grades in the Primary School. Play helps to promote a young child's engagement in lone activities and with peers, inclusion and holistic development. Although it has been strongly argued in a few academic literature that it has been undervalued as a useful curricular tool. Nonetheless, numerous research points to play-based learning as a powerful and promising pedagogy that is proven to improve a young child's academic performance.

Therefore, with the success of this learning strategy which is play-based learning, the classroom provided for these young minds to play, develop and strive must be conducive to learning as the child experiment, create, problem solve and discover details with little support and assistance. This is what we need to see in our Early Childhood classrooms. That is well-designed and equipped learning centres which

enriches the ability for each child to become critical thinkers through trials and errors. Furthermore, a wide variety of materials should be used in the play learning centres for instance blocks, art supplies, sand-trays, water area/trays, puzzles, dramatic play props for drama and storytelling. However, the educator should ensure that the materials and play area both indoor and outdoor must be safe for children to interact with thus boosting their self-worth and well-being.

Therefore, the time is right for educators, lawmakers, policy makers, politicians and psychologists to realized that when children play they also learn and develop.

The idea of young children sitting rigidly to complete academic work and assessments is clearly outdated. Hence, by embracing play-based learning and carefully integrating the strategy into the curriculum for young learners has numerous benefits for the young child in order to lay a solid foundation so that educators can develop the child's full potential as they progress confidently on their academic pathway.

Since play-based learning is effective and is here to stay, it is imperative that play-based learning principles and educational practices are constantly revised or modified. Professional developments sessions should be done constantly with educators to inform them of new research trends and to give ideas on how to

improve their play/learning centres in/out of their classrooms. Additionally, Johnson and Williams (2019) claims that there is a disconnect between policy, research and practice across a number of well-known pedagogies so it is important that a great effort should be made to bridge the gaps for the benefit of curious young children. Therefore, let the children learn an play.

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