BUILDING BLOCKS OF DEVELOPMENT: INTERROGATING THE PLAY THEORY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS TO HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT OF A CHILD

Rose Mugweni

Professor, Department of Educational Foundations, Great Zimbabwe University, P. O. Box 135 Masvingo, ZIMBABWE.

rmugweni@gzu.ac.zw

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to examine the play theory and its implications to the holistic development of a child. My argument is that play theory has great influence in child psychology and needs to be understood in light of development taking place globally and Zimbabwe. Play theory has generated a great deal of research and exerted an enormous impact in the education and care of young children. This forms the basis of this article. Play theory provides educationists with a foundation for pedagogical strategies underpinning how to advance developmentally appropriate interactions with young learners, hence, it needs to be interrogated for its relevance in contemporary early childhood learning environments. Play theory is critical as it facilitates educators' understanding of the holistic development of a child through play. My findings indicate that it is important that the school and community at large, work hand in glove to ensure that all children are afforded an equal opportunity at development, by ensuring a play-based learning supporting environment for children during early childhood. Play should be a medium to help children work through difficult feelings, increase pro-social behaviour, and develop physical and cognitive skills. My recommendation is that play theory should assist early childhood educators to prevent play disruption and succeed in their immense task of producing good citizens who are functional members of society.

Keywords: play theory, early childhood, development, learning, holistic, disruption, catharsis

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS OF PLAY

Play is the hallmark of young children's learning and peer interaction during early childhood and a universal human behaviour (Gosso, Morais & Otta, 2007). The main characteristics of play is that it is fun. Children get actively involved in the "private reality" that makes up their play (Segal, 2004, p38). Dunn (2004) liken play with the level of coordination that must be achieved by a jazz quartet. Through play children learn to control their own impulses and understand peers' intentions. Children get an opportunity to express and explore their feelings, fears, dreams and disappointments (Levine & Munsch, 2014). Play is the basis for children' development of trust and closeness, which are essential in forming relationships. It is essential to development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children during early childhood (Levine & Munsch, 2014). Play also offers an ideal opportunity for educators and parents to engage fully with children. Some authors view play as a business of children. Natural curiosity that resides in children is the most powerful tool for children's learning. According to Froebel, a child that plays

ISSN: 2223-9944, e ISSN: 2223-9553

thoroughly, with self-active determination, perseveringly until physical fatigue forbids, will surely be a thorough, determined, capable of self-sacrifice for the promotion of the welfare of himself and others. Play develops knowledge, compassion, love and ethics in future global citizens and leaders. Through play-based teaching and learning learners' interests, background knowledge, and creativity emerge. Young children try out new ideas through play.

Generally, it is assumed that every child and adult have a developmental need to experience creativity and self-expression; concrete, using open-ended materials during play offers a powerful tool for creativity and self-expression; play develops feelings of competence, power, and self-efficacy; competencies such as problem-solving, persistence, and collaboration are also developed through play. Burghardt, (2004, p. 294) proposes the following characteristics of play. Play is done for its own sake; even when it is an imitation of adult work, play is marked as being different through signals such as exaggeration of activities, role reversals, or laughing; and play is voluntary and spontaneous. Children who must work at an early age, like those in child headed families also find ways to play while they are working (Drewes, 2005).

THEORIES OF PLAY

There are classical and contemporary/modern theories of play. Classical theories of play are: *Surplus energy theory*, *Recreation or Relaxation theory*, *Practice or Pre-exercise theory*, and *Recapitulation theory*. (Mellou, 2006). The *Surplus energy theory* view play as a result of surplus energy that exists because the young are freed from the business of self-preservation through the activities of their parents. Excess energy is release in the children's none goal oriented enthusiastic activities of play. According to the theory young children engage in physical play because of excess energy that need to be used. Recreation or Relaxation theory view play as a mode of relaxation, de-stressor or catharsis which restores energy lost during daily chores and related activities (Mellou, 2006). Hence play is an activity that derives from energy deficit and the goal of play is to restore the lost energy.

Recreation or Relaxation theory

The theory views play as a way of dissipating the inhibitions bult up from fatigue (Mellou, 2006). The fatigue is obtained through engaging in relatively new tasks to the individual or organism. In this instance, play is a mode of relaxation or a de-stressor which restores all the energy that has been lost in the day to day work related activities. As a result, play becomes more prevalent during childhood.

Pre-exercise theory

The theory views play as a necessary practice for behaviours -that are essential to later survival. For example, the rough- and tumble play of young boys is essential practice of skills such as agility and dodging that will later aid children's survival (Mellou, 2006). Hence, play becomes valuable in practicing behaviours that will help children competent and acquire survival skills during adulthood

Recapitulation theory

Children through their play enact the stages of man. For example, when children play with toy bows and arrows, they are reliving traditional times when people were hunters.

Modern theories of play include *Psychoanalytic theory*, *Arousal Modulation theory*, *Bateson's Metacommunicative theory*, and *Cognitive theory* (Mellou, 2006).

ISSN: 2223-9944, e ISSN: 2223-9553

The *Psychoanalytic theory* propounded by Freud focus on the value of play for emotional development. Play is also viewed as repletion compulsion, where a child wishes to constantly repeat ane re-enact an experience (Mellou, 2006). Through play a child works out her pleasure principle, reduces tension produced by unpleasant life experiences. Through fantasy *play a child acts out deal with phobias and negative feelings.*

Arousal Modulation theory

The Arousal Modulation theory advocates that children play in order to regulate arousal levels. The theory relies on environmental stimuli and lack of such stimuli as the reason why play takes place. The theory propounds that a type of play that involves interaction with peers or adults occurs (Mellou, 2006).

Bateson's Metacommunicative theory

Bateson in Mitchell (1991) proposed that animals in play recognise that their action stimulate and cause other activities. Through the actions, metacommunication takes place. Two types of metacommunication are observed in animals' play. First, play occurs when a organism recognises that another is stimulating. The second instance takes place when an organism recognises that it is itself stimulating (Mitchell, 1991). For example, rhesus-monkeys intend to metacommunicate in play. The metacommunication in animal behaviour reveals that organisms interpret themselves and one another. It also informs human beings that animals understand that an action can have more than one reference (Mitchell, 1991). The existence of metacommunication in animals implies evolution in human language.

Cognitive theory

Cognitive development is the construction of thought processes, including remembering, problem solving and decision making, from childhood through adolescence to adulthood. The cognitive psychological theory view play as integral to the development of intelligence in children (Ahamad, Hussain Ch, Batool, Sittar & Malik (2016). Play contributes to cognitive development in a number of ways. Through play children develop imaginary and memory which is essential for thinking about past, present and future (McLeod, 2018). They also feel curious to discover new things and new ideas through play. Consistently, Hestenes and Carroll (2000) cite Vygotsky as saying that play signals the beginning of imagination and the ability to think creatively. Piaget one of the cognitivists views that a child matures through play. The context of development and play should be made to facilitate cognitive and language development. According to the cognitive theory, play is assimilation or a child's effort to make environmental stimuli match his or her own concepts. To Piaget play derives pleasure (McLeod, 2018). It facilitates practice of learned concepts, generation of new ideas and increased creativity (Ahamad et, al. 2016). Overall, the cognitive theory view children's play, sometimes called work" by them, promotes development in all aspects of growth. Play is the best context for children's learning and development in that it is open ended and free, children have control over it, it can be done alone or with others, it can even occur without any materials or equipment, and it can take place in many settings. Play comes naturally to children, so it makes sense that they learn from it. Through his research, Piaget found that people's needs for creating order in their lives is a central drive Piaget, he called this the drive for equilibrium, or a state of balance. To reach equilibrium, people have biological tendencies to organize and adapt (Piaget, 1952).

INFLUENCE OF PLAY ON HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT

In contemporary schools there has been a tendency to downplay play, schools tend to focus on increasing time for computer activities at the expense of physical play. Play has been

ISSN: 2223-9944, e ISSN: 2223-9553

found to be a facilitator for holistic child development (Levine & Munsch, 2014). Figure 1 below shows domain of development that can be facilitated by play.

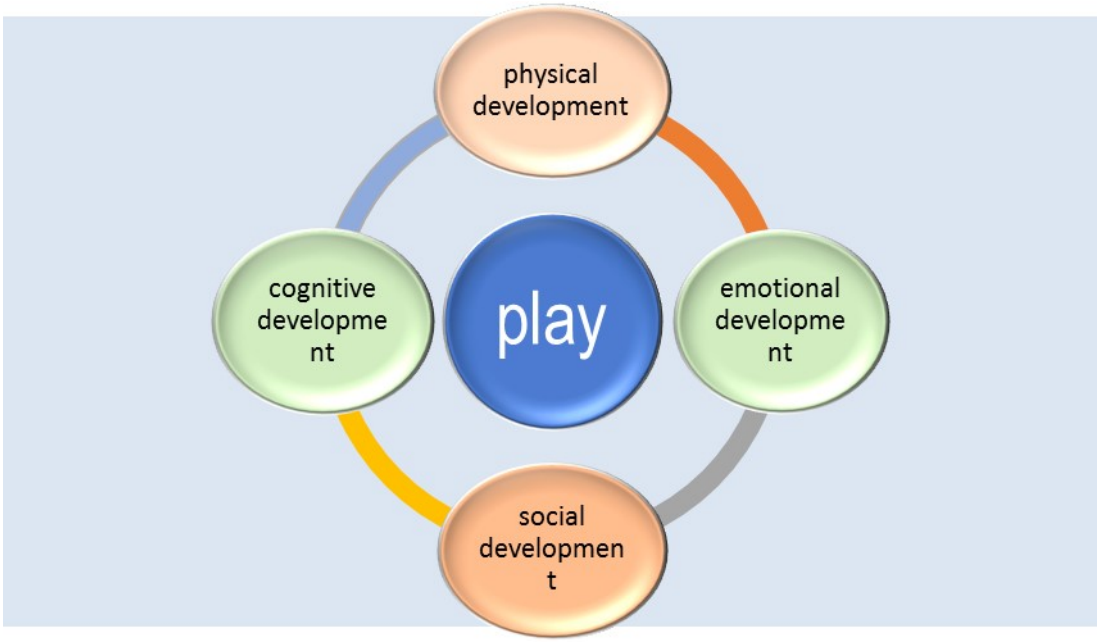

Figure 1: Play and Holistic Development

Figure 1 above indicates four domains that play facilitates development.

Play and Physical Development

Levine and Munsch (2014) assert that play contribute directly to physical development. This takes place through physical play. A type of play like rough-and-tumble builds strength and coordination. It also helps establish leadership and cohesion within a peer group without engaging in actual fighting or skirmishes. Play is essential to development. Physical play goes through three stages namely: physical play; exercise play and rough-and-tumble play. Physical activity play involves large muscle activity. During infancy babies engage in rhythmic stereotypies (Smith, 2010). This type of play consists of purposeless repeated large muscle movements. For example, kicking the legs, swinging arms and waving hands. Portrayal of the play behaviours appear to be a result of neuromuscular maturation (Levine &Munsch, 2014). The type of play takes place in infants before the emerging of voluntary muscle control and regulation of specific body parts being exercised (Smith, 2010). As toddlerhood emerge, the toddlers start to participate in exercise play. The type of play train muscles as well as building strength and endurance (Smith, 2010). Large muscle movements such as walking, running and jumping are engaged in during play. It is observed that exercise play is prevalent during the period of development of muscles and bones in arms, legs are growing rapidly (Smith, 2020).

After exercise play comes rough-and-tumble play. Most of the games played by young boys are based on rough-and-tumble play. The type of play facilitates active learning in young children as they interact with each other and the play environment. As toddlers engage in 'play fighting', wrestling and chasing each other they bear in mind that the goal is not to hurt anyone but to derive pleasure and fun. Boys can also play hunting and chasing using sticks and toy bows and arrows. The play activities promote physical strength, endurance and effect brain development (Haight, & Black, 2001). The function of rough-and-tumble changes from childhood to adolescents. Young children engage in it as a fun activity for friends, it helps build fighting skills and emotional control. During adolescent's rough-and-tumble plat

ISSN: 2223-9944, e ISSN: 2223-9553

becomes a safe way to establish social dominance within the peer group (Pelligrini, 2002). Despite the contribution of play to physical development, there seem to be a decree of time for play during break time in schools (Story, Kaphingst, & French (2006).

Play and Cognitive Development

Play has been seen as taking time off from the 'important work' of children which is academic learning (Pellegrini, 2005). Contrary, Zigler and Bishop-Josef (2006) proffer that only focusing on the core literacy skill is a narrow focus that ignores the developmental need of children to learn through play exploration and play. It is mindful to note that a child's love for learning is intimately linked with a passion for play (Almon, 3003). Playing with objects such as building blocks have been found to improve children's representational abilities, reasoning, creative and problem-solving skills. Literature shows that language play enhances children's language development in a variety of ways since language development is related to other important skills and outcomes, including self-regulation (Vallatton & Ayoub, 2011). Similarly, music play which children often engage in is significant to the development of communication skills and higher cognitive functioning (Winsler, Ducenne, & Koury, 2011).

The psychologist Jean Piaget proffered three stages of play in children' development namely: practice play, symbolic/socio-dramatic play, and games with rules (Levine & Munsch, 2014). In practice play a child performs a certain behaviour repetitively. This happens during the early sensorimotor stage of cognitive development. For example, at this stage infant may drop a toy over and over again. Symbolic or socio-dramatic play is common in toddlers. They engage in pretend and imaginative play. Socio-dramatic play starts when children are two years old. This type of play happens at both Piaget's sensorimotor and preoperational stages of cognitive development (Levine & Munsch, 2014). Around age four children engage more in fantasy play. During the games with rules stage, children make up simple rules for their games. They further develop to play games with preestablished rules like volleyball, soccer, skipping and netball. This play progression takes place in the concrete operational stage of cognitive development.

While the context of play differs across cultures, the ability to use symbols and understand social rules have a more universal pattern It is apparent that play fosters cognitive development as children develop ability to use symbols and understand rules. It is proposed that play can be used as an intervention strategy to help young children develop pre-formal and pre-academic skills in literacy and numeracy (Levine & Munsch, 2014). Play helps children to be motivated and maintain their attention through letting off steam during school break-time. In their study Barros, Silver & Stein found that children who play during break-time at school show belter behaviour in class. Irrefutably, with regards to play and cognitive development, it is evident that children are intrinsically motivated to play and develop cognitively. Barker, Semenov, Michaelson, Provan, Snyder & Munakata (2014) showed that the amount of less-structured time in 6–7-year-olds' daily lives, including free play alone and with others, social outings, sightseeing and visiting museums & zoos, predicted their cognitive self-regulation

Play and Emotional Development

Emotion is the body's physiological reaction to a situation, the cognitive interpretation of the situation, communication to another person, and actions. Sigmund Freud in psychoanalytic tradition view play as the expression of the child's inner emotional conflict (Levine and Munsch, 2014). When children are bothered about something in real life, they play it out in fantasy. For example, a child may become a 'rude mother' when playing with dolls to express her experience with inappropriate child care. The fantasy gives the child a sense of control of

ISSN: 2223-9944, e ISSN: 2223-9553

the situation. In this way play is associated with the expression, regulation and understanding of emotions. Children who spend more time in fantasy play show more understanding of self-emotions and the emotions of others. When children experience severe emotional difficulties, they may use play to re-enact traumatic scenes over and over again with little emotional relief (Barker, et, al., 2014). Consistently, play therapy, a way to help children work through difficult feelings with the help of an adult who is trained to understand play as a type of communication has always been used with success. Through play therapy young children express their thoughts and emotions in symbolic play.

Play and Social Development

By nature, play to children is intrinsically social, hence is linked to the development of social skills and formation of friendships. It implies that play and social development are closely linked. In 1932 Pattern formulated levels of children's play based on the level of social skills a child is capable of using with peers (Levine & Munsch, 2014). The first level is unoccupied behaviour. At this level a child looks around at what is happening but does not engage in the activity. The second level is onlooker behaviour. The child just watches others play. The third is solitary play. The child engages actively with toys that are different from those being used by other children. Level four is parallel play. Here the child plays next to a peer with the same type of toys but does not interact with other children (Coplan & Armer, 2007). This level is followed by associate play. In this type of play there is sharing of toys and interacting with peers but without a common goal. Pattern's sixth and last level is cooperative play. The child now plays as part of a group with a common goal such as building a bridge, house or creating a make-believe ambulance (Dyer & Maneta, 2006).

Sometimes children may be found playing alone due to rejection by peers, shyness or lack of social skills to initiate contact with others (Coplan & Armer, 2007). Parallel play is prevalent throughout preschool years. In young children play and social development are inextricably linked, hence play and social development are inseparable. By age three children begin to show preference for specific playmates and friendships develop. Through friendships a child shows a mutual relationship marked by companionships, closeness and affection (Dunn, 2004). Both peers agree that they have a friendship. Dunn (2004) found that friendship at this age is not based on sophisticated qualities that will enter into relationships at an older age, such as how trustworthy the friend is.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The discourse is that play supports children's development in physical skills and physical development, cognitive abilities, emotional development, social development and motivation for learning. Its highlighted that physical play provided children with exercises and health benefits. It also increases academic progress, cognitive self-regulation, and social competencies. There is evidence that rough-and-tumble play especially with boys facilitates development of social competence and emotional awareness. Play allows for creativity and invention. It is one thing that every child desire to do. Experience shows that to say to a child 'sit still and stop playing is like to say die'. It was also concluded that episodes of play in between learning sessions improve children's learning and attention. The paper concludes that generally plat therapy deals with the relationship between play and holistic development – physical, socio-emotional, cognitive and creativity. It is recommended that childhood programmes should be designed to facilitate all children including those living with disabilities to play.

ISSN: 2223-9944, e ISSN: 2223-9553

REFERENCES

[1]. Ahamad, S., Hussain Ch, A., Batool, A., Sittar, K., & Malik, M. (2016). Play and Cognitive Development: Formal Operational Perspective of Piaget's Theory. *Journal of Education and Practice, 7*(28) 72-79.

[2]. Almon, J. (2003). The vital role of play in early childhood education. In S. Olfman (Eds.), *All work and no play: How educational reforms are harming our preschoolers (pp. 17 – 42)*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

[3]. Barker, J. E., Semenov, A. D., Michaelson, L., Provan, L. S., Snyder, H. R., & Munakata, Y. (2014). Less structured time in children's daily lives predicts self-directed executive functioning. Frontiers in psychology, *5*, 593.

[4]. Barros, R. M., Silver, E. J., & Stein, R. E. (2009). School recess and group classroom behaviour. *Pediatrics, 123*(2). 431-436.

[5]. Burghardt, G. M. (2004). Play and the brain in comparative perspective. In R. L. Clements & l. Fiorentino (Eds.), *The child's right to play – A global approach* (pp. 293-308). Westport, CT: Praeger.

[6]. Coplan, R. J., & Armer, M. (2007). A "multitude" of solitude: A closer look at social withdrawal and nonsocial play in early childhood. *Child Development Perspectives, 1*(1), 26-32.

[7]. Drewes, A. A. (2005). Play in selected cultures: Diversity and universality. In E. Gil & A.A. Drewes (Eds,), *Cultural issues in play therapy* (pp. 26-71). New York, NY: Guilford Press.

[8]. Dunn, J. (2004). *Children's friendship*. Malden, M. A. Blackwell

[9]. Gosso, Y., Morais, M. L. S., & Otta, E. (2007). Pretend play of Brazilian children: A window into different cultural worlds. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 38*(5), 539-558.

[10]. Dyer, S., & Moneta, G. B. (2006). Frequency of parallel, associate, and cooperative play in British children of different socioeconomic status, social behaviour and personality. *Social Behaviour and Personality, 34*(5), 597-592.

[11]. Haight, W. L., & back, J. E. (2001). A comparative approach to play: Cross-species and cross-cultural perspectives of play in development. *Human Development, 44*, 228-234.

[12]. Hestenes, l., & Carroll, D. (2000). The play interaction young children with and without disabilities. Individually and environmental influences. Early childhood research Quarterly, *15*(2), 229-246. http://ecrp.uivc.edu/v4n1/bergan.html.

[13]. Levine, L. E. & Munsch, J. (2014). *Child development: An Active Learning Approach*. Sage, Los Angeles.

[14]. McLeod, S. (2018). Piaget's Theory and Stages of Cognitive Development. https://www.simplypsychology.org/piaget.html.

[15]. Mellou, E. (2006). Play theories: A contemporary review. *Early Childhood Development and Care, 102*(1), 91-100.

[16]. Mitchell, R. W. (1991). Bateson's concept of "metacommunication" in play. *New Ideas in Psychology, 9*(1), 73-87.

ISSN: 2223-9944, e ISSN: 2223-9553

[17]. Pellegrini, A. D. (2005). *Recess – Its role in education and development.* Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

[18]. Pellegrini, A. D. (2002). Rough-and-tumble play from Childhood to through Adolescence: Development and possible functions. In P. K. Smith & C. hart (Eds,), *Blackwell handbook of childhood social development,* (pp. 438 – 453). Malden, M. a. Blackwell.

[19]. Piaget, J. (1952). The origins of Intelligence in Children. New York: International Universities Press.

[20]. Segal, M. (2004). The roots and fruits of pretending. In E. F. Zigler, D. G. Singer, & S. J. Bishop-Josef (Eds.), *Children's play – The roots of reading* (pp.33-48). Washington, DC: Zero to Three Press.

[21]. Smith, P. K. (2010). Children and Play. Malden, M. A. Wiley-Blackwell.

[22]. Story, M., Kaphingst, K. M., & French, S. (2006). The roll of schools in obesity prevention. *The Future of Children, 16*(1), 109-142.

[23]. Vallatton, C. & Ayoub, C. (2011) Use your words: The role of language in the development of toddlers' self-regulation. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *26*(2), 169-181.

[24]. Winsler, A., Ducenne, L., & Koury, A. (2011). Singing One's Way to Self-Regulation: The Role of Early Music and Movement Curricula and Private Speech. Early Education & Development, *22*(2), 274–304.

[25]. Zigler, E., & Bishop-Josef, S. J. (2006). The cognitive child versus the whole child: Lessons from 40 years of Head Start. In D. G. Singer, R. M. Golinkoff, & K. Hirsh-Pasek (Eds.), *plat=learning* (pp. 15-35). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

ISSN: 2223-9944, e ISSN: 2223-9553