

A STUDY ON THE QUALITY OF PLAY TOWARDS STUDENT DEVELOPMENT IN THE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS OF THAILAND

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Abstract. Play is believed to provide benefits for cognitive, social, emotional, physical and moral development for children from all socioeconomic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. As children spent most of their time these days at school, schools should provide quality play especially to the early year's programs. Play would facilitate the development of the whole child if it is of quality. Schools can provide quality play for children if they consider the ten dimensions of play in order to evaluate the quality of play at schools. Aims and objectives, curriculum, learning and teaching strategies, planning, assessment and record keeping, staffing, physical environment, relationships and interactions, equal opportunities, parental partnerships and liaison, monitoring and evaluation are the factors that affect the quality of play at schools. The other essential element to produce quality play is teacher facilitation and understanding towards play. Many theorists like Piaget, Vygotsky, Bruner, Erikson and others have supported the importance of play for children to develop. Thus, the question is not about the presence of play at schools but the quality of play that has been provided by the school is essential. Since, play is common for children, especially in early years, schools already have an essential tool for the development of children but schools need to evaluate and be aware of the quality of play in the schools. Piaget stated the pre – operational stage related to the child's development. At this stage students can apply the theory of assimilation and accommodation. While the child is at classroom experiencing an academic experience, the child is experiencing assimilation but when children are at play they get a chance to accommodate what they have learnt through play.

Play has been regarded as an important element to children's lives. In the olden days when children spent more time in the fields and homes rather than schools like now, they had the opportunity to interact with their family member, friends, relatives and neighbors. We would often see them playing different kinds of group games together. But these days children are sent to the schools at an early age assuming that they would be better off with an early foundation on the academic areas of life in order to be successful individuals in the future.

We could see wonderful playgrounds around the schools with no children playing in it. It is essential for schools to provide the opportunity of play since the school is the greatest area where children could learn and meet friends, in other words school is a social arena where they should be learning and growing. There is a well-established consensus among early childhood professionals that play is an essential element of developmentally appropriate high quality early education programs (Alliance for Childhood, 2006; NAEYC&NAECSSDE,2003).

When Children Play:

- They have many opportunities to apply mental representations of the world to new objects, people, and situations – the key ability for future academic learning.
- They integrate all types of learning – physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and language development.
- They are engaged in things they're interested in – so they have a natural motivation to learn (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000)

A lot of research has been done in the favor of play for young children. It is regarded as chances for the children to apply their skills, learning and ideas in a situation where they don't have to think about the consequences of it in reality. There is a well-established consensus among early childhood professionals that play is an essential element of developmentally appropriate high quality early education programs (Alliance for Childhood, 2006; NAEYC&NAECSSDE, 2003). Play provides benefits for cognitive, social, emotional, physical, and moral development (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2006; Elkind, 2007) for children from all socio-economic, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds (Zigler, E. & Bishop-Josef, S., 2006).

Play is a dynamic process that develops and changes as it becomes increasingly more varied and complex. It is considered a key facilitator for learning and development across domains, and reflects the social and cultural contexts in which children live (Christie, 2001; Fromberg, 1998, 2002; Hughes, 1999, in press).

Theorists, regardless of their orientation, concur that play occupies a central role in children's lives. They also suggest that the absence of play is an obstacle to the development of healthy and creative individuals. Psychoanalysts believe that play is necessary for mastering emotional traumas or disturbance; psycho socialists believe it is necessary for ego mastery and learning to live everyday experiences; constructivists believe it is necessary for cognitive growth; maturationists believe it is necessary for competence building and for socializing functions in all cultures of the world; and neuroscientists believe it is necessary for emotional and physical health, motivation, and love of learning.

Moreover, findings from the recent explosion of research on the brain and learning also delineate the importance of play (Jensen, 2000, 2001; Shore, 1997). Research on the brain demonstrates that play is a scaffold for development, a vehicle for increasing neural structures, and a means by which all children practice skills they will need in later life. This research raises new questions for those who view play as a trivial, simple, frivolous, unimportant, and purposeless behavior (Christie, 2001; Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2001, 2001; Shore, 1997)

A body of research on socio-cultural variations on play exists, but is less robust. We know that socio – cultural variations in play depend not only upon the attitudes of parents, teachers, and society in general, but also on such variables as the amount of play space and time that is available to children (Roopnaire, Lasker, Sacks, & Stores, 1998). Child development experts have been far less successful in understanding the contexts within which play occurs (Roopnaire, Shin, Donovan. & Suppal, 2000)

Both theorists and researchers do concur upon a common set of characteristics that distinguish play behaviors from non play behaviors for children across all ages, domains, and cultures. These unique features include behaviors that are: 1) intrinsically motivated and self initiated, 2) process oriented, 3) non literal and pleasurable, 4) exploratory and active and 5) rule – governed (Fromberg, 1998, 2002; Garvey, 1990; Johnson, Christie, & Yawkey, 1999; Rubin, Fein,&Vanderberg,1983) To best understand the relationship of play to learning and development, teachers must be knowledgeable about the research base and typical characteristics that describe how play enhances all children's learning and development. From this knowledge base teachers will be able to argue convincingly and make appropriate decisions about providing adequate opportunities and time for all children to play (Christie, 2001; Fromberg, 1998, 2002; Frost et al., 1999; Wolery & McWilliams, 1998).

Because play often involves physical activity, it is closely related to the development and refinement of children's gross and fine motor skills and their body awareness. As children vigorously and joyfully use their bodies in physical exercise, they simultaneously refine and develop skills that enable them to feel confident, secure, and self assured. In societies where children experience pressure to succeed in all areas, confidence and competence are essential (Berk, 2002; Fromberg, 2002, Frost et al., 2001 ; Holmes& Geiger, 2002; McCune & Zanes, 2001; Murata & Maeda, 2002; Santrock,2003).

As social organisms, humans have a basic need to belong to and feel part of a group and to learn how to live and work in groups with different needs and developing these social and emotional life skills. For example, children of all ages need to be socialized as contributing members of their respective cultures. Numerous studies (Creasey, Jarvis, & Berk, 1998; Erikson, 1963; Goleman, 1995; Piaget, 1962; Rubin & Howe, 1986; Rubin, Maioni, & Hormung, 1976; Rubin, Watson, & Jambor, 1978;Sutton Smith, 1997;Vygotsky, 1978) indicate that play with others gives children the opportunity to match their behavior with others and to take into account viewpoints that differ from their own. Thus, play provides the rich experience children need to learn social skills; become sensitive to others' need and values; handle exclusion and dominance; manage their emotions; learn self control; and share power, space, ideas with others. At all levels of development, play enables children to feel comfortable and in control of their feelings by: 1) allowing the expression of unacceptable feelings in acceptable ways and 2) providing the opportunity to work through conflicting feelings

Evidence also suggests a strong relationship between play and cognitive development. Studies indicate a positive between play and student learning (Kumar & Harizuka, 1998; Lieberman, 1997). They identify improvements to attention, planning skills, and attitudes (McCune & Zanes, 2001; Smilansky & Shefatya 1900; Sylva, Bruner, & Genova, 1976); creativity and divergent thinking (Dansky, 1980; Holmes & Geiger, 2002; Pepler 1982; Sutton-Smith 1997); perspective taking (Burns & Brainerd, 1979); memory

(Jensen, 1999, 2000; Saltz, Dixon, & Jonson, 1977); and language development Clawson, 2002; Creasey, Jarvis, & Berk, 1998; Gardner, 1993;Howes, Droege &Matheson, 1994).

While some consider play to be trivial and simple, and even a waste of time, “play is not wasted time but rather time spent building new knowledge from previous experience” (Bruner, 1972, cited in Harris, 1986, p.263; Piaget, 1962).Information about typical age-related play behaviors at different ages provides a useful framework for understanding different forms of children’s play and for providing environments that will facilitate these forms.

Educators long have recognized the centrality of play to children’s development and have provided opportunities for both structured and spontaneous play Both theory and research supports such a relationship. Play is not only children’s unique way of learning about their world, but also their way of learning about themselves and how they fit into their world, building on familiar knowledge and deepening their understanding through the recurring cycle of learning that is essential to what all children can understand and do (Erikson, 1963; Fromberg, 1998, 2002; Frost et al., 2001; Johnson et al., 1999; Monighan Nourot & Van Hoorn, 1991; Piaget, 1962)

While infants play alone or with playthings toddlers play beside other children, although not with them. They are sometimes within speaking distance of others but make little or no effort to communicate. Two children playing with similar toys may pursue unrelated activities. They concentrate on their own needs, reflecting egocentric behavior, and have no concept of rules (Parten, 1932; Piaget, 1962). Such play contributed to infants’ toddlers’ growing ability to pay attention and to the development of physical skills, social competence, and intellectual growth (McCune & Zanes, 2001)

Play was an understandable and an acceptable part of children’s lives. In ancient Egyptian wall paintings, for example, children can be seen playing with balls and dolls, as well as jumping rope. (French, 1977). In Greece play was considered natural. Naturally playful, allowed and encouraged. Children were seen as naturally more unformed, unruly, helpless, fearful, cheerful, and affectionate than adults.

Even though childhood and children’s activities were appreciated, the role of the adult was to guide the child gently into becoming a useful and responsible citizen, (French, 1977). Negative attitudes about children and about the need for them to have special activities, began to surface in Europe during the period known as the Renaissance (1300-1600 A.D.) Children were believed to be of little importance compared to adults and were said to lack strength, wit, and cunning. Often they were subjects of jokes and were placed in the category of fools and senile old people,(Tucker, 1974). A commonly heard phrase was “Who sees a child sees nothing” Whiting & Whiting, 1966. Children were put to work as soon as was reasonable, because idleness was considered both sinful and unprofitable (Tucker, 1974).

In fact, the only real nursery rhymes were those composed specifically for the nursery, and the only chants that truly belonged to the world of childhood were lullabies, (Tucker, 1974).The French attitude towards play could be characterized as one of acceptance, and this acceptance has continued to one degree or another until the present. Even though the Catholic clergy took a dim view of play without the redeeming social value of work, they were apparently powerless to prevent its occurrence,(Aries, 1962).

King Louis XII of France, (Aries, 1962) at four, he liked to play cards and to shoot with a bow and arrow, and by the age of six, he was beginning to play chess and to enjoy parlor games. Louis’s play is its similarity to that of the adults of his time. As a matter of fact, many of Louis’s playmates were adults : servants and courtiers. The games of children (and fools) were physical in nature, whereas adults, at least those of the nobility who aspired to some degree of sophistication, played only games of intellect and wit. Work and play were increasingly thought of as separate activities.

Young preschoolers play with other children, talk about common activities, and borrow and loan toys. They have no explicit goals, nor do they make an effort to establish rules (Parten, 1932; Piaget, 1962).Older preschoolers can play together and help each other in an activity that produces some material or product or pursues some goal. Preschool children like to build and create with objects, take on roles, and use props to replace an original object. They playfully re – enact events and change details to match personal needs and desires. Although they may imitate codified rules, their concepts of rules are individual and they make no attempt to win. Through play, preschoolers develop and refine motor skills, experience the joy of mastery, and develop and use basic academic skills such as counting, reading, and writing.

A major way children take ownership of new information is by playing with it. Learning requires an interactive balance of gaining facts and skills required by the culture and making information one’s own. This interactive cycle helps children understand their world in an intrinsically motivating fashion (Fromberg, 2002; McCune & Zanes, 2001; Wolery & McWilliams, 1998)

Jerome Bruner (1972) and Brian Sutton Smith (1967) both maintained that play provides a comfortable and relaxed atmosphere in which children can learn to solve a variety of problems. (p.19) Later, when children are confronted with the more complex problems of the real world, *the learning that took place during play is of great benefit to them.*

Jean Piaget (1962, 1983) Swiss biologist and philosopher perhaps the *most extensive* treatment of play by a cognitive theorist can be found in the writings of Piaget. What certainly is the most influential of all theories of children's intellectual development, maintained that a primary function of all living organism is to adapt to the environment. **Adaptation** involves two processes that usually occur simultaneously: assimilation and accommodation. **Assimilation** means taking new material from the outside world and fitting it into one already existing structure. In a physical sense, the body assimilates food by digesting it, breaking it down so that it eventually becomes a part of the body itself. In an analogous manner, we are able to assimilate new intellectual materials- ideas, concepts, points of view – into the existing structures of our minds, so that those new ideas eventually become incorporated into our own world views. **Accommodation** on the other hand, is the adjusting of the structure in reaction to the newly incorporated material

Piaget's view of development was greatly influenced by his early training in biology. Central to his theory is the biological concept of adaptation (Piaget, 1971). Just as the structures of the body are adapted to fit with the environment, so the structures of the mind develop during childhood to better fit with, or represent, the external world. In infancy and early childhood, children's understanding is very different from adults. For example, Piaget believed that young babies do not realize that an object hidden from view- a favorite toy or even the mother- continues to exist. He also concluded that preschoolers' thinking is full of faulty logic. Children younger than age 7 commonly say that the amount of milk or lemonade changes when it is poured into differently shaped containers. According to Piaget, children eventually revise these incorrect ideas in their ongoing efforts to achieve equilibrium, or balance between internal structures and information they encounter in their everyday worlds.

In Piaget's theory, children move through four broad stages of development, each of which is characterized by a qualitatively distinct way of thinking. In sensorimotor stage, cognitive development begins with the baby's use of the senses and movements to explore the world. These action patterns evolve into the symbolic but illogical thinking of the preschoolers in the preoperational stage. Then cognition is transformed into the more organized reasoning of the school age child in the concrete operational stage. Finally, in the formal operational stage, thought becomes the complex, abstract reasoning system of the adolescent and adult.

Most International Schools provide the latest toys, play equipments even learning and playing environment. But that is not what quality play is all about. All lot of areas need to be considered like the curriculum, time spent on play, aims and objectives, staffing, assessment or record keeping on play should contribute towards a quality play.

The most essential part is the teachers' facilitation towards better play. A lot of teachers may consider play as an essential element towards child development but due to unclear expectation, prescriptions, description in the school system towards play, it could be neglected. Teachers could be just doing other activities like checking note books, talking on the phone, or else just standing by the child. Most of all teachers must really understand the concept of quality play towards child development. In the constructivist point of view the teacher is a learner. With the increasing pressure on the academic areas of early childhood education teachers would have to make extra effort while facilitating play to the children. There is a well-established consensus among early childhood professionals that play is an essential element of developmentally appropriate high quality early education programs (Alliance for Childhood, 2006; NAEYC&NAECSSDE,2003).

To facilitate learning through play, the teacher must be well educated and trained in order to have the necessary skills and knowledge about early childhood development, curricula, standards, and assessment. The teacher is intentional in guiding and extending children's play to make sure children are developing in all areas and key learning goals are achieved. Through careful, trained observations of children's play, the teacher can assess their learning needs and their mastery of curriculum. Teachers use keen observation to assess and support children's learning and development through play.

Teachers should be aware of the characteristics of play in order to be able to provide quality play which would lead to the students' development. Before an activity can be described as play, it must contain five essential characteristics. **First**, play is *intrinsically motivated*. It is an end in itself, done only for the sheer satisfaction of doing it. A **second**, related characteristic of play is that it must be *freely chosen* by the

participants. If children are forced or even gently pressured into play, they may not regard the assigned activity as play at all. A **third** essential characteristic is that play must be *pleasurable*. Children must enjoy the experience or it cannot be regarded as play. A **fourth** characteristic of play is that it is *nonliteral*. That is, it involves a certain element of make-believe, a distortion of reality to accommodate the interests of the player. This is particularly true of the symbolic play that is so characteristic of the preschool years, when children spend much of their time experimenting with new roles and playing out imaginary scenes. **Finally**, play is *actively engaged* in by the player. The child must be involved, physically, psychologically, or both, rather than passive or indifferent to what is going on. (Rubin, Fein, & Vandenberg, 1983)

Adults need to consider **Vygotsky's** concept of '**zone of proximal development**' in order that the child's greatest achievements are possible, achievements that tomorrow will become their basic level of real action and moral reasoning. What is argued here is that selective interventions on the part of the adults can make the zone of proximal development and the corresponding learning more precise. Vygotsky believes that play promotes social and cognitive development in children. He argues that in play a child always behaves in advance of her/his daily behavior; "... play contains all the developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development" (Bodrova & Leong, 1999)

Vygotsky emphasized that children's social interaction with more skilled adults and peers is indispensable in advancing cognitive development. It is through this interaction that less-skilled members of the culture learn to use the tools that will help them adapt and be successful in the culture. When a skilled reader regularly helps a child learn how to read, this not only advances a child's reading skills but also communicates to the child that reading is an important activity in the culture.

Vygotsky's belief in the importance of social influences, especially instruction, on children's cognitive development is reflected in his concept of the zone of proximal development. Zone of proximal development (ZPD) is Vygotsky's term for range of tasks that are too difficult for the child to master alone but that can be learned with guidance and assistance of adults or more skilled children. Thus, the lower limit of the ZPD is the level of skill reached by the child working independently. The upper limit is the level of additional responsibility the child can accept with the assistance of a more skilled person (Goos, 2004; Gray & Feldman, 2004; Kinginger, 2002; Kulczewski, 2005)

'Quality' is a much over-used word that is in danger of losing meaning in the political rhetoric and invective of our times. Philosophers, from the time of Plato and Aristotle, have engaged in debate about the definitions of quality. Attempts to identify key elements in any definitions of quality, be this related to play or any other aspect of education or social life, have proven to be problematic and contentious. The difficulty lies in the concept of quality itself. As early philosophers pointed out, quality is a subjective and qualitative notion. When Plato discusses the concept of beauty, for example, he argues that it can only be understood after exposure to a succession of objects that display its characteristics. It is only understood when reflecting on the quality of those experiences. As Prisig (1974: 85) also points out, 'Quality is neither mind nor matter, but a third entity independent of the two Even though Quality cannot be defined, you know what it is'. Attempting to give play quality fixed dimensions, to be objectively identified and measure, is perhaps a spurious and mistaken exercise.

Quality evaluation is essentially a value based enterprise; it is best achieved through the active involvement of participants in the process. The subjectivity of the definition is thus acknowledgement and celebrated as being central to the debate about quality. Quality is defined by the shared reflections and agreement of experienced practitioners. It is validated by the 'lived experience' held up for the scrutiny of peers (Whitehead 1989). We are very committed to this notion of a 'democratic' approach to developing quality.

It aims to make provision responsive, to ensure that it is fit for its agreed purpose and crucially, it empowers those who provide it (Pfeffer and Coote, 1991). The process of review and implementation thus becomes part of the definition. Paradoxically, then, this definition of quality is not static or finite but dynamic, and varies with time and place. The aim is to capture the quality of play as it is reflected in practice and to encourage practitioners to explore how the individuals in each setting, including parents and children, perceive and experience the quality of play.

All schools may have different perceptions on play. They may be applying in various distinct ways. As the school depicts the importance of play in the school policy or blueprint it would also affect teachers' participation in play. Some schools may take it as a part of the curriculum. But there are still some common elements that must be assessed before the school could really make sure that it is providing quality play that leads to overall child development. The ten dimensions of play were developed by the Worcester team. It has drawn extensively on the views of practitioners, parents and children in a range of

settings and on an informed understanding of research about how young children learn. There is, therefore, an emphasis on the importance of the social context of learning and, in particular, an emphasis on the importance of the staff in establishing this context. This reflects our belief that learning only takes place when young children have positive relationships with those with whom they are interacting.

Within this framework, ten dimensions or aspects of quality may be identified. These dimensions represent the factors highlighted by the many early childhood educators we have worked with over three years duration as significantly affecting the quality of their provision. They are not intended to be an exhaustive list but it is believed to provide a broad overview of the quality of play in any setting.

Pascal and Bertram (1991), set some basic standards in order to evaluate and improve the quality of play. The ten dimensions of play are

1. Aims and objectives:

This dimension refers to the written and spoken statement of policy within a setting in which the aims and objectives of the play provision are made explicit. It also focuses on issues such as how policy statements on play are formed, who is involved in their formation and how they are communicated to involved parties. The extent to which these aims are initiated, shared, communicated and understood by all the involved parties also needs to be considered.

2. Curriculum

This dimension is concerned with the range and balance of play activities provided and the learning opportunities they present for young children. The curriculum is interpreted very broadly to embrace children's all round cognitive and social development. It includes a consideration of the extent to which play activities provide learning opportunities in language and literacy, mathematics, science, technology, physical, human and social, moral and spiritual, aesthetic and creative areas of experience. It may also include reference to the National Curriculum and foundation subjects where this is appropriate. When considering issues of continuity and progression through play, the extent of differentiation within the play to cater for individual needs is also addressed.

3. Learning and teaching strategies

This dimension is concerned with how the play is organized and structured to encourage learning and discovery. The extent of children's independence and autonomy and the rules which govern behavior and participation in play are considered. Who is participating in the play and what roles are being adopted by adults and children are the key issues. The competences being displayed by the children in their play are also highlighted here.

4. Planning assessment and recording and record keeping

This dimension looks at how play is planned, and issues such as who is involved in the planning process and how far the planning builds upon the previous assessment of play activity and experience are noted. Access to the sharing records, and the use which they are put to, falls within the consideration of this dimension.

5. Staffing

This dimension focuses on the opportunities for the involvement of staff in children's play activity; Issues of staff deployment, ratios, management policy and attitude towards play are relevant. Opportunities for staff development and training, which focuses on play, are noted.

6. Physical environment

This dimension looks at the context in which the play occurs. The use of space, both inside and out, to create an environment for play is considered. The availability, condition and appropriateness of lay equipment and documented.

7. Relationships and interactions

This dimensions looks at how the children and adults interact in their play. How far and in what ways relationships are expressed and developed in the play activities is considered. The social rules and codes of conduct which operate are seen as significant. The opportunities for self initiated lay and the degree of staff involvement of staff intervention would fall within this dimension. The involvement of the children, and their interactions in the play activities, is highlighted as a means of reflecting on the quality of the educational experience they provide.

8. Equal opportunities

This dimension refers to the way in which the play reflects and celebrates cultural and physical diversity and challenges stereotypes. The play equipment and the play activities are scrutinized with regard to issues of race, gender, disability and social class.

9. Parental partnership and liaison

This dimension focuses on the nature of the partnership with parents and the ways in which they, and other members of the local community, are involved in the play activities. The extent to which the play reflects the children's home and community environment is explored. Links between the setting and other play providers are also noted.

10. Monitoring and evaluation

This dimension looks at the procedure by which the quality and effectiveness of the play policy and provision are monitored and evaluated. Who is involved in these processes, and how the results of this process are acted upon, are considered.

The ten dimensions of play should be present in order to produce quality play. Thus would there be any differences in the provision and teachers facilitation towards quality play depending on the schools concept of the importance of providing quality play for the early childhood children.

The study would provide a support for the school and teachers to understand that both the school and teachers are responsible towards providing quality play for the development of the children. This would make schools more aware into implementing and including play as an important aspect of child development at schools. Teachers too, would understand and look forward for available school support and enhance students' development at early childhood schools. Further on the implementations of play in the international schools could add as an extra support for children in other kinds of schools.

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