

Critically Discuss the Importance of Play for Young Children's Learning and Development

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Abstract: This study explores the concept of play, the benefits of play for children and the impact of policy on play. Play is a common behaviour in childhood and has a positive impact on children's physical and mental health, as well as their social, cognitive and emotional well-being. Not only does play enhance children's physical abilities and promote their cognitive development, it can also release negative internal emotions and be a means of psychotherapy. In addition, play can improve children's social interaction skills. Policy has an important influence on the implementation of play in early education. Therefore, the government needs to promote awareness and policies to facilitate teachers' and parents' understanding of play and to support its implementation in early education.

Keywords: The Importance of Play, Young Children, Learning and Development

1. Introduction

Play is a fundamental human activity and an integral part of a child's development and growth during childhood ^[1]. Researchers disagree upon the precise definition of play, however ^[2]. This essay will, therefore, explore the importance of play in the context of child learning and development. Firstly, the complexity and diversity of the concept will be discussed in detail. Secondly, the benefits of play will be analysed, concerning the promotion of the physical and mental health of children, and how the child's abilities can be improved. Thirdly, an analysis of the influence of policy and socio-cultural background on the role of play regarding the learning and development of children will be presented. Finally, this essay will explore two international approaches of play proposed by Anji Play and Reggio Emilia to further examine how it promotes learning and development in children. This essay, therefore, will present several arguments that acknowledge the significance of play and corroborates its use within early education as part of the educative process.

2. The Conceptions of Play

The definition of play is a controversial topic among researchers ^[2,3] as there are several trains of thought concerning the nature of play from numerous perspectives, depending upon the discipline of the researcher ^[4]. For example, therapists define play as a means of helping children to face complex problems in their lives ^[5]. In the field of education, however, play is often associated with playfulness as a way to help "humans learn, relate, and interact across generations, cultures, and contexts" ^[6]. Therefore, this means that there is no single definition of play that meets all the views and expectations of researchers from different disciplines.

Nevertheless, numerous researchers support the notion that play is a common behaviour among children, closely related to childhood ^[1,7]. From a socio-cultural perspective, play allows for the creation of a space for children to adapt to the cultural and social background of their environment by developing potential activities in this space as a carrier of social mechanism and activities ^[8,9]. Several researchers have observed and discovered that play is crucial for the promotion of learning and development ^[7,10]. For example, Wood and Attfield (2005) suggested that play can not only improve children's language and communication skills, but also enhance their memory. Children's literacy skills can also be enhanced in play ^[11]. Furthermore, different types of play have positive effects on specific aspects of children's learning and development. For instance, role play is an educational activity that allows children to use their existing cognitive experience to construct a situation, give full play to their imagination, and use things in the surrounding environment to reflect and imitate real life with their friends ^[12]. The findings

of some studies recognized the value of role play in children's social, emotional and cognitive development [13,14]. Most importantly, Gray (2014) and Moyles [15] both believe that the knowledge and skills acquired by children through play could positively impact their future life and learning as opposed to passively accepting information learned in the classroom. After all, play supports the flourishing of creative and cognitive skills that can be transferred to activities such as sports, art performance and daily work later in life.

Children, parents, preschool teachers, members of government and other stakeholders often possess a different understanding of the role of play in the learning and development of children [16]. However, the parents' cognition regarding play could affect how their children play and how it is used within education within the preschool curriculum [17]. Parents from specific traditional cultural backgrounds, such as those found in Africa and Asia, stipulate a high degree of academic success for children [18]. Fung and Cheng's research discovered that parents are increasingly becoming persistent regarding the specific evidence of their children's progress in learning outcomes [17]. There is the possibly, therefore, that the parents will not recognise play based learning methods; as a result, the children might not meet their parents' academic expectations.

3. The Benefits of Play

Research and observation have shown that play positively affects children's physical and mental health, as well as their social, cognitive, emotional health within early childhood education [9,15,19,20]. Different types require the possession of certain skills, for example, social skills, imagination, practical skills and physical coordination.

3.1. Physical and Mental Health

Physical play can involve chasing, jumping and rolling, and other kinaesthetic activities that can enhance a child's physical fitness while toning muscles and improve coordination [21,22]. Additionally, playing outdoors provides a healthy environment that offers fresh air, sunshine, and close contact with and observation of nature, which also has a positive impact on their physical health and cognitive ability [21]. Playing outdoors encourages children to run and jump, which strengthens their cardiovascular system and can promote their physical development to an extent [23]. Playing outside also provides children with direct sunlight, fresh air, wind, and other natural elements; these experiences can improve their ability to adapt to changes in the external environment [21]. Moreover, playing outdoors requires children to make full use of their hearing, vision, sense of touch, and other aspects of their sensory system to identify sounds and observe and perceive the surrounding environment. This allows them to remain competitive with their peers [23]. Therefore, playing outdoor can promote children's cognitive development. Similarly, outdoor play can improve mental health, as energetic activities such as screaming and shouting, chasing and being chased, hiding and seeking, and team-based play can expunge inner negative emotions, such as fear and anxiety [6].

Furthermore, Anna Freud incorporated play into the field of psychoanalysis which was subsequently developed into play therapy [24]. Play therapy enables children to develop their imagination and create a fantasy world to retreat into to treat psychological trauma [2]. Additionally, play therapy can offer children a means of releasing deep feelings or anxieties they would otherwise have difficulty expressing. For example, Malchiodi describes an eight-year-old boy who experienced a fire and repeatedly drew pictures of an incinerated house [25]. This behaviour allowed his therapist to discover his fear which was alleviated through play interaction.

3.2. Improving Young Children's Learning and Development

Role-playing and pretend play allow children the opportunity to accumulate experience to promote their cognitive development by using their imagination and creativity. In role-play, some children choose to portray roles from real life, such as police and doctors [12]. Imitation of the action, language and characteristics of these social roles can enable them to learn the corresponding responsibilities of these positions [8,26]. For example, children who role-play as police can learn how to take the initiative to maintain order, fairness and justice in group activities [12]. Children who role-play as doctors can develop an early comprehension of how to care for patients and implement simple treatment methods [26]. These cognitive experiences are among the initial stages of skill development that will profoundly develop throughout their future [15](Gray, 2014). Similarly, this nature of play can help children learn to

comprehend and control their emotions by dressing up and accepting the responsibility of the role they are portraying ^[2,9].

Activities that encourage play as part of a group activity can enable children to improve their social, communication and cooperation skills with their peers ^[6,20]. For example, Moss described the Crow project, where a group of children between the ages of four and five collaborated to construct a large crow from plaster and clay ^[19]. Only two children participated in the activity initially; however, they realised the complexity of the project required greater participation; therefore, they recruited more children to join the activity. Eventually, almost the entirety of the class cooperated in the activity. This behaviour displays that children will adjust their social interaction in accordance with their situation ^[9]. Children will devise solutions when experiencing dilemmas, which can improve their strategic thinking and adaptability. The children involved in the project possessed a clear division of labour. For example, one group was formed to use iron wire to create the crows' bodies, whereas another group used plaster to cover the iron wire. A third group used feathers or brushes to decorate the crows ^[19]. The children recognised and used each other's strengths to make up for their weaknesses through communication and exchange, and learn from each other, which is that they understand the importance of teamwork.

4. The Factors that Affect Play's Role in the Learning and Development of Children

Policy and social and cultural background are important factors that affect the role of in the learning and development of children.

4.1. Policy

The benefits of play have been widely recognised in the early education of children. As a result, play has been incorporated into the curriculum framework in numerous countries in the construction of early childhood policy frameworks ^[7,27] under the promotion of policy as a pedagogy ^[7,10]. For instance, Chinese education department believes that play is an important form of all-round development education for children, so it requires teachers from infant schools to take play as the basic activity form in the curriculum ^[28](Feng and Liu, 2019). In addition, although the Thai government lacks a unified preschool curriculum involving play to promote learning, the use of some play teaching methods and play- based methods has been introduced into the curriculum of preschool education ^[29]. Therefore, educational institutions and infant schools, in particular, have to consider the value of play and encourage educators to incorporate it effectively into the curriculum framework as an educational method in their daily teaching activities ^[2,9]. However, such a policy stipulates that infant schools should not teach a curriculum developed for primary school in advance to satisfy the demand for strong academic performance from parents from traditional cultures ^[12]. For example, the Chinese government has withdrawn from a series of educational policies, including: "The Outline of the National Medium and Long Term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)" (Outline), and "The Guide to Learning and Development for Children Aged 3-6" (Department for Education), which explicitly emphasised that infant schools should consider play as basic activity and an important form of comprehensive development education for children. These policies can effectively distinguish the education of infant school from the education within a primary school and ensure children are introduced to a nurturing and fun environment ^[30].

Numerous factors need to be taken into consideration to introduce play into the curriculum as a method of teaching. For example, the professional qualification and judgment of teachers, the allocation of funds, the dominant early education trend in the country, etc. ^[31]. Numerous countries have forced play into their early education system through the implementation of policies; however, the lack of consideration of these factors means that, early education in these countries is endangered. For example, the early education curriculum of Thailand stipulates the use of the play teaching method; however, the education department does not provide a detailed guideline and specific course to instruct early education practitioners how to operate in practice ^[29]. Therefore, there are numerous ways to utilise play as a pedagogy in Thailand. Children from various socio-economic backgrounds could be offered play education methods and courses of different levels and quality, which could result in educational inequality ^[29]. Similarly, Chinese early years education has suffered the same dilemma ^[32].

Several policies will hinder play as a pedagogy, however. For example, the neoliberal policy of Britain. Standardisation and accountability are the core of neoliberalism; therefore, neoliberalism utilises bottom-up regulation and compliance regulation to best guarantee quality ^[33]. The government gradually implemented the phonics screening check (PSC) and standard attainment tests (SATs tests) for first-year primary school students between the ages of six and seven, which accounted for the early stage of

children having to start preparing for these tests in advance. “The PSC is a standardised arbitrary pass/fail ‘high stakes test’ in which 6-year-old children decode a mixture of 20 real words and 20 pseudo or ‘nonsense’ words” [34]. Standard attainment tests (SATS) are organised and implemented by the Standards and Testing Agency of the UK Department of Education. The test primarily consists of reading, writing, arithmetic and science. Children who fail to score a mark of over thirty-two must re-take the test. According to research conducted by Bradbury [35] and Bradbury and Roberts-Holmes [36], three-year-old children in UK infant schools have begun training in the phonics screening check. There is the possibility, therefore, that children could exhibit anxiety regarding the failure of achieving a passing grade in the entrance examination for SATS. This in turn could encourage the reduction in playtime to allow the children enough study time to pass the test. Similarly, it is difficult to continue in play early years education due to its lack of suitability in dealing with these tests.

4.2. Social and Cultural Background

The socio-cultural background of children and their families is a crucial factor that affects the integration of play into the early education curriculum [37]. Children from various socio-cultural backgrounds could participate in play depending on numerous factors, such as their system of belief, living environment and social and cultural traditions; therefore, their experience of play differs from one another. Pramling-Samuelson and Fler (2009) mentioned that cultural communities exhibit contrasting means of play and possess differing views regarding its significance from the perspectives of children's family and educational area. Therefore, parents from a Western cultural background are likely to exhibit a separate attitude toward play when compared with parents from countries not aligned with Western educational theory.

Western educational views recognise the value of play [18], which has a deep theoretical foundation. The theory of play for early education in Western culture originated in ancient Greece [2]. The philosopher Plato wrote in his legal works, such as “Republic” and “Laws” that children develop knowledge most effectively through play (Morris, 1998). The theory of the correlation between play, learning and development developed over a period of more than 2,000 years of rumination. Numerous researchers have observed and proven Plato's theory that play is a significant source of developing cognition and mental growth for children [7,10]. Therefore, the combination of this Western educational perspective with the purposeful play of early pre-school education formulates the view that all children can learn and develop appropriate knowledge and skills in play [1]. New learning and growth structures can form moderately through the consolidation of life experiences and cognisance developed in other circumstances into practical application through play [16]. Therefore, in this cultural context, parents from Western cultures support and encourage their children to learn through play and affirm its significance for the learning and development of children.

Several countries disagree with the Western educational theory. This is partially because the theory concerning the advantages of the integration of play within the field of early education. Barr and Borkett's research found that the sociocultural background of the family will have a profound effect on the parents' cognition of play regarding their children's learning and development [18]. Therefore, families from non-Western cultures may not consider the role of play under the influence of this social and cultural background. For example, parents from Africa and Bangladesh disregard how play promotes edification and cognitive growth within children [18]. They perhaps consider play to be a form of entertainment for children, which will result in an inability to concentrate on academic learning. It is possible, therefore, that these children will be allowed fewer opportunities to play as a result of their parents' credence in the lack of positive development that play offers.

5. Different International Curriculums and Approaches to Play

Comprehending numerous international curriculums and approaches to play can develop a comprehension regarding the use of play as a means of heightening children's learning and development in different social, cultural and economic backgrounds. The effective role of play as an education method will be explored in-depth by comparing the two play education methods of Anji play in China, and Reggio Emilia in Italy.

5.1. Anji Play

Anji play, an early childhood curriculum designed by the Office of Pre-Primary Education in the Anji

County Department of Education, is famous for its unique approach to outdoor play, which consists of three characteristics ^[23,38,39]. Firstly, Anji outdoor play has a natural and highly operational play environment and materials, made up of items such as ropes, light bamboo ladders and other objects, such as barrels and tires ^[23,40]. In Anji County, Zhejiang Province, the majority of the infant schools with an Anji play education mode are located in rural areas and natural gullies, hillsides and lawns. Teachers need only include basic materials such as tires, boards and stones to create a natural playground for children (Feng and Liu, 2019). Additionally, Anji county is rich in bamboo; therefore, bamboo is used to make toys, such as bamboo carts, bamboo slides, and so on ^[28]. These play areas and toys from nature have local characteristics and primitive ecology, and a certain degree of challenge.

Secondly, Anji play emphasises returning the dominance of the play to the children; therefore, the role of teachers is changed ^[23,39](Feng and Liu, 2019). Infant schools that implement the Anji play education method allow children more than two hours of outdoor playtime every day at the childrens' discretion ^[38,40]. Therefore, children can decide what to play, how to play, with whom to play and where to play without restriction, while teachers will not intervene ^[23]. This free play time does not follow the conventional structure of playtime at infant school, and the position of the teachers is altered. Children can, therefore, fully realise the fun and value of outdoor play ^[39] (Feng and Liu, 2019). As a kind of true play, Anji play gives children the most real outdoor play experience.

The role of teachers in play has changed tremendously, however. Firstly, the role of the teacher is regulated to that of an observer, as opposed to the designer and controller of the play ^[38] (Feng and Liu, 2019). In Anji play, teachers no longer stipulate the theme of play for children, nor do they choose the place and materials of play; rather, they allow the children the freedom to make their own choices ^[39]. Teachers are required to "close their mouths and control their hands" in outdoor play. Their responsibility is to observe the behaviour of the children and to take photographs when appropriate ^[40]. Teachers can only intervene when children require assistance, or when a conflict occurs (Feng and Liu, 2019). The teachers will return to the status of an observer once the matter is settled ^[23]. The right to intervene and adjust the contradictions between children by teachers may bring hidden dangers, however. Moreover, the role of the teacher has changed from that of the caretaker of the childrens' safety to the protector of the childrens' trust ^[28,41]. Ms Cheng, the founder of Anji play believes further risks must be implemented to protect the children from danger, or the children themselves possess the ability to judge and master play risks ^[38,42]. Therefore, in Anji play, teachers acknowledge the childrens' abilities and allow the children to injure themselves in the play to allow them to learn how to protect themselves and improve their ability to solve problems ^[23,42]. Therefore, in the Anji play, the role of the teacher is to provide technical support for children when it is required ^[28].

Furthermore, Anji play will reflect on the childrens' behaviour following play. The teacher will use PPT to display photographs taken during the activity ^[38,41]. Teachers and children will share and discuss the feelings exhibited during the play according to the content of the photos, then jointly describe and evaluate the childrens' behaviour in the process of the play ^[23,39]. This will enable the children to recollect these fresh experiences and develop their intuition, social negotiation ability and insight in the process of playing ^[40,42].

The three characteristics of Anji play can enhance childrens' physical functions and promote the development of the child's cognitive, emotional and social skills ^[23,28,39]. Additionally, Anji play supports communication with parents and cooperation with the community and the government ^[38,39,41]. Therefore, regardless of the risks Anji play poses to children, parents in Western communities do not doubt and oppose the implementation of Anji play but comprehend and support it (Feng and Liu, 2019). The Chinese government has also provided policy and substantial financial support for the implementation of this policy within infant schools ^[38,39]. Correspondingly, Anji play also follows the national rules of early childhood education ^[23,38]. For example, the Ministry of Education in China requires infant school staff to supply children with approximately two hours of outdoor activities a day ^[30]. Anji play has been incorporated into its daily curriculum plan and is strictly implemented ^[28,42].

In China, however, Anji play as an educational method is primarily adopted by public infant schools rather than private infant schools due to the support it receives through government policies and funds ^[38,39]. Anji play could present certain risks to children and result in injury, leading to blame from dissatisfied parents and medical compensation ^[39]. The government of China has displayed an inclination to promote the development of public infant schools in terms of policies and funds ^[40,42]. Therefore, without government support, private infant schools may not be able to bear the risk of Anji play unsupported.

Anji play advocates the return of "True Play" to children and providing an environment of love and

appropriate to allow children to receive equal happiness in outdoor play^[39].

5.2. Reggio Emilia

There are similarities and differences between Anji Play and Reggio Emilia (Feng and Liu, 2019). Firstly, Reggio Emilia, like Anji Play, uses play to encourage child learning and development and advocates that children should be considered the center in play, have their rights respected, and democratically by allowed the opportunity to express their views to cultivate their sense of autonomy^[16](Feng and Liu, 2019). Reggio Emilia adopted a “listening teaching method” to better listen to children’s ideas^[43]. This requires educators to refrain from criticising children but to listen to their thoughts and problems and extract meaningful views from them^[43] (Rinaldi, 1993). This is similar to the requirement of teachers to remain silent and regulate their actions in Anji play. In Reggio Emilia, these needs have changed the role of the teacher from a traditional knowledge transmitter to a partner for children to learn and play (Feng and Liu, 2019). This means that the teacher is no longer the center of the classroom, but the classroom participant just like the children^[43] (Rinaldi, 2006). As a result, teachers can guide and encourage children to think, observe and discover their interests in equal communication with them, and then generate teaching plans according to their interests^[16](Feng and Liu, 2019).

Additionally, Reggio Emilia's educational methods proposed the concept of the “rich child”, where children equally possess potential and the ability to control their own lives and play; therefore, they can develop their own cognitive framework and learning skills to prepare them for society^[16] (Rinaldi, 1993:105; Rinaldi, 2006). Therefore, the Reggio Emilia education method within play will provide children with an abundance of opportunities to modulate the play activities, including play form, and play materials and environment that could effectively promote their creativity and leadership skills^[44] (Rinaldi, 2006). Additionally, the Reggio Emilia education method considers the significance of the interplay between children during play; therefore, it supports freedom of speech and child agency to stimulate all children to convey and confer their opinions^[16,45].

This distinctive teaching method is inseparable from the communication and cooperation between parents, teachers, children and the government in the local community^[16]. The Reggio Emilia education method integrates of the expedient of children, parents, teachers and the community to construct a democratic condition for children^[43]. Children are allocated equal rights as adults in this environment to be allowed to express their views, which will be listened to and considered by the community (Rinaldi, 2006). Additionally, this education method has been strongly supported by the local government in terms of funds and policies (Feng and Liu, 2019; Rinaldi, 2006). However, the Reggio Emilia education method possesses the same hidden danger as Anji play: adults could utilise their position as authority figures to oblige children to listen to their own arrangements when mediating childrens’ conflicts during play.

The Reggio Emilia education method, in comparison with Anji Play also possesses clear differences, however. Firstly, it is not bound by the national curriculum framework; therefore, its educators are not obligated to follow the rules to be implemented or prepared in advance^[43]. Therefore, educators will have a wider choice of play to offer a better play experience for children. Also, the Reggio Emilia's educational method does not place a limit on children's time^[16]. Thus, teachers will allow children to formulate their activities in accordance to their comprehension of time, personal rhythm and desire, as opposed to stipulating what children should do at what time^[43].

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, play has a positive effect on children's physical and mental health^[23] and also can promote the enhancement of social cognitive ability, problem-solving ability, social emotion and so on^[6,9,12]. Policy and social and cultural background play important role in the implementation of children's play^[3,5,9]. When the value of play is recognized by national government and social and cultural background, the education method and the learning method in the form of play will be vigorously promoted^[46]. However, when national government and social and cultural background think that play is not considered meaningful for the learning and development of children, the play education method and play-based learning method could be hindered^[2,9]. On the other hand, the attitude of children, parents, teachers and government decision-makers towards play as an educational method is not only very important, but also may have great differences^[16]. In particular, parents' cognition of play may directly affect children's play time, method and environment^[17]. Therefore, to better utilise the value of play

teaching methods, educators should understand the local policy and social and cultural background of an environment [6]. In addition, publicising and advocating the benefits of play for children's learning and development to parents and the wider society could facilitate greater implementation of play as an educational method at preschool level [9].

Additionally, as two famous play education methods, the Anji play and Emilia Reggio present two different teaching methods; however, they both emphasise respect for children, and allocate the dominant power of the play to the children [16] (Feng and Liu, 2019). Also, it is important to coalescing the opinions and resources of children, parents, educators, government policymakers and other stakeholders to produce a healthy learning environment [38,39,43]. More importantly, the children's play experience should not be preset in advance or stipulated by teachers [16,42].

Therefore, the children's' experiences and interests should be encouraged, not suppressed. However, the two educational methods face a common problem: determining how contradictions between children should be adjusted appropriately, instead of forcing children to accept mediation results using adult's rights (Feng and Liu, 2019; Rinaldi, 2006). This is a significant challenge for both Anji play and Reggio Emilia, who consider play to be a firm educational method. Consequently, this area needs further exploration in future research."

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