

Teacher's Support on Child Directed Play and its Contribution to Children's Development

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This paper discusses teacher's support on children directed play and the benefits of play in children's development. Children's directed play is the context of play engaged by children's initiation. Children's holistic development can be stimulated through children's directed play. The importance of children's directed play is often ignored by adults. Play is a primary approach of learning in Indonesia kindergartens as stated in Indonesia's early childhood education curriculum, 2013. Given the importance of play for children's holistic development, this paper will explore and analyse teacher's support of children's directed play and its contribution to children's development.

Keywords: *Teachers' support, Child's development, children's directed play, or child-initiated play*

Introduction

Play is a natural and fun activity for children. Naturally, children spend most of their childhood playing freely in an environment with peer and playmates. Through play, children can develop and stimulate their physical, cognitive, linguistic, social, and emotional wellbeing. The International of Play Association (IPA, 2016) states that children need and have a right to play. Children's rights to play should be supported by adults and this is stated in the United Nation convention.

Research from 1988 to 1994 in America indicates that there was an increase in the duration of children's time doing passive activities such as watching television and less play-based activities. This phenomenon affected to increase the risks of obesity or overweight children during the period (Crespo et al., 2001). Furthermore, the research in the USA indicated the decline of children participation in playing, particularly outdoor play (Clements, 2004). Clement (2004) states that children play on their own initiative or engage in free play, such as playing jump rope, hopscotch, and other games, has decreased from 85 percent in the past or

the mothers' childhood to 33 percent of their children. In addition, the longitudinal studies indicate the waning of play and children play was declining in kindergarten (Bowden and Desimone, 2014). The decline of children who play is a crisis of kindergarten and is a major concern that should be solved in kindergarten (Miller & Almond:2009).

The limitation of children directed play was found in Great Britain. The Children's Society and Children's Play Council in Great Britain surveyed 500 children aged seven to eleven to explore their perspectives and experiences in children's directed play (Ball, 2007). The data indicated that 45 percent of children were restricted to play with water, 33 percent were inhibited to climb trees, followed 27 percent were not allowed to use climb equipment, and 23 percent were prevented from riding bikes and skateboards. The decline of free play can cause the deterioration of the mental health and lead to depression (Gray, 2011). The New Zealand Ministry of Health (2017) supports children to engage physical activities and active free play to reduce health problems.

In Indonesia, children-directed play is a learning activity in Early Childhood Education. Early Childhood Education (ECE) in Indonesia considers play a context of learning which is emphasised in Indonesia's ECE curriculum 2013 (MoNE, 2014). Children's development, including physical, cognitive, language, social and emotional wellbeing are developed through play activities. Indonesian kindergartens and playgroups implement play as learning activities for the children. The contribution of play towards children's development has been explored by McKinty (2011). McKinty points out that string games or cat and cradle can be a physical activity that contributes to physical and mental health. A child's social and personal development can be developed through play. This is the main reason why play should be encouraged in Early Childhood (Eberle, 2014).

Regarding the massive benefits of play to child development, teachers should encourage children-initiated play. Nicholson (2016), in two years study in California America Urban District School, found teachers appreciate child-initiated play as a useful pedagogy for children and a crucial component in early childhood curriculum. Within the curriculum of Early Childhood Education, play should be integrated in curriculum. Teachers should be involved and observed children play in how play can be aid for social learning (Blasy, 2002).

Due to the importance of play for children's development, it is required that teachers support child-directed play in kindergartens. This paper will explore and discuss the literature about the importance of a teacher's support of children and the benefits of play for children's development. The literature will be discussed and analysed to provide the knowledge about the importance of free play for childhood development, and the need for supportive teachers to facilitate child-initiated play.

Play and Children Development

Play for children is a useful activity that is essential to learn their environment. Henrick (2011) states that play is the central or useful and substantial to learning when children have fun and experience challenge and risk and obtain satisfaction. Children's play is a meaningful activity that they engage in with peers and play mates. The children play and learn objects, nature, culture, and socialisation.

The New Zealand Ministry of Health (2017) and Dietze and Kashi (2012) highlight the vital roles of play to support to physical, social, emotional, and spiritual well-being. Some researchers such as Nicholson, Bauer, and Woolley (2016), Ginsburg (2007), Dander and Stagnity (2015) acknowledge the critical role of free play for children's holistic development. Children who play a lot will be advantaged for having social skills and more mature emotionally. They can control their emotion and be patient in waiting their turn and chance to play.

The benefits of play to psychological well-being are explained by early childhood educators and psychologists. Children play and react to what they see and observe. Play can encourage them to be mature and independent (Vygotsky, 1933). In addition, the positive effect of play for children's development is supported by Smith and Pellegrini (2008) who state that play is a process rather than the end goal or product. Play is a process to be mature, independent, prepare for adulthood, and learn about their environment.

Children who participate actively in play obtain the benefit and the ability of self-adjustment, flexibility, and adaptability in any condition or situation (Lester & Russell, 2010; Orr & Geva, 2015). When children play hide and seek, for example, they try to adjust themselves to play the game and follow the rules. The children also learn to adjust with playing condition and this is a lesson for them for self-adjustment. Self-adjustment is carried in imagination play. In fantasy play, children learn how to adapt in any context and situation. This is in line with Vygotsky's theory. Children play, according to Vygotsky (1933), to create their imagination. This also contribute to the development of abstract thinking .

It has been explained above that play contribute to massive effects to children. Children can learn and reach their zone of proximal development, to adapt, be responsible to the environment, and support better mental health. The literature reveals that play is crucial and vital for children 's development. Play is a meaningful children's activities, and it is a process of learning to be mature and developed. Children learn adults' work, which is used to prepare children to be a complete human being. Through play, children can develop their physical, cognitive abilities and improve their psychological well- being. Therefore, adult support is important in encouraging children to play.

The concept of a child-directed play is presented in the child's autonomy and freedom in play. In the play, children initially observe and analyse the play condition before they decide to join it. This helps and supports children to strengthen their observation skills (Canning, 2007). Play initiated by children can contribute to feeling free and satisfied. It also contributes to building independence and responsibility. The researchers argue that play should be based on child initiation and support free play. Children decide whether to join and play based on their interest and initiation. In this case, adult's intervention should be minimised.

It is crucial that a child engages and initiate their own play. Nicholson, Bauer, and Woolley (2016) agreed that child-directed play was crucial for children academic and development. Teachers in Lincoln Unified School District in Northern California were aware of providing play in learning and encouraged children to engage their initiative play with fewer teacher interventions.

Moreover, the concept of free play as the child's own choice of play is known by teachers in Jamaica (Long, 2013). Teachers know that free play is crucial for childhood development. However, because of the influence of culture and traditions, parents' intervention cannot be avoided in play (Long, 2013). Children who were less able to conduct free play had a problem with creativity, development, and academic success (Ginsburg, 2007).

The pinpoint of child-directed play is that children need self-reflection, and abstract thinking, and to learn communication skills, emotional control and adult rules and roles in the community (Moser, 2013). Craft, McConnon, and Matthews (2012) support this argument. Craft, McConnon, and Matthews claim that child-directed play could affect children's behaviour in stimulating and maintaining child's interest, provide an opportunity for sharing ideas, and variety of responses and creativity in play. They also explain that there are children agency roles and identity which involve peer in play, to play collaboratively, and in communal situations. The ideas of child-initiated play outlined above are seen as the children are active individuals, who display freedom, self- direction, initiation, creativity and critical thinking.

From the all literature above can be understood that play has dominant roles in children's life. Children physical growth, psychology, well-being, independence, character, abstract thinking and development contributes positively through play activities. Lack of the duration of child play can be influenced to holistic development. When children play, they have fun and feel pleasure, and this benefits for their psychology, readiness to learn, as well as contribute to their cognitive development. Therefore, this can help child's academic success.

Teachers' Support on Children's Free Play

Children have a right to play and should be facilitated in safe environment for them to engage free play. The main role of adults, such as teachers, is to facilitate their play environment and encourage them to play (Lester & Russell, 2010). During play, children should feel secure in play, and direct and control their play (Canning, 2011). The support of adults can be in the form of facilitating the secure environment, equipment, and encouragement. Adults help to set the environment and play materials, while children in the playground play autonomously using the available materials (Davey & McKinty, 2007). Regarding this view, teachers have a role as facilitator not as a director.

Children should have the freedom to engage in their play, and teachers should encourage children not restrict their play. In other words, teachers should have a positive standpoint to facilitate and motivate children to play. Teachers need to equalize their position as adults and practitioners to motivate children to play (Canning, 2011). However, sometimes, adults ignore the need for children to play and think their play is wasting time and is not productive (Gaskin, 2000). The adults perspective toward unproductive children's play contributes to less support for children to play and can lead to fewer children playing in childhood. Indeed, play is valuable for children development when they have their freedom to direct their play. The play can build children's fantasy, develop creativity, feeling secure that can be a positive support for children's development.

Children directed play has been studied by Robson (2010). Robson found children direct their own play and invited adult involvement actively. Adult involvement, in the form of sharing and supporting by using guiding interaction styles contributed to children metacognition and self-regulation development. In early childhood education in Aotearoa New Zealand, play is on children's initiation and is implemented in early childhood education. Teachers in the classroom play a role as a navigator (Stover, 2011).

The theoretical underpinning explains the tremendous benefits to children's development such as their physical, cognitive, abilities as well as their social, emotional and psychological well- being. Those benefits have been pointed out by early childhood educators and psychologists. All aspects of development can be maximised by providing children with opportunity and support them to play. Children's free play should be provided in kindergartens. Kindergartens should facilitate a safe play environment. Therefore, children can develop and learn knowledge of their environment by playing with their peers.

Play in Indonesia Kindergartens

In Indonesia, learning through play is implemented in preschool or in early childhood education (MONE, 2014). The curriculum emphasises that children play as a method of

learning in Indonesia ECE. Teacher involvement in children's play is as a scaffolding to prepare children to be more independent and be able to initiate their own play. This is argued by Vygotsky (1978). Vygotsky contends that children's development needs adults support. Adults provide children with scaffolding to develop their zone of proximal development (ZPD). The zone of proximal development is what children can achieve on their own and what they can achieve in the later development. 'This zone is objective in the sense that it does not refer to any individual child but reflects the psychological functions that need to be formed during a given age period in order for the next age period to be formed (Chaiklin, 2003, p. 49). Teachers' support on play activities can be scaffolding to prepare children to be independent to develop themselves and achieve their zone of proximal development. Indeed, child-directed play should be supported. The teachers provided children to play more by their own way and the children directed their play behaviour.

Learning through play has been implemented in Indonesia as play learning pedagogy in kindergarten. Children in Indonesian kindergartens used play in learning and the results indicated that children's social emotional well-being improved significantly. Through traditional play, kindergarten children showed to be cooperative, follow the rules of play, and can control their emotion, patient, and be sportive in play (Darminiasih, Marhaeni, Utama, 2014). The play is the train for them to interact, socialise, and collaborate.

Play-based learning is not only in Indonesia but also includes in the American curriculum. A study in an Ontario kindergarten found that children learn many skills through play such as social and language skills (Feseha & File, 2016). The research shows that the dominant focus of kindergarten was on play based learning to learn academic skills included in Ontario kindergartens' curriculum (p, 367). While the practice of play according to teachers in Ontario kindergarten should be child-centered or it should be organised and engaged by children as active participant. Due to the tremendous contributions of play and usefulness of play to learn knowledge and skills, teachers and kindergarten principal must insert play as a learning activities in the curriculum. Therefore, teachers can maximise their support for children to play in kindergartens or in early childhood education centers.

Conclusion

Free play, or child initiated play, is a crucial activity for children's development. Therefore, teachers should support and facilitate children to engage in free play and promote self-directed play. Children's right to play should be appreciated and encouraged by providing spaces, time, facilities, support, and encouragement. Furthermore, adult intervention should be minimised and provide the opportunity for children to choose and direct their play. The literature argued that free play might be useful for children health, development, and improving children's psychological wellbeing, problem-solving and critical thinking.



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