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ARTICLE

Playful constraints: the dilemmas of early years classrooms in Bangladesh

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Playful constraints: the dilemmas of early years classrooms in Bangladesh

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Abstract

Play performs an important position in holistic child development. Bangladesh has made a commitment to extending the opportunity for play based learning in early years settings, but this is not without its problems. The imposition of western norms and expectations around the concept of play clash with the economic realities of families and schools in Bangladesh. This study explores the views and concepts of pre-primary teachers on their understanding and integration of play-based learning in pre-primary contexts of Bangladesh. A qualitative approach was adopted using semi-structured interviews with open questions to probe participants' teaching-learning experiences. Although play is considered important for child development, enabling children's social, emotional, mental, cognitive and intellectual skills, several challenges, both conceptual and environmental, mean the adoption of a playful approach is constrained and in need of revision. A key theme that emerges is the ingenuity and self-reliance of teachers, working amidst a number of constraints and with minimal training. Self-reflection and learning from the children in their classes are important processes with which teachers engage in the transition to an adoption of more playful conceptions of the curriculum.

Keywords: playful learning, early years, environmental constraints, professional development, Bangladesh

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আমি যীশু আমি শিশু।
আমি এসেছি শূন্য থেকে,
আমি এসেছি স্বর্গ থেকে,
আমি এসেছি হাসাতে,
আমি এসেছি কাঁদাতে,
আমি এসেছি গড়তে,
আমি এসেছি ভাঙতে,
আমি এসেছি জানতে,
আমি এসেছি জানাতে,
আমি এসেছি ভালবাসা পেতে,
আমি এসেছি ভালবাসা দিতে।
আমি শিশু আমি যীশু।
আমি যীশু আমি শিশু।।

আমি শিশু আমি যীশু।
আমি ভয়কে করেছি জয়,
আমি দূর্বীর আমি দুর্জয়।
চিত্তে আমার নেই কোন শঙ্কা,
আমি বাজাই বিজয় ডঙ্কা।
আমার আগমনে ধরণী পূণ্য,
আমার আগমনে ভুবন ধন্য,
আমার আগমনে বায়ুতে আলোড়ন,
আকাশে বাতাসে ফাগুনের স্পন্দন।
রূপে আমি ভুবনমোহিনী,
মননে আমি মানবহিতৈষী।
আমার আগমনে বইছে চৈতলী হাওয়া,
আমার আগমনে প্রজাপতি সাজায় পাখা।
আমি যীশু আমি শিশু।।

আমি শিশু আমি যীশু।
আমি নিখিলের চির সুন্দর সৃষ্টি,
আমি ধরণীর বুকে অনাবিল বৃষ্টি।
আমার পাঠশালা এই বিশ্বজুড়ে,
আমি আনমনে খেলি এ বিশ্বলয়ে।
হেসে-খেলে মোর কাটে বেলা,
প্রলয়-সৃষ্টি মোর পুতুল খেলা,
আমি মগ্ন শূন্যে মহা আকাশে,
আমি মগ্ন ভবলীলা বিলাসে,
আমি গ্রহ আমি তারা আমি রবি,
প্রকৃতির বুকে আমি নিষ্পাপ ছবি।
আমি নিত্য উদাস সুখে দুখে অবিকার,
আমার আমিকে করতে চাই আবিষ্কার।
আমি আলাদা আমি অন্যান্যরূপ,
পৃথিবী অবাক দেখে আমার স্বরূপ।
আমি যীশু আমি শিশু।।

আমি শিশু আমি যীশু।
আমার আছে জাদুকরী মূলমন্ত্র,
দেখে খেলে শেখে আমি সিদ্ধহস্ত,

Unwanted Song

Mohammad Nazrul Islam

Today's morning is very cloudy,
It starts with father's beating
stepmother ordering me to work.

An everyday maidservant worker,
I return home to orders again
Pick up more straw!
Morning turns into afternoon
with no breakfast at all.

Again maidservant to others
Washing out cups and dishes,
Getting one plate musty rice
My hunger replies-
"Give whatever you like,
Something will do enough"

Catching rice-plate with one hand
trying to eat with other hand,
Both eyes are full of tears
Salty water drops on rice.

Alone
Missing mother
Nobody is near,
Marks of neglect and contempt
Over and over these marks
on body and mind.

Who lives in the behind--
of these open eyes
poster child of deprivation,
No fairy tale here.

How old am I?
After childhood: can you even call it
youth?
Reality tearing.

Perhaps I am not so capable
if having stamina to live at all,
Zest for life
Dreams, desires, love
dropout very early,

<p>আগ্রহ আমার সুখের চালিকাশক্তি, এভাবেই কাটে আমার দিনপঞ্জি। আমার খেলা নহে শুধু খেলা, খেলা মোর জীবনানন্দ ভেলা। খেলার ছলে ইন্দ্রিয় করে কাজে, ভাবনা-কল্পনা যেন তুলির আঁচ। মায়ের বুলি মোর অধিকার, দেখা-শুনা-বলা মোর হাতিয়ার। যখনি মোর পূর্বজ্ঞান দেয় সাড়া, তখনি শিখনের চাবি দেয় ধরা। আমার শিখন সত্য নিরবিচ্ছিন্ন, আমার গন্তব্য অসীম মায়্যাচ্ছন্ন। আমি যীশু আমি শিশু।।</p> <p>আমি শিশু আমি যীশু। আমি সদা কাঙাল ভালবাসার, আমি আল্লাদিত স্নেহ মমতার। স্নেহময় পরশ মুখের হাসি, আমার মনে বজায় বাঁশি। আলো আলো আলো সবার চাই যে ভালো। আমি যীশু আমি শিশু।।</p>	<p>Missed out from life.</p> <p>Education is a fiction beyond dreaming as if cursed from birth. Child rights is a slogan, a written line smudging on a poster disintegrating in the rain.</p>
<p>আমি শিশু আমি যীশু</p> <p>আমি শিশু আমি যীশু। আমি যীশু আমি শিশু। আমি এসেছি শূন্য থেকে, আমি এসেছি স্বর্গ থেকে, আমি এসেছি হাসাতে, আমি এসেছি কাঁদাতে, আমি এসেছি গড়তে, আমি এসেছি ভাঙতে, আমি এসেছি জানতে, আমি এসেছি জানাতে, আমি এসেছি ভালবাসা পেতে, আমি এসেছি ভালবাসা দিতে। আমি শিশু আমি যীশু। আমি যীশু আমি শিশু।।</p> <p>আমি শিশু আমি যীশু। আমি ভয়কে করেছি জয়, আমি দূর্বীর আমি দুর্জয়। চিত্তে আমার নেই কোন শঙ্কা, আমি বাজাই বিজয় ডঙ্কা। আমার আগমনে ধরণী পূণ্য, আমার আগমনে ভুবন ধন্য, আমার আগমনে বায়ুতে আলোড়ন, আকাশে বাতাসে ফাগুনের স্পন্দন। রূপে আমি ভুবনমোহিনী, মননে আমি মানবহিতৈষী।</p>	<p>I am this child</p> <p>I am this child. Here. Now. I came from zero, I came from heaven, I came from joy, I came for fun, I came to laugh, I came to cry, I came to build, I came to break, I came to know, I'm here to let you know, I'm here to perceive love, I have come to convey love. I am the child.</p> <p>I have come to encourage, I have no fear in my heart, I play the victory drum. On my arrival the earth is blessed,</p>

আমার আগমনে বইছে চৈতালী হাওয়া,
আমার আগমনে প্রজাপতি সাজায় পাখা।
আমি যীশু আমি শিশু।।

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আমার আছে জাদুকরী মূলমন্ত্র,
দেখে খেলে শেখে আমি সিদ্ধহস্ত,
আগ্রহ আমার সুখের চালিকাশক্তি,
এভাবেই কাটে আমার দিনপঞ্জি।
আমার খেলা নহে শুধু খেলা,
খেলা মোর জীবনানন্দ ভেলা।
খেলার ছলে ইন্দ্রিয় করে কাজ,
ভাবনা-কল্পনা যেন তুলির আঁচ।
মায়ের বুলি মোর অধিকার,
দেখা-শুনা-বলা মোর হাতিয়ার।
যখনি মোর পূর্বজ্ঞান দেয় সাড়া,
তখনি শিখনের চাবি দেয় ধরা।
আমার শিখন সত্য নিরবিচ্ছিন্ন,
আমার গন্তব্য অসীম মায়াচ্ছন্ন।
আমি যীশু আমি শিশু।।

আমি শিশু আমি যীশু।
আমি সদা কাঙাল ভালবাসার,
আমি আল্লাদিত স্নেহ মমতার।
স্নেহময় পরশ মুখের হাসি,
আমার মনে বজায় বাঁশি।
আলো আলো আলো
সবার চাই যে ভালো।
আমি যীশু আমি শিশু।।

The air stirs,
Sparkle fills the sky.
Fresh wind is blowing
Like a butterfly decorated fan
Upon my arrival
I have so much to give.

I am the rain from heaven.
I am the beautiful creation,
I have the sly smile.
My school is all over the world,
I play passionately in this world.
I do whatever I like best,
Break and create is my play.
When I laugh and play,
I am immersed in the great sky,
I'm engrossed in the abundance each detail
holds

My toys are the planet, the star and the
sun.
In the bosom of nature
I am the innocent picture.
I feel happy and sad,
I want to make a discovery.

I am different, I am extraordinary
The world looks at me in amazement.
I do every day many works,
I have no leisure.
I play and learn every day,
I have a magic key!
I perfect learning by doing,
Curiosity is the driving force of my learning,
Play is the driving force of my happiness,
My play is not only play-
Play is my lifetime pleasure,
Play is my practice of life.
Seeing-listening-doing is my tool,
Thought imagination is my sword.
My mother's words are my right,

	<p>Whenever my senses spring to life, Then my learning is initiated. I learn what is not divided, My learning is always unified, My destination is infinitely enchanted.</p> <p>I'm always in love I am delighted with affection's loving smile, I am always searching for joys I am excited to express myself. I keep the flute in my mind I have come to spread light. This child in every child This good everyone's.</p>
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Introduction: Early Years Playful Learning on the Cusp of Change

As we begin this article, we pause to allow poetic acknowledgement of the wonder and joy childhood play brings into being. For, as Wolf notes in *Poetry Method and Educational Research: Doing Critical Decolonising Political Inquiry* (Fitzpatrick and Fitzpatrick, 2021) to engage in poetry as inquiry opens up the possibility to meet as much as possible the experience in its originality, in its 'itselfness', or as Kelly asserts as a 'door-opener'. If we are to engage with De Sousa Santos (2017) question: is the university prepared to re-found the idea of universalism on a new intercultural basis, we must take seriously the importance of cultural expressions of experience and the openings to new conversations they prompt

Our efforts to translate this poem are a microcosm of the challenges that beset early years practitioners in Bangladesh. They face their own translation challenges as they work in the spaces between international policy with its embedded western presumptions, Bangladeshi nation-building ambitions and local contexts, traditions and exigencies.

Bangladesh is a country that is quickly outgrowing its current economic status; its educational settings are a microcosm of these tensions. Bangladesh primary education has undergone rapid growth and is in the process of being reconceptualised, particularly in terms of how children are introduced to formal education. Play is an important component of early years learning. Early childhood care and development (ECCD) has become a rising concern globally with an emphasis on holistic child development. It is a part of a comprehensive approach to achieving Education for All. In Bangladesh a free pre-primary education (PPE) programme was established throughout the whole country in 2010. This initiative acknowledges play-based learning as a part of pedagogy. The pre-primary curriculum (Directorate of Primary Education, 2012) and the operational framework for pre-primary education (Directorate of Primary Education, 2017) identify play as having the capacity to speed up the holistic development of children. The argument is largely based on efficiency grounds, as there is a correlation between early years provision and reduction in drop-out rates at later stages of education. This pedagogical approach clashes with the predominant rote-based education that most teachers experienced within their own education and, thus, may be prone to adopt in their own practice. Typically, one teacher manages an overloaded classroom of 50 or more children and relies on delivering lessons through disciplined routines to passive learners (Aktar, 2013). This clash between play-based pedagogy and the traditional pedagogical practices prompts our exploration of the conceptual work of integrating play as a pedagogical approach in early years. In a time when developments are still underway, valuable lessons about how to reconcile this clash of pedagogical approaches could pave the way to more congruent adoption of policy that stands a better chance of meeting its aspirations.

Early childhood education has been considered increasingly important since the independence of Bangladesh in 1971. The first education commission of Bangladesh formed in 1974 acknowledged the significance of early childhood education and suggested its opening in the country. The second education commission formed in 1988 also recommended introducing early childhood education in the form of a baby class but none of these proposals was fully brought into action (MoPME, 2013). The present education policy introduced one-year pre-primary education for 5+ children which will be

extended to 4+ children later (MoPME, 2015). A number of educational institutions are providing the Early Childhood Development (ECD) education in the form of baby classes, nursery and kindergarten schools, play group, daycare centres and religious preschools. However, most of these institutions do not have an age appropriate curriculum or teaching learning materials and teaching learning environment at all (Aktar, 2013). The Bangladeshi government is making concerted efforts to improve this situation. The pre-primary education in Bangladesh aims to create a favourable environment encouraging children to the growth of the universal human nature like the senses of eternal wonder, endless curiosity and joy (DPE, 2017). Moreover, it stipulates children should have the opportunities to explore and share their thoughts, ideas and feelings (MoPME, 2008, p.16). Thus, policy strives to create a curriculum that focuses on creating the child's awareness, a curiosity for education and culture and an easiness towards others.

One of the teaching strategies at pre-primary level is to deliver lessons through pictures, colours, beautiful and easy to resource educational materials, models, rhymes, songs, and games (DEP, 2012). In the Bangladeshi classroom there are scheduled moments of free play, but much more time devoted to 'guided play'. In daily routines there are 150 minutes for daily classroom activity in which 40 minutes are allowed for free flow play. For free play, there are four corners furnished with various types of materials. In the pre-primary curriculum, there are 22 games for guided play in which children follow the teacher's instructions (DEP, 2012).

Research into how the pre-primary stages of education in Bangladesh is adopting playful pedagogies is mixed. Chowdhury and Rivalland (2012) report that teachers are making progress integrating play as a teaching-learning method. What their findings reveal is that teachers' conception of play within learning positions the child as learning through imitating the teachers' directed (playful) activities. Whereas, a research study conducted by the Campaign for Popular Education (2014) found mainly conventional pre-primary teaching-learning processes that emphasized the Bengali alphabet and mathematical recognition of numbers. This study seeks to unpick the contradictions presented in this contrasting literature and to more fully understand the dilemmas that give rise to them. It is not only Bangladesh classrooms that strive to make these changes within the constraints that colonial legacies and enduring economic conditions pose.

Conceptualising Play: Children's Work?

The Charter of Children's rights (UNICEF 1989) states that every child should have the right to play. Play's role in a child's social, emotional, cognitive, physical and literacy development should not be underestimated (Kieff and Casbergue, 2000; Moon and Reifel, 2008). Vygotsky (1978) suggested that play allows children to do things beyond what they can manage in actual life through which they reach their zone of potential development. Wilson (2009) defines play as a collection of activities that are generously chosen, individually directed and inherently motivated. It enables children to control their own activities with some extent of self-instruction. Crucial to all these conceptions of play is the child's agency. This agency is key to enabling a child to organize their ideas, feelings, relationships and make

sense of the world and people they meet through play. Play's capacity to facilitate these key developmental milestones contributes to the assertion that play is the child's work.

This conception of play poses important challenges for early years pedagogy. Siraj-Blatchford et al. (2000) describe pedagogy as the reciprocal collaboration between teachers and learners. It is the combination of instructions and strategies based on knowledge, skills and attitudes that create a learning environment that includes school, family and in the wider community (Wall et al., 2015). It is a considerable question raised by Kieff and Casbergue (2000) that what, when and how should early years learners learn? The answers depend on how attuned the curriculum and pedagogy is to their needs, and how integral play is to meet those needs. There is a debate coming from educationalist and psychologists about the content of the curriculum for early age children (Soler and Miller, 2013; Canella, 2005). Rice (2015) emphasises the importance of environmental design, whilst Luntley (2018) argues from the findings of their research for the importance of relationships.

Pyle and Danniels (2016) explored the role of play in educational development, arguing that insufficient play-based classroom activities are the key obstacle to execute early years policies. This research emphasises child-directed classroom activities that ensures play-based learning. Two different teacher profiles were described: The first profile sees play and learning as different and views meeting academic demands using play-based learning as a challenge. The second profile supposes that academic learning could be maintained within play. They conclude that a variety of play-based strategies provides an enlarged definition of play-based learning that helps teachers implement this pedagogical approach. How practitioners understand the difference between play time and task time in early years classroom is important to clarify. In Bangladeshi classrooms one of our main 'struggles' and points of tension is how to engage and retain the interests of young children through the provision of playful learning experiences while ensuring effective learning is taking place. This struggle gives rise to the aims of this study and its research design.

Methods

Aim of research

The primary aim of this study was to explore the following research question:

What is the role of play-based learning in the pre-primary education of Bangladesh?

The research has the following objectives:

- To examine the teachers' concept of play-based learning.
- To examine the teachers' experiences of play-based learning.
- To explore the benefit of play-based learning in the pre-primary context.
- To explore the way professional development of teachers relates to play-based learning.
- To identify what the challenges and restrictions to implement play-based learning are.
- To identify what strategies can be considered to address successful play-based learning.

Bearing in mind the Bangladeshi socio-cultural context outlined above, the possible potential tensions within these points merited particular attention to:

the traditional rote-learning process and play-based active learning process that encourages children's imagination and creativity

how the differences within play-based learning between free play and guided play are understood.

what it means to create a meaningful interactive learning environment for holistic child development.

As a consequence, we listened to teachers' responses attuned to how these themes might arise and prioritised them within our analytic coding.

Leedy (2015) explained qualitative approaches explore real-life experiences, manners and feelings and aims to achieve inclusive and insightful opinions from participants. The characteristic of qualitative research is flexible, contextual and dynamic. As this research aims to gather information about pre-primary teachers' conceptions and attitudes, interviews were chosen. According to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) when the research emphasizes exploring participant concepts and understandings, events or situations from experienced people, this approach is more appropriate.

We obtained information by interviewing 6 professionals who have experience that relates to our chosen topic of interest. We used a semi-structured interview to ask participants to reflect on their own experiences considering the strategies they have used and any barriers they have identified. Although the researcher often has a list of broad questions to ask to standardize the interview process, the semi-structured nature of the interview allows the researcher to be flexible and to use prompts or sub-questions to stimulate further discussion. Interviews facilitated the researchers to comprehend participants thinking in a particular way. The design assisted us to explore deeply participants' views and explanations in their own words (Menter et al., 2011). As Cohen, Manion and Morrison note: "Interviews enable participants to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express how they regard situations from their own point of view" (2011, p.409). Though questions are specific, the researcher can search for explanations and encourage expansion on the responses given, thus allowing a free discussion with the participants (May, 2011). Each participant was asked questions depending on whether they had responded positively, neutrally or negatively. This was to allow the researcher to further investigate participant responses. The interviewer took written notes of participant responses to the open questions and interviews were also recorded to ensure accuracy.

The research was conducted following the guidelines of ethical research from the University of the West of Scotland with approval by the UWS ethics committee (UWS, 2016). In qualitative research, the reliability of the researcher is particularly significant as the instrument of data collection and analysis (Patton, 2002). Given that participants had a work relationship to the researcher, at the time of data contribution, each person got the chance to decline to contribute to the study. This kind of effort helped confirm only those participants willing to do so participated in the data collection process and were ready to present views liberally. A brief discussion at the start of the interview was held by the

researcher to put participants at ease and to ensure they were comfortable proceeding with the research.

Sampling

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) mentioned that five key factors are considered for the selection of a population sample. These include the volume of the sample; the representations and parameters of the sample; entrée to the sample; the sampling approach and the type of research. Menter et al. (2011) states that the semi structure interview sample selection must reflect the characteristics of the cluster being studied. This was a small-scale research project with a purposive sample because of limited time and resources. This research was conducted with several government pre-primary teachers in Bangladesh. Teachers who have pre-primary classroom experiences in Bangladesh and who are actively involved in teaching-learning process were invited to participate in the study. The participants were selected from the researchers' present working organization in Bangladesh. An invitation email was sent to pre-primary teachers; those who responded expressing interest in the study were selected.

Table 1: Demographic for teachers of pre-primary classroom Group One

Pre-Primary Teachers	Gender of participant	Age range of participant	Years of teaching experience
	female	20-25 years	5 years
	female	20-25 years	5 years
	male	25-30 years	6 years
	female	25-30 years	5 years
	male	25-30 years	6 years
	female	25-30 years	5 years

Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected through interviews and open-ended questions was analysed in five stages: familiarisation, transcription, organisation, coding and analysis (Lacey and Luff, 2001). At first, recording the unrefined data was needed. Then all recorded interviews were listened to, to become familiar with the views they contained. Removing names and personal matters, each transcript was specified by giving a code number, such as Teacher 1. The coding process consisted of highlighting and categorizing key words and phrases into main themes relevant to our research question and purpose. In addition we used open coding to identify new points that were not covered within the existing framework (Menter et al., 2011). We then clustered the points into themes (Creswell, 2015). Initial analysis of the responses to the open questions resulted in eighteen codes. After further analysis, these were subsumed under four overarching themes: concept of play-based learning, experiences of play-based learning, professional development, and challenges and restrictions. Each theme is discussed below and illustrated with quotes from the participants' responses to the open questions.

Findings: locating play in Bangladeshi Pre-primary classrooms

In Figure 1 below, we present that coding schemata used to analyse findings. We present findings below working across the top tier of codes, reporting respondents' views as applicable. Conceptions and experiences are presented together as respondents often used experience to illustrate the meanings that they gave to concepts.

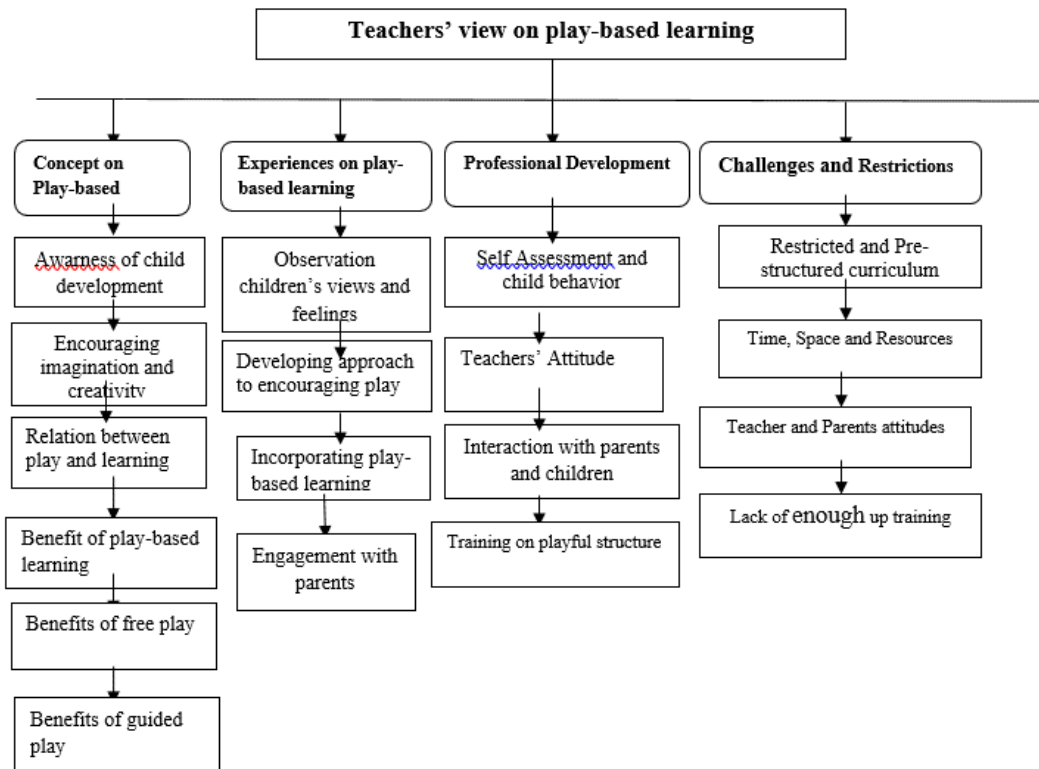


Figure 1: Coding Schemata

Play-based appropriate activities in one culture may not necessarily be considered so in another culture. Therefore, the research focussed on how the participants understood play as a pedagogical theory and how it was integrated in the classroom practices. In general we can say that all participants agreed that child development is an essential subject of study for everyone who works with young children and all participants agreed that play-based learning is key to all activities in pre-primary classroom, however, there are important differences in how respondents interpreted this and in their views on barriers to play.

Differing conceptions of play and learning

Whilst some participants recognised that play and learning are closely related, some teachers viewed play and learning as being separable:

“ I divide the class period into two parts- one is study period and another is play period.” (Teacher-4)

Other participants indicated a more traditional view of the relation between play and learning and saw play as having pejorative connotations:

“Play can be a different subject in pre-primary classes. If the whole time is allocated to play, it will be boring for children.” (Teacher-1)

This view contrasted with teachers who expressed a deeper understanding that something is happening that may not be obvious to the child or other observers that is ultimately important:

“Play helps students to learn something. Children accept it as play but, ultimately, learning is occurring.” (Teacher-3)

One teacher’s views contrasted to those that saw play as a lesser form of learning. In his view play is central:

“Play is not only play: play itself is learning. So, play-based learning is the key to all learning activities. Play-based learning is important because it prepares them for the rest of lives.” (Teacher-6)

This suggests that teachers may not have the same conception of play and therefore have very different approaches to a ‘playful’ classroom. It is important to note that some teachers thought that play should be taught separately as a subject, whereas play-based pedagogy encourages educators to view all activity in pre-primary classes as playful and interactive. In drilling deeper into what can be meant by play, it became evident that there is quite a wide range of activities that teacher’s still see as falling within the broad definition of play.

When asked to describe the benefits of free play, many respondents’ comments emphasised the importance of choice to foster children’s innate reason and inquiry. Free-flow play is very important for a child’s development and learning at this stage. According to Bruce (2002), free-flow play helps children to use what they know and apply it to new situations. In the words of one respondent:

“They like to imagine something and to create anything. Free play encourages them to think, feel and imagine deeply.” (Teacher-1)

Guided play is described as much more structured teacher-led activity and consists of kinds of activities that many Western settings would not encourage in early years settings, rather, they are more typical of approaches used in the initial phases of formal schooling. In describing what characterised the benefits of guided play teachers remarked:

“Children learn to obey the rules and follow the instruction. Children are habituated how to give and follow the instruction.” (Teacher-3)

Guided play was also reported to increase children leadership qualities, implying they do so within structure activities:

“They can learn leadership and how to lead a group of people in guided play.” (Teacher-6)

What is evident in these descriptions is a high degree of structure with set roles of following and leading that children are encouraged to emulate. This raises difficult questions about the educational legacy of colonisation. Most of the participants argued that guided play prepares children to follow the rules and

instructions that are needed for their future life. However, one teacher conceded that children resisted this strategy:

“Children learn about maintaining discipline. They do not enjoy guided play for a long time. They do not like to be guided. They like freedom.” (Teacher-4)

Benefits of Play

Some participants strongly argued that through play children organise their ideas, feelings, relationships and make sense of the world and people they meet.

“Play-based learning promotes their creativity and imagination largely. It helps to perceive others, how to think abstract terms. They can exchange their emotions and feeling with another.” (Teacher-4)

There was also an appreciation that imagination, creativity, and all kinds of symbolic behaviour develop and emerge when play-based learning is enabled:

“Play can be multi-shaped like singing, dancing, acting, exercise and storytelling. Play creates relaxation, emotions and interest.” (Teacher-3)

In this quote the importance of active learning is also emphasised.

The social aspects of learning were also considered an important aspect. The importance of developing relationships through play was articulated by nearly all respondents as typified in this response:

“Play and play-based learning provide the basis foundation of children for school. Children can develop their social skills and build up social relationship through play-based learning.” (Teacher-6)

The impact of relationships on the affective side of learning was also highlighted:

“We know that children arrive at their first day of school leaving their families in fear, so we deal with their anxieties . . . (so that) they make friends with peers easily and build up social relationships.” (Teacher-3)

Developing approaches to encouraging play

Several participants spoke of their desire to develop approaches to encourage playful learning in their classroom environment:

“Play is not only included in play class, but play-based learning can be included in all classes. Every class should be play based.” (Teacher-3)

Another participant stated that a play-based learning environment provides children a natural love of learning:

“I try to include play into my teaching because a play-based learning environment provides children a natural love of learning.” (Teacher-5)

Professional Development

Because there seemed to be a wide difference in teacher's conception of play and sense of its worth in pre-primary classrooms, it was important to inquire about the professional development that underpinned their views. Many respondents indicated they were open to new concepts and ways of teaching and saw an important link between a better understanding of child development and the development of a playful curriculum

"At first, we have to understand the child's mentality. We have to know what children like best. We have to be patient. Training prepares and promotes how to use new things, concepts and ideas in a new context." (Teacher-4)

One participant spelled out in detail the kind of support they would like to see and the strong link between child psychology and early year's pedagogy:

"It is important to increase more short term and long-term training on early year's pedagogy. Seminars, symposiums, research and study reading materials related to child psychology and child wellbeing may help our professional development." (Teacher-5)

The role of self and child assessment was also emphasised:

"We can learn from children. Children learn best when they are in a secure attachment. So, we need to know about their individual differences, home culture and condition of their attachment." (Teacher-1)

These responses emphasise that it is important to keep in mind that every child is a person; they are whole human beings from the very start.

Another participant also expressed his opinion that self-assessment is the best assessment that is very crucial for professional development:

"I have to discover my weakness first. Then I have to study children behaviours." (Teacher-6)

"As a pre-primary teacher it is my responsibility to understand children, believe in their potential and show respect to their personality, opinions, and nature." (Teacher-5)

All participants stated that they need to learn about how children develop and learn. Most of the participants agreed that teachers' attitudes are very important to develop play-based learning.

Challenges and Restrictions

Restrictive Curriculum

Despite a positive attitude to playful learning and government rhetoric advocating such an approach, there is a clash between policy rhetoric and curricular design. Every pre-primary teacher must follow the daily routine suggested by the pre-primary curriculum of Bangladesh that includes only forty minutes of free flow play-based activity with the rest of the timetable comprised of subject based lessons. Teachers were very articulate about the clash between these pre-structured activities and the conception of playful learning.

“Restricted and pre-structured curriculum is the main barrier to ensure play-based learning in pre-primary classrooms in Bangladesh. We have very little freedom to go beyond the pre-structured curriculum. Children’s wishes and freedom of choice are not represented on that pre-structured curriculum.” (Teacher-1)

“150 minutes nonstop teaching learning contact period and one teacher with 60 children are two big barriers to ensure playful learning environment.” (Teacher-4)

One teacher articulated the curricular changes that would be more consonant with their understanding of playful learning:

“Daily routines should be flexible around children’s interest and responsive to learning needs of individual children.” (Teacher-6)

Space and Resources

Most of the participants revealed that large numbers of children is a big barrier to ensure play-based learning:

“Large number of children is a big challenge for ensuring play-based learning in the classroom. So, it’s difficult to conduct meaningful learning at the point of play-based activities. There is not enough space to keep bags, play materials and dedicated learning corners.” (Teacher-1)

Several participants argued that lack of sufficient play materials and spaces are obstacles to ensure playful learning environment:

“It is near about impossible to transit smoothly from one activity to another with play materials within the time allocations without sufficient space arrangements.” (Teacher-4)

Participants also recounted that they collected locally sourced materials themselves to supplement the pre-structured play materials in order to adequately resource the recommended play activities.

Parents attitudes

It is worth noting that parental attitudes were also seen as challenging. Some parents think that play is the additional activity which detracts from valuable learning:

“Some parents want to see play reduced. They think play is the waste of time only.” (Teacher-4)

Overall, the picture that emerges is that educators are engaging with concepts of play, however the range of challenges that confront them are formidable. Below we discuss the import of both.

Discussion

Conceptions of play

The purpose of this study was to achieve more understanding of play-based learning in pre-primary classes. Though play and learning are often separated in the context of time as well as space, curriculum for early years education around the world states that play is considered to be of the utmost important. Whilst all participants agreed that play-based learning is an important component of child development that is essential for children’s physical, intellectual, language, emotional and spiritual

development and their fostering as social beings, findings indicate that teachers have different understandings of play-based learning. Following the teacher's instructions is still seen as a crucial part of a playful classroom. Whether the more child-centred concept of play common in Western countries is compatible with the exigencies that Bangladeshi teachers find themselves in, is open for debate.

Teachers' role in the classroom

It appears from the teacher's statement that in Bangladesh the number of children in the pre-primary classroom is very high. This government prescribed classroom size is 30 children. In reality this is often 50-60 children. These numbers are not helpful to encourage utilizing play-based pedagogical approaches (Hegde and Cassidy, 2009). This is an important factor causing the majority of teachers of this study to focus on play-based activity that are teacher-directed where children had little opportunity to choose their favoured activities. It appears that in many instances play-based activity time was changed into directed learning time in which entertaining elements were incorporated.

Relationship with children

It is apparent from the study that in spite of restrictions, teachers are trying to integrate playful activities that enlarge children's interests and learning. Teachers' views of play-based learning were quite different from the Western early years pedagogy. Cannella (2005) suggests that Western play-based approaches lack worldwide application because of the specific restrictions of cultural realities. Gupta (2011) shows that the Western method of explaining play-based pedagogy can be at odds with different cultural classroom practices. These concerns are borne out by the present study. Whilst Bangladeshi teachers may not be able to equip and facilitate children's experience of free flow play, their move towards guided play activities that incorporate activities that children find enjoyable such as singing, acting, rhyming, drawing or physical activities represents an important step away from traditional forms of disciplined rote learning.

Classroom contexts

Well-designed classrooms are important to assist children's play-based learning. The pre-primary education policy of Bangladesh government is to provide 250 square feet classroom for 30 children. However, most of the participants said that the available pre-primary classrooms were congested with benches and tables. Children often have not enough space to sit properly on the ground or to move freely during play. One of the consequences of rapid and intense urbanisation of Bangladesh is that many schools find themselves without enough safe playgrounds where children can enjoy outdoor play. There is also lack of resources to maintain play-based activities and learning of young children. Here a clash with Western expectation and norms is evident. White (2008) argues for a designed outdoor space to support children's learning and development. Gupta (2011) argued that the Western play practices are not encouraged by such kind of non-resourced educational environments. Despite government policy's encouragement of play-based learning environments (DPE, 2010; MOPME, 2008), the lack of playful resources retards the development of play-based learning in the classroom.

Access to play materials

To encourage different play-based activities, children have to be given a variety of opportunities to discover a range of stimulating and problem-solving resources (Heidemann and Hewitt, 2010). The findings indicated that many children did not have access to open-ended and problem-solving free play materials that influence different types of creative and imaginative activities. Pre-structured play materials are mainly used in pre-primary classroom that do not encourage problem solving or decision making. Furthermore, where teachers reported providing four free-play corners with open-ended play materials, there were not adequate materials to allow all the children to discover and explore their imagination and creativity. As Heidemann and Hewitt's (2010) claim, insufficient play resources increases disturbances. This may explain why some of the teachers perceived their attempts at play-based learning as 'boring'.

Implications for change

One could say that the development of playful early year's classrooms in Bangladesh is itself in its early years of exploration. As important as the findings of current practice are, the implications these point to and the further research they map out are also important outcomes of the research.

Teacher and Community Development

Researching the quality of in-service teachers training to promote playful learning is important to consider. In Bangladesh, most teacher training is conducted traditionally with very little scope of interaction, experimentation or dialogue. It could be argued that unless teachers themselves experience playful learning, it is difficult for them to facilitate it. Just what culturally appropriate form this experiential learning should take is an important strand of further research. For addressing and solving the issues experienced locally by teachers and stakeholders, action research could be encouraged because children's education is influenced by local culture and heritage. In particular, it is important to understand the relationship with parents and local community with pre-primary teachers and educators.

Classroom environment and provision of space

All teachers used their own concepts to explain their play practices in the classroom. They used variety of materials to teach children the concept of different facts through hands-on experiences. Improving children's play in the classroom through bettering the classroom environment and provision of space are two of the vital components for improved playful classrooms (Heidemann and Hewitt, 2010). The literature provides proof that play materials have immense importance in children's learning and development. However, this study highlights that in Bangladeshi classrooms, young children had not enough access to open-ended free play materials that engage problem solving or creativity. Therefore, an important further research area concerns how to develop and implement the open-structured play materials in pre-primary classroom using locally sourced materials.

In terms of both space and materials, often these challenges can be seen as imposing finite limits on possibilities for change. However, here is where practice at the margins offers real potential. Adventure Playground approaches that support children in constructing their own play spaces provide a rich reservoir of examples to draw from (O'Connor and Palmer, 2002; Donoff and Bridgeman, 2017) that

have been taken up in UN Habitat Sustainable Urban Development Network (24: 2012). This approach is gaining ground within the Children's *Right to the City* initiative (Unicef, 2018) in Asia with examples developing in Dhakar (Block by Block, 2020). Perhaps these placemaking approaches that use playful and participatory approaches to redesigning urban spaces can expand playful spaces in and around schools and at the same time introduce parents and other community stakeholders to the benefits of play and its transformational and problem solving capacities in their fullest sense.

“The right to the city is far more than the individual liberty to access urban resources: it is a right to change ourselves by changing the city...the freedom to make and remake our cities.” (Harvey, 2008)

Conclusion

In the pre-primary educational context of Bangladesh there are many obstacles to implementing a playful pedagogy as intended. In conclusion we pose some important questions for the sector. Despite the challenges and areas of implementation which require further research, the current policies and practices of play-based learning constitute an important transition in the early years educational framework of Bangladesh that represents a change from the rote-learning oriented teaching-learning practices towards an interactive teaching-learning method.

However, as Vygotsky (1978) argued, children imitate reality along with their past experiences to develop their own knowledge and understanding through play (Siraj-Blatchford, 2008). In the present study, it appears that children did not get the chances to explore their real-life situations. Instead children were able to learn through imitating the imaginative guidance of their teachers. Whilst these teacher-directed activities were interpreted by the teachers as having the power to step up young children's educational learning, these kinds of pre-structured activities allow no opportunity for the children to develop their own ideas and thinking.

Izumi-Taylor, Pramling Samuelsson and Steele Rogers (2010) in their comparison of early year educators' views across Japan, Sweden and the US, argue that, 'by focusing on only correct answers teachers may discourage playfulness in the classroom and often diminish creativity'. This kind of introduction to education can result in children who only know how to carry out adult instructions and not be imaginative. Children need lots of opportunities to represent their ideas and thinking; if the early years classroom does not provide this opportunity, where will it be provided?

Investing the resources to make classrooms more fully playful involves a gamble: it requires deferring more rigorous structured learning, in the belief that children will come to later structured learning much more able to focus, integrate concepts and develop higher order thinking skills. Is this a gamble Bangladesh can afford? Is it a gamble Bangladesh can afford not to take? More playful early pedagogical practices also put pressure on pedagogical practices across education as they raise expectations of active learning. Are primary educators prepared for the more holistic learners play based pedagogy may present them with?

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