

DEVELOPING PLAY AS PEDAGOGY IN LOWER PRIMARY CLASSROOM

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Abstract

In recent years, there is extensive evidence on learning through play, however, there has been less evidence in teaching through play. This paper will begin by examining play elements in the Strategies for English Language Learning and Reading (STELLAR) Programme in Singapore. It will then proceed to discuss on developing a pedagogy of play for lower primary classroom. To link play and pedagogy, understanding on the unique purposes and nature of play in education settings as well as the role of adults in planning and involving in various activities are essential. This paper will address three themes: the influence of STELLAR curriculum in Singapore, critical issues on play in theory and in practice, and future directions in research. STELLAR, as one of the initiatives imparting primary school does influence not only pedagogical and classroom practices, but also the universal concern for examinations. Teachers, on the other hand, having role on providing good quality play, enable students to explore, adventure and engage in fun-filled activities must also try to adapt with the intention to mesh with MOE policies. Hence, it is important to support and equip teachers and with designated and professional knowledge and expertise in play as pedagogy.

Keywords: Play, pedagogy, lower primary classroom, English lessons.

INTRODUCTION

For English-language education at the primary level, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has encouraged specific initiatives including Strategies of English Language Learning and Reading (STELLAR) to boost the standard of English Language and improve the quality of interaction in classrooms. STELLAR was introduced as a pedagogical model for English Language and literacy in 2006 with the goal to develop in pupils a love for reading and give them a strong foundation in the English Language. STELLAR provides a highly structured curriculum with instructional materials and scripted lesson plans, including discussion points and specific prompts for teachers to use. Three major teaching strategies are recommended: Shared Book Approach (SBA), Modified English Experience Approach (MLEA) and Learning Centres.

Play elements were embedded in every unit of STELLAR Guidelines. Based on the play types classified by Hughes (2006), the dominant play types communication and creative play. Communication play uses gestures, nuances and words in miming, singing and reciting poetry to learn the target language. Creative play allows a new response, the transformation of information, awareness of new connections, with an element of surprise,

for instance playing musical box game while teaching pupils to identify the differences of singular and plural nouns.

Developing a pedagogy of play for lower primary classroom

Developing a pedagogy of play is not about simply adding in a bit of play or play corner and play dough at the commencement of a year as pupils are settling in the classroom. Nor is it a play time where we hope that pupils will learn something and enjoy themselves without having planning and objectives specifically set for the class. Pedagogy is often referred to as the practice of teaching (Siraj-B.I. et al, 2002). It is with direction, planning and goals. In fact, objectives for learning and development are the starting point for planning. Besides that, it aims to promote knowledge, understandings and skills through activities and play in which children are engaged. Creativity and open-ended tasks are encouraged. Of course, it places pupils' interests as an integral part of planning but not following the sequence of topics or units that are predetermined by teachers.

Purposes and nature of play in education settings as well as the role of teachers in planning and involving in various activities

The role of teachers in play includes:

- Planning and resourcing challenging learning environments;
- Supporting pupils' learning through planned and spontaneous play activities;
- Extending and developing pupils' language can communication in their play;
- Observing and assessing pupils' learning through play;
- Ensuring continuity and progression (Wood, 2008).

Good quality play, according to Wood (2008), is linked to positive learning outcomes in the cognitive, emotional, social and psychomotor domains, and in the six areas of learning including reading, writing, speaking, listening. Walker (2007) also mentioned that one of the teacher roles is to provide a rich range of opportunities for pupils to explore, investigate, involve and engage in purposeful and meaningful experiences, so that a number of different types of play, thinking, reasoning and understanding can occur. Besides that, it is pupils initiated with teacher suggesting, prompting, guiding and scaffolding in particular directions. It is suggested to be a combination of teacher-directed and pupils-initiated activities (Wood, 2008). Besides that, for a pedagogy to be indicated as effective, it has to include opportunities for co-construction between pupils and teachers, including 'sustained shared thinking', joint involvement in pupil- and teacher-initiated activities and informed interactions in pupils' self-initiated and free play activities (Wood, 2008). The teacher's role is conceptualized as pro-active in creating play/ learning environments, as well as responsive to pupils' choices, interests and patterns of learning (Wood, 2008) so that they are able to engage in the purposeful work that is truly interest to them.

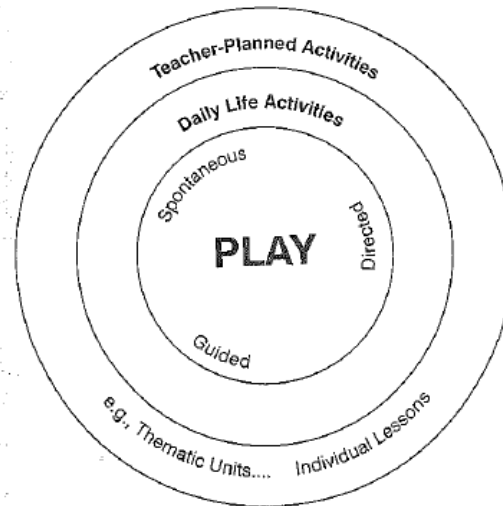


Figure 1: Play at the Centre of the Curriculum by J. V. Hoorn et al (1999)

Based on Walker (2007), play in the classroom setting should focus on the process and not just an end product. The work or creation of the pupil may not necessarily always have to result in an end product. Worksheets and cloned expectation should be avoided. During play, the process itself may be providing the practice of skills, thinking, creating, imagining, or simply engaging in an experience that is purposeful. Play promotes the most natural and meaningful process by which pupils can construct knowledge and understandings, practice skills, immerse themselves naturally in a broad range of literacy and numeracy and engage in productive and intrinsically motivating learning environments. Their interests provide a great 'leaping off point' for teachers who can use these interests to introduce skills and understandings (Walker, 2007).

Play as pedagogy means the teacher's intended act in mobilizing contextual resources to capture, sustain and extend the pupils' unintended experience through a continuous process that helps them construct and reconstruct new meaning of the world. It is the repertoires that a teacher adopts to interweave the pupils' optimal experience with teaching and learning objectives

The Influence of STELLAR curriculum in Singapore, Critical Issues on Play in Theory and in Practice

Currently, the STELLAR programme has been fully deployed in all schools at all levels. It supports and aligns with the 2009 EL Syllabus. It is believed that the implementation of this programme will move learners towards independence readers using quality children's books and activities that motivate and engage young learners. This will offer a powerful means for framing pupils' learning of English Language.

There are some gaps between play in theory and in practice, including having simple knowledge to inform a complex issue as teachers perceive learning through play as associated with fun and happiness and are unaware of play-based pedagogy. Thus, they were encouraged by the immediate excitement of pupils and heading towards using simple means to realize play without understanding its effect on pupils as well as their own professional development. Hence, more support is needed to guide practice through play as well as well as monitor the implementation of play-based pedagogy.

Besides that, for play, teachers need to allow more time for pupils to develop sustained bouts of play, and to return to their own themes and ongoing interests. They need to have time for play activities, especially role-play, as mentioned by Wood (2008) to develop in complexity and challenge in order to support progression in play as well as enhancing pupils' social and co-operative skills, which is also part of the desired outcome of play.

There is lack of continuity in the overall educational system to support the ideology of play-based practice. Great tension in lower primary education when preparation for the next stage is considered, including Subject-based Banding at the end of primary four as well as Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) towards the end of primary six. As lack of more concrete evidence of a play-based curriculum, primary professionals were not confident to uphold learning through play. Another root cause is difficulties in altering the perception of the professional role of teachers. If we are unable to alter teachers' mentality to dispense with this directional role, a teacher-dominated practice will be perpetuated indefinitely.

Table 1. Components of Literacy Behaviours in the Pupils' Play

<i>Play Activities</i>	<i>Literacy Behaviours</i>
Communicative Play	1. singing to the tune with gestures 2. reciting poems
Creative Play	1. Learning the sentence structures 2. Learning the new vocabulary 3. Transforming information into new knowledge
Dramatic Play	1. developing language through role playing 2. creating stories based on past experiences
Language Rhythm	1. reading the alphabet letter from the chart 2. learning the new vocabulary
Story Writing	1. writing stories 2. learning how to sequence 3. writing picture stories 4. reading their dictated stories
Shared – Book Reading	1. Sharing text and texts with the whole class using big books. Innovating on text in order to study how it worked became a popular strategy.
Learning Centre	1. looking and reading materials like big books that children have heard or studied. 2. creating their own stories 3. listening to books 4. learning sequence in a story

Future directions

A clear, explicit parameter of play-based practice for policy makers, teaching professionals and parents to follow and abide by empower teacher autonomy and parent education on play as pedagogy is needed. Future play scholarship should target in providing empirical understanding of what is considered as play in the classroom settings,

and how different forms of play have implications for developing discipline-based knowledge, skills and understanding as well as in the learning of four skills. Research in the field of play and literacy have been conducted from multiple perspectives, showing strong evidence of links between developing literacies and play activities, as evidenced in Table 1. Detailed studies are needed across the subject disciplines in order to provide an evidence base that can inform policy and practice. Another gap is knowledge about how play progresses, how pupils' learning progresses through play within lower primary level and levels beyond that.

Lastly, one of the key points in developing a pedagogy of play in the classroom is to have the policy makers and teachers to equip with professional knowledge and expertise in play as pedagogy. This is because both of them have a strategic role to play: planning for play, using playful pedagogical approaches in teacher- and pupil- initiated activities, as well as engaging on their terms and with respect for their meaning (Wood, 2005). Such pedagogical strategies create the conditions for combining intended learning outcomes with the possible outcomes that emerge from pupils' interests, engagement and participation. More empirical work is needed on the pedagogical knowledge and expertise that underpins these processes, particularly in relation to influencing policy developments and the design of professional development programmes for 'play' specialists. We should have confidence that we can develop a pedagogy of play with unity between playing, learning and teaching. Finally, lifelong playing needs to be considered as inseparable from lifelong learning. We need to re-value our relationship with play as an important dimension of human activity across life-course, and as a source of possibilities of learning and development.

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