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Using Dramatic and Pretend Play to Promote Children's Learning: The Case of Early Childhood Education in Ghana

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Abstract

Communities and cultures have a way of passing on their legacies to their young ones for preservation in order to keep the generation and lineage going. Many of these practices are passed on through dramatic or pretend play. Providing children opportunity to learn best should be done through a medium that children find to be interesting and child-friendly. The purpose of this manuscript is to describe dramatic and pretend play and their place in the education of children in early childhood care and development settings in Ghana. This will inform practice, to enable teachers use such dramatic and pretend play to enhance children's learning. This manuscript is important for teachers, policy makers, and Non-Governmental Organizations who are interested in early childhood education in Ghana. Understanding the knowledge that the ecology within which the child lives and grows will be very crucial, to developing a curriculum and pedagogy that are context bound and therefore very appropriate for the children in that ecology.

Keywords: Play, Community, Culture, Ecology, Lineage

Introduction

Providing children opportunity to learn best should be done through a medium that children find to be interesting and child-friendly. Such opportunities are perceived to be important in the lives of the child. Therefore, using them makes the process of learning easier, interesting, and appealing to the children involved. It is also very important to note that every community and hence culture has a way of passing on their legacies to their young ones for preservation in order to keep the generation and lineage going. Many of these practices are passed on through dramatic or pretend play.

Children's learning can be enhanced by the physical and tactile interactions that go on between them and the teacher. Such interactions constitute a worthwhile activity and have a long tradition in education (Dewey, 1959). Participation and engagement through interaction in the form of play is a cherished activity, especially during childhood (Dako-Gyeke, 2013). As a result, children spend considerable hours playing.

According to Morrison (2002), early childhood education in Ghana dates back as early as 1745 when Ghana (then called Gold Coast) was controlled by European nations. In those years, missionaries established the first recorded educational program that included young children as an effort to promote Christianity. Formal education also known as Castle School began in the Elmina castle when the governor established a school to teach the children that the merchants had with their African concubines. Then in 1843, the British Basel Mission Society attached Kindergartens to primary schools (Morrison, 2002). The term "attached" refers to inclusion of children within the group who were younger than the typical age for the identified class (p. 215). This allowed children between the ages of 4 and 5 to attend classes in primary schools, and also 3 – year olds to participate in training programs before they were moved to primary schools.

While previous studies have examined the educational system in Ghana, there seems to be very little or no studies at all that have explored dramatic and pretend play in early childhood education in Ghanaian classrooms. The purpose of this manuscript is to describe dramatic and pretend play and their place in the education of children in early childhood care and development settings in Ghana. This will inform practice, to enable teachers use such dramatic and pretend play to enhance children's learning.

What is the place of dramatic and pretend play in effective teaching and learning?

The key constructs to be addressed in this manuscript include but not limited to play, interaction, participation, and engagement. The contribution to practice is observed from the fact that children start playing very early in life. Much of their learning's is through play activities in very informal environments and activities. It is therefore proper and appropriate that the transition to formal education should take note of the process of learning which should include the play activities that the child has engaged in since infancy. Once the transition is smooth, learning does not become very difficult for the child. Any deviation from this to making the child do some abstract activities that do not convey any form of enjoyment would be very difficult to motivate the child to become engaged in the learning process.

The audience that I am targeting includes teachers of young children particularly those teaching at the lower primary level (Primary 1-3). Administrators and policy makers would also find the manuscript useful because it would create an opportunity for them to appreciate what they find teachers and children doing in the classroom when they visit such schools and facilities. They would be patient enough to wait for the results of the teaching method and not rush to conclude that teachers are lazy and that children only go to school to play.

Serpell and Marfo (2014) advanced the perspective that pedagogy does not entail just the act of teaching but also the connections that exist among teaching, culture, organization, and mechanisms of social control. By this definition, pedagogy is context-bound and value-laden (Marfo & Bisterker, 2011). According to Serpell and Marfo (2014), the starting points for curriculum design and instructional practice in the African context will be knowledge and understanding about the local ecology of development.

Understanding the knowledge that the ecology within which the child lives and grows will be very crucial to developing a curriculum and pedagogy that are context bound and therefore very appropriate for the children in that ecology. The curriculum cannot be divorced from the people who are the direct beneficiaries of the process and the pedagogy should be fashioned in a manner that allow the children to reap the most benefits from the instructional process.

Marfo et al. (2008) argued that in all cultures, an optimal balance among socialization goals gives children the most ideal opportunities for healthy development. They emphasized that “any viable ECD program in the African context must, as a matter of necessity and principle, build on existing assets and initiatives that address the survival, health, and nutritional needs of children”(p. 203). To them, Africa’s communal and community legacy is highly celebrated and must observed as such. Unfortunately, the legacy’s foundations have been rocked by modernity, urbanization and the social isolation of people from their cultural and ancestral roots.

Providing African children the opportunity to socialize is a great thing that could happen to them. Communal and community legacy have been passed on from one generation to another and it is that which makes Africans unique. If that is taken away from Africa through modernity, then Africa will not have anything to show to the world. Rallying round others who are in need not for

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any personal gain is what makes Africa a community that is celebrated by many.

Marfo and Biesteker (Pre-publication use) explained that the emphasis on Western-style schooling in Africa is problematic when measured by the criteria that education must be locally relevant and transmit a society's enduring values and best practices and traditions across generations. They argued that play is a culturally mediated activity that serves a variety of functions, prominent among which is its use as a mechanism for enculturation. They cited an ethnographic research by Lancy (1996) which studied the Kpelle children of Liberia. To them, play is a very useful way and method of transmitting a cultural heritage to the young ones for preservation for generations yet unborn.

Using play to teach and educate children is something that is prevalent in the African culture. Almost everything is reduced to a form of play so that it becomes interesting and enjoyable to do. Children are happy and willing to run errands because running errands offers opportunities for children to play by using their locally made toy vehicles. Many of the cultural dances provide opportunities for even the elderly ones to engage in numeracy. For example, a local all-female activity called "Ampe" deals with counting as the individual hops around a circle made up of play mates.

Oberhuemer (2005), argued that the early childhood curriculum within a democratic and participatory framework is owned by the practitioners, children, parents, and local community contributing to filling that framework with life. The author stated that it is now widely recognized in the early childhood research community, that children are social agents, participating in constructing and influencing their own lives.

Within a democratic dispensation in the classroom, the child must be recognized as an agent of his own learning and encouraged as such to utilize the facilities and opportunities that abound within the environment in which he finds himself. Teacher education and

hence pre service teacher preparation must focus on curriculum that is child-friendly because it is rooted in the fact that the child is capable of helping his own learning.

Marfo et al. (2004), discussed the African proverb “it takes a village to raise a child” about the changing nature of child rearing and early childhood education in Kenya and Africa. The outlined three messages: “the power of a communitarian ethic in building and restoring hope through shared responsibility for the care and wellbeing of other people’s children, the resilient nature of children especially in the context of supportive and caring communities, and the well-being of children as the foundation for the survival and future vitality of the community itself” (p. 33).

It really takes a whole village to raise the child. In the African traditional informal education, every child belongs to every adult who is considered a teacher of the cultural heritage of the people. Everywhere is a classroom and the curriculum includes everything that one can think about. The discipline that the child needs is the responsibility of all adults and so any adult could administer punishment on any erring child anywhere that act of indiscipline occurs. Therefore every child respects every adult and not only the biological parents.

Description of dramatic play used to promote Children’s Learning in Ghana

A great deal of children’s participation and engagement occurs in the context of work and chores (Marfo & Pence (2008)). For example, rural Ghanaian children were known to turn the daily morning chore of fetching water from the river into play by building a simple “vehicle” with two wooden wheels and a long wooden pole connected to the rod that held the wheels together. On the other end of the pole that rested on the driver’s shoulder there was also a steering device. Big nails hammered partway through the pole at points closer to the steering device were used as anchors to hold the buckets of water. The joy of driving and outracing siblings or peers with this make-believe transporter could not

escape the attention of onlookers. Thus, children construct their own play objects from whatever they can find in the environment (Marfo & Pence, 2008). Schools should therefore provide safe places where children could practice and rehearse civic responsibilities that they want to model.

During an annual schools' cultural festival held in the Central Region of Ghana, I saw three young school children in a dramatic play. In the dramatic play, the children had assumed the roles of medical personnel and were educating the audience about prevention of malaria. They did that by enacting play that emphasized cleanliness of the immediate surroundings and environment of people in the community. They spoke about the need to clean the environment, and the to destroy the areas that mosquitoes lay their eggs leading to the unfortunate incidence of malaria. The good thing about such dramatic play by children was that people were touched because of the message that the children gave to the people watching and listening. Children who observed the activity also learned from it.

In another dramatic play, I saw a young girl dramatizing how adults in her community carried infants and babies. It is important to know that in the Ghanaian context, one of the duties of siblings is to carry and care for their younger siblings as part of their responsibilities towards their communities. Therefore very early in life, parents especially mothers deliberately teach the children particularly the girls how to carry the child at the back. They start this education by getting a doll for the child and then teaching the child how the doll is placed at the back and then tied with a piece of cloth such that the doll does not drop. After sometime, the child is left on her own, to pick the doll, place it at her back and tie the cloth appropriately. The child is considered successful and ready to carry her younger sibling depending upon how well and safe she keeps the doll without making it drop, bath and breast-feed the doll.

Many of the activities that start at home as part of the traditional African education are continued when the children enter formal schools. It is the responsibility of the school to pass on the traditions of the people to its young generation.

Implications of the study for Practitioners

This study is important for teachers, policy makers, Non-Governmental Organizations who are interested in early childhood education in Ghana. This is to ensure that the appropriate methods are used during the instructional process to enable the children benefit most from the process. Understanding the knowledge that the ecology within which the child lives and grows will be very crucial to developing a curriculum and pedagogy that is context bound and therefore very appropriate for the children in that ecology. The curriculum cannot be divorced from the people who are the direct beneficiaries of the process. The pedagogy should be fashioned in a manner that allow the children to reap the most benefits from the instructional process. Serpell and Marfo (2014), advanced the perspective that pedagogy does not entail just the act of teaching but also the connections that exist among teaching, culture, organization, and mechanisms of social control. By this definition, pedagogy is context-bound and value-laden (Marfo & Bisterker, 2011). Accordingly the starting points for curriculum design and instructional practice in the African context will be knowledge and understanding about the local ecology of development (Serpell and Marfo, 2014).

Teachers would plan and use dramatic play effectively in their lesson delivery. Play naturally has the tendency to create joy and happiness. Therefore, lessons that are taught using play would take away the fear and anxiety which children may have for such lessons. It is important that the transition from home to school is managed well to help children adjust to life outside their homes. Using dramatic play in the delivery of lessons would keep children engaged to facilitate the instructional process.

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