

*Abridged from a longer essay published on University Practice Connect*

*Philosophers and psychologists define play as an activity undertaken in complete freedom, in pursuit of no other purpose than the pleasure of doing it and without being judgemental. Often, play creates a make-believe or imagined world in which normal things around us are given new meanings and uses. While psychologists have dwelt upon the role of play in the cognitive development and socialisation of the child, philosophers have recognised its importance in understanding and relating to the world around us even as adults.*

Hunter-gatherers observed during the last century across the world reinforce their egalitarianism through play and humour and cultivate this by allowing their children to play all the time without adult care, supervision, or instruction. The children did not have chores to perform and appear to have learnt mostly through play, which often included role-play of adult behaviour. 'Hunter-gatherer adults, however, do not concern themselves much with their children's education. They assume that children will learn what they need to know through their own, self-directed exploration and play. In play, hunter-gatherer children, on their own initiatives, practice the skills they will need for survival as adults. In their play, they also rehearse and build upon the knowledge, experience, and values that are central to their culture.' (Gray, 2009, p 505) Of course, children participate in adult activities, but voluntarily. Observers have specifically noted that the games of hunter-gatherer children are never competitive. 'The point of hunter-gatherer play is not to establish winners and losers but to have fun. In the process of having fun, the players develop skills requiring strength, coordination, endurance, cooperation, and wit, and they solidify their bonds of friendship.' (Ibid. p. 514)

We have the study of the *Murias* (a Bastar tribe) by Verrier Elwin (Elwin, 1947) in which children inhabit a world of their own, institutionalised as the *ghotul*, which has close interaction with the adult world but is independent of it. It is a world of fun,

frolic, song dance, games, mock and serious work. Elwin describes the singing and dancing, games and other 'recreations', all examples of children organising and managing their own institutions of education and socialisation, using play extensively in the process.

In a society of nuclear, stratified and individuated families as ours, it may be difficult to imagine *ghotuls* as the loci of children's education. Nuclear families and adult-directed nurseries, kindergartens and schools have been firmly established as the institutional basis of children's education and socialisation. Even so, play continues to have an important function in the socialisation of the child, especially with adult participation in it.

The child is not mastering the world of knowledge or reason while playing. She is merely getting immersed in the community of adults who relate to the world in a particular way. It is this immersion in the community which enables the child to eventually inherit the knowledge, symbols, tools and values developed over generations by the community. This means 'to let the child be like one of us, that is, participate in human modes of living. And it is through play that we let the child participate and experience what it is like to become the kind of human being that she can potentially be.' (An, 2018)

### **Deploying play**

Plato (428-348 BCE) was amongst the earliest thinkers to recognise the importance of play in the education of children. He advised pedagogues to eschew force in education and use play in its stead. In his *Republic*, after insisting that the training in dialectical thinking must begin in childhood, he equally strongly counselled against forcing children to learn. '... the instruction must not be given the aspect of a compulsion to learn. Because... the free man ought not to learn any study slavishly. Forced labours performed by the body don't make the body any worse, but no forced study abides in a soul.... Therefore, ...don't use force in training the children in the studies, but rather play. In that way,

you can also better discern what each is naturally directed toward.’

Play is set in contrast to three phrases - compulsion, force and slavishness. Forcing or compulsion is equated with slavery. Instead, play is recommended implying that under conditions of play, children will learn of their own free will and internalise their learning.

Plato subverts all elements of play in the service of educating children as responsible and conforming citizens. Children’s play is divested of autonomy, pleasure, purposelessness, creativity, eschewing judgements etc. and only the shell remains as if to trick the children.

School teachers and pedagogues will immediately find a resonance between Plato’s views with the current educational practices. Since children prefer playing to studying under the teacher’s direction, a teacher may structure pleasurable games which serve the pedagogic purpose of training children to conform to norms, develop skills necessary for practising adult crafts or professions. This essentially is the ‘play-way’ method advocated in popular educational wisdom.

As modernity dawned in Europe, a sharp distinction between work as productive activity and play as indulgence overtook popular imagination. This was also the era of industrialisation when work was becoming more and more alienated, and more and more children of the working class were drawn into the drudgery of the most horrible kind. This set the context for the re-discovery of play as the noblest and the most delightful activity for children. Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852) was a strong advocate of using play as the primary way of learning for very young children (of kindergarten age). To Froebel, the play of children was the ‘purest, most spiritual activity of man’ and ‘typical of human life as a whole – of hidden natural life in man and all things.’ (Beatty, 2017, p. 425). He sought to develop play as the predominant method of education and ended up developing a new orthodoxy that made children go through highly structured games under the direction of the teacher.<sup>ii</sup>

John Dewey adopted Froebel’s principles for the ‘sub-primary department’ of his laboratory school but found his actual curricular design to be at variance with the principles and ended up changing them substantially.<sup>iii</sup> Dewey became one

of the principal advocates of incorporating play in school education, especially of the very young children. He stated the importance of play rather forcefully: ‘numberless spontaneous activities of children, plays, games, mimic efforts, even the apparently meaningless motions of infants – exhibitions previously ignored as trivial, futile, or even condemned as positively evil – are capable of educational use; nay, are the foundation-stones of educational method.’<sup>iv</sup>

Dewey gave his own twist to the understanding of play as not a mere outward activity but (that which) had something to do with mental attitude as a whole. ‘It is the free play, the interplay of all child’s powers, thoughts, and physical movements in embodying, in a satisfying form, his own images and interests.’

To Dewey, there was no hard- and fast-line dividing play and work; he saw the two as part of a continuum, one flowing into the other seamlessly. The firm line drawn by others between work and play divided by the sense of purpose characterising the former and purposelessness of the latter was rejected by him. Both originated in an inner impulse rather than an external pressure or obligation. To him, play and work constituted two main aspects of the outside life which he wanted to use to end the alienation of formal education.

Dewey emphasised that the ‘start must come from the child’ – even if a teacher may give him or her some models to develop his ideas, the child, in order to become independent and develop, must return to his or her own imagery. All activities had to ‘carry the child on to a higher plane of consciousness and action, instead of merely exciting him and then leaving him just where he was.’ (Dewey, 1915) He states it more bluntly in his *Democracy and Education*: ‘... these things shall be subordinated to education - that is, to intellectual results and the forming of socialised dispositions.’

Dewey, thus, was not free of the anxiety of modernity about a childhood left to work itself out without adult supervision, protection or direction.<sup>v</sup> After all, modern civil society or Dewey’s democratic community was constituted by a citizenry that was socialised for a participatory and orderly democracy, which required voluntary consent on the part of the individual to social controls.

The anxiety about childhood, to a large extent, stems from the recognition of the failure in containing social conflicts and tensions and ensuring peace and justice in society. It is the spilling over of these conflicts into children which perhaps lies at the root of the anxiety. In the post-liberalisation era when social inequalities have increased to unprecedented levels and control over productive resources by a handful of corporate houses shatters the dream of a democratic society, the race to access the only capital resource open to the larger humanity, that of literacy and numeracy and the cultural capital of formal education speeds up.

### **Play in Indian educational practice**

By and large, the Indian schooling system bypassed the pre-school age group till very recently when the role of nursery and kindergarten began to be seen as vital in ensuring socialisation of children into 'school-readiness'. This meant disciplining children into sitting 'quietly' in a packed classroom, following the orders of the teacher and equipping them with literacy and numeracy skills prior to admission into formal schools. Toys, games, songs etc, were used to entice children into this world. As a researcher surveying 'play-way' in pre-school education dryly noted, 'preschool in India is serious business.' (Prochner, 2002, p. 446) Despite repeated well-intentioned policy pronouncements, the education component of the early childcare system run by the Women and Child Welfare departments has been non-existent or, at best, is a bad attempt at teaching reading and counting. This effectively means that play has been absent from where one could have most expected to see it – in pre-school education. Our primary and subsequent stages of education have had even less space for play. At best, there is a 'games' period in which children play rule-bound games.

But then, children are children and find spaces for play; they steal time from 'education' to play; to be themselves. The curriculum and expectations from children, till recently, allowed children some free time to play with themselves, siblings or friends and neighbours and even elder relatives. It is for this space that recent trends in education and entertainment are competing – education to prepare the future worker in the service of global capital and entertainment to corner the present consumer. Play becomes the sugar-coating to entice both the student and the consumer in the service of global capital and the nation-state.

The massive campaigns mounted since the 1990s globally sought to enlist play and fun for the cause of spreading literacy by introducing what was termed variously as 'play way' or 'joy of learning' or 'learning is fun'. Activities considered to be close to play became the standard fare of recommended classroom processes in the early literacy levels. Singing rhymes, simple games, manipulation of concrete objects, like toys (TLM) etc, were no longer confined to elite schools but could be seen practised by the contract teachers of humble government schools too. This helped change the ambience of the classrooms and attract children into them. However, this veneer was soon to wear off as it became evident that it did not really help in ensuring 'achievement' or increasing the scores of schools in standardised tests.

Now began the race for testing-driven, 'targeted' teaching of alphabets and algorithms to ensure that children managed to clear the predictable tests. In the higher grades, pressure mounted on children to increase the quantum of time spent on 'studies, tuition and homework' and prepare for the ubiquitous exams, tests and 'project work'. If all this stole away children's leisure time that could be spent on play, they were amply supplemented by the digital games, TV shows and virtual communities purveyed by the IT industry.

As is evident that both these phenomena share the feature of assuming the form of play to grab the attention of children and disciplining their minds and bodies in the name of education and dumbing down their sensitivities and link to real life around even as they participate in a burgeoning market apparently as free consumers.

### **Adult world and children's play**

Play, unlike other activities, can be self-reflective – it is play because one knows that one is playing. This helps one in disengaging from what one is doing even while doing it and reflecting on it and eventually, in building a mindset in which one does not take oneself too seriously. Adults need play as much as children, if not more, to retain their sanity. Whatever benefits it may have for younger children, pedagogic use of play is one way of reminding adults of the wonderful delights of the world of play. In fact, celebrating children, witnessing their play, participating in it and recounting it is a way of fulfilling this vital need. This gives us a clue to the use of play in school pedagogy.

The best way for a teacher to 'use' play is to make the effort and learn to enter children's play and participate in it. There is no shortcut to this. First, it requires children to feel safe with their autonomy and initiative to initiate play in the school context and the presence of the teacher. Secondly, it requires the teacher to shed her/his inhibitions to enter children's play as an equal participant without imposing a pedagogic purpose.

Christopher Joseph An (2018) argues for an approach in which the 'joint attention' of adults and children in play which enables children to acquire the complex mental equipment to make sense of the world and interact with it. It is not rational instruction but active 'shared' participation in the imagined world initiated by the child that enables the child to get her bearings as a rational and autonomous agent in the world. The agency of the child provides the setting for the adult caregiver and the child to jointly explore the world, share linguistic and rational tools, and acquire methods of endowing things with value and meaning. The child's playful exploration of the world, by seeing, hearing, grabbing and tasting things, when accompanied by an adult, results in an interactive exchange of knowledge, values, meanings and modes of using the objects around. Play postulates imagination as the key capacity required of the child. At the same time, adult participation in children's play helps children to be socialised into ways of reasoning and moral decision-making which make us rational and responsible in the exercise of our autonomy and freedom.

Only when play becomes a shared activity and has 'joint attention and participation' can it become a pedagogic tool for scaffolding children's making sense of the world around them and entering the adult community as equals.

### **Recovering time for play**

As anxiety about children not learning enough or buying enough mounts in our neo-liberal era, it seems less and less possible to create playful situations in schooling which is, in any case, too closely controlled by the state and the market to be a free space. The need, then, is to struggle for space and time free of such controls, for both adults and children to enter the world of play – free of purpose, for pleasure and with a sense of freedom.

In many ways, the struggle for an 'eight-hour day' of the workers of the last century which now appears a utopian dream is central to the project of recovering play in our lives. This is now increasingly becoming anachronistic as the boundaries between 'office time' and 'office space' and personal time and space and between market and home, both for children and adults, have been blurred in recent years. This is true for the middle classes, as well as the sea of 'self-employed' workers. What we need to do is to reflect upon ways in which our minds and bodies can be freed in these times when state and capital invade and erode every sphere of our being. Play, then, is the key to this struggle of adults for freedom too.

It may be pragmatic to find spaces and times outside those formally committed to institutions, whether the workplace or the school, on the lines suggested by Ivan Ilyich to create community learning spaces outside of schools. These spaces would lead to engagement in playful activities by different age groups besides deliberate learning activities.

We need not give up on formal spaces though. Play, like creativity, is a commodity that is required also to sustain the state and the market. We can indeed find ways of incorporating playfulness in developing the curriculum. For example, the 'what if' discussions, which seek to imagine a world in which some norm is broken – what if I were the king, or what if adding two and two makes five, and five and five make seven? The range of 'what if' situations can be broadened as a part of the formal curriculum to enable a playful exploration of alternative, imagined, illusory worlds. To what extent this exercise will be in the realm of play and when it will become an onerous task, of course, is anybody's guess.

Play is not all mental activity; it is a very sensuous and pleasurable activity involving the manipulation of physical objects as their meanings transform from the conventional ones. Play, thus, requires engagement with the physical world around, through corporeal activity. In fact, the abundance and richness of objects induce play. Perhaps our classrooms are kept so bare because the abundance of objects at hand leads children and teachers astray into the world of play. When children and even adults encounter rich and varied collections of objects with time and freedom at hand, they can easily slip into play.

If sensuousness and imagination form the two

poles of play, it is impelled by a sense of freedom and pleasure. When a child is caught daydreaming in the classroom staring out of the window, let us know that she is exercising her freedom to play. This

pursuit of pleasure with freedom will eventually help us build a new world, an illusion today that may be a reality tomorrow.

#### Endnotes

- i CN Subramaniam 'Sovereignty, Pleasure, Illusion and Play' <https://practiceconnect.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/sovereignty-pleasure-illusion-and-play-part-i/>
- ii Froebel was prompted by the make-believe games of children to insist on the use of symbolism in the activities and also strictly aver the use of real objects, insisting on the use of make-believe objects instead. Make-believe objects were supposed to trigger imagination in children.
- iii For Dewey's critique of Froebelian methods see his lecture entitled 'Froebel's Educational Principles' incorporated as Chapter V of his book, *School and Society*. Dewey rejected the externally imposed structured games, the fetishism of symbols in the activities and the huge array of subject matter to be dealt with in the preschool stage.
- iv Dewey, 'Froebel's Educational Principles'. This was one of the three key principles he extracted from Froebel's work.
- v Gijubhai Badheka, the much-acclaimed Gujarati pedagogue, in his description of children playing in his imaginary school, demonstrates the possibility of the class descending into Hobbesian 'state of nature' without the guidance of the teacher. He advocates play as an important educational method when under the guidance of a wise teacher. See Divasvapna Part 1, section VII.

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