

We often hear a mother saying how playful her child is. There is a glow on her face for this rightful joy. Teachers too when they talk about their favourite students, mention them as being 'very active'. Yet, do we, in general, perceive children's playfulness as a characteristic of active learning? The fact is that play, and various activities, are essential means of effective learning. Being active is enjoyable because the emotional stimulus is spurred by it. Every child is inherently active, playful and continuously learning unless parents, society or the school environment puts constraints on them.

When it comes to the classroom, play is designed for joyful learning. But do we find learning designs made for children based on this understanding despite the fact that concepts of active and activity-based teaching-learning have been advocated for a long time? Before going into the reasons for it not being taken up readily and widely as a classroom strategy, I am presenting two instances of teachers in two different parts of the country who are successfully adopting playful learning processes in their classrooms.

Success stories

I visited a government upper primary school in the Kannur district of Kerala when the state was in the process of adopting the principles of NCF 2005 in its schools. One lady teacher of class VI took her students to the playground during the maths period. She divided the class into two groups – one group of boys and girls to race on a 500-meter track and another group of students to mark their timings with stopwatches, pen and paper. Each child had something to do.

Once the set tasks were completed (in about 10 minutes), they returned to the classroom and sat on the floor in their groups. The teacher announced the timing of each of the eight runners (in minutes and seconds) and asked the students to first write down the data in ascending and descending orders, then find the cumulative and average timings. The teacher gave them clear instructions. The students were disciplined in how they followed instructions

diligently, clearly demonstrating that they were accustomed to such activities. All the tasks were completed in a 40-minute learning cycle.

The teacher had many 'how' questions – How was the run? How was the noting of timings? How did you understand the process of ascending, descending and average time, etc.? This led to a reflection on their feelings, experiences and learning. The students thoughtfully articulated their responses.

This Kerala school teacher mentioned three things that made this exercise successful:

- Accustoming children to a discipline of playful learning
- Teacher encouraging and facilitating the task smoothly besides giving clear instructions
- The spirit of teamwork among the students

I think it is important that the teacher led the students to interact and reflect on the learning. It made the students enjoy the thinking aspect too. It is a necessary teaching skill that worked well in this instance. Competition, which students are usually nudged into, to perform better in the traditional school system, would kill the spirit of learning in such situations. Here, the consecutive timings of the run helped students to visualise ascending and descending orders. The running of students one after the other provided them with visual pictures of an abstract concept.

In another school in the Hassan district of Karnataka, I met a teacher who was conducting a game with class III students during class hours. She would call the students one by one and blindfold them. The student had to then identify five students based on some clues, such as the sound of their voices. The children had fun and were excited. The teacher said that she would lead the children in discussing the senses of 'listening' and 'touching' after this and cover the related content from the text. She had also prepared activities around 'seeing' and 'tasting' for her students as home and project work for self-exploration.

The game in class provided children with concrete

experiences of their senses. If the teacher handholds with the *why* and *how* questions, children will start articulating their experiences without hesitation. Play and activities are a sure means of students' language development. It is important to note here that one of the most important aspects of a child's growth is the harmony between body and mind. The mind evolves through a child's bodily engagements. If children are not allowed to play, they are robbed of their natural growth and the nuances of language development. Body and feelings through the body, contribute immensely to language development.

Deterrents to designing play as learning tools

What is the reason that we do not see the playfulness of children being used as a means of designing learning on a wide scale across classes and schools?

Teacher-centric teaching

Teachers do not see the rationale behind play as a tool for classroom or textbook learning. In most cases, teachers view play activities as a means of entertainment. When it comes to learning, they see play as an unwarranted diversion. This is the result of teacher-centric teaching and learning that has existed for ages. Teachers need a conceptual understanding of playful learning to realise its impact and then, visualise its practice in their teaching.

When it comes to specific learning outcomes, even if the learning happens naturally, leading to reflections is necessary, whereby, the students achieve desired outcomes. This leading of students to reflect is evident in both the cases above. Asking questions to make children reflect on their own is a skill and it is a higher level of facilitation. It is easy to acquire once a teacher sees through it. But, in general, we do not find teachers using leading questions with their students. They are habituated to give ready answers that are lifted straight from the textbooks.

Societal outlook

School-going children are often denied the freedom to play at home. For the larger parental community and society, the school stands for textbooks and learning for reading them. They know little about the mental processes of a child's growth and how play contributes immensely to children's language and sociability.

During play, children are emotionally awake and

open to positive suggestions. Parents even dissuade school-going children from doing household chores because they relate children's future to their success in our present-day school system. This attitude curtails children's natural growth and interferes with their freedom to explore. It is here that school teachers have an opportunity for engaging in meaningful community service, that is, making the parent community and society aware of the importance of play and freedom.

Space constraints

I came across a Nali Kali teacher in Bellary (Karnataka) during our online engagements. Later, I visited her classroom. After our online discussions about play as pedagogy, she wanted to implement it in her class. However, she was hesitant about managing children and engaging them in learning through play in a class of 70 plus students! Since there was insufficient space in the classroom, moving children in any way inside was a problem. To take them outside in the open was also not a possibility as the compound was small and it would disturb the other classes. She also did not think it safe to take the big group to any open space outside in a thickly populated village surrounded by two-crop paddy fields. I too could not suggest a way out to her at that time and requested her to think of storytelling, role plays, engaging in situational conversations, etc.

In many other schools, it is not just a question of a lack of physical space. Either classrooms are unorganised or unused articles are dumped in them; where sufficient grounds exist; they are not maintained and are not clean or safe for children. The whole situation appears like a self-imposed constraint for activity-based learning. In many schools, teachers find it risky to take children outside to the playground or to open spaces outside school areas. This is also a cultural issue that most teachers and parents see only the classroom as the right place for learning.

Student diversity

Diversity among government school children in terms of attitudes, behaviours, backgrounds and experiences appears problematic for many teachers. They express how challenging it is to discipline students without force. So, engaging them in learning through play does seem like a far-fetched idea to them. But if student diversity can be seen as a resource and their natural and sundry engagements as processes of learning, things can change.

Each child would have a place of dignity and self-worth if teachers start respecting their backgrounds, challenging circumstances and capabilities and design learning based on play out of those. This is where the teacher in Kerala has started to succeed and the teacher in Hassan was about to find a breakthrough and what the teacher in Bellary is keen to do. They are all thinking of how to provide children with the necessary freedom to explore.

Conclusion

The fact is that play is a natural way of engaging children in real learning. I conclude with three important aspects of play that must be kept in mind:

- It would be best if learning is designed on children's natural home or village activities, situations and existing experiences and is worked through these for expected competencies and learning outcomes. There is almost a total lack of awareness among the larger teacher community regarding this despite suggestions in textbooks to undertake some pre-activities and build pre-knowledge connections during classroom

learning. Those teachers who do attempt this, mostly limit this to the previous class textbook knowledge (memorised and not related to their students' life experiences) and some superficial pre-activity.

- Playing needs to be seen as a means for learning that is inherent and natural for children. Play is a tool for learning and a child's natural will to learn would adapt to play with no hiccups. But care should be taken to see that the play involved is appropriate for the learning content, for the child's age and the individual child's inclinations.
- It would succeed when competition is seen by teachers as a deterrent to playful learning, teamwork, mutual learning, and natural relationships among children. Hence, situations or attitudes leading to competition need to be deftly avoided by teachers. The spirit of play should be participation, reflection and mutual learning. Relationships among children will be robust when the teacher establishes learning relationships among them.



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