

Play in Early Childhood Education Centres of India: A Review Article

MONICA JAIRAM*¹ AND GEETA CHOPRA²

¹Ph.D Scholar and ²Associate Professor

Institute of Home Economics, University of Delhi, New Delhi (India)

ABSTRACT

Play is the very characteristic of early childhood years. During early childhood years, children involve in various forms of play which is imperative for the optimal development of children. Play enhances healthy brain development; strengthen emotional, social and physical skills. It provides opportunities to explore world, make relationships, enhance creativity and develop early literacy skills. During these early childhood years in 2018, 66.7% of Indian children were enrolled in early childhood education centres. Hence, it became significant to explore the kinds of opportunities which are given to children in Indian early childhood education centres. Through the process of exclusion and inclusion criteria fifteen empirical studies on “play” amongst children in India were selected. The article concludes the status of play in twelve states of India. Within these twelve states availability of play opportunity, play materials and playing spaces of one thousand three hundred and twenty eight early childhood education centres have been stated. Children displayed various forms of play behaviours influenced by one’s age, culture and socio economics status. Centres do provide opportunities for free play, supervised play, outdoor play and play to enhance early literacy skills. Playing materials and spaces available varies from centre to centre.

Key Words : Play, Early childhood years, Early childhood education centres, Play material, Play spaces

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood years is a period from birth to eight years, it is stage with remarkable growth and development of brain. At this age, children are highly influenced by their environment and people (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], n.d.). During these years one of the specific characteristic of children is to “PLAY”.

Recalling the Indian movie, shows, literature or daily observation like “*Malgudi days*”, “*Taare zameen par*”, or “*Stanley ka dabba*” no matter in which circumstances children were portrayed, in every situation they wanted to play. At times play helped children to forget, their incompetency or overcome their needs and desires. Sometimes play helped children to be friends with their age mates across one’s socio economic status. In a

famous novel series of “*Adventures of Tom Sawyer*”, Tom was always negotiating with Aunt Polly to play. Play is natural and spontaneous to children. But the question is what exactly play is, how it develops and why it is important.

Three approaches given by Robert Fagen to define play: firstly, functional approach, defined play as activity with no benefit or goals. Play does have benefits but play is not done for benefit, it is done for enjoyment. Secondly structural approach, defines play as play behaviours and the ways in which these behaviours are sequenced. A third approach given by Krasnor and Pepler that defined play as “intrinsically motivated”, “non-literal”, has “positive effects” and is “flexible” (Smith, 2010). Surplus energy theory defined play as “aimless expenditure of exuberant energy”. Recreational theory stated “play as something to recreate”. While

recapitulation theory believed play activities satisfy the growing bodies and there is a relationship between play and growth. Instinct practice theory, favoured that there is a motivational instinct to play.

Play begins at early years of life, through repetitions and explorations (Hurlock, 2004). These accidental activities and its repetition lead to sensorimotor or practice play during infancy for example, sucking, banging or dropping repeatedly. After infancy, children involve in play with objects like fitting the Lego, matching the blocks or clay play. By the age four, symbolic or make believe play is started which means to use mental representation to represent one object to another. Likewise, Parten explained development of social play since from the birth of child up to four years that are unoccupied play; solitary play; onlookers play; parallel play, associative play and social play.

Play is spontaneous and natural to children, but evidences states that play is also a necessity for children as play serves various functions. Neural pathways of brain development are determined by the human contacts and interactions during early years. Therefore, while playing with age mate children interacts, uses materials to play, make rules, take turns, uses symbols which in turn advances vocabularies, geometric concepts, colour concept, familiarity with new objects. These concepts serve as prerequisites to develop higher concepts in later ages. When children engage in acting out roles, talking to friends and using props, they learn to delay gratification and focus on their aims. Children develop better memory, self regulation and language skills (Leong and Bodrova, 2005).

In the 21st century, children are growing in the age of urbanized and digital world. The conventional games are taken over by digital games. Children are born with I Pad, smart phones and play stations. Conventional games were discovered with help of friends and local material, whereas digital games are explored individually through hit and trial method. Some of the Indian conventional games like “*poshampa*”, “*kancha*”, “*gilli danda*” called for groups, interactions, taking turns, collectively arranging play materials, on the other hand digital games are solitary play and restricting children from natural exposure with the environment, people and situations. In this era of urbanization, parents are choosing to send their children at early childhood education centres at early ages due to mother’s employment, higher aspirations for children’s learning or to follow trend. Early childhood

education (ECE) centres provides early childhood education to children of age group 3 to 6 years. These centres are in the form of nursery, kindergartens, preparatory schools, preschools, play schools, “*anganwadi*” or “*balwadis*”. Children spend time and learn in these centres. Hence, children practice natural behaviours in forms of play in these centres only. This led to arise following research questions:-

Research Questions:

Question 1- What types of games are played during early childhood years in India?

Question 2- Does early childhood education centres of India provide play opportunities for children?

Questions 3- What type of play material is available in early childhood education centres of India?

Question 4- Is there any playing space in early childhood education centres of India?

On the basis of these research questions, specific objective were framed:

Specific objectives:

1. To investigate play during early childhood years in India.
2. To find out play in early childhood education centres of India.
3. To understand availability of play material in early childhood education centres of India.
4. To look for playing spaces in early childhood education centres of India.

METHODOLOGY

The present review article seems to be a narrative review article in its nature. Since, an attempt has been made to summarize primary/empirical and results have been presented in qualitative form. The methodology has been divided into two parts:-

Selection of empirical studies for the review:

Initially, searching of key words “play amongst children of India”, “play in India during early childhood”, “Indian children games”, “play in preschools” on online databases that are Google scholar and E-journal database of Delhi University which included J- Gate, Proquest, PsycArticle, J-Stor, ScienceDirect amongst others, was done. After not getting much data with respect to Indian context, online database “Shodhganga”, “Google scholar” and manual searching of university libraries that are

National Institute of Educational Planning and Administration, Lady Irwin College, National Council of Educational Research and Training, Jamia Millia Islamia were explored. There is a scarcity of published material on play in India during early childhood years. However, there was plenty of unpublished literature in forms of masters or Ph.D dissertations. Forty two articles related to play amongst children; play pedagogy; early childhood education centres/programmes within Indian context were collected. After skimming the selected literature, out of forty two studies fifteen empirical studies in forms of original papers, unpublished dissertations and research studies were selected.

Inclusion criteria :

Studies meeting the following criteria were selected for the review:

1. Studies related to play amongst children below eight years or which included children between age group of three to eight years.
2. Studies which were conducted in early childhood education centres and were providing some data on play.
3. Studies which were done before fifteen years from 2018 that is period from 2003 to 2018.
4. Studies which carried out in India.
5. Only empirical studies were selected whether they were published or unpublished.

Exclusion criteria:

Studies meeting following criteria were not included in the review:

1. Studies based on secondary data or review articles.
2. Studies which were conducted before 2003.
3. Studies that were not conducted in India.
4. Studies which did not included play in early childhood years or in early childhood education centres.

Process of reviewing empirical studies:

After the selection of fifteen empirical studies second skimming of studies was done. Further, only those sections of studies were read thoroughly which focused on play. On the basis of this, certain themes were decided and a final reading of studies was done. During this final reading, data catering to various themes were extracted from the original studies. The article tries to follow a

preferred format of "IMRAD" that is introduction, methodology, results and discussion/discussion (Ferrari, 2015).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Play during early childhood years in India:

Eighty seven children from the state of Mysore (Karnataka) and Lucknow (Uttar Pradesh) were observed and interviewed, which also included children of age group six, seven and eight years. Observations revealed, that seven outdoor games observed were various forms of "tag" games that are: cops and robbers, hide and seek amongst others. "Tag" game involves touching of players from another team by one person by hand or an object. Other form of outdoor games observed were tug of war, marbles, hopscotch and sipping top. The kinds of games children were involved in indoors were tabletop games like "*halla guli mae*", "*chor sipahi*" (thief and soldier), trump cards, pen picks and pen fights. "*Halla guli mae*" is a game of tray with crevices, player has to empty the crevices that belongs to them. "*Chor sipahi*" (thief and soldier) requires four player, in which players choose the slips randomly and one has to guess who has slips of thief and soldier. Trump cards are pack of cards with wrestling characters, players match the attributes of cards and the player who takes away all cards wins. Pen pick game has six to eight has lying on table; player has to pick pens without touching the other pen. Pen fight game has two pens kept at the two ends of table while both the pen has to flick each other; the pen which falls first wins the game (Kam *et al.*, 2009). Bhutia (2012) in of the observation in the state of Delhi and Himachal Pradesh (Dharamshala) saw three children of age group three (A), six (B) and eight (C) year playing "teacher student" game. Participant "B" gave writing work to participant "A" and helped "A" to write her name, since she was younger. Srivastava (2008) investigated forty children of age group four to seven years in Noida and Nithari village of National Capital Region. Children were found playing games like "*chupan chupai*" (hide and seek), "*pakdam pakadai*" (catch and run), "*murti ghoom*" (turning statue), "*baraf paani*" (ice water), "*langadi tang*" (one leg catch and run). Girls of this age group were involved in games like "teacher teacher", "mummy papa" (mother father), "doctor doctor". Participated girls considered toys as something which is used by children of younger age group and not in their age group. Some girls thought that toys were required

according to the type of game they play. Thirteen children of age group five to seven years of Kalkaji and Lodhi road of Delhi preferred games like “*gudiya gudiya*” (doll-doll), “*ghar ghar*” (house house). Children of age five and six years displayed various roles of adults like teacher, policeman and so on in a sequence of stories. Children of age seven and eight years preferred games with rules (Kapoor, 2005). Twenty eight families, fourteen from both lower and higher income groups were studied in Delhi. It was found that games of children from upper income group were volleyball, hockey, basket ball, “*ghar ghar*” (house-house), “*gudiya ke shaadi*” (doll’s marriage), “*chupan chupai*” (hide and seek), “*gitte*” (pebbles) and “*rassa*” (skipping). Games played by children of low income group were “*gulli danda*” (street game), “*kushti*” (wrestling), “*kabaddi*” (boxing), cricket and “*kanche*” (marbles). Children displayed dramatization or object play of festivals like “*diwali/dusshera*” during festivals like Diwali (Singh and Gupta, 2005).

The studies reviewed have been conducted in the five states of India that are Delhi, NCR/Noida, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh. The age group of participated children ranged from three to eight years, a stage in which children get engaged in associative play, cooperative play, game with rules and particularly in dramatic play. Participated children were involved in all three types of dramatic plays that are family roles like mother-father; character roles like doctor-doctor and functional roles like an elder child is giving work to the younger child while playing teacher-teacher. The dramatic plays were also affected by the cultural practices like children were employed enacting festivals. Secondly, children of this age were seen involving in games with the rules like pen fights, trump cards, catch and run, hide and seek amongst others. Studies highlight the influence of family’s income on the types of games children play. Children with higher income group played games with costly materials like volley ball, basket ball or hockey. Children of low income group played local or traditional games like street games which require a wooden stick and a piece of cork, which are available from waste material.

Play in early childhood education centres of India:

Kaul *et al.* (2015) conducted a study in two districts of each of three states that are Andhra Pradesh (127), Assam (117) and Rajasthan (54), to assess the quality of two hundred and ninety eight early childhood education

centres (ECE) and “*known practices*” (low budget innovate ECE practice programmes). Eighty percent of centres in Assam were not giving free play time to children and only three percent centres gave free play time from daily schedule. Thirty five percent centres of Rajasthan and forty five percent of centres in Andhra Pradesh provided free play time to children. “*Known practices*” and “*Anganwadi*” centres emphasised the importance of free play time for children, while private centres did not give much importance to free play or gave very less time. Free play with supervision was observed in the “*known practices*” centres of Rajasthan, in almost seven eight percent centres teachers were observed supervising and interacting with children during play time. “*Known practices*” centres of Andhra Pradesh had thirty two percent of the teachers supervising children’s play. “*Anganwadi*” centre had more instances of supervised play as compared to private centres. Rekha (2018) studied thirty two Montessori and thirty two non Montessori preschools of Bangalore and fifteen Montessori and sixteen non Montessori preschools of Chennai. There was no dramatization; role play and puppet play were evident in both forms of approaches. Forty observations were recorded which illustrated that in Montessori preschools twenty two times children played with material during free play. In non Montessori preschools there were no free play and manipulative materials available. Twenty one time children were involved in guided play with materials at Montessori preschools while zero times in non Montessori approach. Four types of play were observed in Montessori preschools that are:

- a) Free play – Children were engaged in threading plastic flowers, cutting paper, picking up scattered toys, making sandal wood paste, playing with “*rangoli*” mold, sweeping, moping, cutting, grating vegetables, peeling cucumbers, pounding, sieving, braiding, washing, folding, clothes, building blocks, cubs, rods and so on.
- b) Guided play – Teachers were presenting cylinder blocks, geometrical solids, India maps, pink tower, drawing insects, sand paper letters, binominal cube, stamp game, coloured cylinder, arranging colour tablets, geometrical shapes, tying laces and so on.
- c) Clay work and sand play – Children used wheat flour for kneading dough and making chapattis as part of clay work. Children were given rice,

millet etc. for pouring instead of sand.

- d) Teaching for pre-reading, writing and numbers – Children were made to do activities like big to small, tall to short, thick to thin, matching the sound to the pictures, tracing the outline of letter, matching the dots to numbers, tracing shapes, matching colours to shapes, matching sound box and so on.

Dhingra *et al.* (2005) in Jammu district observed twenty preschools both private and public. Findings revealed that sixty percent of preschools provide two hours of time slot for free play, while forty percent for one hour. Children in this time slot preferred to play outside classrooms. Play activities of these children were to be on swings, dancing/jumping, tag/running, hide and seek and riding rocking horses. When there was little space given to children for play they played sedentary games. Some children played in groups while few preferred to play alone. Children were seen switching games quickly. Within forty play sessions observed twelve forms of games were played by children. Children displayed pretend plays in which they tried to imitate teachers, animals, parents, television actors and friends. A difference in role play was observed like girls were found to be feeding, bathing, and taking dolls to school, while boys imitated police/army officer. Children were seen playing associative play for example they interacted with each other, borrow and lent toys. Constructive plays observed were playing with blocks like forming bridge, house or car. Besides them twelve percent of cooperative play, eight percent of solitary play and five percent of onlookers play was observed.

Seventeen children of age group five to seven years were observed and interviewed in state of Delhi. One child reported that schooling interrupted in children's play. Children used to get less time to play during weekdays or if they had some homework/assignments. Adults emphasised children to study first and then play. Children informed that they used to get extended play time on weekends. Holidays provided much scope for children to play. The study highlighted, how especially for elder children of seven years onwards play was seen as a separate things from studies (Kapoor, 2005).

Subhash (2005) had recorded one hundred and sixty play episodes of forty children in four regions of Kerala preschools that are urban, rural, tribal and coastal region. Findings revealed two categories of play observed in four different preschool, those are:

a) **Material play in preschools:** Rural children were involved activities like touching on the horse carriage, picking up of rubber fruits and stones and putting them into the pockets. Urban children were observed in moving puppy on the wheels, lifting the doll from its hair, thumping a bat against his palm, rotating doll's arm, arranging toys (parrot, tortoise, horse, dolls, vehicles etc) on chair, beating drums with hands/toys, listening toys sounds, walking holding toys, playing with doll (makes doll sit), playing with bat (strikes toys), moving movable toys like dragging toy rabbit, toy horse and playing with puppet toys like making puppet sit in laps. Activities amongst children of coastal region were playing with bough of coconut trees, manipulating plastic rings and playing with toys and cork of net. Tribal children played making bow and arrow with trees branches, plucking of leaves, playing with plastic wires and manipulating coconut shells and flowers.

b) **Physical play in preschools:** Physical play amongst rural children were swinging with friends on wooden horse, riding on duck cycle/ bicycle alone and with friends, throwing stones, climbing trees and walking with friends with hand in hands. Urban children were witnessed in throw ball (throw ball and hops/ run and kick ball), climbing ladder, playing at merry go round (jumps/hangs/pushes merry go round), playing on slider (climbs up and down steps/ hangs on slides) and climbing rope. Play in preschools of costal area were playing with wooden horses (driving/climbing the horse), playing with coconut bough, playing with remnants, running and chasing child, whirls around oneself and hops and playing with sand (picking and throwing sand). Physical play in preschools of tribal area were playing with see saw, hanging around the windows, playing with ball and playing on swing.

From the above studies it can be stated that total four hundred and thirty four early childhood education centres were assessed from the states of Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Jammu & Kashmir, Delhi and Kerala. The participated centres included all three types of centres that are public, private and volunteer organization. Findings revealed that almost all the participated centres provided free play

opportunity for children, except thirty two non Montessori early childhood education centres of Chennai (Tamil Nadu). “*Known practices*” (voluntary organization) of Andhra Pradesh and Rajasthan displayed free play with supervision, while Montessori centres of Bangalore (Karnataka) gave opportunity for guided play. None of the centre reported opportunities for dramatization, role play or puppet play. Rather Montessori centres had facility for water play, clay play, teaching of pre reading, writing and numbers through play. Some centre allowed physical and material play. For the older children (of age seven) play was seen a separate entity from school.

Play material in early childhood education centres of India:

Nath (2009) studied one forty “*Anganwadi*” centres of Chirang and Baksa tribal districts of Assam. Ninety percent of “*Anganwadi*” centres were equipped with play materials however they were unfurnished. Ten percent “*Anganwadi*” workers encouraged children to use natural materials like water, sand, leaves, flower, seeds etc. Some of the indoor materials used were puppets, doll house, flash cards, model of animal/fruits/vegetables, mud, block from card boards, stuffed dolls, drum from waste materials, colour number and alphabet matching cards from card boards.

Kalapriya (2007) studied three hundred preschools of Rayalaseema, Andhra Pradesh both government and private. It was found that forty percent of preschools had indoor constructive play material, fifty one percent had creative play material, twenty nine percent was collage work material, seventeen percent peg board, thirty three percent threading beads, 49.3 percent language development play materials, 30.7 percent cognitive development play material, 23.7 percent science equipment, 15.7 percent had doll corners, fifteen percent of water play material, 17.7 percent musical instruments, 10.7 percent carpentry tools, 27.3 percent soft toys, 30.3 percent audio visual equipments and 10.7 percent pet animals & aquarium were available. Montessori schools had materials mostly related to creative play, cognitive play and soft toys. 13.3 percent preschools had jungle gym, out of which none of the “*Anganwadi*” centre had these play equipment. Thirty percent preschools had slides, twenty percent had merry go round, 31.3 percent had see-saw, 31.7 percent had swings, thirty three percent had tri cycles, 17.7 percent had rocking horses, thirteen percent toy scooter, 62.9 percent small and big balls, 15.7

percent horizontal bars, twenty two percent ladder bars and 28.7 percent of sand pit were available as outdoor play materials.

Ten early childhood education centres were assessed in Bhubaneswar, Odisha. Findings stated that eighty percent of early childhood education centres provided ball to children for outdoor play while other play materials were hardly available. Three centres had flying discs and slides; two centres had cycles, sand pit, bat, ring balls; and one centre had skipping rope, rope ladder, water play, clay, see-saw and swings. Fifty percent centres had buildings blocks for children as indoor play material. One centre had sand materials, colours, water play material, toys, card boards, picture with broken pieces, seriation and matching materials. Only two centres had beads; while three centres had paper materials, clay material and puzzles as indoor play materials (Srivastava, 2008).

Three fifty early childhood education centres both government and private from the state of Assam, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha reported availability of some kind of play material for children. Private early childhood education centres (Montessori) of Andhra Pradesh had all forms of play material that are indoor play material like peg boards; outdoor play materials like horizontal bars; play materials for specific developmental domains; play material with respect to various subjects like science materials, collage materials; play material with specific classroom corner like doll’s corner. “*Anganwadi*” centres of Andhra Pradesh did have materials as in Montessori centres but were limited. “*Anganwadi*” centres of Assam focused on the use of natural play materials like leaves or mud amongst others. Odisha centres differentiated in a way that they had play materials related to cognitive development more like puzzles, seriation or matching cards. However, none of the centre reported non availability of play material.

Play spaces in early childhood education centres of India:

Four hundred preschools of Barpeta and Bongaigaon district of Assam both government and private were investigated. Findings revealed that 81.75 percent of preschools had outdoor play space while 74.25 percent preschools did not have outdoor play space for children. 50.25 percent of outdoor play spaces were not safe for children, 74.25 percent of play spaces were neither cemented nor had grass on the floor. 89.25 percent

preschools had running play space; 24.5 percent had climbing facility; 15.75 percent had cycling facility; 46 percent had water play area and 21 percent had gardening facility (Jadid, 2014).

Kaur (2014) surveyed fifty private schools providing early childhood education in the area of Patiala, Punjab. Seventy nine percent of the schools had excellent and good size outdoor play spaces but in sixteen percent this facility was absent. Forty three schools i.e. eighty six percent, schools had play spaces with a balance of light and shadow. Sixty six percent schools had grass in the playing area with seventy percent of schools having fence in playgrounds.

Verma (2013) had observed thirty two children from two urban and two rural preschools of Kashipur, a city in Uttaranchal. It was found that one of the preschool in rural area used garage as a playing area for children. Classes were given twenty minutes of play time, turn wise due to space constrain. Another rural preschool had playing ground in which children were allowed to play during recess only but was small in size. Therefore, two groups were formed younger and elder group when younger group played elder group ate the lunch and vice a versa. Preschool of urban area which was a high fee pay preschool had large playing ground and children of all ages were allowed to play together. Another preschool of urban area had two playing grounds one was for younger children and other one for elder children.

Total five hundred and fifty four early childhood education centres of state Assam, Punjab and Uttaranchal were studied. Early childhood education centres of Punjab (Patiala) had excellent, spacious and safe outdoor play space for children. The outdoor play space was well grassed and fenced. More than eighty percent of centres from Assam had outdoor play space. Some centres had separate running space, climbing space, cycling space, water play and gardening facilities for children. But fifty percent of the outdoor play spaces were reported to be unsafe without cement or grass on the ground. The rural centres from Uttaranchal had constraint of play spaces due to which children played in garage or turn wise. On the other hand, the urban centres did have play ground and one centre had separate play space according to children's age.

Conclusion:

A narrative form of review article named "Play in Early Childhood Education Centres of India: A Review

Paper" was conducted. The purpose of articles was to understand play during early childhood years and play opportunities given to children at early childhood education centres of India. It was found that very less material is available on play amongst children in India in the recent years. The available studies are mostly unpublished and in scattered form. Therefore, it became relevant to have a structured and compiled form of work on "play in early childhood education centres of India".

In the current review article fifteen empirical studies were reviewed. The article provides various forms of play during early childhood years in five states of India that are: Delhi, NCR/Noida, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh and Himachal Pradesh. Total four hundred and thirty four early childhood education centres of Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Jammu & Kashmir, Delhi and Kerala were assessed. Three fifty early childhood education centres both government and private from the state of Assam, Andhra Pradesh and Odisha reported availability of play material for children. And total five hundred and fifty four early childhood education centres of state Assam, Punjab and Uttaranchal were studied to assess the play spaces.

Hence, it can be concluded that children of India demonstrated various forms of play like associative play, cooperative play, game with rules dramatic play, outdoor play and indoor play. Children's play was affected by age, culture and socio economic status. As age decides the kind of play children involve in like solitary play or cooperative play. Culture defines the way children act while playing and socio economics status allows them to choose the type of game and material to be used. Early childhood education centres of India provide play materials like peg boards; outdoor play materials like horizontal bars; play materials for specific developmental domains; play material with respect to various subjects like science materials, collage materials; play material with specific classroom corner like doll's corner, puzzles, seriation or matching. Early childhood education centre had space constraints as some centres had separate play grounds according to the age while others did not even had one. Some centres reported to have space for running, water play, cycling or gardening.

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