

Culture and Socio-Dramatic Play Themes of Pre-school Children

¹Dr. Sulekha Ram, ² Dr. P.D. Subhash

¹ Assistant Professor, BLMCE, K.G. Marg, New Delhi

² Associate Professor PMD, NCERT, New Delhi

Email - ¹sulekha2145@gmail.com, ²subhashpd99@gmail.com

Abstract: *Child's play is influenced by the socio-cultural environment and it is the function of the specific culture to determine the developmental sequences of play. Socio-dramatic play is the most effective play mode in developing learning abilities. The research study was conducted in select cultural settings of Kerala with naturalistic observation of the free play activities of children between the age group of three to five years. The study concludes that the socio-cultural background has profound influence on the play activities of children.*

Key Words: *Culture, Socio-Dramatic Play, Play Themes, Socio-Cultural Settings.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Educationists around the world agree the importance of early childhood play and its contribution to the all-round development of the child. Children, who are frequently busy with play activities are found to reveal superior ability in applying problem solving skills as play gives opportunities to practice, assimilate and consolidate what they know. Dramatic play, the most important type of play during early childhood, appears when the child is around one and half years and attain its maximum during the age of four to five years (Scarlett, Sophie, Dorothy & Iris, 2005). It provides opportunities for children to experience the things and absorb the facts. Bergen and Coscia (2001) concludes that dramatic play engages many areas of brain because it involves emotion, cognition, language and sensory motor actions and helps in the development of dense synaptic connections. Through dramatic play children imitate real situations, take roles of adults, symbolising real objects they observe and experience in their immediate surroundings; dramatic play helps children create themes to act on it. Children engage in many kinds of play, in which socio-dramatic play is the most typical form of play during three to five years. When children engage in dramatic play in a group of two or more children it becomes socio-dramatic play. Children represent their immediate environment through their body language, natural oral language, and vivid imagination. They are more skilled to play pretend roles between these ages. Children become more capable of assigning roles to different persons and toys as real situations. (Watson & Fisher, 1977). Socio-dramatic play gives ample chances to develop different skills which regulate their life. (Frost, 1992; Landreth & Hohmeyer, 1998).

According to Vygotsky (1978) socio-dramatic play promotes development of the general pre-requisites for academic learning like speaking, reading and writing, and metalinguistic awareness. Play interventions which include scaffolding based on socio-dramatic play help to improve language, and accelerate cognitive, social and emotional development in children. The influence of culturally specific beliefs and practices on the development of a child is examined in Socio-cultural Theory or Vygotskian Theory. Vygotsky (1934) pointed out that cultural values, beliefs, customs, and social group's skills are passing to the next generation. Further, he signifies the importance of social interaction between children and elders for understanding the culture of the society and act accordingly. He stressed the role of adults and other knowledgeable persons in the society in helping children to master culturally oriented activities. He considered cognitive development as a socially mediated process because children need support from adults to handle new situations and challenges. Development of a child never occurs in vacuum. Play occurs within multiple and nested contexts (home and neighborhood) that affect whether and how children play? (Scarlet, 2005) and it is this nested contexts that forms the cultural background of a person. Hence, it is unquestionable that culture influences the play of a child. The cultures which are depending each other make the child to "fit in" while independent cultures prepare the child to "stand out". In this context (Individualist), individual achievement is what matters, so play in individualistic cultures is likely to feature competition (Rogoff, 2003). Each and every human activity is affected by the culture and the society in which they belong. Since play is a basic activity of children, it is affected by their cultural context. Children, when they play, recreate or re-imitate what they have seen around them. Thus, the themes which children enact through their play are a reproduction of their cultural environment. For instance, children from urban area play more with artificial toys and other material while children from rural and coastal area play with natural things like sand, water, stones etc. Children from tribal area usually play with bow-and-arrow and plants.

Roopnarine & Johnson (1994) opined that play differs as stated by its culture and socio-economic status. The cultural setting in which the children live determines how children play, what they play, their play mates, play context and the involvement of adults (Shirley Brice Heath (1983). This is reiterated by Bronfenbrenner (1993) by saying that the best way to understand children's development is the socio-cultural context of the family, its educational status, in

which community and society they belong. Wardk (1996) proved that children are capable of assimilate different cultures and able to function more than one cultural contexts simultaneously. The themes of the play and its complexity are depended on the culture in which children belong. (Roberts, Arth& Bush,1989). NCF (2005) also suggests that preschool infrastructure should be need supportive of children, low cost and culture specific. Vygotsky establishes that cognitive development depends on the conversation between the experts but it is different from culture to culture. Rogoff (2003) argues that that learning tasks of children are rooted in culture. Culture plays a pivotal role in the development of children and also gives unique strengths in children. Gaskins, Height &Lancy (2007) proved that the children belong to tribal and village culture get opportunity to observe adult works and helps them in the works they do. It helps in developing their competencies differ from preschoolers from western cultures. Early play begins with the characteristics of their culture and follows its value system and ethics for long until it gets modified through increasing interactions with the world (Berk, 1997). She also found that culture decides the environment where child's primary activities and interaction takes place. Quality and quantity of play depends on the cultural believes of people who associate with the child. Culture offers different kinds of socio-dramatic play themes with culture specific roles prevalent in the society. Acting out the culture specific role in socio dramatic play make children understand culture and the socio cultural roles they are expected play. It is in a way acquisition of culture. Considering the above discussion a research on the influence of socio-cultural environment on the play themes of children were conducted with the following objectives.

2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERARURE:

Borg, Farhana.(2017) examined the influence of preschool and parents on children's learning about different aspects of sustainability. These aspects included environment, social and economical factors. Fifty three children between five to six years, from six eco- certified preschools, six non- eco- certified preschools, and seven directors were interviewed. Eighty nine guardians and seventy four teachers were filled questionnaires. The study indicated that teachers and guardians practices and discussions about sustainability issues on children's learning of declarative and functional knowledge of sustainability. Also eco and non eco certified preschools did not show significance difference in the context of declarative and functional knowledge of children. (Eco-cetified schools; The schools that work exclusively with education for sustainability). LaForett and Mendez (2017) studied parents believes about young children's play and play skills at home. They conducted the study in a sample of 109 included low-income African-American and Latino parents and their children. The result showed that African- American were more supportive of the opinion that play is valuable to develop social skills and school readiness; while Latino were not supportive on this opinion. It showed that how culture will influence play believes of parents. Yahya and Wood (2017) examined play as a conceptual third space that serves as a bridge between home and school discourses based on socio-cultural theories and an interpretive framework. The study was conducted among 19 immigrant mothers and their children in Canada. The study reveals that the children and teachers utilise play as third space in various ways. They proved that there are some cultural differences experienced by children while playing. The study also illustrates ways that children use play as a bridge between home and school. The study establishes that when children find the way these two cultural sites, they accumulate funds of knowledge and life experiences, which then meet, interact and perhaps fuse together in the conceptual third space. They concluded that educators and practitioners can use 'play as third space' to support children's transition from home to school and assist children who experience discontinuities. Lin et.al. (2014) revealed that parents' perception about play has a positive impact in the development of and social competence in children. 142 Taiwanese parents from different social background were surveyed for the purpose. Majority of the parents opinioned that play contributes a lot towards children's social competency. Newton and Jenney (2011) investigated the association of development of theory of mind with social competence and social peer play with social competence in young children. The study reveals that children's overall performance on combined theory of mind tasks improved with age, but it was not associated with their parent-rated level of social competence. High frequency of cultural-interactive play was associated with social competence. The study also proves that the social competency of children and amount of solitary play has an inverse association with each other but problem behaviour is directly associated with this amount of solitary play. The study concluded by showing the importance of cultural interaction among the children for the development of social skills. Resh and Benavot (2009) established that the way the children play gives a powerful indication of the cultural context in which they live. The researcher gives a strong indication that the nature of children's play change according to the development of society that means the play culture of the children will be different from adult's childhood play. The traditional play themes like, competitions and games, make-believe, chance and luck, and Dizzy play, etc. changes when the society changes.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

- To find out dramatic and socio- dramatic play themes of children at preschool and home in different socio-cultural settings of Kerala.
- To study the influence of different socio-cultural settings on socio-dramatic play of the children in Kerala.

4. METHODOLOGY:

The study was conducted with naturalistic observation among the children within the age limit of three to five years. Children were observed unobtrusively during the play at preschool indoor, preschool outdoor, home indoor, and home outdoor, free play situations.

4.1. TOOLS USED FOR THE STUDY:

- Running records (Hand-on-camera Recordings) of play episodes and Video camera to record the play episodes by the researcher.
- Socio-Dramatic Play Inventory (Developed by Smilansky, 1968) to study the socio-dramatic play of the children.

4.2. SAMPLE:

A group of ten children (five boys & five girls) were selected from each cultural settings; Urban, Tribal, Coastal and Rural areas of Kerala. Thus the study consisted of total forty children.

4.3. PROCEDURE FOR THE COLLECTION OF DATA:

The data were collected through video recordings and running records. Care was taken to record the play behaviour without the knowledge of the children. One hundred sixty play episodes in total of forty children were recorded. Duration of each episode was ten minutes. Since it is a qualitative research depends on video recording and running records of play behaviour of children, the video recordings were thoroughly rechecked many times by the researcher to study the play themes and the influence of culture. The running records of the play activities by the teachers and researcher helped in understanding the total play behaviour of the child.

5. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS:

5.1. Socio-dramatic Play themes of Children in Kerala

Socio-Dramatic Play Themes in Urban Area

“Trapping Thieves”: “Trapping thieves” was another theme played by the children belonging to the urban area. Minimum four members are required for the play. Two of them act like a jail. One child acts as a thief and another as a policeman. The child who acts as a policeman chases the thief and if he/she succeeds in trapping the thief inside the jail she/ he will be the winner.

“Fox and Hen”: “Fox and hen” in this game some of the children form a cage of hen by standing in a circle. One child plays the role of a fox and another as a hen. Fox chases the hen to catch. The hen tries to escape from the fox by entering the fenced area. Personal and group interactions of children were spontaneous according to the play situation.

“Preparation of Food”: In this play three children prepared rice using mud. They used mud in the place of raw rice and coconut shell as utensils. First they prepared a fire place with three pieces of bricks and used small dried sticks as firewood. One of them acted like mother and two as children. They were talking like mother and children.

“Loading and Unloading of Mud”: In this case two boys were playing in the mud. They had a toy car and toy tipper. One boy acted like a tipper lorry driver and the other one as laborer to fill the mud in the tipper. The driver loaded mud and unloaded it in another place.

“Construction of Road”: Two children were trying to construct a new path for running their (toy) car. They used small sharp stick to dig and coconut shell to take out the mud. Mutual conversation between two regarding the process was also there.

“Construction of Vehicles”: Children were making different vehicles like lorry, car, and train etc. using building blocks.

“Story Telling”: During the play one child was telling story of a tiger relating with a famous Malayalam movie PuliMurukan.

“Road Accident”: Different Children were driving different types of vehicles. Those who were driving big vehicles like Lorry, Tourist Bus, Trucks were trying to hit small vehicles like Car, Jeep, Scooter etc. to create accident.

“In the Pond; On the Bank”: In the urban area, children played “in the pond and on the bank” in which a group of children stand in a circle by holding hands. The circle thus formed is considered as the pond. During the play one child gives instruction to jump front and back by imagining inside the circle as pond and outside as bank. If any child do mistake he will be out from the game and who remains till the end becomes the winner.

5.2. Socio-Dramatic Play Themes in Tribal Area:

“Washing Clothes”: Two children were doing household works. One of them brought water from well gave to other. A child acted like applying soap on the cloths and washing. After washing clothes, it was put for drying. There were dialogues between the two children like mother and daughter.

“Preparation of Mud Cake”: Three girls were preparing a cake with mud and water. They used mud as rice flour and coconut shell as vessels. The cake was prepared in the shape of a coconut shell.

“Preparation of Herbal Medicine”: One child was preparing medicine using green leaves and saying that it is a herbal medicine to heal wounds and applying it on the hand of the second child.

“Baby Caring”: One child was taking care of baby doll. She was bathing doll, doing make ups, singing songs to sleep.

“Cleaning of Meat”: One child was acting like cleaning meat. One kind of thick and big leaf was used as meat.

5.3. Socio-Dramatic Play Themes in Coastal Area:

“Kozhiyundo”: A group of children were moving in a circle. One child is roaming outside the circle and asking “*kozhiyundo*” (is there any hen inside?). The child who acts like hen tries to break the hand chain and escape. If the child could escape he/she will be a winner.

“Playing Train”: A group of children moved in a line like train. Each child acts like a bogie. All were moving by making sound of a train.

“Construction of Road”: Two children were trying to construct a new path for running their (toy) car. They used small sharp stick to dig and coconut shell to take out the mud. Mutual conversation between the two regarding the process was also there.

“Family”: Two children (one boy & one girl) acted like father (boy) and mother (girl). The father was getting ready for office and the mother was packing tiffin. Father used a tricycle as motorbike and said “*going to office*”.

“Preparation of Mud Cake”(Appam): Three girls were preparing a cake with mud and water. They used mud as rice flour and coconut shell as vessels. The cake was prepared in the shape of a coconut shell.

“Selling Fish”: Some children were playing fish marketing. They acted like fishing from sea and selling to vendors. One child was selling fish to different houses.

“Temple”: A group of children made a temple. They used a big stone as ‘murti’. One child acted as ‘poojari’ (pandit) and others as devotees. They prepared ‘payasam’(a south Indian dish) with mud(used as rice) as main ingredient and distributed as ‘prasad’.

5.4. Socio-Dramatic Play Themes in Rural Area:

“Playing Train”: A group of two or three children made train by connecting small wooden vehicles. Each child acted like a mechanic. After making the train they sat plastic animals on it and said “*going to park for playing*”.

“Preparation of Bonda (a local food)”: Children were playing in a sand pit. Everybody was making sphere using the sand and was saying they are preparing *Bonda* (which is a local food of Kerala). They were trying to prepare *Bonda* with maximum size.

“Making Paper Boats”: Two children prepared boats by using newspaper. After preparing the boat they floated it in rain water by saying that they are floating the boat in a river.

“Family”: Three children were playing house. In it they prepared rice with mud and vegetable curry with leaves. Fish curry was also a main menu in their food. Girls were preparing food and boys went outside by saying that going for some work to meet their livelihood. The girls were collecting small Jack Fruits and Jack Fruit leaves. Coconut shells were used as vessels. They made spoons with Jack Fruit leaves and coconut sticks.

6. DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:

It is evident from the study that the socio-cultural settings in which the children belong have influence on the Socio-dramatic Play of the Children. In the coastal area, the children played the socio-dramatic themes like ‘*Kozhiyundo*’ in which one child is acting like a hen, in tribal area the children played preparing herbal medicines, in the rural area the plays included caring of baby and preparing food and in the urban area it was trapping of thief. All the themes shows the influence of the socio-cultural settings in which the children belong play a crucial role in the thought process that converts into imaginative play. The study established that the immediate socio-cultural context deeply influence the play activities of children. It decides the play themes and also the role of each player in the play situation. Chowdhary and Corine (2012) also support the findings and their study revealed that the value of play as learning is determined by the socio-cultural context of the given society. It was also noticed that fantasy play themes rooted in our culture did not find a place in the preschools. If we introduce fantasy play themes rooted in culture in the play activities of children it will help in the early introduction of our culture to the tender minds. These types of play themes should be given an appropriate place in our early childhood curriculum for better understanding of each culture. Hence it is time to think of introducing socio dramatic play themes rooted in our culture for facilitating effective learning process in our children. This would contribute immensely to make the learning process child-friendly and meaningful.

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AUTHORS BIOGRAPHY:

Dr. Sulekha Ram:

Dr.Sulekha Ram is working as an Assistant Professor in Education, Bhavan's Leelavati Munshi College of Education, K.G. Marg, New Delhi. Earlier, she was Principal (D.El.Ed), Drishhti Institute, Nilothi, New Delhi, Assistant Professor (B.Ed.) VD Institute of Technology, Sulanpuri, New Delhi.Principal (ETE) VD Institute of Technology Sulanpuri, New Delhi, Lecturer in Mathematics (ETE) VD Institute of Technology Sulanpuri, New Delhi, Lecturer in Mathematics (B.Ed.) Teacher Education Centre Kannur, Kasaragod, Kerala, Lecturer in Mathematics (B.Ed.) Mar Severios Memorial Training College, Mallappally, Kerala. Published articles on different topics related to education. Also presented papers in national and international seminars on early childhood play.

Contact: Mob: 7827776816 e-mail-sulekha2145@gmail.com

Dr. P. D. Subhash:

Dr. P.D. Subhash is working as Associate Professor in Planning and Monitoring Division of National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), New Delhi. He published papers and conducted researches in the areas of early childhood education, school management and global citizenship education. He completed his Ph.D. in Education on the topic "Gender Differences in Free Play Preferences of Pre-school Children in Select Cultural Settings of Kerala" from School of Pedagogical Sciences, Mahatma Gandhi University, Kottayam, Kerala.

Contact: Mob: 8810240481 e-mail-subhashpd99@gmail.com