



# Pedagogy of indigenous play: The case of Ghana's early childhood education

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## ABSTRACT

The study was a qualitative research of a descriptive design type that aimed at eliciting perspectives of 31 early childhood educators enrolled in a post-diploma degree program in early childhood education at the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana; on indigenous-play-pedagogy in early childhood education in Ghana. Four research questions guided the study. Participants of the study provided 13 indigenous plays as well as songs and rhythms. Participants also provided descriptions of how the different plays, songs, and rhythms are practiced and stated the educational relevance of each indigenous play, songs, and rhythms. It was revealed in the study that most of these plays are not used for instruction at the early childhood level because the plays are not catered for in the Ghanaian early childhood educational curriculum. The study thus recommended that steps be taken to document and incorporate all indigenous plays that are of educational relevance to early childhood education into the Ghanaian early childhood educational curriculum, and also steps be taken to engage early childhood educators in training relative to the use of indigenous play pedagogy at the early childhood level in Ghana.

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## INTRODUCTION

Ghana is a West African country once colonized by Britain. Regarding culture, Ghana can best be described as a country of cultural heterogeneity, a country made of different tribes and ethnic groups with different historical backgrounds and socio-cultural practices. Indeed, it is worthy of mention that, notwithstanding these differences, there exist some commonalities in language and cultural practices among the Ghanaian people. Ghana's educational system especially early childhood education in recognition of the need for a linkage between that level of education (early childhood education) and the child's immediate environment as well as differences in cultural practices especially language, makes it mandatory for instruction at the early childhood educational level to be realized through a combination of the English language which is the official language, and the existing local dialect where the school is situated.

Recognition of the place of indigenous knowledge as an important aspect of Ghana's early childhood education is definitely not to be overlooked. However, as to how

play which constitutes a central component of early childhood education should evolve from the child's immediate environment within the spectrum of teaching and learning is not well addressed, and this serves as the basis for this study.

In an era where play is presented as the most potent instrument of teaching and learning at the early childhood level, insights into how play is used relative to the child's environment is critical to every successful early childhood educational program. The concept of play emanating from the child's immediate socio-cultural environment is what is described in this context as indigenous play. This study therefore capitalises on the idea that efficient instruction emanates from experiences of the child's immediate environment (Dewey, 1915). So if play is to be used successfully at the early childhood level, then it must have relevance to the child's socio-cultural environment. As a result, the call for indigenous play in Ghana's early childhood education is in the right direction.

The relevance of play in early childhood educational practices is definitely not in doubt when it comes to Ghana's early childhood educational program. Indeed, play in some quarters is equated to early childhood education and the two are deemed inseparable (Ryan and Goffin, 2008). Pedagogy of early childhood education is required to be propelled on the wheels of play. However, literature on how play being an instrument of instruction especially at the early childhood level in Ghana is non-existent. Limitation on the availability of research in the area of play-early childhood instruction is more profound when it comes to the place of indigenous play in the Ghanaian early childhood educational setup.

Historically, play is widely accepted as an important ingredient in early childhood educational curriculum and pedagogy.

Aside being described as a vehicle for learning, Wood (2004) presents play as a means through which children are able to demonstrate learning on their own. The literature on play being a tool albeit, the most important tool for learning at the early childhood level abounds. For example, pioneer early childhood educators such as Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), and Maria Montessori (1870-1952) have all acknowledged and advocated for play as being the means of early childhood pedagogy. Montessori for example, according to Lillard (2013) posits play as the child's work, and Howes and Smith (1995) allude to the fact that children construct their own knowledge through play-based learning. For Miller and Almon (2009), there is a direct relationship between academic performance and play. These studies are demonstrable attestation of the direct relationship between play and learning.

This study was informed by Vygotsky's theory that learning is not determined by the individual but shaped by social and cultural factors. At the heart of this theory is the close relationship between learning and development, and the environment. Vygotsky (1967) opines that the development of a child is dependent on the interaction between the individual maturation of the child and a system of symbolic tools and activities encountered by the child within the child's socio-cultural environment. Vygotsky's theory is hinged on the idea that learning must be socio-culturally constructed. What is learnt and how it is learnt must be culturally relevant. Positing play within this context, the study proceeded by looking at some examples of Ghanaian oriented play that exist as provided by participants of this study.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature reviewed centred on what constitutes play, some benefits associated with play-based-pedagogy, and what constitutes indigenous play.

### What is play

Play as a concept has always been difficult to define but easy to identify. In English and English (1958), play is described as an activity that is pursued voluntarily devoid of ulterior purpose and that on the whole it is done with the sole purpose of enjoyment or expectation of enjoyment. Dennis (1970) describes play as a subconscious activity that aids the individual in developing mentally and socially. It is seen as something that is separate from work. As the adage goes; all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy (Edgeworth, 1825). Play is seen as fun and something that should be enjoyed. It is actually described as the child's work by Maria Montessori (Lillard, 2013).

### Benefits of play

Literature on play presents it as an important pillar in child learning. Platz and Arellano (2011) have called for play as not just an important method in teaching at the early childhood level but the legitimate method of teaching at that level. Piaget (1962) describes play as the primary mechanism through which children encounter and explore their immediate environments. Piaget goes further to indicate, that play is a natural way by which children are motivated to learn about their environment and the world around which they live. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (2009) in its report for the year 2009 stressed that children, no matter their age, love to play and that play provides children the opportunity to develop physical competence. The association further indicate that play aids children to develop and take control of themselves. Wood (2013) presents play as a context in which children are able to demonstrate their own learning. Christie and Wardle (1992) argue that play serves as a means of helping children to develop self-confidence, and create positive dispositions to support their lifelong learning. Play is described by Fromberg and Gullo (1992) as an activity that enhances language development, social competence and creativity among children. For Frost (1992), play is the chief vehicle for the development of imagination, language and social skills among children. Indeed, the benefits of play is definitely not in doubt.

Despite the above benefits associated with play, there are concerns regarding its efficient use by teachers relative to teaching. For example, Ranz-Smith (2007) has raised concerns about teachers understanding of play as a vehicle for teaching and learning. Again, Pramling-Samuelsson and Asplund-Carlsson (2008) have argued that if play is to be productive, then it will have to teach children something. A study by Wood (2010) questioned whether teachers are able to know if learning is actually taking place through the use of play. This means, play in

itself is not enough but how educative it is, has always been the basis of play-based-pedagogy.

### Indigenous play

Literature on indigenous play practices especially at the early childhood level is very limited if not available. Commenting on indigenous games, Dewah and Van Wyk (2014) describe indigenous games as integral part of indigenous knowledge systems. Indigenous knowledge according to Pewewardy (2012) can be described as learning that involves the whole community and it is characterized with knowledge transmitted from one generation to the other through imitation and other informal means. Whap (2001) also describe indigenous knowledge as “living” knowledge. Whap argues that these forms of knowledge are mostly undocumented but exist from generation to generation and fade with time depending on the influences of other cultures. The literature reviewed was unable to identify any form of information relative to the use of indigenous-play-pedagogy at the early childhood level.

Stemming from the literature reviewed, the following themes were revealed:

- It can be established that play as a concept, is one characterized with fun and enjoyment.
- It was also noted that play is useful in child development as well as early childhood education.
- There were some concerns regarding teachers understanding of play-based-pedagogy and its efficient educative use in teaching.
- Indigenous play was described as the kind of play emanating from the society practicing it.

Based on the foregoing conclusions, this study proceeded to answer the following research questions:

- i. What is the conceptual understanding of play by Early Childhood Educators in Ghana?
- ii. What examples of indigenous play practices exist in Ghana?
- iii. To what extent are indigenous play practices in Ghana used in teaching at the early childhood level?
- iv. What strategies are needed to integrate indigenous plays in early childhood curriculum in Ghana?

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was a qualitative research where 31 early childhood educators enrolled in a post-diploma degree program in early childhood education at the University of Education, Winneba, Ghana; volunteered to participate in

a focus group discussion on indigenous-play-based-pedagogy. The University offers tertiary education programs for different categories of people. Among the different programs organized by the University is a post-diploma program in early childhood education. The criteria for participation in this study was that participants should be teaching at the early childhood level. Prior to the focus group discussion, participants were briefed on the rationale and objective of the study. For the sake of anonymity, the names and identities of participants were disguised and instead identified as numbered educators; Hence, Educator 1 – Educator 31.

Twenty-two (22) females and nine males constituted the sample. Of the ten regions of Ghana, at least there was an educator from 9 of the regions except the Western region where no participant satisfied the criteria for selection. Hence, it would be accurate to conclude that perspectives of the different regions of Ghana were adequately captured. The research design used was a descriptive type research. Data collection was through focus group discussions. There were 5 meetings for 5 weeks. Each meeting lasted for 3 h on Fridays when students did not have classes. Discussions were informal and were tape recorded. The researcher led the discussion by posing questions for participants to respond. There were 10 participants in each session except for the last session which contained 11 participants. It is important to state that the researcher doubled as a lecturer of the Post-Diploma program. After fifteen hours of focus group discussions, the tape recorded discussions was forwarded to a transcriber for transcription. To facilitate analysis of data, the transcribed discussions were grouped under the research questions that guided the study.

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In order to answer the first research question, which sought to establish the conceptual understanding of play by Early Childhood Educators in Ghana, the researcher focused the discussion on issues that prompted participants to reveal the following about their concept of play:

- It is an action that brings excitement and joy;
- It is any activity that enables children to socialize with each other;
- It is an activity that boosts children learning;
- It is used to energize learners.

For example, Educator 15 said; *I do not use play all the time. I only use it from time to time. When children are active, I do not introduce play in teaching but as soon as I see them dull, then I start using play.* Also, Educator 4 indicated that; *It is more of energizer than using it to*

*teach. Most of the time if you look at the condition of the children especially when they are dull, inactive, then you use play to energize them. We introduce play to get the attention of children in order to let them be active during lessons.* This position was held by all participants of the study.

Regarding the first research question, the answer is, it served as an activity of excitement and joy for children, one that enabled children to socialize and learn, and also a tool for energizing children when they were dull.

The second research question asked about examples of indigenous play practices as pertained in Ghana. Discussions of the audio-taped recordings revealed the following examples:

- **Charles Kele** this play according to Educator 24 is a boys' game in which "pressed" cans and sticks are used. Children, according to this Educator place a basket or bowl at a vantage place with players throwing tins into it. If one fails to throw his tin into the basket, then the person becomes a victim of the "Kele". Those who succeeded in throwing their tins into the basket will use their sticks to hit/smash the victim's tin away from falling into the basket until the victim finally succeeds in placing the tin into the basket. Whoever misses in hitting the victim's tin from entering the basket will have to take the place of the first thrower by also attempting to throw his tin into the basket. The educational relevance of this play according to Educator 24 is to create attentiveness, and accuracy among players.
- **Asoso** according to Educator 8 is a play mostly performed by females. This play as described by the Educator is played by ruling two (2) or four (4) lines which players will have to go through while counting the boxes created with the lines. Players do throw an object such as a small stone, and start hopping sequentially in the boxes. When one steps on a line then it means the person has failed and will have to leave her turn for the next person to start the hopping. This play according to Educator 8 helps in counting, helps in physical activity, helps the child to maintain balance, and it is also good for stamina.
- **Pilolo** is also a play mentioned. According to Educator 10, this play is common at the southern part of Ghana. The play according to the educator is performed using small sticks (about ten of them) and these sticks are hidden for players to find. Whoever finds these sticks is deemed the winner and gets the opportunity to hide them. The play according to Educator 10, helps children to count and also helps them to think critically.
- **Mpazie nyasa** is another play described by Educator 3. It is a play that is peculiar to the Northern region of Ghana according to the educator. This play according to Educator 3 means; "My grandmother's sweet soup". The educator described the play as; the player says "Mpazie nyasa", then another person responds "Atabla"; which is a soup made with cassava leaves. Educator 3 notes that "Atabla" is a 6 letter word. So as the player says; "Mpazie nyasa", the respondent should reply only 6 times. If the respondent "over responds", then the other players will give the respondent "knocks". Educator 3 further stresses that "sometimes the person saying "Mpazie nyasa" will tell the respondent the number of times to respond (for example; "Butata, Butata"; meaning "three, three") and if the respondent does respond more than the number indicated then it means he/she has failed". For Educator 3, this play helps learners to become attentive and also promotes tolerance among children as well as counting.
- **Dua, ooo, dua** is a play described by Educator 1. The play according to the educator is peculiar to the Ashanti people of Ghana which literally means; "Tail, ooo, tail". According to Educator 1, "this play is performed by mentioning names of animals. The idea behind this play is for respondents to identify animals with tails whose names are mentioned. If an animal without tail's name is mentioned and one responds, then the person has fouled and the rest of the players will rush to hit the person. This play according to Educator 1 helps children to know the names of animals with tails and those without tails. Simply, it helps children to identify animals and also be attentive.
- **Anhwewakyire** according to Educator 20 is a play common with the Akan speaking tribes in southern Ghana, which literally means "You do not look back". This play according to the educator is performed forming a circle of children. All players squat while a person moves round behind them while holding an item in the hand. The person holding the item goes round singing and drops the item behind any participant's back while singing and running. Whichever person according to the educator has the item behind him/her will have to take the item as quickly as possible and run with it as the first person was doing before the person who dropped it comes to meet him/her at where the person is squatting. If the person goes round to meet the person still squatting without noticing the item been placed behind him/her, then the person has failed and would receive "beatings". This play according to Educator 20 creates alertness and aids one to use his/her senses very well.
- **Baa ba** according to Educator 17 is a play common with the Wale people of the Upper West region. Educator 17 describes this play as being in a "cross" form, and that four (4) people will be at each tip of the "cross". Something spherical according to the educator will be placed in the middle of the "cross" and members will start rolling the spherical object while extending their lines to where their object will reach when rolled. All four lines will be heading to directions either clockwise or anticlockwise. When a member's line

extends beyond the player in front of him/her then it means the player with the short line is eliminated from participating in the play. This play for the educator is helpful in hand-eye coordination, and makes players vigilant since they have to move spherical objects in lines.

- **Lendi** according to Educator 30 is a play among the Frafras of the Upper East region. According to the educator “Lendi” is mainly played by girls. What players do is to go round looking for polythene bags and tie the bag edges together to make it long. The players then tie the ropes made out of the polythene bags with their legs put in the middle. A person jumps into the space left in the tied bags. If the person fails to land in the space created, then it means she has failed. For Educator 30, the educational relevance of this play is that it helps children to have control over their stamina and also build their accuracy skills.
- **Ku ya Ku ya, Ku San San** is a play practiced by the Kusasi and Dagomba people of Northern Ghana according to Educator 26. The educator indicates that children sit in a circle while stones are placed in front of each child. Children then sing whilst passing the stones to each other, and if one fails to pass the stone then he/she has fouled and will be made to move out of the circle. The play according to Educator 26 is a useful tool for attentiveness and alertness, as well as coordination, and a platform for singing.
- **Zona Zona Banjara** is the Wale of the Upper West Region’s form of “Jack where are you?” (English). According to Educator 12; with this play, a player is blindfolded and asked to catch people in a group. The blindfolded person shouts “Zona Zona Banjara” and members partaking in the play will respond; “Banjara”. The blindfolded person will need to coordinate the resonance created between the question and responses from members to know their exact position at that particular time. This play according to the educator creates activeness and attentiveness among children, and also enhances children’s listening skills.
- **Asɔ** which is basically a free fall game where people lean back and then members catch and throw them back and forth into the air is a play among the Akan speaking tribes of Ghana. “Asɔ”, according to Educator 22, is a form of exercise which creates activeness and balancing. According to the educator, it also aids in calculating heights since a person must always be mindful of the person being thrown height vis-à-vis the thrower.
- **Feila** is a play among the Kusasi, and Hausa people of Northern Ghana. This play according to Educator 1 is practiced by drawing 6 square boxes with a player kicking a stone from one box to the other with a leg while he/she hops on a single leg. If the player goes through all the boxes without missing the stone displacement, then it means that player has won. The

significance of this play according to the educator is for balancing, counting, coordination and stamina.

- **Ampe** is a popular play among children of the Central, Eastern, Ashanti, and Brong Ahafo Regions of Ghana according to Educator 18. According to the educator, this play is mostly associated with females. Educator 18 indicates that with “Ampe”, players jump and clap while trying to coordinate their legs. The person who jumps first throws a leg and expect the opposite partner to accurately guess which leg is thrown and respond appropriately. Failure to do so means a loss of point. The accompanying educational relevance of this play as indicated by the educator is that it aims at promoting counting, prediction, physical fitness and alertness.

Other examples of play provided by participants included skipping, clapping and a number of songs and rhythms such as “Gyata”; a local rhythm among the Gas of coastal Ghana which basically is a literal translation of the English rhythm; “a lion, a lion has a tail”.

Overall, the second research question succeeded in capturing a number of examples of indigenous play in Ghana and their educational relevance.

Responses from participants relative to the third research question were that most of the play activities listed were not used in teaching because of the following reasons:

- Limitation of the curriculum regarding what should be taught and how it should be taught;
- Environmental challenges such as limited class space to involve learners in play activities;
- Some schools did not allow teachers to use any local language to teach;
- Some schools were using restricted curriculum which did not make provision for indigenous play activities.
- Curriculum developers did not consider local play or languages which created a mismatch between the curriculum and local plays.

Regarding the fourth research question, there was unanimity on the part of participants in the need to incorporate indigenous play into early childhood pedagogy. A number of proposals provided by participants included a deliberate and conscious attempt on the part of early childhood educators to educate parents on the need and educational relevance of indigenous play in early childhood education. This proposal as expressed by Educator 5 is as follows:

*I think it is possible but before it will work we need to start from our various homes. We will need to educate parents on the benefits of indigenous play in early childhood education. Parents will definitely stop a child who is trying to use indigenous play to learn if that parent does not have any idea about it. So it is better to start educating*

*parents at homes about the benefits of indigenous play.*

Some educators also indicated that indigenous play should be made part of the school curriculum and incorporated into what is taught in schools. In fact, some participants bemoaned the lack of documentation of most of the indigenous plays listed in this study. For the participants, unlike most foreign plays that are documented or written with guides as to how to use them to teach, indigenous play practices are undocumented, hence, makes it difficult to use in teaching. For example, Educator 29 had this to say on this subject; *local plays are being considered as something informal and if we want the effectiveness of them then we should formalize them so that everyone can practice them freely without any restrictions.* It was also suggested that there need to be attitudinal change on the part of the various stakeholders involved in the Ghanaian early childhood educational enterprise relative to the use of indigenous play pedagogy. For some participants, there is the seeming stereotype on the part of the general public relative to anything "local". As a result, most proprietors at the early childhood educational level are adamant and reluctant to accept any form of incorporation of indigenous play practices in teaching and learning, since they are deemed as not educative. Besides, some educators themselves failed to realize how educative some of these indigenous plays are and more so how useful they can be in teaching. Hence, the need for a reorientation on the part of players of early childhood education in the importance of indigenous-play-pedagogy.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study sought to investigate early childhood educators participating in a post-diploma program in early childhood education at the University of Education, Winneba's perspective on how indigenous-play-pedagogy can be incorporated into early childhood educational practices in Ghana. As part of this investigation, participants' conceptual perspectives of what constitutes play were provided. Perspectives on what constitutes play as revealed in this study can be described as activities of excitement for learners. And these activities as indicated by participants served as energizers to prompt learners to be active during teaching and learning. It is convenient to conclude that play as described by participants' was separate from teaching and that it was used when necessary, especially when learners were dull. The challenge for some teachers to use play to teach as articulated by Ranz-Smith (2007) was evidenced in the responses by participants who partook in this study.

At the heart of this study was to determine how

indigenous play can be a tool for teaching at the early childhood level with specific reference to Ghana. A number of indigenous play in Ghana were provided by participants of this study. Indeed, this study provides a snapshot of different examples of indigenous play specific to different parts of Ghana. Most of these play (as can be realized) are characterized with physical activity, use of the learners' senses, adherence to rules, attentiveness, punishments, tolerance, responsibilities, and cooperativeness. All of these are important concepts necessary and foundational to every successful early childhood educational program. Despite these revelations, it is also clear that the integration of indigenous-play-pedagogy into early childhood education can be quiet challenging. Some factors militating against such an important venture as articulated by participants, includes challenges with the curriculum, attitudinal hiccups by parents and management, and importantly though not revealed in the findings of this study, a lack of conceptual framework on the part of early childhood educators in play-based-pedagogy.

It is hoped that this study will serve as a trailblazer in the discourse of incorporating indigenous-play-pedagogy into early childhood education in Ghana and all the different examples of play listed be woven in local languages emanating from the immediate environment of the learner. And if Vygotsky's theoretical postulation of effective and efficient teaching and learning being attained on the wheels of a connection between what is taught and the child's immediate environment, then it stands to reason that the first and most important tool of teaching at the early childhood level; play, must be indigenized. Hence, the urgent call for indigenous play pedagogy at the early childhood level in Ghana.

To attain the above articulated views, it is the recommendation of this study, thus carved out of the findings of the study that the following measures be adhered to:

1. First, the need for immediate and concrete steps to document all indigenous play in Ghana, and efforts to be made to restructure such play to suit teaching and learning. In doing this, it is important to take cognizance of the developmentally appropriateness of such practices relative to the early childhood educational sector.
2. Second, policy framers in the field of early childhood education will have to come to terms with the importance and relevance of indigenous-play-pedagogy at the early childhood level and come out with concrete and practical measures to incorporate it into that sector. This will mean the curriculum at the early childhood level will have to factor indigenous-play-pedagogy. Indeed, indigenous-play must be made part of the Ghanaian educational curriculum.
3. Third, early childhood educators will need training in

play-based-pedagogy especially its use at the early childhood level, and this can be done during early childhood teacher training.

It is worthy of mention, that this study in attempt to address how indigenous-play-pedagogy can be encouraged at Ghana's early childhood educational level did not in any way attempt to present indigenous-play as the best tool for teaching at the early childhood level relative to other examples of play. Also, the study did not attempt to do a comparative analysis of indigenous play vis-à-vis foreign or western play. Instead, informed by Vygotsky's idea that education should be hinged on connecting the environment to the school, this study concludes by emphasising that play being an important ingredient in early childhood education should always be in agreement with the total life of the child as well as his environment, and most especially must not be made to stand in isolation (Liebschner, 1993). And also even though all 31 participants contributed to the focus group discussions, salient responses by participants relative to the research questions are those provided in this study.

In future, it is the suggestion of this study, that future studies will have to do a comparison of the effectiveness of indigenous-play-pedagogy vis-à-vis western-play-pedagogy at the early childhood level in Ghana. And also, studies will have to be done in the area of how some of the above described examples of indigenous play can be used to teach at the early childhood level. This study definitely should not be viewed as a representation of the views or perspectives of all early childhood educators in Ghana regarding indigenous-play-pedagogy at the early childhood educational sector. Rather, it should be viewed as perspectives of just some selected group of early childhood educators who have provided their views on a subject; indigenous-play-pedagogy. It is hoped that this study will serve as the beginning of the conversation on how indigenous-play-pedagogy can be incorporated into early childhood educational curriculum for not only Ghana but anywhere that early childhood education is practiced.

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