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Play and flow: Children's culture and adults' role

Oyun ve akış: Çocuk kültürü ve yetişkinin rolü

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Abstract: The aim of this critical review is to connect the concepts of flow and play to understand how children's culture is affected by adults. Examining adults' views of play in different cultural contexts is crucial to understand how play is supported. Children are also faced many difficulties to find space and time to play. The concepts play and flow are discussed to point out the importance of uninterrupted play for children to develop skills in the process of construction of their culture.

Keywords: Play, flow, early childhood, culture, adults

Öz: Bu kritik yazıda, yetişkinlerin çocuk kültürüne etkilerini anlamak üzere, akış ve oyun kavramlarının bağlantılarının irdelenmesi amaçlanmaktadır. Farklı kültürel bağlamlarda yetişkinlerin çocuk oyununa bakış açısının irdelenmesi çocuk oyununun hangi noktalarda desteklendiğinin anlaşılması için önemlidir. Aynı zamanda, çocuklar oyun oynamak için zaman ve mekan bulma konularında da problemler yaşamaktadır. Oyun ve akış kavramlarının tartışılması, çocukların kendi kültürlerini oluştururken beceri geliştirmelerinde müdahale olmaksızın oynanan oyunun önemini vurgulamada önemlidir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Oyun, akış, erken çocukluk, kültür, yetişkinler

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INTRODUCTION

Meaning and value of play

Play has long been a point of human interest, from the earliest philosophers to today's researchers. On examination, theories and research about play in childhood present converging conclusions regarding the developmental benefits of children's play (Bredekamp & Copple, 2000; Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005; NAEYC, 1991). The positive effects of play on the development of basic skills, whether integrated into daily activities or as part of a teacher-guided educational program, may be summarized as follows: enhancements in collaboration, reconciliation, conflict resolution, problem-solving, establishing empathy among individuals, imagination, self-control, manifestation of higher-order thinking skills, perseverance, monitoring own and other's ideas, understanding other's ideas, less aggression, independent thinking, self-expression, decision-making, creativity, understanding and expressing feelings (Ashiabi, 2007; Broadhead, 1997; Durualp & Aral, 2010; Miller & Almon, 2009; Woolf, 2012). To what extent and under which conditions play helps children develop those skills is still the focus of literature on children's play.

It is important to study the role of adults in children's play when examining the positive effects of play on the development of children's skills. The reason being that the adult is the person who provides opportunities for children's play through the adjustment of physical and social contexts. Adults' perspectives toward play affect how play appears, how frequently it appears, and how it is directed after it appears. Hence there are three different perspectives towards adult participation in and contribution to children's play. The first perspective is that play is natural. Every individual has a tendency to play and it is a spontaneous activity. Play deprivation may potentially result in detrimental effects in a number of developmental areas (Singer, 2006; Whitebread, 2012). Play is valuable since it makes various contributions to development even if it is only used as a tool for entertainment. It is not necessary to assign other value or meaning to play. In this perspective, any type of play which is free from adult interference and involvement is valid and accepted (King, 1979). As a matter of fact, from this perspective, play is seen as such a natural phenomenon that school, as a structured context, cannot be seen as a place for play (Kuschner, 2012).

From the second perspective, however, play is seen as a tool to accomplish the educational ends set by adults. Studies focusing on the educational contributions of play which examine the role of the teacher and curriculum use this framework. The principle of this view is that one is more likely to observe learning taking place if it can be made fun and entertaining.

There are two reasons to include play in school and curriculum. Firstly, education has traditionally been more dependent upon the acquisition of academic knowledge and skills (Bassok & Rorem, 2014) and through the integration of play into school, educational programs and daily activities the aim is to lessen the students' academic burden. This perspective relates to the idea that academic knowledge and skills can be taught more easily through play. For example, Einarsdottir's (2012) study about supporting literacy skills through play and similarly Ginsburg's closely related (2006) study, about the use of play in mathematics education are among such examples that examine the positive outcomes of such practices. Obviously, play is seen as a tool to make arduous and tasking subjects and their teaching more fun, engaging, appealing, and attractive, so that learning comes alive through "playful activities" (Bulunuz, 2012). However, within mainstream education, the current structure and organization of schools, does not seem to allow a fit with play (Kushner, 2012). In order to preempt the complete removal of play from the lives of children and to take advantage of its developmental benefits, some educators find ways to insert play to children's lives. Some similar concept-related approaches which may be cited include, *Learning through play* (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006); *Play-based learning* (Pramling Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006); *Means of instruction* (Cheng, 2001); *Vehicle for learning* (Moyles, Adams, & Musgrove, 2002); *Engine of learning* (Miller & Almon, 2009). Making learning *fun* through play may be seen as a better way to *teach*. Yet children draw a strict line between play and learning or teaching (Wong, Wang, & Cheng, 2011). While children may not see or assign importance to the educational value of play, only the notion of becoming 'good at something' may seem sufficient for the child (Mouritsen, 1998). Moreover, it would be questionable to assume that the developmental benefits of play as suggested by research are still valid when play becomes a teaching tool.

Besides the studies related to the contributions of play in educational and developmental areas, the third perspective relates to the meaning and value of play with respect to sociological, cultural and societal structures (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Göncü, 1999; Rogoff, 2003; Roopnarine, 2012; Roopnarine & Johnson, 1994; Roopnarine, Johnson, & Hooper, 1994; Super & Harkness, 1997). Adult provision of opportunities for play which is seen as the transmission of culture (i.e., play as cultural means) and children's play in order to create their own culture (Corsaro, 1997; James & Prout, 1997; Jenks, 1996) are the two aspects emphasized by Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory. Within this perspective, it is proposed that

children should *learn how to play,* an approach which can be regarded as moving away from the idea of play as children's spontaneous activities.

Children's play and adults' role in cultural contexts

In the context of the cultural perspective, Gaskins, Haight, and Lancy (2007) identify three different approaches towards cultural views of play. They point out that regardless of adult participation in play, the idea of whether children's play is supported or not is a better indicator of the value of play. In "culturally curtailed play", play is not notably appreciated; some games are discredited so that children do not play these games. In "culturally accepted play", play is seen as an activity that keeps children out of the way. Play is neither constrained nor promoted. In "culturally cultivated play", play is accepted and the fact that adults play with children is recognized as important. In such cultures, it is considered important for teachers to integrate play into school and within the educational program in order to support learning. However, there are certain methodological differences to that approach. In certain cultures, play is directed by adults, but in other cultures play is used to teach/learn socially accepted behaviors or to promote independent behaviors in children.

In today's societies, a further approach emerges under the heading of *cultural denial*. According to this approach, we see not only the phenomenon of adults who are unable to participate in children's play due to the constraints of maintaining the demanding pace of their own adult existence, but also that of children's play being seen as waste of time. If the activity is not productive, it has no value in a society in which the connection between work and consumption is so encompassing (Faulkner, 2011). The mission of the school has been redefined by the overall definition of productivity in modern societies. Schools also strive to keep pace with a fast, forward-focused culture; teachers are obliged to deliver heavily academic content, even in the early grades. Play is either erased entirely or reframed in the form of educational games due to an *earlier is better* approach (Katz, 2015) which values overall academic achievement as the product of teaching and learning processes.

It is also equally important to take into account the concept of professional culture. The early childhood education framework is highly shaped and considerably affected by Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) (Bredekamp & Coople, 2000) which emphasize child-centered approaches in classrooms. An equally shared value in this perspective is that of giving children enough time and space to play. Teachers are given guidelines about how to use play-based approaches when interacting with children. However, many studies conducted by non-Western countries explored how and to what extent teachers

exposed, internalized and used such guidelines. The studies conducted in traditional cultures showed that professional/work culture in early childhood education shaped practices by giving more importance to individual activities over group activities, interaction between teacher and student over student to student interactions, and student-centered teaching/learning over group-centered teaching (Cheng, 2001; Pui-Wah & Stimpson, 2004; Wu & Rao, 2011). The place of DAP in different cultural contexts is thus under question. Its bases are criticized on the premise that the values transferred through Westernization and Modernization are seen as more dominant. However, how teachers who have been raised with non-Western values and beliefs base their classroom practices on professional culture remains open for discussion.

To sum up, culture does not only comprise the culture of the country in which people live or their ethnic background. But taken in a wider context if we accept a more encompassing description, culture may be seen as all values and behaviors that groups have described and structured by themselves. Play is both the means and end of producing and co-constructing children's culture. Mouritsen (1998) specified three different types of children's culture. One, is 'culture produced for children'. In this type of culture, media, cartoons, toys, computer games etc. are the products developed by adults who have their own agendas and perceptions of children. 'Culture with children', however, is defined as the activities that both children and adults share, for instance, dance, music and art. The third type of culture is also called 'play culture', and that includes games, tales, songs, rhymes and jingles, riddles and jokes that are produced by children while interacting with each other. Although children are the main actors producing their play culture, they are not totally in charge of the process. In the school context, it seems that teachers and children have different views of play (Glenn, Knight, Holt, & Spence, 2012; Keating, Fabian, Jordan, Mavers, & Roberts, 2000). Since teachers have the power to plan and implement policy, curriculum, daily schedule, activities, school regulations and rules, children's times and spaces etc., thinking of play differently may limit children's ability to produce play culture as they wish. Adulteration is the term used to describe situations in which adults force children to follow adult agendas in play (Chick, 2010; Faulkner, 2011; Hughes 2001, 2012).

The state of play of today's children

According to the Convention of Children's Rights, Article 31 states that children have the right to rest, leisure, play, participate in recreational activities, and create and attend cultural life and the arts. A General Comment on Article 31 has been written by the International Play

Association (IPA) work group and accepted as declared by the UN Children's Commission in 2013. This comment outlines some challenges to the recognition of children's play rights which are stated in such terms as: the lack of recognition of the importance of play, the resistance to children's use of public spaces, the balancing of risk and safety, lack of access to the natural environment, and the growing role of the electronic media. Among these items, the pressure for educational achievement may be considered one which deserves particular attention. Due to the amount of time spent in formal educational settings, children's access to play is strictly limited. The heavily academic content of curriculum, didactic teaching strategies, structured school activities, pre-planned daily schedules, and the considerable burden of homework deactivate and passivate children. The described nature of schooling might be perceived as ordinary or conventional. However, when free play is considered, it is worth asking the question whether teachers' interactions with children reflect the nature of school, or not.

Kushner (2012) proposed a view in which the two facts in children's lives, play and school, are in conflict. From his perspective, play and school cannot go hand in hand for a variety of reasons. Some of these reasons are theoretically based, some are more practically oriented. After examining major theoretical views on child development such as those of Piaget and Vygotsky, Kushner (2012) pointed out that space and time limitations in schools are the major obstacles to children's play activities. When these two realities in children's lives are considered, other potential dilemmas emerging between play and school include, teachers' views of some type of play as disruptive, annoying, and exhausting as suggested by King (1987) (as cited in Kushner, 2012). However, King also suggested that play provides opportunities for autonomy within a context of control and for the development of peer culture.

A number of studies in the area of play show the positive effects of adult involvement, guidance, assistance, and facilitation in play, although those studies are mostly based on improvement in cognitive skills such as self-regulation, exclusive functioning and academic gains in the area of literacy and math. However, when the role of play in the process of creating children's culture (Corsaro, 1997) is considered, the benefits of adult involvement become questionable. Other considerations are related to power, authority, and control and how they are used by teachers to develop equality and democracy in school settings. From a more individualistic perspective, when considering the issue of power and control, how

children's individual character is developed within the restrictive contexts designed by adults would seem to be a valuable issue for discussion (Gol-Guven, 2016).

Play and flow

Adults' involvement in children's play and its benefits are well documented. However, although adult interference and interruption of play has also been studied this topic needs further scrutiny. Flow is the concept that can be used to understand how participating adults' would stop play or change the purpose, content and methods of play. How this prevents play from serving the means that are created and developed by children is an important point to be explored in greater depth.

Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1997) developed the concept of flow that reflects the inner motivation which causes people to continue whatever they are doing at the moment. Csikszentmihalyi studies, begun in early 1960, focused on the tendencies of creative artists who tended to continue their work without even fulfilling physical needs. The interviews he carried out showed that people who are deeply engaging in activities such as art, sport, play (e.g., chess, etc.) and work have something in common. The term flow came from the interviews that people used as a metaphor of their feelings when they are engaged in activities they enjoy. After doing so many studies, Csikszentmihalyi defined the concept as:

> … flow – the state in which people are so involved in an activity that nothing else seems to matter; the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost, for the sheer sake of doing it (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 4).

Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues have studied the concept in adolescents and adults (Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009; Shernoff, Abdi, Anderson, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). The concept was later associated mostly with computerized games. The main focus of studies has been in defining the term and understanding its components. Csikszentmihalyi himself less frequently mentioned play in his writings (some of his examples are playing chess, climbing mountains, playing with babies, reading a book, or writing a poem), because his work mainly focused on leisure and work and lately school work with his colleague Shernoff (Shernoff & Csikszentmihalyi, 2009; Shernoff, Abdi, Anderson, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). However the external challenges towards staying in flow have not been studied. In addition, children's flow experiences such as play have received little attention.

Our behaviors are constrained within limitations bound by time, context and the people around us. We certainly learn this fact in the early years of our lives. It seems that children are quick learners and readers of social cues through socialization processes, that every action

creates a reaction. No matter how deeply involved they are in the activities which they enjoy spending time engaging in, there can be interruption by adults. Anyone observing babies who have started grabbing objects and materials around them would know how fussy, fretful, resistant and rebellious they become if anyone tries to get what they are holding, mouthing, looking, shaking etc. Toddlers, similarly, become very frustrated and uncooperative when they have to leave the activity or context they enjoy and people whose company they enjoy. "Time is up" and "We have to leave" might be a statement used in the context of leaving the playground or a friend. Any kindergarten teacher would know the difficulty of transitions, leaving one activity and starting a new one. Other examples that might cause interruption to an ongoing activity are teachers' warnings such as "Do not run so fast, you will fall and get hurt", "Watch out, be careful". Teachers' interruptions to teach social skills and moral values might also stop children's play. "Say thank you", "Say you are sorry", "Please remember the rules" might be some examples.

In childhood what could be the most engaging, enjoyable, and flowable[1] if not play? When the concept of flow is compared with the concept of play, one can see plenty of commonalities. The concept as it was defined by Csikszentmihalyi shows that play provides flow experiences for children.

> A sense that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand in a goal directed, rule bound action system that provides clear clues as to how one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the sense of time becomes distorted. An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult, or dangerous (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 71).

That play is less likely to be mentioned within the flow theory (or in general positive psychology) may be because of the inferior status assigned to play (Johnson, 2014). However as Peter Gray has recently pointed out, play has many features that are also used to describe the experience of flow (Gray, 2015). Gray (2015) stated that flow and play share common ground because they both require 'being in a deeply involved' state of mind. Gray (2015) pointed out that in order to be in flow, a person needs to control and direct one's actions, to focus on means more than ends, to follow mentally held rules, to separate oneself from other concerns of the surroundings.

There are three features of flow identified by Csikszentmihalyi (1990): Autonomy, competency, and intrinsic motivation. Autonomy might be the most important feature when

[1] The term in its noun, adjective and verb action forms are used so that its complexity is reflected.

children are considered because their behaviors are controlled by adults in the process of socialization. Autonomy as defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1990) is having the power of controlling the environment and feeling free from warnings or judgments. When people act autonomously, it means that they do not have to ask for permission. Autonomy becomes a necessity in order to be in flow, which requires one to be lost in the moment and live in the zone.

Competency development and the association between skill and challenge in the flow theory sheds some light on the importance of uninterrupted play for development. A skill can only be developed based on the accompanying challenge of current engagement. To describe this more simply, the challenge should not be too hard or not too easy. If it is too hard, the person feels anxiety; if it is too easy he or she feels boredom. But the experiencing of those states is important so that the person can adjust the difficulty level of the experience and his/her competencies. If not experienced, one would never decide to continue or stop the activity by himself/herself. Thus, interruptions of the current activity of an individual may result in limitations in skills development.

However, flow cannot be only experienced as an inner state of mind, it can also be created in collaboration with others, such as in sharing the moment, interacting with others in an enjoyable activity, involving oneself in an activity to reach a common interest. Thus when the issue of interruption of play is considered through the lens of developing a community culture, consequences would be pre-evaluated.

The combination of understanding children's culture together with the theory of flow might help to understand the context in which adult interference and interruption occur when children play. Common obstacles to being or staying in flow, listed as boredom, anxiety, worrisome, sadness, withdrawal, and apathy, can be counted as inner states of mind. However, the effects of context and the behaviors of other people have been slightly touched upon. The concept needs to be carried one step further to establish its connection with the social context (i.e., in the process of creating children's culture). Specifically, what it means to be in *flow* when interacting with your peers in an activity which is play. What happens if someone who is not directly associated with your culture interrupts the flow of social interactions appearing in play?

Examining the value of play in a socio-cultural context will provide an understanding of the educational values of play and how those affect teachers' behaviors and practices in the process of building classroom culture. Understanding children's play in flow and children's

culture might help teachers to define their role in play, and to see their effects on the development of play and children's development through play (Uibu & Kikas, 2014; Wu & Rao, 2011; Varol, 2012).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As Sheets-Johnstone (2003) pointed out, when children play they have the opportunity to gain 'Nonlinguistic awareness of the vulnerability of being a body'. Although no measure was used to evaluate the muscle tone, elasticity etc. of the children, it was observed that children seemed to be hesitant to take risks and accept physical/body challenge to overcome some obstacles produced by their peers and the environment. The teachers' constant warnings, such as about running slowly, not jumping off the bench, riding bikes carefully had made children control their movements all the time when they played. When flow is considered, outside interruptions might negatively influence the experience, which in turn negatively affect the development of autonomy and competency in individuals.

Sheets-Johnstone (2003) also stated that 'learning one's vulnerabilities is an adaptive for reproductive success'. Thus, we are seeing some children, in both settings, who are unable to acquire adaptive skills, either in relation to the physical environment or to the social world, in this case their peer group. Teaching manners before letting children weight out the reactions of others when they do or don't do something in a given situation might have limited their adaptive skills to the social environment. Similarly, stopping children from performing certain actions, for instance jumping, running etc. may result in them not being able to develop adaptive strategies in order to challenge potential risks.

Play provides many opportunities for children to know themselves and others. Sheets-Johnstone (2003) stated that we can come to understand our own repertoire of 'I cans' and 'I cannots' as well as that of others. Do we give enough space to children for them to try out new experiences, so that they could evaluate where they are and what they may become? It is important to know ones skills at an early age and to advance these further with the help of adults. The adults' role is to open up the possibilities, not to limit them. As Brian Sutton-Smith (2008) pointed out children need to push their own limits in order to develop: "One wins or loses but most importantly one feels differently about oneself, somehow more fulfilled, perhaps more accomplished", However, teachers' protection of children from injury, bruising, and social wounds becomes to some extent limiting, preventing children from developing.

To conclude, in line with the challenges indicated in the General Comment of Article 31, the general public, governments, and policy makers are invited to take some actions to make play available for children. Among the actions suggested in the document, schools are mentioned as playing a major role in fulfilling the obligations under article 31. Firstly, through provisions to create physical environments to promote play, by opening up the daily schedule more to other possibilities such as rest and play, through planning the curriculum so that it includes cultural and artistic activities such as music, drama, literature, poetry, drawing and painting, sports and games. Lastly, suggestions regarding educational pedagogy were included in the comment stating that active and participatory learning environments should be offered.

The status of play has been discussed from its different perspectives. Some concerns cited are related to educational policies which limit or totally inhibit play. Academic pressure to teach academic skills and content to children is also a concern, in which teachers feel the pressure of extra weight on their shoulders which further limits children's play. In relation to the point of curriculum and educational practices in schools, there are some shared concerns that the academic pressures affect children's learning, behavior and mental health. The use of technology in childhood and adolescence is another issue, on which academics in the area are focusing their attention. Too much technology use is connected to childhood obesity. Changing focuses within society and issues in the close environment, such as neighborhood safety, results in less play on streets. Urbanization might be considered another cause of the changing status of play, as it no longer contains a nature component.

In the midst of all these obstacles between children and play, another problem that needs to be considered is adult involvement in play. There are many reasons why adults place some limits on play and interrupt the flow between individuals and within the group. Adults' concerns regarding children's play are the physical harm that children could do to each other. Teachers express their fear of parents in situations when children are injured or harmed during play. Regulating emotions such as disappointment, anger, frustration that could result in aggression and violence is another responsibility assumed by adults. (Over) civilization (Leavitt & Power, 1997) and the power of moralizing (Jones & Raymonds, 1992) might be considered as limiting children's freedom to express themselves.

Adults' roles in children's lives cannot be overlooked or undervalued. From birth onwards, parents, members of the extended family, neighbors, teachers, coaches and many others have significant effects on children's development. However, children also need their own space in order to make decisions and to consider multiple perspectives while making their own

decisions, in order to build and continue interactions and relationships, discuss the issues related to their own lives with their peers, etc. It is also their right to live their time and space based on their own preferences. This view might seem difficult to put into practice, especially in school contexts which have time and space restrictions. However, to embrace the challenge of changing current practices for the benefits of children is not impossible.

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