

Developing child friendly environment in early childhood education classrooms of physical education

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Abstract

Among all levels of education, Early Childhood Education and Development is considered to be the most critical level for social (relationship to others), emotional (self-image and security), cognitive (thinking and reasoning) and physical development of children. Therefore, the physical education teachers of early years are expected and needed to play a significant role in the teaching and learning process by providing a friendly environment in their schools.

The study employed a case study approach. Information was gathered through multiple methods, which included classroom observations, field notes, document analysis, focus group and semi structured interviews. The focus group participants and the interviewees were selected from a variety of stakeholders, which included parents, students and teachers from public sector to get a comprehensive and representative analysis. Informal conversations with different stakeholders and self-reflections contributed to clarify different aspects of the issues and findings. In this study I explored teacher's role in developing child friendly environment in physical education classrooms. Thus, two female physical education classroom teachers from a public secondary school in Bokaro - Jharkhand (India) of were the primary participants of the study and they taught in early setup.

The study revealed that institutional support and monitoring teacher's personal propensity to learning for improving pupils' learning, the prior physical education learning experiences and pedagogical content knowledge play an important role in engaging teachers in developing their thinking and teaching practice. The contribution of this thesis is that institutional and socio cultural influences are local, and derive from the Indian context, so have a particular significance for designing teacher development programs.

Keywords: child friendly environment; physical education; holistic development; socio cultural influence; childhood

Introduction

The age of physical education is very critical for young children's holistic development (social, emotional, cognitive and physical). Therefore, many countries have substantial investment in the early years of children's education. Several world organisations and forums have also emphasized the provision of equal opportunities for young children for their growth and development. However, in physical education, emphasis is placed on the holistic development of children.

Nevertheless, the current emphasis of a physical education program seems to be more on the holistic development of children by using a multidisciplinary approach to meet children's needs in the areas of health, nutrition, care and education. Development and education are considered to be essential dimensions of physical education programs. Development is considered as a process of change in which children learn through interactions with adults, objects and environment. Similarly, learning is considered as a key part of the development process and the outcome of children's development. Therefore, physical education programs are important for the holistic development of children. Such programs can enhance physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development, language development and basic cognitive skills. Early years education helps children get the best possible start in life. It gives them a firm foundation for future success in school, socially and emotionally.

But unfortunately in India, not enough research work has

been done on physical education programs for children. The reason behind it is that, in general, most of the developing countries and particularly, in India people appears to be unaware about the importance of this significant concept. Even at ministry level they give more attention to primary education rather than giving importance to physical education. Realizing the role and significance of physical education, especially its impact on learning achievement, provision have been made in the National Education Policy to make physical education programs as a compulsory subject at all levels including primary schools.

This research was conducted in the specific social and cultural context of India to seek answers to the following research question:

- How do teachers play their role in developing child friendly environment in physical education classes of Bokaro – Jharkhand of India?

Thus, this research provides a unique contribution to the pool of existing literature, which deals with understanding the underlying child friendly environment and its deep rooted influences on the practices of physical education teachers.

Literature Review

Reviewing the existing literature, I found that various authors have defined child friendly environment based on their own perspectives and views. However, the embedded message in each is not very different. For instance, child friendly environment aims to develop a learning environment in which

children are motivated and able to learn. Staff members are friendly and welcoming to children and attend to all their health and safety needs (Young, 2002, p. 18).

Learning begins at birth and continues throughout our lives. A child who develops well physically, mentally, socially, emotionally and intellectually during the early years is more likely to be a happy and productive member of the society than one who does not. Children whose basic health, nutritional and psycho-social needs are being met will develop and perform better than those less fortunate.

More related to the context of this particular research Mustard (2002) posit that poor development during early childhood years affects key aspects of brain development. For example, it affects all body tissues during life including the immune system, and the brain development influences the cognition, imagination, behavior and skills. Children can get all these skills when they have a friendly environment in their school and only the teachers can create this environment if they are competent and knowledgeable. Therefore, the role of the practitioners and teachers in early childhood education is complex and teachers have to keep pace with the current knowledge and teaching strategies on an ongoing basis. The educational, social and cultural changes require teachers to equip themselves with the required skills, knowledge and teaching techniques to be more effective in their profession. Bath (1990, p. 49) ^[2] postulates that, probably nothing in the school has more impact on students in terms of skills development, self-confidence or classroom behavior than the personal and professional growth of their teachers'.

The classroom is not simply a place in which students learn academic lessons. It is a social context in which students learn social lessons such as friendship, cooperation and appropriate behaviour. All this takes place provided a teacher has the capacity to attract the students by demonstrating care and making the classroom fun for young children (Lee, 2006) ^[13]. According to Edgington (1998) ^[9] the starting point of making the classroom child friendly is to capture the interest of a child and then to sustain and extend it. This can lead to curiosity among the children for further learning.

In a child friendly environment, the most important thing for teachers is viewing children as competent and strong rather than needy and weak. In such a situation teachers avoid corporal punishment because they believe that it is very dangerous for children. Similarly, Jamal (2007) ^[11] believes that physical punishment hinders learning and causes irreparable psychological damage, including confidence and self-esteem. (Kaplan, 2006) ^[12] adds that corporal punishment has negative emotional effects. It can cause depression, anxiety, and other emotional problems. The writer further elaborates that those who were beaten in their childhood were more prone to suicide, violence against others and criminal activity. This shows that corporal punishment not only hurts a child's body but also it causes mental torture and damages the whole personality of a child. This violence can be curtailed or eliminated through laws enacted by the state, mutual cooperation between parents and teachers and proper training of teachers.

The attitudes of teachers and students are also very important in a child friendly environment. They have to be friendly towards the children. Practitioners working with young children set the scene for the emotional environment that the children play in. It is important that they are able to represent

a secure world in which children are encouraged to take risks knowing that they will be supported if necessary (Skinner, 2007).

This study strives to further investigate the nature, function and influence of child friendly environment in physical education classes.

Methodology

Research Design

The social world of human being is composed of a complex array of realities that are highly context bound and in a flux (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000, p. 181) ^[6]. Tajik (2004) says that the social world in which we live, breathe, and act is ever-changing, multidimensional, and therefore, very complex (p. 62). If realities are complex and context-bound then studying the life world of human beings would need a research approach which is scientifically rigorous and yet sensitive to these complex realities. A phenomenological approach may be employed to study a social phenomenon (Van, 1997). This means that studying a social phenomenon needs a qualitative approach that takes the researcher into the very heart of the research setting to describe, analyze and draw conclusions of the research participants and their world. Hence, a qualitative approach to this study was adopted as the most appropriate course of action. Within this particular qualitative approach, a comparative case study method (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) ^[3] was deemed to be most beneficial.

In addition, data was collected through a combination of tools, which included observations, document analysis, field notes, focus group and semi structured interviews. The focus group participants and the interviewees were selected from a variety of stakeholders, which included parents, students, teachers and head teachers from public sector to get a comprehensive and representative analysis. Informal conversations with different stakeholders and self-reflections contributed to clarify different aspects of the issues and findings. The approach of using multiple methods or data sources in research is called triangulation (Cohen, 2000) ^[6], which enables a greater understanding of complex human behaviour and provides multiple perspectives, (Denscombe, 1998) ^[8].

Research Context

This research was conducted in schools of Bokaro Steel City (Bokaro), India which are being run and managed by Steel Authority of India Limited. The rationale for selecting these schools was that these schools have shown strong interest and preference for physical education classes and have an excellent track record in the field of sports, which provides a better chance of finding rich data about child friendly physical education programs classes.

Research Methodology

Themes were focused to extract the data. The study employed the process of organizing physical education programs, general sense making, checking physical fitness and participation in physical education programs, and finally, interpreting and making meaning out of the collected data (Cresswell, 1994) ^[7]. The research participants were informed about the nature, purpose, time and methods involved in the study. Moreover, each participants were conveyed that they

had right to see the interview transcripts for any clarification. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms for each research participant, and their school related data, was used.

Discussion

As suggested by the literature, that child friendly environment is considered a significant source in children's better learning in physical education classes. This research seeks to explore this understanding. While an analysis of the data suggests the presence of a number of facilitating factors. However, only two facilitating factors i.e. personal profile and facilitating factors were considered during evaluation of results. This discussion will seek to describe how each of these facilitating factors led to the establishment of child friendly environment in physical education classrooms.

i) Ms. Deeya Singh's profile and teaching experiences

Deeya is a young lady with a D.P.Ed degree. She is a dedicated and hard-working teacher. Deeya likes sports right from the beginning and that is why she decided to work as a physical education teacher. She is twenty five years old and has been teaching in the same school for last three years.

ii) Ms. Sonia's profile and teaching experiences

Sonia is a relatively young lady aged between twenty five and thirty. She has won several accolades in the field of sports and has attended various courses about teaching young children. She also holds C.P.Ed and has been teaching for last five years. In the current school, she has been teaching for only one year and have spent the rest of her teaching career in another school.

From the whole process it appears that teachers (the research participants) were in favor of child friendly environment. They tried to understand and provide students a friendly environment. In the process they explained and defined what a child friendly environment really is? Deeya said, "It is an environment where young children come to school with joy and happiness. They live in a peaceful and comfortable place where they share their ideas and experiences with other colleagues. They also involve in various hands on activities and learn independently". Sonia too had the same perceptions about child friendly environment and said, "It is a kind of environment where young children do not feel fear and hesitate to come to school from their homes. In such an environment where they can share their feelings and experiences confidently and their overall development has taken place".

It is evident from the above definitions that a child friendly environment encourages teachers to enhance students' learning. In such an environment students can share their ideas; they can interact, ask questions, and provide support to each other. This kind of environment supports students to improve their learning. In such an environment teachers perceive children as a very important part of the environment. They encourage students to share their ideas with their colleagues and participate equally in all activities which they have.

On the basis of these observations and experiences it can be stated that both the teachers had a fairly similar conception of child friendly environment. They further stressed some other factors which facilitate child friendly environment, for instance, collaborative work helps teachers and students to

develop themselves. In collaborative work e.g. reflection, feedback, co-teaching, co-planning, and discussions are helpful for teachers' learning. Hopkins *et al* (1998) ^[10] further support collaborative work and state, "teacher development takes place most effectively in a school where there is a culture of collaboration (p. 482)".

Both of the teachers strongly felt that young children learn better when they use concrete materials in physical education classroom. They manipulate the materials, play and observe them with different angles which help them learn more and more. While talking about a child friendly environment, Deeya said, we encourage students to participate in different activities. They share their ideas, listen to each other, and work in groups. Soniya has also the same feelings and notions about her experiences and said, "we always try to provide child friendly environment for our students. For instance, we encourage them to express their ideas freely. We also provide them different materials to play and work in pairs and groups. Therefore, we have established learning areas in our classrooms. The purpose of these areas is to provide an environment where children can play and manipulate with materials; they can use these materials for their learning".

Establishing a collegial relationship between the teachers was an important part of the process, because, without a sense of collegial relationship professional learning may not occur properly. Little (1990, p. 531) ^[14], talking about the influence of collegiality on professional relations says, "various forms of teacher exchange that pass as collegiality comprise fundamentally different conceptions of teachers' professional relations. 'Weak' and 'strong' versions collegial relations plausibly produce or sustain quite different conditions of teacher performance and commitment.

Thousand, Villa & Nevin (1994, p. 40) say further, "Cooperative and collaborative learning promotes creative thinking by increasing the number of ideas, feelings of stimulating and enjoyment, and originality of expression in creative problem solving.

Both participants also agreed that good relationship and trust building between colleagues, teachers and principal are very important for better learning. Learning does not take place without them. So it is crucial to establish a healthy and warm environment where teachers can get support and encouragement, because in such an environment they can discuss with their colleagues, share their problems and try to solve each other's' problems through collaboration and cooperation. Teachers are personally involved in different activities, which help them to enhance their learning.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it can be brought out that in the process of education, early childhood education is the blossoming stage of human personality. The development fostered during this period acts as a frame and foundation on which the superstructure of an individual's personality is built (Sadu, 2004). Realizing this fact, the National Education Policy recognized physical education as crucial for ensuring overall development of students right from primary level.

Likewise, in the context of current school, the teacher community feels that child friendly environment is very important in physical education setup. It is basic foundation stage where children can develop their skills when they get a friendly environment. Both the participants of this study

strongly believed in the concept of child friendly environment in physical education classrooms. They also tried their level best to develop such an attractive environment and were a good source of documenting and recording their practical work and learning. Yet although each of the participant teachers in this study displayed a strong connection with physical education, children and teaching, the study also concludes that physical education teachers in the region may need to reflect on and understand how their classroom environments and behaviors are likely to influence students' learning. They need to reflect on what strategies and skills should they apply to develop child friendly environment in the schools.

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