

The Development of Early Childhood Education in State of Kuwait Using Play As A Medium Of Learning: A comparative study

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate the notion of play in the light of learning theories, in order to determine its importance in children's development during their childhood. International researches imply the progression of young children's learning when engaged in active play. However, little research has been conducted in Kuwaiti settings on the use of play in teaching literacy in pre-school classrooms. The study comprises the qualitative descriptive analysis, which deals with the data observed in the Kuwaiti kindergartens and English nurseries, comparing certain aspects of physical and learning provision. The value and importance of play is the motivation behind recent developments with regard to Early Years Education in the form of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) documentation (DfE, 2014). The most important point about play is that it is active in nature. According to researchers (Robson, 2011 & Wood, 2004), play is an opportunity for children to develop a sense of self as a result of solving problems within their environment, which allows them to enhance their cognitive skills in the context of specific cultural environments.

1) Play and Early Years Education

One of the characteristics of the first years of a child's life is the speed of growth in its various aspects, whether the growth of intelligence and the acquisition of language, or the growth of social skills, which is the development of the child from intense subjectivity to reciprocal relations with the surrounding individuals, and at this stage the child begins to acquire the foundations of social interaction. The first years of a child's life are among the most important stages of life and the most influential for a person's future. It is a formative stage, in which the basis for the personality of the individual is laid, and in which he acquires his various habits and behaviour patterns.

Early years education involves a specific set of institutions and irrespective of country a stage prior to formal education (primary school), which provides care, education and learning from the ages of about three to five (Pates, et al. 1983). Early childhood education often focuses on children learning through play, based on the research and philosophy of Jean Piaget. This belief is centered on the 'power of play'. It has been thought that children learn more efficiently and gain more knowledge through play-based activities such as dramatic play, art, and social games. This theory exploits children's natural curiosity and

tendencies to 'make believe' mixing in educational lessons (Wenner, 2009). Famous philosophers and educationists considered play as a very important feature, from Rousseau through Dewey, Montessori, Froebel and McMillan to Steiner (Walsh, et al., 2010). It was a basic tenet of Froebel's philosophy that learning comes through play, he argued that children educate themselves and develop their abilities through play. In Froebel's view:

'Just because he learns through play, a child learns willingly and learns much. So, play like learning and activity, has its own definite period of time and it must not be left out of the elementary curriculum'. (Cited in Lilley, 1967: 167)

On the one hand there is the Rousseau notion that play left to itself can lead to learning, and also there is the Locke's notion that children 'may be cozen'd' into learning, to use Locke's own term (Locke, 2000: 143) - to be taught 'without perceiving it to be anything but a Sport'. All the pioneers disagreed with directly inculcating knowledge in the play in the early years, but most from Rousseau assume an element of adult direction and use of equipment designed specifically for learning either letters or numbers.

For some years there has been an on-going tension between academic-education versus play-based education in pre-schools. The one idea is that the curriculum hampers the teachers' flexibility to enable a greater proportion of play-based experiences for the children and the other is that play in an 'educare' system is the vital consideration for young children (Johansson, 1993). From the latter perspective, early formal instruction puts the child at intellectual risk because it requires learning by memorization. Children may master the content to be learned, but they have very little opportunity to ask questions and find answers on their own. Al-Ghazali also pointed to the risks derived from over-emphasis on formal education:

'The child must not push too far. If you do not let your child play, but insist that he learn only from books, his spirit will die and his mental processes will slow down'. (Al-Ghazali, in Al-Da'imm, 1973: 37)

According to Maria Montessori, Play is the work of child. Play is the key to education, and it is the key to the child's life. The child lives in a frame of play and is characterized by vitality and activity and his great ability with the surrounding circumstances, which is characterized by his flexibility. 'Play is essential to development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being of children and youth' (Ginsburg, 2007: 182). Play is a vital necessity through which the body grows, develops it and exploits its kinetic energy. It is not done without mental energy and play is part of the child's life. It is a vital component in children's physical, social, emotional and intellectual development (Elkind, 2008). Children lose spontaneity and initiative in learning when their natural desire to learn is thwarted through too much teacher direction. Hedges and Cullen (2011) cite Australia's Early Years Learning Framework, as one based on the view that 'all the areas must be delivered through planned, purposeful play, with a balance of adult-led and child-initiated activities' (p.7).

In traditional English pre-schools, the rigid, subject-divided curriculum is rejected; instead, free play is regarded as the integrating mechanism that brings together everything learned (Bruce, 2011). An investigation that developed a classification of the content of play was undertaken by Sylva, et al. (1980) in an extensive study of Oxfordshire nursery schools. Sylva and the co-workers arrived at certain conclusions relating what they considered to be complex or challenging activities. They distinguished between 'high yield' and 'low yield' activities. The most challenging activities, such as puzzles and drawing, are high yield

activities compared to the medium yield activities of pretending, such as play with small scale toys, manipulating sand or dough.

Sylva et al. (1980: 48) argued that:

'There are two levels of play. One merely keeps children occupied the other contributes to their educational development. Teachers in nursery schools are concerned with play at the latter level'.

They identified four categories of play: 1) simple play (undertaken in a passive, rather than active manner); 2) complex play (constructive and active play); 3) Practice play (climbing, running); and 4) symbolic make believe (imaginary play providing scope for the development of social skills).

2) Relating theories and practices in early years education

At the time of early pioneers (e.g; Froebel and Montessori), the value of social groups to which parents belonged were the source of constraint on what could be counted as appropriate provision. Currently Ministries of Education or similar institutions regulate and provide constraints on what happens within early years provision.

2.1) Play as serious activity

Early childhood researchers identify children's play as the primary context for studying how pre-school children acquire essential knowledge and interactive skills with their peers (NAEYC, 1991). Froebel (1896) argued that play was a serious and deeply significant activity for young children, 'At this age play is never trivial, it is serious and deeply significant. The focus of play at this age is the core of the whole future, since in them the entire person is developed and revealed in the most sensitive qualities of his mind' (P: 30). He further stated that, 'Play is the purest, most spiritual activity of man at this stage and at the same time typical of human life as a whole, of the inner hidden natural life in man and all things. It gives therefore, joy, freedom, contentment, inner and outer rest, peace with the world. It holds the sources of all that is good'. (P: 55)

Montessori (1965) like Froebel, believe that children learn from their own activities. She argued that children learn and master skills through play and was concerned to plan an environment suitable for young children, which led to respect for the young as individuals. Play is child's work especially when it enhances the various facets of his development and promotes a healthy growth in his mental ability. Play occupies a major part of children's lives and is essential to the whole development in which children learn concepts, develop physical skills, socialise and master life situations (Morrison, 1988). Morrison fortified early childhood programmes, which provide opportunities for play, because these will increase and enhance the limits of the child's learning. He further mentioned that, 'Play is a child's work, and the home and pre-school are the 'work places' where learning occurs through play' (p: 223).

Play is an important childhood activity, which may help children master their development needs so the programme should be based on play. Sylva and Lunt (2003), pointed out that play is the work of the pre-school child and one of the activities most significant to his overall development. They stated that, "Play is more than a child's work, it is a child's need' (p: 171). Curtis (1992) pointed out that modern primary schools have inherited from

the Froebelian tradition the idea of treating the school day as a complete unit in which activity continues for lengths of time to enable children to pursue their own interests.

2.2) Play and a holistic approach

Wherever there is acceptance by authorities regulating and controlling early years education that a holistic approach is important, there is acceptance that care of the physical, intellectual and social aspects of development requires development-appropriate activities. Learning should match children's abilities and develop the child as a whole.

Practice in early years education in Britain has followed the main Western tradition with a holistic emphasis. There were five aims for nursery education in Britain listed by Taylor et al (1972); 1) the intellectual development of the child; 2) the socio-emotional development of the child; 3) the aesthetic development of the child; 4) the physical development of the child; and 5) the creation of an effective transition from home to school.

A Coventry Curriculum Development Paper (1981) described how play could be a means of developing the child as a whole and a way of learning. 'Through play a child discover many things for himself. Play provides opportunities for practising skills and for developing ideas' (p. 8). Havens (1982) stated that play is not a hollow activity carried out by children in their spare time; it is the core of a pre-school child's behaviour.

Nursery schools in Britain have given the prime function of play full recognition, have provided an attractive variety of materials and created many play activities. A further way to encourage play is to provide social opportunities for children to play together and share activities, which result in appropriate communication. Exploratory, imaginative and creative play stimulates speech as it involves transference of messages.

3) Development of the Individual Child/Curriculum

Research (McCain, et al., 2007; Shonkoff & Meisels, 2000) has demonstrated the importance of early years experience as it impacts individual's later success in the areas of social, cognitive, emotional, and physical development. Individual development occurs within cultural, historical and religious activities as a result of cooperation as individuals try to solve conflicts between perspectives (Fleer & Robbins, 2002). 'In terms of curriculum organization, most countries used areas of learning, a few used activities, and no country used discipline or subject' (Walsh, et al., 2010: 5). The most commonly identified areas are social and emotional; cultural, aesthetic and creative; physical; environmental; language and literacy; and numeracy' (Bertram & Pascal, 2002). Walsh, et al., (2010) further mentioned that many countries (including Kuwait) emphasized cultural traditions to enhance social connections through the curriculum, only three countries (England, USA, Tasmania) emphasized early literacy and numeracy within the early years curriculum. In addition, recent conceptual frameworks of child development and early childhood education have suggested that social class, gender, race, and culture are much-ignored factors in the thinking and debate about child development and learning (French, 2007; Spodek, 1991).

Internationally there have been several well-known curricula for pre-school children. Two which are of particular importance are: (1) the American High/Scope Curriculum, that emphasized active learning, and a 'plan-do-review' approach, which encouraged children to take responsibility for their learning within a planned and richly, resourced environment (Abbott-Shim et al., 2000); and (2) Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) (based on Piagetian theory), founded a belief that children learn best by participating in social

activities, based on personal needs and interests, to interact within their environment. The majority of early childhood education programmes are based on *five* main areas of learning for young children: social; emotional; cognitive; language; and physical, therefore, the development of young children is an integrated process of these five areas through play and active methods. Therefore, the ministries of education of many countries have chosen to issue guidelines about EC programming, addressed as much to parents and local administrators as to the educators (OECD, 2006).

3.1) Social Development

Social development is a process in which children develop their relationship with their family, culture, people around them, and the environment. Social development teaches children to understand and manage people, and act wisely in social contexts. Learning to live socially with other people is not easily or quickly achieved; it is a slow process that can take much attention and care to develop. Learning to respect others, to participate and take turns, to share, to face problems and discuss them with others, are not easy processes and take time. Children need to be able to play, experience, and get along with others to develop socially. Life is governed by social rules and that children must learn and establish social values and responsibilities through the learning process (Dreeben, 1968). The social domain improves the ability of children to observe their surroundings and tries to work out what is good or bad or beneficial. A high quality ECE programme can help children to communicate and shape positive relationships with other children and elders. Though this processes the children understand and adopt the ethical issues in their everyday life (MoE, 2007).

Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1985) believed that interaction between the child and others is vital to the development of mutual understanding and knowledge of social skills in life. Each function in a child's social development emerges twice: first on the social level - between people, and then on the individual level - inside the child (Vygotsky, 1986; Wertsch & Rogoff, 1984). Wertsch (1985) explains that Vygotsky was convinced of the importance of social experience in early development, especially in relation to mental development. He stressed the importance of social and cultural influences on human development. These social-emotional transitions allowing children to become 'masters of their own behavior' instead of being 'slaves to their environment' (Bodrova & Leong, 2015: 374). Bruner (1996) emphasized that social experiences play a major part in cognitive development and was convinced of the importance of acknowledging the role of culture and social interaction. Little (1995: 45) argued that:

...children develop socially, emotionally, and intellectually through interaction with others. Teachers need to recognize the importance of developing positive peer group relationships and provide opportunities for co-operative learning situations that engage children in conversation, challenge their thinking and extend their ideas.

The process of social life begins early, but its scope increases, as the child gets older. Early childhood education provides the opportunity for children to develop their social competence when they are put in a position where they must learn to socialize and learn various types of manners. Early learning programmes should consider the importance of both the personal and social aspects of the child because the sense of self and relationship to others is emerging at this stage. It is necessary to provide a social environment that stimulates children with a variety of objects with which to play and

interact with their peers and an understanding adult who realizes the importance of social interaction during this stage of development.

3.2) Cognitive Development

Cognitive development refers to the development of mental processes and capabilities. This is the development of learning, thinking and organizing systems of the mind. It develops the processes of imagining, exploring, thinking, language, reasoning, problem solving, developing and rejecting ideas and concepts. Maturation and interaction with a stimulating environment are important in the development of thinking. Gottfried (1984) stated that in the first five years of life, intellectual competence is related to the environment, and that the greater the variety of stimulating experiences, the greater the intellectual development. Hunt (1961) explained that stimulation; develop the physical and cognitive skills of children. Clarke (1968) argued that the environments, which provide poor stimulation result in poor intellectual development. According to Appleton et al (1975) freedom to explore allows children to process stimulation at their own pace. Sound cognitive development enhances critical thinking and creativity in children. Every early childhood education programme, to some extent, provides children with learning opportunities to explore, experiment, and think as they develop the ability to create different ideas and solutions (NAEYC, 1987). In Montessori's (1965) philosophy in relation to the early years of life, emphasis is placed on the practice of the five senses. Whitbread (1972) explaining this view; 'Montessori found development of the five senses, particularly sight and touch, was fundamental to intellectual growth and understanding concepts of abstract qualities' (p. 57).

3.3) Emotional Development

Emotional development increases children's capacity to experience and manage and express their positive and negative emotions. The development of self-esteem, sense of responsibility, taking care of other's emotions and feelings, and thinking positively are the most important areas of this domain for creating a positive self-concept in kindergarten children (MoE, 2007; Goleman, 1998). During the last decades, theories of emotional intelligence (EI) have become very popular and the advocates of these theories (for example, Bar-On, 2000; Goleman, 1998; Mayer & Salovey, 1997) stated that EI is a positive quality related to intrapersonal and interpersonal functioning, physical and mental health. A central impression of emotional intelligence theory is that individuals differ in their abilities to perceive, understand and use emotional information, and these abilities contribute significantly to various forms of life success.

3.4) Language Development

Language development improves the understanding of words, symbols, sentences, and information around them. Human beings have the ability to learn language from very early age but the appropriate learning environment can improve to read and write the Alphabets and make small sentences in their own everyday spoken language (MoE, 2007; Vygotsky, 1978).

The language and conversation provide a strong literacy base for a child entering kindergarten. The pre-school education curriculum concerned about increasing the children's vocabulary, acquainting them with a way of thinking and expressing, preparing them for reading and writing, correcting mispronunciations which arise for some of them,

training them on listening and implanting the love of reading and preserving books.

3.5) Physical Development

From birth to the age of five years is a period when a child is physically active and energetic. Children pass through obvious changes in their physical abilities and in the level of skill they exhibit in different tasks. Physical experience is fundamental to a child's motor development at this important stage therefore children need opportunities to practice motor skills and co-ordination to test themselves physically. In the classroom fine motor activities can develop the capacity of using small muscles for writing, drawing and doing small tasks (Gardner, 1993). According to Little (1995), 'Rapid physical growth generally slows down after the age of five, children in the early years need physical activity to help them comprehend new concepts' (p. 40).

The attainment of motor skills is an important part of early development. The physical development of the child is brought to its fullest potential using a comprehensive approach involving large and fine muscle skills and differing sensory abilities. Such motor development needs activity and practice to develop to a mature level. Developing the use of large and fine muscles allows children to gain control of the finer muscle group. Furnishing a large assortment of equipment and providing many opportunities for all kinds of physical activity encourages children to participate freely in this pleasure and leads to faster muscle development. Outdoor playground activities, such as, running, playing, climbing and jumping can develop their large muscles. This in turn can develop the confidence of young children. Dickerson (1987) pointed out that lack of physical activity contributes to low levels of fitness. Physical activities need to be promoted in educational settings.

4) Research Methodology

The most appropriate approach that serves the needs of this research study was applied research, which is able to test the theoretical concepts of the teaching-learning process. The theoretical concepts of the overall development of young children and the view of play as a means of developing the three domains-cognitive, social and physical- were tested as a holistic approach to the teaching-learning process. Unstructured observation and unstructured interviews were applied to investigate this. The research was carried out in Kuwait and England. The author gathered information about the provision for play, the learning environment and children's behaviour during play by systematically observing the classes and interviewing the early years teachers to obtain information about the teaching-learning process and the provision for play. The researcher undertook the observation using descriptive measurements and recorded the information by means of a continuous record of all data of interest.

In this study, no more than two pre-school classes located in two individual classrooms were used as samples during the observation undertaken in England and Kuwait in 2017.

5) British Nurseries

Providing children with good quality education and care in their earliest years can help them succeed at school and later in life. Early Years teachers are specialists in early childhood development, trained to deliver the early years foundation stage for children from birth to five (NCTL, 2015).

In England, early years education is provided in nurseries and pre-school playgroups. The target school, with sixteen classes and teachers, a deputy head and a head teacher is typical of many British primary schools. The primary school curriculum is based largely on the National Curriculum, though this is not the case for the nursery or reception classes. The curriculum of nursery classes is based upon areas of learning and experience and desirable outcomes- language, literacy and communications skills, personal and social development, mathematics, a knowledge and understanding of the world and physical and creative development. Permission was obtained from the Head Teacher to observe the nursery class and an arrangement was therefore, made with the nursery teacher for this to be carried out at an appropriate and convenient time.

Historically, in England, there was little government intervention in pre-school provision, in curriculum, and in curriculum implementation. Recently in order to raise standards and improve the quality of early childhood institutions, government intervention in early years education has increased significantly. In 1996, the government introduced a framework for an early years curriculum: *Desirable Outcomes for Children's Learning on Entering Compulsory Education* (SCAA: 1996), which were revised as Early Learning Goals (QCA, 2000). This framework is very goal oriented and specifies a large number of learning goals to be achieved by children (Young-Ihm, 2002).

In England, early childhood education and childcare encompasses a wide range of services. Formal provision includes different forms of nurseries (day nurseries, nursery schools and nursery classes), playgroups, children or family centres and child-minders (DfE, 2013) and also many children are looked after by grandparents, friends, neighbors, nannies or other home carers (Naumann, et al., 2013). 'Early childhood education has changed, in just over two decades, from a grounded and evolving response to meeting the learning needs of young children into a hastily constructed response to modern policy' (Nutbrown, 2002: 5). In recent years early childhood education and care in the UK has been subject to significant reform and the way in which it is governed and regulated has been significantly restructured (Wood, 2008).

6) Kuwaiti Kindergartens

Kindergartens in the State of Kuwait have received state sponsorship and attention, to the extent that it can consider the State of Kuwait to be one of the few Arab countries that does so much in order to raise the level of raising a pre-school child. This interest was represented in providing all the necessary capabilities to achieve the goals of kindergarten, working to develop them in line with contemporary educational trends, and for children, and working to develop them in line with contemporary educational trends.

The emergence of kindergartens in the State of Kuwait dates back to the academic year 1955/54 following the arrival of two educational experts, Ismail Al-Qabbani and Matta Akrawi in 1954, informing them of educational conditions and its various stages, and the recommendation of the necessity of establishing a kindergarten in Kuwait, where children enter it at the age of four and stay there for two years in order to learn healthy habits, or in the best case working to prepare the child for the next educational stage.

In the State of Kuwait the kindergarten stage is considered a qualifying stage for the primary stage. The current developed curriculum contains: Arabic language; the concepts of mathematics; and English language. The developed method curriculum is a

development of the integrated experience curriculum, which is a programme that makes the child discover and conclude in order to innovate without restriction. In the past, the teacher used to give orders in the classroom and the child executes, but now the problem will be put in front of the child to find solutions to it by inventing certain things to solve it to be so An essential participant in the educational process.

7) The Provision within the two schools

During the observation period undertaken in the Kuwaiti and English schools, the researcher collected information about the physical and the learning provision in the two schools and analysed it using the qualitative descriptive approach to elicit the differences between the schools' environments and the way in which they related to children's play.

7.1) The Physical Environment

The two physical environments, particularly in relation to children's age, teacher child ratios and class size, school buildings, equipment and materials, were compared, as was the occurrence of children's play.

a) Age of children

During interview, teachers in the English nursery explained that children were accepted at the age of three/four years and transferred to the infant school at the time of their fifth birthday.

In Kuwait the kindergarten teachers stated that children entered their pre-schools at the age of three years and then transferred to primary school when they began their compulsory education at the age of six years.

b) Teacher-child ratios and classroom size

The English nursery classroom was designed to accommodate up to 25 children with two staff, one teacher and one assistant teacher. The classroom was wide enough to accommodate both children and display equipment. It was designed to encourage children to move freely around the different areas and interact with others.

In Kuwaiti kindergarten the observation of teacher-child ratio and classroom size indicated that in most of the kindergartens there were approximately 20-25 children and 2 teachers per class. The majority of classrooms in Kuwait were small, most being only adequate for children to sit in groups. The children crowded together to undertake any activities; there was no convenient way of displaying the equipment because the rooms were not wide enough to accommodate both children and materials for moveable play.

c) Staff

One teacher and one teacher assistant staffed the English nursery class. The teacher had two years training in teaching children and about ten years experience in teaching nursery children. The assistant teacher also had the experience to deal the psychological needs and emotions of young children.

In Kuwaiti kindergarten there was one teacher staffed class. On the subject of qualifications, it was told to the researcher that the majority of teachers held a degree in pre-school education but some of them had no experience. The teachers who were observed by the researchers during the observation study had degrees in teaching kindergarten children and three year's experience teaching pre-school.

d) Classroom organization

The researchers observed that English nursery schools provided a variety of experiences to facilitate a wide range of learning. The children enjoyed a wide spectrum of play. The class occupied one large, bright room, which was well organized, and decorated with the art work of the teacher and children, such as animals, birds, trees and other objects of environmental interest as well as instructive items like letters, numbers and charts. The classroom had carpeted areas with sufficient seating arrangements, a corner for story telling furnished with a reading corner with books arranged as in a library, displaying the covers. The class had child-sized chairs and tables, which were distributed around the room with the play equipment displayed on them to encourage movement and active participation. Materials such as sand and water were close to the door to prevent damage to the floor.

The Kuwaiti kindergarten classroom had the best facilities in the form of carpeted area, lighting, ventilation, a corner in which to put children's bags and a cupboard for the teachers. There was a small table to display some material, for example, toys, wooden numbers and few books of stories. Equipment was not displayed to attract children as in the English nursery classroom. The classroom did not appear attractive and motivating. The class had wooden child-sized chairs and tables for children.

e) Equipment and materials

In the English nurseries the equipment and materials used for indoor and outdoor activities were carefully chosen and designed to meet children's needs. Both the Local Education Authority and class teacher selected equipment as appropriate for the nursery age group. According to the early year teacher the equipment provided for the nursery children was suitable for learning through play. Children were offered different materials and activities to learn through play.

In Kuwait, it was observed that the material and equipment were not designed appropriately to meet the pedagogic needs of young children. There were no natural materials such as sand and water etc. The teachers stated that they had inadequate equipment and materials in terms of pedagogical value. Regarding outdoor play, there was no apparatus for activities had been found, for example, riding, pulling, pedalling or rocking. Together with the shortage of materials and equipment, it was found that in Kuwaiti kindergarten there was little learning gain from the apparatus, which was provided.

7.2) The Learning Environment

The two learning environments were observed to examine pre-school children's activities and the teaching/learning processes in the two schools and the way in which they related to children's play.

a) Children's activities

It was observed that the in English nursery the teachers organized different types of indoor and outdoor activities. These activities provided the children the freedom of choice and there was enough flexibility for children to operate independently in choosing their activities. Children were observed in small or large groups, painting, pasting pictures, drawing with crayons and pencils in different colours. They created some items from papers and junk materials. Children had their choice to join the group of their choices. During this activity the teachers were observing and evaluating their activities.

The teacher stated that these different activities provided opportunities for children to develop their different needs. She further added that, their fine muscle skills were developed and they improved their social skills in-group play. They learn to help each other and talked to and advised one other on the activities they were undertaking. According to Piaget (1962) children learn pride in achievement through playing, they learn to do their best in play before their achievements are assessed as work.

The researcher also observed the dramatic play activity. Children could take on adult roles such as cooking, cleaning, washing, playing families etc. practising real social life as they pretended to be other family members, teachers, policemen, postman, etc. These activities provide opportunities to develop social awareness and co-operation in the various forms of social responsibility.

Moreover, children were involved in constructional play with the chance to play with wooden building blocks of different sizes and shapes. Playing with these blocks, provided opportunities for visual evidence of mathematical and physical principles. This increases spatial awareness, encourages a measure of independence and builds self-confidence since there is no feeling of failure because it is the children's choice to do the job. Building activities require fine motor control and planning.

The story telling activity was also observed, which took place daily in the reading corner which was provided with a variety of illustrated story books and served as library. Story telling enhances the imaginative development of young children through listening to different stories, as were their listening skills. This activity also improved their conversation since the teacher discussed the story with the children after she had finished it.

Music is another creative activity in the nursery. Finger plays, action songs and rhythmic movement promote a sense of rhythm and music contributes to many aspects of learning.

Moreover, the outdoor activities included watering the plants, pushing trolleys, using a climbing frame, sliding, running and jumping, which gave the children the opportunity to enjoy themselves in a different setting.

In Kuwait, children's activities were divided between two environments, inside and outside. The children spent most of their time indoors. Children have no freedom to undertake any spontaneous activity as a group or individually without the guidance of teachers, except during play periods, which lasted for a comparatively short time.

It was observed that teachers involved the children through questions and answers. During the theme lesson the teachers discussed and displayed materials or pictures relating to the theme. During this activity the majority of time children sat immobile and just listening.

The researcher observed that children undertook some form of drawing or handicraft but not very often. Sometimes songs or story-telling would be substituted for such activities. These all activities taking place under the teacher's direction with all children as a group doing the same thing at the same time.

During the physical education lesson, children moved only according to their teacher's direction but accompanied by songs and gestures. The type of play was determined by the kind of materials and equipment offered. It was also observed that children often played with the very few construction toys such as puzzles and Lego.

Children were noted outdoors playing freely with equipment such as slides, swings, see-saws, and the climbing frames, which covered most of the outside area. The researcher spotted there was no equipment for physical activities, such as riding, pushing, pulling and throwing, which develop children's muscular skills and encourage them to move freely and confidently in small groups.

b) Teaching and learning process

Considerable time was devoted to field study and collecting first hand data through personal observation in the selected schools. This produced a wealth of information about the teaching-learning process in British nurseries and Kuwaiti kindergartens.

It was noticed that in the British nurseries there was a wide range of opportunities to enable the children to learn and at the same time to satisfy their need to move, to interact and to explore. Because the aims of education at an early stage in England are based on children's ability to learn, an informal programme using play is recommended. It was located that play was structured to allow skills to develop in curriculum areas and there was no conflict between the aim of early education and the practice of teaching and learning. Children were witnessed moving, socialising and exploring the environment around them while they learned. They gained experience as they moved freely around the different activities and understood the concepts.

Children also learn incidentally through a variety of activities. They engaged in many activities inside the classrooms such as functional play with natural and man-made materials like sand, water, plants, paints, crayons, dough etc.

The researcher noticed that the activities that children engaged in during their playtime were often related to their curriculum. All activities exhibited and facilitated a wide range of learning. Play observed in the British nursery may develop learning because it is planned purposely to do so. Consequently the environment of play is facilitated to encourage play and at the same to enhance learning.

In Kuwait kindergarten the researcher discovered that teaching and learning also took place but in an environment of formal instruction. This result in a danger of imbalance with the child being kept as a passive recipient rather than being encouraged in a way more likely to lead to development as a whole.

The learning process was developed through instructional methods which gave the children no opportunity to make direct contact with each other to choose friends or to express their feelings freely and exchange information, because they had to concentrate

on the teacher. Additionally, there was no dependence on play as a method of teaching and learning. Both children and their activities were directed and controlled by the teacher. Learning took place in the Kuwaiti kindergarten but in the form of formal learning, which is inappropriate to the child's ability to learn at this stage. Currently, early childhood education in Kuwait has moved to a less formal approach using the new curriculum, including free play in children's activities in response to the impact of Western interpretations of play, learning and development. However, this has not been implemented appropriately on account of a lack of attention to the importance of play in learning.

8) Conclusion

Our present age is characterized by the era of the scientific and technological revolution, space and industrial electronics, the explosion of knowledge and the rapid development in various social and cultural fields. This study has attempted to repair the omission and investigate the importance of play and its role in the learning process by focusing on play with special reference to cognitive, social and physical needs. The role of play is critical to the learning process in early years education settings. Play provides a platform through which children are able to learn about themselves and the world around them through interacting with it. Play has been acknowledged as a central element within the early years education system, which allows children to flourish through interacting with and learning from those around them.

This took the form of observing the play environment in pre-school setting in England and the State of Kuwait and comparing its provision in the two schools.

The findings of this study were presented in two parts. The first part was based on observation of the provision made for early childhood education in the schools in England and Kuwait, particularly in relation to the physical and learning environment. The second part detailed the findings of the frequency of children's cognitive, social and physical play and the relationship between these different types of play and the developmental of these different skills.

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