

THE NATURE OF AUTONOMY AS UNDERSTOOD BY TEACHERS OF 4-6 YEAR OLDS DURING PLAY-BASED ACTIVITY HOUR IN LOW FEE PRIVATE SCHOOLS

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Abstract

Nurturing autonomy or agency in children has been viewed as fundamental on-going process for a child's growth. This study tries to understand what autonomy means to teachers of Early Childhood Care and Education schools during play-based activity hours. To what extent teachers' beliefs are translated into classroom practices which result in governing the children's choice, control and movement. A sample of 10 teachers from two low-fee private schools reveals that although autonomy is seen as a significant factor, the degree of autonomy shifts as per the teachers' discretion. Effective classroom management techniques, discipline and learning outcome take precedence due to which autonomy suffers.

Key Words: autonomy, nurture, play-based activity, choice, control, beliefs, movement, learning outcome.

1. Introduction

Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) has gained significant ground over the past few years in India. A lot of research has been done in this field which tells us how crucial and essential these early years are for the rapid physical and mental growth of children. Given these benefits, it is indispensable for every child to get the opportunity to develop in a healthy and nurturing environment. (Chopra, 2012). But, mere participation in an ECCE setting is not enough, the quality of the setting is also crucial and for this reason, after a lot of debates and discussions, India adopted a National ECCE policy in 2013. The policy lays down the Curriculum Framework to be followed by the settings and do's/don'ts for the teachers. This framework serves as a plan or a broad guideline for the implementation of quality care and education for the young ones (Government of India, 2012).

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The role of teachers/care givers has been given utmost importance in the Curriculum guidelines. It says that earlier, there were no guiding principles on the basis of which teachers would work and hence were neglected throughout. The problem arises when, while framing a child centric curriculum, one only thinks about the best practices and activities for children, which will help in better learning, but does not think about the practices for teachers who are the ones who are going to deliver that learning. Thus, keeping in mind the variety of cultures prevalent in India, the curriculum framework serves as a tool to standardize the teaching practices across ECCE settings and provide a common goal to teachers. Hence, teacher's importance cannot be negated for both academic and non-academic purposes.

Given the short-term and long-term gains of ECCE, we need to focus on the age group of children being catered to. Theory of Psychological Development as given by Erik Erikson talks about the stages in which children develop from birth to 65 years of age. Focusing on the years up to 6, the theory says that children, assuming that they successfully complete the cycles of growth, develop trust, autonomy, initiative and feeling of competence during their early years. (Batra, 2013) Given these outcomes, it is natural to assume that children in this age group are highly energetic, spontaneous and impulsive. It brings us to understanding the importance of play and activities surrounding its benefits to be practiced in ECCE settings. As per the understanding given by the National Association for Education of Young Children (NAEYC), USA, *'Play is an essential part of every child's life and vital to his/her development. It is the way children explore the world around them and develop practice skills. It is essential for physical, emotional and spiritual growth; for intellectual and educational development; and for acquiring social and behavioural skills'* (Stegelin, 2005). This elaborate definition tells us about the importance of play and its overall benefits to a child. I would like to focus on the exploratory nature of children being talked about over here, as it brings to light the nature of children and the practices followed by teachers to tap this exploratory attribute. The exploration has been further elaborated by NAEYC by stating that it means to manipulate objects and play material by children. Although, the manipulation can be possible only when the teachers provide children the opportunity and choice to do so. We see in the National ECCE Curriculum Framework importance being given to play and considering it to be central to a child's well-being. It provides scope for constructing knowledge through manipulation and problem-solving activities. It also helps in developing abstract and representational thought. Play also provides opportunity to improve motivation, creativity and positive outlook towards society and emotional and mental well-being. Thus, it is the responsibility of adults to provide children with immense opportunity to play, explore and apply. (Government of India, 2012)

1.1 Teachers, play and autonomy

As mentioned earlier, adult's involvement in play is crucial as it helps in providing the necessary skills both cognitive and social to children. Below, a scenario is given where a teacher's intervention initiated the child to play with the material:

Three-year-old Mario has been banging bristle blocks against the wall for several minutes. Observing this, an adult comes over to sit beside Mario, and begins putting the blocks together in various ways. As if talking to herself, the adult verbalizes her actions. "I think if I put this red one here, I can make something really different. "Mario watches her and reaches for some red bristle blocks to put together (Ward, 1996). Sometimes, when children are not engaged actively in play, teacher's intervention helps in building a rapport of the child with other children as well as with the teacher. It is said that when teachers participate and show interest in play, they are conveying that play is valuable and important activity and this helps in building strong student-teacher relationships (Ward, 1996). Research highlights four key elements in play, being time, space, experiences and materials. Usually, a time period of 30-50 minutes is enough for children to build ideas, manipulate objects, communicate and use their freedom. It is also said that when children do not get enough time to play with materials, they usually resort to simple activities and do not exploit their creativity. Any kind of space constraints will also hamper a child's play time, as then they will not have space to engage with the materials and also carry out socio dramatic play. Through play, children try and imitate their real-life experiences and express their roles. Materials hold the most important aspect in play, as children engage with them in order to regulate their play time and expand their creativity and imagination. This brings us to our next question as to when is it appropriate for adults to intervene in play? research done by Jones and Reynolds (Reynolds, 1992) points out three areas where adult intervention can be beneficial: (1) Children do not initiate in play (2) Children have difficulty playing with others (3) Play seems to be repetitive and dangerous, break down completely. These interventions can be both from outside as well as inside. An outside intervention is one where the teacher stands on the side and gives suggestions, where her/his role to merely prompt the students in case of any confusion or if a child is not engaged actively. An inside intervention is one where the teacher is a part of the play group by either taking on a role or modelling the play as per the children's needs (Ward, 1996)

The above understanding of a teacher's role in play and the interventions made brings us to question about the kind of agency that children have during play time. With the teacher being constantly involved, a child's freedom to manipulate and explore the materials somewhat gets restricted and leads to curtailment of autonomy as well as functioning of power dynamics in the ECCE settings. As teachers or parents are the ones who sanction play, they are at a higher position of authority to make decisions regarding what to play and how. Research shows that early on, children are able to dichotomise materials as whether they are play based or classroom based. Also, they would see play solely on the basis of freedom to choose (N, 1990). A teacher's understanding of autonomy with self-regulation, choice and control as aspects of it, becomes instructive in gauging the effectiveness of the environment in nurturing the same in children. The teachers' actions and approaches will be underpinned by their beliefs about autonomy and their exposure to and perceptions of the various developmental theories. These beliefs and perceptions intermingle with factors which require a conducive situation for their display, such as the class strength, the time allotted for free play, the availability and access to play materials and if the expectations from the teachers are result or process oriented (Lombaerts, 2009).

1.2 Need and significance of study

As pointed earlier, Erik Erikson's theory places importance on the crucial aspects which a child should have by the age of 6. Erikson also talks about play as a 'function of ego' which provides a child with the power to be 'his own boss, because he obeys himself'. He further elaborates by saying 'play is a way to deal with experiences by creating model situations and to master reality by experimenting and planning' (Lee, 2015). Thus, in order to bring out its relevance in today's context, we need to study to what extent are teachers intervening during children's play time and also the kind of activities being conducted by the teachers, which help in fostering the necessary freedom and initiative.

Given the importance of play in children's life, it becomes necessary to study all its aspects in terms of the kind of choice of materials, control, freedom of movement and exploration. Research in this domain points to the growth of self-esteem, confidence and learning in children. With the dearth of research in India in these aspects, it becomes all the more necessary to conduct research in this domain.

The National ECCE Curriculum Framework also points to the significance of play and the teacher's scope of involvement. The curriculum places emphasis on adequate training to be given to teachers regarding how to conduct classes and what strategies should be adopted to get the learning outcome.

This also puts light to the fact that the teachers are not told explicitly about giving freedom to children regarding the exploration of play materials and enhancing children's creativity. Thus, there is a need to explore the importance given to freedom by teachers during activity hour.

With this regard, whether these aspects are given importance by the teachers in children's learning during play-based activity hour of 4-6-year old is our interest of study. Since teachers are the authoritative figure in the immediate learning environment of a child, these opportunities for development become dependent on their understanding of autonomy and the degree of significance they attach to it in bringing out the best in children. For this study, we would like to understand how teachers understand autonomy and the causes and influences for the current understanding they hold and its consequences in terms of their practices and interactions with the children. We have chosen low fee private schools because the NGO we are associated with, the KEY Education Foundation, is connected with schools from this economic background across Bengaluru and supports them by providing play materials and teacher training on the numerous benefit play has on child development. We felt studying the understanding of teachers who teach children of a specific socio-economic collectivist cultural background will be of value in assessing child development in this broader context and in also supporting the KEY Education Foundation with feedback on the play kit and teacher training modules they have developed.

2. Research Question

The nature of autonomy as understood by teachers for 4-6-year old during play-based activity hour in low fee private schools.

For our quantitative study, we will look into what the teachers' is understanding of autonomy through the following questions.

- What are teacher beliefs on autonomy?
- What does autonomy during play-based activity hours for 4-6-year old mean to teachers?
- What factors contribute to teachers developing autonomy among children during unstructured play time?

The variables we will use are:

- The necessity for autonomy, teachers' understanding of autonomy.
- Education and training, age, work experience, place of longest residence
- Class strength, time, TLMs, expectations as results or process oriented

For our qualitative study, we will look into the nature of student-teacher interaction during play-based activity hours through the following questions.

- How does autonomy play out between students and teachers during play-based activity hours?
- What are the challenges that teachers face in developing autonomy?
- How is it resolved?

The conceptual framework we will use is:

- Choice of language for instructions, control over initiation of play, choices in movement
- Perceptions of teachers on choice, control and initiation
- Conflict resolution through dialogue and negotiations, teacher training.

3. Limitations

A few limitations that we encountered during the study have been related to translation of the teachers' answers into English, as my research partner and I were not acquainted with the local language and had to depend on the translator to ask the questions to the teachers and then translate back answers to us in English. We feel some of the nuances of the teacher's answers might have been lost due to this drawback.

Understanding the context in which the school is and its culture. This would have allowed us to look at the background of children as well and what practices does the school follow in order to bring in desired results.

4. Variables

The variables chosen for the study are teacher education and training, age, work experience, place of longest residence, the necessity of autonomy, teachers understanding of autonomy, class strength, time, TLMs, expectations as results or process oriented.

The National Early Childhood Care and Education (NECCE) Curriculum Framework (2013) specifies the need for qualified staff in early childhood settings and the disparity in the training across both the public and the private sector. Without proper training and exposure, a teacher will not be able to deal with children and the dynamic environment of a classroom or play area. The courses provided by various colleges are obsolete and need an overhaul in terms of practical training and theoretical understanding. A continuous feedback mechanism also needs to be developed so that it helps the teachers to modify their methods and provide ongoing training. The policy also focuses on how it is beneficial for the ECCE school as well as students if the teachers are hired from the local community area itself.

The above variables have been chosen on the basis of the main research question which delves into autonomy as understood by teachers of early childhood education. With the growing awareness about early childhood

care, importance can be attributed to various factors such as policy implementations, the role of media, research grants and the government. These factors have led to a popular belief that early childhood education is an 'investment in the future' (William, 2007). The other factors of teacher's background and training cannot be ignored. The dynamic society that we live in, there are constant changes happening around us and this calls for our need to focus on what effect these changes have on young children. For this regard, teachers training, and role also need to be upgraded as per the current demands. We also need to understand how the pre-service training translates into the ECCE settings, what elements inside a classroom or play area help the teachers to deliver better and what elements prove to be detrimental. The teachers' role is not only restricted to providing quality learning inside the classrooms but also extends to be a facilitator for enhancing the necessary capabilities in children, who are mostly unaware about it at that age. Apart from this, other factors such as the student-teacher ratio and the use of play kits play a significant role in cultivating autonomy and necessary emotional development among children. As mentioned earlier, the nature of teacher's intervention during play will determine the kind of relationships being developed inside the classrooms.

5. Conceptual Framework

Choice of language for instruction: This concept will help us understand how the relationship between student and teacher is fostered in an early childhood setting. According to a study done in Australia, language-rich environments are key to developing overall quality in early childhood care settings. The use of language can also delve into using picture books and dramatic play in order to stimulate the necessary growth in children (Campbell, 2014). The degree of interactions that take place between teachers and students varies according to the activity chosen by either student or teacher. Conforming to the above idea of choice of instruction, a study conducted in the USA regarding the children's interaction with teachers, peers and tasks across preschool activity settings, describes how the nature of interactions changes when the setting is child-centred or teacher-centred.

On average, the interactions of children with their peers and tasks were more positive in a child-directed setting whereas children experienced more conflict during transitions to recess or routine change. Also, the most amount of interactions that happen between teachers and children are during a teacher directed setting, whereas when children talk to their peers, the nature of interaction changes into a more social kind. Moreover, during free play, with minimal teacher intervention, the interactions happen with different objects, tasks, activities, peers, individual self as well as teachers.

The use of colours, drawings, sounds, music and toys lead to a different kind of instruction as given by the teachers. This affects the overall cognitive and psychomotor development of children who are put in an environment which helps in enriching their overall capabilities and develop the necessary skills during that age (Leslie M Booren, 2012)

- *Control over initiation of play activities, choices of movement:* Research done by Elizabeth Ann Wood (Wood, 2014) on the discourse of free choice and free play highlights the importance of a child-centred curriculum which caters to children's needs and interests and enhances the learning in such a way that it fosters autonomy, agency and self-regulation. The study further extends into understanding the shift in autonomy in the face of shifting power structures involving conflict, negotiation and resistance. The research concludes by establishing the importance of how children make and manage their choice in light of the curriculum framework. These concepts will help us to look at how autonomy is exercised during free play, which is now considered as an important part of a child's learning. The freedom of choice and initiation that children have, the extent to which teachers manage a child's freedom of choice and movement, and the challenges that teachers face while conducting free play activities, also do these challenges in some way restrict or curtail the autonomy, free choice and movement of children.

- *Teacher training in solving conflict situations:* We are aware of the importance of quality teacher training for primary as well as secondary education, but the need for a quality early childhood teacher education is extremely vital as well as crucial. By understanding the relevance of training provided and how it is translated into the classrooms as well as during free play, we can comprehend how teachers use their existing knowledge of training and use it to solve any conflicts during play, also how they conduct activities during the free play time. The gravity of an effective teacher training program is highlighted in the National ECCE policy too, where the government has pointed out issues with non-standardization of training programs across public and private sectors. Currently whatever is offered in the name of training is outdated, and devoid of any practical applications. There are universities and government colleges running training programs for teachers with a fixed curriculum and duration, on the other, there are private run institutions who have their own curriculum and no set standards. Thus we have a mix of teachers who are not only ill-equipped but also have different levels of knowledge and understanding. (Government of India, 2012)

6. Methodology

A mixed methodology, both quantitative and qualitative has been used to conduct this study. The variables chosen for the quantitative study will help

us to understand the beliefs and background of teachers, their educational qualifications and the kind of training received. The teachers who come from the local area of the school will help in determining whether there is any difference in motivation among children, as recommended in the National ECCE policy. (Government of India, 2012) The teachers' beliefs and practices will help us to make connections with how they comprehend autonomy and whether they consider it to be a necessary aspect or not.

For our qualitative we are trying to understand how those beliefs come into practice and what challenges do teachers face while conducting the activity hour. What choices are made in order to resolve those challenges and how does it build teacher-student relationships is our focus of understanding by using qualitative techniques.

6.1 Sample Details

For the quantitative study, respondents will be chosen through a random sampling method from schools which collaborate with KEY Education foundation for their training and activity materials. Ten female respondents of a mixed age group will be chosen from two schools situated in urban and rural area of Bangalore. The schools were chosen by KEY Education Foundation where there was availability of teachers as during that time, the academic year had come to an end. A survey was conducted to find out teachers' beliefs about autonomy. The survey helped us gain insight into the beliefs of the teachers and how those beliefs translate into actions which have an impact on autonomy of children. A question with ranking scale has helped in understanding what factors are given more weightage while conducting the activity hour and which ones are given less.

The participants of the qualitative study will be selected through purposive sampling and those who have received training from KEY Education Foundation. Again, those teachers were selected who were available and were able to take out time from their schedules. The teachers of 4-6-year olds were chosen for the purpose of the study. In total 10 teachers were selected, who also did the survey and were a part of the interview for the qualitative study. The interview helped us to see what challenges teachers face while Observation of the video footage has helped in understanding the interaction of the teachers with students during the play-based activity hour.

A mixed methodology has helped us in deriving what beliefs and practices do teachers have with regards to their background and how do these beliefs when translated into actions lead to development of autonomy and hence building student-teacher relationships.

6.2 Tools

In order to conduct the quantitative study, a survey was designed to find out teachers' beliefs about autonomy, their understanding of what free play means and what factors contributed to teachers cultivating autonomy during free play time. The parameters of the responses were kept at: Strongly Agree, Agree, Can't Say, Disagree and Strongly Disagree.

The qualitative study has been conducted using a semi-structured interview, which helped us to gain an insight into teacher's challenges and how they can be linked to the perceptions of autonomy. Observation of two video footage has been done, which helped us to know how the nature of instructions carried out into the classrooms and how they reflect beliefs about autonomy.

6.3 Ethical Concerns

A concern that came up during the research was whether teachers would clearly understand the purpose of the study and the spirit in which they would answer questions, as we had asked them about details of their practices in classroom, which might put the school and the training in bad light. Teachers could also be reluctant to answer questions if it went against school policy. Thus, we changed the names of the teachers for data collection and also gave them the choice to not answer certain questions in case they felt uncomfortable in doing so.

7. Analysis

7.1 Quantitative

Questionnaire: Percentage

The participants had requested to change their names, so we have given codes to ten teachers from A to J

A horizontal (each teacher) and vertical (each question) percentage calculation was done for the survey questions.

The figures were arrived at by clubbing the categories into SA/A: 1,2 Can't Say: 3, SD/D 4,5 for both teachers and questions asked

For one of the survey questions, we asked the teachers to rank the choices given in order of their preference and beliefs (1 being the highest and 6 lowest). Weightage was given to each parameter and the responses were analysed by multiplying the frequency with weightage.

7.2 Qualitative

The qualitative analysis has been done by describing the codes of the interview response and categorising them into themes. The themes are related to the challenges faced by teachers during the play-based activity hour and how do

they resolve it. The analysis also includes the video footage of two activity hours conducted by teachers in low-fee private schools.

| | |
|---|--|
| <p><u>Challenges of discipline related to materials</u></p> <p>Student Comprehension Student exercising choice Misuse of materials Time</p> | <p><u>Resolution</u></p> <p>Teacher led, instructions repeated, extra support, timeout, establish classroom rules, Negotiation and firmness, Collaborative: Dialogue and negotiation, exercise of choice: teacher directed then student led Student led: Exercise of choice: student led</p> |
| <p><u>Video 1:</u></p> <p>No exercise of choice, teacher directed, and teacher led, Initiation of play: teacher led, Choice of movement: teacher controlled</p> | <p><u>Video 2:</u></p> <p>Conditional exercise of choice, initiation of play: choice offered at the beginning, choice of movement: teacher controlled</p> |

8. Findings

8.1 Quantitative: Beliefs about autonomy and what it means to teachers

- 100% teachers agree that play-based activity time allotted in the timetable is important for children
- 70% feel that the time of 40 minutes allotted for play-based activity hour is adequate. 20% disagree that the time allotted is enough and 10% neither agree nor disagree.
- 90% teachers agree that giving autonomy during play-based activity hour means giving children the necessary choice. 10% neither agree nor disagree.
- 50% teachers had agreed to understanding autonomy as giving control to children. 30% disagreed and 20% said neither agree nor disagree.
- 60% teachers agree that autonomy means giving children the freedom to choose their play material. 40% teachers disagree with the above.
- 70% teachers feel autonomy helps in developing problem-solving skills. 30% teachers neither agree nor disagree.
- 100% teachers agree with the statement that play-based activity hour helps in developing confidence in children.

- 100% teachers agree that play-based activity hour helps in developing well-being of children.
- 100% teachers feel that when activity is completely designed by the teachers, the learning outcomes are better.
- 80% teachers feel that any problems that arise during the activity hour should be solved by the teachers.

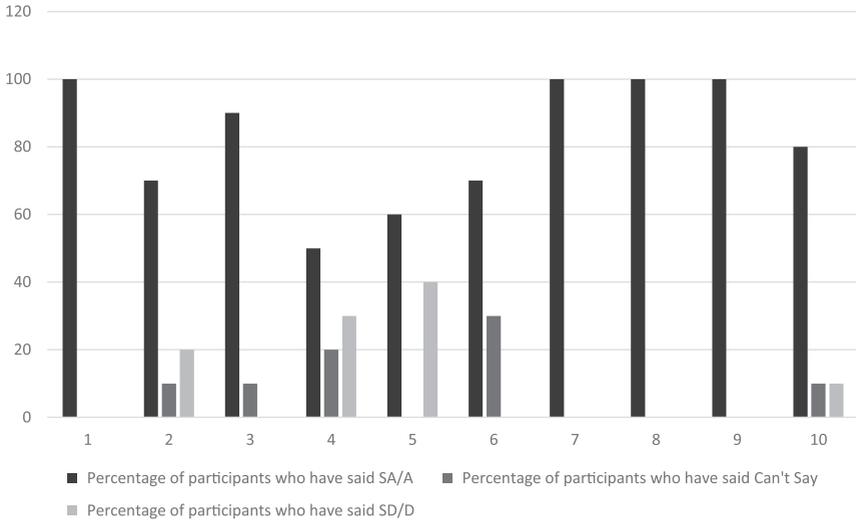


FIGURE 1: Chart showing the participants response to the quantitative survey.

Findings: Individual teachers' response to the survey questions

- Teacher A: 80% agree, 10% can't say and 10% disagree
- Teacher B: 100% agree
- Teacher C: 70% agree, 20% can't say and 10% disagree
- Teacher D: 50% agree, 30% can't say and 20% disagree
- Teacher E: 100% agree
- Teacher F: 70% agree, 10% can't say and 20% disagree
- Teacher G: 100% agree
- Teacher H: 90% agree and 10% disagree
- Teacher I: 70% agree, 10% can't say and 20% disagree
- Teacher J: 90% agree and 10% disagree

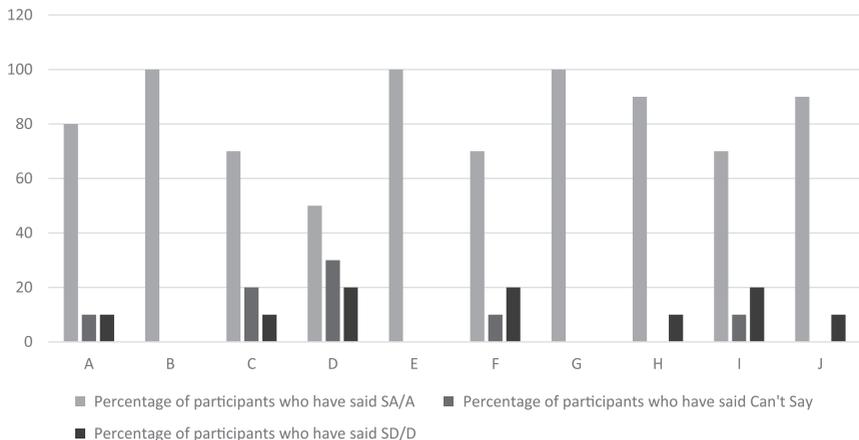


FIGURE 2: Chart showing participants response to each individual question

8.2 Rank

For one of the survey questions, teachers were asked to rank the choices given in order of their preference and beliefs (1 being the highest and 6 being the lowest). Weightage was given to each parameter and responses were analysed by multiplying the frequency with the weightage.

Below is the table which shows the ranking data and the response given by teachers:

| Weightage | Rank | Number of students in the playground | Weighted | Rank | Time allotted for play based activity hour | Weighted | Rank | Teachers' involvement during play based activity hours | Weighted | Rank | Learning as an outcome of play based activity hour | Weighted | Rank | Learning as an outcome of play based activity hour | Weighted | Rank | Play based activity hour as an ongoing process of child development | Weighted | Rank |
|-----------|------|--------------------------------------|----------|------|--|----------|------|--|----------|------|--|----------|------|--|----------|------|---|----------|------|
| 95 | 1 | 3 | 285 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 190 | 1 | 3 | 285 | 1 | 1 | 95 | 3 | 1 | 95 | 2 |
| 80 | 2 | 2 | 160 | 2 | 1 | 80 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 3 | 240 | 2 | 2 | 160 | 1 | 2 | 160 | 1 |
| 65 | 3 | 2 | 130 | 3 | 3 | 195 | 2 | 2 | 130 | 2 | 1 | 65 | 4 | 1 | 65 | 4 | 1 | 65 | 4 |
| 40 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 200 | 1 | 2 | 80 | 3 | 2 | 80 | 3 | 1 | 40 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 25 | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 50 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 5 | 125 | 2 | 3 | 75 | 3 |
| 10 | 6 | 3 | 30 | 4 | 1 | 10 | 4 | 2 | 20 | 5 | 1 | 10 | 5 | 0 | 0 | | 3 | 30 | 5 |
| | | | 605 | | | 485 | | | 470 | | | 680 | | | 485 | | | 425 | |

8.3 Qualitative: How do these beliefs translate into the classroom practices, where the teachers face challenges and resolve them.

- Challenges that the teachers faced were ranging from usage of materials, discipline, comprehension of materials, play with other materials, bringing them under control.
- The interactions of the teachers with children are entirely teacher-led. This happens because of students not understanding what to do with the materials which creates chaos, thus in order to resolve, the teachers take control of the situation and direct the children.
- Each child is given about 10 minutes to play with the materials, the time given is fixed, which leads to either the material not being used properly, or the children are not given the opportunity to think and use the material.
- The resolution of the challenges is usually done through dialogues and negotiation, where the children are 'coaxed' into listening to the teacher in the end not given much freedom with the materials.
- The negotiation usually happens by reminding the children about classroom rules and making them to follow it in case of any conflict.
- In order to maintain discipline in class, children are not allowed to move freely from their assigned groups, which in turn allows the teacher to manage the classroom better. If she sees a child trying to look into other group's material, she uses her authority to make the child sit in his/her designated place.
- The children are sometimes offered to use the material as they wish, but it entirely depends on the teacher to give the choice to children
- A few teachers have keeping the classroom quiet at all times as their priority. This means that they do not allow children to talk out of turn or even chat amongst themselves. The only interaction that happens is directed by the teacher who then discusses the activity with children in case they find it difficult to understand.
- Students are allowed to use the material as they like only once they have achieved the chosen learning outcome of the material as described by the teachers.

9. Discussion

In developing an educational program we strive to direct ourselves consciously towards the cultivation of the fundamental human ability, the ability to construct and transform independently one's own life activity, to be its true agent. It is precisely this ability that enables a person to define herself in the world of life, to become involved in existing kinds of learning activity and forms of interaction with other people and create new ones' (Davydov V, 2003)

The above quote highlights the importance of agency in an individual's life and how it benefits them overall. Importance of play is seen by all teachers that were interviewed and they feel it is a necessary part of the curriculum. But, the nature of play and how it should be carried out is largely misunderstood as each one has their own understanding about how play hour should be. The teachers understanding of importance of play seems to be limited to including a play-period during the entire routine of the child's day in school. The freedom to choose materials, problem solve while doing the activity and focus on children's learning through play is not evaluated. Research done by Elizabeth Ann Wood (Wood, 2014) says that if play is only seen as developing forms of knowledge, skills and understanding that are inscribed in curriculum frameworks they will achieve fixed and partial goals for a child's development. Whereas putting thought to micro aspects of play like autonomy, free choice, control and movement can lead to different interpretations and meaning of the activity. (Wood, 2014). The latter will help in developing deeper meanings of play-based activity hour where children's learning is not only restricted to the learning outcome, i.e. cognitive aspects rather psychological, emotional and social well-being too. In the findings I see that teachers believe in giving necessary choice to children regarding the play material but when it comes to giving control, only half of them agree. This underscore the point where more than half of the teachers believe in resolving conflicts between children by teachers' rather than letting children to solve their own problems. The belief about enhancing confidence is seen only from the light of achieving learning outcome, as with confidence building comes well-being too. I feel that these beliefs arise because of the number of children in the classroom which is being reflected as one of the highest factors regarding autonomy during play-based activity hour. This also leads to a belief about the activity hour being controlled by the teacher as given the number of students per classroom, the idea of autonomy automatically gets restricted. The teachers maybe finding it difficult to control the 4-6-year olds, who are highly energetic and curious about the world around them. Play-time is also one of the ways where they express their curiosity and feel like exploring the materials. The question that needs to be addressed is that if teachers see their involvement as crucial whether from outside or inside

the activity, what kind of involvement should be present? If the nature of involvement shows teachers exercising more control and giving children little space to explore. The teacher's outlook towards controlling and teacher-directed practices brings me to question the training that they receive, whether they are only taught about the learning outcome from each activity or to what extent do they address a child's spontaneity and curiosity, how it can be used to teach skills and development of children.

Teachers A, B, E, G, H and J have more or less given responses which are in the strongly agree or agree range. Teachers C, D, F and I have responded mostly towards can't say/disagree/strongly disagree range. The below table shows the distribution of teachers according to the answers given. Green colour signifies Strongly Agree/ Agree and Red shows Can't say/Disagree/Strongly Disagree.

| Teacher | Age | Ed | Training | Site | Exp |
|---------|-------|------|-------------|-------|-------|
| A | 40-50 | PUC | NTT | Urban | 11-20 |
| B | 29-39 | Grad | NTT | Rural | 11-20 |
| E | 18-28 | Grad | D.El. Ed | Urban | 1-10 |
| G | 29-39 | PUC | No training | Rural | 11-20 |
| H | 29-39 | Grad | No training | Rural | 1-10 |
| J | 40-50 | SSLC | NTT | Urban | > 20 |
| | | | | | |
| C | 40-50 | PUC | No training | Rural | 11-20 |
| D | 18-28 | PUC | No training | Rural | 1-10 |
| F | 18-28 | PUC | No training | Urban | < 1 |
| I | 40-50 | PUC | NTT | Rural | 1-10 |

From the table I can say that those teachers who have received training (NTT or D.El. Ed) and have at least more than 10 years of work experience been able to comprehend autonomy better, as compared to teachers who have not received any formal training. Also, I cannot explicitly state that there is a difference in beliefs of rural and urban settings, as from both areas, I see a concern for autonomy and need to nurture it within classrooms but I felt the teachers in this school had a little more understanding about autonomy, as their facial expressions showed familiarity to the concept and maybe they were relating it back to the training received.

Although one distinction that I found was with the interview of Teacher E, who has got a training from D.El. Ed, she said that (transcript version) ‘children have a different concept and thinking about the material, it is important to give them freedom to choose the material, children make different things from what we think’. This belief might be arising because of the difference in training that the teachers have received. If we look at the NTT course, the course period is for one year where teachers are taught about child psychology, teaching methods, childcare and health, basics of pre-primary education, history and philosophy of pre-primary education and arts and crafts. The D.El. Ed course looks at elementary level children with the course spanning over two years. The course is divided into two parts: General course and Subject discipline, where they also specialise in subjects of their choice. The course covers teaching skills, historical patterns, philosophical theories and current classroom trends. Thus, there might be a possibility that the training received by teacher E also aligns with the National ECCE curriculum framework’s objective, which advocates for a child-centric curriculum and activity. Factoring in the aspect of course duration, a 2-year course provides a comprehensive view about education overall and tries to address all perspectives which are necessary for a teacher to have once he/she starts teaching. Thus, in case of teacher E, where she has received D.El. Ed training and also has experience of 4 years it shows how with even less experience, it is possible to understand the importance of autonomy and move beyond the cognitive development of child.

As mentioned previously, the interviews reflect how teachers are prioritising learning outcome of the activity over everything else, which in turn restricts a child’s choice and control. The challenges that teachers face are student comprehension of the materials, discipline and usage of materials. In order to resolve these, teachers rely on dialogue and negotiation with the child, which in general is teacher directed. When it came to resolve the conflicts, the teachers were assertive to point out that it is a teacher’s job to solve any conflicts and bring the class in order. Managing the class effectively through establishing rules and in turn achieving discipline takes precedence over actual learning. The nature of interaction of the teachers is such that they give the child freedom of choice only when children listen to what teachers have to say. For example, being quiet during activity hour leads to teachers exercising freedom of choice to children. Although the nature of choice is such that even with the exercise of some choice, the teachers feel it is important they maintain control like the situation elaborated above. Choice is viewed as asking for what they want, and it being given. This act of giving keeps the teachers in control as opposed to children choosing from what is available.

Relationship between teacher-student fosters when there is a two-way communication. If children are coaxed into listening to what teachers have to say and are made to compromise on their wishes, then they will soon develop feelings of being reserved and maybe fear. Thus, given the nature of interactions that we see, it is necessary that teachers understand the effects of constant discipline on the child as well as making learning outcome oriented rather than process. In my opinion, a process-oriented learning will inherently lead to desired learning outcome, as the goal to be achieved will be broken down into multiple steps which will in turn lead to better analysis of the learning by the teacher. It will also provide opportunities for a healthy interaction and hence develop confidence and well-being in children. In India, culture plays an important role in the development of child. As unlike West, children in India are expected to stay with their parents. This norm translates into how young children are treated in schools and nursery, where the idea of 'trusting children' is not evident and they are made to do things as directed by adults. The concept of freedom is very conditional, where it is granted to certain degree, beyond which socio cultural influences and traditions do not encourage giving too much freedom to children.

Research by Megan Lee (Lee, 2015) about play and agency in Early Childhood finds that the distinction between work and play and both being seen as polar opposites is largely an adult's discourse. Children do not find much distinction between the two and also feel that work can be fun and sometimes play can seem like work. Children saw and liked play because of its unfinalizability and a space where one can do what they want. These findings emphasize the importance of agency as seen by children themselves, which has a crucial role. Otherwise, play will seem like work, where instructions have to be followed all the time and carried out in the manner outlined in advance. Further research done on outdoor play by Ellen Sandster and Ole J Sando (Sandseter & Sando, 2016) points to a contradiction where there is an increased need to send children outdoors and explore, but on the contrary we want to keep them as safe as possible. This contradiction leads to adult's not allowing children to go outside and play and in case they do, children are sent with certain restrictions and rules to be followed.

The above articles focus on how autonomy is viewed as a significant factor in both play and work for children. Also, the nature of autonomy changes with respect to the kind of play being done, but it is never undermined.

10. Conclusion

Collaboration, Communication, Content, Creative Innovation, Critical Thinking and Confidence are the 21st century skills required to be built in children for them to be successful adults as laid down by professors Kathy H.P and Robert Golinkoff (Golinkoff, 2016). Developing these skills from an early age is an important and crucial task which needs to be carried out effectively by teachers. From the research I can say that teachers recognise the need for confidence building, problem-solving skills, social relations, overall well-being and appropriate learning outcomes for children. But, the need of the hour is to not focus on one skill rather look at them together and analysing it from minute perspectives. If the activities are broken down and analysed, I feel other factors such as autonomy and freedom of movement and control will find place for discussion and can foster too. Currently, few teachers are aware about the need for agency, but they themselves are not aware to what extent it should be allowed and how to nurture it.

The National ECCE Curriculum Framework suggests for a child-centric but with specifics to our research it is concerned with making the material appropriate for the children but in how it is then used and introduced to children the focus shifts to achieving the learning objective. The understanding of teachers here is that learning is established through the learning objective: the outcome preferred over the process, a reason why autonomy suffers. Thus, although we find teachers who are aware of the significance of agency, given their years of experience, training and education, the need of the hour is to focus on how teacher training is carried out in both government and private institutions. As pointed out earlier, currently the scenario is sporadic, with standards not being clearly mentioned about the quality of training to be maintained. Also, I feel the training is designed in a manner where the teachers are made to focus on the learning outcome only. Other factors of how training should be carried out, challenges that can arise in classroom, effective ways to solve them, how to utilise each child's skills and capabilities to achieve the learning levels as well as social and emotional growth. When we point as play being exploratory, it should not only mean manipulation of materials rather how is that manipulation being enhanced and cultivated within activities, how is it being translated into giving children the freedom to choose their materials and use it, to move around and ask questions. Here, a teacher being merely patient, and caring will not be enough, rather he/she needs to prompt the child wherever necessary in order to bring out holistic development.

11. Suggestion

After the study, although all teachers have received KEF training for using materials and conducting classes, the training provided can also address the importance of autonomy of children during school hours. NGOs working with teachers should give them this perspective and learning too.

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