

Functions of Children's Games and Game Songs: A Case Study of the amaNdebele in Mpumalanga Province

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Abstract

Children's games and game songs are part of the traditional literature that was handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. However, on a more subtle level, game songs can also be performed by children to vent secret feelings or experiences that they dare not express openly. The question to be asked is, how do children vent their emotions through games and game songs? The aim of this article is to show how children's games and game songs could function to assist children with challenges. The current research was mainly initiated by the performance of the monologue game songs played by some children in primary schools. Children in Grade R to Grade 6 often aired experiences that they could not easily share. Similar research has been conducted by scholars who emphasise the importance of using games and play in the education of Shona children. They conclude that Shona traditional children's games and play songs help children to learn. In this article, the qualitative method was used to collect data through interviews, questionnaires, observations and related books and documents. Interviews were conducted in Mpumalanga province, in the Dr JS Moroka Local Municipality, at the University of Mpumalanga. Different coding schemes were used to collect and interpret the data. This article argues that games and game songs help children to vent and to internalise individual challenges. Games and game songs also help children to learn in different ways.

Keywords: games; game songs; performance; functions; traditional literature

Introduction

Playing is a way of life. Nearly every child, particularly African children, in communities and societies throughout the world participate in play or know different types of games. Since time immemorial, children have played games and game songs that they have learnt orally from each other—not from books. Games and game songs are transmitted from generation to generation by word of mouth and performance. Because of this, several games have been lost because they were not recorded. Saayman and Van Niekerk (1996) assert that many games are already lost and may never be recovered, mostly because African people never recorded most of their traditions. Goslin and Goslin (2002, 374) concur with these scholars, and they argue that “as these games are lost, there is a risk that they will be replaced by more violent and commercial games.”

Finnegan (1970) states that in terms of African oral literature, little interest has been taken in children’s games and game songs, although isolated instances have been recorded. To date, research on games and game songs has been limited, and only a few books have been written on games and game songs among the African communities in general, and amaNdebele in particular (Ntuli 2011, 5). As games and game songs are part of oral literature, more studies need to be conducted to preserve and record them as they continue to be valuable. This article will serve as a foundation for the untouched part of children’s literature among the Southern amaNdebele communities. It will also assert that games can affect learning either positively or negatively. This research will take into consideration the role played by these game songs in the actual lives of children, irrespective of whether they are performed in or outside the classroom. The hypothesis of the article is that games and game songs are vital to the development of children. Apart from improving the children’s physical skills, vocabulary and knowledge about their environment, the game songs can also be therapeutic to the children, reducing tension and promoting socialisation. The article did not exhaust all aspects of the research of games and game songs; further research needs to be carried out, as there are gaps that need attention.

Concepts Defined

The terms identified as the anchor concepts of the research project are games, songs and game songs.

Games

Games are activities that are organised according to rules and performed strictly for fun. The rules help children to avoid or handle conflict better. Linder (1993, 77) adds that games with rules help children to understand their roles in games. Rules help children to understand themselves and others better and foster social cohesion. The researcher concurs with the above definition because children play games to have fun, and in some games they employ rules to avoid misunderstandings.

Songs

A song is a short piece of music that accompanies a play or a game (Wehmeier 2005, 1405). As children sing, they do not always reproduce the rehearsed song; changes may be made to suit the occasion (Malobola 2001). In most cases, children's songs are short and contain repetitive words that are easy to memorise. The songs the children perform are often used to disapprove of and/or ridicule bad behaviour.

Game Songs

When game songs are played, they are sometimes accompanied by rhythm, songs and/or clapping. Ntšihlele (2003, 26) describes game songs as games that are accompanied by songs that are subsidiary to the games. Children between five and 12 years of age usually perform game songs. Therefore, the article will investigate different functions of games and game songs in the development of children at different ages within this age range.

Literature Review

The themes under which the literature review will be discussed will cover the functions of games and game songs. Jui-Ching (2015) wrote an article about the traditional Javanese children's singing games, *dolanan anak*, and their functions in developing children's cognitive and social skills. As children play, they learn to follow rules and commands for a specific purpose. Jui-Ching (2015) emphasises that children all over the world play, and music is generally an important part of their play. Jui-Ching (2015) used different games and game songs to explore different functions of children's games and game songs.

Madzidzela (2002) conducted a study in isiXhosa to highlight the importance of children's games and game songs as a natural way of educating children. The researcher used magazines such as *Home Talk*, *Sales House* and the *Sanlam Club Magazine*. She listed the functions of games and game songs, such as fun, socialisation, educational, behavioural, and physical development, with the aim of recording and conserving them for future use. Madzidzela (2002) concluded that games and game songs are handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth, and that they help to strengthen children's muscles, encourage children, and boost their confidence, especially when they win a game; they help children to know and appreciate their environment, and discourage instability and misbehaviour.

Nyota and Mapara (2008) emphasised the importance of using games and play in the education of Shona children by indicating that Shona traditional games and play songs contain knowledge and are a way of learning. They examined Shona traditional games using information from developmental psychology and indigenous knowledge systems. They mention that the *nhodo* game teaches children to count in an orderly manner. They also highlight how lessons and cognitive skills are implanted in children's games and play.

Nkopodi and Mosimege (2009) stress the importance of incorporating the indigenous knowledge from the *morabaraba* game by showing that some cultural aspects related to indigenous knowledge games could be used in the teaching and learning of mathematics. They argue that many learners who come from disadvantaged communities fail mathematics because the South African educational system is based on Western culture and many children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds, cannot see the link between the education they receive in schools and their everyday experiences. Nkopodi and Mosimege (2009) further assume that this may have contributed to the lack of interest and high failure rate in mathematics. The researchers strongly believe that indigenous knowledge could be used to promote the teaching of mathematics in multicultural classes.

All the reviewed material will assist the researcher in building a strong case on the significance of games and game songs in the early development of children.

Theoretical Framework

Theories can provide the researcher with the reason for the occurrence of natural phenomena by explaining what the major causes and main outcomes of the target phenomenon are. A suitable theory will provide the researcher with the relevant and meaningful behaviour to be studied. Different types of theories or approaches could be used when dealing with an article of this nature. The researcher has chosen the functional approach to analyse the data.

Functional Approach

Okpewho (1992, 173) explains the functional approach as:

a method of studying the life and culture of a society by examining the functions or roles performed by anything practiced in the society ... as well as the ways in which these functions help to ensure the survival of the society.

Mooney, Knox, and Schacht (2007) support the above scholar when they state that the functionalist perspective emphasises the interconnectedness of society by focusing on how each part influences and is influenced by the other parts; for example, if a child is emotionally disturbed, he/she cannot perform well academically and his/her relations with other children will be negatively affected. Some may be reserved, some may harbour anger, and some may cry easily when triggered even by a minor action (Caplan and Caplan 1973, 284). The functional approach is relevant to this article because it is a way of understanding how children use games and game songs for different purposes.

Merton (1968 quoted in Mooney, Knox, and Schacht 2007) reveals that as children play, there are consequences that are intended and commonly recognised, meaning that children benefit from games and game songs. Some of the hidden benefits of games and game songs are psychological, emotional, social, and mental development, but children are often not even aware that games and game songs are valuable to them.

Games and game songs help children to develop psychologically, cognitively, socially and emotionally. Children learn their culture through playing, and they learn how to use and appreciate their languages. The different functions of games and game songs will be unpacked in this article.

Research Method

The qualitative approach will be used in this research to generate knowledge. Brynard, Hanekom, and Brynard (2014, 39) explain the qualitative method refers to research that produces descriptive data and is generally based on the participant's own spoken or written words pertaining to their experience or perception. The experiences may be related to the phenomenon or actions based on their real-life situations. This approach is not descriptive, but applies the use of words and reasoning, and deals with participants who are human beings.

This article will try to uncover useful answers to some questions on the significance of games and game songs in the development of children. The study is descriptive and applies a qualitative strategy in which the researcher studies an interactive cultural group in a natural setting by collecting data through observation, questionnaires and interviews.

The research is interested in how people value games and game songs, how they interpret their experience, and the use of games as part of a child's development. The findings based on the data collected on games and game songs can be generalised to the Southern amaNdebele population because of the sample selected.

The Overt and Covert Functions of Games and Game Songs

It is generally taken for granted that games and game songs are performed for entertainment. Games and game songs can either be overt whereby the children engage freely to while away time or they can be covert as they are performed to vent hidden experiences. These covert functions are mainly initiated by the performance of the monologue game song played by some primary school learners. Most learners express what they are secretly experiencing at home, including the fights between their biological parents and/or step-parents, and some narrate to themselves or to others how they were sexually assaulted. The children start playing these game songs anywhere; they will even play them in the classroom, beating out the rhythm on a desk or book with a pen whilst the educator is teaching. As the child beats harder on the book or desk, the action being described becomes more intense.

Results of the Investigation and Discussion

From the investigation of the selected games and game songs, it is evident that games and game songs are functional in the development of children. In this article, different functions of games and game songs will be interpreted based on the responses provided

by the participants. Relevant knowledge related to the importance of games and game songs was also drawn from other scientific studies and they were acknowledged.

Data was analysed according to the categories of information obtained from the respondents. Different categories were employed through selective coding to narrow down raw data based on Question 6 of the questionnaire, which was constructed on the functions of games and game songs.

Strauss and Corbin (1990 cited in De Vos et al. 2011) state that selective coding is the process of selecting the core category and systematically relating it to the other categories, validating those relationships, and filling in categories that need further refinement and development. In this article, selective coding was used to group the main categories for the analysis of the data. The researcher selected the core category, related it to the other categories and explained their varying relationships because of the boundaries between the different types of coding that could have been difficult to demarcate. The functions of games and game songs are outlined below.

Emotional Development

Children who have experienced threatening or traumatising situations are often not emotionally stable. Such children start performing the narrative game anywhere as and when the hurtful memory or ongoing issue comes into their minds. Sometimes during play, children enact real-life situations, for example, an intense argument between their biological parents or abuser. As children are in the process of acting out these events in their lives, frustrations are often brought out into the open, and these unpleasant experiences can be reduced to a controllable size within the parameters of a game song. Games and game songs could thus help children to express their emotions. Caplan and Caplan (1973) support the idea of emotional development and say that happy or unpleasant events in a child's life are often revealed while playing with dolls. Tomlinson (2004) says traumatised children may act out their frightening and unpleasant experiences in a game in an attempt to resolve their trauma. Therefore, games and game songs are used as a way of healing the mind.

Children do not only imitate what has happened but also formulate their own narratives. Therefore, children are not only like parrots—they are creative and innovative. As children narrate in the form of play, creativity becomes highly important, as they cannot re-narrate the adult conversation word for word (Malobola-Ndlovu 2018). John, Moletsane, and Mohangi (2016) are of the opinion that children could be authentically helped to heal from their traumatic circumstances by employing a narrative game song or solitary game called *masekitlana*; hence, this game is used as a therapeutic tool in the field of psychology.

In the following narrative, a child is enacting a painful scene:

Ungatjeli muntu Suhla! Wakhuluma lapha ngizokulahlela ngemgodini wethoyilede. Uthule! (Do not tell anyone Suhla! If you tell anyone, I will throw you into the pit toilet.)

Hayi songhwana! Angifuni. Ngizokutjela umma nakafikako. (No uncle! I do not want to do it. I am going to tell my mother when she comes back.)

In the above-mentioned narrative game, the child is echoing the words of the uncle and what she said in response to the conversation she had with him as if it happened recently. The child used two different voices and tones correctly. When the uncle speaks, the voice is authoritative and scary; however, when the child speaks, her voice becomes soft and seems intimidated. The child is assertive of her rights and refuses to be silenced, hence she enacts the hurtful scene in order to internalise it. Fromberg and Bergen (2006, 47) assert that “children do not talk about their concerns and feelings, but play them out.” The child is playing out this narrative in an attempt to feel better and, in a way, repeating the hurtful situation helps her to accept and to let go of that particular experience. As children act out the hurtful experiences, they learn to control and accept them.

Children participate in games because they are non-threatening and enjoyable therapeutic interventions; participants take part in them freely, and as games are pleasurable, children often find them to be a means of healing, for example, the narrative game song. For instance, if parents were fighting, the narrative will go as follows:

Uyangibetha! (You hit me!)

Uyangibetha! (You hit me!)

Ngizokubambisa. (I am going to call the police.)

Ujayeke ngingatjho litho. (I have been quiet for a long time.)

When children play out hurtful scenes, they do so to internalise their experience and to make the scene more tolerable. Tomlinson (2004) states that traumatised children may act out dangerous experiences through play in an attempt to resolve the trauma themselves. Caplan and Caplan (1973, 49) argue that children who repeatedly act out painful scenes do not do so to preserve the pain, but to try to make it understandable and bearable.

Games refresh the minds and hearts of participants and help repress the hurtful issues or scenes for some time. Tomlinson (2004) asserts that traumatised children may act out their frightening or dangerous experiences through play to resolve the trauma by working through it. John, Moletsane, and Mohangi (2016) support the above view by saying that *masekitlana* (the therapy game) can be used to help children who are affected by HIV and AIDS. As children narrate their experiences to themselves, healing can take place psychologically, and they learn to deal with what they have experienced. Games and game songs help children to control their emotions, accept authority and to make an unbearable situation/s more bearable.

Social Development

Children who are not cooperative or who are unable to listen to other children when playing games or performing game songs are often regarded as being problematic. Social development involves the ability to get along with other children. Caplan and Caplan (1973) agree that a child's social growth affects his/her ability to communicate with others. Children participate in games and game songs to socialise and to make new friends. Burnett and Hollander (2004) state that one of the reasons forwarded by children as to why they involve themselves in games and game songs is to socialise with friends and to form new networks. McCall and Craft (1958, 11) agree that children develop social skills by learning to share, cooperate, take turns, play safely, cope and talk kindly to one another.

As children play together, they learn to know one another better and their relationships improve; they learn to be considerate and more accommodating. Yawkey and Pellegrin (1984, 21) found that dramatic play offers children the opportunity to develop social roles and associate relevant behaviour with those roles. Group games, such as *isikomborikhi* (hopscotch) and *intambo* (tug of war), teach children to negotiate and apply rules. In the zigzag game song, performers divide themselves into groups of four and indicate in which direction they are going to move and how high they are going to jump. Their speed will be determined by the pace of the song. After completing one round of play moving clockwise, for instance, they will change direction and move in an anti-clockwise direction. Participants who complete both the clockwise and anti-clockwise movement are rewarded with an extra chance to participate in the game, often referred as an extra life. In this way, participants learn to get along with others quickly. Each time they play, they choose team members based on certain strengths and abilities, for example, jumping fast and being able to play well in a particular game. Therefore, games and game songs are important for social development and mixing with other children, which enables full participation. Children learn accountability and accept victory or defeat from their opponents with a good attitude.

In the top spinning game, the child who failed to spin the top properly will allow the other participants to "spike" his/her top because his/her throw is regarded as *isigodo* (a non-play/foul). He/She must willingly accept the authority of the other participants and forfeit his/her chance to play. A participant who argues and refuses to accept authority will probably not be fit to play with the others in future.

Therefore, games such as hand-clapping and top-spinning games teach children how to socialise, have fun singing with others, and discern how to choose compatible friends.

Cognitive Development

Participating in games and game songs helps children to experience growth in different ways: cognitively, intellectually and socially. Cognitive development has to do with the way information is acquired, how it is represented and transformed into knowledge, and

how it is stored, retrieved and used (Meyer 1998 cited in Van Dyk 2010). Cognitive development involves active learning where children learn by seeing and touching, allowing their brains to process and keep new information; for example, in riddle games, as children are listening to a riddle, they quickly think of an answer. Cognitive development focuses on the child's development in terms of language learning and understanding. It refers to progression, growth and change in intellectual abilities such as reasoning. Some of the games that are performed by children require deep reasoning before a move is made, for example, in the *umrabaraba* game, jokes and *amatarha* (traditional monopoly). While children are playing, they learn to think constructively. In the *umrabaraba* game, which is known as a mentally challenging game, any unwise move can cause the participant to lose a cow or a token. Quick and fast reasoning can make the participant a good and observant player.

In games such as hopscotch (*isikomborikhi*), children learn to recognise different patterns. Creativity is strengthened as children experiment with different shapes and designs (Miller 1989). Therefore, games and game songs can be employed to introduce geometrical shapes in mathematics. Dewah and Van Wyk (2014) found that games made mathematics classes very enjoyable and interesting.

Educational Development

Educational development focuses on teaching and learning. The responses indicate that 52% of the participants were aware of the educational value of games and game songs. Van Hoorn et al. (1993, 14) confirm that play is the child's way of learning. Henkel (1995) says that the first common element of games is their educational value. Kalliala (2006) argues that children do not play to learn, although they learn while they are playing. Therefore, learning is a by-product of playing.

In the zigzag game song (*amazigzag*), participants count in ones, twos, threes and fours as they jump up and hit their feet together to create a musical sound. When they say "stop," all four participants shout "stop" and they rotate and jump into the next quarter of the circle. If they are moving clockwise, they move to the quarter of the circle that is on their left-hand side and vice versa. Failure to land in the correct quarter of the circle will destabilise the smooth flow of the game and two of the participants will land in the same quarter of the circle. Concentration in the zigzag game song will enable the four participants to stay in the game for longer. The educational value of the zigzag game song is to teach participants how to count and to concentrate as they move clockwise or anti-clockwise. Children who concentrate perform better than those who are playful in class. A clockwise movement in the above game can be used to teach how to tell the time and do addition in mathematics. In the clockwise movement, numbers ascend, but in the anti-clockwise movement, numbers decrease.

In the pebble game (*iingedo*), when a participant has taken out the 12 pebbles one by one, he/she has finished the first round of the game where he/she was counting in ones. Then the participant proceeds to the second part of the game where he/she counts in

twos. The participant progresses to the point where six multiplied by two is equal to 12. The game follows this pattern in the next round, counting in threes, until four threes are found to equal 12. The game proceeds to game four, where three fours will be equal to 12, etc. After he/she has counted 11 plus one, the participant is declared the winner.

Some games and game songs are designed to assist in both formal and informal education. They help to teach children to count, order events and to improve their communication. Therefore, children learn best when playing games and game songs.

Physical Development

Games and game songs help children to develop physically, which includes muscle development in the legs, arms and fingers. Physical development helps children to have more endurance and strength when participating in games and game songs. The analysis will focus on gross motor and fine motor skills.

Gross Motor Skills

Actions such as running, ducking, jumping, hopping and crawling fall under gross motor skills. Participants use various parts of their bodies to perform certain movements. For example, in games such as *ikghathi* (the skipping rope game) and *ikhutjhukhutjhu* (the train game song) performers run and jump up and down.

Madzidzela (2002, 54) agrees that physical games help children to live longer, run faster, and boost their blood flow. Caplan and Caplan (1973, 1) mention that play helps children to develop physically.

Fine Motor Skills

When children are not able to copy words from the board or cannot fasten their shoelaces, it clearly indicates that the small muscles of their wrist and fingers are not well developed. Fine motor skills, which involve small body movements, for example in the fingers, hands, toes, feet and wrists, become critical in children's development. Yawkey, Dank, and Glosenger (1986, 17) go on to say that small motor activities also require other types of fine body movements such as coordinating the hand with the eyes. In the pebble game and hand games, eye-hand coordination is essential. In games such as moulding, marbles and making kites, the participants use their fingers and hands to strengthen their muscles. In marble games, children learn how to use their fingers when trying to flick the marble through two bricks with their thumbs. When the muscles of the hand, wrist and fingers are well developed and strengthened, children are able to hold a pen or pencil correctly, which will improve their handwriting.

Conclusion

In this article an attempt was made to close the knowledge gap in the functions of games and game songs amongst amaNdebele as identified in the literature review. Games and

game songs were identified and analysed by using open, axial and selective coding. Through open coding, several games were identified and sorted into different categories.

The article focused on the developmental status of games and game songs in the early development of children. It proved that games and game songs serve different functions in the development of children.

Collecting different types of games and game songs, transcribing and interpreting them is a way of preserving them. The article contributes meaningfully to the preservation of what was handed down from generation to generation. Children are creative and they can recreate a game or game song. Games and game songs offer enjoyment, keep the minds of children occupied, keep children healthy through physical activity, improve socialisation, and cultivate a sense of leadership.

As children participate in games and game songs they develop mentally, emotionally, physically, socially, and psychologically. Games and game songs can be performed anywhere, with or without toys. Children use stones, tins, old and unused items such as bottle tops, old wires, plastics and their hands to play. They can run and touch using their bare hands or run and touch each other by throwing a tennis ball or an improvised ball made of any available material.

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