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# Half of the Fun Had Gone: Revisiting 'Fun' in Early Children Education Through the Re-reading of Asimov's "The Fun They Had" in COVID Situation

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## Abstract

The role of fun and happiness is considered a vital issue in regard of the children education, and a large body of discussion have been made on this topic. Much of the discussions put emphasis on the interrelation between happiness and education. This study tries to revisit the concept of 'fun' in relation to the early children education through the comparative reading of Isaac Asimov's short narrative "The Fun They Had" and the present day's situation under the grasp of COVID pandemic. Focusing on the ruling power of technology over the upbringing and early education of the children, how the children in today's society as well as the imaginary characters in Asimov's short narrative face the crisis and anxiety regarding their happiness as the new mode of education arranges for them a secluded virtual environment gets emphasized in this work.

## Keywords

Children Education; Fun Factor; COVID Pandemic; Virtual Education

## 1. Introduction

Children are the smaller versions of the adults. They are the future of the society. So, the early children education holds the central position in the long-term process of learning. The period of a child's early education is very delicate phase to handle with, and everything which a child senses and experiences in his/her childhood leave a mark on his/her grown up personality. That is why early children education is a matter of much care and attention. The caregivers, the parents and even the members of the early education institution should be very cautious about what they are imparting to the children. The way in which the children psychology is moulded in the very early stage of development leaves impression throughout the life. And for the all-round development of a child the arrangement of a favourable environment is a must as it helps to grow the basic perception about the world.

With the growth of technology, the mode of education, especially of the early learning of a child has been changed enormously. With the running of the physical environment, a parallel environment in the virtual mode has been developed for the children's early education. Sometimes, this parallel system replaces the physical environment which a child so far supposed to be in need of for his/her better growth. In this new environment, today's children become gradually habituated but their attachment to the physical world declines day by day. And the worst part of this new mode of education is that the children become completely dependent on technological system, they rarely make use of their own natural sense. Thus, their ability to perceive things, to question, to imagine, to create things fades away with time. They see things done on the computer screen in the virtual environment, but they engage a

little in the physical hands-on activities of the real world. Thus, their learning, in a way, becomes mechanical. That is why the parent should be careful "to make sure that child had adapted the technology not has become dependent on that." (Kaushik, 2014).

Technology, with a radical pace, has started to rule almost every sphere of human life. The education system is not free from its grasp. The growth of technology has brought an enormous change even in the early upbringing of a child. Today's children are rarely acquainted with different types of physical games and various hands-on activities. Playing, for them, means sitting before a screen and playing with the characters made by various software in the virtual world. Going outside the house, having a number of mates, making fun with them are far beyond their imagination. A little of the sense of cooperation and sharing can be found in them. Sometimes, the attraction toward the virtual game turns into one type of addiction rather than being a healthy practice. The children make themselves confined in a room and rarely shows interest in the outside world. A long distance is maintained between the child and the natural world.

In the virtual education system, being taught in seclusion, children do have no opportunity to make fun. They almost become mechanical. Another thing what bruises their creativity and makes them mechanical is homework. Homework, already an important part of the traditional education system, works as a major factor to hamper the happiness or fun of early education of a child. It now becomes a compulsory part in the curriculum of every institution of children education. But if viewed from a child's standpoint, one would find that very few children accept it with interest and happiness. Most of them are prone to react adversely towards this particular practice of homework. Homework means to them nothing else than a burden which steals of them the valuable time of their play. It deprives them of their childish enjoyment.

A significant transformation has been developed in early childhood education in recent years, influenced by rapid technological advancements, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and a decline in social interaction and hands-on activities (UNESCO, 2023). While technology has created new learning opportunities, it has also raised concerns about the diminishing role of physical engagement and socialization in children's education. The shift from traditional classroom settings to virtual learning has altered how children experience learning, affecting their creativity, perception, and overall happiness (Kim & Lee, 2023).

The COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a catalyst for these changes, accelerating the adoption of technology in education. However, this transition has also hampered in play-based learning system, reducing opportunities for children to engage in free play, social interaction, and experiential learning (García-Carrión et al., 2022). The current educational system, with its increased dependence on screens and mechanized learning, echoes the concerns raised by Isaac Asimov's short story, *The Fun They Had* (1951). Asimov's dystopian vision of a highly technologized education system, devoid of human interaction and traditional schooling experiences, bears striking similarities to today's digital learning environment (Patel et al., 2024).

This paper aims to revisit the concept of 'fun' in early childhood education by drawing comparisons between Asimov's fictional portrayal and the reality of modern-day education in the post-pandemic world. The study explores how the transition to virtual education affects children's learning experiences and highlights the necessity of balancing technology with traditional methods to preserve the joy and developmental benefits of early learning.

## 2. Objectives and research questions

This study reanalyses the role of fun in early children education and tries to point out the factors which hamper the fun, through a comparative reading of the children education in COVID situation and the virtual education system in Asimov's short narrative "The Fun They Had". It basically tries to focus on how the anticipation which Asimov made in the last century about the effect of technology in education system comes to be true in this pandemic situation, and how it is going to be permanent truth in the post-pandemic situation. The study begins with the discussion on the interrelation between happiness and education, and the role of playing in the children education. Then, a comparative study of the present-day children education and the education system which Asimov anticipated in his short narrative has been accomplished. Finally, this study emphasizes those factors which hamper the fun of children education in both today's time and in Asimov's story. And the paper concludes with the anticipation of the possible changes in the education system in the coming future and emphasizing how in the coming future the children are going to miss the fun of a traditional school.

(1) What is correlation between free-playing and learning?

(2) What are the major determiners of early children education? How do they influence child's early education?

(3) How does technology-based education affect the aspect of free playing and fun in early children education?
(4) What is the correlation between early children education and socialisation? And how various phases of socialization manifest at different levels of children education?
(5) How is COVID pandemic catalysing the process of technology-based education and hampering the fun education of the early childhood?

## 3. Role of fun and free playing in early children education

It can be found that children learn the things better in which they find fun. Learning with playfulness is better learning. "Happiness and education are, properly, intimately related: Happiness should be an aim of education, and a good education should contribute significantly to personal and collective happiness." (Noddings, 2003). So, if monotony and boredom enter into the minds of early learners the whole process of learning gets affected. In the virtual mode of education, the children become engrossed in the mechanical world having little time to interact with their mates. This makes them deprived of the fun of mingling with others and sharing things. "Positive relations with other people are certainly a source of happiness in both private and public life" (Noddings, 2003). But this concept of positive relation is somehow getting faded with the advent of the digital era where people get secluded. Robert Lane provides empirical evidence for companionship as the main source of happiness. But, as the children of the upcoming digital era are brought up in a virtual environment, they are going to be deprived of the advantage of a healthy companionship.

The sense of companionship grows in the minds of the children when they engage in mutual cooperation, share things and engage in physical activities together. One way to grow this sense of companionship is playing. Playing plays an important role in the early stage of learning of a child. A child learns while playing. He/ She learns about the size, shape, smell, taste and tactile quality of their world. Play and hands-on activities are of central importance to the children's healthy development. There has been a great deal of research about play over decades. "Brain researchers continually remind us that brain is not an isolated organ in the body. It is linked to everything else—to language, to movement, to social and emotional experiences. Thus, when the hands, the eyes, the ears, or the heart are being stimulated through life activity, so is the brain." (Almon, 2004). Jane Healy, a learning expert, who have presented a lot of discussion on the brain development and computer use in childhood, emphasized on the fact that a child, for his/her development needs to move his/her body and to be engaged in nature and in life. At birth, the brain does have the capacity to learn to walk, run, speak, jump and do a host of other things. But the capacity in the brain develops only if the child actually does the things and does not just watch them being done on screen. (Healy, 1998). Thus, hands-on activities take major part in the development of a child. It boosts up the child's imaginative power, curiosity and perception of the outside world which help a lot to grow his/her sense far better. Sharing the field with other children while playing or performing hands-on activities brings in the child the sense of mutual cooperation. The children also find it much more pleasurable and joyful when they are surrounded with their same aged mates. They can make fun of things and newer ideas of making fun peep through their minds. Two children from different mother tongues may not speak with each other but they can spend the whole day playing together. This is the universal power of the language of playing.

## 4. Children education in "The Fun They Had" and in Covid pandemic situation: A comparative analysis

The story "The Fun They Had" by Isaac Asimov first appeared in 1951 and was reprinted in February 1954 issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. The setting of the story is on May 17, 2155, a long distant future where the teenage characters Margie and Tommy find it completely alien to have a printed "real book" which they think "awfully funny to read words that stood still instead of moving the way they were supposed to—on a screen". Margie even cannot think of a 'human teacher' because for her, "A man isn't smart enough". The existence of a physical building of a school where pupils meet and study together is far beyond their imagination. They have reached at the time extremely rich in technology and they can even think nothing to do without the help of technology. School, for Margie, is a room next to her bedroom with a mechanical teacher waiting for her and the screen lit up as her class begins. This is all what 'school' means to her. The instant reaction of Margie after listening the very name 'school' is that of scornfulness, and she angrily expressed—"I hate school." The fun of the early school life is what they are deprived of. The concepts of 'classmate', 'companion', 'sharing of ideas', 'playing together', 'having fun together', 'helping other on the homework' are completely alien to them.

Fun and happiness are the important factors in the early education of a child. At the same time, companionship in the process of playing helps the child grow better. A child begins to learn the values of life while sharing the stage with his/her mates. These are the factors which Tommy and Margie's mechanical lives do not have any place for. In Margie's society, every child does have his/her personal schoolroom and a personal mechanical teacher who is geared for a particular 'level' to "be adjusted to fit the mind of each boy and girl…". Margie even wonders thinking of a number of kids learning the same thing. The story very minutely hints every nuance of the psychology of a child through the character of Margie. For Margie, everything associated with the education system which she has to follow brings the sense of monotony, boredom and hatred. The adjectives used for the mechanical teacher "large", "black", "ugly" point toward the dissatisfied psychology of Margie. Even she feels disappointed when the teacher is not taken away altogether. Surrounded by a highly technologized mechanical world, the very lives of the little children become mechanical. They are also put into a race and are relentlessly chased by the time.

Asimov wrote the story imagining a highly technologized society of a distant future of about two hundred years past his time. But the interesting thing is that in today's situation, after the passing of nearly a century, half of the imaginary story which Asimov wrote comes to be true. The story narrates all that we are experiencing in today's world. From the time of Asimov, the society developed a lot in science and technology. And with the growth of technology, the means and mode of living of people changed enormously. Technology begins to rule over every sphere of human life. In his story, Asimov reached to the highest peak of a completely technology dependent society. And through our present days we are going to touch that peak in our coming future. We have already entered into the time where nearly everything gets controlled by technology. Technology is gradually going to take the whole of the education system under its grasp. And under this situation, a new phenomenon, COVID-19, with its devastating grasp, makes entry into the life of people leaving a mark of enormous change on it. It affected almost every sphere of human life be it social life, personal life, professional life, religious life or educational life. In this time of COVID pandemic children are the worst sufferers. The enormity of the destruction caused by COVID-19 is beyond their understanding, but they have to pay for it at every moment. The natural upbringing of a child in a natural environment is going to be an uncommon scenario in this era of high technology. Children's upbringing and early education take place in a mechanical environment. COVID-19 is working as the catalyst in this process. As the consequences of the pandemic, the child's interaction with the natural world comes to a halt. With the rest of the world, they also get confined within the four walls. Thus, they have lost the minimum opportunity to come out in the open air and interact with natural environment. The notion of learning through playfulness is almost forgotten. The children are restricted to go to school and playground, and play with their mates, but COVID-19 could not free them from the burden of their home-work. Like Asimov's Margie, today's Margie also have to present the homework before her teacher at a particular slot of time through the online mode. She too has to sit before the computer screen and face the almost mechanized man-teacher with whom once, in the pre-pandemic situation, she could have engaged in a face-to-face conversation in a physical environment. It is true that today's Margie has yet not entered into that phase of Asimov's Margie where she must have to work with a mechanical teacher instead of a man teacher, but the environment of a school as physical building is going to be missed. Today's Margie, in this pandemic situation, also begins to miss those fun which she once had with her mates in the pre-pandemic situation. While sitting before a computer screen, she too, like Asimov's Margie, loses herself in the thought of the lovely and playful environment of the school of 'old days' that is the pre-pandemic days.

The studies show how the children in present day's COVID emergency share the stage with Asimov's Margie. Technology, with a radical pace, has started to rule almost every sphere of human life. The education system is not free from its grasp. The growth of technology has brought an enormous change even in the early upbringing of a child. Today's children are rarely acquainted with different types of physical games and various hands-on activities. Playing, for them, means sitting before a screen and playing with the characters made by various software in the virtual world. Going outside the house, having a number of mates, making fun with them are far beyond their imag-ination. A little of the sense of cooperation and sharing can be found in them. Sometimes, the attraction toward the virtual game turns into one type of addiction rather than being a healthy practice. The children make themselves confined in a room and rarely shows interest in the outside world. A long distance is maintained between the child and the natural world. Using technology to enhance teaching and learning practices in the classroom is now becoming common place. But it should be kept in mind that technologies should be used in ways that support existing classroom development and educational goals rather than distort or replace them. At the same time, access to technology tools and digital media should not exclude, diminish or interfere with children's healthy communication, social interactions

and play. If a child mostly depends on technology for all basic learning, then his/her creativity can be put at risk.

From the above studies it also becomes obvious that the worst kind of consequences resulted from the virtual education system can be traced in the psychology of the child as the fun factor of the early learning is affected most by the new mode of education. In the virtual education system, being taught in seclusion, children do have no opportunity to make fun. They almost become mechanical. Another thing what bruises their creativity and makes them mechanical is homework. Homework, already an important part of the traditional education system, works as a major factor to hamper the happiness or fun of early education of a child. It now becomes a compulsory part in the curriculum of every institution of children education. But if viewed from a child's standpoint, one would find that very few children accept it with interest and happiness. Most of them are prone to react adversely towards this particular practice of homework. Homework means to them nothing else than a burden which steals of them the valuable time of their play. It deprives them of their childish enjoyment. In Asimov's story, Margie, being a child, is not an exception. She too expresses the adverse reaction towards the practice of homework. As the story narrates— "The part she hated most was the slot where she had to put homework and test papers." Many scholars and critics have also given their opinion on the adverse impact of the practice of homework. As Noddings (2003) states— "There is little evidence that homework actually increases learning, and for elementary school children, homework may even impede learning by destroying interest and curiosity." Cohn (1999) also ironically remarked: "For some people, the premise here seems to be that we can relax if kids don't have time to relax. If they have lots of work to do every night, never mind what it is, then they must be learning". HomeWorks are prepared almost mechanically, the child rarely shows interest or curiosity towards them. In most of the cases, the child is dictated by his/her parents or home tutor and his/her hands mechanically moves to attain what he/she has been asked to do. The HomeWorks given to the children vary from one to another even though they hold the same standard. Thus, there are little opportunity to discuss the homework with the classmates. And in Margie's society, the condition of the early learners is much more pathetic as they don't even have a mate in their classroom whom they can at least make a conversation with. In present day's pandemic situation, children are facing the same anxiety as Margie faces. They also have to sit alone before the computer screen and submit their homework before the deadline.

Both the homework and the secluded classroom are the causes which make Margie scornful towards the school. These things arouse the sense of disgust as there is no fun in them. What generally all the child search for in everything is the component of happiness. That is why being unmindful to her own class before the mechanical teacher in the small classroom, Margie is thinking of that old school where "all kids from the whole neighbourhood came, laughing and shouting in the schoolyard, sitting together in the school room, going home together at the end of the day." Recollecting those happy days with the mates in the school building and school yard, today's Margie is also going to feel the same as Asimov's Margie did.

## 5. Conclusion

The rapid and radical growth of technology and the acceptance of it in the education system lead the society towards the future where there would be no physical school nor a human teacher. COVID-19, working as a catalyst, actually speed up the pace of this process of gradual change. Our future generations are going to be the part of that society in which Asimov places Margie and Tommy. The children in the story do not have any idea about a physical building called 'school' where a number of learners learn together. They even wonder thinking of a 'human teacher'. Our future is going to be the same— no school, no outdoor games, no socializing. The school education has a salient feature of uniformity. But, in today's educational system, like that of Margie's society, this uniformity goes missing. In their learning system in Margie's society, they are taught individually in isolation. So, the fun, which only a healthy companionship can provide with is missed by the children in Asimov's story. The same thing happens to today's children who are missing the fun which once they have in the company of their mates in the pre-pandemic situation.

## Declarations


- **Funding:** The author declares that no fund from any funding source has been provided for the completion of the research work.

- **Conflict of Interest:** The author declares that she has no conflict of interest.
- **Ethics Approval:** None of the procedures performed in this study involves any human participant or any animal. So, the author is not liable to include statements regarding ethics approval.

- **Consent:** As this study deals with no personal data of any individual, it does not need the consent from anyone.

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