

**ENTRENCHING THE CHILDREN'S RIGHT TO PLAY AND
EXPLORE THROUGH THE CREATION OF PLAY
OPPORTUNITIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMMES**

BY

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Abstract

The paper is a research report that investigated how play opportunities can be created for children in early childhood programmes located in disadvantaged neighbourhood and whose practices do not support the right of the child to play. The study was a quasi experimental research. Two nursery one classes from two nursery schools were used as sample schools. An observation rating scale was constructed using adaptations from Themers and Carlson (2007) observation rating scale for preschoolers. The treatment which lasted eight (8) weeks was done between the administration of the pretest and post test. The data was analyzed using t-test for independent samples. Results showed that the mean of the availability of play opportunities at the post test level was higher for the experimental group than the control group while there was no much difference at the pretest level. The result also showed significant difference between pretest and post scores of pupils on motivation and participation. It was therefore concluded that the creation of play opportunities have higher motivation in schooling for children with wide range of indoor and outdoor play and activities than children with limited play opportunities. It was recommended that teachers of nursery schools located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods should be trained on how to create play opportunities for pupils inside and outside the classroom and that play materials and facilities should be improvised from local resources.

Introduction

Play is interesting, fun and excitement for children of all generation and times despite changes in educational trend. The value of play in early childhood development has compelled childhood programmes to recognize, respect and support play as a major component and activity of early childhood education. Therefore, in an attempt to project play as a pivotal principle for effective childhood programmes, terms like “play class” “play school” and “play house” have been coined to caption the centrality of

play in those programmes where children get engrossed in complex play activities such as block-building, pretend play, playing with toys, wooden planks, clay, sand and water as well as rough-tumble play.

Research evidence overwhelmingly recognize play as intrinsic characteristics of children, therefore, the appropriate approach and practice to early childhood learning and development should be through play (Coppole and Brekedamp 2008). According to Lester and Russel (2010), the benefit of play is so critical to childhood development and learning

such that the United Nations Convention on The Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989 stipulated it a right of the child. However, in some early childhood education programmes, the attitude of proprietors, teachers, caregivers and parents differ towards play. Such persons feel that children's play is disruptive, waste of time and of no value. Therefore, they ignore it, curb it as something dangerous, restrict it or even prohibited it. Lester and Russell (2010) found that such attitude make adults to misunderstand and ignore the children's need for space and time to play. This was reflected in the policy, plan and practices in their early childhood education programmes. They found that these adult see children's play as a luxury and not a necessity of life.

The concern for investigating the possibility of creating play opportunities for early childhood education programmes situated in disadvantaged neighbourhoods was borne out of the concern for the apparently gross inadequacy of play facilities in the indoor and outdoor environment of nursery/primary schools located in such neighbourhood in Jos metropolis. The study therefore set out to create play opportunities for children in nursery schools and to ascertain the effect on the motivation and participation of those children in early childhood education.

Children's right to play is a discrete element of article 31 of the United Nation Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC) of 1989. The provision of this article serves as the basis for recognizing, respecting, supporting and promoting play time and play facilities in some nursery schools located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods motivated the study.

Another motivating factor for the study is that the National Policy on Education (NPE) (2004) suggests play as the method of learning at the preschool period. Finally, advocates of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) after intensive review of researches on play and childhood, recommends play and block time for outdoor and indoor play as the developmentally appropriate practice for early childhood education (Copple) and Bredekamp, (2008). With this recommendation based on empirical evidence, the researchers are compelled to study the possibilities of creating play opportunities for preschool children in disadvantaged neighborhoods so that those children can experience the fun and excitement associated with play in early childhood besides its contribution to physical, social, emotional and intellectual development of the child.

Statement of the Problem

The near absence of play space, play time and play facilities in some nursery schools located in disadvantaged neighbourhoods would be seen as the violation of the rights of the child to play and deprivation of the benefits of play in childhood, particularly on development and socialization. The question this situation raises is how can play opportunities be created for children in preschool programmes such as nursery schools from local and affordable toys and play equipment?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to create play opportunities for nursery school pupils both in the classroom and outside the classroom and to support play activities among the pupils.

The specific objectives were:

1. Create play opportunities for children in nursery one in the indoor and outdoor environment of the experimental classes.
2. To stimulate children to explore the toys and play equipment inside and outside the classroom.
3. To give the children opportunities for free choice play activities in the classroom and outside the classroom.
4. To find out what difference the provision of play facilities, space and time make on the motivation and participation of the pupils in schooling.

the control group and experimental group

- a. Before the treatment
- b. After the treatment

Literature Review

Friedrick Wilhem Froebel (1782-1852) first gave the notion that children learn through play. His approach to early childhood education and development emphasized the educational value of play. He believed that child development occur through play. Morrison(2009) observed that since then, most early childhood programmes have incorporated play into their curricula and have made play a major part of the day for children in preschool programmes. Subsequently, other approaches to early childhood have advocated play as an integral component of early childhood education. Among these are Montessori, constructivists (High/Scope), and Reggio Emilia approaches.

The Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) explained that play is a dynamic, active and constructive behaviour which is a necessary and integral part of childhood. (Brewer, 2007) Essa (1999) simply said that play is an activity engaged in for the purpose of fun. Henninger (2009) listed the broad categories of activities that could be called play as such behaviours as swinging, sliding, running, digging in the dirt, building with blocks, dancing to music, making up nonsense rhyming words, dressing up and pretending. In a recent study of play, Lester and Rusell (2010) found that play manifest itself in many different ways including highly active games such as chasing, rough- and-tumble games, and play fighting, pretend and socio-dramatic play, language play, social play, games with rules and construction play. Among these diverse manifestation, they

Research Questions

The following research questions guided the study:

1. Were play facilities and toys available in the control and experimental classrooms before the treatment?
2. Is there any difference between the mean and standard deviation of the control and experimental groups after treatment?

Research Hypotheses

1. There will be no significant difference between the motivation of children in the control and children in the experimental classes before the treatment.
2. There will be no significant difference in motivation between the children in the control and experimental classes after treatment.
3. There will be not difference in the participation of children in free choice activities between

concluded that play is recognized by its apparent spontaneous, voluntary and unpredictable nature accompanied by signs of pleasure and enjoyment.

The benefit of play has also been investigated. Lester and Rusell (2010) found the following benefits of play.

1. Helps children to interact with their current physical and social environments.
2. Provides safe place where emotions can be experienced with the consequences they might bring in the real world.
3. Provides opportunities to move beyond existing ways of being to transform structures and cross borders.
4. Play enables children to meet other rights of the child. Through play children meet their rights for survival, protection, participation and provision.
5. Play has an impact on children's health, well-being and development.
6. Develop language and literacy skills.

Morrison (2009) list the benefits of play in early childhood as

1. Achieving knowledge, skills and behaviour
2. Learning concepts
3. Developing social skills
4. Mastering real life situations
5. Practicing language processes
6. Developing literacy skills
7. Enhancing self esteem
8. Preparing children for adult life and roles.
9. Participation in how to become independent, make decisions cooperate or collaborate with others.

Some studies have been carried out on the strategies for creating

opportunities for play in early childhood education.

Colker, (2010) reports how to make and use puppets housed in the dramatic centres. She found that puppet house offer children the opportunity to make puppets, write scripts and perform puppet shows. She made and used a variety of paper bag puppets and sock puppets. She found that through the puppet house, children learnt social skills, language and mathematics skills.

Colker (2010) has also made suggestions for creating opportunities for outdoor play. These include:

- a. Building and using obstacles and a hoop
- b. Getting ropes for skipping, galloping and twirling
- c. Creating a park or taking children to the park.

Marshall and Dickinson (2010) created play opportunities through

- a. Finding a local supplier of recycled materials
- b. Asking families to contribute large cardboard boxes, left over fabrics, lumbers;
- c. Gathering sticks, reeds, rocks and other natural materials
- d. Contacting local utility companies for left over and manufactures for donation of spoils, caps, tyres or parking materials.
- e. Using clay and mud. Creating mud-patch mixed with sand when it rains. This is because children gravitate towards mud and makes use of it for good exploration.
- f. Gathering local musical instruments and creating a basket of table of musical instruments outdoor. In addition

- create a giant xylophone from scraps of wood and blocks.
 - g. Creating act out areas with dress-up clothes for various professions and roles in the drama play area.
 - h. Creating hide way, and quiet zones by creating cubbies, nooks, crannies, hiding spots and outdoors by hanging fabrics, used sticks to make tepees planned greenery that grew into shade over the years.
 - i. Creating an outdoor art studio by moving tables and supplies outdoor and constructing sculptures, bring in simple supplies such as paints and brushes, boxes, tree slice, and pieces of wood.
 - j. Creating space for water play. Open outlet in water to create streams, drips, and pools. Then put cans, containers and cups, brushes and droppers in the area.
- To help the Nigerian early childhood teacher create a variety of play opportunities for children, the Nigerian Educational Research development council (NERDC) (2007) has developed a national manual for toy making from which the teacher can make toys for the use of children. They have described how to produced toys and play things like counters, charts, flash card, puzzles, floating objects, soft toys, outdoor swing, out play car, truck, books, number, shapes, outdoor climber, tricycles, tunnels, balance Beams, rocking boats, skipping ropes, hoops, bean bags, sand and water play, and Ludo (dice) for the use of 3-5 years old children.

The variety of play opportunities one can create in an early childhood programme from the above literature review served as motivation for the

researchers to experiment creating the play opportunities using mainly local materials in nursery schools that have little or no toys or functional outdoor playing facilities at all.

Methodology

The design used for the research was the pretest, post test, two group quasi experimental designs in which two nursery one classrooms were selected based on their similarity in background, age of pupils, classroom organizations and teaching approaches. School B served as the experimental group while school A served as the control group.

Population and Sample

The population was made up of pupils in nursery schools in Hwolshe village of Jos South Local Government Area. Two of the schools were selected as sample schools for the study based on the following criteria.

- i. Both schools were located in the same community therefore the background experiences of the children are parallel in every way.
- ii. Both schools are church-owned schools of the same denomination.
- iii. Both schools had swing stands but the swings were not functional.
- iv. Both schools had teachers and auxiliary staff with parallel qualifications.
- v. Apart from climber in school A, both schools had no toys, or other play facilities besides dysfunctional swing stands.

The study was carried in nursery one of both schools where the average age was 3.7 in school A and 3.6 in school B.

Instrument for Data Collection

An observation rating sheet was adapted on the Themer and Carison (2007) observation rating for preschool. Each behaviour attribute was rated on a five point scale.

- (a) Not at all (0)
- (b) Highly inadequate (1)
- (c) Inadequate (2)
- (d) Adequate (3)
- (e) Highly adequate (4)

The instrument adapted was validated by an expert in test and measurement after watching the DVD of Themer and Carlson's observation rating for preschoolers. The observation rating sheet consisted of three sections.

- (a) outdoor environment and behaviour
- (b) Indoor environment and behaviour
- (c) Behaviour attributes.

Procedure for Data Collection

The researchers used some of the strategies by Colker (2010) for creating play opportunities as well as the manual produced by the Nigerian educational and research development Council (NREDC) for creating play opportunities for the experimental group at a minimal cost. The researchers made puppets and some toys like various kinds of vehicles, houses, blocks, other toys various kinds of vehicles, houses, blocks, other toys from local materials. However, some like the sets of occupational kits were bought. Items like clay, sand, water and various form of containers types were obtained from the neighbourhood and paints were bought to colour so that the school environment became decorated with bright colours.

The sand bags were arranged the position they were by the church to stop erosion of the church premises but they

ended serving as play facility for balancing, running across and jumping over by the pupils. Likewise the researchers rearranged and fastened ladders used by builders which served as climbers to play materials from local materials which will still produced the desired effect of making children play freely at school.

The study was carried out in two phases:

Phase 1- Two weeks observation of three days per week of both classrooms. The data collected in this phase gave the pre-test score for each group.

Phase 2- Play equipment and toys were set up in designated places outside the classroom. These were provision for swings, twelve tyres coloured in four colours-red, blue, yellow and green; ropes, sand area, sand bags arranged in rows and climbers.

The indoor environment was reorganized with learning centers and equipped with relevant toys and learning materials. These were the drama play center, literacy center, mathematics, science center and the art center.

A learning center period of one hour and an outdoor time of 30 minutes three times a week were created in the weekly schedule of the experimental class.

During the period for learning centers and outdoor time, pupils were asked to freely choose the learning center and play activity they wanted to participate in.

For the learning centers, addition materials were added to each center after two weeks for the purpose of sustaining interest in the activities at the learning centers. The treatment lasted for eight weeks.

During phase two, data was collected using observation sheets during the learning center time and

outdoor time. The data was also collected in school A on the same behaviour attributes as in school B. At the end of eight weeks, the average behaviour score of each child on motivation and participation was computed. The score of the two groups

were compared using t-test.

Data Analysis and Results

The data collected for the study is presented to answer the research questions for:

Table 1: Mean and Standard Deviation Score for Availability of Toys, Learning Materials Play Facilities before Treatment

SCHOOL	N (Items)	$\sum X$	X	SD
A	21	29	1.38	1.69
B	21	30	1.42	1.69

Table 2: Mean and Standard Deviation for the Availability of Toys, Learning Materials and Play Facilities after Treatment

School	N (Items)	$\sum X$	X	SD
A	21	32	1.57	1.72
B	21	60	2.85	0.81

Hypotheses Testing

Table 3: t-test Examining the Difference in Motivation between Pupils of School A and School B at the Pretest

School	N	$\sum X$	X	S^2	SD	t-value	DF	P.0.05
A	30	67cn	2.23	0.5369	0.732	0.5655	51	1.685
B	23	50	2.17	0.5425	0.7366			

Decision: Since the calculated t-value of 0.5655 is less than critical value at 0.05 (1.685), the null hypothesis is accepted.

Table 4: t-test Examining the Participation of Pupil in School A and B at Pretest

School	N	$\sum X$	X	S^2	SD	t-value	DF	P.0.05
A	30	61	2.03	0.3092	0.5501	1.811	51	1.684
B	23	53	2.30	0.3122	0.5581			

Decision: The t-value of 1.811 is greater than critical-value at 0.05, therefore, the null hypothesis is rejected.

Table 5: t-test Examining the Participation of Pupils in School A and B on the Post Test

School	N	$\sum X$	X	S^2	SD	t-value	DF	P.0.05
A	30	75	2.5	0.4655	0.6822	51	5.69	1.684
B	23	79	3.43	0.2582	0.5081			

Decision: t-value is $5.69 > P.0.05$ of 1.684 therefore the null hypothesis is rejected.

Table 6: t-test Testing the Motivation between Pupils of School A and School B THE Post Test

School	N	$\sum X$	\bar{X}	S^2	SD	t-value	DF	P.0.05
A	30	60	2	0.5572	0.7427	51	10.303	1.684
B	23	86	3.7	0.5425	0.451			

Decision: t-value > P 0.05, the null hypothesis is rejected to mean there is significant difference in the participation of the two groups.

Findings

1. The mean difference in the availability of toys, learning materials and play facilities between school A and school B was very small (0.004) at the pretest meaning that no much difference existed in the two schools before creation of play and exploration activities for school B.
2. The mean difference between pupils in school B after the creation of play opportunities is higher (school A 1.57, school B 2.85). This difference is much considering the fact that the maximum score is 4.
3. In the pre treatment, there was no significant difference between school A and school B in motivation.
4. In the pretreatment there was significant difference between school A and B on participation.
5. In the post test (post treatment) there was significant difference in both the motivation and participation of pupils.

The conclusion to be drawn from these findings is that there were more toys, learning materials and play facilities at the post test than the pretest and that the creation of play opportunities increased both the motivation and participation of pupils in school B classroom activities.

Discussion

The reorganized classroom and the arrangement of the colourful play materials outside the classroom made so much impact on the pupils. When they arrived the first day, facilities were provided and the classrooms were reorganized. The pupils buzzed with excitement and curiously explored the center trying all the new things such as the magnetic boards. The findings of Rayes (2010) who in a similar study added extensions to learning centers. Pupils were attracted to the extensions and zealously explored the new objectives by asking questions or trying them in different ways.

In agreement with Lester and Rusell (2010), the researchers observed that the play opportunities made the children to interact with the physical environment as well as with one another thereby acquiring social skills and improving their language. This confirms the observation of Hysan and Saia (2010) who stated that children connect with each other during play.

Recommendations

It is clear from this study that creating play opportunities promote play among children in early childhood education. The researchers hereby make the following recommendations for school proprietors, teachers and caregivers to support and promote play as a right of the child.

1. Create conditions in which play can take place to address the children right to the provision of play. Interventions to promote play must ensure the availability of play facilities, space and time. Teachers must therefore plan for play by scheduling it on the daily routine of the children.
 2. Teachers and caregivers must not dismiss or restrain play but supervise it to ensure that children do not get hurt particularly in outside physical play or rough-and-tumble play.
 3. Both indoor and outdoor environments should be planned by school authorities to support and promote play by careful organization of the environment to attract pupils to play and explore.
 4. The State Universal Basic Education Boards should organize workshop and training for teachers in early childhood education on how to make toys and play materials/facilities using the handbook manual for making toys to be facilitated by Nigerian Educational and Research Development Council (NERDC).
 5. The schools should deliberately budget for the procurement or making of play equipment, materials and toys.
- environments with play facilities to make early childhood education exciting and developmentally appropriate. The study has revealed that teachers can create ample play opportunities in the classroom and outside the classroom using cheap and local materials. Play space, facilities and time provide children with the opportunities to enjoy their right to play. The play opportunities enhance children's motivation and participation in learning activities in early childhood education. In nursery schools where children have little or no play facilities and time, the teachers can be trained to improvise the manual for making toys in Early Education by the Nigerian Education Research and Developmental Council NERDC (2007).

Conclusion

Without making adequate provision for play in Nursery Schools, children are robbed of the essence of childhood. Early childhood education programmes should therefore recognize, respect, support and promote the right of the child to play in their schools by planning the indoor and outdoor

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