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An Assessment of Play as a Strategy on Pre-Schoolers' Classroom Participation in Public Pre-Primary Schools in Bunyala- Busia County, Kenya

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Abstract:

Learner's classroom participation can be gauged by; confidence levels turn taking, numeracy skills, manipulative competencies and task completion. However, over time, adequate inculcation of play as a strategy in early childhood classrooms is yet to be achieved. This underscored the need of this study. The study assessed play as a strategy on pre-schoolers' classroom participation in public pre-primary institutions of Bunyala sub-county, Busia County, Kenya. The guide objectives of this study were: to establish the types of play used as a strategy on pre-schoolers' classroom participation and to investigate the types of play materials used by pre-schoolers' in public pre-primary schools in the said study location. Methodology adopted was descriptive survey research design. Social-Cultural Development Theory (Vygotsky, 1978) guided the study. Research targeted a population of 27 public pre-primary centres in Bunyala Sub-county. Of this population, 2 were used in piloting while in 25 actual study was conducted. The parameters of analysis were 25 heads of public pre-primary centres, 50 teachers of public pre-primary centres and 100 pre-schoolers. The sampling techniques adopted were purposive and simple random. Data was collected using questionnaire and observation guide. Reliability and validity of the instruments were addressed through piloting and test retest. Descriptive statistics for measures of central tendencies were applied. For qualitative data, content analysis was adopted. Regarding types of play, the study found out that all the pre-unit teachers were engaging their learners in various forms of play with physical type being the most common (91%) though with a myriad of challenges. The study also found out that there were various play materials available for the pre-school learners mostly the local ones though with acuteshortage especially the commercial ones. It was concluded that pre-unit learners in Bunyala Sub-county were not adequately exposed to all forms of play besides inadequacy of play materials. The study recommended that play materials should be availed and pre-unit learners get exposed to them.

Keywords: Play strategy, classroom participation, play materials, pre-scholars

1. Introduction

The pre-schoolers' play setting can either be outdoor or indoor based on age. Through effective play, learners build ideas and exploit their environment thus tapping their classroom participation.

According to Nell *et al* (2013), children often play simply for fun and enjoyment. Although this assertion of Nell *et al* is true especially if viewed from a child's perspective, but in the eyes of an abstractive and analytical adult, this innocent activity of children tends to perform more than mere joy. It is these derivatives of play, the intrinsic values that scholars have been researching to bring out to the stakeholders to convince them to accept playing as a vital element in youngster's wholesome growth.

According to Maria Montessori (1870-1952) in 'The Structured Play Theory', pre-primary scholars are usually facilitators of their own learning through active play. For this reason, it would be a win strategy to structure a play setting with a definite learning outcome in order to induce higher learner participation in a pre-primary classroom.

As per the review (2005) of Singer and Singer's study (1990), make-believe play and play materials had a positive impact on pre-school learner's overall classroom participation. Singer and Singer's position was augmented by Clements & Sarama (2009) whose study established leading role of both physical, social and cognitive play in teaching Mathematics and reading. They both revealed a declining classroom participation of pre-scholars in cases where play materials like cubes were inadequate; in Yale State (USA).

Play took the centre spot in the early Germany Kindergartens using play toys and the 'Froebel gifts and occupations' among the pre-primary school learners (Kreck, 1977). In his study on the importance of play in both English and American pre-schools, Whitbread (2011) observed that; relevant physical, social or cognitive play and materials influenced pre-school learner's classroom participation.

A study of US by Anderson (2008), reported low levels of classroom participation where there was either no play employed whether outdoor or indoor or the teacher had inadequate play materials whether local or commercial-based. This was evidenced by a high rate of failure in task accomplishment, low confidence levels and poor turn taking abilities. In seeking to gauge the role of play in pre-scholars classroom participation, Finish study, 'The Power Of Play' (2017) found out that learning outcomes in cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains was impressive where play such as hide & seek and dramatic play were employed and low where play was lacking.

An investigation by Tarimo (2013), assessing use of play by pre-primary teachers to improve classroom participation, in Kilimanjaro region of Tanzania, established a low classroom scores for cases in which there was no play whether outdoor or indoor and cases where play materials were not enough. More to disparity of location, the study failed to address how the play materials affect learners' participation indices.

In, 'Getting Children Ready for Primary Schools in Kenya Baseline Report (2016)', survey by Tayari Pre-primary Program; nature of play and play materials have a large influence on learners' classroom participation.

Against this backdrop of the above studies cited, none had been conducted coincidental to the researcher's target area of Bunyala sub-county, Busia County, Kenya on play as a strategy on pre-schoolers' classroom participation in public pre-primary schools.

The researcher intends to address gaps cited there above and bring up as one, a conclusive finding that will show in a nutshell the types of play, its effects and play materials on pre-scholars' classroom participation indices.

1.1. Statement of the Problem

Pre-scholars' play is reflex activity necessary for a real-life experience that impacts on classroom participation. This is according to Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852), in 'The Centred Play Approach Theory'. The constitution of Kenya, 2010, envisages play as a basic right of a child. Not to be forgotten also are efforts of several child advocacy groups, in trying to ensure children get as much play opportunities in both school and home settings. However, many reports have indicated that in very many pre-primary learning centres, play as instrument of enriching pre-schoolers classroom performance has not been given the seriousness it deserves. Njagi (2009) reported that in many ECDE centres in Kenya, many children play to meet growth requirements as elicited by the natural processes of growth and development but not to meet academic expectations since there are no properly laid down structures. Matterson (2011) adds that limited studies have been done on the relationship between the efforts to inculcate play in pre-scholar's classroom programs and pre-scholar's classroom participation in light of numeracy skills, turn taking abilities and confidence levels in Bunyala sub-county as reported by Busia County Baseline Pre-school Survey Report (2016) and The Bunyala sub-county DICECE officer's records (2015-2017). This is what has necessitated the study by the researcher, setting out to asses play as a strategy on the overall learner's classroom participation.

1.2. Purpose of the Study

The research aimed at assessing play as a strategy on pre-schoolers' classroom participation in public pre-primary schools in Bunyala sub-county, Busia County, Kenya.

1.3. Objectives of the Study

The research was pegged on these objectives;

- To establish the types of play used as a strategy on pre-schoolers' classroom participation in public pre-primary schools.
- To investigate the types of play materials used to support classroom participation in public pre-primary schools.

1.4. Empirical Literature

Academic investigators and other educationists continually advocate for class-related socio-physical and cognitive playand their respective play materials that enhance cognition, numeracy, literacy and general participation among pre-schoolers. In spite of reservations from some tutors and scholars about classroom-related physical activity posing dire retrogressive impacts on task performance by learners, it's crystal clear as indicated by numerous reviews that such physical and social plays positively enhance the holistic learners' classroom behaviour and development (McMullen, Kulinna and Cothran, 2014). However, any proof on class-related bodily tasks is still scanty.

Smilansky (1990) highlights a model with five elementary play systems: Firstly, is functional play or exploratory play presented as both physical and cognitive whereby a young one gets to understand and acclimatize to own environment. Functionally, exploratory plays are more or less social in nature for instance dumping, filling, stacking, water play, and outdoor play. Constructive play as a form of mental play meant to make up a task as well as solve a problem, involves learners putting up things by assembling units or objects using blocks. Another cognitive play is dramatic play which basically employs pretence. The child is required to pretend to be somebody else, for instance the child may pretend to be a doctor or a teacher. It is important to note that dramatically, whatever form of interpersonal mingling among kids is not necessary. Another social type of play involves games with rules which comprise cooperative play, purposely either for winning or losing. Such games differ from the competitive games usually known as "sports" because they are

substantiated by child-controlled rules. Playing such games among learners start with regulations phase at around six years old and run progressively into middle childhood. Such play culture indicates that kids comprehend the social rules of our society.

Computer-aided games as a teaching-learning strategy via the Computer-Assisted Instruction and which entails the use of drill-and-practice, tutorials and simulations through computer-based tools and applications alongside a teacher as a guide in a pre-school class setting to provide learning objectives, resources and assessment of learners, impact on learner's cognition, emotions, social, moral, psychomotor, creativity, interest and independence; all aspects of classroom participation (Zavaleta et al. (2005).

1.5. Theoretical Framework

This survey was anchored on 'Social-Cultural Development Theory' (Vygotsky, 1978); which holds that through play, learners make encounters with others by use of language and role play for social growth. Vital play materials like toys, bean bags, beams, rollers and the culturally-particular practices like viable attitudes and values which the learners engage in gauged by the engagement or play time available largely influence play as a strategy on pre-schoolers' classroom participation.

According to Vygotsky, learners are lively allies in such dealings, constructing their own knowledge, experiences, values, attitudes and skills through cognitive, physical and social play. He believes that learners' mastery of social skills in play for classroom participation is influenced by the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as well as scaffold activities that include external support given by both physical and socio-cultural environment to the learner through the type of play whether cognitive, physical or social, the teacher, the play materials or the caregiver's mediation through material sharing, manipulation and interactive play. This aids in linking what the child can do independently and what he or she cannot. Vygotsky alludes that 'A child's greatest achievements of; self-confidence, turn taking, manipulation and numeracy aspects like sorting and counting as well as task completion as indicators of classroom participation are dependent on play. Therefore, classroom participation and development of pre-schoolers should be supported via play by the play type whether physical, social or cognitive and play materials.

1.5. Conceptual Framework

The study was guided by the following conceptual frame work showing the relationship between play types and materials as the independent variables and pre-schoolers' classroom participation as the dependent variable. According to Mutai (2006), conceptual framework is a graphical and diagrammatic association amid indicators in the study to enable a quick grasp of the underlying concepts.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework

1.6. Research Methodology

It adopted a mixed methodology encompassing both qualitative and quantitative approaches to generate information out of multiple sources within a single investigation (Creswell & Clark, 2011).

Because of the goals of this study, qualitative methodology was used to analyze majorly data or characteristics for which numerical value cannot be assigned such as data from observation guide. For the data whose values are numerical, quantitative approach was employed.

Descriptive survey design was used for the research. This design basically aims at is finding out the who, what, where and how of a phenomenon of a study (Cooper, 2006). Serem&Boit (2013) assert that descriptive survey design should be the most appropriate in gathering first-hand information in a relatively big populace under observation.

The researcher collected information from a sample data that represented the whole population in the research field. The target population of 27 public pre-schools, 27 head teachers, 81 teachers and 3312 pre-schoolers was informed by prior work of Singlehton (2013), which proposes that the setting be that which is associated with the investigator's concern, simply reachable and permits establishment of immediate rapport.

Target Population of Bunyala Sub-county	
Pubic ECDE Institutions	27
Head teachers	27
Teachers of Public ECDEs	81
Public ECDE Learners	3312

Table 1: Target Population

A sample size of 25 head teachers as the managers of public primary schools in which the ECDE institutions are situated were sampled using purposive sampling technique. This involved a purposeful targeting themas persons of benefit to the study (Kombo& Tromp, 2006).To obtain the desired teacher and learner samples in the study viz 50 teachers and 100 pre-unit scholars respectively, the researcher used random sampling by using lists of teachers and learners in each school and randomly picking on the ones to include in the study; 4 in each centre with full knowledge of gender awareness to avoid any form of bias as provided for by Sidhu, (2002).According to Mugenda&Mugenda (2003), sampling 10 to 20 % of the reachable populace is normal although this range changes with the size of the population under study in which case the principle was applied. It also observes that when the population is so small, it is best to take the whole of it, as sampling would be meaningless hence all the 25 heads were used.

Target Population in Bunyala Sub-county	Procedure of Sampling	Sample Size in Bunyala Sub-county
Heads of the public pre-schools	$100/100 \times 27$	25
Public pre-primary school teachers	$61/100 \times 81$	50
Public pre-unit learners	$10/100 \times 1002$	100
Total		175

Table 2: Sample Size and Frame

The quantitative data collected was analysed using descriptive statistics viz mean and standard deviation by help of the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS version 21)while qualitative data was analyzed by using content analysis. Findings were presented using tables, pie-charts and bar graphs.

2. Research Findings and Discussion

2.1. Influence of Types of Play on Classroom Participation

In assessing the extent to which different types of play influences on classroom participation among children, the respondents were given different statements asked to show the degree to which they concurred to every sentiment in regard to their centres. A five-pointLikert scale of 1-5 was adopted where: 1- represented 'Strongly disagree', 2 -'Disagree', 3- 'Neutral', 4- 'Agree' and 5- 'Strongly agree'.

'Strongly disagree' was therefore interpreted as an equivalent of mean score ranging from 0.0 to 1.0, 'Disagree' with mean score ranging from 1.1 to 2.0, 'Neutral' with a mean score ranging from 2.1 to 3.0, 'Agree' with a mean score ranging from 3.1 to 4.0 and 'Strongly agree' with a mean score ranging from 4.1 to 5.0. A standard deviation more than one (> 1) indicated significant differences in the feedbacks from participants. The findings were as presented in Table 3.

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Cognitive play helps children learn the nature of their surrounding thus improving classroom participation	170	4.11	.655
Cognitive play helps children in combining pieces or entities thus improving their classroom participation	170	4.05	.734
Social play exposes children to negotiation skills thus improving classroom participation	170	3.98	.757
Physical play increases children's physical activity levels thus improving their classroom participation	170	3.89	.749
Physical play has positive effects on improving on-task and reducing off-task classroom behaviour and selective attention among pre-school children	170	3.87	.713
Social play helps children in understanding and accepting the perspectives of other thus increasing their classroom participation.	170	3.85	.698
Mean	170	3.96	0.718

Table 3: Influence of Types of Play on Classroom Participation

The findings on Table 3 above indicates that the participants strongly agreed with the statements that cognitive play helps children learn the nature of their surrounding thus improving classroom participation (Mean 4.11) and that Cognitive play helps children in combining pieces or entities thus improving their classroom participation (Mean 4.05). It was also established that the informants agreed with the statements that social play exposes children to negotiation skills thus improving classroom participation, physical play increases children's physical activity levels thus improving their classroom participation, physical play has positive effects on improving on-task and reducing off-task classroom behaviour and selective attention among pre-school children and that social play helps children in understanding and accepting the perspectives of other thus increasing their classroom participation (Mean between 3.1 to 4.0). These findings are in line with those of Singer, Michnick Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, (2006) who found that socio-cultural values and aspirations among young ones that in turn direct them to cede to the outward forces thus behaving in culturally-acceptable manner are greatly informed and shaped by involvement in play.

2.2. Influence of the Type of Play Materials on Classroom Participation

To assess the influence of the type of play materials on classroom participation, the respondents were given different statements and asked to show the degree to which they concurred to every sentiment in regard to their centres. The findings were as presented in Table 4 below.

Statement	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Play with wooden blocks open up learning around arrangement, balance, and height through stacking, placing, and constructing thus promoting classroom participation	170	4.18	.713
A material's sensory and aesthetic properties may also transform as a child plays with it, generating opportunities for further experimentation thus promoting classroom participation	170	4.11	.603
Play with large paper sheets invites learning around gravity, weight, and shape through movement and throwing thus promoting classroom participation	170	4.08	.635
Use of different play materials allows children to extend and make their learning more complex over time thus promoting classroom participation	170	3.89	.770
Mean	170	4.07	0.680

Table 4: Influence on the Type of Play Materials on Classroom Participation

The findings on Table 4 shows that the respondents strongly agreed with the statements that play with wooden blocks open up learning around arrangement, balance, and height through stacking, placing, and constructing thus promoting classroom participation (Mean 4.18), play with large paper sheets invites learning around gravity, weight, and shape through movement and throwing thus promoting classroom participation (Mean 4.08) and that a material's sensory and aesthetic properties may also transform as a child plays with it, generating opportunities for further experimentation thus promoting classroom participation (Mean 4.11). The survey also found that the participants agreed with the statement that use of different play materials allows children to extend and make their learning more complex over time thus promoting classroom participation (Mean 3.89). These findings are in line with that of Pacini-Ketchabaw et al., (2016) who found that diverse play instructional resources are capable of uncovering distinctive and divergent education and participation lanes among pre-schoolers.

3. Conclusions

In regard to the outcomes of the research, it is summed up that pre-unit learners in Bunyala sub-county were not being exposed adequately to all forms of play as recommended. This was majorly attributed to shortage of pre-unit teachers and inadequacy of play materials in the ECD centres where these young learners go.

The researcher also concluded that there was serious inadequacy of play materials among the ECD centres in Bunyala sub-county. This was claimed to have been occasioned by inadequate funding by the government and reluctance of parents to participate in purchasing these essential materials of learning among the pre-schoolers.

Summatively, the study concluded that play is a very important component of classroom participation among the pre-schoolers and that with the right type of play and play materials in place, pre-schoolers are guaranteed active and effective classroom participation thus boosting their academic performance all factors held constant.

4. Recommendations for Practice

In reference to the research results, the following commendations were drawn;

- On types of play, it is recommended that pre-schoolers should be exposed to all types of play equally and adequately since these types of play accomplish different roles in the pre-schoolers' classroom participation.
- On the availability of play materials, the study recommends that different types of play materials should be made available for the pre-schoolers. Further the study recommends that the government through the relevant ministries should allocate more funds to help in purchasing play materials. Still on this, the study recommends that pre-unit teachers should embrace the use of locally available play materials and improvise where possible.

5. Recommendations for Policy

For effective use of play in promoting classroom participation, a few policy measures ought to be implemented among them being the following:

- Both the National and County governments should consider allocating and disbursing funds on time to the public pre-schools as envisaged in their respective governments' policy frameworks to aid the implementation of the mitigation measures in regard to play as suggested by the study.
- The National ECDE Policy Framework and Standards Guidelines 2006 should be fully enforced by the national government to provide the structures for such implementation and incorporation of play in classroom work.

6. Suggestions for Further Research

The research having been conducted in public rural ECD centers, the researcher therefore suggests that a comparable survey should be conducted in an urban setting to compare the difference between the two in terms of play as a strategy on pre-schoolers' classroom participation. Further research can also be conducted to establish the impact that play has on pre-schoolers' educational achievement.

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