



PLAY BASED LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION (ECE) CENTRES IN ZAMBIA: A TEACHER PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

The study sought to explore the nature of play-based teaching and learning at Early Childhood Education (ECE) Centres in Zambia from the perspective of teachers. A case study design was employed with a qualitative approach to collect data from participants. Data was coded and grouped according to emerging themes. Results indicate that children were engaged in both conventional and indigenous play activities mainly through free play. Teachers demonstrated a positive perspective of play based learning, asserting that play based pedagogy benefits children holistically. Implementation of play varied across ECE Centres with some teachers integrating play in the delivery of lessons and others engaged children in play activities only during the time allocated for play time on the timetable. Notable challenges faced by teachers were lack of age appropriate play infrastructure that supported learning, lack of implementation guidelines, and curriculum overload. The study has recommended the need for the Ministry of General Education to put in place guidelines on play based teaching and learning in ECE.

Keywords: child development, early childhood education, play based learning

1. Introduction

Play is the most important aspect of childhood. It is viewed, conceptualised and defined from different theoretical and ideological perspectives. There is no specific acceptable definition of play, different descriptions have been used such “play experiences” described as; meaningful, joyful, actively engaging, symbolic, iterative and socially interactive (UNICEF, 2018). For instance, Fromberg, (1992:43) defined play as “*an activity that is symbolic, meaningful, active, pleasurable, voluntary, fun, and engaging.*” From the pedagogical perspective, play is seen as an approach where teachers recognise that

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children learn through exploration and create opportunities for children to be actively engaged in the learning process.

2. Country Context

The Zambian government has identified Early Childhood Education as a policy priority area. Studies from within Zambia have demonstrated that exposure to quality early childhood experiences can facilitate for a smooth transition from Pre-school to Primary school and can also meet the developmental and academic learning needs of the children (Matafwali & Munsaka 2011; Zuilkowski, Fink, Moucheraud, & Matafwali, 2012; Matafwali & Serpell, 2014; Matafwali & Kabali, 2017). To ensure provision of quality ECE, the Ministry of General Education in 2013 embarked on curriculum reform which signified a paradigm shift in pedagogical approach at ECE level from didactic approach to play-based learning (MESVTEE, 2013). The aim of this shift was to ensure that the learning process in ECE is playful, engaging and highly interactive. The assumption is that play-based learning will provide children an opportunity to explore, discover and innovate with the teacher retaining the role of a facilitator.

2.1 Importance of Play based Learning

Play occupies children's daily routines and is described as work for children. Play also enables children to develop memory skills, language development and the potential to regulate the children's behaviour and build strong relationships (Bodrova & Leong, 2005). Evidence shows that children learn and develop through play (Bredekamp & Copple, 2009; Ginsburg, 2007; Hennigar, 2013; Johnson & Dinger, 2012; Nell & Drew, 2013). In each of these studies, play is epitomized as having a positive effect on children's learning and development. Play is said to provide an opportunity for children to develop and demonstrate knowledge, skills, concepts and disposition (Biddle, et al., 2013; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002). Parten (1932), cited in (Munsaka and Matafwali, 2013), made a systematic observation of play in Pre-school and classified it into six types namely; unoccupied play (unfocused activities such as pacing); solitary play (children play alone); onlooker play (children watch others play but not participating); parallel play (children play next to each other but with little interaction); associative Play (Children interact and associate with each other at different levels) and cooperative play (Children unite as they play). Iona & Opie in the 1960's cited in (Mtonga 2012) have further categorised the nature of play as follows: playing with toys; nursery games; ball games; chasing games; catching games; slapping or beating games; duelling or exerting games; throwing and hitting games; seeking games; guessing games; daring games; acting and role-playing games; dancing and singing games; language games; and other games and playtime activities. Pyle & Danniels (2017) recommend play-based learning that meets both developmental and academic needs of learners.

Teachers remain strategic in the implementation of any curriculum strategies. Thus, effective implementation of play-based learning requires teachers to apply

systematic approaches that would ensure that child-directed activities (free play), teacher-directed play (learning through games) and collaborated directed play (collaboratively designed play) are well coordinated with the teacher taking the role of a facilitator. Through such an approach, teachers are expected to be innovative and maximise on the use of age appropriate play materials to ensure that the learning process is engaging and playful. Charlesworth, Hart, Burts, Thomasson, Mosely, & Fleege (1993) postulate that teachers who support a didactic view of learning in Early Childhood Education are more likely to align classroom practices with their own line of thought and usually apply teacher centred pedagogy. Conversely, teachers who hold a constructivist view are more likely to engaging and use strategies that create opportunities for children to direct the learning process mainly through play-based pedagogy.

Although the importance of play to child development is well established, teacher perspective on play-based pedagogy is not adequately documented in Zambia. Previously, research has shown that creating a balance between teacher beliefs especially on didactic way of thinking and play-based curriculum is not an easy task as it requires resourcefulness on the part of the teacher. Lau & Cheng (2010) made an observation in Hong Kong classrooms that a good amount of time in Kindergartens was devoted to reading and arithmetic whilst only 30 minutes in a three hour programme was often allocated to play activities. The study further established that teacher directed activities were more prominent in spite of the government prescribing a policy that upheld a play-based curriculum for all Kindergartens. Furthermore, Fesseha and Pyle (2016) conducted a study that sought to conceptualise teacher's understanding of play based learning in the Ontario curriculum. They found that although all the teachers that participated in the study exhibited positive perspectives of play-based learning and were consistent with the definition of play based learning, more than half did not fully integrate play-based learning pedagogy in line with the curriculum. It is clear from the foregoing that although teachers may exhibit a positive perspective on play-based learning, it does not warrant effective implementation in the learning process. A study by Sjoerdsma (2016) found that Kindergarten teachers and administrators had mixed and neutral perspectives towards student-centered instruction and the concepts of play-based instruction which influenced implementation.

Challenges that have been highlighted in the implementation of play based learning are mainly conceptual and social cultural based. Pyle, Poliszczuk & Danniels (2018), reported that kindergarten teachers had conceptual and practical challenges particularly with integration play-based learning in core subject areas such as literacy and numeracy. They specifically found play-based pedagogy less structured and difficult to plan and were uncertain on how to implement guided play. Social cultural context also has an influence in the implementation of play based learning. Mtonga (2012) found that although indigenous Zambian verbal and performing arts as well as play and games are significant in the transmission of knowledge and Zambian cultural values, these indigenous practices were rapidly disappearing due to the negative effects of urbanization, modernization, and increased social-economic differences in Zambia.

Despite the challenges highlighted, teachers remain key and are therefore expected to be resourceful, creative and innovative when implementing a play-based curriculum.

3. Study Objectives

The study sought to address the following objectives:

- 1) Establish the nature of play-based teaching and learning in ECE centres;
- 2) Establish teacher perspective on play-based teaching and learning;
- 3) Identify challenges in the implementation of play-based teaching and learning.

4. Methods

The study mainly applied case study through qualitative approach. This provided an opportunity to have an in-depth understanding of the nature of play in Early Childhood centres.

4.1 Sample Size

The study comprised a total of 62 participants as follows: Ten (10) Head teachers and fifty-two (52) Early Childhood Education teachers drawn from Ten (10) ECE Centres in Lusaka and Chongwe districts of Zambia. Participants were purposively selected.

4.2 Data Collection Instruments

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from forty teachers on play-based teaching and learning in ECE Centres. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were conducted with twelve teachers on scope and challenges in the implementation of play-based teaching learning.

4.3 Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse qualitative data by coding data according to emerging themes. The qualitative data were described in detail using direct citation (verbatim). Descriptive analysis was applied to generate frequencies.

4.4 Ethical Consideration

The study took into account ethical considerations in the implementation process. Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Zambia Research Ethics Committee for Humanities and Social Sciences. At implementation stage, permission was sought from the Ministry of General Education at the provincial and district levels. The school administrators were also informed about the study. Informed consent was obtained from participants. Participants were further informed that participation was voluntary and that they were free to withdraw from the study if they felt uncomfortable.

5. Findings

Findings are presented in line with study themes; conceptualisation of play at ECE centres; teacher perspective on play-based learning; challenges in the implementation of play-based learning.

5.1 Nature of Play at ECE Centres

The findings revealed that teachers engaged children in both conventional and indigenous play activities. In order to determine the prospects of play in ECE Centres, teachers were asked to indicate the nature of play activities they engaged children in at ECE Centres. Thereafter, the types of play activities at their respective ECE Centres were scrutinised and grouped into two categories;

A. Conventional Play Activities and Indigenous Play Activities

The conventional play activities are comprised of play activities by Iona & Opie (1960's) cited in (Mtonga 2012) and those by Parten (1932), cited in (Munsaka and Matafwali, 2013). The study found that various conventional play activities were being implemented in ECE centres including: Football, Netball; Playing: with Hula-hoops; skipping ropes; building blocks; puzzles; templates; Snakes and Ladders; Ludo; Maze (network); toy cars and animals; trucks; dolls and Teddy Bears; Home corner play; water play; sand pit play; painting; skipping; beading; puzzle games; athletics; moulding and modelling; singing and dancing; story telling; playing on various play equipment (such sliding, swinging, climbing,) Pretend/role playing; Bean bag throwing; playing with toys; "Hickey, Hickey Ponkie; Hands up America; guess the profession; Word chain; guess the sound of the animal; guess the sound of the letter; Say the missing number; Police and robbers; *Sheep Sheep* come home; what's the time Mr Wolf?; and Computer/Video games.

B. Indigenous Play Activities

For indigenous play activities, most of them were played using the language of play Nyanja. Although the terms have been indicated in a Zambian language, the activities are quite similar to those cited by Iona & Opie (1960's) cited in (Mtonga 2012). These include traditional play activities and the most played were; Kalambe (Chasing game); ciyato (Catching game); nsolo (exerting game); bunga bwamale (Nursary game); pada (Exerting game); kabushikalilalila (Chasing game); Kankuluwele (Dancing and Singing games); Mulilo Kulupili (Chasing game)); Donkey kiliyo kiliyo (Exerting game); chibale (Sorting game); Ndingo ndingo ee ya ee (Attention span game); Nadyako (Daring game); Pomo dimba (Daring game); Walya ndimu, walya ndimu (Seeking game); killer (Throwing and hitting game); sojo (Throwing and hitting games); Zambe Zambe (Clapping game); Mary, Mary (Seeking game); and Rape yalungula (Attention span game).

5.2 Teachers' Perspectives of Play at ECE Centres

Teachers shared different perspectives on play-based activities children were engaged in at ECE centres.

A teacher from an ECE centre in Kalingalinga had this to say:

"The boys like playing physical activities like football, ka-touch and climbing on the Monkey boxes and the girls like playing with Teddy Bears and dollies, though generally both also participate in traditional games like kabushikalalila, agode agode, chidunu (hide and seek) and waida. Interestingly, there are also some children who do not like playing with their friends especially very young ones. Instead, they like isolating themselves and do own things."

Another teacher from the ECE centre in Olympia shared similar observations:

"Girls like group activities like singing and dancing, London Bridge is falling down, I want to see my Jane and throwing and catching activities like round us and game. Even traditional games, girls are quite selective. Mostly, they like skipping, waida and ciyato while boys would go for chidunu and kabushikalalila."

Teachers further noted that children enjoyed participating in play based activities. One of the teachers observed that:

"It seems most children don't get tired of playing because as long as you let them play, they never run out of ideas on what activities to do. Their innovations never cease to amaze me. They are such a marvel to watch."

When the teachers were asked to give their perspectives about Free play, majority of them reported that they found free play beneficial to the children although they expressed some concerns on the need for close supervision when children engage in play activities. They had the following to say:

"In my opinion, free play gives children an opportunity to interact with their friends and somehow, they develop their self-confidence, self-esteem and social skills. For example, those children who are very shy, they learn to play with their friends and slowly gain confidence." (A teacher from an ECE centre Olympia park)

Another teacher at a Pre-school in Kalingalinga made similar observations:

"Children benefit a lot from free play. At this pre-school, we like giving them plenty of toys and Jig-saw puzzles to play with which develop their fine-motor, gross-motor and cognitive skills. Now, you find that as children play, they sometimes argue or fight over a toy and in the process; they also develop conflict resolution skills."

A teacher at the ECE centre in Libala had this to say:

“I feel bad that the children I teach do not usually get opportunities to participate in free for them to sharpen other areas of child development like socio-emotional and physical development because here, during free play we are told to keep the children in-doors and give them Jig-saw puzzles and building blocks to play with.”

When teachers were probed during the FGDs to give their perspectives on how they implement play for enhancement of child development through play activities. A teacher at the ECE centre in Chongwe observed this:

“I do not consider the developmental aspects when engaging children in play activities. Whatever comes to mind is what I do with children. I think that is why it was difficult for me to even categorise the play activities children are engaged in for enhancement of child development in the questionnaire.”

Another teacher from the ECE centre in Libala noted the following:

“Madam, as much as I play with children at times, I am not in a position to categorically say how these play activities can be put according to developmental areas.”

5.3 Implementation Strategies of Play at ECE Centres

In order to establish the approach in which play was being implemented at Pre-schools. Out of the fifty-two (52) teachers who participated in the study, forty teachers (40) responded to the questionnaire.

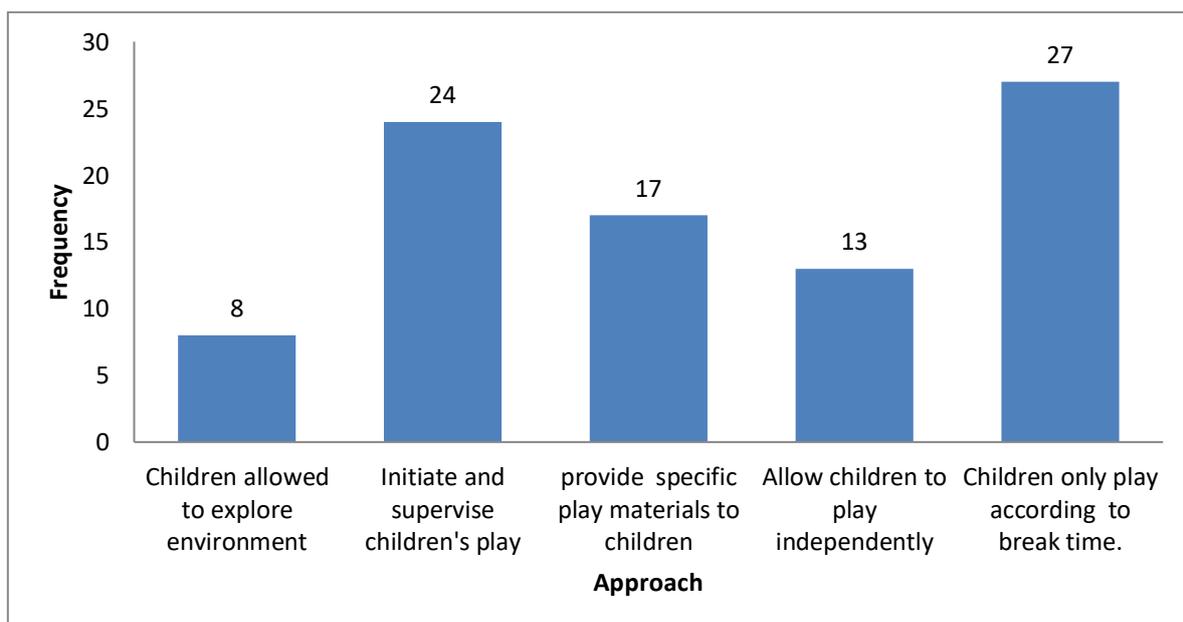


Figure 1: Implementation strategies of play based learning

Five approaches were outlined in the questionnaire and teachers were asked to tick what was applicable. The results revealed that the highest frequency was recorded by 27 teachers out of 40 who indicated that “Children only played according to break time, followed by 24 out of 40 teachers indicated that as teachers they “initiated and supervised children’s play,” whilst 17 out of 40 teachers indicated that they “provided specific play materials to children.” This suggests that children mostly played during break time as opposed to them playing independently or being allowed to explore the environment.

Different implementation approaches were highlighted by teachers. For instance, one teacher noted the following:

“I engage children in a variety of play activities both traditional and conventional activities. I try to balance the games in terms of those that develop the children physically, emotionally and those that develop their cognitive skills and their creativity, although I have noticed that children like games that are physical and fun” (Teacher from the ECE Centre in Olympia)

Another teacher at an ECE Centre in Kalingalinga said:

“It just depends on my mood and the situation in general on that particular day. If the children seem to be in the mood of playing, then we do a good number of activities, if not I let them do whatever they want.”

5.4 Challenges Teachers Faced in the Implementation of Play at ECE Centres

Several challenges were identified by teachers in the implementation of play based learning. From the given options, the results revealed that “limited play equipment” had the highest frequency with 36 teachers out of 40 citing it as a challenge, followed by “limited outdoor space” and “limited toys” which were both cited by 32 teachers out of 40. This meant that the main challenges cited by teachers from the given options were limited play equipment, limited outdoor space and limited toys.

Full details of the challenges teachers faced in the implementation of play in Pre-schools are shown in Figure 2 below.

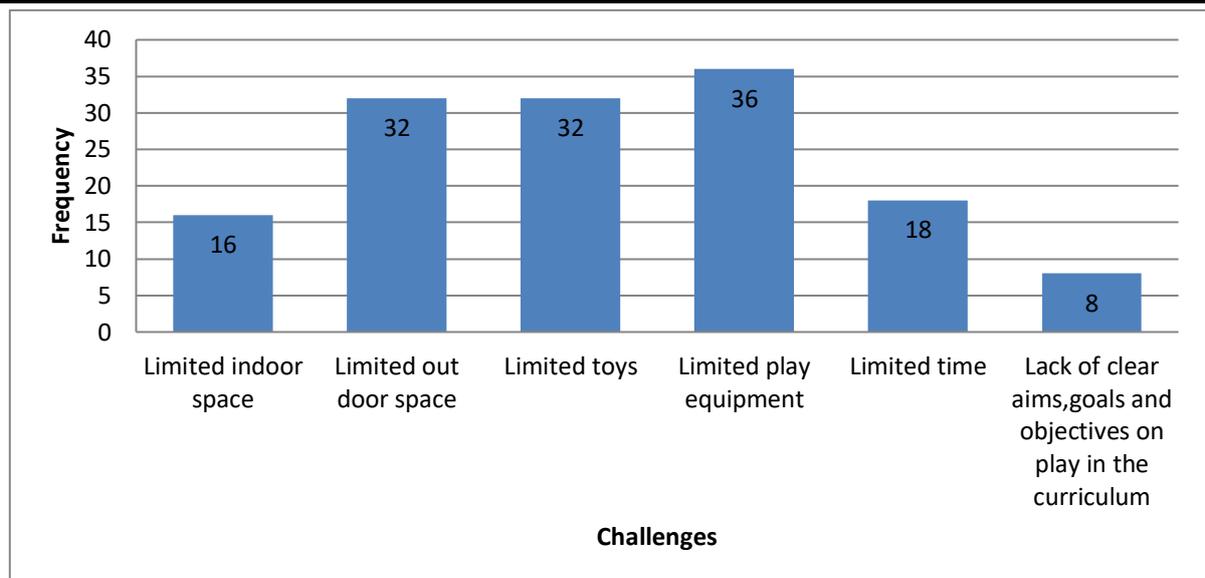


Figure 2: Challenges faced by teachers in the implementation of play

“Challenges in the implementation process were mainly related to inadequate time and lack of appropriate teaching and learning materials.”

“As much as I would like to engage children in play, time to do so is not just there. The Time-table is packed with subjects like Pre-maths, Integrated Science, and English. We are not allowed here to start playing with the children when you are supposed to be teaching.”

“I don’t usually take children outside for games because of the experience I had. One day, a boy in my class fell on the concrete whilst playing and bruised his knee, his mother shouted at me. I felt very bad. Now, I let them fix puzzles in class or just do something else in class than going outside to play.”

“I teach those in Pre-grade and I don’t have free play on my Time-table. My supervisor expects me to have a lot of reading sessions with the children. Unless on a day when there is Physical Education (PE), children at least have time to play.”

There are very few out-door play equipment and among a few which are there, some are broken and as a result, children often fight to get a chance to play there. In summarising the results, the perspective of teachers on play-based learning as a pedagogical approach was generally positive. However, implementation is constrained by inadequate and or lack of outdoor play materials. Teachers also had challenges integrating play-based learning in classroom activities.

6. Discussion

The study revealed that while teachers appreciated the importance of play-based pedagogy, they did not adequately integrate play in their lessons. This aligns with

previous findings by Fesseha and Pyle (2016) who observed that majority of teachers did not fully integrate play-based learning as described in the Ontario curriculum. Perhaps it confirms the assertion by Charlesworth, Hart, Burts, Thomasson, Mosely, & Fleege (1993) that the orientation of teachers either through constructivist or didactic would to a larger extent influence teachers' pedagogical approach to curriculum implementation. For teachers that attempted to integrate play-based pedagogy in their lessons, play was mostly teacher directed and free play was highly supervised leaving children limited freedom to explore. For instance, instead of teachers letting the children to have their own choice of play activities, children were being guided on what to do. It was clear from classroom observations and interaction with teachers that most teachers used approaches that they were conversant with and in the process failed to effectively implement play-based learning in line with curriculum guidelines.

The challenges on play equipment, limited outdoor space and limited play materials, limited time, limited in-door space and the curriculum lacking clear guidelines have previously been reported (Matafwali, 2007; Matafwali & Munsaka, 2011). Elsewhere, Pyle, Poliszczuk & Danniels (2018) identified three common challenges: i) emphasis on direct instruction playing a key instructional role when play is supposed to be key in directing instruction in Kindergarten, ii) play being less structured and difficult to plan, and iii) feeling uncertain on how to implement guided play. The present study showed that the structure of the Time-Tables at ECE Centres were overloaded with didactic activities and as a result, most periods were reserved for subjects such as Mathematics, English and Integrated science at the expense of free play. These findings are similar to those by Lau & Cheng (2010) in their Hong Kong study where they reported that a good amount of time in Kindergartens was devoted to reading and arithmetic whilst only 30 minutes in a three hour programme was often allocated to play activities. There is no doubt the curriculum structure and inadequate expertise to implement play-based learning could somewhat contribute to teachers seemingly not being certain on how to implement play-based pedagogy in the Zambia context.

7. Conclusion

This study revealed that children were involved in both conventional and indigenous play activities. Although teachers made an effort to implement play-based learning approaches and appreciated the importance of play, most of them did not seem to have adequate knowledge on the linkage between play-based activities and developmental milestones. Most importantly, some teachers had challenges in integrating play-based pedagogy in the lessons. Inadequate age appropriate teaching and learning materials plus inadequate time allocation for play-based learning were the major constraints in curriculum implementation. The study therefore recommends that teachers should be provided with guidelines on implementation of play-based teaching and learning. There is also need for capacity building for teachers on the implementation of a play-based ECE curriculum coupled with on-going mentorship by standard education officers to ensure

effective implementation of play-based teaching and learning. In addition, provision of age appropriate teaching and learning materials remains crucial for effective implementation of play-based teaching and learning.

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Disclaimer

The authors wish to declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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