

Play-Based Pedagogy in ECE Centres: An Emphasis on Module Improvement for Expanse Students

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Abstract: *The tenacity of the study was to establish the impact of play-based pedagogy in ECE centres by focusing critically on module growth for expanse students. The research was moored on learning through play approaches. 120 ECE learners and 3 teachers participated in this research. Data were collected through non-participant observations, interviews, focus group discussions and audio-visual methods in three ECE classrooms on selected teachers and children. The findings show substantial improvement on learner participation, interaction and self-regulation for children in schools that have implemented appropriate play-based pedagogy. The play-based teaching methodology is faced with challenges of time management, lack of teaching/learning materials and the use of the familiar language. It was observed that modules for expanse students require aspects of learner involvement, interaction, problem-solving, self-direction and stimulation in addition to the five main processes of module production. The study recommended the inclusion of play-based pedagogical aspects in the modules developed by the University and further research to compare schools that have already implemented play based to those that have not or are still struggling with implementation. It further recommends triangulation of methods and research that is focused on professor-student interaction, student to student interaction and collaboration, student involvement and demonstration of interest as an addition on how teachers are employing play-based pedagogy generally and how best practices such as experiential learning activities could be included in modules to be used by in-service teachers.*

Keywords: Early childhood Education (ECE), Early Learning Development Standards (ELDS), Child Observation, Experiential learning experiences and Play based pedagogy

1. Introduction

There is a universal movement globally to recognise early years education as a unique phase in children's learning, that should be branded by a curriculum that focuses on Holistic learning, and by teaching methods that are appropriate for young children (Walsh et al, 2010; OECD, 2001). The term early years is used to cover children aged between 0 and 8 which approximately entails care, middle class, reception and the first few grades in primary education (Bruce, 1991& ELDS,2016). Diverse countries have varied ages that children start school or really engage in any formal type of education and care. In Zambia, for example, the government provides basically middle class (3-4 years) and reception (5-6 years) in its current curriculum (MOE, 2013). In these two types of education for the children, the teacher and the teacher educator remains key in employing suitable methods of teaching that can inspire learning and bring about optimal development in children. The methodology remains mainly a play-based one, which should be fused in all modules developed for expanse students.

2. Aim

The aim of this research was to establish implementation of play-based pedagogy in ECE centres in view of incorporating the approach in the modules for distance students pursuing a Bachelor of Early Childhood Education. It examined best practices in play based curriculum, highlighted lessons learnt, implemented play methods in modules in a quest to address challenges ECE teachers face in implementing play based pedagogy as most of them are assumed not to be trained on how to use the said approach.

3. Literature Review

It is important to state that modern ECE in Zambia was first formalised in public schools in 2014 following the launch of Early Childhood Education in the Zambia Education Curriculum Framework of 2013. Play based pedagogy describes an approach where the teacher recognizes that children learn best through a child-centred curriculum, with rightful resources and learning materials, application of interest, creativity and motivation, planning and implementation of educational activities and recreation of behavior (Zakiah Mohamad Ashari & Mohamad Kamis Baharuddin, 2017).

A child-centred curriculum offers children the chance to make choices about what, how and with whom they want to play with. This approach enables children to initiate and direct their own play with the support of interested and responsive adults. In an ECE curriculum, children construct their own knowledge from their experiences and interactions with the world around them. Educators foster children's growth and development by building on children's interests, needs and strengths within a harmless and considerate environment (Community Childcare Victoria, 2011).

A teacher who is using play-based pedagogy guarantees that children are active. Children have a lot of hands and minds on activities. Playful environments exist during indoor and outdoor play. Further, guided and unguided learning are feasible.

In past years, children learned how to play in different age groups using various games such as 'hide and seek' as they roamed about the villages and compounds during free time

(Walsh et al, 2010). This later developed into mathematical investigations in adult –life. Today however, children are more likely to be involved in a lesson, structured games or play if these are mind stimulating and fun (Stephen, 2010a). Because of the advancement of technologies, children mostly engross in group or mixed play usually under a guidance of a teacher in school or an adult at home (Walsh et al, 2010).

Therefore, this research highlights key issues that emerged in an investigation into play-based pedagogy in Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres on the Copperbelt.

4. Methodology

Observation methods were used. Data was collected through keeping notes in a diary (Lapassade, 2000, Elliot 1991, Jorgensen, 1989). The research combined direct observation with content analysis of video- taped courses (Fontaine, 1997).

5. Limitations

The method used was not triangulated with a questionnaire. Research was not focused on professor-student interaction, student to student interaction and collaboration, student involvement and demonstration of interest but on how teachers were employing play- based pedagogy generally and how best practices could be included in modules to be used by in-service teachers.

6. Findings

This research found that, the teachers who succeeded to implement play-based pedagogy, had learnt to be patient, watching play that is primarily solitary, constructive and associative (Walsh et al, 2010). Teachers are also learning to be virtuous listeners who are able to pay attention to conversations, learn how to maintain play and make notes about issues that children would want that are currently unavailable (Ibid). Teachers are able to link the introduction to the topic, use activity method of teaching together with other methods like discussion, demonstration, corner-play and many others to achieve the stated outcomes and to drive the core ideas/facts; effectively use questioning skills thus probing questions and distributing questions evenly. Teachers were gender sensitive. They sequenced core points throughout the lesson. The classrooms were well organised and lessons went on smoothly.

This study has helped Early Childhood Education department at the University to re-look on the module content for distance students and make it more responsive to the current needs and challenges being faced by the teachers the institution is training. It is hoped that the interventions can help not only teachers from the University but the entire country and beyond.

7. Best Practices

This research learnt that, it is significant for educators to have the learners in mind when planning activities (Bruce,

1991). Educators should integrate learner's ideas and interests to come up with activities (Brooker & Edwards, 2010). In this way, the educator and the learners become co-constructors of knowledge and partners in the learning process (Bruce, 1991; Brooker & Edwards, 2010).

According to Jones & Reynolds (2011), space is very significant for play to take place in a manner that would stimulate learning. As argued by Rogers (2011), if the house or inside the classroom is small to accommodate most of the activities then, it is better to let children play in both inside and outside.



Figure 1: Example of In-door play

For outdoor activities, children can be allowed to play in the garden or yard.



Figure 2: Example of Out-door play

The role of the educator would be to plan the environment that has activities that are arranged in provoking and inviting ways to encourage exploration, learning and inquiry. This can only be achieved by giving children autonomy as they play (Bruce, 1991). It is important to note that when many activities are displayed, children will develop interest and will be able to follow activities in their own way.



Figure 3: Example of children involved in a number of activities

This is important to reflect on because when children discover something on their own, remembering becomes easier (Stephen, 2010).

Play does not happen in an emptiness, it is undertaken within a physical and social space (Lester & Russell, 2008). When children are playing, they learn to resolve conflicts, negotiate and regulate their behaviours (Refer to figure 2 and 3 above).

One of the best ways to achieve this is not to allow adults to interfere in children's activities. When several children are playing together, allow them as far as possible to settle their own dispute. Children should be aware that sometimes play contains frustrations, challenges and fears (Shipley & Duncan, 2008). Despite challenges and fears, play should be enjoyed. Though adults are not supposed to interfere, they can play a part to monitor children and can always interfere when they notice that play has become harmful. The educator should inspire children to make connections with others, develop friendships and regulate their behaviours (Ahn, 2005).

Play supports the development of a whole child. It helps learners on how to deal with anxiety, frustration, normal development conflicts, traumatic situations, unfamiliar concepts and overpowering experiences (Berk, Mann & Ogan, 2006). It also gives learners numerous opportunities to feel good about themselves because there is no right or wrong way to play. Children have successful experiences that positively influence their self-concepts in this kind of play learning.

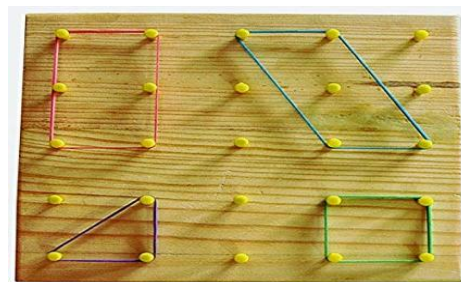
It is logical for the educators not to be fearful when a child shows adventurous spirit and should not bother over small injuries (Kontos, 1995). A child must be allowed to climb, jump, and explore, because in such ways it learns to judge width, height and distance, and develop self-confidence. It is also imperative to teach the child to take care for its toys without preventing it from enjoying and provide adequate warning that can safeguard all children during play.

Further, this research learnt on how to effectively use and interpret basic curriculum materials namely the syllabus, children text books and teachers guide as well as other

reference books, selecting appropriate relevance previous knowledge for the topic, stating of outcomes that are achievable, measurable and observable and suit the level of the children; selecting of teaching and learning activities that help children to develop necessary learning styles such as curiosity/initiative, persistence, attention, self-direction, problem-solving and creativity. (Early learning and development standards for Zambia, 2016) and acquire proper knowledge based on the other remaining developmental domains such as cognition and general knowledge including early mathematics and early scientific development, physical well-being and motor development, social and emotional development; spiritual and moral development (ibid); preparation of the daily programmes, schemes of work, writing an integrated lesson plan, assessing learners among others.

In order to implement the lessons learnt from this research, the modules have been written in such a way that they are interactive and teachers acquire skills for directing play (for example, role play) using the full continuum of teaching strategies: recognise, model, facilitate, support, scaffold, co-construct, demonstrate and direct (Bredenkamp & Rosegrant, 1997). In this respect, a teacher shows children exactly what classroom activities and rules look like by directly instructing and demonstrating (Anderson & Spainhower, 2012). This allows children to then practice the skills taught with sporadic modelling, facilitating or support from the teacher when needed (Bruce, 1991). Throughout all these processes, teachers ensure that they allow children to make their own decisions and resolve their own problems whenever possible. The teacher is however, invigorated to be nearby and provide support, scaffolding and co-construction of knowledge with the children.

The modules being developed at the University have an overwhelming of illustrations, play based activities (for example, games, stories, puzzles among others).



And captions that arouse thinking ability for teachers who need a lot of ideas to plan and deliver play based lessons to the children. In this regard, the teacher studies various methods of engaging children in play based pedagogy by providing skills to small groups of children through direct-instruction lessons which would be repeated by the children themselves without the teacher's guidance-for example, corner play- (UNICEF-The LEGO Foundation, 2018). The teacher later assesses the lesson by reconsidering the group activities with the children and making corrections where necessary.

This research feels play based pedagogy is well suited to supporting diversity and inclusive education, as it nurtures

the interests, insights and backgrounds of all children (Wood & Attfield, 2005). Play offers an opening for child's natural instincts and emotions. It is a means by which a child will improve mentally, physically, socially and emotionally by acquiring knowledge and skills through watching the result of its actions. Mental and physical development cannot take place to the completest extent unless a child is allowed to discover and develop in its own way. A busy child is happy and gives little concern. It may appreciate ideas and suggestions from older people, admiration and praise of its success but it will dislike their interference in play. The kind of play and the involvement gained will depend upon the needs of the individual child. If therefore a child is provided with a diversity of materials with which to experiment, it will use those, which give it the greatest satisfaction.

There is no research that can be completed without any challenges. Early childhood education (ECE) is a relatively new concept in Zambia. It has not yet been fully appreciated by many including education professionals (VvoB, 2020). This in itself gives an insight into what kind of challenges are faced by the sector. Some of the challenges faced were lack of equipment to use for example laptops, cameras, printing, laminating and binding facilities; qualified personnel to proof read, content edit, illustrate and quality assure the modules; infrastructure where to do the printing of modules and keep modules; transport to help the department monitor the way modules are being used by distance learners.

Teachers teaching in these classrooms are however, not well vest in modern methods of teaching such as 'play based pedagogy'. This is evidenced in the number of teachers visited on the Copperbelt during this research. This challenge among teachers is necessitated by the fact that their trainers (lecturers) in colleges and universities are themselves learning the play based pedagogy as they train teachers. This makes it difficult for teachers to implement appropriate teaching methods that are play based in nature as they lack skills. Often time's teachers have used traditional methods such as organizing their classroom with traditional activity areas such as surgery, cookery and constructive materials and afterwards remain inactive. They simultaneously apply the same activity to all the children and ignore that all the children do not have the same interests, possibilities and rates of development (Eadap, 2003) in Vassiliki Riga & Kafenia Botsogiou (2004). Further, this methods are usually meant for older children in primary and junior secondary (ibid).

8. Recommendations

This research recommends the following:

- 1) Stakeholders be capacity built in play based pedagogy to enable them identify suitable aims and outcomes, determine the previous knowledge and describe a detailed play based curriculum to include in the modules. When this is done the pedagogical approach and way of structuring course materials will be eased.
- 2) Each group of children in an early childhood centre or school should be assigned a teacher, who has initial early childhood training.
- 3) Education programs for teachers should provide them with stronger and more specific foundational knowledge of the development of children's social, effective behaviour, thinking and language.
- 4) A critical component of pre-service preparation should be a supervised relevant student teaching or internship experience in which new teachers receive on going guidance and feedback from a qualified supervisor.
- 5) All early childhood education and childcare programs should have access to a qualified supervisor.
- 6) Departments and other agencies interested in young children and their families should initiate programs of research and development aimed at learning more about effective preparation of early childhood tendencies.
- 7) The building of demonstration schools and extra infrastructure to accommodate new developments in ECE should be considered by relevant authorities.
- 8) Ministry of education should consider engaging Universities and colleges that have expertise in ECE training in the development, implementation, monitoring and review of curriculum and standards.
- 9) Because research has identified good practices that are appropriate and important for inclusion in early childhood programs, standards should be developed and evaluated regularly to ascertain whether they are in conformity with the current scientific understanding of children learning.
- 10) Organisation and government bodies concerned with the education of young children should actively promote public understanding of early childhood education and care.

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