

The Role of Child's Play in Child's Growth, Child's Development, and Child's Learning in the Mprumem Circuit of the Gomoa West District

Derrick Nii Quarcoopome Sackey¹, Maame Esi Anderson², David Akrofi³, Mary Rosaline Ansah⁴,
Joana Mensah⁵

¹Department of Social Sciences, SDA College of Education, Asokore-Koforidua, Ghana

²Bewadze D/A Basic School, Mprumem Circuit, Gomoa West District, Ghana

³Department of Education, SDA College of Education, Asokore-Koforidua, Ghana

⁴Department of Education, SDA College of Education, Asokore-Koforidua, Ghana

⁵Simiw M/A Basic School, Komenda-Edina-Eguafo-Abrem Municipal, Ghana

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the study was to investigate how early childhood teachers in the Mprumem Circuit of the Gomoa West District of the Central Region of Ghana perceive the role of child's play in child's growth, child's development and child's learning in early childhood setting. The study was guided by three research questions. A purposive random sampling method was used to sample forty-five respondents for the study. Questionnaires were distributed to early childhood centers who agreed to participate in the study. This study concludes that play helps children's cognitive development in a variety of ways, and children learn to use language as a tool to meaningfully communicate with others through play. Also, this study concludes that inadequate trained teachers, emphasis on rote-based teaching, and inadequate play-based resources are the main challenges. The study recommends that the Ghana Education Service needs to organize regularly an in-service professional development programme to empower early childhood teachers. Again, administrators of early childhood institutions in the Mprumem Circuit need to make provisions for play-based materials to be readily available for teaching and learning.

Keywords: Child's growth, Child's development, Child's learning, Play-based learning, Early childhood education, Early childhood setting

INTRODUCTION

According to Kendrick (2005), play is a crucial mechanism for fostering children's learning and development. Play helps children develop their emotional, intellectual, physical, and social skills in ways that cannot be taught in a traditional classroom setting. Children who have a foundational understanding of the universe can be guided by playing games, and this foundational understanding will pave the path for them to learn about language, art, social science, arithmetic, and physics. There are numerous learning possibilities in children's play, but there is no assurance that kids will pick up everything they need to know through play. Giving kids the option to select from a variety of carefully thought-out, engaging learning activities increases the likelihood that they will learn via play. Both Piaget and Vygotsky highlighted the impact of play on children's growing cognitive abilities, particularly the talents (Tarman & Tarman, 2011).

Since there are benefits and drawbacks to including teachers in children's play, this topic has generated

debate. Children's play is enhanced by teacher involvement, which also helps them grow intellectually and socially. On the other hand, if teachers intervene during play and provide more structured cognitive exercises through it (Johnson et al., 2005), this will disturb the children's play. With Smilansky's research on play training, the teacher's role in play has gained significance. The developmentally normal processes of children and the kindergarten's nondirective enriched environment are insufficient to provide the underprivileged children the boost they need. These children won't have the conditions necessary to develop socio-dramatic play without some sort of positive parental or educational intervention (Smilansky cited in Tarman & Tarman, 2011). Children's learning experiences in early childhood settings are influenced by instructors' pedagogical views, knowledge, and willingness to put theory into practice. Thus, teachers who recognize the importance of play and are aware of how play may support children's learning, growth and development can foster an environment in the classroom where children can fully benefit from what play has to offer.

Statement of the Problem

Play has historically had a significant and undisputed role in children's development and is still vital in early childhood educational practices today. Play has been deemed to be developmentally suitable for instruction in early childhood settings over the years. Play has been promoted and utilised in early childhood educational techniques by philosophers including Froebel, Montessori, Piaget, Vygotsky, Dewey, and Gardner (Abdulai, 2014). The relevance of play in young children's development of pre-academic skills is supported by literature already in print. Despite these, there are growing worries about how play is used in the classroom by instructors, the difficulties involved in using play, and how to create a "play friendly" environment. Fascinatingly, Abdulai (2014) asserts that little is known about the role of play in early childhood educational settings in Ghana. Even if the majority of teachers don't use actual objects in their lessons, studies have shown that learning happens spontaneously (Ministry of Education, Ghana, 2012).

According to studies by Agbenyega and Klibthong (2011), Buabeng-Andoh (2012), and reports ordered by government agencies (Ministry of Education, Ghana, 2012), kindergarten teachers are not well-equipped to successfully execute the play-based pedagogy that is advised. The insufficient play-based pedagogy material coverage at the pre-service level and the lack of ongoing in-service professional development programs to address some of the knowledge and skill-related problems are a few factors put out for this lack of preparation (Tamanja, 2016). The goals of Ghana's early childhood education curriculum are heavily based on theories of play, which are seen to be good for children's learning, development, and growth. It might be worthwhile to look into how teachers perceive the role of child's play in child's learning and development, the role of teachers in child's play, growth and development, and the challenges teachers face when organizing play-based pedagogy in early childhood classrooms in the Mprumem Circuit of the Gomoa West District.

Research Questions

In order to achieve the objectives of the study, the following research questions were formulated.

1. What is the perception of early childhood teachers towards the role of play-based pedagogy in child's growth, development and learning in early childhood setting in the Mprumem Circuit?
2. What is the role of early childhood teachers in child's play, growth, development and learning in early childhood settings in the Mprumem Circuit?
3. What are the challenges of planning and implementing play-based pedagogy in early childhood settings in the Mprumem Circuit?

Significance of the Study

There is significant amount of researches on children's play in early childhood in the country. However,

there seem to be very little concentration of research on the role of play-based pedagogy on children's growth, development and learning in the Mprumem Circuit of the Gomoa West District. Therefore, the results and findings of this study would bridge the study gap and bring to light; the role of play-based pedagogy on child's growth, development and learning, the role of teachers in using play-based pedagogy, and the challenges associated with planning and implementing play-based pedagogy in the early childhood classroom. Given the foregoing, this study aims to give insights into how early childhood teachers in the Mprumem Circuit of the Gomoa West District of the Central Region of Ghana perceive the role of child's play in child's growth, child's development and child's learning in early childhood settings.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

Theories in Play

According to Montessori (2008), children learn best through sensory experiences and can gain life skills through engaging in classroom activities. Piaget promotes the notion that interactions between children and their settings lead to learning (Alharbi & Alzahrani, 2020). Piaget and Montessori emphasize the value of an open atmosphere that offers a variety of opportunities for children to investigate and build upon their experiences. Piaget also emphasizes the value of play as a method of learning (Mooney, 2013). During play, children have the chance to fully develop their minds, bodies, emotions, and social skills in order to be well-prepared for life.

In addition, Vygotsky (2004) affirms that play is an important part of children's learning and development. Vygotsky changed the way educators think about and perceive play. In all learning disciplines, play is a crucial component for children. Also, according to Vygotsky, play plays a crucial part in children's learning, growth, and development. Vygotsky also believes that development and language are interconnected and build upon one another. In his explanation of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Vygotsky emphasizes the need for teachers scaffolding their students' learning and growth through play-based learning.

The Importance of Play-Based Pedagogy in Early Childhood Education

Play is regarded as being pleasurable, fun, and process-focused. Typically, a player's external goal during play is absent (Ashiabi, 2007). Play is crucial for children's growth and learning since it greatly affects their cognitive, physical, social, and emotional health. According to Stegelin et al. (2015), play helps children's cognitive development in a variety of ways, including perspective-taking, memory, linguistic proficiency, and creativity. Play supports a variety of facets of a child's development. Children learn to use language as a tool to meaningfully communicate with others through play, which establishes a social environment (Weisberg et al., 2013). Froebel and Vygotsky's contention that play is a developmental tool throughout children's preschool years and that creativity may be effectively cultivated as a necessary life skill is described by Aljarrah (2017). Play is the children's business and their method of exploring the world. The point of argument here is that there is a strong link between play and learning for young children especially in the areas of problem solving, literacy, and social skills. According to Pyle and Danniels (2017), a teacher-directed emphasis deprives children of opportunity for stress-relieving play.

Children learn to read, write, utilize math and science concepts, and use these skills through play. Young children learn through sensory encounters and develop the life skills they will need. Play is useful in developing the curriculum, including subjects like reading, writing, science, and mathematics. Children's comprehension of stories is increased when they act out stories through dramatic play, according to Oppong Frimpong (2021). Also, when children play with symbols (symbolic play), it gives them the fundamental skills they'll need for future writing and reading (Stone & Burriss, 2016). Kamii (2000) is aware of how play encourages youngsters to make connections between objects, which is crucial for the growth of number

sense. Children have the chance to think creatively and divergently to solve issues in novel ways and to forge their own scientific identities by experimenting with science (Stone, 2016).

Teachers' Role in Children's Play, Growth, Development and Learning

While the value of play in children's development is universally acknowledged, there is continuous debate regarding the extent to which teachers should participate in children's play (Tsai, 2015). The various concepts stem from various educational understandings of how play affects children's learning. Children's play is typically thought of as a child-led activity that children carry out on their own, unsupervised by adults. According to this viewpoint, teacher intervention is unnecessary during child-led play because it is believed to be the most useful for children's learning. Teachers may have different objectives, such as teaching academic subjects, and their involvement may impede children's play from developing naturally. On the other hand, other studies (Wood, as referenced in Altun, 2018) indicate that there is no assurance that child-guided play will result in high-quality learning outcomes. Involving teachers can improve children's play skills and support their social, cognitive, and language development (Smilansky & Shefatya, 2010).

Research literature on teacher's perspective on play shows that even though teachers value play in the classroom settings, they have different views on involving children's play in their classrooms. Enz and Christie (cited by Altun, 2018) studied teachers' play interaction styles and concluded that teachers use four different styles which are stage manager, co-player, play leader and director roles. The stage manager style includes making props and materials accessible, responding to children's needs, and organizing the play environment. In co-player style, teacher takes an active but a minor role in children's play. In play-leader role, as similar to the co-player style, teachers are active in play episodes and have extended role such as being a leader introducing new elements in ongoing play episodes. Finally, in director role, teachers decide the play theme and the children who are going to be actors in the play. In this style, teachers stay out of the play and give some directions or ask direct questions to the children during the play (Altun, 2018). In a study, Kontos (cited by Altun, 2018) observed forty (40) teachers and found that most of the teacher's role in children play were either helping children to involve in the play (stage manager) or facilitate children's ongoing play activity (play enhancer).

Challenges Associated with Planning and Implementing Play-Based Pedagogy

In the Ghanaian context, the play-based pedagogy has been emphasized in the national preschool curriculum and teachers are encouraged to adopt play-based activities in their teaching and learning process. Puteh and Ali (2013) reiterated that play focuses on children's natural characteristics and that learning through play is the most appropriate approach in early childhood curriculum. Nonetheless, managing play-based activities is one of the most challenging tasks that teachers have to face. Studies have shown that many teachers never prioritize the use of play approach in their teaching instruction. This is because they lack the skills in planning and organizing activities and in using materials and resources effectively during play activities (Puteh & Ali, 2013). In Ghana, like in most countries in the world where early childhood education has been overlooked for many decades; large class sizes, lack of play-based resources and teaching materials, teacher absenteeism, and emphasis on rote-based teaching have been a major challenge to the smooth organization of play-based pedagogy (Dzamesi & Heerden, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

The study employed the descriptive survey design. Descriptive research determines and reveals the way things are and is directed towards the determination of the nature of a situation as it exists at the time of the study. Amedahe and Asamoah Gyimah (2016) believe that the purpose of descriptive research is to observe, describe, and document aspects of a situation as it naturally occurs. The aim of the study was to investigate how early childhood teachers in the Mprumem Circuit of the Gomoa West District of the Central Region of

Ghana perceive the role of child’s play in child’s growth, child’s development and child’s learning. Hence, the use of the descriptive survey design was justified. The research instrument used was a questionnaire which consisted of closed ended items. The questionnaire had of four sections. Section A gathered demographic data of the respondents. Section B asked respondents to provide responses to items concerning the perception of teachers towards the role of child’s play in child’s growth, development and learning. Sections C gathered responses on the role of teachers in using play-based pedagogy in the early childhood classroom. Section D looked at challenges associated with using play-based pedagogy in the early childhood classroom. A purposive random sampling method was used in the selection of the sample. In all, forty-five (45) questionnaires were distributed to early childhood centers who agreed to participate in the study. The sample were drawn from public schools (government) with early childhood centers in the Mprumem Circuit. Items on the questionnaire were responded to by staff involved in early childhood activities at each school except the head of the institution (if he/she is not a class teacher). Frequencies, percentages, mean scores, and standard deviation were generated to describe the number of responses to each item. These were then presented in tables and discussed.

DATA ANALYSIS

Research Question One

What is the perception of early childhood teachers towards the role of play-based pedagogy in child’s growth, development and learning in early childhood setting in the Mprumem Circuit? This research question gathered data on the perception of early childhood teachers on the role of play-based pedagogy on children’s development and learning. Table 1 presents the data gathered from the respondents.

Table 1: Role of Play-Based Pedagogy on Child’s Growth, Development and Learning

Role of Play	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Mean	Std. Deviation
Children learn to use language as a tool to meaningfully communicate with others through play.	17 (38%)	23 (51%)	5 (11%)	2.267	.6537
Play helps children’s cognitive development in a variety of ways.	20 (44%)	22 (49%)	3 (7%)	2.378	.6138
Play helps children to improve their socio-emotional skills.	15 (33%)	19 (42%)	11 (25%)	2.089	.7634
Play helps children to explore the world.	13 (29%)	15 (33%)	17 (38%)	1.911	.8208
Children’s comprehension of stories is increased through play.	17 (38%)	19 (42%)	9 (20%)	2.178	.7474
Play encourages children to make connections between objects.	12 (27%)	15 (33%)	18 (40%)	1.867	.8146

From Table 1, the statement Play helps children’s cognitive development in a variety of ways had the highest mean score (Mean = 2.378, Standard Deviation = 0.6138). This finding is in line with the believe of Stegelin et al. (2015) that play helps children’s cognitive development in a variety of ways including perspective-taking, memory, linguistic proficiency, and creativity.

Also, from Table 1, the statement Children learn to use language as a tool to meaningfully communicate with others through play had the second highest mean score (Mean = 2.267, Standard Deviation = 0.6537).

This finding supports the assertion by Weisberg et al. (2013) that children learn to use language as a tool to

meaningfully communicate with others through play which establishes a social environment.

In contrast, from Table 1, the statement Play encourages children to make connections between objects had the least mean score (Mean = 1.867, Standard Deviation = 0.8146). This finding contradicts the view of Kamii (2000) that play encourages youngsters to make connections between objects which is crucial for the growth of number sense.

Research Question Two

What is the role of early childhood teachers in child’s play, growth, development and learning in early childhood settings in the Mprumem Circuit? This research question gathered data on the role of early childhood teachers in children’s growth, development and learning through play-based pedagogy. Table 2 presents the data gathered from the respondents.

Table 2: Teachers’ Role in Children’s Play-Based Pedagogy

Role of Teachers	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Mean	Std. Deviation
Stage manager: teacher makes materials accessible, responds to children’s needs and organize the classroom.	15 (33%)	21 (47%)	9 (20%)	2.133	.7261
Co-player: teacher takes active but minor role in children’s play.	18 (40%)	24 (53%)	3 (7%)	2.333	.6030
Play leader: teacher takes active role in play and have extended roles.	19 (42%)	21 (47%)	5 (11%)	2.311	.6682
Director role: teacher decides the play theme and the children who are going to be actors in the play.	15 (33%)	16 (36%)	14 (31%)	2.022	.8115

From Table 2, the statement Teacher takes active but minor role in children’s play had the highest mean score (Mean = 2.333, Standard Deviation = 0.6030). This finding is in line with the findings of Kontos (cited by Altun, 2018) that most of the teacher’s role in children play is to facilitate children’s ongoing play activity.

Also, from Table 2, the statement Teacher takes active role in play and have extended roles had the second highest mean score (Mean = 2.311, Standard Deviation = 0.6682). This finding supports the view of Enz and Christie (cited by Altun, 2018) that teachers are active in play episodes and have extended role such as being a leader introducing new elements in ongoing play episodes.

Research Question Three

What are the challenges of planning and implementing play-based pedagogy in early childhood settings in the Mprumem Circuit? This research question gathered data on the challenges of planning and implementing play-based pedagogy in early childhood settings. Table 3 presents the data gathered from the respondents.

Table 3: Challenges Associated with Planning and Implementing Play-Based Pedagogy

Challenges	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Mean	Std. Deviation
Inadequate trained teachers	20 (44%)	22 (49%)	3 (7%)	2.378	.6138
Large class sizes	13 (29%)	27 (60%)	5 (11%)	2.178	.6138

Lack of play-based resources	19 (42%)	18 (40%)	8 (18%)	2.244	.7433
Lack of support from administrators	15 (33%)	22 (49%)	8 (18%)	2.156	.7057
Emphasis on rote-based teaching	18 (40%)	22 (49%)	5 (11%)	2.289	.6614

From Table 3, the statement Inadequate trained teachers had the highest mean score (Mean = 2.378, Standard Deviation = 0.6138). This finding is in line with the conclusion of Buabeng-Andoh (2012) that kindergarten teachers are not well-equipped to successfully execute the play-based pedagogy in their classrooms.

Also, from Table 3, the statement Emphasis on rote-based teaching had the second highest mean score (Mean = 2.289, Standard Deviation = 0.6614). This finding supports the view of Dzamesi and Heerden (2020) that emphasis on rote-based teaching have been a major challenge to the smooth organization of play-based pedagogy in early childhood settings.

Again, from Table 3, the statement Lack of play-based resources had the third highest mean score (Mean = 2.244, Standard Deviation = 0.7433). This finding is in line with the view of Tamanja (2016) that insufficient play-based pedagogy material coverage at the pre-service level is one of the many challenges associated with involving children in play-based pedagogy in the early childhood settings.

CONCLUSIONS

Guided by the research questions of this study, as well as the findings presented above, the conclusions of this study are as follows.

1. Based on the data gathered and analysed for research question one, this study concludes that the perception of early childhood teachers in the Mprumem Circuit towards the role of play-based pedagogy in children’s growth, development and learning include; play helps children’s cognitive development in a variety of ways, and children learn to use language as a tool to meaningfully communicate with others through play.
2. From the data presented on Table 5, this study concludes that the role of early childhood teachers in children’s play include teachers in the Mprumem Circuit acting as co-players and play leaders.
3. With regards to the challenges associated with planning and implementing play-based pedagogy in the Mprumem Circuit, this study concludes that inadequate trained teachers, emphasis on rote-based teaching, and inadequate play-based resources are the main challenges.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made.

1. The Ghana Education Service needs to develop and organize regularly an in-service professional development programme to empower early childhood teachers in the Ghanaian setting to use familiar indigenous forms of play including folktales and games to teach the early childhood curriculum.
2. Administrators of early childhood institutions in the Mprumem Circuit need to make provisions for play-based materials to be readily available for teaching and learning. Also, heads of early childhood institutions in the Mprumem Circuit need to make play-based pedagogy a priority in teaching and learning by insisting that early childhood teachers regularly use play in all teaching activities.

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