

Teaching children through play in Debre Markos City Administration: Practices, challenges, and opportunities

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Abstract

The study aimed to explore the practice, challenges and opportunities of teaching pre-school children through play. Descriptive qualitative design was used in the study. Six preschools out of 35 preschools in the city, and six teachers were selected purposively. Data were collected through interview and observation in indoor and outdoor settings. Semi-structured interview guide and observation checklist were utilized. The data were analyzed by using thematic analysis technique, which involved coding the data, identifying patterns, and developing themes relevant to the study objectives. The result revealed that teachers unanimously expressed beliefs about the importance of play for teaching children but their practices various in various ways. Regarding challenges the study identified multiple constraints including large class size, lack of play materials, and grounds, teachers' lack of pedagogical skills and low professional efficacy; while the theme of opportunities for using play to teach children composed of sub-themes such as policy provisions that encourage the use of play, children's interest to play, teachers' devotion to use play as an instructional strategy and the suitable physical setting of the schools. In conclusion, although teachers demonstrate good understanding of the role play in teaching children, the actual practice lags behind the expected standard. The finding has implications for practice and intervention.

Keywords: Early childhood, care, Education, play, outdoor class

Introduction

Play is an instructional methodology for the implementation of preschool education program to enhance the physical, mental, social, and emotional aspects of children's development. Involvement in both individual and common games promotes functional and social skills. According to MoE (2009), the type of play in which children engage, should be chosen by the children themselves and facilitated by the teacher (MOE, 2009).

Teachers believe that play is important and necessary in early childhood. They are equally unclear of their role in play due to a lack of training and knowledge coupled with personal perceptions, experiences, and curricular demands (Shindler, 2010). According to Smith (1995) teachers perceive that children learn best through play but many teachers often lean predominately towards a teacher-led environment because of top-down pressure, lack of time or inadequate training in play-based pedagogy.

Play-based learning is a child-centered approach where children engage in learning through play (Ashiab, 2007). Integration between play and learning fosters the development of fundamental skills required for problem solving, language acquisition, literacy and numeracy competence, as well as social and emotional regulation (Smith & Peter, 2008). Play provides children more opportunities to interact with their peers and understand how to regulate their behaviors in certain situations (Saldatia, 2009). Challenges exist when classes are too large when more than 30 children are in small space; it is challenging to give children active experiences with materials. Large classes also make it difficult for teachers to support children's play through personal conversations and through provoking questions. Preschool teachers reported challenges regarding the difficulties related to the discrepancies of assessment and teaching through play to meet curriculum expectations (Drew, 2023; Pelletier, 2014). With class sizes slowly increasing, gaining insight on students' development is difficult, especially when there is a lot of movement going on within the class. Teachers must find the time to constantly observe children and create activities (Karia, 2014).

The Ministry of Education (MoE, 2009) established national standards specifying maximum class size thresholds for pre-primary schools. According to these standards, the maximum number of children per class is set at 30, with a total enrollment cap of 240 children per school.

Teachers' understanding of the meaning of play varies across various research (Samuelsson & Johansson, 2006). Different definitions and perspectives of play and learning make it challenging for teachers to integrate play within their classroom (Pyle & Bigelow, 2015).

For this study, play as an instructional approach, is underpinned by the cognitive and social constructivist learning perspective. From the constructivist viewpoint, children learn through engagement with the objects around them and through the social

interaction with caregivers, peers, teachers and with more capable adults (Göncü & Main, 2023, and Walish, 2010).

Many teachers do not have the training, knowledge and skills to implement a method of teaching children through play in their classrooms. They may think of learning materials are only as workbooks or charts on the wall rather than objects that children can explore and use in their learning (Samuelson and Johansson, 2006).

Statement of the problem

Teaching children through play can cause both excitement and frustration for teachers. Pyle and Bigelow (2015) studied on play in the kindergarten classrooms, but they overlooked to explore the challenges and opportunities teachers faced while using play as an instructional strategy. Another study by Smith and Peter (2008) emphasized on lack of play opportunities and its association with anxiety, depression, suicidal tendencies, and feeling of helplessness and obesity. It was highly related to personal challenges. But the current study intended to find out challenges and opportunities pertinent to the use of play as an instructional strategy in the context of the study area. In addition, being a parent, the authors had close contact and exposure to observe preschools of the study area. Experiential evidence witnessed that Preschool teachers were struggling in keeping the balance between the implementation of play as an teaching- learning strategy and achieving curriculum standards and parent expectations in learning outcomes of numeracy and literacy skills. These problems motivate the authors to conduct the study.

Therefore, the study aimed to achieve the following specific objectives

1. To investigate preschool teachers understanding on teaching children through play.
2. To assess preschool teachers' practices in teaching children through play.
3. To identify the major challenges influencing the implementation of teaching children through play.
4. To investigate the opportunities for better implementation of teaching children through play.

Significance of the study

The findings generate mammoth importance by providing deeper context-based sagacity into the issue under study. Results are particularly significant for pre-primary school teachers and the principals in resolving practice-level challenges so as to ensure

optimal learning and development among children. Findings are significant for practitioners to develop child-friendly and play-based intervention programs.

Methods

Study Design

The study utilized qualitative descriptive research design to explore the practice of play as an instructional strategy to teach early childhood children. The design is well suited for generating in-depth and context-specific empirical evidences. It enables the researchers to capture teachers' and observed practices. Qualitative descriptive design focuses more on plenary description to present, analyze and interpret data than inference and abstraction as the case in other qualitative study designs such as grounded theory and phenomenology (Colorafi & Evans, 2016; Lammbert & Lambert, 2012).

Study area

The study was conducted in Debre Markos City administration, which is capital city of the East Gojjam Zone in Amhara Region. There were 35 preschools in the city administration of which 21 schools were privately owned while the rest 14 were government schools. Government schools offer payment-free services.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

The study used purposive sampling techniques to select six teachers and respective pre-primary schools in order to collect relevant data aligned with the objectives of the study. Participant teachers were intentionally designated based on school type (government or private), school location (downtown or periphery), teaching experience (3-11 years), training and educational background (certificate or diploma levels) and willingness to involve in the study.

The sample size was determined by the guiding principle of data richness and saturation rather than statistical representation. Hence, purposive sampling allowed the authors for targeted exploration of the practice, challenges and opportunities in using play to teaching children in the early childhood period of development.

Data collection instrument

Interviews as well as indoor and outdoor observations were used as data collection instruments to explore teachers' perspectives, lived experiences, and practices in using play for their day-to-day instructional activities.

A semi-structured interview guide was prepared in line with the objectives of the study and relevant review literature. The guide enabled us to maintain consistency across interviewees and enabled us to pose flexible probing for new ideas and clarification of responses. The contents of the guide were reviewed by two experts from the department of psychology at Debre Markos University.

Interview was employed face-to-face in a convenient room at each school. Each lapse of interview lasted approximately 90 minutes and was conducted in Amharic language. It was audio recorded, which was later transcribed and then translated into English for further organization, coding, analysis and interpretation.

Likewise, an observation checklist was developed by the authors, which focused on teacher's demonstrable creative abilities to create playful scenarios and how she integrates with her instruction, availability and developmentally appropriateness of play materials, physical settings, and child safety and wellbeing. Each participant teacher was observed in regular class session for eight sessions throughout two academic months while teaching various subjects including literacy, numeracy, environmental science and fine arts.

Ethical consideration

A formal request for cooperation was initiated by the department of psychology, Debre Markos University, to ensure consent from concerned bodies such as local education office personnel, school principals and participant teachers. The purpose of the study was clearly communicated to all of them.

Data Analysis Techniques

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis procedures to identify themes, patterns and emerging meanings drawn from the data. Open coding; categorizing, theme formation and refinement procedures were performed. To achieve trustworthy and credibility strategies like debriefing, member checking and data triangulation were employed. Finally, the findings were presented narratively and substantiated by direct quotations.

Results and Discussion

Teachers' understanding of teaching children through play

The first theme, which was discussed with preschool teachers, was about their understanding of teachers on the values of teaching children through play. All most all of the respondents respond consistent understanding about the roles and values of play in classroom instruction. One of the respondents responded that teaching children through play is the way that provide opportunity for children to learn as a fun and enjoyable manner. She believed that when children learn through play, they will develop numeracy, literacy, and social skills easily. Similarly, another teacher participant explained her understanding as, " *I understand that teaching children through play allows children to become more active and creative. Through this method children learn by enjoying themselves*".

According to Pardhan (2012) teachers perceive that children learn best through play but many teachers often lean predominately towards a teacher-led environment because of top down pressure, lack of time or training in play-based pedagogy, and deep seeded beliefs that direct teaching is the best way for children to learn. Teachers will either under or over manage the play experiences of young children mostly due to a lack of understanding of play concepts (McInnes & crowley, 2011; Ranz-Smith, 2007). Many teachers are not comfortable with and do not necessarily trust child-led or child- initiated play due to a lack of play knowledge, experience, and pressure to prepare children for the next grade.

Teacher's practice in teaching children through play

With the exception of one of the participant teachers, they claimed that there are different kinds of locally established types of play that helps children to enjoy themselves both in the classroom and outside the classroom. These lists of local play includes "*Yetefawun feligu*", "*Meharebien yayachu*", "*Zuruzuru, Teter kilabosh*" and "*Segno-makisejno*" and the like. Through these kinds of play children were learning different subjects. For instance, in "*Yetefawun felig*" type of play used to teach numeracy for children in such a way that first she showed that a fixed number of playing materials made up of locally available resources and then she hide one of the playing materials. Then, she allowed children to find out the lost and count the available playing materials. These kinds of play help children to develop their numeracy skill by counting numbers and operating basic arithmetic.

Similarly, a teacher also responded that through “zuruzuru and Meharebien yayachu” kinds of play, the teacher taught children science contents like sense organs and their function. During this play the teacher provides playing materials like balls for one of the child and allows him/her to rotate the other children who made a circle in the playground and then a child holding playing material might put at the back of a child in the group. The group members were constantly find the ball by back side touching. During this time, children can understand that their hand/skin is one of the five sense organs used to touch.

Likewise, teachers used “zuruzuru” type of play that she used to teach mathematics by allowing children to run out along a circular path on the playground and when she calls a certain number, then that number of children attached to each other. For example, when children played zuruzuru and if a teacher called loudly number four, then four children were attached to each other immediately. Having this in mind, locally established play used for children to learn mathematics and used to develop their numeracy skills. To give due emphasis on the above idea, the following response was directly quoted from one of the participant respondents.

To teach mathematical contents like shape and patterns, I provided different size and colored blocks for children to form different shapes and patterns. Those plays help children to develop mathematical concepts like shape and patterns. They were also learning mathematical concepts like length and width by elongating and diminishing the size of the block they made. Children were also learn science concepts like color by examining the color of the blocks provided for them to play.

However, the data collected from one of the participant who was teaching at government school, indicate exceptional experiences. She was not using use play to teach children in the classroom rather she allowed them for free play on open play ground in the school compound. She says, “I didn’t use play in the classroom to teach children but I used play as instructional methodology to teach children outside the classroom.” She argued that unlike private owned schools, classrooms in government owned schools are not appropriate to launch indoor play since classrooms were basically furnished for primary school students. Due to recent policy directives from local authorities, primary schools have been required to accommodate pre-primary education within the primary school compound.

The authors launched multiple classroom observation to observe the actual practices in the classroom so as to triangulate the data between teachers’ information collected

through interview. The researchers observe some degree of difference between what was discussed in the interview sessions and in actual practice in using play as a teaching strategy. The observed discrepancy in the tone of expression and the reported frequency of applying play in the interview section and the magnitude of actual practice can be attributed to social desirability, lack of knowledge and skill in creative, structured and planned use play, and may be cultural and societal influences that also exerted in any other situation. According to Desimone et al. (2002), social desirability and professional norms may account for the discrepancy between report and real behavior. Teachers tend to report in ways that align with policy expectations or pedagogical principles rather than actual instructional practices.

Even though there were different playing materials prepared from locally available resources, teachers didn't allow children to play with those playing materials. Naturalistic observation pinpointed that sometimes teachers were using songs to teach children and we hold discussions after the termination of an observation session at two schools by asking them independently, "Do you think song and play are the same? Both of them replied that that song is a kind of play which they use to teach children through play.

In his review, Goulden (2012) commenced functional play more for children's learning and holistic development. Children should be given the opportunity to practice different types of play at school that demand the involvement of their physical, cognitive, moral, intellectual and social aspects of knowledge, skills and values. Functional play experience may include repetitive and explorative action such as a baby shakes a rattle or a preschooler putting together puzzles or stringing beads (Wilson, 2015). Teachers have also expressed positive outcomes of teaching through play. They noticed that because play-based is a child-centered approach, they are able to understand students' interests and provide support through differentiated instruction (Goulden, 2012). Functional play has strong theoretical support from social constructivist perspective (Göncü & Main, 2023; Drew & Crestie, 2008).

Challenges of teachers in teaching children through Play

The second theme analysis was pertinent to challenges teachers faced in their effort to teach children through play. Accordingly, four sub-themes emerged: playground, class size, play materials, and professional competency related. The detailed description and analytical interpretations are presented hereunder.

Challenges related to playground

All respondents felt that their respective school's outdoor playground was suitable for children to play and for teachers to teach through play. The landscapes and school compounds were free from harmful conditions which can cause accidents and hazards on children.

Provided that authors conducted critical observation on indoor and outdoor playgrounds. Government schools' outdoor playgrounds are wider than the playgrounds found in private schools. However, indoor playgrounds in private schools were more attractive, safer and better suited than those in government owned schools. Indoor playgrounds in private schools enable for easy movement where as hard to do so in public schools.

Teachers did not have the knowledge and access to national, regional and local standards of the size and minimum thresholds of play materials and spatial sizes of indoor and outdoor playgrounds. The discrepancy between teachers report and our observation might be accounted for the reason that teachers lack knowledge and understanding of those standards. In this regard, the findings of this study contradicted with teachers understanding and quality and appropriateness of playgrounds in the areas (Martlew, 2011).

Challenges related to class size

Three of the participant teachers (one from private and two from public schools) explained large class size, on average more than 50 children, which significantly exceed the standard class size of 30 students set by the Bureau Education in Amhara National Regional State. The presence of large number of children made teaching through play very challenging in both indoor and outdoor settings. However, the other three teachers confirmed that the number of children in their respective school was found to be manageable, not exceeding 30.

Challenges related to lack of play materials

The availability of play materials was commonly inadequate in all schools. One of the participants strongly expressed that lack of indoor and outdoor play materials is pain staking and robust hindrance to teaching children through play in her day-to-day instructional activities. She says, *"The school has a problem of financial constraints and running short of budget for buying playing material."* Similarly, the rest five participants shared their idea, i.e., acute scarcity of playing materials.

In addition, the authors observed that the availability and functionality of play materials across the schools was limited and, in most cases, developmentally inappropriate for some children. One of the teachers said that there were a few outdoor playing materials like slides, Merry-go-round and Swings (jiwajiwie). But Merry-go-round and Swings (jiwajiwie) were not functional. The only play material that was functional in this school was the slide one, which was too height particularly for children age 4-5 years old (KG1-KG2), since it was assumed to serve all KG1-KG3 students. In terms of functionality, availability and appropriateness, play materials in all schools lagged behind the national standard (MoE, 2009; Walsh et al., 2010).

Challenges related to lack of professional efficiency of teachers

Preprimary school teachers' professional competency depends upon three pillars: First, alignment of pre-service teacher education trainings including relevant curriculum, policy provisions, childcare and child-friendly pedagogical skills with in service school practices (Walelign & Dawit, 2023). Second, the extent to which preschool environments such as including administration, physical settings, availability and appropriateness of play materials are convenient to implement teacher's knowledge and skills (e.g., play-based teaching-learning). Third, the existence and quality of continuous professional development programs at school levels (Hertu & Selhako, 2024). Regarding the alignment between teacher education training and school practice, one the participant teachers from public preschools stated that she earns diploma in teaching primary schools. However, during the data collection time she was supposed to teach in preprimary school class. She boldly argued the incongruence between her training and current practice.

The type of training which were provided for preschool teachers in the college and the type of work which we implemented in the school were mismatch to each other. To elaborate this, during the training time a lot of courses which were not related to pre-primary education was provided for us. For example we were allowed to take chemistry, Biology, physics, mathematics and other social science courses but these courses were not related with teaching children in preschool.

Smith and Peter (2008) assured that many teachers are not adequately trained to implement teaching children through play in their classroom. They may think of learning materials are only as work books or charts on the wall rather than objects that children can explore and use in their learning. We observed that teachers did not effectively plan and design structured plan to teach children through play. They overwhelmingly emphasized on songs and free and unstructured play, particularly in

outdoor playgrounds. We observed that the involvement of teachers while children engaging in free play was minimal to null. This might relate with poor training background and limited skills and knowledge in creative integration of play with child pedagogy.

Opportunities to teach children through play

The fourth thematic area raised to the respondent teachers was about the opportunities that help teachers to teach children through play. All respondents responded that there is a policy directive that encourages the use of play as an instructional method to teach children. They believed that this policy provisions helps them to get favor from parents and school principles. Moreover, they extended their consensus on the issue that most children prefer to learn through play rather than learning through the conventional methods. Equivocally, participants agreed on the physical setting of their respective school, interest of children to wards play and the devotion of teachers to teach children were taken as an opportunity to make use of play as instructional strategy that enables them to optimize children's learning and overall development.

Strength and Limitations

In-depth and context-specific insights drawn from this study can be ascribed to the strength. However, it has some limitations. First, results from purposively selected and small-size sample cannot be generalized beyond the specific context of the stud. In this regard, only analytical generalizability of the results should be taken into account. Second, data collection methods such as interviews and observations are inherently subjective and may be influenced by participants' self-reporting tendencies, including social desirability bias. As a result, behaviors might appear in the form that differ from actual ones. Third, the interpretation results might be influenced by authors' subjectivity, even if they tried to use reflexive practices to enhance credibility of findings.

Conclusions and recommendations

Based on the findings of the study the following conclusions are made and corresponding context specific recommendations are forwarded hereunder.

- ❖ As regards to the preschool teachers understanding on teaching children through play was found to be good. However, what they reported verbally does not ensure their actual practice. In conclusion, continuous follow-up and capacity building that focuses on the practical utility of play as structured instructional strategy is required to improve the learning and development of children at the study area.

- ❖ Children prefer to learn through play which increase their motivation and engagement but it should be implemented cautiously, because some students may feel comfortable when they are taught in other approaches rather than play.
- ❖ Preschool teachers responded they have been practicing teaching children through play. However, their response on the interview part and what is really practiced in the classroom is different enough. To conclude from this, teaching children through play is not well practiced in the selected preschools.
- ❖ Innumerable challenges are daunting practice of teaching children through play; some of the challenges were problem of playing ground, large class size and teacher competency on teaching children through play. From this one can conclude that the practice of teaching through play is hampered by many challenges from different directions.
- ❖ Finally, the opportunities provided for teachers to teach children through play were addressed by this study, the only opportunities that preschool teachers was the interest of children to participate in teaching through play.

Based on the findings of the study authors recommended the following practical implications:

- ✓ School principals should give due attention to the implementation or practice of teaching children through play,
- ✓ To improve preschool teachers' understanding, the education office of the city administration should organize training on teaching children through play.
- ✓ Both the schools and the education office should provide materials to teach children through play effectively.
- ✓ Teachers should plan to update themselves through different continuous professional development programs.
- ✓ Continuous professional development programs and capacity development training programs should be launched at the schools

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