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By

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Research Article

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ABSTRACT

In most parts of the world many early childhood practitioners recognise the importance of free play for children's development and emphasize play in their classrooms. This study analysed the impact of stakeholder perceptions on the use of free play in 10 preschools attached to primary schools in Masvingo district of Zimbabwe. The methodology employed in the study was largely qualitative, using the observation, interview and document analysis as data collection methods. Study participants included an Education Officer, ten school administrators, twenty preschool teachers, and twenty parents. From a detailed analysis and discussion of results, several findings were drawn. There were inconsistencies and inadequacies in the manner in which free play was conceptualised by the different stakeholders. Teaching in preschools was largely formal and free play opportunities were limited in the preschool daily schedule. Preschools were insufficiently equipped in terms of play resources because stakeholders had a limited understanding of the benefits of free play to children's development and learning. The study concluded that free play was not being sufficiently offered in preschool and this disadvantaged the children. Therefore, the study recommended that stakeholders recognise the value of free play and support the teachers in its implementation.

Key words: free play, preschool, stakeholder, early childhood development.

INTRODUCTION

The topic of play in early childhood has been advocated by pioneers of early childhood education such as Froebel (1782 - 1852), Rachel (1859 - 1917), Margaret McMillan (1860-1931) and Montessori (1870 - 1952) as centre of the preschool curriculum. This study analysed the influence of stakeholder perceptions on the use of free play as a teaching approach in preschool classes attached to primary schools in Masvingo district in Zimbabwe. Research documents that young children learn best in an environment which allows them to explore, discover, and play. Play is essential to development because it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of children (Click, 1996; De Witt and Booysen, 1995). Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) recognizes the significance of play in the lives of children, and acknowledges it as a specific right, in addition to and distinct from the child's right to recreation and leisure (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2006). In preschool, play is an integral part of the curriculum, founded on the belief that children learn through self-initiated free play in an exploratory environment (Hurst and Joseph, 1998). Hence, this study sought to analyse the impact of stakeholder perceptions on the use of free play as a teaching approach in preschool.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

One of the indicators of high quality preschool programmes is a curriculum that recognises the value of children's play (Click, 1996; Bredekamp and Copple, 1997). In 2004, the Zimbabwean Government through the Ministry of Education, Arts, Sport and Culture (MoEASC) enacted Policy Circular 14 of 2004 which directed all primary schools, to attach preschool classes with effect from January 2005. This move was in response to the recommendations of the 1999 Presidential Commission of Inquiry into the Education and Training System (PCIETS) in the Zimbabwe. One of the major findings of the Commission on the Early Childhood Development (ECD) programme at preschool level in particular, was lack of equity and access to preschools for most children especially the disadvantaged populations. This move gave the preschool programme a better status than it had previously, because most preschools operated on a loose supervisory support (Dyanda et al., 2006). The preschool in a primary school setting has several stakeholders who contribute significantly to its activities, including curriculum implementation among others. Preschool stakeholders for this study were composed of an education officer, school heads, parents, and teachers. Free play as espoused by some philosophers,

psychologists and educators is the centre of the preschool curriculum. Hence, the study sought to find out how stakeholder perception of the free play approach impact on its use in preschool.

Most of the primary school heads and education officers in-charge of the ECD programme did not have ECD qualifications, but had specialisation and lengthy experience in primary school education (Dyanda et al., 2006). Lack of specialist qualifications by ECD supervisory staff has implications on curriculum implementation. Schweinhart (1988) states that training in upper primary school grades may be a hindrance for school administrators because they may have a set of expectations that are not appropriate for three-to-five year olds. If they are to supervise preschool curriculum implementation effectively, they need some orientation in preschool teaching. Their perceptions on free play as a teaching approach may be very different from that of the teachers. Due to their strong orientation and experience in the primary school grades, administrators may be in favour of a preschool curriculum that is formal. It is against a background of these realisations that this research was undertaken.

The content of the preschool curriculum is determined by many factors, including the subject matter of the disciplines, social or cultural values of a given society (NAEYC Position Statement, 1999). Parents want to give their children the best possible start in academic life. Parents have different perceptions about the best approaches to early learning. Most parents value cognitive stimulation of children from the earliest possible age through academic training as a way of preparing them for the infant school. Such information is what is readily available through the various reading and play materials on the market. Though useful for parents, such information can also be misleading in that some may unnecessarily burden their children with academic-oriented activities and deny them of pleasurable play moments (The American Academy of Paediatrics, 2012). If parents hold perceptions of that nature, it could imply that they may have a limited understanding of the value of free play to young children's development and learning. Misconceptions about the preschool teaching may lead parents to put pressure on teachers to employ the academic-oriented approach. Such parental expectations may influence teachers to deny children adequate free play opportunities so as to make more time for formal activities. Thus, the research sought to find out if free play maintained its pivotal role in preschool.

In a bid to attain and maintain the so called high academic results, some schools assess their first grade applicants on formal academic skills before admitting them. The demands of such schools obviously have an influence on the use of free play in the preschool. Research has revealed that the academic approach has taken a leading role in the preschool curriculum (Elkind, 2007). Three-to-five-year olds are expected to engage in far more early mathematics, writing and reading activities than before (Almon, 2004). Experience has shown that this trend is evident in some preschools in Zimbabwe due to grade one school readiness expectations of selected schools. Prospective grade one applicants at private and former white only schools are assessed on formal reading and mathematics readiness skills. The academic-oriented approach is in direct contrast to the active and interactive curriculum assumed by constructivists, who see young children as active agents in constructing knowledge (Wardle, 2006). The beliefs behind the academic-oriented approach is that children benefit by preparing for the rigors of infant school and beyond at an early age. Bredekamp (1992) states that the inclination toward formal academic instruction for younger children is based on misconceptions about early learning. The pressure for "academic readiness" could imply that a large portion of the preschool schedule is spent on academic training of children. Thus, this study sought to find out whether free play has maintained its prominent position in the preschool curriculum.

The formal teaching approach is developmentally appropriate for the learners at primary school level, and not for 3-to-5 year-olds. A growing body of research points to the fact that children in the preschool phase learn most effectively through a concrete, play-oriented approach (Beaty, 1992; Young-Ihm, 2003). Several studies have compared children in "academic" preschool classrooms that emphasize direct, formal instruction with children who are in play-oriented programmes (Bredekamp and Copple, 1997). A variety of literature indicates that preschool programmes in which play is the centre of the curriculum fosters all school-readiness outcomes, whereas formal academic instruction interferes with most of them (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009). To meet the expected academic readiness of the infant school, preschool teachers may markedly reduce the use of free play in their teaching. Hence, the need to find out the extent to which free play is used as a teaching approach in preschools. The objective of the study was thus to assess stakeholder perceptions on the use of free play in preschools. The study sought to address two key research questions regarding stakeholder perceptions on the use of free play in preschools and how the perceptions influenced the use of free play in preschool.

Conceptual Framework

The use of free play as a teaching approach draws extensively on the theoretical perspective of constructivism. Constructivists like Piaget and Vygotsky view children as active agents in their development (Isenberg and Jalongo, 1993). For Piaget, the children's knowledge arises from interactions between them and objects in their environment (Hohmann and Weikart, 1995). Vygotsky describes play as a leading activity and believes that play allows children opportunities to use language and to learn through role playing (Isenberg and Jalongo, 1993). Constructivists assume that children are constructors of understandings of their world. "No one else can construct knowledge for the children, they must do this themselves" (Hohmann and Weikart, 1995). Using the constructivist

approach to teaching goes well with the way young children learn. A large body of research has shown that young children below age seven learn through direct involvement with materials and activities in their environment (Beaty, 1992). In addition, Gordon and Browne (1989) assert that as children interact with their thoughts and experiences with materials, ideas, and people during play, a great deal of learning and development is taking place in them. A constructivist view provides a strong argument for advocating play as the centre of the preschool curriculum.

METHODOLOGY

The study was largely qualitative based on observation, the interview and document analysis as data collection methods. The use of multiple data collection methods was for the purpose of triangulation. Purposive sampling was employed in choosing the ten primary schools in the district because they had preschool classes attached to them. This study's participants were made up of one Education Officer, ten school administrators, twenty preschool teachers, and twenty parents. Teachers were included because they are directly involved in teaching and are expected to understand the use of free play in the preschool curriculum. School administrators were chosen because they are supervisors of the preschool programme and custodians of its policies, and should therefore be in a position to understand and actively support the free play-based curriculum. The Education Officer was selected because he monitors preschool activities and is also a custodian of ministry policies and thus, has great influence in curriculum implementation. Two parents from each of the ten primary schools who had children attending preschools were purposively selected. Parents were found to be suitable study participants because they are important preschool stakeholders and to some extent influence curriculum implementation.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The concept free play

Free play periods are common preschool activities characterized by child-initiated engagement and social interaction (Bredekamp and Copple, 1997; Essa, 2003). According to Wardle (2008) "free play" means play free of structure and adult involvement. However, this does not mean that the adult has no role in the free play activity. In fact, the adult sets the stage for free play by planning for play opportunities and sourcing for developmentally appropriate play materials. According to Bredekamp (1992) free play means extended opportunities for children to guide and direct their own play, and presumably their own learning. Much of young children's learning takes place when they direct their own play. Current research and child development theories reveal that young children learn most effectively when they become deeply involved in their own learning (Beaty, 1992). In free play activity children are in control of the learning situation in contrast to adult-led activities.

Benefits of free play to the young child's development and learning

From as early as the 19th century, philosophers such as Froebel and Montessori used play in early childhood settings as a pedagogical tool. In general, research shows strong links between creative play and language, physical, cognitive, and social development (Almon, 2004). Play paves the way for learning (Bergen, 1998). De Witt and Booysen (1995) postulate that in order to justify the inclusion of free play in the preschool curriculum there is need to reflect on the importance of play in the life of the young child. Some of the more common functions of play are to facilitate physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development (Stebbing, 1999; Elkind, 2007). Wilson et al. (1995) note that the four broad aspects of child development are what the preschool philosophy and curriculum are based on. Free play fulfils a crucial role in the child's holistic development and should therefore take a central role in the preschool curriculum. Employing free play as a major teaching technique prepares the child for formal school and life in general, as aptly pointed out by De Witt and Booysen (1995) that few – if any – aspects of the child's development cannot in some way or other be associated with play. Play provides a natural integration of learning domains, integrating social, emotional, and physical learning with cognitive and academic learning. This integration is difficult to achieve and maintain in teacher-directed instruction (Wardle, 2006).

DATA PRESENTATION, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

An analysis of the research results reveals the following major findings:

- Stakeholder understanding of the benefits of free play varied.

- Stakeholders were not aware of policy regarding the use of play in ECD.
- Their perceptions on the use of free play had negative impacts on its implementation.

Each of the findings will be discussed in the sections below.

Stakeholder understanding of the benefits of free play varied.

This section presents views from teachers, the education officer, school administrators and parents. Among the participants, only preschool teachers showed a comprehensive understanding of the benefits of free play to children's development. The teachers outlined the benefits of free play in relation to the four broad domains namely physical, social; emotional; and cognitive development (The American Academy of Paediatrics, 2012; Elkind, 2007). The teachers' specialisation in early childhood development equipped them with knowledge and skills on free play as the centre of the preschool curriculum. The education officer and school administrators' understanding of the benefits of free play was rather simplistic. To them, free play was an activity of less importance that could be done by children during school recess period. As aptly noted by Dyanda et al. (2006) most school heads are not ECD specialists but have training and long experience in primary school education. According to Schweinhart (1988), familiarity with teaching in upper school may make one have expectations that are not developmentally appropriate for young children. The school administrators' strong orientation in primary school education influenced the preschool curriculum toward a more formal approach to teaching.

Parents' conceptualisation of the benefits of free play to young children's development and learning was rather shallow. School, they said, should be a place for serious learning because children have plenty of time to play at home. Parents expected their children to engage in academic activities such as reading, writing and counting and argued that such skills were important for their children's success in schooling. While it is true that academic skills are an important aspect of formal schooling, a growing body of research shows that every competency important to school success is enhanced by play (Isenberg and Quisenberry, 2002; Singer et al., 2006). Elkind (2007) claims that during the early years, play is "the dominant and directing role of learning" and that children learn best through self-directed learning experiences.

Practitioners' lack of awareness of the policy regarding the use of play in preschool

Practitioners in the education sector exhibited a lack of awareness of Ministry of Education policy stipulations regarding the preschool curriculum. Both the education officer and school administrators indicated that they were in possession of some ECD policies, but had not acquainted themselves with the documents due to pressure of work. Even though teachers sometimes employed free play in their teaching, they had neither received nor discussed any policy issues pertaining to the preschool curriculum with school administrators. The 2006 Education Act Section 27 (Chapter 25:4) and Statutory Instrument 106 of 2005 Section 10 (2) state that there should be no three Rs, that is, reading, writing and arithmetic, in the preschool curriculum, but that it should be play-based. Director's Policy Circular 12 of 2005 Section 3.6 reads: "It is important that all concerned guard against formal teaching of children at this juncture as at this stage of their development, children learn through play, hence the importance of play centres". The Zimbabwean preschool legal framework clearly emphasises the free play-based approach in preschool. Wardle (2008) asserts that play provides the ultimate curriculum for holistic development. As Hirsh-Pasek et al. (2009) aptly note, 'both free play and playful learning should command a central role in high-quality education for preschoolers'.

In spite of MoEASC efforts to increase awareness of the importance of free play in preschool through toy production workshops for parents and communities in the country, publications and funding for setting up of outdoor play areas, practitioners revealed ignorance in terms of what is contained in policy. All these developments point to the fact that in Zimbabwe, free play is central to the preschool curriculum even though its implementation has significantly diminished.

Stakeholder perceptions of free play and their impact on implementation

a) Emphasis on academic-oriented curriculum

Participants, with the exception of teachers, revealed that the preschool curriculum should be academic-oriented. Teachers were expected to engage in formal activities such as number work, reading and writing, yet, the goal of preschool education is to develop the child in the physical, social, emotional and cognitive domains (Isenberg and Jalongo, 1993; Stebbing, 1999). Academic skills training has been found to be limited to cognitive stimulation, however, the demand toward the growing academic skills-oriented preschool curriculum by parents emanates from the recognition that young children's acquisition of literacy is critical to their long-term learning and school success (Nicolopoulou, 2010). Parents particularly, said that they wanted their children to be taught academic skills so that they do not fall behind when they get to the first grade. Teachers revealed that school

administrators believed that play was of less importance. They often expressed dissatisfaction when they found children engaged in free play because in their view play did not constitute learning.

Ultimately, teachers allocated very little time to free play in their daily schedules. The American Academy of Paediatrics (2012) reports that in spite of the numerous benefits derived from free play for children, its duration in early childhood daily schedules has been markedly reduced to make room for more academics. An analysis of the class schedules in all the preschools studied revealed that free play was allocated very short periods of less than 30 minutes and was offered only a few times a week, while academic skills were allocated more time. Click (1996) suggests scheduling large blocks of time in which children can engage in free play activities. Children need large blocks of time for free play both indoors and outdoors. Short free play periods decrease both the quantity and the quality of children's play. Long free play periods prompt children to become involved in more complex, more productive play activities (Fox, 2008). Play England (2011) cites obesity, rickets and attention deficit disorder as just some of the growing problems experienced by children that health experts have recently linked to a lack of play.

Scholars against the play approach believe that it is time-wasting to engage children in free play activities (Almon, 2004). Play critics claim that with the ever increasing amount of information and skills needed by young children, teacher-guided instruction is necessary to achieve specific goals and objectives (Wardle, 2008). Teachers-in-charge of the infant school departments too, favoured the academic oriented approach and repeatedly indicated to preschool teachers that prospective grade one pupils should be taught academic skills so that they attain school readiness. Luke (1992) cited in Aliwood (2002) states that school readiness not only involves being exposed to various prescribed preliteracy and prenumeracy activities and knowledge, but also involves learning how to successfully function in the classroom.

Academic skills instruction is not consistent with developmentally appropriate practices, expectations and does not result in school readiness at all. In fact, research suggests that over-use of instructive teaching approaches can stifle child-initiated learning and weaken young children's self-confidence and motivation to learn (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000; Singer et al., 2006). In the study teachers engaged children in formal activities to meet the demands of parents and school administrators. Administrators feared that engaging in a non-academic curriculum would deter prospective clients. Critics of the play-based approach claim that play-based programmes do not provide children with adequate academic knowledge to do well in the first grade. However, young children can certainly benefit from some direct instruction and from being taught various sorts of specific content, if that constitutes one element in a balanced preschool curriculum (Nicolopoulou, 2010). But a heavily dosed academic-oriented preschool curriculum is developmentally inappropriate and counterproductive. Several studies reveal that children who attended more academic-oriented preschools instead of play-focused preschools were found to be more anxious, less creative, and less enthusiastic about learning (Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff, 2003). A study by Marcon in 2002, found that children who had attended play-oriented programmes where child-initiated activities predominated did better academically than those who had attended academic-oriented programmes (Almon, 2004).

Inadequate play resources

Observation of both the indoor and outdoor preschool environments revealed that they were insufficiently equipped for free play opportunities. Stakeholders' limited conceptualisation of free play in the preschool curriculum resulted in their lack of support in providing play resources. Teachers revealed that both the school administrators and parents had not been supportive in terms of play resources, but readily provided materials for teaching academic skills. Administrators cited lack of financial resources, while parents believed that the school fees they paid should adequately cater for all school needs. Yet, for free play to be successfully implemented, there is need for an abundant and variety of play materials and equipment. Research has documented that, one of the most powerful factors related to holistic development during the preschool years is the availability of play materials (Beaty, 1992). In a study, Bradley in Goldstein (2012) established that children with access to a variety of toys were found to reach higher levels of intellectual achievement, regardless of their sex, race, or social class.

Children will play longer when suitable play objects are available, and stand to gain the greatest benefits that play has to offer (Goldstein, 2012). Schweinhart (1988) argues that school administrators should provide the early childhood programme with the equipment and materials necessary for a developmentally appropriate curriculum. Parents have a high degree of input into curriculum (Click, 1996), and one way of doing it is supporting the school by providing play resources. The sourcing of play materials was the teachers' sole business and they mostly relied on "safe junk" materials which they collected from nearby shops. The lack of play resources, inadequate time allocation to free play and emphasis on an academic curriculum stifled effective holistic development of children in the preschools studied.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

School administrators, education officer and parents' perceptions of free play as a teaching approach hindered its use in preschools which further disadvantaged the children. The academic approach was given more priority than free play due to the limited conceptualisation of free play by stakeholders. Practitioners' ignorance of policy requirements was a major constraint in the implementation of the free play method. The preschool stakeholders should acknowledge the importance of play as a potential medium of instruction. Research has established strong links between children's capacity to play and their holistic development. The study recommends that preschool stakeholders be oriented by early childhood specialists on the value of free play as a teaching approach in preschool. There is cause for a deep concern as free play disappears from the preschool curriculum.

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