AJEMATES
African Journal of Educational Management, Teaching and Entrepreneurship Studies
VOL.9 (1), May-September, 2023 https://ajemates.org

CONSTRAINTS ON THE USE OF PLAY-BASED LEARNING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN ORUMBA SOUTH LOCAL GOVERNMENT EDUCATION AUTHORITY, ANAMBRA STATE

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ABSTRACT

Play-based learning is central to and highly valued as a quality pedagogical practice in early childhood education. This study titled Constraints on the use of Play-Based Learning in Early Childhood Education in Orumba South L.G.A. of Anambra State adopted a descriptive survey research design and two research questions guided the study. The population of the study comprised all the 110 early childhood educators in public primary schools in Orumba South Local Government Area. The entire population was used because it is not too large. The instrument for data collection was a 30 item structured questionnaire developed by the researchers titled "Constraints to the Use of Play-based Learning in Early Childhood education (CUPLECE). The instrument was validated by three experts. To establish the reliability of the instrument, Cronbach Alpha was used and a reliability coefficient of 0.76 obtained for the entire instrument. Data collected were analyzed using the mean scores. Findings from the study revealed among others that there is inadequate number of specialist staff and inadequate number of trained support staff, that there is a dearth of appropriate and digital play materials and toys, lack of conducive learning environment, parental pressure and concern for academic achievement were constraints to the use of play based method in early childhood programmes. Based on these findings, the recommendations were that teachers should be trained to acquire necessary child friendly teaching skills that enable play based learning, conducive environment and play materials should be provided in schools and parents should be enlightened on the benefits play based learning.

Keywords: Curriculum, Early Childhood Education, Play, Play based Learning

Introduction

Children of today are adults of tomorrow. If we desire responsible adults in the next generation, our Early Childhood Education today must be designed to reflect the needs of the future. Early Childhood Education typically covers children three years of age until the start of primary education. It is focused on the support for learning available to children in formal or organized settings and programmes. Early Childhood Education

lays a sound intellectual, psychological, emotional, social and physical foundation for development and lifelong learning. The future needs quality Early Childhood education, and this should be a type of education that would help the learners to develop critical thinking and logical reasoning needed in solving real life problems. According to the UNICEF Brief, (2017) scientific researches over the past thirty years reveal that the most important period of human development is the period from birth to eight years old. During these years, the development of cognitive skills, emotional wellbeing, social competence and sound physical and mental health builds a strong foundation for success well into the adult years. The National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2017) reports that in early childhood, learning takes place at a speed that will never be equaled. At this stage of human development, the very structure of the brain is powerfully shaped by early experiences. Such experiences if deeply lived, practiced and felt in the early years of human development remains for the rest of one's life. These early experiences are facilitated and sustained through the use of appropriate participatory pedagogy for teaching the children in Early Childhood Education programmes especially in this 21st century.

Early Childhood education for 21st century learners is expected to enable children develop their natural potentialities at the early stage of life, thereby sustaining and laying a solid foundation for their contributions to society as creative and productive citizens. No wonder Bosah, Obidike and Obumneke-Okeke (2017) noted that the sustainability of any society lies in young children and there can be no sustainability without quality early childhood education. These critical skills when developed in childhood form part of the fundamental building blocks of 21st century skills. Ezekeke (2017) notes that the 21st century skills are regarded as survival skills which learners need to master in order to succeed and work in this digital era.

Central to quality early childhood education is learning through play. There is a well-established consensus among early childhood professionals that play is an essential element of developmentally appropriate, high-quality early education programs (NAEYC, 2013). Children make sense of the world around them through play. Play is one of the most important ways in which young children gain essential knowledge, attitudes and skills. All types of play, from fantasy play to rough-and-tumble, have a crucial role in children's development. Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Singer, and Berk, (2011) note that play is the lens through which children experience their world, and the world of others. If deprived of play, children will suffer both in the present and in the long-term. With supportive adults, adequate play space, and an assortment of play materials, children stand the best chance of becoming healthy, happy, productive members of society. The importance of play in young children's life cannot be over-stated; it is their primary occupation, impacting all areas of their development.

All children regardless of ability need a variety of opportunities to playfully interact. The UNICEF Brief (2017) noted that an important aspect of play is children's initiative, decision making, self choice and control over their experiences. Play enables children take active roles and ownership of their experiences as well as recognizing and trusting children to be capable, autonomous and agents of their own playful learning journeys. Play allows children to communicate ideas, build deeper understanding and powerful connection through social interaction. More so, play enables children practice skills, try out possibilities, and discover new challenges leading to deeper learning. It is a natural tool that children can use to build their resilience and coping skills as they learn to navigate relationships and deal with social challenges as well as conquer their fears.

Furthermore, play satisfies the need to express imagination, curiosity and creativity. It is through play that children develop a general mind set towards solving problems that include both abstraction and concrete. It enables children string bits of behaviour together to form novel solutions to problems requiring the restructuring of thought or action. Children at this stage need abundant opportunities for gross motor play. Satcher as cited in Mabagala(2017) asserts that through such movements, children learn more about their physical abilities and can enhance their problem solving skills.

It is believed that providing increased time for play can lead to better concentration, reduced disruptive behavior, and attainment of higher test scores in reading, math, and writing. It is also known that physical activity improves overall health. Play is, therefore very essential and important part of a child's life. It is through play that a child's aptitude and personality canbe fully explored. Through play, social skills are also developed to help a child to be aware of other people who are around his/her life and learn how to respect others (Cheng, 2011).

Play is so important to optimal child development that it has been recognized in Article 31 of the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child. This article recognizes "the right of child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and threats". It is in recognition of the above that the Federal Government of Nigeria in the National Policy on Education (2004) affirmed the relevance of play in the Early Childhood Education Programme. The policy outlined among other objectives, the inculcation of the spirit of inquiry and creativity through exploration of nature and environment, arts, music and playing with toys and to teach the rudiments of numbers, letters, colours, shapes, forms, to the child through play. To achieve these objectives, the government pledged to ensure that the main method of instruction at this level of education shall be through play. Therefore, in order to meet up with global best practices and in line with the Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP),instruction at the early stage of life should be play-based. Bearing this in

mind, it is noteworthy to assert that education at this level stands against rote learning, rote skill learning and memorization which characterize learning in most Early Childhood programmes in Nigeria.

Childhood education sets the tone for all other educational achievements. One very important factor for impactful Childhood Education is the use of play-based learning to implement the programme. Children are hand-on learners; they acquire knowledge and skills through playful interaction with objects and people. Under changing educational paradigms, there has been a shift from teacher oriented education towards education constructed from a child's perspective. To further explain this Ezekeke (2017) reiterated that education of learners in the 21st century has taken a dramatic departure from factory based education, text-book driven, teacher-centered and pen and paper schooling to the learner friendly, borderless walls, constructivist and multi perspective approaches to teaching and learning. The above, aptly describes play-based learning.

There is need for education that encourages playful learning, which puts emphasis back on natural approach to learning. Play based learning has been described as a teaching approach involving playful, child-directed elements along with some degree of adult guidance and scaffolded learning objectives (Pyle & Daniels (2016). According to Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek and Golinkoff (2013) play-based instruction is regarded as an important pedagogical approach to support academic and social outcomes in early childhood settings. In the same vein, Play-based learning is central to and highly valued as a quality pedagogical practice in early childhood education. A play-centered preschool curriculum is not a laissez-faire approach. It's not the same as giving children "free play" separate from "teaching." Rather, teachers use the power of children's developing ideas, interests, and competencies to promote learning—through play, circle-time, and small-group activities. Play is not a break from the curriculum; play is the best way to implement the curriculum. Gleave and Cole-Hamilton (2017) assert that play-based learning is considered by experienced educators as pivotal to the process of learning and development of learners. Play-based pedagogy also encourages the inclusion of Information Communication Technology (ICT) into early childhood education through the use of electronic toys and digital games. Fisher, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Singer, and Berk, (2011) noted that electronic toys and digital games keep children on task for a longer period of time. The 21st century children are digital natives and so it is essential that their education reflect the now and the future.

Unfortunately, in recent years, early childhood classrooms have become more academically focused. Martlew in Pyle and Daniels (2016) asserts that worldwide there is a growing concern about decreasing opportunity for children to participate in play. Rusell in Pyle and Daniel (2016) reported that the current standards in early childhood classrooms have become heavily focused on teaching

academic skills as early as possible believed to maximize children's future academic success. In the same vein, a study by Posse and Melgossa (2008) affirm that today many childhood institutions follow the trend of producing "gifted children" as they entice the parents by saying that their children will come off the pre-school knowing how to read, write and perform mathematical or scientific equations. This advancement causes anxiety to the children.

Play based learning has been discarded for more advanced teaching methods that are not child centered or child friendly. Most childhood educators misconstrue play as frivolous and tend to separate play from learning. This focus on academic skills has changed appropriate pedagogic practices in early childhood classes and learning becomes more teacher-directed and instructional. These teacher-directed academic instructions result to children taking on the role of passive recipients of knowledge instead of constructing their own learning. It disregards the milestones these toddlers are supposed to achieve then. Golinkoff and Hirsh Pasek in Pyle (2018) suggest that this over-use of didactic teaching has suppressed child initiated learning and undermined young children's self-confidence and motivation to learn. Instead of learning in a conducive environment characterized by natural happiness through play this time the innocence of the child is ruined.

Play has become limited in most pre-schools as learning becomes more formal and academic oriented. Posse and Melgossa (2008) noted furthermore that through unhealthy, intellectual, emotional and social stimulation, children are forced to exert efforts that are inappropriate for their ages.. As a result, the length of time many children spend in play is decreasing. Oyeyemi as cited in Alike (2016) stated that most early childhood programmes in Nigeria emphasize intellectual development, hence the yardstick for assessing the quality of pre-schools by parents was the extent to which the pupils were able to memorize and regurgitate information, poems, facts and figures. The above scenario plays out almost in all early childhood educational settings in Nigeria and Anambra State in particular.

The teacher is the key to the play-based curriculum. To facilitate learning through play, the teacher must be well educated and trained in order to be aware of the psychology of the child and also acquire the necessary skills and strategies used in play-based learning. It is extremely important that teachers of young children have a strong academic background and knowledge of play-based methods to best offer support to children during play. The school environment should be organized to encourage the use of play, parents also should also be properly educated on the need for play in early childhood settings. Therefore, to achieve the purpose of Early Childhood Education, instruction should be handled by appropriately trained personnel capable of using the desired pedagogy, in this case play-based learning to ensure high quality pre-school experience for all children under their care.

The importance of play-based learning in early childhood education programme is

genuine and a sine-qua-non for the realization of the laudable objectives of Early Childhood Education as envisaged by the National Policy on Education (2004).Gray (2011) contends that restoring children's play is not only the best gift we could give our children, it is also an essential gift if we want them to grow up to be psychologically healthy and emotionally competent adults.The ideal situation therefore demands the integration of play based learning for quality early childhood learning.Despite all the benefits of Play-based learning, most early childhood educators in the study area use more of rote memorization and direct instruction in classroom delivery.The study will investigate constraints on the use of play-based learning in early childhood education programmes in Orumba South Local Government Education Authority of Anambra State and possible solutions to such problems.

Research Questions

To guide this study, the following research questions were posed:

1. What are the constraints on the use of play-based learning in Early Childhood Education Programmes in Orumba South Local Government Education Authority of Anambra State?
2. What are possible solutions to the constraints on the use of play-based learning in early childhood education programmes in Orumba South Local Government Education Authority of Anambra State?

Research Method

The study was on Constraints on the Use of Play-Based Learning in Early Childhood Education in Orumba South Local Government Education Authority, Anambra State. The research adopted a descriptive survey research design. Two research questions guided the study. The population of the study comprised all the 110 early childhood educators in public primary schools in Orumba South Local Government Area. The entire population was used because it is not too large. The instrument for data collection was a 30 item structured questionnaire developed by the researchers titled "Constraints on the Use of Play-based Learning in Early Childhood education (CUPLECE). The instrument was validated by three experts. To establish the reliability of the instrument, Cronbach Alpha was used and a reliability coefficient of 0.76 obtained. Data collected were analyzed using the mean scores. For the research questions, a four-point rating scale of Strongly Agree (SA) = 4, Agree (A) = 3, Disagree (D) = 2 and Strongly Disagree (SD) = 1 were used to answer the research questions. The criterion mean was set at 2.50. Any item scoring 2.5 and above were regarded as agreed while any item scoring below 2.50 were regarded as disagreed.

Presentation of Results

Table 1: **Mean Scores of the Constraints on the use of Play Based Learning in early childhood programmes in Orumba South Local Government Education Authority of Anambra State**

S/N	Constraints to the use of play based learning include	X	Remark
1	Inadequate number of specialist teachers	3.47	Agreed
2	School Administrators without specialist training	2.91	Agreed
3	Inadequate number of trained support staff	3.12	Agreed
4	Defective early childhood curriculum	3.20	Agreed
5	Lack of conducive environment at schools	3.76	Agreed
6	Unhealthy Competition with other schools	2.38	Disagreed
7	Overcrowded classrooms	2.76	Agreed
8	Poor collaboration between families and school	2.66	Agreed
9	Excessive demands and pressure from parents	3.82	Agreed
10	Teachers poor knowledge of play based learning skills	3.50	Agreed
11	Irregular re-training and professional development of teachers	2.81	Agreed
12	Dearth of appropriate and digital play materials	2.71	Agreed
13	Poor motivation of staff	2.76	Agreed
14	Parents poor knowledge of importance of play-based learning	2.53	Agreed
15	Teachers lack creativity to improvise needed play materials	2.41	Disagreed
16	Curriculum contents above the level of learning	2.67	Agreed
17	Irregular supervision of early childhood programmes	2.02	Disagreed
18	Non-availability of curricular user –friendly guides for teachers	3.47	Agreed
19	Educators lack of knowledge of assessment techniques of play base learning	2.51	Agreed
20	Paucity of funds	3.12	Agreed
	Total Average Mean Score		**2.92**

Result from table 1 shows that the respondents identified that almost all factors mentioned are constraints to the use of play based learning method in early childhood classes. Item by item analysis indicated that the respondents agreed to 18 factors as constraints and disagreed on items 6 and 15 .

The total average mean score of 2.92 which is above the bench mark of 2.50 supports that play based learning is constrained.

Table 2: Mean Scores on possible solutions to the constraints to the use of play-based learning in early childhood education programmes in Orumba South Local Government Education Authority

S/N	Solutions to Use PlayBased Learning in EarlyChildhood Programmes	X	Decision
21	Recruiting qualified early childhood teachers	3.54	Agreed
22	Parent teacher collaboration	3.23	Agreed
23	Curriculum should be reformed to incorporate play based learning	2.82	Agreed
24	Provision of play materials both electronic and digital	3.62	Agreed
25	Spacious and conducive learning environment should be made available	2.54	Agreed
26	Seminars and workshops should be organized for teacher development	2.62	Agreed
27	Provision of curricular guides to teachers	3.32	Agreed
28	Maintaining minimum standards in teacher-pupil ratio	2.51	Agreed
29	Emphasizing play based learning in early childhood teacher education	3.38	Agreed
30	Enlightening parents on the need for play based learning in pre schools	3.71	Agreed
	Total Average Mean	**3.12**	

Responses from table 2 show that the respondents, agreed that the items listed were possible solutions to the constraints to successfully use of play based learning in early childhood education programmes in Orumba South Local Government Education Authority. The total average mean score of 3.12 which is above the bench mark of 2.50 supports the claims.

Discussion

Findings from the study reveal that several factors constrain the use of play based learning in early childhood education programmes in Orumba South Local Government Area, Anambra State. Some of the constraints are curriculum related which include overcrowded ECE curricular, Non-availability of curricular content interpretation guides and defective curricular that is not be age appropriate. These factors point to the fact that any defect in the curriculum will constrain the use of proper teaching methods. This is in line with the findings of Alike (2016) who reported that the curriculum was defective i.e it was above the level of the children because major stakeholders in the education of young children were not sufficiently involved in the preparation of the curriculum. This finding also corroborates that of Agu, Anyikwa and Olibie as cited by Alike (2016) that teachers were unfamiliar with early childhood curriculum guidelines. If early childhood educators cannot use guides effectively to interpret the curriculum, then the idea of play based learning becomes a mirage.

Findings from the study also revealed that some constraints on play –based learning as seen in the table are teacher-related.

These include inadequate number of specialist staff, poor knowledge of teachers on skills for play based learning, inadequate number of trained support staff, limited opportunity for retraining and professional development of teachers, inadequate knowledge of teachers roles in the play based learning, lack of knowledge of assessment techniques of play based learning and poor motivation of staff. These findings are in agreement with the findings of Alike (2016) who discovered that most of the teachers in early childhood care centers in Anambra state lack necessary skills to foster creativity in children. Again the UNICEF brief (2017) noted that many early childhood teachers are not adequately prepared to implement play-based learning in their classrooms. This has negative implications because teachers are drivers of curriculum and according to the National policy on Education (2004) no education system can rise above the quality of its teachers. If teachers are not adequately equipped, poorly trained and motivated they will not be able to deliver lesson objectives using the play-based learning method.

Again, findings showed that lack of collaboration between family and school, parental poor knowledge of benefits of play based learning, parental pressure and demand for academic assessment results were constraints to the use of play based learning in early childhood education. This is in line with the findings of Opper in Cheng and Fung (2012) that parents not only expect young children to be learning the skills of formal literacy and numeracy, but they also expect teachers to be responsible for teaching these formal literacy and numeracy skills, and that some parents go so far as to expect teachers to assign their children large amounts of homework every day, even at the age of three.

In addition, results from the study showed that various solutions proffered to help ameliorate these constraints of play based learning were agreed upon for use in quality early childhood programs. They enhanced teacher education, improved learning environment and provision of learning materials (toys) and parent education. This is in agreement with Cheng and Fung (2012) that the key to quality education can be found in several domains: fostering children's development through developmentally appropriate programs; equipping schools with adequate facilities and resources; finding qualified and professionally competent teachers; building collaborations between families and schools; community support and parental involvement.

Conclusion

This study sought to identify the constraints on the use of play based method in the early childhood education in Orumba South Local Government Education Authority. It revealed the uses and educational benefits of play-based curricula and revealed stakeholders (parents, teachers, and administrators) induced constraints on play based learning. The study revealed that more is needed to be done to help parents to understand the importance of play in children's development. Parents are the

key stakeholders in their children's education. Their desires and expectations must be respected. However, when parents focus on their children's academic outcomes but not on their meaningful learning, care should be taken to prevent their expectations from overshadowing teachers' pedagogic autonomy and professional judgment. The study further showed that early childhood educators were not competent enough to utilize play based learning techniques, as proposed by the National policy on Education and NAEYC position statement for effective learning and to meet up with 21st century global standards on early childhood education.

Recommendations

The following recommendations that were derived from the results of this study should be implemented:

1. Government and individual owners of early childhood education centers should aid and support teacher training through productive in-service training, such as workshops, seminars and conferences.
2. Early Childhood Education teachers and caregivers should be provided with enabling environment in order to achieve stated objectives.

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