

INFLUENCE OF PLAY ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF PRESCHOOL CHILDREN IN ANAMBRA STATE

NNAEME BLESSING NGOZI
godsblessingjeoma@gmail.com
+2348069281213

**Department of Educational Foundations, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University,
Igbariam Campus**

&

OKOYEUZU VIVIAN
Vivianlinus20@gmail.com

&

CHUKA, ADAOBI BLESSING
Blessingchuka@gmail.com

&

AJOGWU TOBECHUKWU MAXIMILIAN CAJETAN
tmc.ajogwu@unizik.edu.ng

Abstract

Play has been a natural activity which serves as a learning tool and as well a recreational activity for children. The recent reduction in the activity of play bore the concern of the researcher towards investigating the influence of play on the physical, socio-emotional and cognitive development of preschool children in Anambra State. Instead of meaningful play activities, academic curriculum and screen time has replaced the core activity of preschool children. High screen time among children has reduced the physical movement of children thus it affects their fine, gross motor skills and socio-emotional development. The study aimed investigated the influence of play on the development of preschool children in Anambra State. The findings of the study indicated that play; to a high extent has a positive influence on the physical, socio-emotional, and cognitive development of the preschool children in Anambra State. Therefore, it was recommended among others that parents, teachers, and curriculum planners should create more time for play in preschools. That is, various kinds of play should be creatively infused during classroom activities.

Keywords: Play, development, preschool, children.

Introduction

During early childhood, neuron connections in the brain begin to multiply in millions due to the rapid development of their brain. It is crucial at this stage that the cognitive, socio-emotional and physical skills of the child be honed properly. The new experiences learnt, words and new behaviours adopted serve as a foundation for the future. Research (Canadian Council of Learning, (2010)), indicated that the experiences during the first years of a child's life have a major bearing in the workplace and many other aspects of a healthy, fulfilling life. The physical, cognitive and social development of a preschooler is part of the checklist that indicates what a child should be able to do by a certain age. Development is the child's ability to do more challenging things as they get older (Charlesworth, 2012). Development involves

the ability of a child to gain mastery or control over physical actions, carrying out tasks skillfully and easily. The development of preschoolers can be influenced by genetics and environment, also been realised that when children play, they adapt to the world around them. One of the key activities that has helped to enhance the development of preschool children is play. Scholars have agreed that play enables children to become active explorers of their environment. Play can be acknowledged as a vital medium through which children express themselves. It is an absorbing natural activity that provides enjoyment and some sort of experiential learning to children. Famlii (2019) defined play as the fundamental learning mode and emotional outlet of childhood. Play comes in different forms and stages. Bento and Dias, (2017), said that play is a natural compelling activity that promotes the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional wellbeing, offering the necessary conditions for children to thrive and learn. A classical theorist of play, Parten (1932) developed six social stages of play which takes place from infancy to the preoperational stage of development. According to Parten, the stages of play include: unoccupied play, solitary play, onlooker play, parallel play, associative play, and cooperative/social play. More so, there are different forms of play such as: motor-physical play, constructive play, expressive play, fantasy/dramatic play, cooperative play, and virtual/digital play. Significantly, the rate of time spent during play and kind of play experienced by children varies across gender, location and socio-economic status. Brockman, Fox and Russell (2011) informed that boys tend to play further away from home with friends, while girls tend to play closer to home, often with family members. As regards to the level of play engagement in various socio-economic statuses, children from middleclass society are often coerced to replace play with schoolwork or screen time while children from low economic societies are forced into providing by joining in the family economy (Lancy, 2012).

Unfortunately, some adults fail to realize the vital role of play in the overall development of children; hence, they regard children's play as a waste of time. Parents and teachers often have a perception of play as break or relief from learning. In its real sense, play is a serious form of learning for children, for self-initiated play nourishes the child's curiosity, imagination and creativity, and these abilities are like muscles—if you do not use them, you lose them.

In recent times, preschool or early childhood education has become a common practice in Anambra state. The provision of pre-primary education assists working class parents who have no relations or house help to take care of their children while they are at work (Obiweluzor, 2015). Parents and teachers fill preschoolers' time with after school lessons and other structured academic activities, such as homework, assignment and tutoring which deprives them of the opportunity to play. Preschoolers are bombarded with academic activities which has little benefit for their overall development. Instead of having recreation at home such as outdoor play, they are confined to their televisions or game sets which in turn reduces the social activity of a child. As screen time increases and schools cut recess and physical education necessities, children and teens become more inactive (Ertheo, 2019). As education is becoming more standardized and competitive, schools are placing more importance on math, reading, and science and forgetting the importance of physical play, physical education, and recess (Ertheo, 2019). Preschool education in Nigeria has become highly academic because many parents in a bid to hurry their children want them academically prepared for primary education. Importantly, it has been observed that many schools in the bid to impress parents of preschoolers, expose the children to academic activities made for older children (Salami, 2016). Above all, denying children the opportunity to play is denying them their childhood. Most adults no longer allow children to be children. Unfortunately, due to rise of insecurity cases in Anambra State such as kidnapping, children are forced to stay indoors. Their pattern of play thus becomes restricted and inhibits their creativity. The free time for play at home is either

preoccupied with house chores, assignment or television. Also, lack of communication or poor neighbourhood relations has caused anxiety about children's safety, thus reducing the rate of outdoor play. Besides the developmental benefits of play, it teaches children how to live communally and adopt socio-cultural values. Therefore, this paper seeks to investigate the extent to which play influences the development of preschool children in Anambra state. Specifically, the general objective of the study is to determine the extent to which play exert influence on:

1. The physical development of preschool children in Anambra State.
2. The socio-emotional development of preschool children in Anambra State.
3. The cognitive development of preschool children in Anambra State.

Play and Preschoolers' Physical Development.

Physical development occurs in the brain, gross and fine motor skills. It can be defined as the physical changes in the body and involves changes in bone thickness, size, weight, gross motor, fine motor, vision, hearing, and perceptual development (Ruffin, 2019). Development occurs in a cephalo-caudal and proximodistal pattern. Cephalo-caudal simply means that development occurs from head to tail or from top-down while proximodistal means that development begins from the centre of the body (spinal cord) and spreads towards other parts of the body (inside-out).

Preschoolers' physical development can be encouraged by allowing children to engage in outdoor play. Outdoor play improves the child's vision, motor fitness, coordination and immunity of the child (Okoruwa, 2016). Physical and outdoor play are beneficial to children as they decreases, the risk of developing bad health conditions like heart disease, high blood pressure, diabetes mellitus, and obesity. Physical play improves spatial-visual intelligence (dexterity and eye-hand coordination) and bodily-kinesthetic intelligence in preschool children. Studies show that physical activity in early childhood is associated with better physical health which involves proper body posture, stronger bones and posture, and better cardiovascular and respiratory function (Davis, 2019). Parents involved with their children in some physical activity, encourage their children to be more active and enhance parent-child communication. Okoruwa (2017) stated that outdoor play prevents obesity, improves children's mood, enhances creativity and teaches children how to respect nature among others. Physical play allows children to amass necessary motor skills (writing, handling tools, walking) which will enhance their ability in several spheres of life.

Play and Preschooler's Socio-emotional Development

Socio-emotional development refers to how a child develops cordial relationships and handles conflicts with age mates. As children develop socially and emotionally, they experience temper tantrums, mood swings, and an expanding social world, they learn more about their emotions as well as those of other people (Cherry, 2019). Cooperative and outdoor play are very essential in developing the socio-emotional development of a child. Cooperative play with their age mates enable preschoolers to explore, understand, imbibe and practice social roles. During cooperative play, children are involved with what the others are doing-all play the same games, talk about what they are doing, borrow and lend playthings, follow each other with trains or wagons without assigning tasks and materials, or choosing a goal (Torbico, 2013). Children who can play freely with their peers develops skills for seeing things through another person's point-of-view, for cooperating, helping, sharing, and solving problems (Open University 2011). Okudo and Manuel (2013); Wathu (2016) in their study investigated that children who had more play time and necessary play materials had proficiency in their language and social

development. Outdoor play encourages children from diverse backgrounds to develop friendships as they learn and grow (Murray & Ramstetter, 2013). Life social skills such as leadership ability and the art of carrying out responsibility are nurtured during cooperative play.

Play and Preschooler's Cognitive Development.

Cognitive development in early childhood refers to children's mental capacity for problem solving, language acquisition and learning about objects (Adams & Mila, 2015). Guerra, Williamson, and Lucas-Molina, (2012) stated that cognitive development is the proliferation of internal cognitive scripts or patterns of thinking and understanding as well as larger schemas, or overarching beliefs about the self, others, and how the universe works. Simply put, Cognitive development encompasses the changes and growth experienced by individuals in their internal mental processes. This can be observed in the individual's ability to solve problem, think abstractly, plan and make decisions.

Guided play activities such as pretend and constructive play are more effective in building the cognitive development of children. Pretend play enhances symbolic thought which is a crucial developmental milestone for preschool children. Symbolic thoughts can be defined as the capacity to use mental representation; this can be images of objects or actions held in our mind or language where words represent our thoughts and ideas (Mcmanis, 2016). Pretend play also builds the language and communication skills of preschool children. It enables children experiment with and learn about the power of language, how it affects us and those around us; it also gives children the means to re-enact situations (Homan, 2016). Children build their vocabulary skills when discussing with their toys or other children. Stagnitti (2011) stated that pretend play facilitates thinking skill.

Constructive play enables preschoolers to become more focused and patient as it prepares them for life (Hart, 2016). Constructive play creates healthy disequilibrium in children as they tend to try out new ideas during construction. Destroying a structure and trying another idea is pretty normal during constructive play. Reason is that their initial ideas or plan might be altered during execution therefore, it teaches them patience and mental toughness. It makes them persistent and motivates them to achieve their goals (Walter, 2018). Play materials used in constructive play include scrabbles and puzzles.

Theories of Play and Development

In terms of theoretical implications, theories from scholars like Jean Piaget's on cognitive developmental theory on play (1962), Psychoanalytic theory of play by Sigmund Freud, Anna Freud and Erik Erikson; and Hebert Spencer's theory on play (1875) were proposed to anchor this study. Jean Piaget propounded that play serves as a means of assimilation. This simply means that, play was a medium through which children learnt new behaviour or skill. He was of the belief that play aided the cognitive development of children. While play encourages children to be curious, it gives children the opportunity to become self-directed learners.

The Psychoanalytic theorists proposed that play has an impact on the emotional health of children. It relieves them from anxiety, serves as a pressure valve and teaches children how to interact with other children. The result of this study supported their claims, as it proves that cooperative, social and associative play enables children to develop interpersonal skills. Also, it concurred with the facts that play enable children to express their emotions freely.

Hebert Spencer (1875) believed that play served as medium of releasing surplus energy. Children during play learn to fine tune their gross and fine motor skills. Evidence from this study proved that play improves the physical fitness of preschool children. It also shows that

functional play improves the eye-hand coordination and bodily/kinesthetic intelligence in preschoolers.

Educational Implications.

The findings of the study showed that play has a positive influence on the overall development of a child regardless of the settings children find themselves. The study has implication for both the home and the school.

Parents who want to see their children develop holistically should endeavour to create meaningful play time for their children. Play creates an opportunity for parents to discover the talents, mind and personality of their children. Whenever possible, parents should participate in some kinds of play with their children for such participation increases attachment, necessary for meaningful parent-child relationship.

Preschools have been proliferated as busy parents need such schools to care for their children. Consequently, play should dominate the curriculum of preschools. This means that preschools should have assorted play materials and children should be given ample time to play with these materials along with their mates. Teachers should understand better the need for employing play-way teaching method. Preschoolers are known for having short attention span and one of the ways to hold their attention, is by being creative and playful while teaching. They should be able to create stimulating instructional materials. Play-way method will help make teaching and learning more interesting rather than being boring and monotonous.

Besides, preschool teachers should focus on play-based activities such as creative arts, role play drama, writing, singing, dancing and rhymes should be encouraged. A play-based learning curriculum will help to eliminate fear of schooling and will increase the confidence of preschoolers while learning.

Conclusion

Play is crucial for the development of children. It is the work of a child and should be promoted in every school and home. Depriving children of play is stealing their childhood from them. Preschool teachers should creatively infuse play in the classroom activity by encouraging hands-on activity such as puzzles, scrabbles, painting and drawing. Also, outdoor play should be encouraged as it gives room for other forms of play and it also promotes the physical, socio-emotional and cognitive development of preschool children.

Recommendations

The study recommends that;

1. Parents, especially those living in urban settings should encourage social play among children, as social play promotes socialization and cooperative existence.
2. Seminars should be conducted on improving the ability of teachers to create or improvise instructional materials.
3. The government should build play recreational centers with necessary play materials and playgrounds for preschool children in Anambra State
4. Preschool teachers should be creative on implementing the play-way method of teaching in the classroom.
5. Curriculum developers should give more emphasis on creative play in the preschool curriculum.
6. Children should be allowed to frequently try hands on skills such as drawing, painting and role-play drama.

7. The government should provide conducive environment for preschool children as most of the public preschool classrooms in Anambra State are dilapidated. Essential materials such as comfortable chairs, tables, play materials and books, should be provided. This will be of a huge benefit to children from low-socio-economic class.

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