

Play Based Learning with Early Childhood Learners: Perspectives of Kindergarten Teachers in the Wenchi Municipality

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Abstract: Play allows children to build and extend their knowledge and skills as they interact with their environment, with others, and on their own. This research study aimed at exploring kindergarten teachers' perspectives on the 'play based learning' approach to teaching Early Childhood classrooms. This study employed a qualitative research design with the use of a descriptive survey. Purposive and simple random sampling techniques were used to draw 100 kindergarten teachers from the public kindergarten schools. Questionnaire was used to gather the data from the respondents. The descriptive analysis was the procedure applied for the data analysis. The findings of the study revealed that the majority of the kindergarten teachers have knowledge and understanding of the concept play based learning approach to teaching. However, lack of learning materials, parent's expectations on children's academic performance and large class size were the major factors impeding teachers from implementing the play based learning in Early childhood classrooms. The study recommended that the Education Directorate in collaboration with the Local Assembly should supply learning materials to schools, organise regular in-service training to teachers, and build more classrooms so as to curb the challenges raised.

Keywords: Play Based Learning, Learning Through Play, Kindergarten Teachers and Play, Early Grade Learners, Play Pedagogy

1. Introduction

Globally, play based learning have been identified as one of the developmentally appropriate pedagogy to be used in facilitating youngster learning [1]. As such, existing literature on early grade learning has highlighted the relevance of play method of teaching and learning in early learning of pre-academic skills for all young children [2]. As such, the early 2000s, there has been a change towards the use of play-based learning in early grade education curriculum across the world, including Ghana. Studies have shown that, early childhood philosophers such as Froebel and Montessori acknowledged play based learning as a best method used in facilitating children learning.

Furthermore, Philosophers such as Piaget, Vygotsky and Dewey have all advocated and used play pedagogy in their early childhood educational practices due to the significance to children learning. For instance, Piaget developed the

'PILES' theme to meet the physical, intellectual, language, emotional and social needs of children. Piaget's constructivist theory emphasises hands-on educational experiences, giving children the chance to explore and manipulate objects in a form of play. As such, purposefully engaging children in play activities in the learning environment is an important vehicle for children's learning, because when children are engaged in meaningful play activities, they learn about themselves, other people, and the world around them easily [3].

Despite the potential presented by play-based learning, this pedagogy is challenging to implement given its broad definitions and differential implementation in children's lives and their learning settings. In spite of that, play based learning has been recommended for children learning all globally and Ghana is no exception.

However, although the existing literature has enumerated the significance of play based learning, interestingly with Ghana, little is said about how teachers apply and integrate

play based learning activities in Ghanaian early grade classrooms. In spite of the fact that extensive studies have documented the value of play as a developmentally appropriate method of teaching at the early year's level, research has revealed that in Ghanaian classrooms learning occurs naturally even though most teachers do not use play method and primary learning aids in their classrooms [4].

Nevertheless, studies have revealed that children prefer activity based learning to traditional direct teaching [5]. As such, child-centred approach to teaching like play pedagogy is accepted globally to be one of the best pedagogy to use in facilitating children learning including Ghana. This notwithstanding, in Ghana, many teachers appear to be using direct instruction in teaching children. For instance, according to Ampiah, many teachers in Ghana appear to be using teacher-centred approach mostly in teaching children which make them passive participants in the teaching and learning environment [6]. Hence, this study sought to find out Wenchi kindergarten teachers perspectives on play based learning approach to teaching and to establish factors that impede teachers from integrating play based learning activities in their classrooms.

The study intended to answer the following question:

How do teachers view the concept 'play based learning' approach to teaching in the Wenchi Municipality?

What are the factors that impede kindergarten teachers from integrating play based learning in early grade classrooms?

2. Literature Review

This study was guided by the constructivist theory of learning postulated by Dewey (1859-1952), Vygotsky (1896-1934), Montessori (1870-1952) and Froebel (1782 – 1852). They developed the "child-centred" theory and challenged didactic teaching, which is more of teacher-centred method. For instance, Froebel highlighted the importance of play as the educational "medium" through which children reach their intellectual and emotional potentials. Similarly, Montessori used play pedagogy in facilitating children learning in her early childhood education.

The term 'play-based approach' is used to describe an approach to teaching and learning in early childhood centres recognises that children learn through play and build on their play experiences to promote further learning. Children's abilities, interests and negotiations are usually catered for in this approach. According to Bruce, children learn through play activities such as counting, matching, adding and subtracting [2]. Play-based pedagogy is described as an approach where the teacher acknowledges that children learn through an active, hands-on, playful environment. Play based learning is one form of child-centred approach curriculum, where the primary aim is for the child to learn how to acquire the skills of synthesis, analysis, evaluation and induction of communication and reception of ideas and knowledge through action and doing. Play pedagogy focuses on the child and place the child at the heart of learning.

Play-based learning approach is a good example of a child-centred approach. Play pedagogy is method that allows children to create, adapt, explore, experiment, learn, communicate, socialize, and problem solve [7]. Play allows children to build and extend their knowledge and skills as they interact with their environment, with others, and on their own [2]. It is a method geared toward preschool and has a principal focus on gaming. In the play-based teaching, children learn cooperatively with their peers, the teacher becomes a facilitator and guardian to learning, and children are at once involved in the discovery of their own knowledge. It is therefore recommended that children learning environment should be play oriented and that children should be guided and allowed to learn through play by engaging them in different activities using variety of learning materials. Thus, play based learning is described as an approach where the teacher acknowledges that children learn best through an active, hands-on, playful environment [8].

This notwithstanding, certain factors can prevent teachers from integrating play based learning in their classrooms. For instance, Kamau study findings revealed that, high cost of the learning materials, poverty, and poor classroom environment can impede the application of play based learning in schools [9].

Firstly, inadequate learning resources in school sometimes prevent teachers from practicing play method in their classrooms. Many schools are unable to purchase or design learning materials due to limited resources of the schoolhouse. This make it difficult for teachers to get sufficient learning materials to use in their classrooms. As such, many teachers' are provided with very few resources for material development and this practice seems to prevent many teachers from using play method in their classrooms [9].

Secondly, poverty on the part of parents also hinders the teachers from using play based learning in their schools. For instance, according to Kamau the finding, teachers' reported that most of the children come from poor backgrounds where parents struggle to meet with the educational needs of their children with physical challenges. So, parents in most cases are not capable to purchase play and reading materials that may be needed in school. Approximately 87% of the parents interviewed reported that lack of finance was a major factor that impedes their support to their youngster.

Thirdly, in cases where some resources were availed teachers felt that they are not competent enough to develop materials. Besides most of the teachers felt that the undertaking of developing materials is time consuming and overwhelming to them because of other duties which they should address in the schoolhouse. They felt it would be helpful if the school had a specialist in material development to assist in the development of play and learning materials for all children [9].

Further, according to Lynch's study of play showed that some kindergarten teachers value play-based instruction and find it developmentally appropriate [10]. Nevertheless, although they find play valuable, these instructors are under pressure on state standards and the stress of meeting all the teaching requirements. Kindergarten has become more

academically rigorous and teachers feel pressure to train kids for similar tests [11]. The public have critiqued kindergarten classrooms because of the academic pressures put on the learners [11]. As a result, play has diminished in the kindergarten classroom. Because, instead of school buying art supplies, dramatic play materials, or sand and water boards, they are purchasing textbooks and workbooks [11]. Because academics have a precedence over play in the kindergarten setting.

Moreover, teachers' perception and position towards the application of play based learning approach to teaching largely depend on their cognition and understanding about the concept. UNICEF contends that, teachers own limited knowledge and comprehension of play theory or PBL as a concept plays role in their attitude towards practicing play pedagogy [12]. As a consequence, many teachers tend to avoid play based learning activities due to their perceptual experiences.

Again, research studies led by Opoku-Asare, in Ghana on instructional strategies applied by teachers indicated that, high learner-instructor ratio in basic schools coupled with overcrowded classrooms apparently contributes to teachers' inability to adopt interactive instructional strategies other than "chalk and talk" method which dominate curriculum delivery in many Ghanaian schools [13]. Therefore, large class size can make the practising of play pedagogy very difficult for teachers, thereby compelling teachers to resort to teacher-centred approach of teaching.

Finally, besides the social surroundings of a given institution, the placement, size, space, shape and structure of the schoolroom, the presence and effective management of different instructional facilities like: furniture, reading materials and library services have direct bearing on the instructional methods use in classrooms. For example, a neat and well-kept classroom with appropriate learning materials and a well-ventilated room help teachers demonstrate confident application of interactive activities [14].

3. Research Methodology

The primary aim of the study was to establish the perspectives of kindergarten teachers in the Wenchi municipality on the concept play based learning approach to teaching and to determine the factors that impede teachers' efforts in integrating play based learning in their classrooms. However, in order to accomplish this task, the study employed qualitative research design with the use of a descriptive survey. The purposive and simple random sampling techniques was employed to select 110 respondents because the study was focused on only public kindergarten teachers who were trained (professional) and were presently teaching in the public kindergarten schools within the Wenchi Municipality to make it specific and manageable.

The research instrument that was employed for data collection was a questionnaire, since the study entailed a descriptive survey of kindergarten teachers' perspectives on the play based learning. The data for this survey were

gathered mainly through questionnaires. Questionnaires which consisted of closed and open-ended items was used to elicit responses from the respondents, because the use of the questionnaire as a method of collecting data helps the researcher to collect the view of a large number of respondents in a short period of time [15]. Accordingly, Kankam and Weiler, believes that questionnaires are the most useful tool to use in finding out about the views and perspectives of respondents [16]. In all, 110 questionnaires were distributed to the respondents to draw out responses that address the study's guiding questions. However, out of the 110 questionnaires, 100 questionnaires representing (91%) of the respondents were completed and delivered.

The descriptive analysis procedure was the method applied for the analysis of the data collected. The data were processed using the excel software. The data was analysed using frequency distribution count tables, percentages, charts, graphs and description after the responses were coded for easy recognition. Supporting this, Coolidge argued that, the findings of a data should be presented, analysed and described as presented by the respondents [17].

4. Findings and Discussion

In this study, three biographical variables such as gender, teacher qualification and level of teaching were selected because it had a direct relationship on their application of play based learning in classrooms.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Teachers.

GENDER	NUMBER OF TEACHERS	PERCENTAGE
Gender		
Male	0	0%
female	100	100%
Qualification		
Trained	100	100%
Untrained	0	0%
Level of teaching		
Kindergarten 1	42	42%
Kindergarten 2	58	58%

Source: Field Data, January (2019).

From the data in Table 1 all the 100 kindergarten teachers who took part in this survey were female-trained teachers representing 100% of the respondents sampled. 42% of the respondents were teaching in kindergarten 1, Whiles 58% were teaching in kindergarten 2 of the Wenchi Municipality.

Table 2. Educational Background of the Kindergarten Teachers.

Qualifications	Number of Teachers	Percentages%
Teacher cert "A"	12	12%
Diploma	66	66%
Degree	22	22%
Total	100	100%

Source: Field Data, January (2019).

The data in Table 2 shows that (12) teachers representing 12% have Teachers' Certificate "A". Sixty-six (66) of the kindergarten teachers representing 66% have diploma

certificate. Whiles twenty-two (22) teachers representing 22% have degree certifications.

5. Teacher's View on the Concept of 'Concept 'Play Based Learning' Approach to Teaching

Research Question 1: How do teachers view play based learning approach to teaching in the Wenchi Municipality?

This research question sought to establish how kindergarten teachers view play based learning approach to teaching. With this research question, hundred (100) respondents were asked the questions such as "what is play based learning approach to teaching?" in your own opinion, what is 'play based learning'? How do you view the concept play based learning? Based on the teachers' responses, the following themes and patterns were deduced and categorised into five themes. Below are the themes that emerged from the teachers' responses:

Play based learning is the act of assisting children to learn in a form of play by actively exploring and participating in variety of class activities.

Play based learning approach involves the use of variety learning materials in helping children to learn through doing.

Play based learning approach to teaching is a difficult teaching method for teachers.

Play based learning approach is a method of teaching which is involves a lot of time.

Play based learning is just allowing children to play with materials and move around.

Below is a figure showing the Kindergarten Teachers' responses.

From figure 1 it is evident that majority of the kindergarten teachers have fair knowledge and understanding about the concept 'play based learning' approach to teaching. For instance, out of 100 respondents, 70% of them exhibited having knowledge about the concept play based learning approach to teaching based on their responses. They viewed play pedagogy as "Play based learning is the act of assisting children to learn by allowing children to actively explore and participate in variety of class activities". This gives credence to Bredekamp and Copple, who argued that, play method is an approach to teaching which identifies and put the child at the core of learning [18].

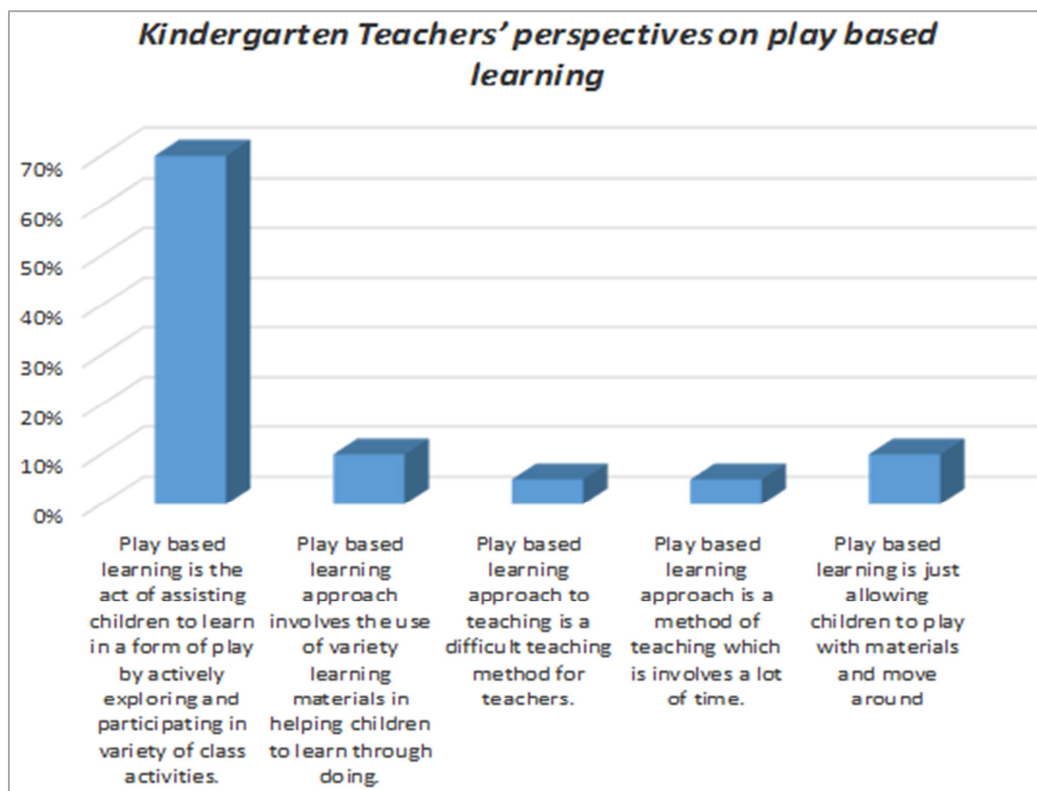


Figure 1. Kindergarten Teachers' perspectives on play based learning.

However, 10% of the respondents indicated that play based learning involves using variety of learning materials in assisting children to learn. This confirmed Kamamu positioned that, lack of materials in school sometimes prevent teachers from practicing play method in their classrooms, because learning through play involves the use

of variety of materials. From these responses, it was deduced that few of the respondents viewed play based learning as a method that is economically expensive to use.

Accordingly, 5% respondents indicated that play based learning was time consuming. To this category of teachers, using play activities in class demands a lot of time.

Further, 5% of the respondents viewed the use of play based learning approach in the classroom as a teaching pedagogy which is difficult and tedious to teachers to use in teaching.

Finally, only 10% of the respondents claimed that 'play based learning' is a method of teaching that allows children to play around in class. This category of teachers' feels that play based learning involves allowing children to participate in learning process freely and move around in class. Supporting this view, Bruce contended that, play is free and unconscious and because of that, play activities have always been integrated in the early childhood educational curriculum [2].

From the responses of the respondents, it is apparent that most kindergarten teachers in the Wenchi Municipality have adequate knowledge and understanding of the concept although few of them view it negatively.

6. Factors That Affect Teachers in Using Play Based Learning Approach in the Kindergarten Classroom

Research Question 2: What are the factors that impede teachers from integrating play based learning approach in kindergarten classrooms?

This research question aimed at identifying those possible factors that impede teachers from integrating play based learning approach in teaching children. Below are the responses of the respondents regarding some of the factors that prevent them or make it difficult for them to use play based pedagogy in their classrooms.

Below is Figure 2 Showing the Factors Impeding Teachers from Using Play Based Learning.

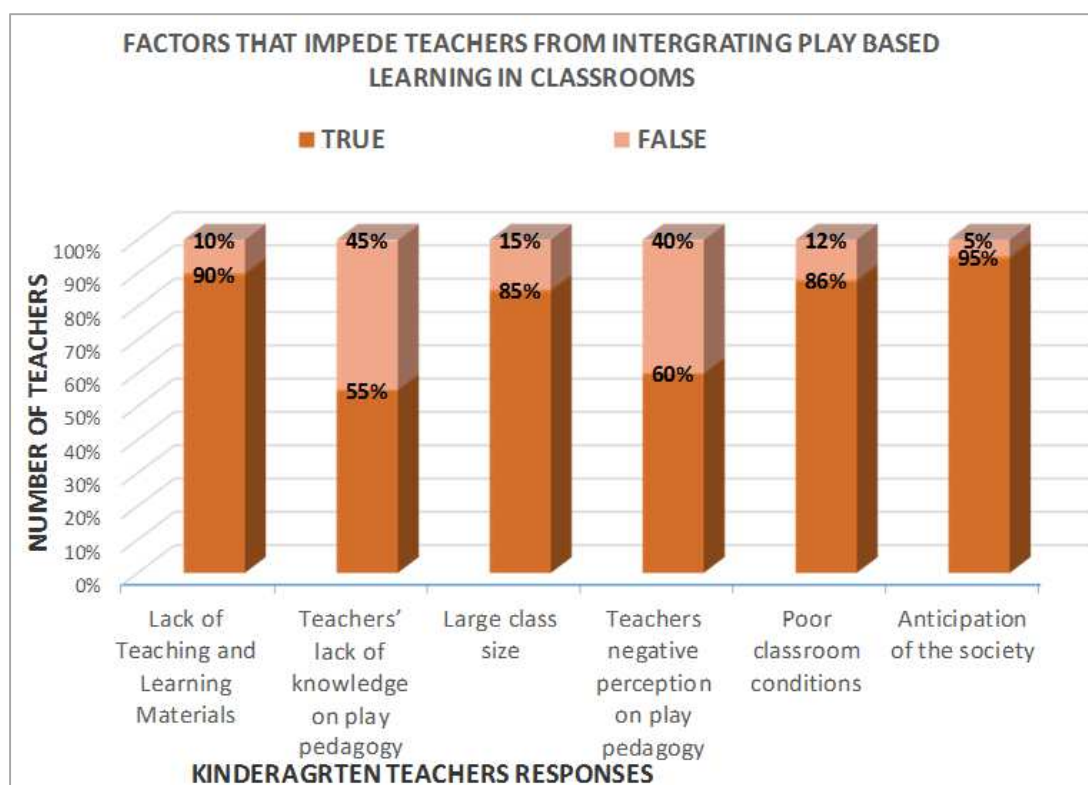


Figure 2. Factors impeding teachers from using play based learning.

Figure 2 shows that 90% of the respondents claimed that lack of learning materials in schools is one of the factors impeding teachers from using play based learning. Only 10% of the respondents disagreed to this assumption. Supporting this idea, [14], research finding revealed that lack of instructional materials compels teachers to resort to direct teaching.

Further, 55% of the respondents agreed to the assumption that, teachers' lack of adequate knowledge on the concept play based learning can impede them from applying it in their classrooms. While, 45% of the respondents disagreed to this assumption. This gives credence to UNICEF, who contended that, teachers own limited knowledge and comprehension of

play theory or play based learning as a concept plays role in their attitude towards practicing play pedagogy.

However, 85% of the respondents agreed that large class size impedes teachers from integrating play based learning activities in their classrooms. Only 15% of the respondents disagreed to this assumption. In support to this idea, Opoku-Asare [13] stated that, large class size in Ghanaian schools make the application of interactive pedagogy difficult for many teachers.

Additionally, 60% of the respondents agreed to the assumption that teachers' negative perception can influence their teaching practices. Only 40% of the respondents disagreed on this issue. This confirmed Ampiah [6]

positioned that, some Ghanaian teachers' negative attitude toward the use of interactive instructional methods is due to their teaching beliefs.

Again, 88% of the respondents agreed that poor classroom conditions can impede teachers from the integrating play based learning approach in their classrooms. While only 12% of the respondents disagreed to this assumption. Supporting this assumption, Alemu [14], noted that, a neat and well-kept classroom with appropriate learning materials and a well-ventilated room help teachers demonstrate confident in implementing interactive activities in their classrooms.

Lastly, 95% of the respondents agreed that parents' interest in teachers output of work and children academic performance can impede teachers from practising play based learning in their classrooms. Only 5% of them disagreed to this assumption. Accordingly, Lynch's [10] contended that, kindergarten teacher's value play-based instruction, nevertheless, these instructors are under pressure on state standards and the stress of meeting all the teaching requirements. Supporting this idea, Bowdon [11], also argued that, Kindergarten has become more academically rigorous and teachers feel pressure to train kids for similar tests.

Thus, from the responses of the respondents, it is apparent that, many factors impede teachers from integrating play based learning in their classrooms. The most dominant factors that appeared to impede teachers from applying play based learning activities is lack of learning materials and poor classroom conditions.

7. Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, the following conclusions are drawn.

Kindergarten teachers have adequate knowledge and understanding of play based learning approach to teaching and learning.

The findings of the study revealed that lack of learning materials, teaching resources, large class size and poor classroom conditions are the major factors impeding teacher from integrating play based learning in early grade classroom of the Wenchi Municipality.

Thus, kindergarten teachers in the Wenchi municipality have knowledge and understanding of play based learning approach to teaching. But may not be applying play based learning in their classrooms due to lack of resources, lack of learning materials and poor learning environment. Therefore, the study findings confirmed Alemu [14] study results, which shows that lack of instructional materials in schools prevents teachers from applying interactive approach in teaching children.

8. Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the researcher makes the following recommendations.

Firstly, the Wenchi Municipality Education Directorate in collaboration with the Municipal Chief Executive should

supply the schools with variety of teaching and learning materials as well as provide adequate classrooms to schools in the municipality.

Secondly, the directorate should continue to encourage teachers to use play based learning approach in teaching children by organising regular in-service training courses for early grade teachers and grant the teachers the opportunity to update and upgrade their knowledge and become abreast with modern trends and methods of teaching children.

Further, teachers who also try to use play based learning in their classrooms should be motivated. They should be given rewards and incentives to serve as encouragement for their colleagues to enumerate. Finally, this research is only an initial explorative work, and as such, further studies should be considered in the area of exploring play pedagogy in Early Grade Education.

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