PLAY MATERIALS AND PUPILS' SOCIAL SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN PRE-PRIMARY LEVEL OF EDUCATION IN URUAN LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA

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Abstract
This study investigated the availability of play materials and their impact on the development of social skills in preschool children in Uruan local government area. Descriptive survey design was used in the study. Cluster sampling technique was used to select 12 schools (6 private and 6 public) from the area for the study. Simple random sampling was used to select 24 preschool teachers and 120 preschool children from the selected schools to form the sample size. The teachers also served as research assistants. A researcher made questionnaire and an observation schedule were the instruments used by the researchers to obtain data to answer the three research questions of the study. Descriptive statistics of percentages mean and standard deviation was used to analyze data obtained. Findings showed that private schools had more and quality play material than public schools. Preschool children were found to develop social skills of cooperation and communication when playing with play materials. It was recommended that government invest in play materials for preschool children as it is their laboratory and that teachers should encourage the children to interact with play materials and their peers so as to develop good social skills.

Introduction

Play is the way of life for children; it is their natural response to items and people around them. It is what children do regard as a serious business to them. **Wathu, Mwania and Mwinzi (2017) stated that** play is any behavior that is freely chosen, intrinsically motivated, and personally directed by the child. Wuest and Bucher (1999) cited in Mabagala and Mabagala (2012), define play as activities that are freely engaged in for purposes of amusement. It is a spontaneous activity and the act of playing is rewarding in itself. In the same manner Cordes and Ibrahim (1999) define play as activities in which individuals engage in freely and from which they derive personal satisfaction. Although there are varying definitions of play, there are common elements to most definitions. Play is regarded as: (a) being spontaneous (b) free from rules (c) involving active engagement (d) intrinsically motivated (e) a means rather than an end (f) having no time dimension and place (it can take place at anytime and anywhere). Play includes a range of self-chosen activities, undertaken by children for their own interest, enjoyment and satisfaction (Lindon, 2002).

Froebel (1894) cited in **Wathu, Mwania and Mwinzi (2017)** felt that play was a way in which children gain insight into their world and was a means of creative self-expression.

White (2004) views play as a way in which children learn about the world around them, learn to talk and share and learn about themselves. All types of play from fantasy to rough-and-tumble have a crucial role in children's development. Rogers (2017) opined that play is a means of learning about the world, oneself and interacting with others and that its importance made the United Nations to list it as one of the basic rights of every child, opens a new window. 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 the arts" (Ginsburg, 2007, Mabagala and Mabagala 2012). It therefore means that children develop from playing around. Benefits of play to children have been seen to cut across physical, emotional and social development. Rogers (2017) listed six benefits of play to children to include

- **Play Builds Imagination and Creativity**
- **Play Fosters Cognitive Growth**
- **Play Reaps Emotional and Behavioural Benefits**
- **Play Facilitates Group Interaction**
- **Play Encourages Greater Independence**
- **Play Promotes Physical Fitness**

In the words of Bright Horizons family solutions (2021), When children play, they are developing skills in all areas of development: cognitive, physical, communication, and social/emotional. They practice and reinforce these skills in a way that can't be achieved through worksheets or screen time. It is through play that children develop essential life skills, they learn how to interact with their peers and with adults, they learn how to choose friends and enemies, they learn how to run around, play team games and sports (Tombs, 2011). Play also provides bonding opportunities. Circumstances in which children play among themselves or with their parents or teacher creates close relationships and bonds between children and their parents or teachers. The bonds in turn lead to love and trust. In addition, play helps children to understand their cultural aspects such as their language, cultural beliefs, norms and values.

Bell and Wolfe (2004) argue that play contributes directly to children's social and emotional development and further observes that if children are to discover what they are good at, what they like and what they are like, they will need variety in their play, and a broad assortment of toys to make it possible. Exposure of children to diverse play materials make a remarkable impact on the quality of play and the quality of play can influence the outcome of the play. It is common knowledge that since baby weaning was considered a role for women, baby girls were usually provided with baby dolls to cater for. This may have been intended to prepare the girl for her role as a mother. It therefore goes to show that the application of play materials in modeling the child had been known by our forebears.

Wangui (2013) defined play materials as items and equipment used during play by both teacher and learners in order to enhance child's holistic development which includes toys,

balls, ropes, swings, tyres and dolls. According to Gichuba, Opatsa and Nguchu (2009) cited in Wangui (2013), types of play materials include audio – visual, which produce sound and pictures like a television, audio and tactile. Audio are materials that produce sound for example, radio. Visual materials need the sense of sight to be utilized only for example flash cards and tactile materials can be manipulated like toys, dolls, clay and blocks of wood. Play materials have many advantages as Mabagala and Mabagala (2012) noted that toys and play materials stimulate and prolong play.

According to Gichuba, Opatsa and Nguchu (2009) as cited in Wangui (2013), the importance of play materials includes promoting social emotional skills and language development. Total growth and development is enhanced by use of play materials. They also enhance learning and creativity in children through manipulation. According to Wangui (2013), children pay a lot of attention to materials that look attractive and appealing. This increases their attention span, hence promoting concept acquisition and social emotional skills. Kamen (2005) opined that the relationships and interactions between preschool children and play materials enhance warmth, friendliness and caring attitudes among children. Where they see no other child, they sometimes relate with the play materials as fellow human beings. They develop affinity with the materials to the extent of sleeping with them on their beds. This is the interaction that will exist when they meet other children as playmates. Thus, Wangui (2013) upholds that the play materials also promote and develop positive behaviours, communication and social skills among children.

This study relies on "social development theory" by Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist who proposed that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the process of cognitive development and that, every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first , on the social level and later on the individual level. first, between people (interpsychological) and then, within the child (intrapsychological) (Vygotsky, 1978). He also proposed in his theory the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Vygotsky's theory Sociocultural theory focuses not only how adults and peers influence individual learning, but also on how cultural beliefs and attitudes affect how learning takes place. According to Vygotsky cited in Cherry (2019), children are born with basic biological constraints on their minds. Each culture, however, provides "tools of intellectual adaptation." These tools allow children to use their abilities in a way that is adaptive to the culture in which they live. The tools can be play materials and adaptation to culture involves social interactions which result in social skills development.

According Darling-Hammond, Flook, Cook-Harvey, Barron, & Osher (2020), the Early Years Learning Framework defines play-based learning as "a context for learning, through which children organize and make sense of their social worlds, as they engage actively with people, objects and representations".
The significance of play and play materials in social development of a child has been investigated. 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 (Cheong, 2011).

Whist playing together, children learns to co-operate, follow rules, develop self-esteem, control and learn generally how to get along with other people (Elis and Arnold, 2006). Young children are naturally curious, so providing them with high quality (which may not mean expensive) materials are important to the learning process. Toys that encourage children's imagination help them know that the world is a diverse and wonderful place (Wathu et al 2017).

It was also observed by Wathu et al 2017) that through play experiences, children learn about themselves, their environment and people in their lives, experiment with different ways to solve problem, develop body control, practice social skills and express creativity. An environment that encourages children to make their own choices helps them feel safe, valued, adventurous, competent and confident to take initiative. Teachers and parents are required to provide playing materials for their children so as to help them get engaged in a meaningful and quality play which influences their social and emotional development (Jane, 2001).

In a study, **availability and use of play materials, and their influence on social and emotional development of pre-school children in Kyangwithya zone, Kitui County, Wathu et al (2017) observed that** *there was a strong positive correlation (r=+0.75) between availability of play materials and social development of children and a significant difference (p<0.05). These means that if there is more variety of play materials and are well used, the children are likely to have good social and emotional development. In a related study by Wangui (2013) on* **impact of play materials on social emotional development of pre-school children in Ngewa zone, Kiambu county, it was found** that play materials have a net positive effect on social emotional development of preschool children. Equally, it was discovered that play and unscheduled time that allow for peer interactions are important components of social and emotional learning (Elis and Arnold, 2006).

This study was set to investigate the influence of availability and utilization of play materials on the social skills development of the child in Uruan Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Research Questions

The study sought to answer the following research questions.

1. What play materials are available in preschool classes in Uruan Local Government Area?
2. How do play materials influence development of cooperation skills in preschool children?
3. How does the availability of play materials influence the development of communication skills in preschool children?

Research Methods

The study adopted a descriptive survey design. Cluster sampling was used to select six private schools and six public schools with preschool classes from Uruan Local Government Area for the study. The study area is a fast growing and developing area because it has borders with Uyo the state Capital. Part of the Uyo Capital City Development area is within Uruan Local Government Area. The airport in Akwa Ibom state is located within Uruan and

because of the rapid urbanization, many schools spring up and many workers drop off their children with care givers at the school before going to their offices and business. Cluster sampling technique was used to select 12 schools (6 private and 6 public) from the area for the study. Simple random sampling was used to select 24 preschool teachers and 120 preschool children from the selected schools for the study. Two teachers and ten pupils per school were selected. The teachers also served as research assistants. The study used a researcher made questionnaire and an observation schedule to collect data. Questionnaires were responded to by the teachers while observation was done on the pre-school children by the same teachers. Data obtained were analyzed using descriptive statistics.

Results

Research Question One: Play materials available for preschool classes in Uruan Local Government Area.

Table 1: Availability of Play Materials in the Preschools

S/N	PLAY MATERIALS	PRIVATE SCHOOLS		PUBLIC SCHOOLS		
		AV AILABLE	NOT AVAILABLE	AVAILABLE	NOT AVAILABLE	
1.	Wooden Blocks	6(100%)	0(0%)	2(33%)	4(67%)	
2.	Baby Dolls	4(67%)	2(33%)	4(67%)	2(33%)	
3.	Ball of various shapes, colours and sizes	6(100%)	0(%)	6(100%)	0(0%)	
4.	Floor Puzzles	4(67%)	2(33%)	0(0%)	6(100%)	
5.	Plastic Tools	3(50%)	3(50%)	0(0%)	6(100%)	
6.	Toy Musical Instruments	3(50%)	3(50%)	2(33%)	4(67%)	
7.	Alphabet Magnets, Beads	6(100%)	0(0%)	3(50%)	3(50%)	
8.	Bean Bag	5(83%)	1(17%)	2(33%)	4(67%)	
9.	Floor Cushions	3(50%)	3(50%)	0(0%)	6(100%)	
10.	Green Toys Dump Truck	3(50%)	3(50%)	0(0%)	6(100%)	

From table 1, it has been found that all the preschools in the area has balls of various shapes and colours, most of the schools (67% for both private and public) have baby dolls. There was hardly any toy that all the private schools failed to have while all public schools did not have floor puzzles, plastic tools, floor cushions and green toys dump truck.

Research Question Two: How do play materials influence development of interactive skills in preschool children?

Table 2: Cooperation skills development in preschool children

S/N	ITEMS	SA 4	A 3	D 2	SD 1	Mean	σ
1.	Pupil shares the play materials in his/her possession with others	35	58	20	7	3.00	0.83
2.	Pupil plays beside others	41	40	26	13	2.91	0.99
3.	Pupil supports others to fix objects	39	51	22	8	3.01	0.88
4.	Pupil accepts materials from others	29	47	27	17	2.73	0.98
5.	Pupil is selective of who to share materials	21	32	45	22	2.43	0.98
	Total	165	228	140	67	2.82	0.96

From table 2 it can be seen that the mean rating score of cooperation skills is 2.82 with a standard deviation of 0.96. Since it is above the 2.5 mark, it shows that the raters agree that the pupils have cooperation skills while using play materials. They share the play materials in their possession, they play beside other pupils and were found to support others during play. The pupils were seen accepting play materials from other pupils. However, the pupils were not selective in their playmates.

Research Question Three: How does the availability of play materials influence the development of communication skills in preschool children?

Table 3: Communication Skills development in preschool children.

S/N	ITEMS	SA 4	A 3	D 2	SD 1	Mean	σ
1.	Pupil mimics others in play	23	41	33	23	2.53	1.01
2.	Pupil makes verbal communication with mates	31	47	29	13	2.80	0.94
3.	Pupil smiles at others while playing with materials	40	49	22	9	3.00	0.90
4.	Pupil speaks to play materials	19	40	44	17	2.51	0.92
5.	Pupil expresses annoyance to mates when offended	29	36	38	17	2.64	1.00
	Overall	142	213	166	79	2.70	0.97

Result displayed on table 3 shows that the preschool children develop communication skills when using play materials with their peers. The mean rating score was 2.70 with a standard deviation of 0.97. The children were seen mimicking others as the used play materials. They also attempted to express their minds verbally when interacting with the play materials. The children were also found to smile to other as a way of expressing their pleasure over the use of some play materials. Some of the children were seen speaking to the play materials as if the materials could hear while some did not. They usually expressed annoyance when the play materials that attract their attention is taken away.

Discussion of Findings

Findings of this study have shown that schools in Uruan local government area have some play materials but they were not adequate in some cases. Private schools have more play materials than public schools. This is in consonance with the findings of Wathu et al (2017) who *found out that majority of the schools had play materials. However, these materials were not adequate for the children, hence this did not support variety that promote and stimulate prolonged play, which enhances social and emotional development.*

The study also showed that when playing with play materials, preschool children develop social skills of cooperation and communication. This corroborates that of Wangui (2013) who found that play materials have a net positive effect on social emotional development of preschool children. It also confirms the findings of the study by Wathu et al (2017) that *there was a strong positive correlation (r=+0.75) between availability of play materials and social development of children and a significant difference (p<0.05). They observed that if there is more variety of play materials and are well used the children are likely to have good social and emotional development.*

Conclusion

Play materials are available but inadequate for preschool children in Uruan Local Government of Akwa Ibom State. Private schools have more play materials than public schools. Preschool children develop social skills of cooperation and communication with peers while interacting with play materials. The use of play materials improve the quality of play and sustain the interest of the children. It can be employed in teaching the preschool children.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made

- *School owners should improve upon the quality and quantity of their play materials.*
- *Government should invest in play materials for preschool children since that is their laboratory equipment.*
- *Teaches should be trained on utilization of play materials to ensure that the have ability to harness this very important aspect of education.*
- *Parents should be advised to provide a rich stock of play materials and educational toys at home to excite their children.*
- *Children should be encouraged to interact with play materials and peers to encourage the development of good social skills.*

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