

PLAY AND TEACHING IN EARLY CHILDHOOD CLASSROOMS: PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES OF TEACHERS AND CHILDREN IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

In this study, a descriptive qualitative approach was followed to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives and practices about using play as a means of teaching in classrooms. This qualitative research study is guided by two research questions, (i) What do early childhood teachers see as the benefits of play as a means to learning. (ii) What do early childhood teachers see as obstacles to using play as a means to promote learning? The subjects of the study were all randomly selected early childhood teachers in a rural area of Bojanala Region of North West Province in South Africa. Data was collected through observations and interviews (individual and focus group). The total number of four randomly selected participants took part in the research, according to the socio-economic status of their school. Findings of this research study of the conducted classroom observations revealed that teachers; defined play differently, large enrolment and inadequate resources had a negative influence on children's play habit and are a challenge to teachers and encountered obstacles using play as a curricular tool. Their daily routine activities and practices indicated a lack of proper guidance and support. It was also confirmed during teachers' interviews that, teachers worked on their own without any classroom support or guidance. Based on the findings of this study, implications for the early childhood practices are deliberated and recommendations for future research are suggested.

Keywords: early childhood development, indoor play, outdoor play, perspectives, play, practices, teachers.

INTRODUCTION

The role of play in the development and education of young children has been a topic of interest in the early childhood literature since Friedrich Froebel presented his ideas about play in the Crèche curriculum early in the nineteenth century (Sim ZL, Xu F, 2017). Since that time, many studies have documented the role of play in children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Kittredge, Klahr, 2016; Sim ZL, Xu F, 2017; Adu, & Ngibe, 2014). In the most recent decade, the National Association has reaffirmed the educational significance of play for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which supports play as the core of a developmental appropriate early childhood program (Adu, & Ngibe, 2014).

In spite of the emphasis on play in the literature, there has been some disparity between the findings of the research and the actual beliefs and practices of early childhood teachers. In a study conducted by authors (Pyle, DeLuca, Danniels, 2017; Quyen, & Khairani, 2017; Phajane, 2017), nursery teachers defined play as fun, exercise, or free activity and said that they allocated only a specific time each day for play. These teachers, who for the most part were not qualified

to teach and had only the minimum training required by government and local agencies, believed that children learn by engaging in structured, teacher-directed activities, not from play activities of their own choosing. Many of the teachers viewed play and learning as separate entities and some of them said they allowed children in their classrooms to play only after their assigned work had been completed (Wood, & Bennett, 1998).

Subsequent studies of early childhood teachers by Wood & Bennett (1998), Wood, & Attfield, (2005) found that unlike the teachers in the 1998 study, these teachers indicated a strong commitment to play. Their actual practices, however, did not match their stated beliefs. Killen, (2015) found that although preschool and early childhood teachers said they believed in the value of sociodramatic play, there was considerable variation in the amount of time provided for this type of play, with some teachers allowing as little as 15 minutes a day. In their study of early childhood teachers in Bojanala Region Schools, (Phajane, 2017) compared what teachers said about the value of play with observations of their actual practices. Although the teachers' responses indicated that, they believed play was important, in practice the curriculum was dominated by more activities that are formal.

South Africa's future is dependent on a workforce having the necessary knowledge, skills and values to contribute productively to the country in order to achieve a rewarding life grounded in an educated and open society (Quyen & Khairani, 2017). Among other factors, this realisation and recognition have led to the introduction of the Early Childhood Curriculum Background by the Department of Basic Education (2012), where the emphasis is on children learning through play and active discovery Department of Basic Education (2012).

Early childhood education plays a significant role in the lives of young children and there is consistent evidence that high quality early education programmes can contribute to children's short-term and long-term gains in cognitive, language and social-emotional development Aronstam, & Braund, (2015); Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, Kittredge, Klahr, (2016). The Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2012) recognises the right of the 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. Building on the work of earlier researchers (Pyle & Danniels 2017) much research has been contributed about children's play, (Pyle, Prioletta & Poliszczuk 2017). The Department of Basic Education (DBE, 2012) also recognises play as a right for all children.

Governments are increasingly focusing on early childhood education with legislative policies and strategies being directed at the accessibility to quality early childhood learning experiences. Such moves are motivated by research findings that early childhood programmes can contribute to a child's physical, social, emotional and cognitive development (including language, perception, reasoning and memory) (Pyle, DeLuca, Danniels, 2017; Wood, & Bennett, 1998; Schleicher, 2016).

Amidst the above complexities, the early childhood teachers, who are the direct change agents in delivering a developmentally appropriate curriculum, may not be adopting such an approach to their teaching due to high academic expectations that parents have for their children (Ramani, Eason, 2016). Thus, preschool teachers are caught in a situation where they have to manage conflicting expectations and orientations (Winston, 2015). There is a need to cultivate creativity and thinking skills in children and preschool teachers need to align their beliefs and practices with the global fashion of education (Winston, 2015).

The literature on play and its benefits in contributing to children's learning are often inconclusive. There is a plethora of definitions of what constitute play (Brink Schroder, 2014). Play is too profound and intangible a concept to define in a way that brooks no argument (Holt, Lee H, Millar, Spence, 2015). It is an elusive phenomenon because scholars view it through different lenses and is always changing in shape and value (Pyle, DeLuca, Danniels, 2017; Quyen, & Khairani, 2017). Thus, the dilemma exists as to whether play can provide any kind of excellence in relation to real learning for children (Phajane, 2017). Furthermore, it is argued that play in educational settings is socially constructed within each cultural context and hence, the value and benefits deriving from play are contestable and vary in relation to the values and beliefs of the particular culture (Wood, & Attfield, 2005).

Finally, yet importantly, the lack of quantifiable evidence that children benefit from play provides arguments for some teachers and parents to push for more activities that are academic whereby results can be better measured (Wood, & Attfield, 2005). Play as a means to an end to promote children's learning is more fluid and intangible in interpretation and implementation. The ephemeral nature of play does not allow it to be understood easily (Winston, 2015).

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF PLAY IN EDUCATION

As South Africa moves towards a knowledge-based economy, a creative and innovative workforce is imperative for the country to succeed (Mertler, 2010). It is not surprising that policymakers and teachers are being swept along in the educational policy directives (Mertler, 2010). There is a need to re-examine old ways of thinking and doing things and the associated need for flexibility, creativity and innovation (Pyle, DeLuca, Danniels, 2017). In addition, teachers need to align educational curricula to the rapidly changing economic and information technology landscape (Holt, Lee H, Millar, Spence, 2015). A paradigm shift seems necessary to bring about a well-educated population, equipped with knowledge and skills, dispositions and inclinations to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century (Pyle, DeLuca, Danniels, 2017).

Children all over the world face multiple challenges in realising their right to play. Too often, the centrality of play in children's lives is misunderstood and ignored. Play is perceived as deficit time, better filled by adult-directed, purposeful activities. Growing pressure on children to achieve in school is reducing the perceived legitimacy of playfulness. Too often, the curriculum and daily schedule fail to recognise children's need for play and recreation. At worst, early childhood education becomes focused on academic targets and formal learning at the expense of participation in play and broader development outcomes, while extracurricular, tuition and homework often intrude into children's free time, leaving little time for child-initiated activity (Katz, 2012).

While play is undervalued in some societies, in others it may be highly valued as the means to achieving an adult-directed curriculum. The educational potential of play is now widely accepted, although the evidence that play is the best medium for early teaching and learning is still contested. In consequence, the concept of play as pedagogy offers both potential threats and opportunities (Bowdon, 2015). Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) describes how young children benefit from adult scaffolding of their imagination, pretense and subject knowledge (Vygotsky, 1995). However, the risk in educational play is that adults may begin to dominate play, or disguise didactic teaching as support for play. When this happens, the benefits of play may be lost, as educational play will have become another form of instruction.

Early childhood education authorities agree that the early years are a critical learning time for children as they develop their cognitive, emotional, physical and social faculties and skills (Katz 2012). What is the best way to help children learn? This has been a concern in education and has been a topic of various studies (Kyriakides, Creemers, Antoniou, Demetriou, & Charalambous 2015). Jones and Jones (2012), find that children learn by observing their social settings; they are active in their learning; they collaborate with adults and peers and they initiate their own learning experiences.

i) Teacher Perspectives and Practices

Teacher practices appear to be deeply embedded within value and belief systems that are rooted in ethnicity, community, and social class (Jones, & Jones, 2012). Beliefs are formed from personal experiences, education, and values. Teachers' beliefs are often implicit and unarticulated, yet they influence teachers' perceptions and practices, judgments, and decisions, and direct teachers to act in certain ways (Katz, 2012). Perspectives are the particular strategies that the teacher uses to enhance children's development. Previous research indicates that teachers' practices are associated with their beliefs (Jones, & Jones, 2012; Guney, & Al, 2012; Antoniou, Kyriakides, & Creemers, 2015).

ii) Role of the Teacher in Play

The role of the teacher in play within the classroom setting is very important. The teacher must be an observer, an elaborator, a model, an evaluator, and a planner of play (Chen, 2014). In observing, teachers watch children's interactions with other children and with objects. They observe the length of time that children can maintain a play episode and they observe children who have trouble playing or joining playgroups. These observations are used in planning additional play experiences, in making decisions about whether to enter the play situation, and in assessing the play of individual children. In a review of studies concerning the effects of the physical environment on children's behavior in preschool settings, Coskun, (2017) concluded that if a setting is to provide support for developmentally appropriate activities, teachers must engage in systematic observation of children at play.

Teachers have a choice when deciding how to present information or new concepts to children. Some information must be presented in a teacher-directed format. Play is one of the teaching strategies available to teachers as they plan for children's learning. Using play experiences as teaching strategies requires that the teacher observe how the children use the materials and that she asks questions to guide children's thinking and reflections. Chen, (2014) reminds us that although we use play in various ways in the classroom for our own purposes, we need to remember that the children have purposes of their own, and need to deal with purposes largely by themselves even if under distant supervision, making use of this vital and universal kind of communication. Teachers can make plans for play experiences, but the children's needs must be honoured and they must be allowed to use play for their own learning.

Teachers have many opportunities to plan environments and materials so that learning goals can be achieved in playful activities. Observations of children at play will help teachers choose other play materials that will help children learn concepts, clarify, and extend their understandings. Selecting guided play, as a teaching strategy does not imply that play is

assigned; it means that careful thought is put into the selection of materials and intervention in children's play. A teacher might put out an assortment of materials that she expects will invite children to explore a new concept. If children do not learn the concept from interacting with the materials, and then the teacher must choose other materials or select a different approach. Assigning a child to complete a task means that the child no longer has a choice and that the teacher has chosen a teaching strategy other than play.

PERSPECTIVES ABOUT HOW CHILDREN LEARN (LITERATURE REVIEW)

Piaget's constructivist theory of development postulates that children act on their environment to construct an understanding of how the world operates. The theory also emphasizes the need for children to be actively involved in constructing knowledge of their physical environment (Piaget, 1997). Children need to explore, experience, and receive feedback from their actions on objects in order to move from the sensorimotor stage to representational and formal operations. The environment is a crucial factor, as children construct knowledge by handling tangible objects and using their senses to learn through hands-on experiences (Antoniou, 2016).

Play is acknowledged as supporting intellectual development alongside social, emotional and physical development (Wood, 2014; Holt, Lee, Millar, and Spence 2015; Marais, 2016; Arda, & Ocak, 2012; Aronstam, & Braund, 2015; Bowdon, 2015; Pyle Danniels 2017; Pyle, Prioletta, Poliszczuk). Early childhood theorists Froebel regards kindergarten as a Child's Garden where children grow naturally through creative play, exploration and self-expression (Bowdon, 2015). Froebel's approach to early childhood teaching emphasises the inherent nature of children's learning that unfolds through their play activities. He sees play activities as a pure and natural mode of learning through which children achieves harmony (Bowdon, 2015).

Play helps children develop organizing and problem-solving abilities. Children playing must think about organizing materials in order to meet their play goals. For example, a child wanting to play visiting the doctor must decide where the doctor's office is, where the waiting room will be, what will be used for a stethoscope, and so on. Children must also organize tasks. They must decide how to move and arrange materials so that they can play. Some of these organization tasks require very fine discriminations, such as sorting by size, shape, or colour. Children playing must also think about the other players involved.

On the other hand, psychoanalytical theorists, such as Freud, believe that children's play is primarily emotional (Aronstam, & Braund, 2015). Through enacting real scenarios in their play, children work out their emotional conflicts in play such, as a visit to a dentist (Leflot, Van Lier, Onghena, & Colpin, (2013). Through play, children express emotions that relate to situations that they have no control over and this helps to develop mastery over stressful situations (Leflot et al., 2013). Erikson theorises the psychosocial stages of child development (Sim, Xu 2017). According to Erikson, children learn to master their emotional conflicts and resolve the anomaly in each of the stages. For example, the first stage of trust versus mistrust, to a child, means achieving a sense of trust and secured attachment that outweighs mistrust and this same feeling will provide the child with confidence to explore, play and interact with others in the future (Sim, Xu 2017).

Emphasising the affective aspects of play, both Freud and Erikson position play as a tool for emotional development and a medium for children to cope with difficult experiences and to work out their problem (Leflot et al., 2013) and learning is an individual endeavour (Holt et al.,

2015). Teachers who are influenced by psychoanalysis theorists will provide children with materials, time and space to play independently for them to work out their emotional conflicts (Holt et al., 2015).

As both Piaget and Vygotsky have encapsulated in their thinking a holistic framework that covers significant aspects of both inner and outer forces of cognitive development of the child (Wood & Bennett, 1998, Wood, & Attfield, 2005). These two constructivist theories are chosen because of the underlying assumptions that learning takes place through constructing knowledge when children engage in activities and explorations. According to Wood (2014), the constructivist theories of Piaget and Vygotsky are prevalent in the literature of play and focus on learning through play.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this paper, a descriptive qualitative approach was followed to investigate challenges Early Childhood Education teachers faced with play as a medium for learning specifically, how they incorporated play into their teachings Patton, (2015); Merriam, & Tisdell, (2016). The research approach used for this research were a qualitative research approach, namely observation and interviews. The study endeavours to explore early childhood teachers' perspectives and practices about using play as a means of teaching in classrooms. In terms of addressing the main objective, a case study was chosen because through case studies researchers: *get as close to the subject of interest as they possibly can, partly by means of direct observation in natural settings and partly by their access to subjective factors (thoughts, feelings, and desires)*, (Merriam, & Tisdell, 2016).

Merriam, & Tisdell, (2016) recommend case study research as a suitable choice when a researcher wants to answer a descriptive question (e.g. what happened) or an explanatory question (e.g. how or why did something happen)? I chose an instrumental case study as research design, because I opted for a design featuring an in-depth study of interactions of a single instance in an enclosed system (Shanahan, 2016).

The total samples of two Early Childhood Education (ECE) centres, four teachers and children, in a rural area of Bojanala District of North West Province in South Africa were selected randomly according to the socio-economic status of their school. Data was collected through observations and interviews (individual and focus group). The findings indicated that factors such as time management in using play, lack of resources associated with using play, childrens' inappropriate and socially unacceptable behaviours, class composition such as teacher- to-child ratio and diversity of children in the class, and collegiate support of their colleagues (School Management Team), had a negative influence on children's play habit. The researcher recommended that Early Childhood Education to have their own School Management Team (SMT). Ministers of education at the national, provincial and local levels take definite measures to improve in-service training for teachers of ECE.

RESEARCH AIMS

The aim of this study is to understand the perspectives and practices of early childhood education teachers in South Africa in using play as a means to promote children's learning in a manner that

is compatible to the intent of the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework. To also undertake a pragmatic study of children's role-play activity as well, in order to better understand the relationship between teachers' provision, the offered curriculum on the one hand, and children's responses to that provision, the received curriculum on the other hand. Another aim of this paper is to determine how early childhood teachers are seen as obstacles to using play as a means to promote learning.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In pursuing the above aims, two research questions were formulated to better understand the early childhood teachers' perspectives and practices on play, to promote children's learning and how their perspectives affect their classroom practices. These questions are derived from the research problems and aims presented. They are:

Research Question One: What do early childhood teachers see as the benefits of play as a means to learning. This question allows teachers to express and categorically state what they believe are the benefits that can accrue from play activities. In so doing, teachers will be able to reflect on their practices and their professional experiences in their classrooms.

Research Question Two: What do early childhood teachers see as obstacles to using play as a means to promote learning? The last research question probes into reasons and arguments teachers see as obstacles to using play as a means to promote learning. Identifying constraints will help policy makers to plan for professional development programmes to educate and emphasise the significance of the value of play in children's learning.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The highlights the findings in respect of play and teaching in early childhood classrooms are arranged limitations, classroom management, teachers' perceptions and practices of the importance of play, attitudinal constraints and classroom arrangement and use of resources.

i) Arranged Limitations

In addressing, the first classification of obstacles to play, four teacher-participants related arranged limitations as a concern associated with using play in their classrooms. Within this classification, three themes emerged from the data analysis and they were time, resources, space.

Teacher-participants voiced their frustrations on the issue of time management in using play to promote learning in their classrooms. For example, Teacher **D** commented, *we have indoor play equipment seesaws, simple obstacle equipment. However, every time, we must push the equipment out on Monday, set it up and on Friday we must take them down because on Sunday church members need to use the classroom. It is very troublesome we do not have time, we must look after my class so after a while, we do not play the equipment anymore.*

Teacher **P** said, *"Time is another challenge. We need to do so many things like preparing lessons and teaching materials, doing observations, setting up learning corners"*.

Teacher-participants related the lack of resources as a concern associated with using play in their classrooms. For example, some typical statements by Teacher-participants **S** and **A** were:

When children are engaged in play, insufficient resources such as storybooks, teaching aids such as cassettes, videos, and play materials. It is very troublesome. Children play the same toys every time said Teacher S and A.

Teacher-participants highlighted physical space limitations as another issue that hindered their efforts in using play to promote teaching. For example, the following teacher-participants shared; *we will prepare our own materials put them in a plastic boxes due to space constraint.*

ii) Classroom Management

In extending their views and experiences on obstacles, they encountered in using play to teach in their classroom, teacher-participants raised concerns about classroom management. Within this classification, two themes emerged and they were children's behaviours and classroom composition.

In this theme, childrens' inappropriate and socially unacceptable behaviours were central to all teacher-participants' discussions. They had concerns about children fighting over play materials, pushing, refusal to share and inappropriate use of languages.

For instance, *Teacher P shared, limitations there might be, a quieter or shy child may feel out of place sometimes as this child may take a longer time to get use to the environment. Also sometimes, children cannot share and they snatch toys from their friends. It is also common that boys tend to engage in rough play like doing flying kicks and push and kick (imitated from video games and television).*

Teacher D also commented, *"Some will fight, snatch toys. Some will grab all the toys. Then you have to explain to them to share, and not to snatch. If not, accidents might happen and parents will not be happy and say children learn to fight when they play"*.

The second theme to this category related to class composition such as teacher- to-child ratio and diversity of children in the class. Teacher-participants shared this concern. *Teacher S was concerned about the mixed-age grouping and gender composition of her class. She perceived boys to be more physically active than girls in their dramatic play experiences, and more were inclined to engage in rough and tumble play, which was problematic for her.*

You see, I (Teacher A) have an autistic child in my class. He does not play with others or sometimes, he is slow to respond to his friends. His friends do not like to play with him. I have to hold him with me and that can be challenging because I need to manage other children as well.

iii) Teachers' Perceptions and Practices of The Importance of Play

Participants were also asked to list any other barriers they faced in using play materials and activities in the classroom. *Several teachers identified child behaviours such as hyper-activity, and negative behaviours like throwing and breaking, and children putting things in their mouths as barriers.*

Another **Teacher S** stated that getting other teachers interested in using play materials was a barrier. Finally, another two teachers commented on the fact that they were the only teachers in the classroom and such activities usually leave a mess that would require help cleaning up. This is disappointing in that the data suggests that early childhood teachers continue to struggle to implement national and state standards and guidelines on a daily basis. This translates into lost opportunities to provide hands-on, active learning experiences, where children

actively construct physical, social, and logico-mathematical knowledge, as suggested by (Sim, Xu 2017).

iv) Attitudinal Constraints

This third classification of constraints as perceived by teacher-participants **P** and **D** to be a hindrance to play relate to the intangibles of attitudes of concerned parties. Four themes emerged from the data and they were parental expectations, collegiate support, management support and principal's expectations.

In our South African background, many parents like to see their children doing worksheets and rote learning, not play. Parents are worried that their children will not be able to catch up in primary school because they play all the time in preschool. They would like the centre to give spelling, learning of timetable and assessment books, because, from books, children gained knowledge.

On getting collegiate support, four teacher-participants said that they were more likely to implement a play curriculum if they had the support of their colleagues. For example, the following teacher-participants said:

Teacher **D**: *Sometimes teachers do not bother to clean up, so I must clean up and nobody bothers to put back the toys in the proper place.*

Teacher **P**: *I do get challenges from my colleague. I think it is her age and how she is brought up. She is rather senior in this centre and she does not believe in play and setting up the appropriate learning corners. She went through the drill and test method. She believes in drilling, memorise and do rote counting without providing concrete experiences.*

Teacher **A**: *finds it boring to change toys, and to arrange the learning corners. This is the main obstacle.*

Teacher-participants **A** and **S** had expressed their regrets in not being able to put the constructivist theories to use due to lack of management support. Management committee does not support, and then it is very difficult because they always say that children must do formal learning and parents are not happy if their children play every time.

More directly, four teacher-participants said that their principals' expectations were often instrumental in whether to use play in their classroom teaching. For example, *Teacher D said, My principal told us to set up learning corners it was very difficult. Not very helpful sometimes. She does not provide the necessary guidance.*

v) Classroom Arrangement and Use of Resources

It was observed that Teacher **S** in her classroom *missed arranging the classroom according to different areas*. Preparations and use of relevant resources were also neglected. In contrast to *Teacher P's classroom, was properly arranged in different areas as required even though the class was small*. There was effective use of indoor resources in both classes but learners were not exposed to outdoor activities, which is intended to be an extension of the indoor classroom.

DISCUSSION

These mistakes could have been noted by the School Management Team (SMT) who could have provided the needed support and guidance to correct the mistakes with the sole purpose of improving quality teaching of teachers. The classroom errors that happened in this specified school could be an indication that the teacher was not properly trained, or lacked experience in teaching in early childhood centre or did not receive good guidance and support from the School Management Team (SMT). Areas of a well-planned room and its importance are different working or play areas to expose learners to a variety of activities. Similarly, relevant resources are regarded as the essential tools teachers use to reinforce quality teaching and learning.

A question was asked to determine the use of play as a means to promote quality learning in early childhood classrooms teachers. The responses from teachers were very general and not specific to the classroom day-to-day practices. Their concern was to be recognised and taken seriously as teachers by the school. Nonetheless, teachers pointed out that it would be better if the early childhood centres had their own directorate that understands their operational functions.

To have a section in the Foundation Phase (Grade R-3), specifically assigned to managing and supervising early childhood education would bring improvement to the quality of teaching. The implication thereof is that people who are responsible would have acquired the necessary knowledge about early childhood practices and their focus would then be to supervise and support practices in early childhood classes.

A question was asked to establish how teachers resolved the challenges they experienced as early childhood teachers. Issues raised by the teachers were overcrowded classes, which created situations that did not allow for teachers' individual attention to learners and being undermined by teachers from other Grades and the School Management Team (SMT). There was also the issue of poor understanding by other role-players of how early childhood centres operates that was brought to the fore by the four teachers. A concern that the early childhood outdoor areas were not regularly maintained was also raised. Two Teachers **P** and **A** indicated that they always had to go to the School Management Team (SMT) and ask for their assistance when they needed help, but there was little proactive assistance provided by the School Management Team (SMT).

From the teachers' responses, their experiences in teaching early childhood learners were not pleasant because overcrowded classrooms prohibited effective teaching and learning. It is impossible for teachers to create the different learning stations (Learning Areas) required in overcrowded classrooms. Failure to create learning stations denies learners the opportunity to be exposed to a variety of stimulating environments. Teachers alluded to the concern that teachers from other Grades (R to 3) were looking down on them and, as a result, it affected negatively on their self-esteem and motivation. Respect for each other within an institution improves relationships between staff members, subordinates and their SMT.

Lack of understanding of practices in early learning classrooms by other role-players especially the SMTs, affected negatively on the support that could have been offered to early learning teachers. The implication therefore is that without understanding of early learning practices by the SMTs, there cannot be effective teaching, learning, and support of those practices in early learning classes.

Neglect of the early learning outdoor area poses a very serious problem because the outdoor area is an extension of the indoor classroom. Early learning learners are supposed to be

exposed to both indoor and outdoor areas to develop them holistically. Indoor and outdoor environments are quality indicators for ECD in South Africa; therefore, their optimal use is also of importance (Department of Basic Education (2015) (DBE, 2015). Many of the teachers viewed play and learning as separate entities and some of them said they allowed children in their classrooms to play only after their assigned work had been completed (Ramani & Eason, 2015).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Merriam and Tisdell (2016), recommend case study research as a suitable choice when a researcher wants to answer a descriptive question (e.g. what happened) or an explanatory question (e.g. how or why did something happen?).

This study has opened a small window to a neglected area, which is listening to the voices of early childhood education teachers. Further research is needed to understand more fully the beliefs of different groups of early childhood specialists. Findings from these studies can then be used to fine-tune existing early childhood education policy frameworks and or formulate new tenets to suit future circumstances and early childhood educational landscape development.

From the research front, the scale of this study can be expanded using a larger sample by including more early childhood education centres and teachers to share their experiences. The scope of this study can also be meaningfully extended to embrace perspectives of administrators and parents as their perspectives may serve to complement the perspectives of early childhood teachers in addressing potential gaps and challenges to be addressed by educational policy makers. More importantly, further research needs to be undertaken on developmentally appropriate practices and eclectic approaches at early childhood education levels with the view of harvesting the positive attributes from these approaches. In addition, with the high level of prioritisation in education, it is timely to deploy resources to undertake longitudinal studies in an effort to ascertain the long-term benefits of engaging our children in early childhood education.

CONCLUSION

To this end, early childhood teachers should continually avail themselves of professional development training as such training not only advances new knowledge (both theoretical and pedagogical), but also serves to influence teachers' belief structures and attitudinal dimensions towards using play as a curricular tool. Studies have shown that in-service training of early childhood teachers helps to improve the quality of early childhood classroom environments and prepare teachers to handle pressures of early academic preparation and challenges of differing expectations with third parties (for example, parents, principals or supervisors, management) (Ginott, Dr., Haim (2003); Holen, S., Waaktaar, T., Lervåg, A., & Ystgaard, M. (2013).

On the institutional front, educational policy makers and others involved in early childhood education such as professional organisations, administrators and researchers have to keep pace with development in the field. They can provide support to early childhood teachers by way of creating conducive climate to adopt and adapt to education innovations and developing classroom environments, which support play-based learning. In addition, administrators could provide teachers with structural support such as teaching resources,

appropriate play materials and time, visits to other school sites and attend related early childhood education conferences to update teachers with knowledge of current early childhood best practices. Early childhood teachers should be empowered to act on improving classroom curriculum and teaching methodologies after their professional training.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Teacher-participants **A** and **S** had expressed their regrets in not being able to put the constructivist theories to use due to lack of management support. Management committee does not support, and then it is very difficult because they always say that children must do formal learning and parents are not happy if their children play every time.

This study suggests a number of implications for practice. First, workshops and Professional Development training sessions should encourage early childhood teachers to embrace developmentally appropriate practices, including the use of play activities, thereby increasing teacher knowledge and ability to provide learning environments filled with opportunities for children to be actively involved in constructing knowledge. Second, teacher training and professional development programs need to address teachers' perceptions of barriers to providing play experiences and materials. Encouraging teachers to reflect on their beliefs of developmentally appropriate practice and use of sensory experiences can accomplish this. This may help to eliminate the conflict between teacher perceptions and what they practice in the classroom.

Third, training should be followed up with a session to discuss progress and impact on classroom practice and share how experiences and activities were accomplished. Fourth, teachers should develop ways to utilize floater staff and volunteers to aid in supervision of the classroom while play experiences and activities are provided. This will allow for crucial teacher-child interaction. Having additional people in the classroom will also help facilitate the progress of clean up. Finally, teachers, directors, and administrators need to discuss and formulate a plan to not only fully integrate play and teaching into the curriculum, but to modify daily schedules and routines to allow ample time to explore play rich learning environments and become fully engaged in play activities.

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