

The Importance of Play on the Holistic Development of Pupils in Preschools

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Abstract— This study was carried out in the Marian preschool, Dama Road and the Municipal preschool Dauda Town, in Kenema. All the two schools are found in Kenema city, Nongowa chiefdom, Kenema District in the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone.

The study adopted a case study to explore the development of pupils and the importance of play in children. The sample used for the study comprised of 80 respondents which was made up of 8 educators, 2 head teachers and 70 pupils of both the nursery schools.

The major instruments used were observation, interview and questionnaires. Two sets of questionnaires were used for the head teachers and the educators to reflect the objectives. The questions were pretested for the uniformity of items. Observations and interviews were used for the children at play. They were asked questions and they gave their honest answers.

The data collected from the questionnaires, observation and interviews were analyzed qualitatively using descriptions in narrative form.

I. INTRODUCTION

The history of Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) refers to the development of care and education of children from birth through eight years throughout history. ECCE has a global scope caring for and educating young children has always been an integral part of human societies. These societal roles have evolved over time and has remain varied across culture, often reflecting family and community structures as well as the social and economic role of women and men.

Child development starts from pregnancy through the provision of balanced diet for the mother, because children develop in a sequential order and not always at the same pace. Providing guidance to children is the best way to give them a firm foundation in choosing acceptable ways to solve problem and get along with others. Therefore, to manage problem behaviors, it is better to prevent them before they even start. The parents (first contact person) and teachers are very key in actualizing the vision of rapid growth of children. The more an early child educator of a child in a school understands early development, the better that educator will be equipped to respond to the growing needs of young children. By knowing and understanding development, plans can be made to target leaving in the sight zone where the child is ready for the next step. When educator knows how children learn, they will be able to plan for appropriate development opportunities for exploitation and meaningful learning. The most disturbing and damaging efforts too often by some adults is what they try to make a child conform to and behave unduly by asserting fear in them. This is against the ethics of providing guidance. In addition, the children are threatened with hash words or physical force, they do not learn to make good choices

because the brains are under toxic stress which is proven most often to harm the developing brains.

The minimum standards talks about stimulation which means the provision of activities, actions and materials that challenge the child's response, activate the child's curiosity, encourage problem solving ability and help to link to others emotionally. It involves making use of all the senses such as hearing, smelling, felling, touching and tasting.

We should also note that when there are guidance strategies in place, children will make mistakes in their behavior but what we are require to do is to help prepare the educators with ways to deal with challenging behaviors. Knowing the possible cause of behavior is the first step. Redirecting and supporting will be explored as tool of handling the behavioral issues. Educators are required to learn that possible guidance is much better for a developing child than any kind of negative punishment.

The first world Conference on Early Childhood Care and Education took place in Moscow from 27 to 29 September 2010, jointly organized by UNESCO and the city of Moscow

As a journey to a strange or an unknown place in life, so it is with a child's progress or development marked by certain indicators called developmental milestones. These milestones broadly indicate the age at which a child is ready and expected to do certain activities.

The idea of a preschool started in the form of caring for children whose parents took their children to day care centers to be cared for by professional because of their various engagements.

It started in America where parents sent their children to day care centers at will to be cared for. This later developed into a nursery school where children are professionally cared for during the day.

In Sierra Leone it started with private individuals who established schools of this nature. It is stated that children crave for activities, it is the duty of the teacher to provide play materials for preschool pupils. Much emphasis has not been laid on play materials and equipments in the preschool in the country.

Aristotle [584 to 322 BC] emphasized the importance of physical training of children because a sound in a sound body. In preschools these materials and equipment are used as teaching and learning materials.

Herbart [1776 to 1841] and many other educators and philosophers supported and emphasized the intension of outdoor activities. Play creates more confidence in children as they realize that their individual needs and interests are met. It develops the individuals abilities and capabilities of children

which indicates that they should be allowed to learn according to their own interests and needs. They become more active when they are able to arrange and organize their activities on their own. Play helps children to creative, release emotional tension, be tolerant and persevere until the succeed.

Research Objectives

1. Find out the types of play and use the importance of play in the preschool.
2. Identify and understand that development of children take place in sequential order, simple to complex.
3. Discuss the roles of educators in the holistic development of pupils through play.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study was carried out in Kenema city, Nongowa Chiefdom, in the Eastern Province of Sierra Leone. The study adopted a case study of two nursery schools in Kenema city. The sample used comprised of the two head teachers, the eight educators and seventy pupils of both preschools. The head teachers and educators of both preschools were interviewed. The pupils of both preschools were observed at play and some bigger ones were asked questions and they gave their honest answers.

The meaning of play

Research has shown that children learn best in an environment which allows them to explore, discover and play. Play is an important part of a developmentally appropriate child care for children. It helps in the development of the cognitive, socio emotional and physical behaviors of children.

Play is very difficult to define. Scales, et al [1991] called play as “that absorbing activity in which healthy young children participate with enthusiasm and abandon” Csilzentmihaly [1981] described play as a subset of life....., an arrangement in which one can practice behavior without dreading its consequence.

Piaget [1962] defined play as assimilation, or the child’s efforts to make environmental stimuli match his or her own concepts. He claimed that play is just for pleasure, and while it allowed children to practice things they had previously learned and not necessarily result in learning new things.

According to [Johnsen and Christie 1986] has viewed play as a process reflective of emerging symbolic development but contributing little to it.

Vygotskian theory states that play actually facilitates cognitive development. This means that children not only practice what they already know but also learn new things.

Garvey [1977] gave a useful description of play for teachers when she defined play as an activity which is positively valued by the played, self motivated, freely chosen and engaging

According to Webster’s Desk Dictionary of the English Language, the word play has 34 different meanings such as light, brisk, changing movement, to pretend you are a butterfly, to act or imitate the part of a person or character, to employ a piece of equipment eg. To play blocks, exercise or activity for amusement to recreation eg. To play tag, fun jest or the action of a game.

Play for young children assume many different forms. Mildred Paten [1932] was one of the early researchers who studied children during play. She focused on social interactions between children during play and activities. Paten did note, however that in her research with two to five year olds, participation in the most social types of groups occurs most frequently among the older children.

The types of play

Play is a natural activity of children and as stated by Pestalozzi [1746 to 1827] who agreed with Roussean [1712 to 1778] that life for the young child should be happy and free.

Mildred Parten puts forward the following types of play that children involve in.

Onlooker behavior.....playing passively by watching or conversing with other children engaged in playing activities.

Solitary independent ...playing by oneself.

Parallel....playing even in the middle of a group, while remaining engrossed in one’s own activity. Children playing parallel to each other sometimes use each other’s toys but always maintain their independence.

Associative.....when children share materials and talk to each other, but do not coordinate play objectives or interests.

Cooperative..... When children organize themselves into roles with specific goals in mind eg. To assign the role of a doctor, nurse and patient.

Pretend play is when young children from the toddler age and up engage in pretend or fantasy play called dramatic or socio dramatic play. This kind of play can take place at any place and time and in any setting. Children may act out driving a car at a table, take on the role of others they know like mother, father, and teachers and so on. Children use this type of play in order to make sense of the world around them.

The importance of play for pre school pupils.

Jean Piaget says that play meets the physical, intellectual, language emotional and social needs of children. Children’s curiosity and imagination naturally evoke learning when unfettered. Children learn through interactions with others. Children learn more efficiently and gain more knowledge through activities such as dramatic play, art and social games. Play serves as the primary channel by which children learn more about themselves and the environment in which they live.

According to Comenius [1592 to 1670] confirmed that children play by instinct. Play helps them to explore and experiment their environment which helps them to cope with life’s tasks and to master the basic movement to enable them gain confidence in themselves as individuals.

Tassoni has said that play opportunities will develop specific individual areas of development or several areas of development. It is therefore important that educators promote children’s development through play by using various types of play on a daily basis. Allowing children to help get food also develops their math skills, leadership, language and communication.

Margaret McMillian [1860 to 1931] suggested that children should be given free school meals, fruit and milk and plenty of exercise to keep them physically and emotionally fit and healthy.

Rudolf Steiner [1861 to 1925] believed that play time allows children to talk, socially interact, use their imagination and intellectual skills which helps them to develop all the domains.

Maria Montessori [1870 to 1952] believed that children learn through movement and their senses and after doing an activity using their senses. This include physical benefits such as healthy weight, strength, cardiovascular fitness, stress free, improved social skills and improved sleep. It also helps them to be empathic towards each other.

According to Fromberg and Gullo [1992] states that play enhances language development, social competence, creativity, imagination and thinking skills.

Fromberg [1990] claims that play is the ultimate integrator of human experience. This means that in play, children draw upon their past experience things they have done, seen others do, read about or seen on television and they use their experiences to build games, play scenarios and engage in activities.

Frost [1992] stated that play is the chief vehicle for the development of imagination and intelligence, language, social skills and perceptual motor abilities in young children.

Garvey [1977] stated that play helps children to gain knowledge of themselves, comprehension of verbal and non verbal communication and an understanding of the physical and social worlds

In reality and honesty, play is the first way children learn to make sense of the world at the early age. Children watch adult's interactions around them and they pick up their minor distinction/nuance from facial expressions to their tone of voice. They explore different roles such as learning how things work, how to communicate and work with others. These things cannot be taught by any standard curriculum but are developed through play. Children use fine and gross motor skills in their play. They react to each other socially. They think about what they are going to do, use language to talk to each other and to themselves and respond emotionally to play activities. All these are key to the holistic development of the child. Play stimulates social and emotional development of the child and strengthen the child's self image. It helps children to become very good readers and writers

Age distribution in the pre schools

The age distribution of pupils in both schools were the same such as ages 3 to 4, 4 to 5 and 5 to 6 though all in the same classroom and seated in different groups according to their levels. A representative sample of 35 pupils, 18 boys and 17 girls from each of the levels, from each of the two schools were asked some questions and observed while at play. The Marian preschool is a catholic, government assisted school while the municipal preschool is a government school. These schools had children of mixed age group.

It was noted that the boys were domineering and wanted all the play things to themselves. The boys liked playing with the Lorries, climbing on roving beam, wooden blocks and swinging.

The boys prepared paper boats out of old news papers, which they floated in the water.

The girls liked and were interested in playing with the dolls, throwing the soft balls, playing in the sand and water and the seesaw.

Both the boys and girls liked drawing with crayons, clay to mould different shapes such as fruits and tunnels .All of the pupils liked playing father and mother, the girls laid on mats with dolls as their babies.

Most of the boys liked the balancing cars and Lorries/ big trucks. The girls collected sand and water in containers and role played cooking. On the whole, the children enjoyed playing with the different materials. While paying, I heard through their conversation saying words like the same, bigger than, equal, plenty, fine, empty, full, how much, rice, mama, papa and a lot more. They were very happy, active, empathic and friendly with each other.

The head teachers and educators are now in line with the key situation approach that is now operating in preschools. All the complained about was that, the shortage of materials, bigger space/ room to accommodate all pupils and the play areas. They emphasized that the needed help from the government to construction more buildings and to train more educators and helpers as it has added more work for them.

Some of the educators do not know what to, where to start and where to end with the pupils, not to talk of how to set up the play areas. Most of the educators were not also conversant with most of the materials provided for the pupil, how to use them and what they were meant for, so they also needed education on them.

The roles of educators in the pre schools

According to Froebel [1882 to 1852] the educator's task is to organize and guide the free and continuous development of self activity of the child but, must never force the child to play. This means to carefully organize the child's environment by providing special materials designed for use to give the practice in activities within the environment as supported by [Ngebeh 1987].

The early childhood educator should provide appropriate indoor and outdoor play environment. This means that safety should be the primary concern, age and developmental levels must be carefully considered in the design and selection of materials. Once appropriate environments and materials are in place, regular safety checks and maintenance must be done to ensure sound and safe continued play.

Educators should work with children to develop rules for safe indoor and outdoor play, the appropriate use of materials, and the number of participants in each play area / equipment, taking turns, sharing with others and cleaning which gives them information before they begin to play. Remember that this discussion on rules need to be ongoing as most children need frequent reminders about rules because new situations may arise such new equipment in the class.

Educators must always observe children closely during play for appropriate social interaction and motor behavior. It is very important that they take their own decisions during play, choose what they want, where they want, the roles they want to play and how play will proceed. However, some children will need the assistance of the educators in joining a play group and modifying of behavior or negotiating a

disagreement. All this can be achieved through carefully observation by the educator and then decide when to offer assistance and what form of assistance.

To provide child guided learning exercises, individualized learning and developmentally appropriate learning tenets of early childhood education. This can be done by providing real life situations and activities to enrich the children's play which will enable them to learn various skills. These will help to follow through when a task is difficult and be able listen to and follow directions for a few minutes. Some of these skills are self-control, which is within the social and emotional development that is learned through play.

Educators must promote the holistic development of each child and each one to become a lifelong learner.

III. SUMMARY

The theory of play has been opposed by many people because they think that children are not gaining new knowledge. However, children need enough time for play. Accordingly to Christie and Wardle [1992] short play periods require children to abandon their group dramatizations or constructive play just when they begin to get involved. When this happens a number of times, children may give up on more difficult and complicated forms of play and settle for less advanced forms that can be completed in short periods of time. Short play periods will reduce maturity of children's play such as persistence, problem solving, negotiation, planning and cooperation. But enough amount of time such as one hour to one hour and thirty minutes or longer as it helps them to become more involved in more complex tasks and more productive activities. Play is very vital for the overall /holistic development of the child. Therefore observing children at play is of utmost importance and must be done regular. It helps to evaluate children e.g. Children with special needs, planning for future play experiences, types of play materials to use, reporting to parents, checking their progress, and determining the areas of strengths and weaknesses

IV. CONCLUSION

Research has shown that play is a dynamic active part of childhood and children learn best in the environment which they always explore, discover and play a lot. Play is an important part of a developmentally appropriate child care program. Play helps in the holistic development of the child. Children actively involved in play may be engaged in a variety of activities, independently, with a partner or in group as play

is closely tied to the cognitive, social moral and motor development of young children. It is an important part of developmentally appropriate early childhood programs. Play is very easy to recognize. The younger ones spend a large part of their time playing with varieties of toys. It is the responsibilities of the educators to provide or make available for use by the children.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

That children be observed daily by educators while at play and that there must be two classrooms such as indoors and outdoors.

Provision of enough materials for pupils to avoid domineering or keeping materials or toys to themselves and depriving others.

In-service training such as workshops or seminars for educators to acquire the required skills of how to deal with the children.

Provision of adequate or enough spaces in and outside the classroom for free movement and accommodation of the play areas.

The use of locally made materials in preschools that are made by educators themselves.

Allow children to do things by themselves with the guidance and assistance of the educators which helps mental and physical development of pupils and become self reliant.

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