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Attitude of Some Selected Primary School Teachers to Play as a Teaching-Learning Strategy

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Abstract

This paper is based on the established framework of general principles that education must be child-centered. It examines the attitude of public primary school teachers towards the use of play as a way of facilitating learning strategy that makes teaching child-centered. It looks into divergent power of play as a stimulus to quick response to learning. Observations on teachers were carried out and comments are recorded and analyzed. Validity was ensured by requiring them to provide reasons and justification for their views and their actions. Generally, the teachers' attitudes indicated support for play-based curriculum in the early years. However, teachers find it difficult to translate these into practice. They need to be creative about the usage of play-activities. A teacher's creativity implies originating, impactful teaching, conducive learning environment, motivation of children and active involvement of learners. The paper recommends among others, creativity and innovation in teaching and adequate provision of resources for teaching and learning.

Key words: Attitude, Teachers, Playway methods, Teaching- Learning Strategy

Introduction

There are three contemporary issues that have come to characterise primary education, they are; constructivist learning, creativity and child-centredness. Constructivist Learning as cognitive acceleration seems to

support teaching and learning because children are stimulated and involved: their own learning as well as developing their own thinking skills. Creativity is advocated by government and scholars, educational creative teaching is the idea of differentiating teaching to accommodate different learners and the different styles of learning. Child centred learning once again has re-emerged and focused on five major outcomes for every child. These are summarized as follow 1. to be healthy, 2. to stay safe, 3. to enjoy and achieve, 4. to make positive contribution and 5. to achieve economic well-being; (Johnston, Halocha and Chater 2007) on completion of primary education.

It follows therefore that, the focus of primary school teaching today are to promote cognitive, social and emotional development as well as health needs of the child. These are different needs; but all must be satisfied at the same time. One cannot be deferred to a later date. It means therefore that, teachers should be able to develop the kind of teaching strategy that can safely and adequately cater for the various strands at the same time. Play- based learning strategies appear to be potentially helpful in attaining these goals.

Play has been defined differently by scholars. According to Oduolowu (2011), Frederich Froebel described it as “the natural unfolding of the germinal leaves of childhood”. For Dewey as cited by Oduolowu, play consists of activities not consciously performed for the sake of any result beyond themselves. Erikson (1963) described play as relationships with people and materials, while Elkind considered it as nature’s way of dealing with stress. For Piaget (Cited in Oduolowu, 2011) it is one of the means for the child to develop his/her understanding of the world. It has two primary features. It is undertaken for the pleasure of the activity and without any effort at adaptation to achieve a definite end (p.84). According to Shirpley (2008), it is better categorized; as pleasurable, symbolic, active, voluntary, process and self-motivating.

McAuley and Jackson (1992) however maintain that, most of such definitions have been descriptive, often indicating individual’s perception, arising from the individual’s observation of children at play. Three distinct elements have shaped the widely held view that, among children there is a strong relationship between play and learning. These are called received opinion, practical experience and elaborate prescriptive theory. In

order to obtain a more critical view of the importance of play in early childhood, evidence from research needs to be examined.

A study by Meadows and Cashdan (1988) had recommended that, "The traditional free-play curricular should be re-thought, because the conditions for learning are not always present in the range of activities presented by the children's play. That position was strengthened by Bennett, Wood and Rogers (2001) study which showed that; play in preschool and school setting indicated that the rhetoric of play is not realized in practice.

A study by Bergen (2002) noted that; "there is a growing body of evidence from research to suggest that, high quality pretend play is an important facilitator of perspective taking" and later abstract thought, that it may facilitate higher-level cognition. Bergen further noted however that; "special educators often use play intervention methods such as script rehearsal to promote young children's pretend play abilities, because of hypothesized relationships between enhanced play- skills and enhanced cognitive social and language development". Research suggests that, there are significant problems relating to the nature and purpose of play in educational settings. Scientist's research has failed to provide a unified theoretical and pedagogical knowledge to guide practice. There is little clarification of the nature of teaching and learning in play, the influence of different play contexts and the relationship of play to the curriculum. If play is to be used in pursuit of more clearly defined educational purposes in line with contemporary recommendations, the quality of play in educational setting needs to be improved (Bennett et al 2001). It also means that teachers need a more informed understanding of the processes of learning, the potential of a wide variety of play, experiences and the meaning of those experiences to children.

Bernet *et al* (2001) identified eight conditions for improving the quality of play in schools. These are as follow:

1. integrating play into the curriculum through clearly specified aims and intentions.
2. balancing children's and teachers' intentions
3. creating a supportive teamwork for developing children's competencies as learners

4. making time for quality interactions to enhance learning through play
5. recognizing opportunities for teaching through play rather than relying on spontaneous learning.
6. freeing the teacher for more interaction in a meditational role.
7. teaching children the requisite skills and strategies for becoming independent by making choices and decisions and providing a structure for review time so that children become more consciously aware of what they are doing, learning and achieving in their play (p.130).

Types of Cognitive Play

Piaget identified three types of cognitive play that matched the first three stages of cognitive development. These are functional or practice play, constructive play and dramatic play. According to Oduolowu (2011) citing Smilansky(1968), a fourth categorization is games with rules.

Functional play: This occurs in the first two years. Children engaging in repetitive muscle movements initiating other people around them. It helps children to explore their environment, while developing their physical skill. Children enjoy it, and will like to repeat it quite for some time. For instance, a child will repeatedly shake a rattle because of the slearme derived from the sound (Oduolowu, 2011).

Constructive play: Children make something out of materials that may be available. This is to manipulate in that, they create things. They may build trains from match boxes and so on. It is also referred to as make-believe play. It is the kin of play in which children may play adult roles, such that girls play the role of mothers, while the boys act as fathers or hunters . It is the kind of play where children do a lot of imagination. It provides them with opportunities to explore as well as solve problems. In games with rules, children learn to abide by the rules of a particular game, and by so doing they modify their behaviour, such games may include: "ludo, ayo, cards".

Dramatic Play

This is also known as fantasy or socio-dramatic play. There is substantial evidence that, socio-dramatic play tends to be a dominant form of play in early childhood. It integrates a wide variety of behaviours. Similansky (1968) argued that, it either uses learning relevant capacities or contributes to their development.

Benefits of Play in Children's Mental Development

Research and practical experience point to the important role of play in children's development and learning across cultures. Young children's play allows them to explore identity, negotiate, take risks and create meaning. The intellectual and cognitive benefits of playing have been well documented. Children who engage in quality play experiences are more likely to have well developed memory skills, language development, and they are able to regulate their behaviour, leading to enhanced school adjustment and academic learning. (Similansky, 1968). Play is a mirror of society. It reflects its basic values and transmits these to the child. Play helps the child to acquire the technical knowledge, the roles and the values that will be required in adult life. It helps children to observe, concentrate, experiment and gives them many opportunities for exploration and sense of achievement.

Play is an essential need of childhood because it can reinforce the instincts that allow children to prepare skills for the future. Through play, children can learn much of what they will need to know to survive in the future. Play allows children to practice, elaborate on and perfect skills before they become necessary for survival in adulthood. Play also can facilitate children development from lower to higher functions and from understanding simple concepts to performing advanced mental activities.

Play and creativity appear to be synonymous. Research has established that highly creative, curious, humorous, playful and expressive. Ling Tsao (2002), citing a number of researchers submitted that: play materials, like puzzles, that have only one purpose may encourage children to seek out the one correct answer and to abandon alternative solutions while divergent objects like blocks, may guide children to numerous approaches, leading them to appreciate the fact that, problems may have multiple solutions (Hughes, 1999).

According to Pepler (1982), factors like individual personal attributes for example; playfulness, and play situations that relate to play may influence cognitive development. The relationship between play and intellectual development could also be a complex combination of factors. It could therefore be said that, no single variable produces all of the effects of play on cognitive development. It is also worthwhile to note that: "the quality of child – parent relationship, peer interactions, and by the environment provided by parents and other caregivers for play do affect the intellectual functioning of a child" (Pepler, 1982).

Characteristics that promote learning; such as curiosity, openness, resilience, concentration and creativity are developed in play (SACSA 2009). Play for instance is linked to the development of resilience and the beginning of empathy as children begin to understand and appreciate other points of view. Not all play is kind or inclusive, educators must therefore act to ensure that, play is not harmful.

In discussing play, Oduolowu (2011) observed that; "the benefits of play cover the intellectual, social, emotional and physical developments of the child which is the focus of primary school teaching.

Play enriches cognitive development of children. Playing with toys open up the visual environment, whereas play in nature full of colours, creativity, images creation of pictures, graphs and models enhance the intellect. Play promotes conversation and so facilitates speech development. Children through "Make believe" plays; increase co-operation, empathy and impulse control. They negotiate with others, take turns, make friends, and learn to get along with others. This promotes social development. Play is a great outlet for stress. It balances emotions, and help to develop appropriate psychological traits. Intra-personal plays promote self motivation and self esteem while a child learns to master emotional issues like: anxiety, frustration, and conflicts. Play ensures balanced emotional development.

Children learn best when they manipulate objects, dance, role play as well as "make believe" activities involving; motion, action, promotion and healthy active life. This involves a lot of running around so they develop motor skills. (Oduolowu, 2011, Berk, 2008)

Teachers' Views about Play

The views generally expressed by the teachers were very much in tune with the position of Clark (1986) who had argued that teachers put forward as follows:

- (a) knowledge of play are generally aggregations of cause and effect proposition. These are from sources like: - 1. rules of thumb, 2. generalization from personal experiences, 3. beliefs, 4. biases and 5. prejudices.
- (b) The teachers they are strongly committed to play as an integral part of the curriculum. Play is considered as contributing to quality learning.
- (c) Teachers' views of play make clean distinction between work and play
- (d) Though not backed by scientific research, studies indicate that, teachers' belief about teaching and learning are related to how they think about teaching, how they learn from their experiences and how they conduct themselves in the classrooms.

Evidence from research sponsored by Economic and Social Research council of United Kingdom as reported by (Bennett, Wood and Rogers, 2001) indicated that: there is strong theoretical support for play based curriculum in the early years, but teachers' find it difficult to translate into practice. This study sought to provide a clear specification of teachers' views of play from ten primary two class teachers, from ten schools within Olorunda and Osogbo Local Government Areas in Osun State. The information was gathered through pre-observation questionnaire designed to ascertain teachers' attitudes. Then an observation of a video-recording of play activities associated with teachers' attitudes was undertaken. Finally, a post activity interview, while the teacher viewed the video tape was held, the opportunity was also taken in the interview to discuss factors which mediated teachers' intentions and their fulfillment. Each teacher's observations and comments were recorded and analyzed. The concern for validity was ensured by requiring respondents to provide reasons and justification for their views and their actions. Generally, teachers' views indicated that, they were strongly committed to play as a strategy, and for improved learning quality. They found it difficult to translate into practice.

Sampled Teachers' Views

The views of play of the sampled teachers are not very much different from each other. They all agreed that, play is both special and important in early years education. According to them, play provides ideal opportunities for children to learn because it is easier for them to remember what they have done in play. Because play is enjoyable, it boosts interest, engagement and motivation. Play therefore provides relevant and meaningful experiences that lead to learning. The view that plays provide opportunities for learning is endorsed by the teachers' response. They believe that play is often initiated by children and it is based on their needs and interests. The teachers generally did not think much of their role in directing the pattern of children's play. They thought play must be used as a means of engaging children in self-sustaining activities, while the teacher is busy with other things. They strongly believe in the inherent value of play that, it can be left to the children "because it is their own work..... I would prefer it to be their own work though". It was clear that, although play is highly valued, by teachers, its relationship to children learning and development could not be taken for granted.

Comments on the Sampled Teachers' Views

All the teachers sampled agreed on the need to make adequate provision for resources. The play items provided were also remarkably similar. Play materials included items like: bean bags, toys, dolls, blocks, sand, water, hoops, balls, tires, boxes, ropes, paper, and puzzles. The teachers did not think that, it was necessary for them to be actively involved in children's play. Some of the teachers think that, their roles were to make supportive comments, and not to be physically involved. One said that; "she would rather be a supporter of children's own idea while another said he would rather stay back and only watch them to play, while others think that, they would ensure appropriate use of materials with a view to directing the focus of the play".

According to Bennett et al (2001), deliberate and planned observation is an important tool for assessment and diagnosis of early childhood education. This is so because, play has a revelatory function which allows teachers to interpret children's play behaviour. It provides a

window into the child's mind (p.39). The links between assessment and diagnosis of the child is however clear to the teachers.

The difficulties of planning for play are revealed by the information gleaned from the teachers. Few of the teachers did not think that, play could be planned, because it is intrinsically spontaneous. They are however prepared to go with the flow of unplanned development.

Almost all the teachers affirmed that, play enables them to assess a child's language ability, but the teachers do not formally assess children's learning through play. It is only common for teachers to interpret children's play behaviour in terms of their personal lives and characteristics rather than learning outcomes (Bennett P.49)

Many of the dynamic, learning relevant cognitive processes were not always evident. It is also clear that, teachers need a more informed understanding of the processes of learning; the potential of a wide variety of play experiences and the means of those experiences to children. It is clear from the researchers' observations that, there is need for balancing children's and teachers' intentions, making time for quality interactions, to enhance learning through play and freeing the teacher from more interaction in mediatory role when children are at play (Bennett p.130).

Conclusion

The focus of primary school teaching is child-centred and seeks to promote his health and develop his mental capacity. Though enquiry is one of the good forms of teaching the primary school child; play still plays a decisive role in a comprehensive manner to cater for his need. It is beneficial. Teachers believe and are committed to play-based learning; but children need to be creative about its usage. Most importantly, play-based learning strategies appear to be potentially helpful in attaining the educational goals for the primary school children.

Recommendations

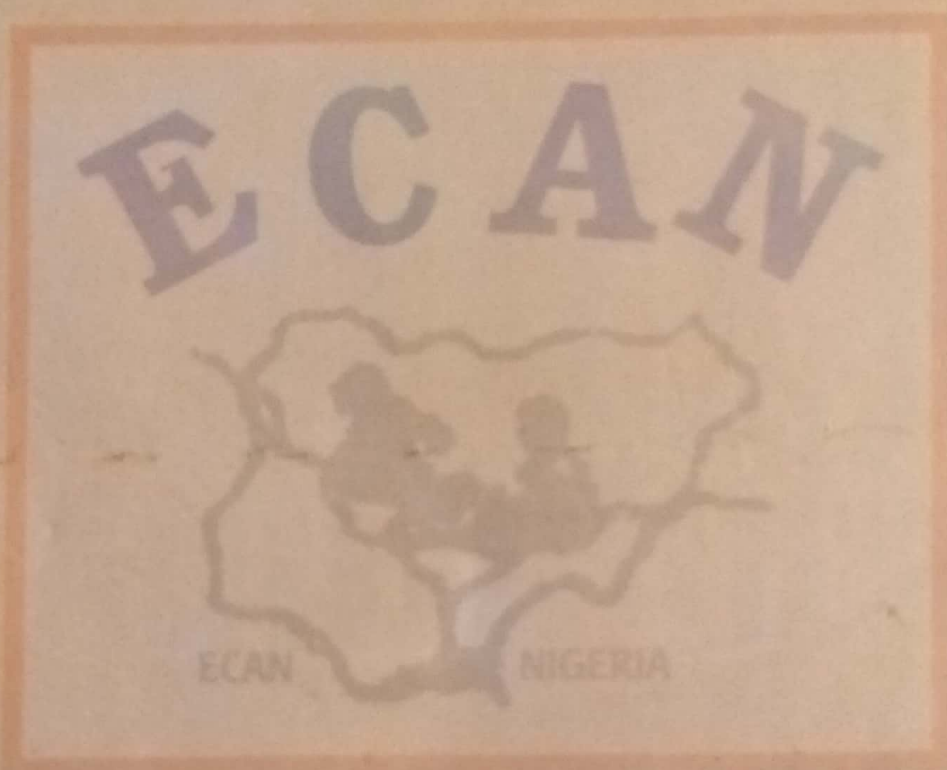
1. In order to promote creativity in teaching-learning, teachers must be able to provide original and creative activities, make real impact on children, possess pedagogical knowledge and skills, motivate children, provide satisfying learning environment and actively involve children in the learning process.

2. The school curriculum must take notice of children's developmental characteristics; consistent with their unique needs, interests and modes of thinking.
3. To facilitate healthy physical growth, appropriate and enough play ground space for children enough to take 20-25 children and two adult at a given time should be provided.
4. Adequate toys and play equipments must also be provided. Consumables like; paper, crayon, construction materials and others should be made available.

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