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PLAY AS A WAY OF LEARNING FOR YOUNG CHILDREN: PERCEPTION OF CAREGIVERS IN ILORIN WEST LOCAL GOVERNMENT AREA OF KWARA STATE

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Abstract

The purpose of the study was to find out the perception of caregivers on play as a way of learning for young children. A total of 221 caregivers were randomly selected from 82 preprimary schools in Ilorin West Local Government Area of Kwara state. 145 caregivers were female while 76 caregivers were male. A researchers' designed questionnaire titled "Questionnaire on Caregivers' Perception of Play as a Way of Learning" (QCPPWL) was used to obtain the data for this study. The data were collected using a researcher designed questionnaire and was analysed with the use frequency count, percentage, t-test and Analysis of Variance. The findings revealed that caregivers had positive perception of play as a way of learning. The findings also showed that there was no significant difference in the perceptions of male and female caregivers on play as a way of learning. It was also unfolded that educational qualification and teaching experience had significant influence on caregivers perception of play as way of learning. Among others, it was recommended that workshops and seminars should be organized for caregivers to improve both their perception and ability to use play for children's learning.

Key words: Play, learning, caregivers' perception

Introduction

Early childhood is a critical and sensitive period in a child's life when the foundation for future growth and development is laid. In this period, children's major activity is play. Play avails children the opportunity to interact with their physical and social environments. Through this interaction, children express their needs, interests, thoughts, imaginations and creativities. In the words of Oduolowu (2011), play is as any behavior that is freely chosen, personally directed and Morrisson (2006) defined play as what young children spend most of their time doing from the moment they wake up till they close their eyes at night. During their plays whether guided or not, children explore the environment. Play is not only an enjoyable activity of young children rather it fosters the psychological and physiological development of young children (Segun-Dipe, 2015). Ekine (2012) asserted that play is the medium used by children to translate experiences into something internally meaningful. Article 31 of the United Nations convention on the right of the child states that children have the right to rest as

well as play in ways that suit their ages. Play is essential for the physical and mental well-being of children. Play shapes a child's world and through play, a child waves an understanding of what the world is like. Children learn by playing and play is a child's right.

Perry (2004) is of the view that children can learn anything through play. Similarly, Ross (2000) mentioned that children learn a lot of science skills such as observation or well thought theories through play experiences. Lawani (2012) noted that learning can be made easy for preprimary school children through play. She further added that play makes children discover things themselves and have permanent learning at the earliest stage of their lives. Iroegbu (2012) asserted that play activities are essential for young children's development across all developmental domains of physical, social, emotional, cognitive and linguistic. Play is common among all children and it serves as a means of their learning about and making sense of their world. Brewer (2007) described play as a worthy activity through which a child explores the world around him/her and which enables the child to acquire some firsthand knowledge and experience about the natural world. Play is an important experience for children (Haney & Bissonnette, 2011). Play has the potential to strengthen empathy and sensitivity towards others through perspective taking. As children gain experience imagining what others are thinking and feeling, they become more skilled in expressing empathy and compassion towards others (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2001)

From ancient philosophy to modern scientific research, play has been viewed as an integral component in learning and child development. Play has an important role in the physical, social, emotional, language and cognitive development of children and in essence it is a learning experience. Play contributes to children's general personality development, allowing them the opportunity to practice their linguistic, cognitive and social skills. Play is also associated with creativity, especially the ability to be less literal and more flexible in one's thinking.

Some studies have shown that certain types of play can help engage children in learning, influence their motivation to learn, improve self-regulation, and focus their attention. Research also indicates that play that is both teacher-guided and child initiated is most beneficial for children (Childcare & Early Education Research Connections, 2011). Developmental theorists like Piaget (1952) and Vygotsky (1966) provide frameworks for considering the cognitive implications of play for development. While Piaget describes play as practice for strengthening of skills and existing schema (i.e., assimilation), Vygotsky ascribes a more central role of play as a mechanism for building cognitive structures, such as symbolic representation. Building upon these theories, there are many ways in which engaging in play facilitates the development of cognitive skills. For instance, through fantasy play children begin using symbols. Symbolic representation is the fundamental cognitive skill underlying literacy, writing, mathematics, and other complex skills essential for functioning in modern cultures (Haney & Bissonnette, 2011). According to Piaget and Inhelder (1969) play is a way for children to unify experiences, knowledge and understanding. Vygotsky (1966) considered play to be important for an individual's cognitive development.

Charter for Children's Play (2007) states that play is something that children want to do naturally and is the most effective way of learning as they can explore the world around them, develop their imagination, participate, share and socialise with others. To appreciate the benefits of play, we must recognise that children learn better when they can experience, manipulate, explore and experiment from direct sensory encounters around them. Play allows children the opportunity to develop sharing

and turn taking skills, whilst also providing an outlet for a child's feelings to be displayed. Montessori placed emphasis on children's self-initiated learning stating that play supported the maturity and development of the mind, body and brain in terms of gaining greater awareness and sharpening abilities to gather and organise information.

Umek and Musek (2001) believe that when properly structured, play can enable teachers to see pupils demonstrating their understanding of a subject, thus making it a method of effective assessment. They argue that Children can achieve higher levels of individual cognitive functions (conservation, one-to-one correspondence, decentration) in their symbolic play than they demonstrate when the same mental operations are tested and measured in formal, non-play, situations. Segun-dipe (2015) asserted that there is natural link between play and development. She added that Development theory shows that play is critical to the development of intelligence, personality, competencies, a sense of self, and awareness. Play is so critically important to all children in the development of their physical, social, mental, emotional and creative skills. Similarly, Kenneth (2006) published a study on "The importance of play in promoting Healthy Child Development and maintaining strong parent – child bonds". He stated that play is healthy and in fact, essential for helping children reach important social, emotional, and cognitive developmental milestone as well as helping them manage stress and problem resilient.

Several studies (Segun-dipe, 2015; Ekine, 2012; Iroegbu, 2012; Perry, 2004) have been conducted on play but none of the cited studies have investigated the perception of caregivers on the use of play as a way of learning for young children. Hence, this study investigated the perception of caregivers on the use of play as a way of learning for young children. Since caregivers are regarded as the facilitators of learning at the preprimary level of education use play as a vehicle for the leaning of young children, it is highly important to study and analyse their perception on the use of play as a way of learning. Perception goes a long way in affecting individual attitudes, values and beliefs. If an issue is perceived sensitive, such perception fertilizes individual beliefs, attitudes and values. The perceptions of caregivers on the use of play as a way of learning have several implications for the total development of children. It is against this background that this study investigated the perception of caregivers on the use of play as a way of learning for children.

The teachers' gender, teaching experience and educational qualification are also variables of interest in the study. The gender of the teachers, the teaching experience and the educational qualification of teachers are all important variables which must be considered in the study so as to know the moderating influence the variables have on caregivers' perception of play as a way of learning.

Research Question

1. What is caregivers' perception of play as a way of learning for young children?

Research Hypotheses

- H₀₁: There is no significant influence of gender on caregivers' perception of play as a way of learning for young children.
- H₀₂: There is no significant influence of teaching experience on caregivers' perception of play as a way of learning for young children.
- H₀₃: There is no significant influence of educational qualification on caregivers' perception of play as a way of learning for young children.

Methodology

The study adopted a descriptive survey research design. 221 caregivers were randomly selected from 82 preprimary schools in Ilorin West Local Government Area of Kwara State. 76 caregivers were male while 145 caregivers were female. A researchers' designed questionnaire titled "Questionnaire on Caregivers' Perception of Play as a Way of Learning" (QCPPWL) was used to obtain the data for this study. The questionnaire contained 15 items measuring caregivers' perception of play as a way of learning. A 4 point-likert type scale of strongly Agree (4-points), Agree (3-points), Disagree (2-points) and Strongly Disagree (1-point) was used to elicit the needed data from the respondents. The questionnaire was given to lecturers in the Department of Teacher Education, University of Ibadan for validation. To trial test the instrument, the instrument was administered to thirty caregivers who were not part of the sample. Cronbach alpha was used to test the reliability of the instrument and its reliability index was 0.84. Descriptive statistics was used to answer the research question while independent sample t-test and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were used to test the stated hypotheses.

Results

Research Question Two: What is the caregivers' perception of play as a way of learning for young children?

Table 1: Table showing caregivers' perception of play as a way of learning for young children

S/N	Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean	S. D.
1.	Play develops thinking ability in children	19 (8.6)	35 (15.8)	100 (45.2)	67 (30.3)	2.03	.90
2.	Children who engage in play are usually more intelligent than those who do not play		19 (8.6)	121 (54.8)	81 (36.7)	1.72	.61
3.	Engaging in group play makes children learn how to relate with their peers		65 (29.4)	62 (28.1)	94 (42.5)	1.87	.84
4.	When children play, they tend to forget what they have been taught	18 (8.1)	21 (9.5)	120 (54.3)	62 (28.1)	2.01	.84
5.	Children could learn simple obedience and conform to set rules through play	3 (1.4)	124 (56.1)	38 (17.2)	56 (25.3)	2.33	.87

6.	Playing with others and taking rightful turns while playing makes children learn patience	85 (38.5)	2 (.9)	76 (34.4)	58 (26.2)	2.52	1.25
7.	Play fosters team spirit in children		42 (19.0)	38 (17.2)	141 (63.8)	1.55	.79
8.	Play improves children's attention span	1 (.5)	18 (8.1)	148 (67.0)	54 (24.4)	1.85	.57
9.	Children learn how to control their emotion, if they engage in play	1 (.5)	105 (47.5)	74 (33.5)	41 (18.6)	2.30	.77
10.	Giving children opportunity to engage in play, advances cognitive development	43 (19.5)	36 (16.3)	40 (18.1)	102 (46.2)	2.09	1.18
11.	Group play improves children's speaking abilities		22 (10.0)	123 (55.7)	76 (34.4)	1.76	.62
12.	Children express their feelings and opinions freely when taught through play		63 (28.5)	77 (34.8)	81 (36.7)	1.92	.80
13.	Play improves children's ability to co-ordinate their fine and gross motor skills	42 (19.0)	2 (.9)	119 (53.8)	58 (26.2)	2.13	1.01
14.	Being allowed to participate in play activities develops confidence and sense of belonging in children.		2 (.9)	42 (19.0)	177 (80.1)	1.21	.43
15.	Play is not necessary for children, if they are to learn		4 (1.8)	143 (64.7)	74 (33.5)	1.68	.50
	Weighted Average						1.93

NOTE: The figures in parentheses represent percentages

Table 1 showed that caregivers agreed that playing with others and taking rightful turns while playing makes children learn patience (2.52). However, they disagreed with the following: Play develops thinking ability in children (2.03); Children who engage in play are usually more intelligent than those who do not play (1.72); Engaging in group play makes children learn how to relate with their peers (1.87); When children play, they tend to forget what they have been taught (2.01); Children could learn simple obedience and conform to set rules through play (2.33); Play fosters team spirit in children (1.55); Play improves children's attention span (1.85); Children learn how to control their emotion, if they engage in play (2.30); Giving children opportunity to engage in play, advances cognitive development (2.09); Group play improves children's speaking abilities (1.76); Children express their feelings and opinions freely when taught through play (1.92); Play improves children's ability to co-ordinate their fine and gross motor skills (2.13); Play is not necessary for children, if they are to learn (1.68). They also strongly disagreed that being allowed to participate in play activities develops confidence and sense of belonging in children (1.21). The weighted average is 1.93 which is a numerical indicator that the caregivers had negative perception of play as a way of learning for young children.

Hypothesis One: There is no significant influence of gender on caregivers' perception of play as a way of learning for young children

Table 2: Summary of t-test analysis showing influence of gender on caregivers' perception of play as a way of learning for young children

Variable	n	Mean	Std. Deviation	t	df	Sig.	Remark
Female	145	46.21	3.63	.809	219	.419	Not Significant
Male	76	45.82	3.15				

Table 2 showed that there was no significant difference in male and female caregivers' perception of play as a way of learning for young children ($t = .809$; $df = 219$; $P > .05$). This implies that gender had no significant influence on caregivers' perception of play as a way of learning for young children. The hypothesis is therefore not rejected in the light of the result.

Hypothesis Two: There is no significant influence of teaching experience on caregivers' perception of play as a way of learning for young children.

Table 3: Summary of ANOVA analysis showing influence of teaching experience on caregivers' perception of play as a way of learning for young children.

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Remark
Between Groups	1456.266	5	291.253	52.383	.000	Significant
Within Group	1195.426	215	5.560			
Total	2651.892	220				

Table 3 showed that there was significant influence of teaching experience on Caregivers' perception on the use of play as a way of learning for young children ($F_{(5, 215)} = 52.383$; $P < 0.05$). The hypothesis is therefore rejected in the light of the result.

Hypothesis Three: There is no significant influence of educational qualification on caregivers' perception of play as a way of learning for young children

Table 4: Summary of ANOVA analysis showing influence of educational qualification on caregivers' perception of play as a way of learning for young children

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	Remark
Between Groups	1225.197	5	245.039	36.932	.000	Significant
Within Group	1426.495	215	6.635			
Total	2651.692	220				

Table 4 showed that there was significant influence of teaching experience on Caregivers' perception on the use of play as a way of learning for young children ($F_{(5, 215)} = 36.932$; $P < 0.05$). The hypothesis is therefore rejected in the light of the result.

Discussion of Findings

The powerful role of play in the development of social skills and self regulation can not be emphasized and that is why it is recommended in the National Policy on Education (2013) that the method of teaching to be adopted at the preprimary level of education should be play way method. This study probed caregivers' perception of play as a way of learning. From the analysis, the outcomes revealed that caregivers seemed to have negative perception on of play as a way of learning. This result negated the findings of Haney and Bissonnette (2011) which revealed that teachers had positive perception of play. On the contrary, this finding negated the submission Paley (2004) who stated that play is the mechanism by which children learn.

The findings also revealed that there was significant difference in the perception of play as a way of learning for young children. Furthermore, the findings also unfolded that gender had significant influence on caregivers' perception of play as a way of learning for young children. These findings corroborated the finding of Yusuf, Daramola, Bello and Obafemi (2015) who reported that gender had significant influence on perception.

Conclusion and Recommendations

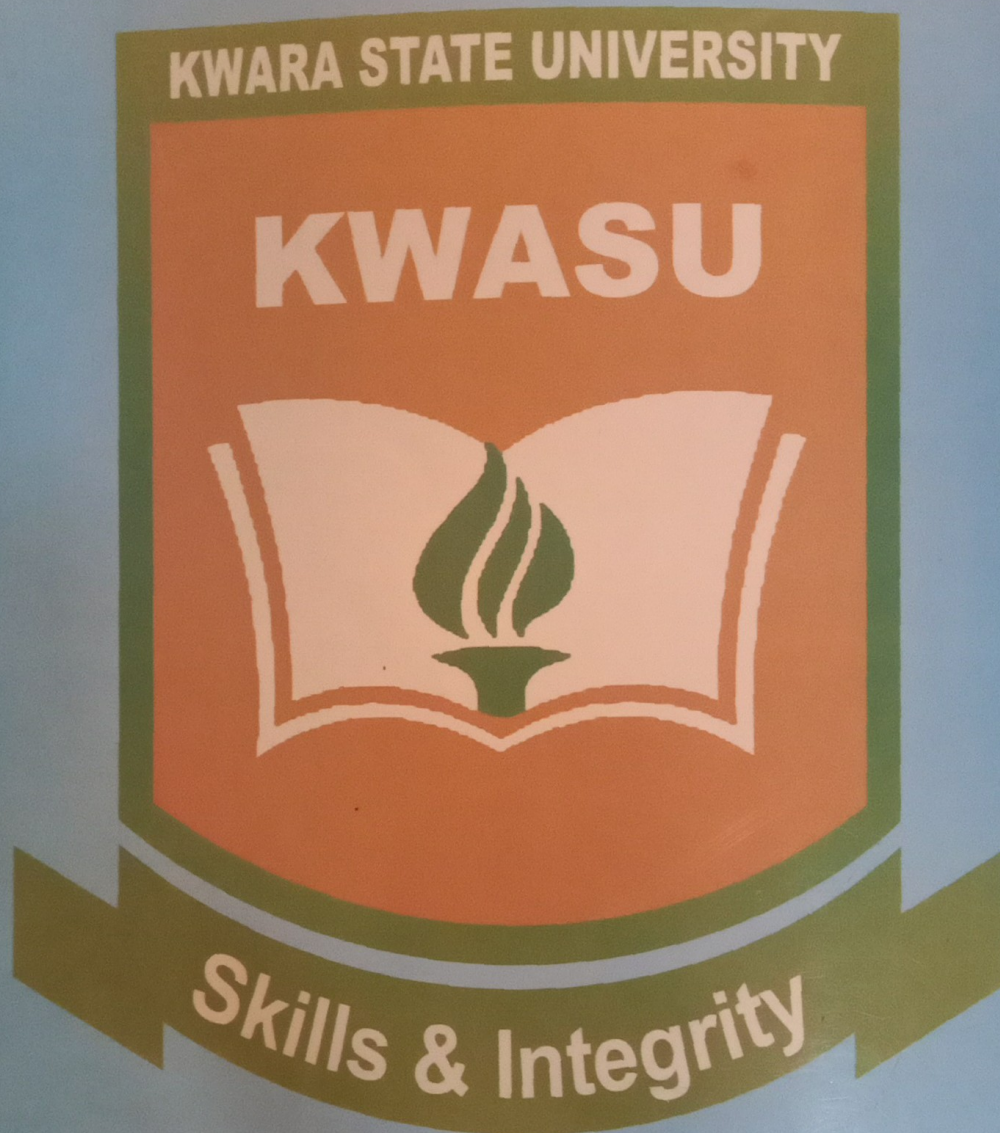
Play is essential for young children's development across all developmental domains of physical, social, emotional, cognitive and linguistic. From the findings in this study, it was concluded that caregivers had negative perception of play as a way of learning. Based on this, the following are recommended to improve caregivers' perception of play as a way of learning for young children:

- Workshops and seminars should be organized for caregivers on the use of play as a way of learning for young children.
- Government and agencies like National Commission for Colleges of Education (NCCE), Nigeria Universities Commission (NUC) should ensure that the curriculum of teacher education programme particularly in early childhood education is oriented towards play-way method.

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